

MARKS OF DISTINCTION



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Marks of Distinction

Henry van Zeyst

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Preface

It has been said about my writings up to date that they are not the simple expositions as found in the earlier booklets by Bhikkhu Dhammapāla, such as “Basic Buddhism” and “Buddhism for Students”. These writings and others before 1947 had to fulfil a certain need which was the lack of information in English in a form understandable by young students in Christian schools, who by that time had banded themselves together in the All-Sri Lanka Buddhist Students’ Union with their branches all over the country and their annual Congresses since 1942.

Many students are now leaders in their own right, but show their appreciation for the work of that time. But time has passed on and their needs have also shifted. The present day young generation is more Sinhala, oriented, as it should be; and there are many eminent scholar monks who can provide for their needs. Thus we have to move on to a deeper understanding which must supersede mere learning.

It is the feeling of that need which is the urge for my late writings, which are perhaps more individualistic and thereby less dependent on ancient tradition. Yet, the truth remains the same, as each one has to find out for himself (*pacattam veditabbo viññūhi*), if he is intelligent.

And if he is not, I can only quote Buddhaghosa from his

commentary of the Majjhima Nikāya: “If you follow this, try to understand; if you don’t, go home and eat some porridge!”¹

Henri van Zeyst
Kandy, January, 1979

¹Papañcasūdanī, II, 44.

Introduction

The three marks (*ti-lakkhaṇa*) are referred to as characteristics, essentials, signata, signs of the teaching of the Buddha. They are the most noteworthy, most important, most expressive, most typical, most distinctive, indispensable, elementary, basic, constitutional components or qualities of the doctrine of the Buddha, without which there just would not be any Buddhism.

The entire doctrine finds its foundation in those essential principles on which rests the entire super-structure of the Buddha's philosophy, logic, cosmology, ontology, psychology, ethics and eschatology. They are there, not made by the Buddha, but observed by him, to be the essential qualities of all that appears and becomes in matter and in mind, in time and in space; all that operates by nature or by will, as cause or as effect; all that is composed, arises and ceases; all that is constructed, or invented, arranged or adjusted, in fact or in fancy; all that is formed by hand or by thought; all that is dependent on conditions in arising and cessation, in birth and death, in becoming and ending. And thus they form the characteristic marks of the teaching of the Buddha, because they are the essential elements of all phenomena which appear or are perceived.

But it was the Buddha alone among all great founders of religion, of systems of philosophy, among all the great thinkers of the world throughout the ages; it was he alone who made those foundations of the universe also the foundations of his doctrine. They are the marks of impermanence (*anicca*), conflict

(*dukkha*) and insubstantiality (*anatta*). Each one of the three is a complete unit for observation, basically integrate in all its parts, complete in its complex, finished in its composition, perfect in its circuit, universal in its application, an all-enclosing orbit, a circle of action and reaction, each one a sphere with its own influence; and yet so closely linked together, that the three are inseparable and complete; that to understand one, one has to understand all; that in the understanding of one, one has also understood all.

This is possible in the perception of impermanence (*anicca saññā*), in the perception of conflict in impermanence (*anicca-dukkha saññā*) and in the perception of the unreality of conflict (*dukkha-anatta saññā*). Thus the three circles are linked and interlinked to form the chief characteristic teachings of the Buddha, the three marks, which are the distinguishing features of his doctrine, its basis and foundation, which must be understood before any true progress can be made, and without which there just is no Buddhism.

Without separating the three, we shall consider them one by one, in their origin, their function and their cessation, for the sake of understanding. For, only in understanding is there awakening and enlightenment.

The Perception of Impermanence

Impermanence (*anicca*) can be viewed from three aspects, one negative aspect of change in the sense of losing its earlier character, one positive aspect of formation in the sense of becoming or acquiring another character, and one general aspect of conditionality that is of its arising being dependent on cessation, and vice versa.

In its negative aspect of change, impermanence is the absence of permanence. Although impermanence as change is always present in everything, it is not always immediately evident and perceptible, as the process of change may be too slow for measurement. Thus, the dissolution of a world cycle will not be evident within a single life-span. Yet the findings of pre-historic remains in deeper strata of this world, the extinction of volcanoes, of animal species, of petrified plant-life in coal mines, however, provide sufficient evidence of the constant and total process of change in which earlier species have given way to newer evolutions. Outside this earth we have the evidence of extinct astral bodies or planets, showing us the way our own planet is heading together with the entire solar system, which we are part of.

This wearing-away process² is easier recognisable in the day-to-day occurrences when material phenomena prove to be dis-

²S. IV. 52.

connected “as if they were iron darts³”. What is joined becomes separated in parts, what is wholesome loses its vitality, what appears to be continuous becomes disrupted, whatever grows is subject to decay. And the general characteristic of impermanence applies to everything that is composed, so that the Buddha said:

“Whatever is composed is decomposable” (*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*).

Thus, to understand this negative aspect of impermanence, namely the decomposibility of all that is composed, one has first to understand the nature of composition (*saṅkhāra*). A composition is whatever is united or put together (*saṅkhāra*). Now, whatever is put together in nature or by artificial means is subject to decomposition. Thus the various chemical elements, however closely united they are in forming a component quite different from their original nature, such as oxygen and hydrogen forming water, can be separated again. The process of decay observable in all that lives and moves is but such a dissolution of a union and a return to earlier conditions.

What happens in the material world at large, and in the microscopic world of the individual body, that same process of dissolution, separation, decay, disappearance, can be observed in all the faculties of the mind as well, in its functions of the senses of the sense-organs (*vedanā*) as well as in the process of perception (*saṅkhāra*) in which the past is brought into contact with a new experience, in which the new experience is compared with the memory of the old. When ideas are stored away as memories, it is felt as impermanence in the sense of dissolution, for in memory the actual present loses its vitality. It is in this separation that the absence of comfort and support is experienced; but instead of taking this as a starting point for lust to fade out and be liberated,⁴ this feeling of loss is set aside by preserving that experience in memory which is the “I”-maker (*ahaṅkāra*). Memory is then

³Vism. A. 824.

⁴A. IV. 100.

used as a means for preserving what has already been dissolved in the actual present.

And so the question arises: What is memory?

Memory is the process of grasping the past (*atitaggahana*), the fading away process of the more active imagination or image-making. It is a representative cognition, grasping the past as a thing of the past and calling it back in a process of recollection. In the ultimate sense it is dependent on sensuous impressions, and more immediately on the mental reception thereof, that is, the mental attitude of image forming, which is the imagination at the time the sense-impressions were formed. The depth and quality of memory, therefore, are dependent not so much on the external object, but on the mental assimilation thereof. And so, memory is a result of association of ideas. It needs an object of the past, and this object has to be introduced in present thinking. When this object was introduced for the first time, there were already a host of other thoughts with which it became associated.

Now, whenever one of those other ideas recurs, the associate idea might come along. If memory were a faculty developed and improved upon utilitarian lines (as it is possible to a certain extent), a thing of the past would be liable to be recalled whenever wanted, just as a reference book in a library. But memory is not only some storing-up faculty, but rather a special kind of systematised association. Thus, people have a good memory for facts connected with their profession, because such facts have the greatest chance and frequency of recurrence. Memory is not improved by learning many things by heart, but by finding logical, i.e., rational connections. This is the method of science, where numerous facts are reduced to a simple law which then can be applied to individual cases.

There remain, of course, the very important questions of how the past has come up to the present, or, how do associate ideas persist, and how do they re-associate themselves again, when

their former leader recurs? The ordinary psychological explanation would have us believe that every event after its occurrence leaves behind an impression in the unconscious, which is usually understood as a lower level of submerged consciousness, another plane of thought, which does not necessarily run parallel with active thinking. But, apart from the fact that the existence of such a plane cannot be proved but only surmised, it would logically lead to the belief in some entity, having the capacity of storing up past experiences, as in an archive. This storing entity, which in later developed schools of Buddhism has been given the name of *alaya-viññāṇa*, would in reality not be different from a permanent soul, which idea is most categorically denied in the Buddha's teaching of non-entity (*anatta*). It is from this store-house of the unconscious that long-forgotten events are called back.

The objection to this theory of the Yogacāra school and of the Sarvastivāda, though largely adopted later by Mahāyana Buddhism and certain modern psychologists, is of course, that it leaves entirely unexplained in what those past images of memory exist and persist. Even if one could be made to believe in their persistence as impressions in soft wax, there still remains the unsolved problem of how they answer the call of a recurring associate idea. For, if the new idea knows its similarity with the old idea, it is not memory, i.e., a remembrance of the past, because both would be present. If, on the other hand, the old idea senses the presence of a new similar idea, and if it rises from its unconscious sleep for the sake of making its acquaintance, it cannot be called memory either, for then the present would not call back the past, but the past would be calling upon the present.

It is suggested sometimes that—just as a deep wound when healed will leave in the body a scar which will remain even though the tissues are for ever changing and all material in the body will have been within seven years—in a similar way, sensations, perceived by the sense-organs and communicated to the brain, will not be entirely effaced during the many changes, but leave some trace in the living tissue of the brain.

Then, when a similar impression recurs, the same sense-organ will communicate to the same department of the brain with which it is connected by the nervous system. Thus that first impression will receive a second imprint. The preservation of form is then believed to account for the continuity of memory. The objection to this physiological theory is that it only leaves room for memory through the recurrence of the original experience, so that pain would be remembered only by the repetition of that particular pain. It is clearly evident, however, that the memory recalls the past without repeating the experience. And thus the problem still stands unsolved, whether considered from a psychological and idealistic viewpoint of a storing in the unconscious or from a physiological and materialistic point of view, of a physical impression in the brain tissue. Briefly stated, the problem is that memory is an act of remembering, i.e., thinking about past events; but thinking is always in the present. How then does the past event come into the present thought, if there is no continuous entity which preserves the impression for future reference?

Memory seems to be a reproduction of a past event or thought, for it is not the identical event which comes up from the past, but a reflection (and frequently a distortion) thereof in a new thought. A thought of remembrance is, therefore, not a thought in the past, but a revival of the past in the present. It is essentially one single process: the recognition of the past taking place in the present, for thinking is always present. And thus, in memory the past must be in the present. Memory is not a thought of the past, neither is it a thought in the past. There is no reflection in the sense of bending back to the past, but it is a continuation of experience, of a process started in the past, and continuing to live in the present. Only in this sense is recognition possible, for if the mind could go back into the past, recognition ought to have taken place already before the process of remembering began. How otherwise would a thought know how far to return into the past, and to which particular event? One cannot go looking

for something which one does not know. If it is known, it is no longer past, for it is present in the knowing mind.

Now, by considering the process of thought and the process of the unconscious as two individual processes, this difficulty is indeed unsurmountable, for still the question remains: How does the thought in the upper stream find the thought sunk in the lower current, which might not even flow in the same direction? Recognition is the conviction that an event has occurred already previously and such recognition must take place in the present thought-process. The element of the past must be in the present, therefore, as an essential part of the process. It cannot be an old thought stored away, for, if thoughts could be stored, they would cease to be thoughts, because thought is thinking in action; and action is never stagnant. Thus, when in Buddhism we speak of the subconscious stream (*bhavaṅga sota*), we do not understand by that term an undercurrent of thought which runs its own course independently from the process of active thought, but the same process of actual thinking, which continues its natural, logical course, till interfered with (*bhavaṅga-cālana*) and interrupted (*bhavaṅga'upaccheda*) by a new challenge and then changes its course in the new direction, marked by a turning to that particular organ of the five sense-doors (*pañca-dvāravajjana*) where the disturbance was received and perceived. When it then is conceived in full consciousness, the whole of the subconscious and the unconscious is in that stream of thought.

Each thought has grown from experiences of the past, embedded in the previous thought, together with the external influences and challenges which conditioned it in the present. And thus, each thought, while passing by and passing away, has also been passing on to its successor the tendency by which it was produced itself, modified, intensified or weakened. And thus every thought contains the experiences of all previous events which built it up and which, therefore, are present in the current thought, in a way similar to that in which every step we make, every letter we write, every word we speak, contains all the efforts of our childhood,

all our failures and successes, all the past in the present. Memory, then, is the recognition of actual effects and of the causes which produced them, in an understanding of their simultaneous association. Memory as an act of remembering should therefore not be confused with the final moments of identification and registration (*tad-ārammaṇa*) of a complete unit of thought. Memory is a phase in the thought-process which does not meet a challenge at any of the five physical sense-doors or organs, but which enters purely and simply through the mind-door (*suddhika-manodvāra-vīthi*).

Considering that daily thousands and thousands of ideas supervene each other, it should cause no surprise to realise that most thoughts are individually lost for ever, although theoretically it would be possible to retrace all past thoughts merely by analysing one single present thought. For, rejecting the theory that a concept is a thing, an entity which can be stored up as an individual item, memory can only be understood as a process of thought, in which one idea has grown into the next one, handing down its characteristics while losing its individuality.

From this one can draw the startling conclusion that a good memory is a sign of a shallow mind. Only he who thinks little will easily remember trifles. “Only shallow people require years to get rid of an emotion”.⁵ But not only is memory a sign of a shallow mind, of narrow-mindedness, it is also an ideal form of craving on which the “ego” individuality is based. If not for memory, man’s only knowledge would be the ever new beginning “now”. He might have momentary desires, but not that clinging to desires and possessions which is proper to man, and hardly found in beasts. Likes and dislikes arise as in a flash; it is memory which makes them grow into love and hate. Yet it is not love or hate which is remembered, but only the situation, the occasion, on which there was a concrete experience, causing a sensible impression to be remembered and to be reproduced. In a certain

⁵Oscar Wilde.

sense then we may say that it is the memory which makes the “I”, for only by memory are past experiences remembered as “mine”.

Memory as the “I” maker then is the instrument of greed through which the “I” tries to continue as an entity. But when the fulfilment of need does not amount to greed, memory does not function where instinct suffices for the continuation of the species. Nature merely strives for satisfaction or fulfilment of its needs as a reflex action to a simple necessity. Then there is no wilful response to a challenge, but a mere reaction to a stimulus which reverts to type when left alone. Thus the whole of nature in its millions of years of evolution has adapted itself to changing conditions, but has not been able to produce one comfortable arm-chair, such as an ordinary carpenter can do in a day’s work. Instinct does not act with any conscious effort; it arises from a certain awareness of natural physical needs. This awareness, and the instinctive reaction thereto is not an act of memory, for sometimes the instinct is used only once in a lifetime as e.g. in the case of caterpillars making their cocoon with great skill and precision, which does not admit the possibility of acquired learning. Instinctive action, therefore, is not guided by an idea of result or of object.

In Buddhist psychology instinct would be best rendered by an individual’s “natural disposition” (*sabhāva-dhammatā*), which will differ in degree but not in kind from the instinctive tendencies of others. And so it will happen that inhuman instincts remain the same, even when human characters and habits differ.

The chief instincts are those which are classified as the roots of all evil: lust, hate and delusion (*loba, dosa, moha*). We may even say that these are the roots of life itself in so far as these three having been overcome, rebirth will not come to pass any more. They are inborn tendencies (*anusaya*), the inheritance from past actions. Before reason will be sufficiently developed to become a decisive and responsible factor with regard to volitional activity,

those proclivities are already at work. For there is in the functioning of the mind something else besides its rationality, existing together with it and even before it, stronger than any reason or argument, inborn and not cultivated. They are the latent dispositions (*anusaya*), or proclivities, dormant tendencies, or biases, usually enumerated as sensual passion (*kāmarāga*), lust for life (*bhavarāga*), aversion (*paṭigha*), conceit (*māna*), erroneous views (*diṭṭhi*), perplexity (*vicikicchā*) and ignorance (*avijjā*). Sometimes, obstinacy (*adhiṭṭhāna*) and prejudice (*abhinivesa*) are also classed as dormant tendencies. It will be seen that all these can easily be reduced to the chief roots of evil inclinations: greed, hate and delusion. All are the experiences of some need, a need to obtain, a need to get rid of, a need of external help, of security. The need to obtain corresponds to Freud's sex-instinct; the need to get rid of corresponds to his ego-instinct; the need of security to the inferiority complex.

More elaborated and detailed classifications, which have superseded the pioneer's grouping, still show the unmistakable characteristics of the Buddha's analysis. Thus, in the most recent system of correlating instinct and emotion, we find the following five instincts to be rooted in greed: the protective instinct as expressed in maternal care, love and tender devotion; the pairing instinct, bending towards mating and reproduction, expressing itself in lustful excitement, sometimes mistaken for love; the food-seeking instinct or appetite, bending towards material sustenance and nourishment in the narrower sense, expressing itself in playing and hunting; the hoarding instinct, following that of acquisition, expressing itself in protection of property, arising from the need of storing food and of sheltering; and the creative instinct, resulting from the need and urge to be productive. According to the same system the following three instincts are rooted in hate: the instinct of escape, of self-preservation or the danger-instinct with its emotions of fear, terror and fright; the instinct of combat and aggression, expressing itself in anger, annoyance, irritation, in plays and sports, in rivalry and competi-

tion; and the instinct of repugnance, expressing itself in feelings and finally there are the following six instincts which are rooted in ignorance or delusion: the instinct to appeal for support, which is expressed in a feeling of distress and helplessness; the instinct of curiosity brought about by the need of investigating the unknown, calling up a feeling of mystery; the instinct of submission, which leads to devotion and self-abasement, a feeling of subjection and inferiority; the instinct of assertion, expressing itself in an elated feeling of superiority and pride; the social or herd instinct, reducing nostalgia in loneliness and isolation, expressing self in imitation; and finally, the instinct of laughter, following the need of relaxation, an expression of carelessness.

From these primary instincts will result many complexes of instinctive impulses, just as an act of conceit may result from a complex of the creative emotions in the instinct of greed together with feelings of assertion in the deluded tendency of inferiority-awareness. Awe is fear plus devotion, which is aversion plus delusion. Hope and despair spring from the facilitation or obstruction, respectively, of the basic needs, growing out into greed or hate.

Instinct is thus not a substitute for reason, it is not brought about by remembrance and repetition of previous acts, but it is a dormant, innate tendency, which is fundamental, not only in animals, but also in men. Without these tendencies man simply could not exist, for reason would never perceive the primary wants, on the satisfaction of which the very functioning of life is dependent, just as much as a practical, normal life becomes impossible, when a total loss of memory interrupts the smooth continuance of activity which is based on learning, practice and habit.

It is the instinct which predisposes the mind; it is memory which can check the mind in experience; but it is the intellect which should see and understand the way and give guidance to sane living. Thus we see how both memory and instinct have a function to perform which is essential from a biological view-

point. Memory is essential to ensure a smooth continuance of action, for without memory there is no yesterday, no background, no foundation. Without yesterday there is no history to continue; without background there is no name to resort to; without foundation there is nothing to build on for progress. In other words, without memory there is no past, no present and no future. Instinct is essential to ensure the satisfaction of basic requirements, for without instinct there will be no spontaneous action, no reflex action, no reaction. Without spontaneous action there can be only motivated action; without reflex action there can be only wilful action; without reaction there will be no response to any stimulus. Thus, from a biological viewpoint, the absence of memory and instinct will spell certain death; for, the mind (as reason) cannot act without motive, cause or justification. And in an emergency, when direct action is essential, any argument, however logical, will be fatal.

But from a psychological viewpoint, memory is the faculty which clings to the past, which ignores the present, which craves for the future. Memory is the creator of “I” and “mine”, the cause of conflict, the motive in rebirth. Again, from a psychological viewpoint, instinct is the instrument of grasping, the innate disposition of character, the inheritance of past karma. Both are psychological necessities for the origination and continuation of the “self”, as much as they are biological necessities for the continuation of life. But that is taking for granted that the continuation of “self” is a psychological necessity. It is this issue which will be considered in full in the later section on “Perception of the Void in Conflict”, the essential characteristic of the Buddha’s teaching on soullessness (*anatta*). In this present section on the “Perception of Impermanence” it suffices to say that existence is not a psychological necessity, even though the mind in memory has made it so.

This lengthy digression on memory and instinct was considered necessary at this stage, because it is through memory that the mind endeavours to obtain a permanence for itself, which

has no place in the universal perception of impermanence (*anicca saññā*). It is this search for permanence in the impermanent which is the cause of conflict. Existence is phenomenal and impermanent; and if those phenomena are understood as such, life will not appear as the possession of an individual, as the property of an entity. If this process is seen and understood as a rising and ceasing event in the present, dependent on the cravings of instinct and the clings of memory, then life can become free from those biases and tendencies.

So far we have seen impermanence (*anicca*) from a negative aspect. But if it is seen as a positive process of becoming, it is not actually different from its process of cessation. For, whether the arising or the cessation is in evidence, it is always a process of change. The change observed in a growing plant is as much growth as it is decay. The seed has to burst for the tap-root to find its way into the soil. There the roots absorb the nourishment needed for growth from the nitrogen in the soil. The sprouting leaves draw in the carbon-dioxide from the air, and both are converted into the chlorophyll which is the essential colouring matter in the plant component. Even a simple oil-lamp can continue to give light in a positive way only by consuming the oil, by burning the wick, by drawing oxygen from the air, and it is only in the burning-up process of combustion that light can be produced. Thus everywhere the process of change, of alteration, can be seen as becoming and as ceasing.

This process can be observed equally in the process of thought, where in contact with a sensible object sensation (*vedanā*) arises, to become perception (*saññā*); this perception in turn lays hold of the object in a psychological way by comparing it with past experiences in memory, thereby forming a concept (*saṅkhāra*) which is a composite picture, part reflection, part projection, with clinging to the past and craving for the future, resulting in a thought of consciousness (*viññāṇa*). This arising of the new

thought is not new at all in the sense of creativeness, for it is based on memory of a decaying past, it is fed by ideals of volition (*cetanā*) and is thus a reaction rather than action. The resulting knowledge is not a new understanding but a reflection of the old mind, a picture formed by clinging to decayed thoughts of memory. This apparently positive process of acquiring knowledge is the food which keeps thought alive, one of the four kinds of nutrition (*āhāra*) on which this process of change depends.

Impermanence is indeed a process of nutrition in its three aspects of intake (*uppāda*), of relish (*thiti*) and of passing (*bhaṅga*), more literally arising, stabilising, ceasing; the three moments (*khaṇa*) of every unit of impermanent existence. If the Abhidhamma⁶ and the Vibhaṅga Commentary further dissect each such moment into seventeen moments of cognisance, it is only to show the constancy of impermanence. Whether one walks with long strides or with short steps, the distance covered by walking is not different; and as long as there is the process of walking, the division of the distance covered in miles or kilometres is only one of measuring, of comparing and judging, but does not alter the process of movement and change. What is evident, therefore, is neither the origination or the cessation in the process, because in becoming there also ceasing, and in cessation there is also origination. “Only the alteration of what is present is evident”.⁷

This leads us to the third aspect of impermanence. If there is neither origination nor cessation in a static way, then what is this impermanence in itself? Such is the question which can only be put in ignorance, for it presupposes the existence of something which changes which is impermanent. It is precisely the misunderstanding of impermanence which leads to the great delusion of a substance, an “ego” underlying these changing phenomena

⁶Yamaka, II, 13–14.

⁷A I. 152.

of arising and ceasing. And so, it is not impermanence (*anicca*) which can lead to emancipation, but the perception of impermanence (*anicca saññā*). Impermanence is there, whether it is seen and observed or not. The hours pass and the night becomes day, but it is not the night which becomes enlightened. It is the perception (*saññā*), the intelligent awareness without the composite reflection and distortion of a wilful mind, which in seeing can understand. In seeing impermanence there is no seeing of an underlying permanent substance, and hence there can be no understanding as long as there is seeing of what is not. In seeing impermanence it is only the conditional arising and cessation which can be understood. The Buddha has not told us what there is underneath the phenomena, but only that phenomena arise in dependence on other phenomena. There is birth, because there is decay. There is death because there is birth. “When this does not arise, that cannot become. This will cease with the cessation of that”.⁸

It is the understanding of the conditionality of the process of origination and cessation, which is the process of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), which provides the clue to the problem. It was this understanding that whatever arises, is arising in dependence on conditions, and that whatever ceases, is ceasing because of the cessation of those conditions which made it arise—it was that understanding which enlightened the bodhisatta in that night of insight, when he ceased the search for self-satisfaction through sense-pleasures and denial, and found the middle path of understanding, the true nature of impermanence, the impermanent nature of conflict and the nature of conflict in the attempts of escaping impermanence. When impermanence is seen and understood to be the nature of composition, and not just a qualifying aspect; when it is seen and understood that every composition must be decomposable just because it is a composition; when it is seen and understood that impermanence

⁸M. I. 262.

is not an added qualification to a mode of existence, but that it is the essential nature of existing, and that there is no existence possible without being impermanent, just as a river must flow in order to be a river, and as fire must burn in order to be fire at all—then a search for permanent existence becomes impossible. It is therefore in the understanding of the nature of existence to be naturally impermanent just because it is composed. It is in that understanding that a search for the permanent will cease spontaneously.

It is that search which is conflict; and that is the second characteristic mark in the teaching of the Buddha. It is then conflict (*dukkha*) which must be understood, so that impermanence (*anicca*) will cease to be a problem. For, with the cessation of conflict, there is no more problem.

Perception of the Conflict in Impermanence

What is dukkha? It is the basis of the Buddha's, teaching, the knowledge of sorrow and to be free from it:

One thing only do I teach,
Woe, and how its end to reach

*Dukkhañceva paññapemi
Dukkassa ca nirodham*

Sorrow (*soka*) is suffering resulting from loss (*vayagama*). It is lamentation (*parideva*) expressing itself in weeping and crying; it is pain because of bodily discomfort (*kayika asatā*); it is grief (*domanassa*) in mental disagreement, (*cetasikā asāta*); it is despair (*upāyāsa*) in mental unrest (*upāyāsitatta*). And so, birth (*jāti*) is suffering as the manifestation of composition (*kandhānaṃ pātubhavaṃ*) as the conditioning cause of all misery, and also as the evil result of past dissatisfaction. Decay (*jarā*) is suffering as the dwindling of vitality (*āyuno saññaṃ*). Death (*maraṇa*) is suffering as the dissolution of composing aggregates (*khandānaṃ bheda*). “To be associated with things one dislikes, to be separated from things one likes, not to get what one wishes—that is also

suffering”, said the Buddha. But this suffering must be comprehended (*pariññeya*) for its cause to be eradicated (*pahātabba*) and its cessation to be realised (*sacchikātabba*).

Then what is suffering, what is sorrow, what is grief, what is despair?

When we speak of sorrow, it is the experience of an inner conflict within the individual. And that is always subjective, even if one feels grieved over the misfortune of others, for it is by way of substitution that one experiences a vicarious sorrow in one’s relationship. But this conflict is felt not only in relationship with others, but also and mainly in oneself. More than that, it is practically felt exclusively in oneself, for even relationship which causes conflict is caused by the misunderstanding thereof which has the “ego” as its centre of attraction, of protection, and hence of opposition which is conflict.

Physical discomfort, as disease, may be a lack of ease, and this was experienced by the Buddha himself and his arahants on many occasions. The Buddha, when tired, would ask his faithful disciple Ānanda to fold his outer robe and spread it on the ground for him to rest a while. He was once wounded in his foot by a stone thrown by Devadatta. Sāriputta, the chief disciple and arahant, experienced thirst, and asked for some water to be given to him. Mahā Moggallāna, the other chief disciple and arahant, who in a previous life had been the cause of the death of his parents, was ultimately set upon and clubbed to death by a gang of rebels. But none of those physical sufferings experienced by these perfect ones could amount to conflict which is always the outcome of a distorted mind. If physical discomfort then becomes a source of sorrow, it is not the disease of the body but the conflict in the mind, in the distorted mind; it is the wrong approach of a diseased mind which causes the conflict.

There may be pain, loss and even death; but such suffering is not conflict when there is no opposition. From where does this opposition arise, and why? Life, property, possessions, relations, achievements, qualifications are all means through which the

“ego” acts; and without any of those, the “ego” has no name, no fame, no influence, no connection, no existence. All these make the “I”; and therefore, any kind of loss in any of these relationships is experienced as a loss of “self”. It is not just property, but my property which has to be insured. And so the “I” lives in that relationship, and in fact the “I” is that relationship. Living, as a process of becoming, is also a process of cessation, but that impermanence is not experienced as conflict until the process which is my life is ceasing. Grief is experienced when it concerns *my* loss, of *my* relations.

Thus, suffering which is conflict is entirely self-centred, self-based, self-focussed. And this conflict exists only in impermanence (*anicca-dukkha*) when that is seen but not wanted. But that also means that the mind when it has understood conflict, is also free from it. Why then is impermanence not wanted? Why is it not understood? Why is there conflict? Why does the mind not want to be free? Why does the mind see only in distorted images, in misshapen reflections? This is the crucial question: Why does the mind not see that it is in conflict?

Let us begin at the beginning. What is the position of the mind, of thought, when coming in contact with impermanence? There will be an immediate reaction of opposition, which is created by the mere fact of seeing the impermanent as an opposite. This sense of opposition is caused by the approach of the mind. Whenever there is a new contact in the senses, a thought is flashed back to find out whether anything is known about it already. This happens every time one is introduced to a new situation, person or event. There is a naming of category or family, in which the new acquaintance is framed to see whether it or he fits. A misfit would be disturbing. The thought now is concentrated on a possible familiarity which will enable the mind to place the new in the cadre of the old. The old is fixed and the new is fitted, shaped, adjusted, accommodated according to the plan already there. The old is the past, is memory, is thought, the thought of “self”; and with that fixture a comparison is made of the new within that

framework. A name will bring up the memory of an earlier association, and with that conditioned thought there is a confrontation with the new. But there is no attempt at understanding the new. The only action is that of thought trying to accommodate the new into the old; the unknown remains unknown, and the distorted view is classified with the old.

Now, the old is the remembrance of earlier experiences, which have been stored up in memory to form, to build, to strengthen the “ego”. The “ego” has nothing else but these memories; the “I” is memory trying to continue by preserving and enriching those memories, to continue thereby into an ideal future. Memory is the resistance to impermanence. Thought, therefore, when contacting the new, sees only itself and tries to bring the new into line therewith. If that can be done, the new will be acceptable, for it will strengthen the old idea and the new ideal; if it cannot be done, the new will be opposed as being dangerous to the projection into the future, and harmful to the continuation of the old. And so, there has been really no contact of understanding at all, but only a contact of grasping through the process of cognition, the process of the mental aggregates of grasping (*upādānakkhandha*) in reception (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*) and conception (*sañkhāra*), which then constitute a thought of consciousness (*viññāṇa*). There has been no understanding, because there has been no approach with an open mind, sincere, unbiased and unconditioned. There was only an approach of grasping and assimilation into the already conditioned framework of past memory, which is the “I”.

As we have seen already, that conditioned framework is the fixture of the “I”, without which there could be no “I”. The “self”, in order to be at all, has to continue, has to project its memory as an image into the ideal, has to make itself permanent. Permanency, endurance, continuance, is essential to the existence of “self”. And thus, when this ideal is confronted with the impermanent, there is bound to be a clash of opposition, of rejection, of conflict,

in the attempt to bring the impermanent into the framework of the ideal permanent.

The permanent is the ideal, the hope of continuity, the expectation of security of that which has been built up in the past to form the "I". This "I" is not what appears now as transient phenomena, but what it has been made to appear as its ideal. It actually is the sum-total of the influences of society and education, the conditionings of culture and tradition, the fears and hopes instilled by religious beliefs and morals, the associations with political and philosophic views, the learning and practice of books and rules, the belonging to a race, the feelings of nationality, the adherence to a creed, the acceptance of authority, the membership of institutions with varying interests, the dependence on the views of others, the fear of public opinion, the attachment to family, relations and friends with similar views and interests, dependence on property, inherited or acquired, on qualifications of learning or experience, dependence on the esteem of others, on their flattering agreement, on their recognition, on a job or income. To realise what all that means, just think for a moment, what "I" would be without all that. It is no more a question whether the "I" can endure without all this; for it simply is all this. And without it there just is no "I".

Can such a "self" which is built for security and endurance ever meet impermanence without condemnation or rejection? And can such meeting in opposition ever be in understanding with an open and unconditioned mind? Every thought is impregnated with the greed for self-protection, fully biased in hope and fear; can such thought ever see anything direct and not distorted, free and unconditioned?

Well, that is conflict which is the fear of loss (*vyāsana*), which is the pain of disagreement (*asāta*), which is the despair of unrest (*upāyāsītatta*): to see the unwanted, to feel the insecurity, to sense the void of "self". It is the fear of self-knowledge which prevents self-understanding. The "I" just cannot afford to look at itself, in fear of dissolution. And yet, that "self" has to go on, has to

continue in all its pretence and hypocrisy, or die in truth. And so there is no way to a gradual ending of that “self”: either one sees, or one refuses to see. There is no solution to this problem, which would be a compromise and an escape. There is only the dissolution which is the ending of this conflict, the ending of a distorted vision of a deluded mind. Why does the mind not see? Because it does not want to see. It is the fear of finding that there is no hope of escape.

Conflict exists only when impermanence is seen, but not wanted. The mind which has understood conflict in impermanence (*anicca-dukkha saññā*) is free from it.

For this understanding, which does not come about through logic which is thought, not through striving which is desire, not through concentration which is an escape—for such understanding it is necessary to have direct insight. But insight which is direct perception is prevented by the distortions of desire, of prejudice, of conclusions, of clinging, of conditioning in the anxiety for security. There must be direct and open understanding of those distortions as distortions, as misshapen reflections in a curved mirror. For, in understanding there is no fear; and without fear there is no conflict. Fear is not of the unknown; it is the dread of losing all that which constitutes the “I”, all its images and pretensions; it is fear to acknowledge the fact that without this entire build-up there is no “self” to continue, to become, to be secure, to be permanent. It is fear of an image, of losing that image.

And what happens when that image is gone? With it go all those distortions and prejudices, all hopes and fears, all conclusions and conditionings, all dictates and anxieties. It is to be free and without conflict. Only then can impermanence be seen as impermanence, which is a fresh awakening every moment with the impossibility of clinging to it, just because it is impermanent, and because there is no “self” to turn it into an image to worship and to possess. That is the joy of creation, of living without fear and without conflict.

Perception of the Void in Conflict

We have been speaking of understanding which does not come through learning from books, but which comes through seeing, direct seeing, unbiased seeing, seeing without projection, without ideal, without background. That kind of seeing is insight which alone is understanding. Such understanding comes as a destructive flash of lightning. And one is afraid of destruction; and so one avoids it, one makes secure against it and the conflict continues without understanding.

There is much gratification in life, even though it is not lasting and cannot give security. It makes one forget, for a moment or two, and then again the hankering comes for more, and the search for security is on again. It is not the gratification one wants, but the temporary forgetting and the security it provides, as an escape, from the ever recurring conflict. One searches for an escape, but the escape itself is the conflict between the actual and the idea. One cannot let the ideal go, because it is the only thing which makes the "I" continue. Understanding, therefore, is dangerous to relationship and to the entire course of living, thinking and acting. Understanding is dangerous to the "I". And so one has to choose, and is afraid to choose.

To be is to act; but every act is a choice (*cetanā*) and in choice there is conflict (*dukkha*). Existence is not possible without conflict, as long as there is choice. Is it possible to live without choice

and hence without conflict? We have seen what conflict is, conflict in impermanence (*anicca-dukkha*); we have seen that conflict is in the approach of the mind to the perception of impermanence (*anicca-saññā*), in its choice of the concept of permanence, the ideal. It is then this concept of permanence, this ideal of continuance, which has to be perceived and understood in its place in the approach to the problem of conflict. It is in this understanding that the unity of the three essentials will become most clear, for when the concept of permanence is understood and disposed of in the void of non-entity (*anatta*), the problem of conflict will be solved also in that same understanding of the unsubstantiality of conflict (*dukkha-anatta, saññā*).

What is then this substance, believed to support the phenomena; what is this entity which holds together all appearances; what is this soul which binds together all material and spiritual qualities; what is this essence which is the backbone of all existence; what is this abstract form which gives shape to all concrete expression; what is this "self" which stands aloof from all others; what is this individual which is distinct in personality, in action, in thought; what is this thinker, this actor, apart from thought and action; what is this permanent entity which remains unaffected by universal change and impermanence; what is this being which is not subject to becoming and ceasing? Who is this watcher who can remain aloof from his choice? Why is there choice?

Choice is the mechanical response to memory, which is the accumulated selection of past experiences. In the present moment of experiencing, in the fullness of that moment of being, there is no thought about an experiencer who can stand aloof and watch. If that were so, the experiencer is a watcher and is not involved in the experience at all. And yet, to retain that experience of the moment and continue in it, the experience has to be preserved by mind in thought, in memory. Thus is created the onlooker, the spectator, the knower of the memory of the experience; but that is not the experiencer; that is only the memory which tries to continue, when the actual experiencing is no more. It is that memory

which selects what is favourable for continuance, flattering for existence, gratifying for sense-satisfaction. Thus it is memory which creates the “self”, the onlooker, the storekeeper, who selects, who chooses, who is the cause of conflict; for, existence is not possible without conflict, as long as there is choice.

Choice becomes necessary when conflict is felt in opposition without understanding. The conflict of opposition is destructive to continued existence, and thus opposition must be eliminated by suppression or sublimation, by conquest or submission, as long as there is continued existence. And so, choice in opposition becomes necessary for existence. Such striving for continuation is, however, only the striving for an ideal, a concept, which is the choice made by mind in the face of opposition. It is the mind, in need of continuance, being a “self” in opposition to non-self, which has created this ideal of an entity, which remains permanently as a substance underlying the changing phenomena, as an essence in abstraction, supporting the actual existence which is fleeting, as a soul which will live on for ever after discarding its instrument, the body.

In making this “self” secure, the mind has invented an elaborate system of religion, of philosophy, of theology, to prove the existence of this essence, to convince itself that there is an ultimate security, an eternal rest after striving, an attainable goal of achievement. To see and understand this process of “self”-making is to dissolve its arguments and basis, so that there is no food for thought, no feeding the emotions, so that the mind remains open and free to see what is. It is to see and understand the perception of that void of “self” (*anatta saññā*), and in that perception also see the void of conflict (*dukkha-anatta saññā*).

Self-knowledge has been advocated by all great thinkers from the time of the beginning of analysis of thought by the ancient Greek philosophers, when they reduced all knowledge to that recurrent maxim: “Know thyself”. It is the ultimate search for realisation in the still older Vedic writings, the search for the *paramātman*, in delusion separated from the Brahman, as the

relative separated from the absolute, ultimately to be re-united with its source. It is the basis of all religions, whose system of morality is founded on the salvation of an eternal soul through grace and through prayer with good works. It is the key-stone of the many systems of philosophy, especially the idealistic schools, even when the search for “self” is camouflaged by a postulate of a substance or a categorical necessity, a divine essence in existence.

This search was on at full strength during the lifetime of the Buddha who, in the first sermon recorded in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, enumerates and classifies sixty-two different schools of thought, claiming to have discovered this essential entity in the various mental aggregates, a “self” possessing them or being possessed by them, independent of or depending on matter or mind, etc. Ultimately rejecting them all as so many wrong views (*micchā-diṭṭhi*), basing their opinions on phenomena without understanding them, thus being enmeshed in this net (*jāla*) of theories and wishful thinking. Still, it is the one question to be answered before anything else and on the answer of which depends the stability of the entire structure of traditional metaphysics. But, instead of analysing the concept of “self”, instead of approaching the concept with an enquiring mind to find out why such a concept should have arisen at all, the many systems provide us with many proofs of the necessity of such an entity, of the existence thereof, of its function and nature. And so, argumentation has taken the place of analysis, and faith is trying to supersede understanding.

But logic in reasoning⁹ cannot solve the problem, because it presupposes that which it is out to prove. Then logic becomes a sophism: *petitio principii*.

The first alleged proof is taken from external evidence, namely the opinion of all men; if all people agree upon one point, it is said to be the voice of nature which cannot err; it is said that all people

⁹The following notes are extracts from Bhikkhu Dhammapāla’s *Broadcasts on Buddhism* (July 1943) published under that title by the Y.M.B.A., Colombo in 1944, most of it reprinted without permission and without acknowledgement by G.P. Malalasekera in *Aspects of Reality*, Wheel Publication No. 127 in 1968.

at all times have been convinced of a continued existence after death. Now, this argument loses its very foundation, because not all men believe in a soul. One sixth of the world's population is Buddhist and denies the existence and the very idea of a soul; further there are millions of atheists and scientific men who have lost all faith in God, soul and religion; who have turned completely materialists; who, even if some of them accept the existence of a substance underlying the phenomenal, will consider this to be of a purely material substance dependent on, and perishing together with, the co-existing form; further still, even the majority of the so-called believers are so only in name, for they contradict their faith by their deeds whenever they commit a "mortal" sin, that is condemning their souls to eternal damnation for the sake of a short lived satisfaction, which they certainly will never would do if they really believed in an eternal soul. Thus, there remains only a very small minority who truly and actually believe in their soul and the salvation thereof. And as their belief is based on emotion and devotion, they certainly cannot claim to echo the voice of nature. For their conviction is not even a natural growth of mental development, but rather a remnant of the childish submission in their youth to the dogmatic interpretation by ecclesiastical authorities. This kind of blind faith, which, enforced upon the child, remains sometimes a habit in uneducated adults, is in reality the crudest form of religion, hardly to be distinguished in degree from the superstitious practices of primitive tribes.

But, moreover, what is this voice of nature? It is nothing else but the collection of individual opinions, just as a nation is the collection of persons, born and living in the same country. If one individual can err, so can two or three or a thousand, or a million, and even all. Thus the fact of general opinion, even of the whole human race, should never be overestimated. In the past we have seen how the strongest convictions about the heavens and the earth have crumbled up, so that now they seem ridiculous to us. Yet in their days people have even made the sacrifice of their lives for convictions, generally disbelieved then,

but now equally generally accepted; which is only another way of saying that general opinion has changed. Only 400 years ago the mass of civilized humanity laboured under the delusion that the sun goes round the earth; that this forms the centre of the universe. Copernicus stood practically alone opposing not only what was then said to be common sense, but also divine revelation and the authority of the Bible. Galileo was jailed and by threat of torture compelled to disavow his former opinions because his telescope contradicted the sacred texts. Because Giordano Bruno dared to draw some inferences from the Copernican theory contrary to the Scholastic philosophy of the Church based on Aristotle, he was excommunicated and handed over to the secular authorities with a recommendation of a “punishment as merciful as possible and without shedding of blood”, the atrocious formula for burning alive. He perished in the flames, turning his eyes away from the crucifix which was held up to him, the victim of theological stupidity and self-applauding intolerance, the martyr for freedom of thought. It was, and still is the common daily testimony of the sense of sight of every being, that the sun does move round the earth. And yet, that sense of sight, that common sense, that general opinion, that divine revelation, that biblical authority, were clearly mistaken and false. The same happens even nowadays, and might happen over and over again. What was only yesterday proved by science and tested in practice, is overthrown, today by some newer theories equally proved and tested and universally accepted, till tomorrow some more advanced theories are brought forward, explaining the same facts quite differently, but more logically and more according to the truth.

Thus it will be seen that a general, or even a universal agreement of opinion is no sign of proof of the truth. To say then that the voice of nature, if there would be any such thing, cannot err is neither induction, i.e., a conclusion from individual experience to a general truth or principle, nor deduction, i.e., an application of a universal characteristic to individual cases. It is merely bad

logic based on sentiment rather than on reason. In this way then we have disposed of external evidence in favour of the soul-idea in two ways, namely in so far as we have shown that the existence of a soul is not the universal opinion, and even if it were so, it would prove nothing. It may be true that all people at all times believe in existence after death; even Buddhists accept this doctrine; but existence after death does not involve a permanent existence after death, neither the existence of a permanent soul. Even the Hindus, who believe in transmigration of soul as opposed to a soulless rebirth as in Buddhism. do not really believe in individual, permanent souls; for, according to Vedanta the soul after transmigration through many lives in Samsāra will be reunited, re-absorbed in Brahman from where it was emanated in the beginning of its wandering. There its individual existence will have come to an end.

External evidence thus having failed, we come to a whole series of arguments, alleged to be proofs from internal evidence. Internal evidence means evidence which manifests itself not directly in its existence, but only indirectly through the manifestation of action. Thus, when a car-tyre goes flat we may safely conclude that there must be a hole in the tube or a leak in the valve, even if we cannot discern it with the eye; for if there were no hole, the air would not have escaped. Similarly, from the working of the intellect we may draw some conclusions with regard to the nature of the intellect.

Now the mind is said to have universal or general ideas. Though John Locke, the English philosopher of the 17th century, in his doctrine of ideas maintained that universal ideas stand for individual objects, which are real in the context of experience, this would be a proof for the materiality of universals, rather than for anything else. There will be, however, few supporters of the soul-theory, if any, to support this opinion, for, if universal ideas stand for individual objects, they would cease to be universal.

And that is exactly our point of view. Berkeley, though, a bishop of the Church of England, and an idealist in the fullest sense, thought rightly that all ideas are particular; things or objects as presented are individual; they are given together with the relations, each of which may be described by concrete reference to the presented object or event. Thus there is no such thing as shape. Apart from the objects possessing shape, nor colour apart from objects having colour, or any idea of motion except as bodies moving (*Principles of Human Knowledge*). The idea of a triangle is dependent on the knowledge of various types of triangles. The idea of colour has no reality, cannot be thought of except as red or blue or white, etc. And so, universality has no meaning apart from the relationship of particulars. An idea is general only in so far as it stands for particulars of the same kind. We speak of humanity. It is true, the idea maintains even though individuals die and are born, even though after a hundred years the whole human race has been renewed. But still the idea is only possible as a collective noun through knowledge of individuals. Thus the idea is based on, and derived from, material experience, and therefore cannot be said to be immaterial. A further proof that the so-called universal or general ideas are based on a material foundation can be obtained from the fact that, if the material experience is insufficient or wrong, the so-called general idea will suffer from the same deficiency. When experience grows, ideas become enlarged, so that the most general or universal idea is dependent on the largest amount of individual, particular experience, which is always material and impermanent.

If, therefore, universal ideas do not contain anything immaterial, the intellect itself cannot be said to be immaterial. Thus, even if there would be a soul, we might conclude from its material action that it too would be material. But material is composed, hence it is also decomposable or impermanent.

Once it is admitted that everything is received according to the nature of the receiver, it will have to be admitted also that as the mind has many times very material and materialistic

ideas, thoughts of lust and hate, of profit and comfort, that those thoughts must come from a material source. If, therefore, the soul is said to be that source, it is a very material soul indeed; decomposable also, because it is material and impermanent and no "soul" at all.

Another argument from internal evidence brought forward to prove the existence of an immaterial and permanent soul is taken from the fact that the mind seems to have immaterial concepts such as unity, truth, virtue, justice. Those concepts, however, are not truly immaterial as they have been derived from material experience. The idea of unity arose only when, after counting for a long time with beads or beans, we were able to substitute units for those objects. Unity is nothing but uniformity from a certain point of view, while the differences are intentionally overlooked. Even unity and order in nature, on which science has built its laws and axioms, have no real existence, but are based on experiment and observation, hence thoroughly material, and can easily be overturned by new observation and experiment. Even a thousand scientific experiments do not definitely prove that and make it a law, but one single experiment can upset the law and prove its invalidity.

Just as physical phenomena do not follow an absolutely rigorous necessity, but permit a contingency, incalculable as chance, so the mind does not follow any fixed law. Though conditioned and influenced, its choice cannot be predicted; and so, the alleged perfect regularity, uniformity, necessity of things is a mental fiction, a proof of the possibility of mental aberration in its lack in actuality, rather than of immateriality.

Likewise, truth, virtue, justice, etc. are only ideas resulting from the association of different experiences; they are dependent on education, and that is not even a sign of reason, still less of immateriality. For even a dog can learn to do many things and finally come to 'understand' that, putting up his right paw means a piece of cake. Education, which is nothing but mental training, brings ideas together; and once they are associated, the point

of connection might become hidden in the sub-conscious mind. The real connection being forgotten or suppressed, the mind will try to establish an artificial link, which is called rationalisation. If ideas such as virtue and justice were really immaterial and permanent, they ought to remain the same unaltered in different times and climes.

But the association of ideas depends on acquired learning and cannot, therefore, be an inherent natural action of a permanent soul. Thus, a Christian who keeps two wives is guilty of bigamy and is considered as very immoral. But a Muslim can be very virtuous in the legal possession of even more than two. That morality changes is a truism. Not so very long ago slavery was deemed right, encouraged by the State, sanctioned by the Church; but that way of thinking has given place to a morality which judges slavery to be wrong, because it assigns higher values to human personality. A few hundred years ago any father had the right of life and death over his own children; nowadays we have even laws for the prevention of cruelty against animals. The moral laws which prevail here in Kāmaloka, the sphere of the senses, do not hold good in the heavens of Brahmaloaka. These few examples then show that abstract ideas, as virtue, justice, morality are very much impermanent and can, therefore, not be the expressions of a permanent soul.

But then, the mind can conceive essential ideas, it is said, expressing the intrinsic nature of things, such as definitions which comprise the common genus and the "specifying difference", which set forth the exact meaning, nature and class inherent in individual objects. These are said to be unchangeable and can therefore only be conceived by an unchangeable, permanent entity or soul. Definitions are said to have originated from Socrates, while Plato built up a system of eternal ideas. But definitions have as little reality about them as a mathematical problem. They may be useful and even necessary for logical distinction and classification, but they cannot be said to be either permanent or

impermanent, because they are mere mental concepts, and have no existence outside the human brain.

Definitions, essential ideas, so-called eternal principles, are all based on material experience and exist only in particulars, in individual thoughts. It is the very nature of essence to be particularised. It is true that we try to separate the idea of man, that is, mankind, from this or that individual. But at once we find it impossible for the essential idea to exist separately and equally impossible to unite it with the individual, as we do not see any relation. This unnatural and illogical position arises from the mistake of trying to separate the two: essence exists only in particulars, in existence which is individual and not general. Thus, they are not unchangeable in this sense that the objects to which they refer and on which they depend are changeable and impermanent. These particulars being material, so are, therefore, definitions and essences, abstractions and universals.

The last arrow on the bow of internal evidence from the intellectual powers is the reflex idea. In reflection, thought becomes the object of thought. And here certainly, say the upholders of the soul theory, is nothing material. According to Buddhism the mind is classed as a sense, the internal sense, and thus we have two sources of ideas: sensations which have come through the external sense-doors, eye for sight, year for sound, nose for odour, tongue for taste, and the whole body for touch, and sensations furnished by the mind of its own operations, which is reflection. Thus, reflection is the knowledge of perceived sensations. When sensations are material and are perceived in material sense-organs, how then can the knowledge thereof become at once immaterial? Reflex ideas are experienced also in animals; they too show to have memory, attachment, revenge. Yet, nobody will maintain that animals have an immortal soul, for never yet has a dog been baptised to save his soul from eternal damnation. But if animals can have reflections without a permanent soul, why should a soul be postulated in the case of humans?

Separate from the intellect there is another power in man,

which is the subject of much controversy, and that is the will. The supporters of the soul-theory try to make the working of the powers of the will dependent on the soul they imagine; and just as they claimed for the power of the intellect, so they claim for the will-power to be immaterial because it strives (they say) not only after material and particular good things, but for the absolute good. This, however, is not correct, because the absolute good cannot even be known; would it be known, it would cease to be absolute and become relative to the knower. What cannot be known, cannot be desired or willed, and such a general object cannot have any attractive power. No man can love the most beautiful woman in the world without knowing her, though even that is still rather material. One always strives for some particular good which is always material. "Immoral objects" do not exist. This is a mere phrase, meaningless in itself.

It is maintained, however, that some will-objects are unchangeable, e.g. it is always good to respect, one's parents. But if such respect would include even obedience with regard to evil, it would no longer be good and thus no fitting will-object. Whatever is good or bad is only so with respect to its good or bad effects. *Kamma* is only *kusala*, that is, skilful and wholesome, if there is a skilful effect (*kusala vipāka*). And as the effect or the result is always particular and a concrete instance, the action and volition must be of the same kind.

From this follows a last objection, namely the freedom of the will. In inorganic matter we see a rigid determinism towards a certain end, but in similar circumstances man remains free and master over his actions, which clearly shows his superiority over and independence from matter. Thus, if the will is free, that is, independent, it must be immaterial and then also permanent. But, this discussion on the freedom of will is usually opened from the wrong perspective. For, whether one accepts the freedom of the will or rejects its independence, in both cases the will is taken as an entity, as something existent, be it free or be it bound. Will, however, can neither be said to be free, nor bound,

because it is non-existent. It merely arises, whenever there is a possibility of choice. If there is nothing to choose from, there can be no question of willing. On the other hand, the possibility of choosing shows the presence of two opposites or more. Their very presence shows that there is an influence and that the choice is conditioned. The possibility to choose what is wrong, therefore, also shows that the action is conditioned and not free. Even if one chooses what one knows to be harmful in some respect, there will be also some motive which brought about that choice. Knowing, e.g., that association with certain people will bring one to excessive drinking, gambling and other actions which will cause financial difficulties, deterioration of health and the ruin of family-happiness, yet one might seek that company because one lacks the moral strength to break with them.

To show one's courage and to imagine one's independence are sufficient unconscious motives to influence and determine one's choice against the better dictates of reason and common sense. Even one's pride might not allow one to go back on a previous decision, even if that is seen as harmful. If there were no attraction, no inducement, no motive, equilibrium would have been established already and no choice would take place. Thus, volition arises only when a choice becomes possible. If there is the possibility of a choice, there will be attraction and repulsion which influence the choice and make it conditioned. If there is no choice, then, of course, there is no will at all. Real freedom then does not lie in the will, but in being without will.

Having thus disposed of all the so-called proofs in favour of a permanent soul, yet there are some Western scholars in oriental languages, though not in the teachings expressed therein, who venture to offer their criticism on this most essential and distinctive mark of the teaching of the Buddha. They have tried to explain "no-self" as "self" or "soul" in the following way: When the Buddha, speaking of the components of the aggregates of

clinging (*pañc'ūpādānakkhandha*), said of each separately: “That does not belong to me; that am I not; that is not myself”, what else could he mean but that the self or soul exists separate from them? To which we answer: Had the Buddha stated simply and directly that there is no permanent ego-entity, he would have given the impression of siding with the Annihilationists against the Eternalists. Well, both schools were wrong and the Buddha wanted to show to both that they were wrong. Therefore, without saying that life comes to a complete end at death, which is the teaching of Annihilationism, he merely analysed the so-called “being”, and whatever he found of matter or of mind, he did not find a soul there. And so he denied the opposite teaching of Eternalism as well. Could he have taught us the doctrine of no-self (*anatta*) more explicitly and more impressively? Whatever there be “that does not belong to me; that am I not; that is not my self” (*n' etaṃ mama, n' esoḥam-asmi, n' eso me atta*).

There is then no sound basis for the assertion that there is a soul distinct from body and mind. A human soul cannot be distinct from human life, and human life collapses together with the body. What remains is the influence of good and bad deeds, which will be the cause of good and bad in another life. But that is not my “self”. There is no soul, there is no self, no permanent “I” or ego-entity. But there pulses on a flux, a process of life, of action and reaction, which rises and falls as the waves of the ocean. Those waves will come to rest and that process will come to a stop, when all desires are stifled, because “I” is an expression of selfishness, of craving. When craving has gone, no “I” will be left.

If the teaching of the Buddha is rightly said to be beyond sophistry (*atakkāvacara*), it is never more so than with regard to the teaching of soullessness (*anatta*), because any reasoning, even the purest logic, will presuppose the “ego” in thinking, as Descartes did: “I think, therefore I am” (*cogito ergo sum*). The burden of proof is not on those who do not believe in a soul. And soullessness cannot be proved with reason, just as darkness

cannot be seen by introducing a light. Darkness can be experienced only when all light is quenched. Likewise soullessness, the insubstantiality of phenomena, can only be realised when all selfishness is excluded. When the craving of “mine” and the pride which says “I am” have vanished then the error of self-delusion (*sakkāya diṭṭhi*) cannot arise.

Now, having totally rejected the concept of an individual and permanent entity, in the sense of a physical substance or a spiritual soul, how does this negative knowledge fit into our scheme of thought? How does it affect our mode of thinking? how is it to be related and experienced in our approach to the problem of conflict? As long as this theory of no-soul remains an intellectual exercise, it may be interesting as a pass-time, it may be valuable as mental escape, but it certainly will not be that mark of distinction, singled out by the Buddha as the foundation of his teaching. And failing to do that, there is no essential difference between this and other systems of living and thinking.

This soullessness of everything, physical and mental, is indeed the very essence of the Buddha’s doctrine. Impermanence is so obvious and universal, that theologians had to go out of their way to create a soul-concept for their desire for continuance to hang on to. This soul-theory is in a way more important in various religions than the concept of God as divine creator, a personal and individual absolute; for what possible use can there be for a divine existence, if the individual cannot continue, so as to be in a permanent relation thereto.

And so, there remain two points to be considered:

One, what is the relationship of this negative knowledge with the problem of conflict, as life has been seen to consist of? And how is this understanding of “no-self” an essential feature, a mark, a distinct doctrine of the highest importance, as a mere negation?

Two, Why should there be this widespread emotional need for belief in a soul, when the intellect contradicts it?

Conflict is known at every level of our existence. In nature there is the struggle for the survival of the fittest. In the mind

there is the conflict of becoming, a conflict between what is and what is desired. Conflict is a fact which cannot be denied, as it is there within and without. Man's very progress and advance in science, medicine and mode of living, has been made possible through his struggle with his beliefs and outdated views. Conflict is a fact; but is it essential for living?

What is essential is an indispensable quality of intrinsic nature. And thus the question is: Is conflict indispensable to the intrinsic nature of living? We know by experience, by observation, by memory, that all life as we know it is conflict. Life as we know it is a bundle of material and mental factors. The mind is a bundle of sensations (*vedanā*), perceptions (*saññā*), ideations (*saṅkhāra*) and thoughts (*viññāṇa*); ideations are mental concepts and compositions of various forms of greed (*lobha*) and hate (*dosa*); thoughts are reflections based on those compounds and stored in memory which is dead knowledge or ignorance (*moha*, *avijjā*). All together they form that delusion of a "self", which cannot endure without projection, but which in itself is void (*anatta*).

Is all this indispensable to the intrinsic nature of living? Living is not the memory of a dead past; it is not a mental projection into an unborn future. Living is the actual meeting of a challenge, which has no value and cannot be met if not understood in the present. To see and understand the challenge is a direct perceiving without prejudice or condemnation. It is without conflict because it is not conditioned by thought, memory or idea; it is without conflict and without opposition, because there is no "self" in it intrinsically. Thus, essentially there is no conflict; if there is, it is introduced by thought. We have seen already, how this essence is not to be understood as a philosophical abstraction, as an absolute reality underlying the phenomena and supporting them. It is that which makes a thing what it is. It is as the perfume of a flower, the colour of the rainbow, the intelligent insight of the mind. Reason may give shape and value and all things which

provide attraction. But reason changes with the fashions, so that good reasons cease to be the real reasons.

Essence is that which accounts for existence, it is the *raison d'être*, the actuality of reality, the living of life. It is only insight which can see and understand this essence, while mere thought, which is conditioned by memories and ideal, cannot see independently and be free. In conditioned thought there is no freedom of insight. Thus, when there is conflict, it is memory which compares and judges, condemns and rejects, according to the standards of the past, established by tradition and faith. It is thought projected as an ideal which strives to attain and to become. But there is no understanding of the actual conflict, as long as there is a rejection through comparison or a projection through desire. Yet it is in conflict that this process of rejection and projection can be observed. And thus it is conflict that contains the essence of insight (*dukkha-anatta saññā*).

Hence, instead of trying to escape from conflict, it should be welcomed as an opportunity to see life in action, mind in reaction, memory as clinging to the past, ideals as escapes into the future. A conflict is not a problem to be solved, but a misunderstanding to be understood. When thus a conflict reveals its very nature, its essence being a "self" wanting to become more "self", then the insight thereof releases the perfume of freedom. In that freedom, there can be action through understanding which is not conditioned by any thought of "self".

This, then, is the relationship between the conflict in impermanence (*anicca-dukkha*) and the perception of the non-entity, the voidness of this conflict (*dukkha-anatta saññā*). The conflict itself is meaningless because its basis of the resistance of an ideal "self" against the actuality of impermanence is the basis of voidness, of non-entity. Thus the conflict itself is not only impermanent, but it is essentially conceptual, conceived by, and existing in the mind only. This is made into an essential ingredient of living, because of the desire for continuity, because of the psychological necessity of the "I" to continue. Unless the "I" continues, there is nothing to

strive for, even if striving means struggle and conflict. Struggle is the essence of self-continuity; and so, when continuance is made essential, the “I” too is made into the ideal of a permanent “soul” without which there can be no endurance.

In the realisation of this essentially characteristic mark of distinction, of the non-existence of any permanent essence, there is also realised the non-existence of conflict. Conflict due to ignorance ceases to be with the arising of understanding. It is the dissolution of the problem, of all problems, based on misunderstanding, on the misconception of separateness, of opposition, of conflict.

It is significant that after listening to the Buddha’s first sermon on the four Noble Truths and the path thereto, only one of the five disciples, Kondañña, was able just to enter that path. A further exposition by the Buddha on the mark of soullessness (*anatta-lakkhaṇa*) was necessary to make them all five realise that “beyond this there is no more”.

The load of life laid low,
The precious price is paid;
The waves of well and woe
Of stormy stream are stayed.

The direst duty’s done,
A ten-fold tiger tamed;
The weary war is won,
The timeless term obtained.

About the Author

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

He died on September 15th in 1988.