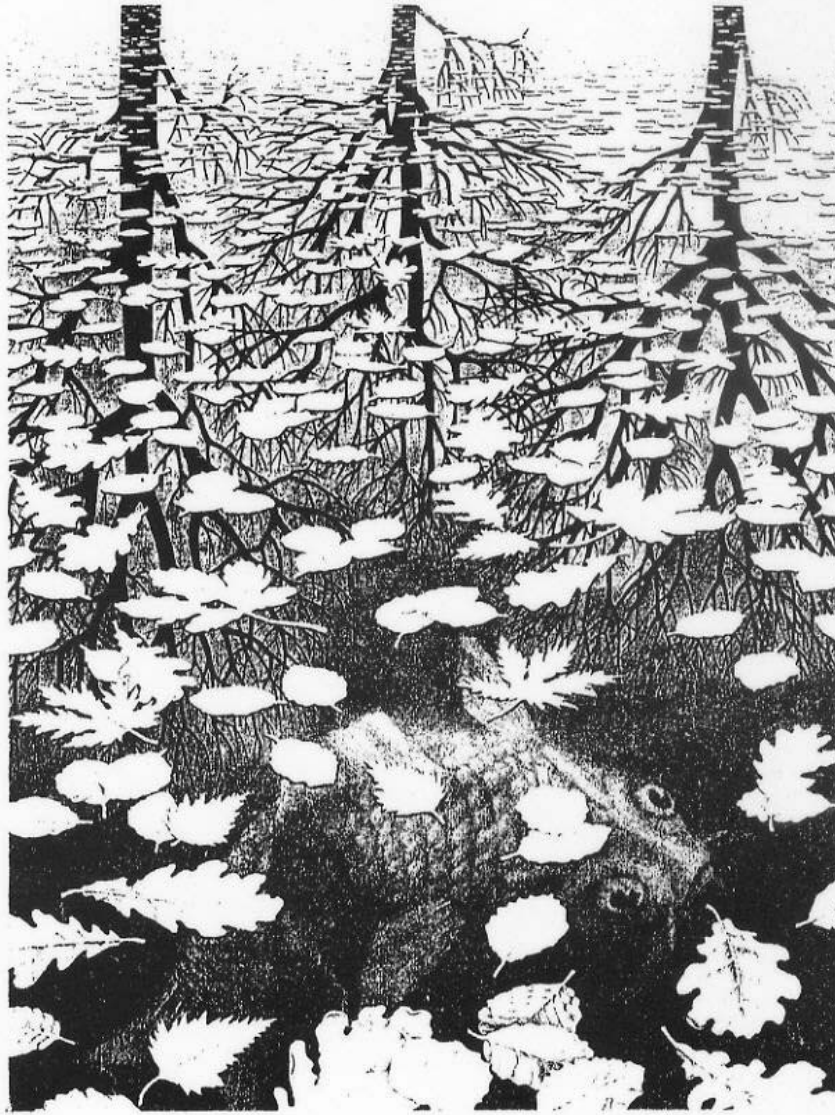
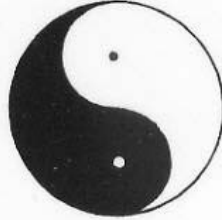


# AS IT IS



BY

**ABHINYANA**



IN THE BLACK,  
THERE IS SOME WHITE;  
IN THE WRONG,  
THERE IS SOME RIGHT;  
IN THE DARK,  
THERE IS SOME LIGHT;  
IN THE BLIND,  
THERE IS SOME SIGHT.

**DEDICATION ...**

*I wish to dedicate this book to anyone who is humble, courageous, and sincere enough to admit and to say: "I don't know," and whose minds, therefore, are not fully made up.*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION .....	5
WORLD VIEWS .....	7
LOONY LORD COLIN .....	13
IF ... ..	21
THE BEST TEACHER I EVER HAD .....	29
IMAGES .....	33
SEARCHING TOO HARD .....	41
DISASTER .....	47
KNOWING, NOT KNOWING .....	51
GAMBLERS, ALL .....	53
MAGIC WANDS .....	57
SEX .....	65
SAVIORS AND SUPERMEN .....	69
LOVE REVEALED .....	77
THE POTENCY OF WORDS .....	79
ANCIENT ROOTS .....	87
GRATITUDE IS THE KEY .....	93
PRINCIPLES .....	101
SCAPEGOATS .....	107
EXPERIENCE IS NOT ENOUGH .....	111
WHAT IS FAIR? .....	119
DRAW NO CONCLUSIONS .....	125
BOREDOM .....	133
FREEDOM MUST BE EARNED .....	139



## INTRODUCTION

One morning, during my meditation, into my mind came the title of this book: AS IT IS. And it came before I'd written the book, whereas the titles of previous books came halfway through or near the end. So there is at least one thing different about it.

We are often torn between the actual and the ideal, between life as it is, and as we would like it to be; we live lives of dichotomy, and suffer much more than we need to do in consequence. For all our wonderful possessions, we are seldom happy, and even less contented.

At the end of 1996, I was in a bus in Kathmandu, on the way to Bhaktapur. There was a conductor collecting fares and issuing tickets, and also a young boy — 13 or 14 years old — whose job it was to call out, loudly, the destination whenever the bus stopped, and to signal the driver to continue after picking up passengers; this he did by an amazing repertoire of whistles. While the bus was moving, this boy — who would not have been paid much, and whose clothes were shabby and not-too-clean — sat on the rear seat singing his heart out, oblivious to what anyone might have thought of his out-of-tune renditions. He neither asked nor expected anything from us, but when my companions and I got down at our stop and the bus was pulling away, he leaned out of the back door and shouted: "Goodbye! I love you!"

What joy! It gave me a buzz that lasted several days! He had seen people from all over the world, with wealth beyond his wildest dreams, but he was in no way envious. Had he, in his simplicity, seen that the wealth hanging from the visitors had not brought them the happiness they sought? Not likely; he wasn't the philosopher-type. But he was content with his lot in life, living on the subsistence level, breathing in the polluted air of his once-fair valley, day in and day out bumping along in a rickety old bus, cold in

winter and hot in summer, and with little hope of improvement. Who was he, this teacher? We would consider him poor, but in one way he was richer than us. We look and search, but see not. He saw, without looking!

The ideal must be beyond our reach for a long time to come, but not so far that we give up in despair of ever being able to reach it. If we cannot completely bridge the gap between the actual and the ideal, we can bring them closer together in reconciliation, so that there is less conflict. To hope for a life without struggle, however, is both vain and unrealistic.

If we can and will break out of habitual and rigid thought-patterns, life might take on another meaning, and become more of an adventure than a drudge. It will still be as it is, but the way we perceive it will be different.

## WORLD VIEWS



**H**ow big is your world? By this, I do not mean the Planet Earth on which we all live and spin through Space. I mean your mental and spiritual horizons: How far do they extend, and how many people and things do they encompass?

By study, observation, and reflection, we may broaden our horizons, mentally, just by traveling, and coming into contact with, and living among, people of different nationalities, races, and cultures. Today, more than ever before, with jet travel within the reach of most people in the developed world, our opportunities for such broadening of the mind are immense.

Until recently, because of the centuries of Western colonization of countries in other parts of the world, Western influence was predominant. But, might there not be a turning of the tide, as other countries complete the assimilation of Western culture, and begin to export their own cultural influences to the West? Will the West—can the West—remain as it is, impervious to and unchanged by other cultural influences? To do so, it would have to make a very determined stand, which in itself would mean recognizing other influences, and thus being influenced. Even during war, there is exchange. The fact that English has become the main international language makes of it a conduit for the infiltration of non-Western ideas; in opening up the world, the West has opened itself up to many things of other cultures that might otherwise have remained restricted to those cultures; because of it, for just one example, the literature—both religious and secular—of other cultures has been made available to the English speaking world, without ordinary people needing to learn the languages it was originally written in. Is this not a great advantage? (It also greatly diminishes any excuses that we might make for not knowing about other



religions and cultures, and for ignorantly thinking that our religion and culture is and must be the best merely because it is ours). Moreover, with an international language like English, we can go more or less anywhere, and stand a good chance of finding someone with whom we can speak English. We all have world views—that is, ways of looking at and considering the world—but while some of us have broad and wide world views, the world views of others are narrow and cramped. Many years ago, I worked in a factory in England with people whose views of foreigners were appallingly narrow and prejudiced; none of them, at that time, had traveled abroad, and some of them had not been very far from their home town, and this was probably the reason for their small mindedness; if they had been abroad they might have understood, while there, that they were foreigners too; on the other hand, though, they might not have done this and continued to think of the people in those lands as foreigners and themselves as not. It is hard for some people to open their eyes and minds. When I began to travel in other countries, and live with people of different nationalities, races, and religions, I came to see that, though there are, of course, differences between people, the things we have in common—the similarities, the humanness in us all—far outweigh the differences; had I not been able to see this, my mind would never have permitted me to travel so freely, and live with so many people other than those of my own nationality and race. As it is, for many years, I have given blood regularly, in whatever country I happen to be in when it's time to give again. My blood probably flows now in the veins of people of many different nationalities and races; hopefully, those who received the blood I donated didn't object to receiving the blood of a 'foreigner. My world view has expanded, and I do not think in terms of just one country, or one nationality, and although I do recognize that there are various skin-colors in the world, we are all members of the human race. The time is hopefully near when people will no longer be required to state their race in answer to questions on forms for immigration purposes or such like, or could write with immunity: Human. Of course, my understanding of Dharma—as far as that extends—has helped me tremendously with this, for it reveals how 'all beings are friends in suffering'—and not just human beings, either, but all beings, from the tiniest to the greatest. This is a stupendous thing to contemplate. In fact, because it is so all embracing,



excluding nothing and nobody, it is the most complete world view imaginable; but to live by it is quite another thing. For most of us it is, and will remain for a very long time, an ideal and not an actuality—an ideal to work towards, like a tiny spark of light in a dark night. A Buddha is someone who has realized that ideal, and has made it His own, someone who has left behind the narrow idea of self and, identifying Himself with all, has become one with all. Compare and contrast this with the world view of Thomas Aquinas, one of the main theological pillars of the Catholic Church, who is regarded as a saint. He stated (but we must realize that it was his own subjective opinion, and might even call it his own delusion): "Next to contemplating God, the greatest pleasure of the blessed ones in Heaven will be to watch the tortures of those burning in Hell." And an earlier Church Father, Augustine of Hippo (also called 'Saint'), after his conversion and baptism into Christianity, wrote: "Wondrous depth of Thy words, whose surface, behold! is before us, inviting to little ones; yet are they a wondrous depth, O my god, a wondrous depth! It is awful to look therein; yes ... an awfulness of honor, and a trembling of love. Thine enemies thereof [referring to pagans, or non-Christians], I hate vehemently; oh, that Thou wouldst slay them with Thy two-edged sword that they might no longer be enemies to it; for so do I love to have them slain!" This was written by a follower of someone who prayed for the forgiveness of his enemies even while He was hanging on the cross!

On the other hand, the greatest Christian of them all—Francis of Assisi—prayed thus: "LORD, make me an instrument of Thy Peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.

"O DIVINE MASTER grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love; for it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life".

Whether we are followers of the Christian religion or not, we cannot fail to admire the magnanimity—the Dharma—of this. In spite of the prevalence of war, the exploitation of the poor by the rich (or of some of the poor by some of the rich, not all), in spite of famine and man-made conditions that result in the death-by-starvation and disease of millions, in spite of religious fanaticism and its concomitant excesses like terrorism and 'holy war', we are, I am sure, making progress and moving in the right direction, even if only slowly, painfully, and unsteadily. The picture is not completely bleak. The United Nations Organization, although it is bureaucratically top-heavy and largely effete, with its officials getting huge salaries for doing very little, is a product of our times, and we should see it in a positive light despite all its deficiencies. For, just as it arose from the ruins of The League of Nations, if it collapses, in turn, something else will arise, phoenix-like, from its ashes, and will hopefully be better able to deal with the problems that will exist then, as now. We soon forget the past, and find it hard to imagine what the world was like without such an international body, (before which legitimate complaints could be brought with some hope of redress), when empires were won by the sword and the gun, and retained by the winners for as long as they could, and when international opinion counted for little, and could be safely flouted. The cynics in our midst will say that nothing much has changed, and that international opinion still counts for little. But it counted for far less before, and half a loaf is always better than none.

We should not be too starry eyed, and expect all problems to be resolved immediately merely because there is such a body as the U. N., for the problems it must deal with are not created by controllable and programmable machines, but by governments and states composed of people who are imperfect, and the U. N. itself is made up of the same imperfect species. Therefore, we must be prepared to stumble along, make mistakes and sacrifices, and suffer, as we have done for as long as man has been man. But it would help if we could get rid of the debilitating idea that man is a degenerate creature, a sinner who went wrong a long time ago, and has suffered as a result ever since. ("Human history is not a decline from

primeval perfection, as in Genesis, but a slow and painful ascent.")<sup>1</sup> If we did, we would take heart from the incredible success we have had so far, in the face of terrible obstacles, and face the future with greater fortitude.

Although Man is capable of boundless stupidity and evil, at the same time he is also capable of great goodness and wisdom, and we must not forget this, as it is our greatest treasure; if we ignore it, we might easily give up in despair and despondency. And it is the task of those who have perceived it to help others to discover it in themselves, difficult and thankless though this task often is.

We are all participants in the great drama of human history and unfoldment, not merely spectators. But to participate consciously requires interest, love, the ability to stand back and look at things in perspective, and see beyond the narrow confines and concerns of self. And an understanding of the past is essential for an understanding of the present and a vision of the future; for the present is the sum total of everything that has gone before and this, in turn, conditions the future. Therefore, pause awhile, and without haste for yet more progress, look back, and review the vast panorama of history, flinching not from the savagery, crime, and bloodshed, for these are ineradicable parts of it all, and remind us where we have been, and how. They will also hold many lessons for us, and help us see what things we should try to avoid. Although it is said that history repeats itself, and mankind remakes the mistakes of the past, it must not necessarily be so; history stands there, gone but still here, ready for us to extract knowledge and wisdom from its experience. It is because we learn and benefit so much from the past that we do not need to 'invent the wheel' in every generation, but merely take up where others left off.

Scattered throughout the pages of history are countless figures from whom we can draw inspiration for our own living—sages, saints, heroes, statesmen, philosophers, inventors, discoverers, artists, poets, scientists and others who, though long dead, still live for us in the things they left behind.

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<sup>1</sup> From "The Lessons of History," by Will Durant.

Through the records that remain of their teachings, ideas, and discoveries, we still have contact with them, though their bones might have turned to dust. Looking back, therefore, and perceiving these benefactors of humanity standing out like beacons against the backdrop of the far more numerous indifferent, thoughtless, or stupid people that populate and overpopulate every age, we experience a great surge of admiration and gratitude, and a determination to contribute a little of one's own to the further unfoldment of man's collective fortunes. And so, with the past lovers of humanity behind us, reminding us, and spurring us on, we turn again to face the future, with courage and love. If we begin to think about our identity, our inquiry will lead us, before long, to the realization that who and what we are is intimately bound up with, and connected to others who, likewise, are parts of something greater than us and they; indeed we will not have gone far before it dawns on us that, as separate individuals, complete and sufficient in ourselves, we simply do not exist. Our world view then must necessarily expand, in order for us to perceive how we fit into the overall picture. In a logical sequence, love, compassion, and morality follow on from understanding life as it is.

## LOONY LORD COLIN

AS LONG AS WE persist in seeing just what we want to see, and disregarding or twisting everything else to suit our particular views and preferences, all that we might say about Truth is vain and meaningless. Moreover, much of what we call Religion is a selection of certain things made long ago by people who had, in many cases, personal aims and purposes in mind. Most people since then merely inherited their religion from others, knowing little, if anything at all of the foundations of their religion, or of how it came into being. Thus, delusion is carried over from generation to generation, and is even added to rather than reduced; it is given the sanction of time, and seldom questioned.

Sometime in 1992, while glancing through a local Melbourne newspaper (which is something I rarely do), I came across a short announcement which read: "UFO researcher seeks genuine new friendships with anyone who cares anything at all about UFO's. Come and have coffee with me anytime. Colin."

Well, I have little doubt that there are—must be, by reason of the immensity of the universe—such things as UFO's and Extra Terrestrials, and am interested in their philosophical implications. I called Colin and made an appointment to go to see him a couple of days later, at 9:30 a.m.; being an early riser myself I thought this would not be an unearthly hour to visit anyone. However, my standards of early and not-so-early were obviously not his, for when I arrived at his door and rang the bell, I was met by a long silence, until finally, he lumbered down the hallway and opened the door, clad in a scruffy old dressing-gown, still half asleep. I guessed he had been out in some distant galaxy the night before and had gotten back late. He invited me in and showed me his bookshelves, and told me to browse while he went to straighten his antennae and rinse the stardust from his eyes. I was struck by the predominance of books on the Bible and

Christianity, and (sorry if this displays bias on my part) thought: "What have I got myself into here?" There were also several framed certificates with dubious and preposterous titles like: "From Jehovah God to Colin," and "Lord Colin Something-or-other."

Anyway, I was there and could hardly leave immediately, so had to stick it out for a while, and went along with him politely while he spouted a lot of unabashed nonsense. He claimed that E.T.'s, of whom there are different kinds, of course—"MIB's" or "Men-in-black" (the bad guys, one of whom Colin said had once fired some kind of ray at him which had caused him acute headaches and nightmares ever since), and their opposites, the good guys, whose generic name I don't remember, not deeming it of great importance—had come to Earth to verify and endorse the Judaeo-Christian Bible. My reaction to this was: "Why only the Bible? There are lots of other Scriptures in the world that are regarded by their adherents as 'holy' and authentic." But he seemed to know nothing about them, which caused me to further doubt his sincerity, as I feel that a serious Ufologist, such as Erich Von Daniken (the author of the best selling book on the subject, *Chariots of the Gods*), would surely have made the effort to examine the various scriptures of the world for possible references to UFO's, and not confined his research to just one book, especially since he (Colin) had been interested in UFO's for thirty years or more. He further claimed that J.C. was an ET., and quoted his words: "My kingdom is not of this world," in support of his contention. He also showed me some photos that he had taken of 'UFO's', but they were just blurry bright spots in the sky that could have been anything, and were not at all convincing. And, needless to say, he was a veteran of so many trips in space-craft that it had become as commonplace and unremarkable as riding on Melbourne's trams! He wasn't aware that I was a monk, as I don't always wear my robes, and my hair at that time was about 1 cm long, but later, after I had told him of my opinion of the accounts of bloodshed and horrific crimes to be found in the Old Testament, and the anthropomorphic deity created by man (rather than the other way around) therein described, I revealed to him that I was a monk. He seemed a bit surprised at this, and, if I might say so, rather impressed; perhaps he'll add me as another feather in his cap, and might even consider me an E.T.! I

went on to tell him something of my 'down-to-earth' philosophy, which, while it has room for UFO's, E.T.'s, and lots of other things, is quite in contrast to his head full of scrambled ideas.

Anyway, I made an excuse to leave, and thought: "That's that; no point in pursuing it any further." A couple of days later, however, I got a call from 'Lord' Colin, inviting me over there again; he said some of his friends would like to meet me.

Well, since he didn't offer to send a UFO to pick me up, I prevaricated somewhat, and told him "maybe some other time." But, considering that there was a possibility that his friends might be a little less addled and more open-minded than him, I agreed to go when they called me again a few days later; there might be an opportunity to impart some Dharma to them, I thought.

The second visit, however, was even worse than the first because, although there was one man there who seemed to be a bit more rational than Lord Colin, the others were clearly under the sway of their silly leader. Sometime into the meeting, he asked me if I would like to see a video about UFO's, and I thought: "Well, anything's better than having to listen to twaddle from these folks," so eagerly agreed. It was a home video they had made, and one part of it showed them making a trip out to some mountain where, at night, they shone flashlights up into the sky in an attempt to attract any UFO's that might be in the vicinity.

Around Lord Colin's neck was 'a priceless crystal from Venus'—obtained during one of his trips there, no doubt—which he said enabled him to communicate with extra terrestrials in their spacecraft. Unfortunately, on that particular night no such craft responded to their signals; perhaps the E.T.'s were camera shy! Another section of the tape showed Lord Colin and some of his friends sitting in a circle, holding hands, meditating, and chanting "Om." He then said to them, "What did you get? What did you feel? Did you feel anything?" For people who are supposed to be initiates into cosmic mysteries (as they claimed) they looked very silly!



Our capacity for deceiving ourselves is so great, and we cling fiercely to anything that offers us the slightest chance to escape from, or avoid, the harsh realities of life, no matter how foolish or illogical it might be. With our beliefs and concepts, we try to measure the Immeasurable, rather like trying to empty the ocean with a spoon!

All religions advocate or prescribe codes of discipline or things to be done and not done. Such things, like prayer, meditation, fasting, donating to charity, and so on, usually differ from what people normally do in their daily lives.

Now, why does religion recommend/prescribe such disciplines, and why do people do them? Dare we ask this? Dare we go into it, and examine our motives, to find out what lies behind? It might pay dividends if we did.

Are such things expressions of our understanding; that is, do they come naturally and spontaneously? Or do we do them in order to get something back in return? What are we aiming for with our pious practices? Do we know? Are we merely following what someone has told us, or do we see, clearly, the benefits that come immediately from doing them? Do we do them because it is right to do them, as things complete in themselves, or as means to an end?

If we are aiming for Truth, or Enlightenment, God, Nirvana, or whatever name we use to designate the Absolute—supposing that there is such a thing—we should know that It—the Unconditioned—cannot be manipulated, produced, brought about or attained by any practice or practices whatsoever. We cannot go to It, for It is already Here. Thus, there is no Path or Way to It, for a Path is always something that leads from here to there, or from there to here, or somewhere else, but there is no Way to get to Here, as we are already Here, although we don't know it. All we have to do is to see It; there is nothing to attain that we have not already got. Ramana Maharishi, an Indian sage who died of cancer in 1956, said this on the subject: "Renunciation and Realization are the same; they are different

aspects of the same state. Giving up the Non-Self is renunciation; inhering in the Self is Jhana or Self-Realization. One is the negative and the other is the positive aspect of the same single truth. Bhakti, Jhana, Yoga—are different names for Self-Realization or Mukti, which is our real nature. These appear as the means first; they eventually are the goal. So long as there is conscious effort required on our part to keep up bhakti, jhana, yoga, etc., they are the means. When they go on without any effort on our part we have attained the goal. "There is no Realization to be achieved. The Real is ever as it is. What we have done is realized the unreal, that is, we have taken for real the unreal. We have only to give up that; that is all that is needed."

This is not to say that our practices are wrong; they aren't. What is wrong, or maybe not right, is how we carry them out, and why. By means of such activities, we aim to acquire something that we've already got, and often, in our haste and desire, we become fools, bigots, and hypocrites. Also, we tend to blind ourselves to what is in front of us, and bring about self-projected (self-created or imagined) ends. Thus, some Buddhists see visions of the Buddha or Bodhisattvas in forms consonant with their ethnic or cultural background (Chinese Buddhists would see the Buddha in the Chinese style, for example, as they would expect to see Him, and not in the Thai or Sri Lankan style, while Tibetan Buddhists would see Him as portrayed in Tibetan images or paintings, etc.). Likewise with people of other religions: Christians would see visions of Jesus or Mary in forms familiar to them. It is unlikely that Buddhists would see visions of Jesus or Krishna, or Christians see visions of the Buddha or Rama. But if such visions were truly what Carl Jung called 'archetypes'—that is, symbols of things universal, and therefore common to all humanity—there would be no reason at all why Christians should not see visions of the Buddha or Buddhists see visions of Jesus, and so on, for these things would transcend cultural and religious barriers. Can it be, therefore, that we see—when and if we see—only things that we have been programmed to see, and that visions are subjective—  
from the mind—rather than objective—from outside? People believe that their visions are real and objective, of course, because they want to believe, but are they, really? Are they any more 'real' than dreams, or drug-induced

hallucinations? When we dream, we think it is real at the time, and indeed, it is as real while it lasts as waking life is while we are awake. Can we say that waking life is not a dream? Can we be sure that what we are doing at this or any other moment is not a dream? When we are dreaming, do we know we are dreaming, or do we think it is real? Life as we know it is of the substance of a dream, and once something has passed out of the present into the past, we cannot be sure that it really happened, or if it was just a dream. Neither can we be sure that the present is not a dream.

Many people are familiar with the old story of a man who had a dream that he was a butterfly, flying around from flower to flower, doing what butterflies do. And when he woke up, he wasn't sure that he was a man who had had a dream that he was a butterfly, or if he was a butterfly now dreaming that he was a man!

Not long ago, I had a dream that I was being bitten by bed bugs (and I have had some experience of these creatures in India and other countries); I woke up and began looking for the bite marks on my legs, and was surprised to find there were none!

So, how can we determine what is true and what is not, what is real and what is unreal? Is it really within our capacity to do so? Or must we allow Truth—if there is such a 'thing'—to reveal itself to us, and work through us? We cannot 'practice' Truth; Truth must live in us, or manifest through us. Nor can we talk about It, as It is not a word, and any attempt to catch or measure it with words is useless. Like this, organized religion, with its theories and dogmas, does more harm than good, as it forces us into unnatural beliefs and patterns, instead of helping us to unfold and develop our potential. In short, to sum up: religion is more of a matter of learning to put something back into life than getting something out, of overcoming delusion rather than of encouraging it and of thereby discovering who we are.

As he was about to die, some disciples of Ramana Maharishi begged him not to leave them. He replied: "But I'm not going anywhere; there is nowhere to go!"



## IF ...

THE WORD "IF" consists of just two letters, but it's a big word on which so much often depends. "If only I hadn't done that!", we sometimes say, or "If it had only turned out like that instead of like this," etc. Thus, we are torn between what is and what might have been.

Because the future is not ours to see, it is inappropriate to make promises (which concern the future, not the past or the present), for between the making and the fulfillment of a promise, many things are sure to happen—some of them unforeseen— which might easily prevent the keeping of the promise. Thus, promises, when made at all, should be made with a qualifying "if" or "on condition that," so that, if something comes up to prevent the promise being carried out, there will be a reasonable excuse or justification for it, such as "There was an accident on the highway, and I got stuck in the traffic, and had to wait," or (if it really did happen), "I got a flat tire." Such mitigating circumstances are understandable and acceptable, as they are beyond our control, and were not intentionally brought about.

In making promises, as in all things, the Golden Rule should govern our conduct: "Do unto others as you would like them to do to you." Making promises with an 'if clause' can be and often is used as a way out of the promise; but, since we are not very pleased if someone uses that device upon us, we should think twice before doing it to others.

There are cases, as I have shown above, when promises cannot be kept. But, as far as possible, our given word should be of sufficient value to us that when we make any kind of arrangements with others, we should treat them as important even if they are only minor things. For if we treat small things as important the probability is that we shall also treat bigger things as important. And observant people will come to know us as dependable, so that if there is a need for assistance and someone reliable, people will

automatically think of someone they know who can be trusted, rather than of someone who has let them down in the past.

I am writing about Dharma here, and I presume that anyone reading this will be concerned enough about their own integrity to realize the importance of keeping their word to others. We can all see room for improvement in the world, and would like it to be a better place to live in. But how can we reasonably expect it to get better if fulfilling our commitments is not important to us?

Have you noticed how hard it is for some people to apologize? Is it that they have such a high opinion of themselves that to admit to making a mistake or being in the wrong would amount to something like self-destruction? Is it a matter of maintaining a facade at all costs that saying sorry is just inconceivable and out of the question? Is it that they are so insecure that they are afraid to bend a little bit? Or is it that they are so proud that it is beneath their dignity to apologize to 'lesser beings'? Whatever the reason, it is not a positive characteristic. And some people will go to amazing lengths to preserve their 'face', piling more mistakes on top of the mistakes they were so unwilling to admit, and the problem becomes compounded thereby.

It is unpleasant to be with such people, as they often try to put the blame onto others for things that they themselves have done. It is also very difficult to discuss and reason with them, as they soon 'clam up' and go on the defensive, feeling as if they're being attacked. They become prisoners of their own pride.

At the other end of the spectrum are people who are forever apologizing, as if they are afraid of causing anyone the slightest inconvenience—"Sorry for breathing in your air space," kind of thing. Their subservience and obsequiousness becomes quite tedious; they behave like beaten dogs with their tails between their legs. We get the feeling that they will do anything to please, but their ingratiating ways lack sincerity, and it is easy to imagine



that they could not be relied upon, and would betray others, at the drop of a hat.

Apologizing from the heart and not merely from the tongue means exposing oneself, and there is a risk that others will misunderstand, and take one for a weakling. But there are dangers in everything; life is dangerous, and so, if we realize we have said or done something wrong, and have upset or hurt someone, the only right thing to do is to try to make amends as soon as possible, either by a straightforward "I'm sorry for what I said or did; please excuse me and understand that I spoke in haste, and didn't mean it," or by doing something to demonstrate one's contrition.

There are many ways to speak, and not just with the tongue; and if our words of apology are not followed by appropriate actions, the words probably don't mean very much. The sooner we can correct our mistakes, in some measure, the better, for the longer we leave it, the harder it becomes; time doesn't always resolve things, and sometimes it compounds them. It might be compared with cement: when it is freshly laid, it can be made to go where we desire, but when it has set and hardened, it cannot be changed.

Some people find it hard to forgive injuries done to them by others, and apologies are lost on them. But this should not deter us from apologizing to them if we have cause to, for it is just as important—and maybe more so—to forgive ourselves as it is to be forgiven by others. If we carry around a head full of guilty feelings about the harm we have done to others, we will never be at peace with ourselves. I've several times written letters of apology to people who I'd hurt years before, and felt a great sense of relief at doing so. Carrying unresolved grudges and feelings of guilt is both useless and injurious to our mental equilibrium. But conscience—which is more developed and sensitive in some than in others (indeed, some people seem not to have any at all, but it is there nevertheless, buried deep in the dark recesses of the mind, awaiting its germination)—does not permit us to go on making mistakes and doing wrong forever.

Flattery is another form of speech to beware of, as it is seldom sincere, and comes usually from an ulterior motive—something is wanted or hoped for in return. It is pleasing to hear nice things about ourselves, is it not? (Some people become addicted to it, and crave more.) But we should know ourselves well enough to be able to distinguish between genuine praise and hollow flattery. We should also try to minimize the amount of flattery we lay upon others.

There are surely good things about anyone for us to perceive and praise; of course, we all have negative qualities, but this is not because we want them; they cling to us like barnacles to a ship's hull, and impede our progress through life in a similar manner. To focus on people's negatives, and ignore their positives, does not help us in any way, as would paying attention to their good points.

It is easy to fall into the habit of complaining and faultfinding, and hard to break it once we have gotten into it. The faults of others are easy to perceive, while it is hard to see our own, especially since we rationalize, disguise, and refuse to face them.

We like to be praised, but are often niggardly in praising others. To develop the antidote to blaming and censoring others, we might say to ourselves something like this: "This person has qualities that annoy me, but he's also a human being, struggling through life, just like me, and wishes to be well and happy, too. Therefore, let me overlook his bad points, and try to find something worth praising about him," and if we look closely enough, we will surely find things about him—or anyone—that are appealing and praise worthy. If we have seen something of our own positive qualities, we might feel that others have theirs, too, even though they might not be aware of them themselves; it might even be possible for us to help others discover their own good qualities, in which case we shall have done them the greatest service possible.

There is a story of a housewife who once served chicken feed to her family for dinner, and when they thought she had gone mad and protested

about it, she calmly said: "I didn't think you'd notice, because I've been cooking for you for the past twenty years, and trying to please you, but never once have I received a word of praise from any of you for my efforts!"

Maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration — twenty years, and no word of praise!? We often do take people for granted, however, and relationships grow stale and dull because of this, whereas, if we would bestow a little praise now and then, where it is deserved, and some encouragement when needed, just to show that we care, there would be that essential element of joy and togetherness that is beyond price. Everyone likes to be appreciated, but we must give out before taking in, as is the usual order in sowing and reaping; we cannot expect to reap where we have not sown.

I knew an old couple in their eighties who lived alongside their daughter and her husband in a 'granny-flat'. Because their son-in-law worked long hours, and had little time or energy for taking care of the grounds around the house, they helped out by mowing the lawns, weeding the gardens, and keeping things in pretty good shape. But never once did their son-in-law thank them for their efforts, or told them how nice things looked. One time, however, when the oldies were unwell, their daughter mowed the lawns, and her husband was later heard to say: "She's made a very good job of that!" Clearly, his approval depended upon who did the job, and not how it was done, which was sad, was it not?

I would like to end this off with an anonymous little poem, entitled:

*TELL HIM NOW*

*If with pleasure you are viewing  
Any work a man is doing,  
If you like him and you trust him,  
Tell him now.  
Don't withhold your approbation  
Till the parson makes oration,*

*As he lies with snowy lilies o'er his brow.  
For no matter how you shout it,  
He won't really care about it,  
He won't know how many tear drops you have shed;  
If you think some praise is due him,  
Now's the time to slip it to him,  
For he cannot read the tombstone when he's dead.  
More than fame and more than money  
Is the comment warm and sunny,  
And the hearty warm approval of a friend;  
For it gives to life a flavor,  
And it makes us stronger, braver,  
And it gives us heart and courage to the end.  
If he earns your praise, bestow it;  
If you like him, let him know it;  
Let the words of true encouragement be said;  
Do not wait till life is over,  
And he's underneath the clover,  
For he cannot read the tombstone when he's dead.*

*"The source of Man's unhappiness is his ignorance of nature. The pertinacity with which he clings to blind opinion imbibed in his infancy .... and the consequent prejudice that warps his mind .... appear to doom him to continual error.... He takes the tone of his ideas on the authority of others, who are themselves in error, or who have an interest in deceiving him. To remove the Cimmerian darkness .... to guide him out of this Cretan labyrinth, requires the clue of Ariadne, with all the love she could bestow on Theseus. It exacts a most undaunted courage ... a persevering resolution.*

*"The most important of our duties, then, is to seek means by which we may destroy the delusions that can never do more than mislead us. The remedies for these evils must be sought in Nature herself. It is only in the abundance of her resources that we can rationally expect to find antidotes to the mischief brought upon us by an ill-directed, overpowering enthusiasm. It is time these remedies were sought; it is time to look the evil*

*boldly in the face, to examine its foundations, to scrutinize its superstructure. Reason, with its faithful guide experience, must attack in their entrenchments those prejudices of which the human race has been too long the victim....*

*"Let us try to inspire man with courage, with respect for his reason, with an inextinguishable love for truth, to the end that he may learn to consult his experience, and no longer be the dupe of an imagination led astray by authority .... that he may learn to found his morals on his nature, on his wants, on the real advantage of society; that he may dare to love himself; that he may become a virtuous and rational being, in which case he cannot fail to be happy."*

*(d'Holbach, German philosopher, 1723-1789)*



## THE BEST TEACHER I EVER HAD

"**M**R. WHITSON taught Year Six Science. During the first of his classes, he gave us a lecture about a creature that he called the Cattywampuss, an ill-adapted nocturnal animal that was wiped out during the last Ice Age. He passed around a skull as he talked. We all took notes, and later had a test.

"When he returned my paper, I was shocked. There was a big red X through each of my answers. I had failed. There had to be some mistake! I had put down exactly what Mr. Whitson had said. Then I realized that everyone in the class had failed. What had happened?

"Very simple, Mr. Whitson explained. He had made up all that stuff about the Cattywampuss. There had never been any such animal. The information in our notes was, therefore, incorrect. Did we expect credit for incorrect answers?

"Needless to say, we were outraged. What kind of test was this? And what kind of teacher?

"We should have figured it out, Mr. Whitson said. After all, at the very moment he was passing around the Cattywampuss, skull (in truth, a cat's), hadn't he been telling us that no trace of the animal remained? He had described its amazing night vision, the color of its fur and any number of other facts he couldn't have known. He had given the animal a ridiculous name, and we still hadn't been suspicious. The zeros on our papers would be recorded in his grade book, he said. And they were.

"Mr. Whitson said he hoped we would learn something from this experience. Teachers and textbooks are not infallible. In fact, no one is. He



told us not to let our minds go to sleep, and to speak up if we ever thought he or the textbook was wrong.

"Every class was an adventure with Mr. Whitson. I can still remember some science periods almost from beginning to end. One day he told us that his Volkswagen was a living organism. It took us two full days to put together a refutation that he would accept. He didn't let us off the hook until we had proved not only that we knew what an organism was but also that we had the fortitude to stand up for the truth.

"We carried our brand new skepticism into all our classes. This caused problems for the other teachers, who weren't used to being challenged. Our history teacher would be lecturing about something, and then there would be clearings of the throat and someone would say "cattywampus."

"If I'm ever asked to propose a solution to the crisis in our schools, it will be Mr. Whitson. I've not made any great scientific discoveries, but his class gave me and my classmates something just as important: the courage to look people in the eye and tell them they are wrong. He also showed us that you can have fun doing it.

"Not everyone sees the value in this. I once told a primary school teacher about Mr. Whitson. "He shouldn't have tricked you like that," the teacher said, appalled. I looked that teacher right in the eye and told him he was wrong."

I came across this article in a magazine some time last year, and was so delighted with it that I wanted to print it in BECAUSE I CARE, but hesitated to do so without first contacting the author for his permission. I obtained an address in the U.S., but it seemed 'not quite right,' and I doubted if I would get a reply, but wrote anyway. There was no reply, and neither was my letter returned to me undelivered, but by that time it was too late to include it in that book.

Now, however, because it says so well and humorously what I am trying to say—believe nothing, no matter who says it, but check it out carefully—I have decided to risk any breach of copyright, and hope that the author really wishes to share something, like the teacher in his article, and that, therefore, he won't mind me using his words, and might even take it as a compliment. I am not using them for monetary gain, but to share something good with others. I would like to thank David Owen, the author, whoever and wherever he is, and ask his pardon for using his words without his permission; in exchange, he may use mine, if he likes.



## IMAGES

**H**AVE JUST SEEN something on TV about a man whose 28-year-old son committed suicide, leaving a pathetic letter that cried out for love. The father feels remorseful that he never—as far back as he can remember—told his son that he loved him or gave him a hug, and that is something he will probably feel bad about for the rest of his life.

All too often we do things that we later regret, and leave undone things that we should have done. Thus, remorse haunts us like a ghost, and becomes a burden hard to bear. Yet it has a positive aspect, if we will see it as a teacher, reminding us that though the past has gone and cannot be changed, the present is in our hands, to mould as we will, and to fashion the future therefrom. We need not go on making the same mistakes, over and over again; it is possible to learn from them, so that the future might be so much better than the past, and our mistakes will thus turn out to have been useful.

Though it is by no means anything new, it is much in my mind recently how many people concentrate on amassing more and more wealth, to the exclusion of other concerns, and in the process neglect their children. I am thinking especially here of refugee migrants, who arrived in the West with very little, and had to make a new start. Many of them accepted the challenge wholeheartedly and energetically— some of them doing two or even three jobs at the same time; the economy, a few years back, permitted this, and many people were able to prosper to a remarkable degree.

Some people claim that they are working so hard for the future of their children, but this is not always true; it is often for their own material benefit. By working so hard, and spending little or no time with their children, they fail in their sacred duty as parents. Do they, perhaps, think of their children as mere possessions, like cars, TV's, video's, etc., that have no

life or feelings of their own? The words of Jesus echo down the centuries, warning of this: "For what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but loses his own soul?" Many parents not only lose their souls in their mad scramble after wealth, but also lose their children, and I am writing this now in the slight hope that it might alert just one or two parents to the necessity of spending time with their children, doing things together with them, learning from, with, and about them, discussing things with them, discovering and enjoying them, and treating them as human beings with minds of their own whose opinions and ideas deserve, at least, to be expressed and heard, if not always acted upon.

I know of parents who are so busy working that they almost never sit down to eat with their children, and it has gone on for so long that neither parents nor children seem to feel there is anything unusual about it. Food is cooked and left where anyone may help themselves to it at any time. This is a recipe for further estrangement between family members later on; unless the incongruity of it is noticed and remedied, it might become incurable.

Another cause of problems in migrant families is language. Some parents make little effort to learn English, while their children absorb it automatically at school and from TV, etc., and it becomes their first language, with their mother tongue a poor second. I recently asked a Vietnamese teenager what language he talks to himself in. "Talk to myself in?" he said. "What do you mean?" "I mean, what language do you think in? For thinking is really like talking to ourselves." "Oh, mostly English," he replied. He neither reads nor writes Vietnamese, and even his spoken Vietnamese is not very good.

And just now, as I was writing this, another teenager dropped by to show me some of his homework, and was visibly pleased by my approval. When I asked him if he had shown it to his parents, however, he answered—as I suspected he would—"No, I never do; they're not interested." How sad, I thought; even though they would probably not understand very much, they could at least show some interest, just to encourage the boy and make him feel good.

I know several Vietnamese fathers who habitually shout at or talk loudly to their teenage children, and seem unable to sit down and discuss anything quietly and reasonably with them; I have the feeling that they are somehow afraid of their kids, and that this is because of the culture gap. Having grown up in Vietnam, and come to the West while their children were very young, they have worked to establish themselves while their children went to school here and absorbed the culture from the environment. So, while the parents' knowledge of English and the ways of their new country increased only very slowly (and there are some people who didn't bother to learn any English whatsoever, in all the years they have been here. I find it hard to comprehend how they could absorb so little from the bombardment of TV and other sources; surely something would stick), the kids took to them like ducks to water, leaving their parents far behind. Now, no doubt the parents feel some pride in the achievements of their children, but at the same time, the father's traditional role as unquestioned head of the family might be rocked and eroded by the superior knowledge of the kids over theirs in some areas. But how else should this be? The conflict that develops over this is both productive of suffering and pointless. Frequent shouting is counter-productive, because it alienates the kids; they 'turn off', pay no more attention, and might even do the opposite of what is expected, just to be contrary. If their fathers realized this, they might switch to another tactic. And do not all parents wish their children to do better and achieve more than they themselves did? Is that not what all their sacrifices are about?

It is true, too, that young people, flushed with the exciting discovery of the treasury of knowledge and information that is readily available to them in forms and quantities unheard of before, and bursting with hormones, energy, and enthusiasm, often feel that they know much more than they do. On the other hand, their parents, whose fire and youthful ardor has diminished (and in some cases, sunk down to the ashes and almost died out), are so involved either with trying to make ends meet, maintaining a balance, and worrying about the future, or in acquiring as much material wealth as they can, and worrying about the future, that they have little time and interest to pay much attention to what their children are doing. And,

because of the vast amounts of new technology and information that young people grow up with, the generation gap—which is a very real thing—becomes wider than it really needs to be, and though parents and children live under the same roof, it is as if they inhabit two different worlds.

Now, how important is it for parents and children to communicate? Everyone must decide about this for themselves. But if there is a problem regarding this, and if it causes sufficient discomfort, there is a way to resolve it, though it might be somewhat difficult and unpleasant.

There is a choice to make between the problem and the possible solution: which is more unpleasant and difficult?

By looking at the problem—whatever it may be—by analyzing and identifying it, then sitting down to discuss it with all parties concerned, in a spirit of willingness to listen to everyone's point of view, and by bringing things out into the open, they can often be seen in a different light and the preposterousness of some of them may be revealed and given up. Needless to say, this requires honesty and fearlessness, and a readiness to accept responsibility for one's share in the problems, and this is seldom easy or nice.

Moreover, it seems that many of us are fond of our problems, and wouldn't know what to do without them; it is a kind of symbiotic relationship: we depend upon our problems, and our problems depend upon us, and we would have nothing to complain about if we didn't have them. So, strange as it might sound, we might not be interested in finding solutions to our problems, as peace is 'boring', and we prefer to live in strife; it is far more exciting. If we are unwilling to try to work out our problems, we have no right to complain, but must put up with them.

A saying that we sometimes apply to others is: "A leopard cannot change its spots," but though this is true of leopards, it is inappropriate of people.

We reserve the right to change ourselves and expect others to accept the changes in us, do we not? How come, then, that we do not always accord the same rights to others, but expect them to remain as they were at a particular time—and it might have been only a very brief and passing phase—in their lives, so that we might remember them as such, and love or hate that image of them? On one hand, we might say of someone, in exasperation: "He's always like that! He'll never be any different!" as if we know that person so intimately and well that we can see his entire life laid out and revealed before us, like a map. And on the other hand, we might accuse someone else: "You've changed, and are not what you once were!" as if he had to remain forever frozen in time, like a photograph, just to suit our view of him.

Both these ways of looking at people are distorted, and arise out of ignorance of the Law of Change, and such ignorance causes us to hold onto and try to prevent things from slipping away from us; this results in suffering. Of course we change, and even if we wanted to and tried to, we could not remain the same; life does not and will not permit it.

If we knew more about the ceaseless process of change, we would not cling so much to the images of the past, and would frequently update our perceptions of people and things. Often, however, we do not really live with people but with the images of them that we have carried with us from the past. Many people marry images of a person rather than the actual person standing beside them at the ceremony. And often, the images are years out of date, and bear little or no resemblance to their objects (if they ever did). There is great need, therefore, to frequently renew our acquaintance with people who are near to us—parents, spouses, children, friends and even enemies—to discover new and exciting things about them that we might previously have been unaware of, to refresh ourselves thereby, and to put aside the old images as no longer fitting. We are not like statues or old photographs that stand still in time; we move.

We can live in close relationships for many years, and still know little about each other, still misunderstand each other. We sometimes hear of



someone waking up and asking him/herself. "Who is this person beside me in bed? What am I doing here with her/him?" as if they were complete strangers. I recall looking at my parents one day at the dining table and thinking: "Who are these people?" as if I'd never seen them before. It was a strange experience, but one which can be explained. You see, when we grow up with people it is easy to take them for granted, without knowing or understanding very much about them; so we stop learning and are left with little more than an image.

Another time, when I met my parents again after not seeing them for six years, I was surprised at how much they had aged, when I should have expected it.

I know a Vietnamese family who came to Australia about twelve years ago, leaving two of their four children behind in Vietnam, unwilling, perhaps, to 'carry all their eggs in one basket' during their escape from Vietnam by sea. These two children were finally able to reunite with their family three years ago, and had to learn about their parents anew, with different eyes and ideas than those of their siblings, who had accompanied their parents and grown up with them without a period of separation. It may be assumed that they see their parents quite differently, and the two newcomers might have a clearer and more accurate view of them than the others.

There are always new things that we can learn about anyone— though sometimes with a bit of a shock—and we should not presume that we know someone merely because we have been closely associated with him/her for a long time; we might know many things about him, but we can never know all there is to be known about anyone, as we are just too complex. The mountain is clearer to the climber from the plain, than half-way up its slopes. Therefore, there is room for discovery, is there not?

Sometimes, when people fall in love, they think they will be very happy if they can get married; but, after achieving their desires, the bliss seldom lasts long before disillusionment sets in, and one partner finds out—if

he/she had not known before—that the other snores at night, has smelly feet or body odor, an annoying habit of not replacing the cap on the toothpaste, or some other petty faults, while the other is appalled to wake up and see his wife with curlers in her hair or her face covered in some kind of gook. Then the complaints start to fly: "You're not the man I married! Had I known you better, I would never have tied myself to you! I hate you!" Or, "You're lazy and don't keep the house clean or take care of the kids! Besides, you're a lousy cook, and my mother is far better than you!" Thus, ill-will grows where bliss was expected. The chances of finding someone perfect to be one's partner are extremely remote, and even if one found such a person, it would probably be awful living with him/her, as one would be made so much more aware of one's own faults and imperfections. So, we must learn to compromise, and accept a reasonable amount of imperfection in others—as long as it's not deliberately cultivated—just as we like others to make allowances for our idiosyncrasies, without rejecting us.

It is not uncommon to hear teenagers—though it is not restricted to them, by any means—complaining that no one understands them, and that they can't talk with their parents. Well, communication is a two-way thing, and both sides have a responsibility to work towards getting to know each other better. Yes, it might be that parents do not understand their children (it would be more surprising if they did), and I feel that this is much more likely with refugee families where the children are more westernized than their parents, having grown up in the West, while their parents will probably never understand much about Western culture (supposing that anyone can understand this confusing and chaotic life style we have created). But do kids understand their parents? That's another thing, isn't it? Actually, they have a greater responsibility to try to understand, because their knowledge is, in many cases, more extensive and up-to-date than that of their parents. We cannot reasonably demand or expect other people to understand us, but, it is within our capacity to try to understand others. I once advised some teenagers who were concerned about their parents not taking time off from their work to talk with them enough, to unite and 'go on strike' by not eating, if necessary, until their parents agreed to do so. A bit drastic, perhaps, but if it can help to correct the situation, why not? The

fact that these kids didn't try to apply my suggestion—or any other means, for that matter—doesn't mean that others cannot or will not, and I offer it here as just one possibility of breaking up a log jam.

Now, more than ever before in human history, we are entering uncharted territory, and every step takes us further and further into the Unknown, where there are so many new and complicated things; unlike in times past, when things changed very slowly, and there was a settled pattern to life, we have no maps from anyone to guide our every move and, consequently must feel—and often grope—our way along. Ebullient youth are always better able to do this than older people, and the future always belongs to them; but they, in turn, as they grow older, must gracefully surrender the lead to those who come after them, in the natural order of succession. Kahlil Gibran, in his famous book, *THE PROPHET*, wrote something about parents being like bows from which their children, like arrows, are shot forth into the world; the simile is very apt.

When we act a part in a play, we must know not only our own part, but also much of the parts of the other actors, as our part is intimately connected to and bound up with theirs. Anyone wishing to play the part of Romeo, for example, must know the parts of Juliet, her relatives, his friends, enemies, etc. And in order to do this, Romeo must be Juliet and the others—must put himself in their places, and feel how they feel; the same goes for Juliet, and all the others; it is not just a matter of learning one's own lines and performing one's part, for these mesh-in with, are connected to, and depend upon all other parts of the play; nothing exists in isolation.

Likewise, in 'real life' (which is also a drama, sometimes funny, sometimes tragic, at times dull and monotonous), we must consider not only ourselves—and cannot/do not—but must take into account the other players all around us, as our role depends upon them. Imagine a play with only one actor, or a world with only one person.

**"He who cannot do what he wants, let him want what he can do."**

(Leonardo da Vinci)

## SEARCHING TOO HARD

AS REFERRED TO IN the previous article, "Images," when people come to something with their eyes and minds open, it is easier for them to understand it, and see deeper and clearer, than for people who have grown up with it and perhaps never examined or questioned it.

For this reason, Westerners who come to Buddhism have an advantage over Asian Buddhists, for though the forms that Buddhism has taken over its long history are all Asian, the essence of Buddhism—the Dharma—being universal, transcends all forms and cultural accretions.

Sadly, many Westerners do not make the most of this advantage, or simply do not understand it, and so easily get side-tracked, or fall into the trap of choosing and identifying with one of the numerous ethnic forms of Buddhism, such as Chinese, Japanese, Burmese, Sri Lankan, Tibetan, etc., and become polarized thereby, whereas, if they had used their common sense, and followed up, instinctively, on what they had stumbled on initially (and many Westerners seem to have an inborn affinity with Dharma), they might have gone to the roots instead of fixing their attention on the branches and twigs. To study the forms is very interesting, anthropologically, no doubt, but to base one's life on one of them, and conform to it to the exclusion of other forms and ways, will result in a narrowing instead of an opening and a flowering.

There is some excuse—that is, it is understandable—for people who are born into and raised in a Buddhist culture to take sides like this, and become sectarian (it happens with any/every people, in whatever religious background they have been raised). But for Westerners, coming new to it from the outside, without any bias towards one side or another, there is little excuse for accepting and adopting the first form they come to, and for not investigating things clearly. I am not suggesting that all Western Buddhists

proceed like this, but there are enough of them to warrant writing this about them. Having somehow sloughed off the fetters, dogmas, and superstitions of their Judaeo-Christian conditioning (or some of it, anyhow), they then proceed to drape themselves with Buddhists chains, as if they were garlands; the name and the form might be different, but the condition is essentially the same.

If I were to tell all the tales I have heard of the foolish things that Westerners—having become monks—get up to, in their desire to become enlightened, it would form a small book on its own, so I will mention just a few to serve as illustrations (and hopefully as warnings to others who might think of becoming monks).

All Buddhist monks, of whatsoever sect or school of Buddhism (and I should include Buddhist nuns, too, otherwise I might be accused of being sexist), have a rule to abstain from eating after 12 noon until dawn the following day. There are several reasons for this, not the least of them being the desire to cause as little inconvenience as possible to the lay-people who provide the food for the clergy. It was originally only a minor rule, however, as can be seen from the fact that for the first twenty years of the Buddha's forty-five-year-long ministry, monks were allowed to eat at any time. The proximate cause for this rule being made by the Buddha arose one evening when a certain monk went out with his bowl for alms to a village, where he saw a woman drawing water from a well. Standing quietly at one side—as monks are not allowed to attract attention to themselves or ask for anything when out on alms-round — he waited for the woman to finish her chore and notice him. When she turned around and saw this cloaked figure standing in the half light however, she got a shock and, being pregnant, had a miscarriage as a result. Consequently, when this was reported to the Buddha, He promulgated the rule that monks should eat only up until noon. There were other reasons, too, among them the cutting-down of time monks spent thinking about food and eating it, and another, that of self-restraint.

Over the ages, this rule has come to be somewhat of a fetish, and many monks (and lay-people, too), place undue importance on it, seeming to think

that enlightenment might be gained as a result of not eating after noon. But enlightenment is not so easily attained, alas! If only it were! Other monks, however—mainly from the colder countries to the north and northeast of India, to where Buddhism later spread, like Tibet, Mongolia, China, Japan, and Korea—choose to disregard this rule and eat three times a day, unlike the monks of Thailand, Cambodia, Burma, and Sri Lanka, who eat twice a day within five hours, and fast for the remaining nineteen hours, but whose intake of food is often the same as that of monks who eat three times a day.

I once spent some time with a certain Western monk who was well known—or perhaps I should say 'notorious'—for his meticulous observance of the rules, and who had a habit of pulling other monks up for not being as strict as himself. One day, he said to me: "You should brush your teeth after your forenoon meal, in case any particles of food that are lodged between them slip down into your stomach afterwards, constituting a violation of the rules." That struck me as absurd. I wonder if the Buddha would have thought of something so petty?

And here is another tale regarding this rule, about a group of Western monks who had been invited to someone's house for lunch. However, they were delayed, and arrived a little late, so did not have time to finish their meal before 12 o'clock. Several of the monks, who were on a strict-observance-of-the-rules trip, were anxiously watching the clock, and as the minute hand got near to 12, they put down their cutlery and ceased eating. One of them, however, who was not so strict, continued eating some cake he had started on, and became aware that the other monks were casting worried looks at him, and when one of them remarked: "I wonder what the Buddha would have said about eating over time," he replied: "He would have said: 'Eat your cake!'" which is just what he did.

The following story reached me from a German monk friend of mine who lives in Thailand, and concerned an Australian monk who told someone that when monks travel, they should carry with them some rope or cord to use as a clothes line, for if they were to use the clothes lines of places where they might sojourn, they could not be sure that they had not previously been used

for hanging robes that monks had bought themselves (or which had not been 'properly' offered to them by lay-people), and the dye from an improperly offered robe might get into their own through the medium of the clothes line, thus besmirching its purity! How ludicrous! It is amazing how they can think up such things, instead of directing their energy to more important matters.

Needless to say, Western monks are somewhat 'odd', merely by reason of them being monks, but I think it can be fairly said that most of them are sincere, in their own ways, about their search for enlightenment, even if their efforts are sometimes a bit misguided. However, out of haste, and/or not understanding that the state of enlightenment known as Nirvana is unconditioned, and cannot be attained by anything we might do in our desire to attain it, they set about practicing all kinds of austerities and disciplines, and easily fall into playing the 'holier-than-thou' game with their rules. This is tantamount to what is known in Pali (one of the Buddhist scriptural languages) as 'Silabbattaparamasa', or a belief in and clinging to rites and ceremonies as a means of 'making merit' and/or attaining enlightenment; according to the scriptures, it is one of the three fetters or hindrances that fall away upon the attainment of the first stage of Buddhist sainthood known as 'Sotapatti', or 'Entering the Stream'. So, far from being weakened and broken, this fetter is only strengthened by the misconceived efforts of such monks (though it must be said that monks are not the only ones who enter such blind alleys).

Our greed or desire for Truth or enlightenment only drives enlightenment away. J. Krishnamurti once said: "The Sublime is not within the structure of thought and reason, for thought has always a measure. Nor is it the product of emotion and sentiment. If you are seeking the highest you will not find it; it must come to you, if you are lucky, and luck is the open window of your heart, not of thought," meaning to say—if I may offer an interpretation—that we cannot find enlightenment, cannot attain it by any effort, for it is unproducibile, and cannot be caught by any snare we might set for it; the only thing we can do is to prepare ourselves for it, to become more sensitive, open, and receptive, so that enlightenment might arise; we can

develop an interest in, a joy in, a passion for Dharma, can attune ourselves to it, and if enlightenment doesn't arise, we can try to live in an enlightened way, and this, to a great extent, is within our capacity. And from this should arise a feeling of joy, a sense of living in harmony with Dharma that transcends the personal happiness we seek. Enlightenment might then arise later, and take us by surprise, without being sought.

There is a passage near the end of Hermann Hesse's famous and beautiful novel, *Siddhartha*, where the principal character, whose name forms the title of the book, meets again his boyhood friend, Govinda, when they are both old men, and Siddhartha says to Govinda: "When someone is seeking, it happens quite easily that he only sees the thing that he is seeking, that he is unable to find anything, unable to absorb anything, because he is only thinking of the thing he is seeking, because he has a goal, because he is obsessed with his goal. Seeking means: to have a goal; but finding means: to be free, to be receptive' to have no goal. You, O worthy one, are perhaps indeed a seeker, for in striving towards your goal, you do not see many things that are under your nose."

In this book, also, Siddhartha meets the Buddha, and speaks with Him, and, although he is immensely impressed with the Buddha and His teachings, he cannot accept and follow them, but must find his own way. He tells the Buddha that never before had anyone explained things so clearly and logically, and yet, in His system, there was a flaw: it was impossible to convey to another what He had experienced during His Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, as it was something so personal, and had to be experienced by the individual, each for himself; it cannot be transmitted.

Some Western monks remain in robes until they die; some remain for 20 or 30 years, then disrobe and return to lay life; others remain for just a few years and then leave. I remember a remark once made by an Australian monk who resides in Singapore about some Westerners who leave the monk hood, and I agree with it: "They are not just not monks anymore," he said, "but not even Buddhists!" This is probably because, having tried and failed to attain anything of lasting value through their austerities and weird



practices—tried and failed to 'storm the gates of Heaven' kind of thing—they conclude that there is nothing to be attained, and, in their disillusionment, discard everything, and not just the robe. What a pity! If only they had not been in so much of a hurry! If only they had not set their sights so high, and been content with the small successes that they all surely had on their way. I cannot say what, exactly, I have 'got' from my years as a monk, but I feel that, if I were to disrobe (and this is a possibility, although I have no plans to do so), I would still have something left over, as the Dharma doesn't depend upon whether one has a robe and a shaved head or not; it knows no such restrictions, but is applicable and available to everyone; and I can say this with authority, from within rather than from without. I could say exactly the same things if I were not a monk, but many people would not listen, as they are so attached to the monks, so under their shadow, considering them to be the authority. This is wrong, and I use the robe to inform people that it is wrong. I have said it before, and I will say it again: the center place of Buddhism belongs to no person or persons—not even the Buddha Himself—but only to the Dharma; it is not, or was not, a personality cult. Unfortunately, over the ages, people have come to overly depend upon the monks, feeling that only they can understand the Dharma well, instead of exerting themselves and trying to realize it themselves. But this is not so, and I have come across some lay people who are better Buddhists, and more learned and humble, than most monks I have met, and I say this here not to be critical of the monks, but in order to encourage, uplift, and inspire lay people, and help them to overcome the erroneous idea that, as laymen, they are somehow 'second class' Buddhists. Shaving one's head and donning a robe does not automatically make one better or holier than people who live the family life. It might be that the lifestyle of the monks, cut off from the emotional ties and problems of family life, makes it easier for them to follow the Way (whether they take advantage of the opportunities provided thereby or not is another matter, of course; it does not automatically happen), but it must be stressed, again and again, that the Dharma is not exclusive, is not the monopoly of any class or group of people, but is open to all. Nor is it necessary to call oneself 'Buddhist' to live by and benefit from the Dharma, as it is universal and omnipresent, transcending all barriers and artificial divisions.

## DISASTER

TELEVISION HAS BROUGHT the furthest corners of the world into our living rooms, and while this is indisputably marvelous, it has also trivialized things. Constantly, we witness wars and conflicts going on live, we see people actually being killed, or dying of starvation and disease, we are exposed to brutality and crime, and gradually, imperceptibly, we become inured to it all, to the point where it loses its shock value, and no longer moves or affects us. Reality is reduced to the level of fiction, as in the movies. We get overdosed, not being able to fully comprehend; we lose our sensitivity and become dull. It is quite true that too much of something good may easily become bad in its effects; TV is a prime example of this.

Our complacency and false sense of security are sometimes profoundly shaken by unexpected and unpreventable natural disasters like earthquakes, storms, droughts, volcanic eruptions, etc.; our lives may be turned upside down instantly by such things and our nicely constructed plans for the future brought to nothing; pride of technology and ingenious achievement is humbled, and the prospect of having to start rebuilding what took us so long to build before is daunting, and fills us with despair.

We do not know all the causes of Nature's ferocious outbursts, and will certainly never be able to bring them all under our control, so we must reconcile ourselves to living with them, and accept them as part of the price we have to pay for being alive; as long as we live on this planet we shall be subject, in some degree or another, to the various disasters that may strike us without warning from above, below, and around; they have gone on for infinitely longer than Man has been here, and there is no guarantee that we shall continue to swarm over the Earth like ants indefinitely; our existence is precarious, and we could easily be terminated by one of any number of causes, as have been countless other species before and during our time. Moreover, the ease and comfort that we have developed has lulled us into a

state of indolence and complacency, and weakened our physical and moral fibers; we have become addicted to it all, as upon some drug of dependence, and are unwilling to give up any part of it for the sake of saner living.

Nations that were once virile and energetic have lapsed into lethargy and decadence, and their places in the vanguard of things have been taken over by more youthful and vigorous nations. Thus, the Law of Change plays its eternal game with us, moving us now high, now low on the ceaselessly turning Wheel of Life.

We have been led to believe (and most of us need little convincing about this, but are eager to accept it), that with money, we can do anything. And so the motto on the currency of the U.S.: "In God we trust," is seen to be missing the letter 'l', and should more appropriately read "In Gold we trust," for without a doubt, money is the religion with the most adherents in the world, no matter what they call themselves. We cannot deny that money is important, and has been ever since it was invented; no-one can give up using money without being a burden on others. But to place such emphasis on it as we do, and measure people's worth and success by how much money they have, encourages the growth of antisocial qualities such as unchecked greed and envy, and leads to all manner of excesses and crimes.

Disaster is not just something that comes to us from Nature, but is engendered, more so, by human beings. The suffering that Nature causes us is much less than that caused by other people. A severe earthquake might kill fifty thousand people or more, and cause immense property damage, but one of man's stupid wars might cause ten times more deaths and do just as much damage—or more—to buildings, roads, and other infrastructure. A volcano can cause considerable, but usually temporary, climatic changes, while man in his ignorance and carelessness has also brought about such changes, the effects of which are only just now starting to become apparent and which might be permanent and irreversible; we have yet to learn to what extent our lives and our planet will be affected thereby. And in spite of the fact that millions are dying of starvation, due to natural and artificial famines, people in other parts continue to blithely reproduce prolifically,

unaware, it seems, of the consequences of their unrestraint, and encouraged to do so, in many cases, by benighted theologies which unashamedly proclaim contraception to be unnatural and therefore evil.

So, while natural disasters—still termed "Acts of God" by some insurance companies—go on, the biggest disaster is Man himself, and it is ironic that while there is little we can do to prevent earthquakes, droughts, tidal waves, and so on, it is quite within our capacity to lessen and somewhat control the major disaster that is Man and his impulses. Yet, in our age of increased and unprecedented education and literacy, multiple means of worldwide communication, jet travel, and other wonderful forms of technology, it is as if we insist on remaining basically ignorant concerning our humanity—prejudiced, aggressive, and destructive. It's really quite amazing!

Ask anyone, anywhere, if they like to suffer, and almost no-one would answer in the affirmative. But so many of us actively cause and promote suffering in various ways, either at home within our immediate family, and/or around us in society; we are a troublesome species, and many of us are hard at work disturbing or hurting others, unaware that they are just like us in their desire to be happy and free from suffering. Don't like suffering, we say? It's not true! We are actually very fond of it, not in ourselves, of course, but in others. Yet if we clearly understood how society—any society—is made up of individuals just like ourselves, all contributing to the whole of which we are parts, we would see that whatever affects one affects all, and hence, to cause suffering to another is also to hurt oneself.

We cannot all be doctors or teachers, it is true, nor do we all need to be, but we can all tune into the common life that we all share and try to act in ways that are beneficial to one and all, instead of harmful. It is not very difficult to understand this; we don't need a Ph.D. to grasp it; all we need to do is consider first our own interests, and then to consider those of others, for they are very similar; remember, we are of the same species. And thus, the disaster that is Man might be brought under control, and the energy that he hitherto used for negative purposes could be turned to positive ends.

*Chaung Tzu was fishing with his bamboo pole in Pu river. The Prince of Chu sent two vice-chancellors with a formal document: ‘We hereby appoint you Prime Minister.’*

*Chaung Tzu held up his bamboo pole; still watching Pu river, he said: “I am told there is a sacred tortoise, offered and canonized three thousand years ago, venerated by the Prince, wrapped in silk, in a precious shrine, on an altar in the temple.*

*“What do you think: Is it better to give up one’s life and leave a sacred shell as an object of cult in a cloud of incense three thousand years, or better to live as a plain turtle, dragging its tail in the mud?”*

*“For the turtle,” said the vice-chancellor, “better to live and drag its tail in the mud.”*

*“Go home,” said Chaung Tzu, “and leave me to drag my tail in the mud.”*



**“Worry gives a small thing a big shadow.”**

(Swedish proverb)

## KNOWING, NOT KNOWING

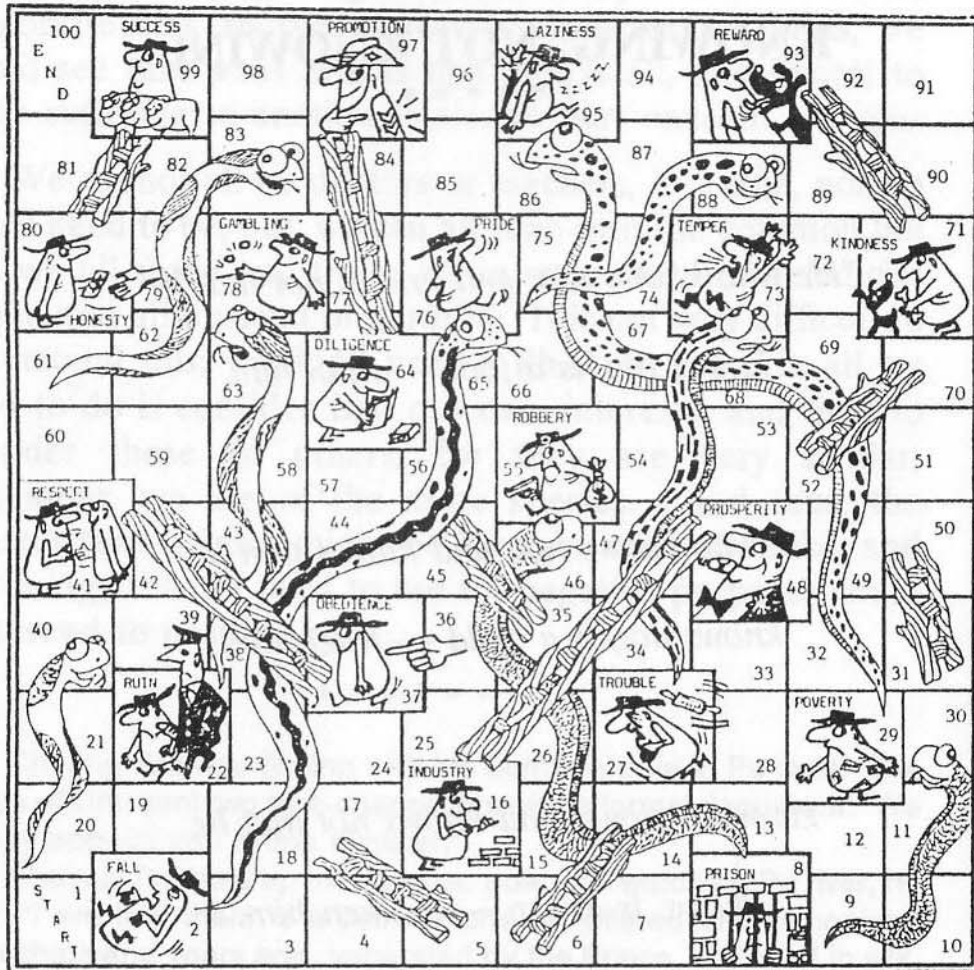
***“He who knows not, and knows not that he knows not, is a fool — shun him.***

***He who knows not, and knows that he knows not, is a child — teach him.***

***He who knows, and knows not that he knows, is asleep — awaken him.***

***He who knows, and knows that he knows, is wise — follow him.”***

(Persian saying)



## SNAKES-AND-LADDERS

Although the game of Snakes-and-Ladders is primarily a game for children, if we look at it closely, we shall see that it is a simple depiction of the Law of Karma: up the ladders and down the snakes. Where this game originated, I do not know, but it is quite philosophical, and shows life for the 'game' that it is: sometimes we win, and sometimes we lose.

Very often, the simple contains the profound; however, we usually do not see it until it is pointed out. What a pity that we always wait for someone to teach us, instead of learning for ourselves!

\* \* \* \* \*

## GAMBLERS, ALL

No-one enjoys funerals—except perhaps those who might have disliked the dead person and those who stand to gain something from his or her will—but funerals provide us with much needed and excellent opportunities for introspection, especially if we are confronted by the stark reality of the corpse, and are unable to turn away from it. A funeral puts us in a situation which, far from being morbid—as many people suppose—might yield tremendous insights, and quite possibly change our lives in ways unimagined. It might even be said that death is the key to life.

I have just returned from the funeral of a young man who went into the hospital for a minor operation on his ear in 1984; the operation went wrong and his brain was starved of oxygen, with the horrifying result that he was left disabled thereafter, unable to do anything for himself, or even to speak. Why this terrible misfortune befell Tai—for such was his name—we cannot say, and we must be careful not to casually and callously dismiss it as "his karma", as if we know, for we really do not know. What we do know, however, is that he didn't want or try to be, like that; it happened to him. One day he was young, healthy, and handsome, with everything going for him, and the next day, his life had changed forever, and he had become a prisoner in his body, wanting both to live and to die, but caught between and unable to do either.

Two years after this happened, his condition came to the notice of someone named Jacquie, who responded to his needs, and not only took care of him as normally only a mother would, but fought and contended with the hospital authorities until they finally but reluctantly agreed to pay ongoing costs for Tai's hospitalization; this was no minor victory, as the hospital had refused, and continued to refuse, to accept responsibility for negligence. Jacquie's loving care for Tai touched many people, and caused some to remark that they must have had some strong bond from a previous



life. I can't say much about that, but am full of admiration for her tireless efforts with Tai. He responded so well to her that he even made an attempt to write short notes to her, the first one of which, though hard to read, of course, said: "Chết rồi," which is Vietnamese for "Dead already," probably meaning that he was as good as dead, and, therefore, there was no point in taking care of him. This did not discourage Jacquie, however, and for seven long years she bestowed her love and care on him, and the Vietnamese that she had previously learned came in very useful in facilitating communication with him.

Tai's struggles in this life are now over; ours, however, go on, and if we can learn something from cases like this, to apply in our own struggling lives, Tai's suffering might be seen as not entirely in vain, and he might be regarded as our teacher. "Teacher?" you might say. "In what way?" Well, let me explain.

Although many of us do not approve of gambling—observing how it causes so much misery—and would never enter a casino, play cards or mahjong for money, bet on horses, and so on, we are all inveterate gamblers, even so, for the simple reason that life itself, day-by-day, and even moment-by-moment, is a gamble. Everyday we run countless risks, from operating dangerous machinery, working with toxic substances, dealing with unpredictable human beings, to the hazardous venture of crossing the street. We have grown so used to the dangers inherent in these and countless other activities, however, that we no longer think of them; but this does not mean that they are not there.

You might be the best driver in the world, but that is not a guarantee of safety on the roads, as there are just so many variables involved, and not just the competency of the driver or the road worthiness of the vehicle. And, though in other ways we might distrust other people, we willingly and unhesitatingly commit our lives into the hands of complete strangers like taxi drivers and others, on the assumption that it will be alright. Looking back, I must say that I have led a charmed life so far, as during my many years of traveling the world, I have been with some very bad drivers

(including a monk who once drove me around Canberra, and whom I told that, though I didn't mind visiting people in the hospital, I did not want to be taken to stay there as a casualty), and have never been in any kind of car 'accident'. It would be impossible to compute how many times I—or anyone else for that matter!—could have died on the road!

We set off on journeys, long and short, and make plans about what we will do when we get to our destinations, as if we have already arrived; the fact that we have done so until now does not mean that we always shall. Again, it's a gamble, and "there's many a slip between cup and lip."

Of course, if we were to worry about all the things that might happen to us, we'd probably never get into any kind of vehicle, but that would be quite impractical, so we take risks, which is what I mean by gambling.

But there are infinite other forms of gambling, and who would deny that marriage is a gamble? And even before that, falling in love is a risk-fraught matter, as the first flush of love—which knocks some people off their feet—is usually only very brief, and is hard to sustain. The high divorce rate in Western society is clear evidence that the turning of the 'roulette wheel' of marriage doesn't always come up with what people hope for, and often ends in bitterness and rancor.

Then, perhaps an even greater gamble, over which people have less control than over their marriages, is having children. It is impossible to know what might become of them, and, having got them, they cannot be returned to the store for a refund. No matter how hard parents try to raise their children well, explain to them about the right and wrong of things, set them a good personal example, and provide them with a good education, it is not sure that they will respond in the way hoped for.

Yes, life, right the way through, is a gamble, but, if we understood this, and how there is no choice but to participate in the game, we would be better prepared to take the risks, and be more philosophical about it when we lose or do not succeed to the degree we had hoped to. And, if it seems

that Death eventually catches us out, it will still have been worth playing the game, because from beginning to end, there are opportunities, not only to learn things, but also to improve things for ourselves and for the players who will follow us.

So, Gamblers, throw your dice, and do not be disappointed if it doesn't come up six; there are times when even a one might be appropriate, and any situation, if examined intelligently, might be seen to hold something positive.

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*[This article is dedicated to the late Co Van Tai of Melbourne.]*

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## MAGIC WANDS

**B**efore leaving office, George Bush made a trip to Somalia, and told the U.S. Marines there that they were doing God's work. Doing God's work? What utter nonsense! Why doesn't God do his own work? Such a statement implies that the situation in Somalia has arisen with God's consent, or that the claimed omnipotence of God is not supported by reality—is, in fact, denied by reality! Our capacity for superstitious belief and self-deception is so great! Half the world is under the malignant influence of the belief in a good, kind, omnipotent God. Why doesn't it wake up and shrug off its delusion? It's truly amazing!

More often than not, people who follow religion—any religion—are unrealistic in the things they expect from it, and even though their expectations are seldom, if ever, fulfilled, they still go on believing and expecting. If, let us say, someone bought a car, and expected it to fly, he might be quite disappointed upon finding that it couldn't fly; the fault, however, would not lie with the car, but with him for expecting something from it that could not possibly happen.

Unrealistic expectations of religion may be called "The Magic Wand Syndrome." Many people obviously think that by believing in and praying to some God or other, practicing yoga or meditation, and so on, something miraculous might happen, to transform or save them. They willingly do all kinds of things—pray, chant, follow rules or precepts, fast, perform penance, mortify their flesh, make pilgrimages, give donations, do charity work, become vegetarian, practice meditation, etc.—with the idea of getting something in return. But it is best to be careful, before we begin, otherwise we might trip over our own feet in our haste to get or attain, for that which we might expect to attain cannot be calculated or measured in terms of 'this-for-that.'

Many things are involved in anything and everything—so many, in fact, that we cannot possibly imagine how many. Nowadays, people are worried about the damage to their health caused by smoking (and quite rightly, too); but, we cannot simply say that if you smoke you will get lung cancer, for though smoking might well be the major cause of lung cancer, it is not the only cause, and my father is living proof of this: he has smoked heavily since he was a boy and, at 83, he still shows no signs of lung cancer. Can we, perhaps, attribute this to his karma, and the lung cancer of others to theirs? An effect is not produced by just one cause, and neither does one cause produce just one effect.

So, when we follow a religion, we cannot be sure that what we might do will inevitably produce the longed-for results, as we can know only some of the causes of those results, and by no means all. If we see someone getting results by doing certain things, that is no guarantee that if we do the same things in the same way, we shall get the same results, as each person has different accumulations—different karma—and so their actions produce different results, in different degrees. There is danger of disappointment in practicing Dharma with the idea of getting something in return, for though there would be results (as every action has a reaction), they might not be the ones we hoped for.

If only we were not in so much of a hurry! If only we didn't want so much for ourselves—our own small selves! If only we would see that to live virtuously is sufficient reward in itself, without thinking of what we might get as a result! We would probably be more happy than we are, and there would be far less conflict between people of different religions—or even of the same religion—than there is, and the results that follow—as follow they do—would be far greater, and much sweeter and gratifying for not being sought or expected. If we expect something pleasant, we feel good when we get it; but if we get something pleasant when we are not expecting it, it is so much better as there is the element of surprise about it. So, if we really wish to give someone a gift—not from custom or because it is expected of us, but because we feel like giving it and want to give it—any day will do; it doesn't have to be a 'special' day, like Christmas or a birthday; we can make

any day special, if we wish to, and there is no reason why we should not do. And the least expected the gift is, the better. When gifts are exchanged from custom, as at Christmas time, some people consider the value of the gifts they receive against that of those they give, and bad feelings often result.

It is sometimes said that "It is more blessed to give than to receive," but really, we can give nothing that we have not first received, and in giving, there is a feeling of satisfaction of knowing that one has done something good or right, and made someone happy, and is this not a kind of receiving, too?

If we were to plant seeds in the garden, but then, impatient for them to grow, every day or so we dig them up to see how well they are growing, we would probably damage them and impede their growth instead of promoting it. And this is like what happens if we are overly concerned with getting results from our Dharma practice.

There was a Sufi woman mystic named Rabiah al-Hadawiyah, who lived in Baghdad during the 8th century, and sometimes she would be seen walking the streets with a flaming torch in one hand, and a pail of water in the other. When asked why she was doing this, she said that she wanted to bum down Heaven, and extinguish the flames of Hell, so that people would live righteously, and love God for His own sake, without greed for reward, or fear of punishment.

There is a word in Buddhist parlance—Vipassana—that many people have seized upon, and there is a tremendous amount of pride and elitism attached to it. It means 'Insight' or understanding clearly and directly how things are: subject to Anicca, Dukkha, and Anatta (Impermanence, Unsatisfactoriness, and Selflessness or No Self-Existence). When people babble on about 'practicing Vipassana', I feel they have acquired this word to their own detriment, and it would be better if they had never heard of it at all, for the simple reason that Insight isn't something that can be practiced; it is not within our capacity to practice it; on the contrary, it either arises or it does not arise (rarely does, usually does not), and there is no way by which

we can force it to arise. All that we can do is to prepare ourselves, and open the doors and windows of our minds, and maybe—just maybe—it will come. The more we look for it and expect it, however, the more we drive it away, for it cannot be grasped and made into a personal possession; our efforts to 'get' and 'achieve' it—no matter how pious and good—are self-doomed to fail.

If we were to examine our motives (and it is important to do so), we would probably find that our search, including our practice of such things as morality, charity, meditation, and so on, is rooted in greed, or fear, or some other shaky emotion; we want to acquire something we have heard might be acquired if we do certain things, or we are afraid of not getting such things if we do not do these things. What does it all mean? Let me use a mundane illustration:

Recently, in Australia, some major stores held after Christmas sales, with greatly reduced prices advertised on some goods. As the management obviously hoped for and anticipated, people began lining up outside hours before opening time, and, when the doors were finally opened, there was a mad and unstoppable surge forward into the stores, with people being swept off their feet, falling down, being trampled on, suffering cuts, bruises, broken bones, and other injuries. For the sake of getting something cheap (which they might not have really needed anyway), they were prepared to behave shamelessly, completely disregarding other people around them—young or old—and push, shove, grapple, and grope. Yes, they might, eventually, have got a bargain, but at the same time they lost something in themselves, something that thoughtful people strive to protect and develop rather than discard: dignity. In our conceit, we consider ourselves superior to animals, but that is insulting animals, who are often superior to us!

Life becomes more and more complex as we go on, and many of us find ourselves increasingly hard-put to cope with the speed of change; we become tense and fearful; simplicity of living recedes ever farther behind us. Yet would we abandon the luxuries and comforts that fill our homes for

simple living? No, instead, we always want and acquire more. Some people, feeling the strains and pressures of life more acutely than others, perhaps, look around for something to help them deal with their problems and frustrations, and some find it—or so they think—in meditation, which becomes, in some cases, yet another possession, something else to think of as their own.

If we go into the practice of meditation without understanding why we are doing it, or to get something out of it, it is rather like applying perfume or deodorant to cover up body odor: another odor is added instead of the first odor being removed. Moreover, mental derangement might easily result; it is not uncommon in 'meditation freaks.'

"I wish to find peace of mind," some people say, without ever trying to find out first why their minds are not peaceful, or whether it might not be the natural state of the mind to be un-peaceful. So, like hypochondriacs rushing to the medicine cabinet at the first tiny twinge of pain—real or imagined—they jump into this or that meditation method (and there are some strange and dubious ones around).

It would be infinitely better, I feel, if we assessed ourselves as human beings, to see what we have and are, before trying to acquire and accumulate anything else. We tend to compare ourselves with others, and deprecate ourselves or envy others if we find that the comparison favors the others. How little we understand of what it means to be human! There is so much to do to understand what it means to be as we are right now, without grasping for more. The ladder we intend to use to reach the stars should first be planted on a firm foundation, and not on sandy ground; an understanding of the past is essential to understand the future.

The word 'meditation' sets many people spinning, like tops, and gives them airy fairy ideas about something that has been going on in their minds, on and off, all their lives, but they never noticed it before. The word has become fashionable.



Meditation should not be seen as a means to grasp something, or to escape from something, but as a realization of what is here, and what has always been here, a seeing of life as it is.

Sometimes, overwhelmed by the omnipresence of suffering in the world, I feel as if a great burden is weighing me down and crushing me. It happened, several times, that this feeling came over me as I was walking along, and my legs felt as if they were made of lead: so heavy. Sitting down somewhere—it didn't matter where, even with people all around—my mind automatically became concentrated, without effort, and the object of concentration—suffering—seemed in no way repulsive or morbid, but was viewed in its cause-and-effect aspect. Meditation came, unsought, and there was no attempt to grasp it, or measure it with time; it was a thing of quality rather than quantity. Thus, suffering is seen as a key that unlocks closed doors, and not as something to be regarded with fear and loathing. (I feel that this kind of thing is not uncommon, and that most people might have experienced it now and then, although they might not have been aware of what it was: natural, un-produced meditation). By this, too, we see that, though suffering exists, and has arisen/arises from various causes, it can, with wisdom, be avoided or lessened; we are not helpless victims, bound and gagged on the altar of pain; we can change our condition, can change the world, in a positive way, though this can happen only if we understand how things are now.

Some people will probably disagree with and dislike what I've said here, for shaking their beloved system, and exposing the fact that it is precariously balanced upon words like 'meditation' and 'insight'. Can we—dare we—suppose that insight into reality arises only through the practice of certain systems and disciplines? Can we catch the wind in a bottle, or put chains on the sea? Come on!

I am not against sitting cross legged, and paying attention to one's breath; in fact, I think it is as good an exercise for the mind as gymnastics or calisthenics is for the body. But if we view it as a 'magic wand,' as

something that will ultimately solve all our problems, I feel it is a case of expecting too much.

To reiterate: Insight is not something we can 'practice' or 'do,' but must come to us, unsought and un-produced.



## SEX

**T**HIS ARTICLE WILL probably be the first one that some people will pick out from the Contents to read; fascinating subject, isn't it?

The principal religions of the World—Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—have always been, and still are, male dominated; they consider women inferior to men, and give them lower positions. Some changes are slowly taking place to this attitude in Christianity, largely because it is a 'Western' religion, and women in the West are much more aware of their 'rights' than women in other parts, but they are minor changes, and we can never imagine a female Pope. In the other religions, there is little evidence of even this much change, however, and this is especially surprising in the case of Buddhism, which advocates but does not always practice equality.

Why women do not question more the treatment they have received and suffered under male-made religion, and demand nothing less than equal treatment is a mystery, for without their vital role, the human race would soon become extinct. It would be well for the Popes and other leaders of religion—and in fact men generally—to recall that their mothers are/were all women, and that women form half the total population of the world.

Now, anyone who suggests that men and women are equal is severely deluded; they are not equal, but different and each has roles to play that the other cannot play. There is no question about being equal. However, we can, with a little understanding, try to treat each other equally and fairly, be we male or female, just as we like others to treat us. And if religions were firmly based on this principle, and it were widely observed instead of believed, there would be far less conflict and confusion in the world than there is; that's for sure.

But before we can bring about some change in this direction, we must understand something of how the existing state of things has come into being. Are there any valid natural reasons why women should be regarded as in any way inferior to men? If anything, childbearing should make them superior, because although the part of the male in this is indispensable, his contribution is very brief, and the woman is left to carry the burden.

Superstition and male fear and envy of women's unique ability to bring forth new life have caused women to be relegated to a lower position and sadly, most of them have accepted this with little more than an occasional whimper until now. Is there nothing they can do about it short of abandoning religion altogether, as many women as well as men have already done? Of course there is! Men need women, do they not? I don't mean in just a sexual sense, and for the sake of reproduction, but without women—who are, in general, the main supporters—organized religion would soon wither away. Anyone who has been to Thailand, for example, and gone out in the early morning, will probably have noticed that it is the women rather than the men who wait outside their homes to offer food to the monks as they come along with their alms-bowls. No women, no monks; it's as simple as that.

Now, let us talk a little about sex. In this time of AIDS, the facade from behind which we used to view it has been rudely torn away, and we cannot afford to be coy about it now. We are sexual beings, and the sexual or creative urge is very strong. People do it; we've all come through it; thank goodness the old taboos about the subject have gone—or largely gone—and we can talk about it today.

Oh, we have always talked about it, but mostly as a secret or dirty thing, something to joke about, and not as a thing to be discussed in polite company. In the Victorian era, it was unmentionable, but large families were the rule rather than the exception; obviously action was more important than the word. And it is now being said—and written—which gives it more credence, though we certainly should not believe everything that is written or said, and that is why I have qualifyingly written "it is

said"—that Queen Victoria, Empress of India and the Dominions, and titular head of the largest empire the world has ever seen, had several lovers after the death of her husband, including one of her Indian servants. She is also said to have requested to be buried with a lock of hair and a photograph of her Scottish attendant, her final beau!

It is claimed of Mary, the mother of Jesus of Nazareth, that she conceived her son without help from his father. Well, knowledge of biology and anatomy was scant in ancient times, and claims of supernatural births were quite common; Mary was not unique in this. Mahamaya, the mother of Prince Siddhartha, who later became the Buddha, was also said to have conceived in a miraculous way, and— one up on Mary— to have given birth to her son from her side, instead of in the ordinary manner!

In spite of what I might say about this, many people will continue to cling onto these 'gilded lily' stories. Well, I don't remember it, but my mother told me that I was brought by a stork. Does that make me a storkling? No wonder I have a long nose!

The Jewish/Christian Bibles— and the Hindu scriptures, too— have certified childbirth as something dirty, impure, and therefore shameful. In the book of Leviticus of the Old Testament, Chapter 12, it is written:

1. And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying:
2. Speak unto the Children of Israel, saying: If a woman have conceived seed, and born a man-child, then she shall be unclean seven days; according to the days of her separation for her infirmity shall she be unclean.
3. And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.
4. And she shall then continue in the blood of her purifying three and thirty days; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying shall be fulfilled.

5. But if she bare a maid-child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her separation; and she shall continue in the blood of her purifying three score and six days.
6. And when the days of her purifying are fulfilled, for a son, or for a daughter, she shall bring a lamb of the first year for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon, or a turtledove, for a sin offering, unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregational, unto the priest:
7. Who shall offer it before the Lord, and make an atonement for her; and she shall be cleansed from the issue of her blood. This is the law for her that hath born a male or a female.
8. And if she not be able to bring a lamb, then she shall bring two turtles, or two young pigeons; the one for the burnt offering, and the other for a sin offering; and the priest shall make an atonement for her, and she shall be clean."

How many points of gross and cruel superstition can you, dear reader, find here? How strange— how ridiculous! — that even after 4,000 years, we are still being affected by them! They have conditioned our collective attitude towards women, for one thing; for another, they have instilled in people the baseless and horrific belief that sin can be washed away by blood; they also show Dracula in a more favorable light as compared with the bloodthirsty God of the Bible, Jehovah. There are other points, too; do some homework yourself, and try to find them.

## SAVIORS AND SUPERMEN

SOMEONE ONCE REMARKED TO ME that she had heard it said that a certain well known monk had a wife. I replied to her: "I don't care if he has ten wives! What is important to me is what I can learn from him that might be useful to me in my own life".

Long ago, I gave up the immature pursuit of looking for a 'savior', someone to 'save me', 'forgive my sins', or live my life for me. I have accepted responsibility for my own life, and hope that I will have the fortitude from doing so to accept whatever comes to me without overly complaining or blaming others; I am in training for this now.

Some people think that a teacher's teachings have little value if he himself does not always live by them, but I do not subscribe to this idea. If we do not expect the teacher to be perfectly enlightened, or to 'save' us, it becomes unimportant whether or not he lives by his own teachings. (If someone cooks delicious food, and spreads it on the table, but does not eat it himself, it would not mean that other people could not eat it, would it?) In any case, people would be foolish to merely believe what he says, but should test it to find out if it is true and useful to them or not. In this way, we might learn something good from anyone, regardless of the morality of the person; and we would discover that the teacher is important only insofar as what he says is true; it is not enough for him to claim that what he says is true; it must be true, independently of his claims. And would you mind if your geography teacher had never been to the far away places that he talks about in his lessons? Would you dismiss his teachings as invalid if he hadn't?

Jesus of Nazareth spoke so much about Love that many people have come to regard it as the cornerstone of his teachings, but he actually said very little original about Love, other teachers having said much the same kind of



things before him. He said things like, "Love your neighbor as yourself", and "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them who despitefully use you and persecute you", and so on. But he did not always show love himself, and was often quite harsh (contrary to the 'gentle-Jesus-meek-and-mild' image many people have of him), especially to the Scribes and Pharisees, whom he cursed as 'hypocrites' and 'vipers'. Moreover, his love was not broad and all embracing, but was limited to a small group of people — the Israelites — and he told his disciples to go forth and spread his message only to the Children of Israel and not to the 'Gentiles' (the Jewish term for non-Jews). And there was also the time, as recorded in Mark 7:25-30, when a Greek woman approached him and asked him to exorcise her daughter of the spirit that possessed her. He told her that it was not right to give the bread of the children to dogs, meaning that his teachings and help were not for Gentiles. But she persisted, and said that the dogs may eat the crumbs that fall from the table, whereupon, Jesus relented and helped her. But why, if he was all compassionate and loving, should he have hesitated to help her in the first place? These days, he would be accused of racism for talking like that!

Then again, there is nothing in the story of Jesus, as recorded in the New Testament, to indicate that he felt any kindness towards animals; on the contrary, we read (Matt. 8, Mark 5, Luke 8), how Jesus drove evil spirits out of a possessed man, which then went into a herd of pigs that was grazing nearby, causing them to run headlong downhill to drown in a lake. He was also not averse to giving instructions on how to catch fish.

In spite of such personal discrepancies, we don't dismiss the teachings of Jesus as useless, and it doesn't mean that we cannot benefit from them. There are the inspiring examples of Francis of Assisi and the late Mother Theresa to demonstrate that the love which Jesus spoke about is a real and practicable thing; in fact, these two followers of Jesus seem to show love in a higher degree than did Jesus Himself (Saint Francis and Mother Theresa can't deny that, as they would, because he died more than 700 years ago, and she died just recently, but we can imagine them being horrified of the suggestion that the disciple should be more advanced than the Master!);

they didn't allow Jesus' occasional 'lapses from perfection' to prevent them from applying and experiencing what he taught.

Imagine what the world might have been like if more Christians had attempted to live by the teachings of Jesus, instead of merely believing in Him, and praying to Him to save them; or if Buddhists had not treated the Buddha as a God or Superman, and tried, instead, to experience for themselves what He was talking about! It would, for sure, have been quite different than it is now!

Most of us have, or have had, 'hero figures' to whom we look up and admire. Some of them we leave behind as we grow up and mature, while others remain with us for life; and as we go along, we might acquire others, too. Often, however, we find that if we meet our heroes — who are usually remote from us, and beyond our reach — they appear otherwise than the image we have built up of them, and not larger than life, as we previously supposed. And so, we feel somewhat disappointed and let down. It would, therefore, be better, perhaps, not to meet our heroes, but to keep them at a distance, for then the qualities that we most admire in them might remain intact and continue to inspire us and serve as examples for our own living.

My elder brother, who is really quite a heathen and not at all religious or spiritually inclined, once went to church with his wife and young children, for some reason that I no longer remember. They sat there quietly, waiting for the service to begin, and when the minister, in his clerical vestments, mounted the pulpit from behind, the silence was suddenly broken by a loud and awe-filled whisper from one of my nieces to the other: "Look, Linda, there's God!"

There are many misconceptions about clergy people, some of which have been deliberately propagated and maintained over the ages to engender a mystique in the minds of the laity, but, while few people would retain their childhood ideas into adulthood, many people do harbor strange ideas about monks, nuns, and priests. Among the faithful, there are some who elevate the monks and priests so high that they almost need a telescope to see them

in the sky, and then, if the monk or priest does something they don't like, or that they feel he shouldn't do, he falls in their esteem, and they feel quite disappointed. But this is more because they put him so high to begin with, rather than what he might or might not have done. They expected him to be super-human and not to have human frailties. Some of them might even be surprised to learn that the monk or priest has to use the toilet like other people!

Some people use the clergy as scapegoats, so that they can do whatever they like without feeling too bad about it; they feel that Dharma is only for monks and nuns, or other people who live cloistered lives, and that it doesn't apply to them; they resent any suggestion that it does. A man once came to see me to complain about a monk whom he had seen smoking, and said it was very bad "But," I said, "what about you? You are smoking right now as you are telling me this!" "Oh, but I'm not a monk," he replied, "so it's alright." Thus, the monk becomes a convenient excuse for them to avoid doing what, deep inside them, they know they should or should not do. "I don't have to do that," they say, "because I'm not a monk."

If a monk refuses to be placed on a pedestal and worshipped, but insists on being a human being, with feelings and faults, like other people; if he admits that he is not enlightened, and refuses to pretend that he is, as many people expect him to be; if he presents his ideas in ways that people cannot reject, evade, or pretend that they don't understand, it throws some people into turmoil, and they feel threatened, and don't know what to do. This is because they live in a framework of rigid concepts, in which there is very little need to think for themselves. Very few of us want to hear things explained to us in ways that we can understand; very few people want the undergrowth of delusion cleared away, for they would stand exposed and be robbed of any excuse for avoiding their responsibilities. Anything that reminds them about their social obligations is resented and resisted; they just don't want to know! And anyone who wishes to propagate Dharma must be prepared for opposition, and no doubt he will have many enemies, for the naked truth is the last thing that most people want; this is the reason that religions have cloaked themselves in mystery and ceremony: as a

concession to the masses; deny them this, and they withhold their support. Truth is never popular in the world; it hurts.

Many other people, of course — mainly of the materialist kind — view clergy people as out of touch with reality, as anachronistic in the modern world; clergy are often the subjects of derision, ridicule, and jokes at the hands of such people, unless and until they need them for occasions like baptisms, weddings, or funerals, and then they come with polite, respectful words and fine titles, and expect the monk to be ready and happy to oblige them.

I was told recently that someone had said that I am not a real monk because I don't stay in a temple, or chant every day, or perform ceremonies. Well, I have met this person several times over the last five years, and know that he is stuck on form, and knows little of the essence; nor does he seem to be interested in learning anything, being content with what he thinks he already knows. No doubt he feels his beliefs are threatened by my non-conformity, and doesn't know how to categorize me, and fit me into his scheme of things. But why should I fit into his narrow world? I am not his puppet or slave, and I must say that the opinions of such people do not matter very much to me. Nor do I claim to be, or wish to be, the kind of monk that he is used to: those who stay in temples, chant in languages that few of them understand, perform ceremonies for the dead, etc., but who provide little for the living in terms of helping them to understand something of the Dharma. My way is not a way for the dead, but for the living, and I think I may fairly say, without boasting, that people would have to be pretty dumb if they could learn nothing useful from or through me, out of all the things that I have explained.

If monks refused to live up to people's unrealistic expectations of them, and would admit that they are not enlightened (although they would like to be), it would be so much better. As it is, because they feel that people expect them to be 'holy,' there is a tendency, in some monks, to pretend that they are, and once they get into this game, it is very difficult to get out.

During the Dalai Lama's 1992 tour of Australia, he was interviewed on a current affairs program, the host of which, Derryn Hinch, said to him that he had heard that he — the Dalai Lama — had quite a sharp temper. The Dalai Lama replied, with one of his delightful chuckles, and in his rather high pitched voice, "Yes, why not? I am also a human being!", and went on to explain that he thought he had inherited it from his father, who was quick tempered. What a startling admission from someone who is highly revered and widely regarded as a genuine holy man! I can imagine some people being somewhat shocked and disappointed to learn that even people at such a level can sometimes get annoyed! Many of us, you see, are so unsure of ourselves, so weak minded, that we look outside of ourselves for saviors and supermen, someone to do for us what only we can do for ourselves — to become, in other words, a vicarious substitute. This tendency leads to all kinds of excesses and troubles, and severely weakens a person's capacity for making the necessary efforts himself.

Because I feel that I have something worthwhile to share with others, I would like to make it quite clear that it is not within my capacity to take the karma of others upon myself, even though I might wish and be willing to; each and everyone has his/her own individual karma (plus group karma), and each must try to work things out for him or herself, with whatever help they might get from others; if they are unwilling to do this, any help from outside will ultimately not be very effective. The best form of help is that by which a person comes to understand how to help himself; without this, other forms of help might only cause a drug-like dependence.

I am also not a priest or intermediary between people and the Buddha. I do not, merely because I am a monk, have special powers that other people don't have, neither do I have access to secret knowledge denied to others.

I can perform ceremonies for the dead, like other monks, but I do not know how effective they are in helping those who have passed on. Perhaps there is an effect, and perhaps there is not. I do not know what happens after death, so I am not qualified to say anything about it; nor do I know anyone who is, although lots of people talk about it as if they are in direct contact

with the after-life. I have read about it, of course, and heard others speak about it, but how can we be sure that they are not just repeating what they have heard, like parrots? On this matter, I must plead ignorance.

What then, can I do that might be useful to others? I know that some people think that the things I talk about are just a matter of words. Well, they are, if people allow them to remain as such. But, if they would test the things I talk about, to see if they work, and are valid and useful to them or not, rather than merely believing or disbelieving what I say, they might find out, for themselves, whether they really are a matter of words or not. From my side of the fence, the things that I talk about and try to transmit to others, are things that I have had some experience of — it is not merely a matter of words or belief with me. However, I will readily admit that I do not always live by what I talk about, and sometimes, I make mistakes. But this should surprise no one; like the Dalai Lama, I am also a human being! And, even if I do not always do what I say, that doesn't make my words invalid and useless to others, does it? If people do not expect me to be a savior or a superman, they could still learn useful things from me, just as I could learn things from them. And it does not really matter from whom we learn as long as we learn; a diamond is a diamond, no matter where it is found. Personality should not come into it, but so often, like small children clinging to their mothers, many people are unable or unwilling to see beyond personality. Meanwhile, life goes on.

Yes, but we need to be able to respect a person in order to learn from him, some people might say. This is rather like putting the cart before the horse, is it not? If we respect only the form and then expect to learn, we might be disappointed; we might even be led astray. Respect should be earned, and not bestowed just out of custom. Lao Tsu said — in the Tao Te Ching — "Respect of Tao and honor of virtue are not demanded, but are in the nature of things." And somewhere else, in the same book, he spoke about foolish people laughing at the mention of Tao. So obviously, respect comes only from those who recognize something deeper. For my part I respect, and feel grateful towards, anyone who helps me understand something useful, and that person does not have to be holy, good, or even someone I like! Respect

comes naturally if learning is important to us. And respect does not necessarily mean bowing to someone and making offerings to him or her. The best way of showing respect and gratitude to someone who has helped us understand something is to apply what we have learned from him in our lives; merely to say "yes, yes," but to do 'no, no', has very little meaning.

I once knew someone who was excessively respectful towards monks, but when he tried to manipulate me, and I refused to 'dance to his tune,' he got mad with me, and told someone that he would give up being vegetarian. But if he became vegetarian because of me, it was a sign that he had no roots in himself, and didn't understand about vegetarianism. This same person donated a refrigerator for my use, but it didn't work; perhaps he thought that it would work for me when it wouldn't work for him because I am a monk! He also donated a saucepan with a hole in the bottom! It is amazing what people expect of monks! However can they avoid disappointment?

I have no, nor do I want, any disciples; I feel that we should be disciples of Dharma, or Life, not of a person or persons.

*"Pain is neither intolerable nor continuing, provided you remember its limits, and don't let your imagination add to it."*

(Epicurus, Greek philosopher, c. 300 B.C.)

## LOVE REVEALED

"**L**OVE CAN BE ANALYZED as having five aspects or dimensions: ① Purity; ② Intensity; ③ Extensity, ④ Duration; and ⑤ Adequacy.

These terms signify the following:

**PURITY:** The freedom of a kindly action from any taint of self-interest.

**INTENSITY:** The extent to which a person actually does what he says as regards loving other people. A person who says "I love humanity," but seldom does anything tangible to implement it has low intensity love.

**EXTENSITY:** The radius of a person's loving concern. A person who is concerned only about his own children has relatively low extensity, although it is higher than one who is concerned only about himself. One who is concerned about the children of his neighbor has a little wider extensity; and one who is concerned about children all over the world, whether he is acquainted with them or not, has still wider extensity. Persons like the Buddha, Jesus, and St. Francis, whose loving concern seems to have been universal in scope, have the highest extensity of all. (The Buddhist Scriptures repeatedly show the Buddha's universal concern for all sentient life).

**DURATION:** The length of time that an act of creative altruism consumes. The act of giving a coin to a blind man is certainly an act of merit, but its duration is very slight, as compared with the acts of a person who year after year goes to read for the blind or transcribe books in braille.

**ADEQUACY:** The degree to which the consequences of a kindly act correspond with its intention. It is generally accepted that an act is to be judged by its motive, but the consequences of an act should also be taken



into account. A person may perform an action with a motive of pure unadulterated kindness, but if he does it without good judgment it might result in tragedy, and he is, in part, responsible. A classic illustration of this is told with many variations in the old Buddhist Jataka Tales: A monkey wanted to kill the flies that were troubling his master's sleep. Picking up a branch that was lying nearby, he aimed a blow at his master's forehead, killing all the flies, but also killing his master!"

*(Extracted from Gina Cerminara's book: Insights for the Age of Aquarius [published by Quest Books of the Theosophical Society], where she comments on the ideas of noted sociologist Pitirim Sorokin about the nature of love).*

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*“The road to success is always under construction.”*

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## THE POTENCY OF WORDS

**I**T IS AMAZING how little we know about the words that we use, and how we often speak without really understanding what we are saying. Is this because the words we use are not of our own personal crafting, but were originated by others long ago, and we just acquired most of them in our childhood, before the age when we were able to ask what they meant, etymologically? How casually we use these means of communication, and often, how unskillfully. Words are tools, the correct use of which can help us to produce masterpieces, but if used unskillfully or unwisely, can cause disaster. Merely having the tools is not enough; we must know how to use them properly. Much trouble is caused by words, intentionally or unintentionally. Much wonder is bypassed each day because we do not appreciate the beauty and import of words, and what they are capable of conveying.

With words, we can 'press each other's buttons' — that is, touch each other — in countless ways; we can inspire, inform, influence, enlighten, soothe, encourage, educate, persuade, elevate, cheer, stimulate, enliven, relieve, excite, charm, and energize, provoke, sadden, tempt, discourage, bore, deceive, deflate, enrage; we can exhort, impress, entertain, pacify, incite, and so on. Words are incredibly important in our lives.

Ask people in Australia: "How are you?" and you will probably receive the response: "Good, thanks!" Now, that's quite a claim to make, isn't it? Who dares to say he/she is good? Of course, we understand that they mean 'fine', or 'well'. Then there is the common misuse of 'can' in place of 'may', as when people ask, for example: "Can I have some more tea, please?" or "Can I go with you?" the best answer to which, of course, would be to say: "I don't know: can you?"

It is not uncommon to hear people say: "I'll do my best," or to exhort someone else to do so. After trying, and failing, to do something, we might say: "well, I did my best" and this is often an excuse or a cover-up. But, you know, we have never done our best, for the simple reason that we do not know what our best is, and we can always see how, upon looking back on something we've done, how we could have done better; there is always room for improvement and indeed, learning from our mistakes is how progress has been made throughout the ages. Therefore, to talk about 'doing our best' has no meaning.

Most people — most religious people, at least — have ideals. The ideal that Hindus aim for is 'Moksha' ('Liberation from Samsara'), or 'God realization'. Christians hope for salvation from their sins, and Heaven, while Buddhists aspire to Nirvana, or Enlightenment. So, there is a dichotomy in our lives; we are caught between the actuality of 'mundane' life, and the supra-mundane ideal. This is bound to lead to frustration, but, perhaps this is necessary and unavoidable and should not always be regarded as something negative; it, too, has its purpose and leads to many breakthroughs, as artists, scientists, inventors, and creators in any field would probably aver (and frustration is deliberately cultivated by practitioners of Zen in order to 'bring the pot to the boil', as it were). Frustration is seldom a pleasant thing, being something that will not permit our minds to be at ease; but if, after many attempts and failures to achieve something, we finally succeed, we might look back on the whole process and recognize that frustration had a part to play in it, and indeed, might have validated it all; for if we were to succeed in whatever we did at first try, without ever knowing failure, success would have little value to us; as it is, success can be seen as success only because of failure; so failure is also important.

When aiming for some far off spiritual ideal that is difficult to attain we must take care not to disregard, or think lightly of, our lesser successes on the way, in case, not realizing our grand aim, we consider our lives to be failures. Holding onto narrow, fixed goals, might make us unable or

unwilling to settle for anything less, or to switch to something else; this can easily result in disillusionment, lethargy, despair, or even madness.

It is important not to try to run before we can walk, and to be happy with what we have so far achieved, for even minor achievements are part of the journey. And if you feel that you haven't achieved anything, it is a sign that you need to apply this advice. Haven't achieved anything? Is it nothing to be what you are right now? You could say that you have achieved nothing only if you have not thought about, understood, or appreciated what it means to be a human being. In this, however, you are not alone, but are surrounded, on all sides, by vast numbers of other people who have not understood, for we have not been taught, shown, or inspired to think about what it means to be alive — or, if we have, it hasn't affected us very deeply. We have grown up with it, have treated it superficially, and have taken it all for granted, without question and without wonder. If we could begin to break out of this habit (for it is a habit), we might begin to understand something more of ourselves than does the average person, who is really quite ignorant and dull in this respect, even though he/she might otherwise be sophisticated and well educated.

If we were transported to another planet where everything would probably be quite strange and different than on our own, we might be very excited and alert, noticing everything in detail, as we would expect it to be strange and different. But we have grown so used to living on our own planet that many of us notice very little about it; it no longer excites wonder in us (if it ever did!), and we behave as though we've 'seen it all, know it all, have done it all.' Have we been so overdosed that our brain cells have become stupefied, and no longer capable of wonder and appreciation? Is it the fault of our education systems worldwide, which have over-stressed the role of the teacher and the teaching, and neglected learning and discovery?

Education has become, to many of us, merely something that equips and enables us to function in the world, and to earn a living therein, rather than a means to overcome ignorance and help us become more enlightened. But surely, we have reached the stage — those of us who are fortunate enough

not to live in places like Somalia or Ethiopia — where life is more than just a matter of survival and the drudge of earning a living. Many people in the past have struggled, suffered, sacrificed, and died so that we might now enjoy better living and working conditions than they knew; but now that we've got them, many of us don't know what to do with them, and show our gratitude by complaining of being bored, and not knowing what to do. I imagine that the people of Somalia do not complain about being bored, when they are constantly preoccupied with trying to survive! Boredom is a rich man's disease. It is so funny how we overcome one set of obstacles and, in so doing, create another set for ourselves: Our wealth, luxury, and leisure hang upon us like chains and are not the blessing that they should be. Might this not be because we played little or no part in their creation, but merely inherited them from others? We therefore lack the appreciation that creation brings.

I once knew someone whose husband's sickness and death led her into Dharma, but she later complained that, in spite of her 'practice,' she had never had a 'spiritual experience.' I'm sure that she's not the only one who thinks like this, and it's probably just a case of 'not being able to see the forest because of the trees.' She has concepts of what a 'spiritual experience' is or should be, and has never glimpsed that life — in all its apparent 'mundanity' — is one big spiritual experience, simply because we are spiritual beings, much more so than we are physical beings! But since it is not easy for us to grasp this, it necessitates a spiritual experience to see this spiritual experience, sort of like needing to be educated to be educated, or like fish in water: they would never think about water (supposing fish can think and reason about anything) while they are in it, and there is plenty of it; but if they were pulled out of it or their pond dried up, water would be the only thing they would think about!

There is a little anecdote from India that might be pertinent here: "Where shall we hide the Truth from man?" the gods all cried when man was made. "How can we guard our secret now?" they asked each other fearfully. "If we hide it in the earth, he will dig it up; if we hide it in the mountains, he will

climb them; even if we hide it in the sea, he will find it. Where shall we hide the Truth from man?"

Quite beside themselves, they cried: "This little man will take our throne; we have made him far too smart not to claim our heaven home! Hide it in matter, he will analyze it; hide it in water, he will crystallize it. Even in Hell he will surmise it! Where shall we hide the Truth from man?"

They thought of stars in outer space, or in the nature of a tree, but they knew that man would solve each and every mystery. "Hide it in the wind, he will pursue it; hide it in the act, he will do it. Even in the atom he will view it. Where shall we hide the Truth from man?"

They solved the mystery of how the gods should win. The wisest said: "Let's take the Truth and hide it deep inside of him. Hide it in his heart, he will doubt it. Hide it in his soul, he will live without it. Even if we should reveal and shout it, he won't believe the Truth is within him!"

Many times, I have heard expatriate Vietnamese talk about going back to live in Vietnam once the communist regime there has collapsed, and it has become 'free'. Even before this longed-for event, however, some of them have been back for a visit, as Vietnam slowly opens up. Upon returning to their countries of domicile, they tell not only positive tales of how nice it was to be with family and friends there again, and how the situation there is improving, but also complain about how inefficient are things like sanitation, transportation, communication, and so on things that they were at ease with and probably didn't notice too much before their escape to the West. But now, having lived in the West for some time, and grown accustomed to conveniences like washing machines, refrigerators, private cars, etc., they find it hard to adjust to being without them. But in any age, and with any people, it is much easier to make the adjustment from not-having to having, than to make the adjustment from having to not-having. Life, however, pays little regard to our feelings and wishes, and we sometimes have to take a step backwards.

Have you ever been to a country where no one spoke your language, and you didn't speak theirs, and where you felt terribly alone, unable to communicate, but then someone came along who spoke your language fluently, and with whom you could converse freely about anything? If so, you will probably recall how relieved you felt, to go from trying very hard to communicate by means of sign language and the few words of the local tongue you might have been able to pick up, to 'normal' speech.

It is good for us to be in situations of deprivation and simplicity at times, as it helps us understand and appreciate the good things we have in such abundance. But, apart from just having and appreciating things that have been made by others, it would be better for our souls and self-esteem if we created something — anything — by ourselves, instead of merely buying everything, because even if what we make is inferior to what we might buy reasonably cheaply, we would have the satisfaction (which is a spiritual quality), of knowing that, "I made that myself." We have overemphasized the academic side of our education at the expense of the artistic, creative side, and stand in need of a re-balancing. Therefore, creativity is something that should be nurtured and encouraged in us from childhood upwards, and when children come home from school with things that they have made or drawn there, they should be praised for their efforts, and encouraged, so that they might find joy in creativity. In no way should they be ridiculed or discouraged.

Unless and until we begin to doubt and question the standards on which society is based, we will not be able to go very far along the Way; it is necessary that we stand back, and view things from a distance, in order to see them in perspective. Most great teachers have said, in one way or another, that the road upwards is hard and narrow, while the road downwards is easy and wide. Modern society is constituted overwhelmingly on a material basis, with very little consideration for our spiritual well being, and this brings about all kinds of ill effects. I would like to quote here something pertinent from Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World Revisited" to illustrate this:

'... modern technology has led to the concentration of economic and political power, and to the development of a society controlled (ruthlessly in the totalitarian states, politely and inconspicuously in the democracies) by Big Business and Big Government. But societies are composed of individuals and are good only insofar as they help individuals to realize their potentialities and to lead a happy and creative life. How have individuals been affected by the technological advances of recent years? Here is the answer to this question given by a philosopher psychiatrist, Dr. Erich Fromm:

*"Our contemporary Western society, in spite of its material, intellectual and political progress, is increasingly less conducive to mental health, and tends to undermine the inner security, happiness, reason and the capacity for love in the individual; it tends to turn him into an automaton who pays for his human failure with increasing mental sickness, and with despair hidden under a frantic drive for work and so-called pleasure."*

"Our 'increasing mental sickness' may find expression in neurotic symptoms. These symptoms are conspicuous and extremely distressing. But "let us beware," says Dr. Fromm, "of defining mental hygiene as the prevention of symptoms. Symptoms as such are not our enemy, but our friend; where there are symptoms there is conflict, and conflict always indicates that the forces of life which strive for integration and happiness are still fighting." The really hopeless victims of mental illness are to be found among those who appear to be most normal. "Many of them are normal because they are so well adjusted to our mode of existence, because their human voice has been silenced so early in their lives, that they do not even struggle or suffer or develop symptoms as the neurotic does." They are normal not in what may be called the absolute sense of the word; they are normal only in relation to a profoundly abnormal society. Their perfect adjustment to that abnormal society is a measure of their mental sickness. These millions of abnormally normal people, living without fuss in a society to which, if they were fully human beings, they ought not to be adjusted, still cherish "the illusion of individuality," but in fact they have been to a great extent de-individualized. Their



conformity is developing into something like 'uniformity.' But "uniformity and freedom are incompatible. Uniformity and mental health are incompatible too. Man is not made to be an automaton, and if he becomes one, the basis for mental health is destroyed.

"In the course of evolution, nature has gone to endless trouble to see that every individual is unlike every other individual. We reproduce our kind by bringing the father's genes into contact with the mother's. These hereditary factors may be combined in an almost infinite number of ways. Physically and mentally, each one of us is unique. Any culture which, in the interests of efficiency or in the name of some political or religious dogma, seeks to standardize the human individual, commits an outrage against man's biological nature."

Should we not then rejoice in being ourselves, and try to discover what it means? How terrible it would be if we were all like photocopies of some prototype!

## ANCIENT ROOTS

**WE DO NOT KNOW** — and probably we never can or will — when or why men first began to think about what, if anything, happens after death, but we have inherited the process that began with their first speculations, in a long, unbroken string, and the same thing puzzles us.

Like us, of course, primitive man could see that death is something final and irreversible in terms of the body, and that no one awoke from it and resumed their normal activities as after sleep; the body, when dead, begins to putrefy and stink abominably; if not cremated, or eaten by birds and beasts, it will be consumed by maggots, until finally, only bones remain. Beyond this, we know nothing for sure.

From the discovery of ancient graves, and the artifacts found together with the bones therein, there is reason to suppose that, many thousands of years ago, some of our ancestors performed services or ceremonies for their dead, or how else can we account for things like weapons, jewelry, cooking utensils, and foodstuffs that were buried with them? Surely, primitive men were not so naive as to suppose that dead bodies, which would soon be reduced to bones, would be able to use these things; they must have been included for use in a postulated 'afterlife.' How, when, and why was the tremendous mental leap made between the observable death and dissolution of the body, and the unobservable, but imagined, survival — in some form or another — of something 'immaterial?' And how long did it take for such a supposition to become a widely accepted part of diverse cultures?

Several thousand years BC, the Egyptians had developed a brilliant culture centered around death and the after-life. Pharaohs and other high ranking, rich and powerful people spent many years of their lives thinking about and planning for their own deaths, and we might conclude that the rest of the people planned about it according to their lesser means. The

pyramids are the most visible and durable forms of this death culture, and there still exist many mummified bodies in museums around the world. Nor were only people mummified, in hope of resurrection (which was an old, old concept long before Jesus was born), but animals and birds, too. Life in this world was regarded as a period to prepare for death and the after-life.

Now, throughout recorded history, people have reported seeing ghosts, and this has continued until the present, in spite of our increased learning and scientific knowledge, and we haven't been able to adequately explain this. There is no reason to suppose that primitive men didn't also see ghosts or apparitions, although they probably understood even less about them than we do, and were proportionately more scared. Like us, they most likely would have thought of them as 'non-material' entities, and probably concluded that life doesn't end with the body's death, and that something remained. Fear of ghosts, combined with a dim hope of surviving death, was probably one of the main factors in the beginning of religion, together with the propitiation of imaginary spirits or gods (at this stage, it would not have included a moral code, which would come much later, as a means of bringing some semblance of order into society).

When men had evolved further, and had entered the stage of cultivating their own food, instead of hunting and gathering it wherever they could find it they would have been deeply struck by the regular rotation of the seasons, and seed time and harvest, noting how seeds planted in the ground must 'die' in order for new life to spring up therefrom. Many nature- and fertility-cults developed out of such observations, for men were very close to, and dependent upon the soil in those days (unlike we of today, who are still dependent, but not close to the soil).

Surrounded by such cults of death and resurrection, it is not surprising to find this and other 'pagan' beliefs central to Christianity; the followers of Jesus turned his ignominious death on the cross to their advantage by the use of this popular concept, taking him beyond the sphere of death and the power of his enemies to harm him; thus, he became more effective in death than in life, and the belief of his followers magnified and distorted him out

of all proportion, when he was no longer around to discourage or prevent this inevitable tendency.

The major religions all have concepts about life after death, and most of them place great significance on the state of the mind at the moment of death. Catholics call in a priest to administer 'the last rites' to someone who is about to die, who will be urged to confess his sins and make his peace with God, so that his mind will be unburdened for passing on. Buddhists invite monks to chant at the bed-side and/or preach Dharma to the dying person, as a means to help him/her focus his/her mind on something positive; it is considered very important to let go and die with as peaceful a mind as possible, in line with the teachings that the last thought moment of the present life will determine the first thought moment of the next life, for the one flows into the other in an unbroken continuum. It is believed that a positive state of mind at death will carry one to a positive next life; whereas, if a negative or unwholesome state of mind prevails at death, the subsequent rebirth will not be very good.



In 1991, when I visited the Vietnamese Refugee Camp at Sungei Besi, Malaysia, someone told me of a refugee who had been there for several years, pining and hoping that his application for resettlement in another country would be approved. One morning, he was called to the office of the UNHCR, and informed that he had been accepted for resettlement in the U.S. We can imagine his joy, can we not?

During the afternoon of that same day, however, there was a thunderstorm over the Camp, and he was struck by lightning, and killed outright. "How unfortunate! How sad!", most people would say. Yes, but there is another way of looking at it, particularly if we accept the concept of Rebirth, and I propose it here not because I am heartless, and feel no sorrow at his abrupt death, but more out of a desire to extract something useful from it, so that

his death might be illustrative of something to someone, and therefore not in vain. It is possible, if not probable, that the mind of that young man at the time of his sudden and unexpected death was still infused with the joy from the news of his acceptance, and so we might say that he died happy, which is not something that anyone can arrange or engineer. Had he gone to the U.S., as he expected to, and lived there for many years, he would have been happy at times, no doubt, but at other times, we can say with equal certainty, he would have been unhappy and sad, from encountering the many difficulties and problems, sicknesses and setbacks that life holds for us all in varying amounts; and the possibility of him dying with a happy mind would be much less than 50%. Therefore, contrary to what many or even most people would say, I maintain that he was fortunate to die in the manner that he did.

Recently, while relating this incident to a family who had been in the same Refugee Camp years before, they told me of a similar case that took place there. A man who was the sole survivor of his boat's asylum seekers had just received the long awaited news of his resettlement, and overjoyed, he went to burn incense at the foot of a coconut tree in thanksgiving, though why he chose a coconut tree, I don't know, unless — as it not uncommon in certain Asian countries — there was a small shrine there. Whatever, as he was doing so, he was struck on the head by a falling coconut, and died instantly.

Christians believe — as they are taught so — that our lives begin with the present life, but go on into an infinity of either heavenly bliss or infernal suffering; to them, there is no life prior to this one. To believers in rebirth or reincarnation, however (and this includes Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Theosophists, and even — surprisingly — some Christians today), the present life is just one of a long series of lives, which stretch out on either side of this one like links in a chain; the present life is not the first, and, in all probability, will not be the last. Although I personally accept the Buddhist concept of Rebirth, I cannot prove or demonstrate it to anyone, so I prefer not to say much about it, for if I did so, I would be in the same position as those who claim this or that about things that cannot be verified.

Moreover, I feel that the present life is the most important, as it's the only one we've got (in fact, there is only and always the present moment; the past and the future are unreal, and we cannot even talk of the present, for it is not something to be spoken of, but to be lived).

According to the concept of Rebirth, therefore, the death of this body is merely one of a number of such events in the long career of any individual, and is by no means unique or unusual. Also, as we can all see, we do not have to be old to die; death does not respect youth, health, or strength, any more than it respects wealth, rank, or power; when it comes for us, swiftly or slowly, we cannot refuse its summons, but must go.

Now, following what I've just said, it may be that someone will think thus: "If it's so important and fortunate to die with a happy mind, I'll wait until I'm very happy, and then blow my brains out!" Ah, the cunning human mind, always seeking to control and manipulate everything! Do you think it would work that way? You might be able to obtain a gun (in a world that is awash with weapons, that would not be very difficult); you might wait until you are very happy, and then raise the gun to your head, but ... do you think that at the last moment, when you are about to pull the trigger, your happiness would hold? Could you be sure that your mind would not shake, and your happiness flee?

"Well, in that case," you might think, "I'll hire a hit-man to follow me around until he sees me happy, and then blow me away." Could we engineer our own death in such a way as to be sure to die happy? I would not advocate trying it, because although there are certain circumstances under which I could understand suicide, I can see plenty of reasons for wanting to live and work for the betterment of the world we live in, even if, personally, we make no further progress than what we've made so far.

Yes, life is a struggle; why not? And if we were taught so from the very beginning, instead of being led to believe otherwise, we would be much better equipped to deal with its ups and downs, pains, sorrows and disappointments than we are. As it is, our advances in science and

technology, wonderful though they are, have shielded us from some of the blows of life, and given us the hope that we might eventually be free from them all, and so life often catches us with our pants down, unprepared.

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**"The gem cannot be polished without friction,  
nor man perfected without trials."**

*(Chinese proverb)*

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## GRATITUDE IS THE KEY

**W**E SPEAK OF the Past and the Future but, in reality, there is only the Present, and here, in the Present, we were born, here we live, and here we will die. There is always only the NOW!

Most of us marvel, now and then, at Nature — its beauty, its strength, its persistence and tenacity, the wonderful variety of its life forms. But can we perceive a purpose in the producing, evolving, and sustaining of all these forms? Can we even say that there is a purpose in it all? Or is it merely a matter of things coming into being, remaining a while, reproducing, suffering throughout, and then dying, leaving only a few bones or a bit of ash? Does Nature have a discernible purpose?

Well, the fact that this question is being posed implies doubt, at least, and/or perhaps the intention to stimulate or irritate others to ask the same question, not just superficially, or in passing, but as something that intimately concerns us all.

We are — are we not? — one of Nature's countless life forms, but unlike the myriad other forms, humans alone can ask this question, and it both ennobles us, and causes us quite a lot of anguish. The other forms live by the laws of Nature, follow the promptings of instinct, and never question their bondage. But we, to a large extent, have broken away from our Mother and her laws, and, to that extent, have become unnatural; this process continues. We still eat, sleep, procreate, defecate, etc., in much the same way as our primitive ancestors did, and as other life forms did and still do; physically, we have not changed very much for thousands of years, except for getting a little taller and a bit healthier, perhaps, and these are due to better nutrition. We still carry vestiges of our primitive past with us in the form of the hair on our heads, which would have served to protect the skull and the delicate brain within from being scorched by the sun; we retain the



nails on our fingers and toes, though they are no longer needed as weapons; and why men have nipples, no one knows! It is in the mind — mentally — that we have evolved the most, and have graduated from living solely by instinct to living by discernment and reason. When this process began and why, whether it will eventually reach a point where no further development is possible, and if there is a design in it all, we cannot say, and no one should be so bold or brash as to claim to know the purpose of life (no matter what this or that book might have to say about it). We may, if we have thought about it somewhat, declare that "such-and-such is my purpose in life," and strive to realize it; that is our prerogative. But at the same time, we must allow other people the same freedom and right to decide for themselves what their purpose is or is not, without trying to force ours onto them, or expecting them to conform to our ideals.

We are confronted now, moreso than ever before (because we know much more about it, and cannot ignore it), by the immensity of the Universe, which we attempt to measure by 'light years'; but, although it is easy to talk in terms of millions, or even billions of light years, it is really incomprehensible to us, and, of necessity, we feel tiny and unimportant in relation to it all. It is here, however, where Science has forced us to see how infinitesimally small we are, that Mysticism takes over, to save our dignity and sanity, and we move away from the intellect somewhat, to the intuition, and feel — rather than discover by the process of thought — that we do have a role to play (as does everything else, no matter how large or small), and, as such, we are important.

Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, and all other famous conquerors and empire builders, did what they did only because of people behind them, whose names and deeds were never recorded — people like their foot soldiers, water carriers, cooks, grooms, messengers, and so on. Behind Columbus, Magellan, Neil Armstrong, and all other pioneers, explorers, and discoverers, were rank upon rank of other people, supporting and financing them. The great inventors like William Caxton, Benjamin Franklin, Louis Pasteur, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, and so on, all relied upon others to assist, encourage, feed and clothe them. In short, no one does

anything alone; our living, our every action, even our every breath, somehow involves others, even if it is not immediately apparent. And not only does it involve other people, but other things — all other things — in a vast network. To see this is Mysticism: an intuitive awareness of how things exist interdependently — so interdependently, it has been said, that if it were possible to remove a single grain of sand from the Universe (which it is not, of course, because where would it be removed to?), the whole Universe would collapse!

Far from being opposed to Science, this is really complementary to it, and continues where Science begins to fumble and stumble among its laboratory equipment and its theories and hypotheses, for it leads us into the dimension of Love and Compassion, which arise from seeing and feeling things — all things — as interdependent, and could never lead to the cruelty and abuse of power that Science sometimes engenders. It could be called 'The Science [or Art] (Science and Art are not mutually exclusive, as is sometimes supposed, but are, seen from one viewpoint two names for the same thing) — of Life and Living.' A scientist might be persuaded — by others, or by his own base desires — to use his knowledge and power for harmful purposes; it goes on all the time, especially in the arms industry.

Life is so tenacious that, even when people are starving to death, as in such places as Ethiopia, Somalia, or in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, and can barely stagger around, they somehow find the energy to procreate. One sometimes wonders: If mothers really love their children, as it seems they do, how can they bring them into such hellish conditions, to suffer and die? There seems to be no reason in it at all. We cannot suppose that there is nothing more in it than just a few minutes of sexual pleasure, when all other pleasures are denied to them. Then what? We must not forget Mother Nature's urge to ensure the survival of the species; She is prepared to sacrifice millions of individuals, and not care at all, it seems, or if the species becomes extinct, as so many species have and will. Does Mother Nature really care, when She can produce others to take their places, or none at all? We might think we are highly intelligent and sophisticated, and that we are really in control of our lives, but it is a delusion, and we have

not gone so far away from our basic instinctive roots that Nature cannot recall and humble us, and use us as pawns in Her callous chess game.

In its attempts to ensure the survival of the species, Nature makes allowances for failures and a high attrition rate, and reproduces prolifically, prepared to sacrifice many so that a few might live and carry on their line. Compared with the fecundity of insects, or fish, for example, Man is really quite puny, for it takes some years before a human is able to take care of itself, and humans rarely give birth to more than one baby at a time. Man is not armed with fangs or claws with which to protect himself, he has no body armor, and it was only his superior intelligence and cunning that enabled him to become the dominant species on the planet. Most insects lay dozens or even hundreds of eggs at a time, and are capable of multiplying at an alarming rate, but because of predators that live off them and keep them in check, they have not increased to overwhelming proportions, even though they've been around much longer than Man.

Even if there is no purpose to Life — and I'm not saying there isn't, mind — and even if death is the end of our lives — which again, I'm not saying is so, but many people believe it is — Life, as it is, enables us to work towards, and achieve, many things, not just for ourselves personally, but for our whole race. Just think: we have inherited most of what we have and are from those who went before us, including our theories and beliefs about life and death; are we going to pass on to our descendants just what we have inherited, no more and no less, or are we going to add something to it — some interest, as it were — so that those who come after us will be the beneficiaries of our living, with its discoveries, achievements, progress, sufferings, and mistakes? I write, not because I think that my ideas are unique or have never been told before, but because, by so doing, I might add my voice to all those who have ever tried to indicate to others that life is a precious commodity, and must be used for the common good; I have little else to offer except words, but words can and do change the world, and so, I try.

There is room for improvement in the world, as most people would agree — on the socio-political level, on the economic level, the scientific and technological levels, and most of all, on the mental spiritual level, for this is the level from which all the other changes must come. We can, and should, work for enlightenment of the mind, to overcome ignorance, and understand that it is not your life, or mine, but ours that we are talking about.

Concern is now spreading, and even alarm, that our planet, which has been abused, exploited, polluted, and husbanded unwisely and profligately for so long by an ever increasing number of bipeds, is reaching a crisis point, with noticeable changes in weather patterns, greater frequency of storms, hurricanes, floods, droughts, ozone depletion, deforestation, rising temperatures and the predicted rise in sea levels that will follow as a result as the ice caps melt, and so on. You and I might not be able to do much about it, but it would be a step in the right direction if we could see something positive in it all: it is forcing us to see beyond our national frontiers, and our narrow, insular ways of looking at the world, and recognize it as an undivided whole, instead of as a collection of separate nations. Pollution knows no frontiers, and needs no passport, visa, or ticket to ride; there is no point in complaining about the winds blowing sulfurous factory emissions from one country to another, for the winds are not to blame. We are now able to appreciate that what people do in the Amazon jungle, for example, affects people all over the world, but are we also aware that what we are doing — each one of us — is also having an effect on the planet? We should not just blame unscrupulous loggers and mine owners, but must accept responsibility for our involvement in the condition of the planet, for we are surely involved; think about this every time you flush a toilet, or discard a plastic bag, for instance. It does not mean that we should cease using our toilets, and dig holes in the back garden, as in the old days, but that we must be aware of how we are involved, and how we contribute to the overall state of things, and then follow this up by trying to reduce our contribution to the amount of waste and pollution.

It is hard to awaken people, but we must try, and if we are reasonably mature, mentally, we will not mind making some adjustments to our lives,

and won't feel offended when/if someone reminds us of our responsibilities. We are living in a time when we cannot always afford to 'pussyfoot around' and consider everyone's personal petty sensitivities; our very existence is at stake — maybe not immediately, but in the future — and not merely a few bruised egos, or some 'loss of face.'

No-one likes criticism, that's for sure, but only mentally immature people resent honest and fair criticism, and deliberately go against it, just to prove that they are 'their own man' and 'don't take orders from anyone.' As we mature mentally, we are better able to consider things, and if we find something right — whether we are helped to see it through advice, instruction, criticism, or whatever — we are more likely to accept it and incorporate it into our lives.

Mental maturity, however, doesn't always coincide with physical maturity, and cannot be measured by how many years a person has lived; a young person might be more mentally mature than an old person; age is not the criterion in this.

Years ago, during my stay in the Bataan Refugee Camp — and I keep talking about this, as it contained many interesting experiences from which useful lessons may be drawn — the Camp administration (Filipino, of course, though the Camp was funded by the UNHCR), provided each billet (and there were some 3,000 billets in the Camp, ten to a building, each accommodating about six refugees), with a plywood-topped table and two benches, not very strong or durable, but quite serviceable. Before long, however, many of these tables and benches were spoiled and useless from being left outside in the rain. This was just one of numerous examples of how many of the refugees neglected to take care of things in the Camp, and so great sums of money had to be spent to repair or replace them.

And where did the money come from? From the not-unlimited funds of the UNHCR. And so, what could and should have been spent on other refugees had to be spent on replacing things that had been broken or wasted by careless people. There was an obvious "It's-not-ours, and-so-there's-no-

need-to-take-care-of-it" attitude among the refugees. Because of this, the Camp administration found it necessary to institute a 'Work Credit System,' whereby each adult refugee was required to work two hours per day, at various tasks, and if, by the time they came to leave the Camp, they had not fulfilled their work quota, they were 'put on hold,' and not allowed to depart (in theory it was like this, but it seldom happened; the Filipinos were very good at making lists of rules, not good at enforcing them, but good at breaking them, and the refugees soon came to see the truth of the old saying that "a barking dog doesn't bite"). The Work Credit System was a shameful comment on the refugees, for it implied that, without such a system, they would not have kept their Camp clean; and in spite of the System, it was dirty. This is how they demonstrated their gratitude for being hospitably taken in and accepted for resettlement. It was also quite common for refugees to go into the nearby beautiful forest and start fires, which would often burn out of control, destroying many trees; they also did this on the hills surrounding the Camp, and the seedlings that had been planted and replanted several times in an attempt at reforestation there never had a chance to grow; those who did this obviously enjoyed seeing everything going up in smoke!

Yes, I'm complaining, and some people won't like it. Many people expect a monk to always use nice and kind words, but they never consider their own actions. If they put aside their antiquated concepts about how a monk should be, and stopped to think a little bit about why I am complaining, they might understand that I am not doing it just for the sake of complaining — I only wish it were not necessary! — but for the sake of everyone, including the people who do crazy things! We are all in the same boat, whether we like each other or not! It appalled me to see the forest and the hills on fire; it wasn't my country — I wasn't born in the Philippines — but it was/is part of my world, and I cared about it, and still do.

Of course, I am aware that anyone who points out things like this, and complains, will not be very popular. Now, I won't say that I don't care about people's opinion of me, because I do, but not so much that I will keep quiet about things that are more important to me; I will not let people's opinion of

me immobilize and silence me. It's not a matter of who is right or wrong, but of what. I have a responsibility, both to the world as a whole, and to myself, to express my disapproval of such carelessness and stupidity; if I were to see it, and keep quiet, I would be giving my tacit consent to the continuation of the destruction, and that I will not do. I am not afraid to stand alone in this, if necessary. Moreover, if enough people complain loudly enough, it will eventually have an effect; somebody will listen.

Are you one of those who prays when you are in trouble or you want something — "Help me! Give me! Save me!" — but who do nothing positive for the good planet that supports you (your life support system)? if so, it would be better not to pray at all, for if you do not know how to take care of what you've got already, it would only be detrimental for you to get more, because the more you have, the more responsibilities you will have. Think carefully before you pray, therefore; your prayers might be answered! (But then again, they might not be).



*'It is those who are not learned that are saved rather than those whose egos have not yet subsided in spite of their learning. The unlearned ones are saved from the relentless grip of the devil of self-infatuation; they are saved from the malady of a myriad whirling thoughts and words; they are saved from running after wealth.' It is from more than one evil that they are saved."*

*(Ramana Maharishi)*

## PRINCIPLES

**H**AVE YOU EVER NOTICED how we often criticize people of our own race or nation, but if someone of a different race or nation says something negative about ours we feel quite upset or become defensive? What does this indicate but racism, in a latent form, at least? We might hotly deny that we are racist, and would never do anything that might be condemned as such, but it is there in most of us nevertheless, and in many people it would not take much to stir it up; governments do this, with various forms of propaganda, and by appealing to patriotism and nationalistic sentiments, when it serves their purposes to do so.

If, however, we are aware of the lingering and deep-rooted element of racism in us, and that it is there because of ignorance of the nature of life, we will be better able to control it when and if, under favorable conditions, it might otherwise awaken from its dormant state and burst out.

We might have had some unpleasant experiences of people of a certain race or nation; it does happen. But we must be careful not to let it influence us into developing a dislike for that race or nation in entirety, and stigmatize the people thereof as "no good." For, just as our own race or nation consists of not just one type of person, so people of many kinds are to be found everywhere; no nation or race has the monopoly of 'good' or 'bad' qualities; all are still in the process of evolution, though evolving to what we really cannot say. And if we make statements such as — for example — "I don't like Greek people," we should qualify and soften them somewhat with the phrase "in general," or "generally speaking," for no one has ever met all Greek people; moreover, if we had met many people of a particular nationality, we would surely have come across some whom we liked, as well as some we didn't. During my several visits to Turkey, for instance, I encountered quite a bit of hostility from people there, though this might have been because they had had some negative experiences with other



Westerners before me; thus, their hostility was not necessarily directed at me personally. But I also met some kind and friendly people there, and I would like to go back again someday, to discover something that I feel I missed or overlooked before.

We may be cultured, urbane and sophisticated, but how deep does it all go, and what lurks beneath it? There are countless things in our psyches — many of them from the remote past — that we know little or nothing about. Are we so sure of ourselves that we dare say we would never, under any circumstances, give way to our baser instincts? Our principles would need to be very strong for that, would they not?

Undoubtedly, cannibalism was an integral part of life in many parts of the world, and has come to an official end only within living memory. Nor is it hard to imagine a resumption of it, under certain circumstances — and I'm not referring to isolated and well publicized cases of serial killers like Geoffrey Dahmer of Milwaukee, USA, whose demonic mentations caused him to dismember and eat parts of his victims' bodies. What I mean is that civilization, as we know it, is often only a very thin — and in some cases, not a very highly polished — veneer; scratch it and beneath, we might easily find barbarism and savagery, alive and well, biding their time, awaiting opportunities to emerge and terrorize the world; it has happened before, and will undoubtedly happen again. Our primitive instincts are not dead and gone, but are there in all of us, and we are all capable of doing things that normally we would be horrified at. Our moral codes are validated not because we have transcended the capacity for anti-social behavior, but because, still being capable of such, we restrain ourselves, either out of fear of being caught and punished, or out of understanding that certain things should not be done. Make no mistake, though: we are all capable of breaking the law in many ways. Moreover, most of us feel a certain pleasure in doing so, if we can get away with it.

Some years ago, in the Palawan Refugee Camp, a group of young boys came to me in the temple one day, and asked me to shave their heads (this was not uncommon among the Vietnamese Buddhists, some of whom had

vowed to shave their heads or become vegetarians for a month or so if they survived their escape from Vietnam by boat). Someone else told me that



these boys — all unaccompanied minors — had been at sea for many days, during which their supplies of food and water had run out, and the only way they could survive was by eating the flesh of their companions who had died of starvation or exhaustion. I complied with their request, and tried to assuage the guilt that they obviously felt by telling them that they had done nothing wrong, as

they had not killed the people whose flesh they had eaten, and only did it in order to survive. Even though I am a convinced vegetarian, I can understand people doing that, though what I would have done had I been in their situation, I don't know, and can only speculate. It would have been a real test of my principles; would they have stood up under such conditions? Or should they have stood up? I can eat meat; that is not difficult; all you have to do is put it in your mouth, chew it, and swallow it. I have taken no vow to be a life long vegetarian, but it is something that I feel strongly about.

One time, while staying in a temple in Malaysia, someone brought some cakes and rolls for my breakfast, and when I bit into one of them, I found that it contained meat, so I put in on one side, without making a fuss over it. When the man saw that he had unintentionally brought meat he was quite upset and apologetic, but I told him not to worry, as meat wouldn't kill me. Unlike the brahmins of India, I am not a vegetarian out of concern for personal purity, but for the sake of the animals; I object to killing, and vegetarianism is one way to express this. No matter if we take extreme care to eat only food that is considered ritually 'pure,' the body is full of all kinds of impurities like excrement, urine, sweat, pus, sebaceous secretions, mucus, ear wax, etc.; there is no question about bodily purity.

Benjamin Franklin became a vegetarian for some time, and was quite happy with it until " ... in my first voyage from Boston, being becalmed off

Block Island, our people set about catching cod, and hauled up a great many. Hitherto, I had stuck to my resolution of not eating animal food, and on this occasion I considered the taking of every fish as a kind of unprovoked murder, since none of them had, or could, do us any injury that might justify the slaughter.

"All this seemed very reasonable. But I had formerly been a great lover of fish, and, when this came hot out of the frying pan it smelt admirably well. I balanced some time between principle and inclination, till I recollected that, when the fish were opened, I saw smaller fish taken out of their stomachs; then, thought I, 'If you eat one another, I do not see why we may not eat you.' So I dined upon cod very heartily, and continued to eat with other people, returning, only now and then, occasionally to a vegetarian diet. So convenient a thing is it to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do."

Well, at least he was honest about relaxing his principles.

It is easy to be 'moral' and 'good' when our circumstances are fortunate, but if our circumstances change, and we fall upon hard times, what becomes of our principles? Will we — can we — maintain them, or will we change them like we change our clothes? Dare we say that we would never kill, cheat, lie or steal? We do not know what will happen tomorrow.



“The world, men had begun to learn, was not a nest of revolving crystalline spheres with the earth at its precious center and man thereon as the chief concern of the moon, the sun, the planets, the fixed stars, and beyond all these, a King of Kings on a throne of jeweled gold, surrounded by nine rapturous choirs of many-winged luminous seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominions, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels and angels. Nor is there anywhere towards the core of this earth a pit of flaming souls, screaming, tortured by devils who are fallen angels all. There never was a Garden of Eden, where the first human pair ate forbidden fruit, seduced by a serpent who could talk, and so brought death into the world; for there had been death here for millenniums before the species Man evolved: the deaths of dinosaurs and trilobites, of birds, fish, and mammals, and even of creatures that were almost men. Nor could there ever have occurred that universal Flood to float the toy menagerie of Noah’s Ark to a summit of the Elburz range, whence the animals, then, would have studiously crawled, hopped, swum, or galloped to their continents: kangaroos and duck-billed platypuses to far-away Australia, llamas to Peru, guinea-pigs to Brazil, polar bears to the farthest north, and ostriches to the south... It is hard to believe

today that for doubting such extravagances a philosopher (Giordano Bruno, 1548-1600), was actually burned alive in the Campo dei Fiori in Rome in the year of Our Lord 1600, or that as late as the year of Darwin's "Origin of the Species," 1859, men of authority still could quote this kind of lore against a work of science."

*(Joseph Campbell, in "CREATIVE MYTHOLOGY," commenting on the ideas of Baruch Spinoza, 1632-1677, Jewish Philosopher).*



**"Life is not a journey, but a destination."**

## SCAPEGOATS

**A**LTHOUGH WE DO NOT have eight tentacles, like an octopus, or many arms, like a Hindu deity, all around us, we constantly touch people in many ways, and are likewise touched by them. Life is a subtle and unsubtle give-and-take, because we do not live alone, simply because it is impossible to do so.

Someone recently asked me what I thought of kids of different ethnic groups speaking their native languages in school, and I responded that if their English is sufficiently good to express themselves adequately in, it is best to speak in that language, for to speak in a minority language when we know the language of the country we live in would be to deliberately exclude others from what we are saying, and, since no one likes to have this done to them, it is an activity pregnant with problems and ill feelings; it is also considered by many people — understandably enough — as very rude. This applies in any country, and not just in a country where English is the lingua franca.

If we learn how to put ourselves into others' positions, it can obviate many misunderstandings and problems, for just like you and I, everyone else has their legitimate feelings, and if we wish others to respect our feelings, we must respect theirs; it is not a one way street.

I am definitely not advocating undifferentiated conformity, but to deliberately stand out as different is to invite trouble, and I have often thought it improper and unwise for people to speak loudly in public in languages that people around them don't understand. For not only is it unnecessary, but it attracts attention to them, and sometimes resentment. American tourists have long had an unenviable reputation for this, and though people are happy to relieve them of their greenbacks, they otherwise do not respect them very much. Many people have an inborn xenophobia —

fear, dislike, or even hatred of strangers and foreigners — that they have not been able to overcome, or might not even want to, and therefore, they need little excuse to say or do something unpleasant, or worse. Not only because we know there are such people in the world, but more out of respect and consideration for others, we should walk lightly through life, causing as little disturbance as possible as we pass by.

Most of us are familiar with the word 'scapegoat,' but its origin is not so well known, so it might help to give a short explanation here. When Moses led the biblical Israelites out of Egypt (and most people will have seen the very entertaining movie "The Ten Commandments"), they wandered around in the desert, it is said, for forty years. It is never explained, and seldom queried, where they obtained such things as wood, which the account has them using in abundance, along with lots of other improbable things; it also has them being miraculously supplied with 'manna from heaven' and water which sprang from a rock. Anyway, in the book of Leviticus (the third book of the Bible), is an interminable list of rules and regulations about what the people should and should not do, and how to do/not do it, and if anyone has the time, interest, and patience to read that book, he/she will probably feel appalled at the blood thirsty and petty nature of the god who could demand unquestioning obedience of such silly things therein recorded. In chapter 16, he/it gives instructions for a goat to be selected from the flock, and the sins of the people to be symbolically laid upon it in 'vicarious atonement,' before releasing it into the desert. What utter b.s.! But at least the goat would still be alive, unlike many of its fellows that were dragged off to be ritually sacrificed to placate the vengeful deity. Now, goats are pretty resourceful at surviving in arid conditions; therefore, that particular goat might be considered lucky to escape from being used as a burnt offering!

Today, however, there is generally no element of luck attached to the concept of scapegoats; anyone who becomes, or is used as a scapegoat, is considered unlucky. And, in times of economic hardship, such as the present in many countries, with about one million people out of work in Australia (and other countries undergoing similar unemployment), some people look around for scapegoats — someone to blame and vent their

anger and frustration on. It is not uncommon for minority groups or people of different ethnic origins than the majority in a society — especially if the minority are hard working and prosperous — to feel the brunt of such frustration.

We might complain about harassment and infringement of our lawful rights, but lots of people are deaf when they choose to be. It is better, therefore, as a member of an ethnic group in a host country, to take care to do nothing that might attract unwanted attention to oneself, or to antagonize others. This is not to say that one should walk in fear, but rather with dignity, and concern for others; prevention is always better than cure.

During the Vietnam War, the Viet Cong had little trouble in turning the populace against the Americans and their pro-American governments in Saigon, as the Americans were strangers and aliens there, and most of them understood little of the language and culture of the Vietnamese, and perhaps cared even less. And, because it was the American bombs and chemical defoliants that brought death and destruction from the skies to young and old, male and female, friend and foe alike, it was easy for the VC to portray them as enemies of the people, invaders from a foreign land and culture; patriotism is a force more powerful than understanding. The Americans had little going for them, and were defeated more by the propaganda of the VC than by their arms, and it was only after Saigon fell in 1975 that many people realized they had backed the wrong horse; but by then it was too late, of course.

With crime rates continuing to soar, and no decline in sight, it is foolish to parade one's wealth before the eyes of those who need little temptation to steal. Part of the blame for theft lies with those who thoughtlessly walk around draped in gold and jewels; it inspires envy and greed in others.

Elephants and rhinoceroses are now in danger of extinction because their appendages are valued by men. Yet their tusks and horns serve no essential purpose, and they could still live without them. Would it not be an act of compassion, therefore, and in the vital interests of the animals themselves,



if they were to be rounded up and their tusks and horns surgically amputated, thus depriving poachers of their main, if not only, reason for killing them? If I were an elephant, I think I would not object too much to this sacrifice, for if the elephants are killed, they lose everything, and not just their tusks!

Tall and straight trees are singled out for their usefulness, and soon cut down, but gnarled and twisted trees are rejected and left standing. Sometimes, beauty and usefulness are their own enemies, while ugliness and uselessness serve as protection against aggressors. As Lao Tsu said: "The Sage wears rough clothing, and holds the jewel in his heart." That is, he is not ostentatious, and does not make a show, preferring to hide and disguise his attainments rather than display them.



**Beauty is a mystery ...  
It exists only in the mind  
Which contemplates it.**  
*(David Hume, Scattish philosopher)*

## EXPERIENCE IS NOT ENOUGH

**H**AVE YOU EVER DIALED a wrong number and been answered rather irritably by the person on the other end, as if you had done it on purpose, and they had never done the same thing? How do you react if someone calls your number by mistake?

Not long ago, my phone rang, and when I answered it, the voice of the elderly lady caller was most apologetic, and said: "Oh, I'm dreadfully sorry; I've got the wrong number. Please excuse me for disturbing you." I hastened to assure her not to worry; it wasn't a problem. But the politeness and sincerity in her voice made me feel good; it was as if I were talking with someone I knew well; I felt that this was the kind of person that one could easily get along with. In an age where brusqueness and couldn't-care-less-ness is all too common, it is pleasant to meet someone — even if it's only over the phone — who respects others enough to be polite and sincere; it kind of restores one's flagging faith in humanity.

Once, in Sydney, while sitting in a car waiting for the lights to change to green, I heard a tremendous sneeze, and, looking around to see who had made it, my eyes locked into the somewhat embarrassed look of a man in the car next to ours. What passed between us was a sort of communion that remains in my mind, for it was as if, having sneezed so loudly, and drawn attention to himself, his barriers were down for a moment. We smiled at each other knowingly, and then the lights changed, and we drove off. But I felt that because of such an opening, a friendship could easily have developed between us, complete strangers to each other though we were.

A year after this, I was in a crowded bus in India, and had to stand up for over an hour, as there were no empty seats; but I didn't mind as I had no choice except to stand, as people in India seldom give up their seats to anyone, and it wasn't a long trip anyway. Standing there alone, among so

many people, with no companions but my thoughts, into my mind — though why, I can't say — came the memory of The Great Sneeze, and I felt a sense of joy and lightness come over me. It was hard to restrain myself from laughing out aloud about it, and if I smiled to myself no one seemed to notice or care; in India, they probably think you're mad anyway, no matter what you do or don't do!

Now, anyone with a bit of imagination, and who has experienced the sudden and unexpected upsurge of a fond memory that made them feel warm and good — and I'm sure it has happened to most people, if not to everyone, at one time or another — will understand that I hadn't had too much of the hot Indian sun on my bald pate, and will probably empathize with me.

And how have you felt when, out on the street, you almost walked head-on into someone coming from the opposite direction, and each one, in an effort to make way for the other, turned aside, only to come up against each other again; so, once more, both parties dodged, with the same result, until finally, you managed to disengage yourselves?

It is really quite funny, though at the time maybe a bit exasperating; but, because both parties dodged, it showed a willingness to consider each other; if one or the other had been stubborn, and kept on walking straight ahead, the other party would have to give way, sort of like in a game of 'chicken' or brinkmanship. Try to observe the situation next time it happens, if my telling of it here has not robbed it of its spontaneity by then. And my talking of this brings to mind the well known incident from the story of Robin Hood, where Robin was about to cross a stream by means of a narrow plank, but saw a giant of a man stepping onto the other end. Both men, unwilling to give way to the other and 'lose face' thereby, advanced onto the plank, where they met in the middle and attacked each other with their staves, and were knocked into the stream. Fortunately, they saw the funny side of this, so became firm friends instead of enemies, as could easily have happened, and John Little — for such was his name — was renamed Little John by Robin Hood, and has been called so ever since.

What a lovely thing it is to communicate with others on the same frequency, and to know that you are being understood! What a lovely thing it is to meet someone and smile, just for the joy of communication, and with no other motive! The fact that we live in such huge communities today, where there is a lot of fear, tension and suspicion, should not prevent us from seeing the possibilities of such communication; we need it so much, and so should open ourselves to it, even though we will probably sometimes be rebuffed. Some of us lock ourselves up within stern facades, pretending to be other than we are, and, after a while, we forget that it's only a masquerade, and take it for real, thus becoming prisoners of ourselves. Certainly, we all know that appearances can be deceptive, and that if we always take people at face value, we might sometimes be cheated and disappointed; but, we should not conclude from this that all people are cheaters. Are you a cheater? And, if you have suffered painful experiences at the hands of others, that is all the more reason for you not to cause suffering to others in similar ways: you know how it feels.

Now, because no one really wants to suffer, we may suppose that some people — even though they may be only very few — have learned enough from suffering to have made up their minds not to hurt others in any way. There are good people in the world, and we should not allow the publicity about the crazy people, who commit all kinds of crime and folly, to blind us to this.

Everyone experiences many things as they pass through life. But it is not enough just to have had many experiences; we must learn something from them; only then is experience useful. Unfortunately, not everyone does learn, and some people who have had many experiences might have learned less from them than people who have had fewer than they. So, to say of someone: "He's had lots of experience," might not really mean as much as we suppose it to mean.

Looking back on the five years that I spent in the Refugee Camps of Southeast Asia, the thing that saddened me the most was not so much the

suffering of the refugees, which was a result rather than a cause, but the fact that many of them seemed to have learned very little from all their pain and suffering. Was I too naive and idealistic to expect refugees not to take advantage of opportunities to exploit and tyrannize their own people? There were many instances of refugees stealing mail — and sometimes huge amounts of it — from Post Offices in the Camps while they worked there as volunteers; there was large scale pilferage of food supplies, theft of private property, and generally, where there was an opportunity for self-gain at the expense of the community, there would be no shortage of takers. Was it too much to expect them to consider the feelings of their fellow refugees, having undergone the same difficulties in their escape from a common enemy — things like being attacked, robbed, raped, terrorized and killed by pirates, running out of food and water at sea, with people in the boats dying of starvation and dehydration, overloaded boats being hit and swamped by storms, and so on? Obviously it was, for all this had failed to create a bond between them, and unite them in their adversity. Thus, life in the Camps went on as it did outside, with corruption flourishing wherever it could, with people quarrelling, fighting, stealing, cheating, and sometimes killing each other, people drinking to excess if they had the money to do so, without a thought for those who had no money and couldn't afford to buy basic necessities, or give their children a little treat. No, not everyone learned from their pain, and some used their good fortune at being safe and free to cause more suffering to others. Many were quick to blame others for their situation, and complain about it, instead of looking at it intelligently, to see what they might make of it. Many were very lazy, and would not lift a finger to do anything to clean or improve the Camps, unless ordered to do so by the Camp authorities, but would sit around all day long, smoking, drinking, gambling, quarrelling, or feeling sorry for themselves. Then they wondered why Western countries reached saturation point from taking in refugees, and began to suffer from 'compassion fatigue'; no country needs or wants people like that, already having plenty of its own. It is not a right that people who flee their countries should be accepted for resettlement by another country; it is not a right, but a privilege and a blessing !

One time, in Bataan Refugee Camp, the Camp having become excessively dirty because of the carelessness of the refugees, and overgrown with long grass because of the monsoon rains, the camp administration summoned the representatives of such refugee groups as the Boy Scouts, the Catholic Youth, and the Buddhist Youth (known as 'The Buddhist Family,' or 'Gia-Dinh Phat-Tu' in Vietnamese), to a meeting, and asked them to 'volunteer' to clean up certain areas of the Camp. Having no choice but to accept an assignment, the Buddhist Youth were given the job of cleaning up the cemetery area. On the day appointed for this, they assembled in the temple, and someone came to ask me for the Buddhist flag. When I asked them what they wanted it for, they said that they were going to clean up the cemetery. I remonstrated, in vain, that they didn't need the Buddhist flag to do something useful for the community, but they insisted on having it, and off they marched through the Camp to the cemetery, with the flag held high in front of them. If they had not been 'asked' to clean up, they would never have done it on their own initiative, and I say this from my long experience of them. All that I ever saw them interested in was playing and singing, and while this is alright for small children, many of these were young adults. Then, when there was no alternative but to do it, they made a big show of it, and let everyone see what they were doing by carrying the Buddhist flag! They and I obviously had different ideas about Buddhism, and I must confess that my understanding of Buddhism seemed rather out of place in the Camps, where any mention of social service or community work was often met with a look of disbelief. There were exceptions to this, of course, but they were exceptions, not the norm. It has amazed me, therefore — but I'm very happy about it — how so many Vietnamese refugees have made out extremely well in the West, in both study and business; many of them have worked very hard, and have succeeded in what they have undertaken. But it has been largely for themselves; to get them involved in community work is very difficult, and Vietnamese who have tried have told me of their frustration therefrom. Might their reluctance to do something for others be a result of the forced labor programs imposed upon them by the communist regime in their homeland? Has this killed or stunted their ability to feel and care for others? I don't know, but I do know that my attempts, by word and

example, to get the refugees in the Camps to do something for their community had little success.

Once in Palawan Camp, I called some of the young people who frequented the temple to help clear a plot of waste ground behind the temple, so that we might grow some vegetables there. Nobody had used this ground for anything except dumping garbage in all the years — almost ten — that the Camp had been there, so it was heartening to see it becoming clear and its potential revealed as the work progressed.

I had only a small group of people to work with me, and it was a bit difficult to maintain their interest and attention as the days passed; there was a marked tendency for them to stop work and drift away if I went off to do something else, and almost none of them took the initiative to begin work without me, although there was nothing at all technical about it that required supervision.

To counteract this tendency, I explained to them that they shouldn't think they were working for me or because of me, but with me for the sake of others, because if they thought they were working for or because of me, they would stop work when I left the Camp, whereas if they understood, clearly, that we were working for the community, out of love for others, they would continue working and working with joy — long after I had gone. Sadly, they didn't seem to understand this, and so, after I was no longer there, the work ceased, and the ground went back to garbage, which meant — did it not? — that they had been working for or because of me, which is not what I wanted at all. (In actual fact, I had been working for them!)

If we see something that needs doing, and if we have the capacity and time to do it, it is infinitely better to do it on our own initiative than being told or asked to do it by someone else; we do not always need to depend upon authority if we use our minds and accept the responsibility that comes from being members of a community; we do not need someone standing behind us with a gun, telling us what to do and what not to do.

This particular task of cleaning the waste ground had a number of interesting side effects: not only did we transform something that no-one else had thought of using into something useful, but there were several lessons in it for those with eyes to see. Palawan Camp is situated on a beach on an island in south Philippines. It is not a very nice beach, of course, otherwise there would have been a tourist hotel there instead of a Refugee Camp. Because of its situation, the ground was full of hard coral rocks, and so our work of clearing the ground necessitated digging up and smashing some of these rocks. This was quite difficult, and we found that if we just smashed away at them with a sledge hammer, it entailed a great expenditure of energy, whereas if we looked at the rock from different angles, we might be able to find a weak spot which, when struck, might cause the rock to split easily: a case of mind over muscle.

Then, on the other side of this ground stood the residence of a French-Canadian Catholic nun who was noted for being a bit fierce; someone had also told me that she was not very sympathetic towards the Buddhists in the temple because the sound of their chanting (which, I will be the first to admit, was a bit difficult to bear, as they often insisted on using a microphone and amplifier for it, even when there were only a handful of people; it was totally unnecessary!), was not music to her ears. Anyway, while we were at work one day, she came out to me and said: "I'm so pleased with what you are doing; it looks so good! And I would like to offer you something to buy refreshments for your workers," and she pressed a 100-Peso note into my hand! We became quite good friends after that, because she, at least, had understood that what we were doing was not just for ourselves. And the best thing was, we had no idea, when we started work, what kind of effect it would have upon the nun; indeed, we didn't even think about her, let alone expect anything from her. So, when she came out with praise and a gift, it was so much nicer because it was unexpected.

On top of this, other refugees, seeing what we were doing, were inspired to do something similar around their own quarters, and soon there were



several tiny garden plots, where there'd been only garbage and weeds before. And the vegetables that were grown and harvested from our plot of ground were only another result of our efforts (and, in my opinion, not the most important result either).

The coral rocks lying around the Camp were regarded by most people as obstacles or nuisances, I suppose, and as far as I could see, no-one had found a use for them. But, following my life long commitment to recycling, and finding uses for things that are wasted or regarded by others as useless, I began to look at these rocks and wonder what could be made of them. There were some trees in the Camp, but no seats for people to sit on in the shade and relax. Wooden seats would not have long withstood the voracious appetites of the ubiquitous termites, or the careless usage of some of the refugees. Seeing the need, therefore, and how to fill it, I asked some people to help me to drag out some of the rocks that would serve our purpose, set them in place beneath the trees, then cemented their tops flat, so that they might be used as seats; and then, before the cement dried, I wrote various 'messages' in it that I thought might be edifying. Thus, what had formerly been useless became useful, and, while most people would only use them to park their butts on for a while, some would, I am sure, learn something from those 'sermons in stones,' and they have probably been carried all over the world since then.

If we will just break away from convention and the 'herd mentality' at times, and look at things somewhat differently than others look at them, we shall probably make some surprising discoveries, from which will flow a feeling of joy that surpasses the happiness we seek; it is not really far away.

## WHAT IS FAIR?

**WE** SOMETIMES HEAR people say, when they are struck by misfortune: "Why is this happening to me? It's not fair! I don't deserve this! I've never done anything wrong or bad!" (We might even have said the same thing ourselves). Some recount all the good they have done, like following certain moral rules and religious practices, donating money to charity, helping people, becoming vegetarian, etc., thereby revealing that they had done such things with the idea of getting something back in return, and not as an expression of their understanding.

Who said life is or should be fair? Wherever did we get this notion from? To expect life to be fair only increases our problems. But, though life might not be fair according to our standards, it is impartial; the rain wets rich and poor, young and old, male and female, intelligent and dull, powerful and powerless, beautiful and ugly alike; life does not show favoritism, and cannot be petitioned, bribed, or cajoled. If we understood more about life's impartiality, we would accept things that we cannot change, and would not waste so much time complaining, which only makes matters worse; as an old proverb puts it: "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness." We cannot stop the rain, but we can carry an umbrella.

When things go well for us, we accept it without question, and never ask: "Why me? Why not these others?" Our ways of looking at things are self-centered and biased, and of course we get only a narrow picture, like when we look through a keyhole. We cannot reasonably complain that this is all there is to be seen.

Why do we not make use of the world's wisdom? There is an abundance of it, and always has been, just waiting for people to pick it up and make it their own. We live in spiritual poverty, when all around us is a treasury of wisdom. And it is amazing how simple aphorisms can strike a chord in us

— and this phrase 'strike a chord' is very apt, because something resonates within us as we recognize and thrill to something from outside — and make a great deal of difference in our lives, like this one from Lao Tsu, for example, written over 2,500 years ago: "Accept misfortune as the bodily condition, for without a body, how could there be misfortune?" Thus, we can be somewhat reconciled with misfortune, and learn how to deal with it better than we do.

If we believe that the universe was created by and is maintained by an omnipotent Being or God, we are faced with a dilemma, namely: Why do things go 'wrong,' or is that all part of the plan? It is a question that most thoughtful people have asked. Do we see the hand of a good, kind, omnipotent, and omniscient Being in the world? Even a human father, with a modicum of love, would not allow his children to suffer as in places like Somalia, if he could do anything to prevent it. So what is all this talk about "God is Love?" The Somali parents love their children, but cannot feed them; it isn't because they don't want to, but because they are unable to. The Somali warlords are able to feed the children, but don't want to; they have power, but no love. Now, if 'God is Love,' but doesn't do anything to help people in distress, it must be because he is not able to; and if he is able to do something but doesn't do so it means he is not Love, no matter what people claim. One cancels out the other; they can't both stand.

A Scottish philosopher by the name of David Hume, (1711-1776), looked objectively at nature thus:

*"One would imagine that this grand production has not received the last hand of the maker, so little finished is every part, and so coarse are the strokes with which it is executed. Thus the winds ... assist men in navigation, but how oft, rising up to tempests and hurricanes, do they become pernicious! Rains are necessary to nourish all the plants and animals of the earth, but how often are they defective! how often excessive! There is nothing so advantageous in the universe but what frequently becomes pernicious by its excess or defeat; nor has nature guarded with the requisite accuracy against all discord or confusion.*

*"A perpetual war is kindled among all living creatures. Necessity, hunger, and want stimulate the strong and courageous; fear, anxiety and terror agitate the weak and infirm. The first entrance into life gives anguish to the newborn infant and to its wretched parent; weakness, impotence and distress attend every stage of life, and it is at last finished in agony and horror ... Observe, too ... the curious artifices of nature, in order to embitter the life of every living being ... consider that innumerable race of insects, which either are bred on the body of each animal, or, flying about, infix their stings in him. Every animal is surrounded by enemies, which incessantly seek his misery and destruction. Man is the greatest enemy of man. Oppression, injustice, contempt, violence, sedition, war, calumny, treachery, fraud; by these they mutually torment each other ...*

*"Look around this universe. What an immense profusion of beings, animated and organized, sensible and active! You admire this prodigious variety and fecundity. But inspect a little more narrowly these living existences ... How hostile and destructive to each other! ... The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children."*

A pessimistic way of looking at things? You may think so, if you are in the habit of looking at the beauty of nature and ignoring the ugliness, or the terrifying and relentless forces that nature often throws at us, its admirers, without regard for our lives or property. No, this is realistic, and nature doesn't give a damn about our feelings; let us be clear about this; we live forever on the rim of a dormant volcano, so to speak, or are sitting on the back of a sleeping tiger, which might wake up at any minute and devour us. To say to the volcano or the tiger: "It's not fair!" would be a waste of breath!

This is an age of great skepticism, but though this could be one of our greatest assets, it is more often shallow and superficial skepticism, and based upon arrogance, than founded upon perception. Just because we have

been to school for a number of years — and even to university — and know how to read, write, and a few other things, many of us appear to think we can safely dismiss things with just a cursory examination, or none at all; our mental life becomes impoverished by such an attitude. And Democracy, whereby people are given equal rights — the illiterate and ignorant on a par with the learned and cultured, for example — goes to our heads, which we then hold high with pride, like the branches of a tree without fruit.

Skepticism born of inquiry and experience is a healthy thing, and should be encouraged, to counteract the dull and lazy trait in many of us of merely believing; while skepticism of the kind that comes from our personal preferences and prejudice is, and can only be, narrow and limiting.

Many people either had no interest in religion to begin with or, having perceived something negative about it — and let's be honest, and admit that there are plenty of negative things about organized and formal religion — have rejected it completely, without trying to extract anything positive and useful from it. In some cases, people retain, or continue to be influenced by, the superstitious aspects of religion, and this is rather like throwing away the banana and eating the skin.

To extract the essence and discard or disregard the packaging (if we must, though if we understand, there is really no harm in keeping the form, too), requires intelligence and persistence, as it — the essence — is sometimes deeply hidden — like diamonds in the ground — and is not immediately obvious. It behooves us to look deeper into things, to try to find something good; it is always there. I know some people whose house was completely destroyed by fire, but instead of bemoaning their fate, they sifted through the ashes until they came upon their melted-down jewelry. Any thing, any situation, might be looked at in different ways, and something positive drawn from it. A loss doesn't have to be a complete loss, unless we allow it to be. And anyway, what can be lost will eventually be lost, but understanding this can be a source of gain. And how?

Because when something is lost, or disaster strikes, we might suffer less from it than we otherwise would by reflecting on it thus: "Well, it came, and it went. What is surprising about this? How could it be any different, since nothing lasts forever?"

People reject religion outright probably because they saw only the form — the container — and never bothered to investigate it to see what it contained, or just assumed that it is something outmoded, anachronistic, and of no importance to them. Yet we often see people turning blindly and superstitiously to religion when something unfortunate happens to them — they lose their job, have an accident, become love sick or heartbroken, or someone near and dear to them falls sick or dies, etc., etc. — and pray to 'God,' Jesus, Mary, the Buddha, Kwan Yin, Sai Baba, or whoever else they can think of, to help them in their distress. Well, I can understand this, of course, and am not saying it's bad, even though it's not right, because when we are healthy, there's no need to go to the doctor. But I also think it's a pity that people leave it until something unfortunate happens, as it's often too late then. It is better to think ahead, like when planting seeds for a future harvest; they do not grow and bear fruit immediately.

Vast numbers of people are scornful of religion and anything connected with it; but are they so complete in themselves, one wonders, and have such a degree of philosophical fortitude that they would be self-reliant and never turn to religion for help and support, no matter what happens? Maybe, but probably not. Even seemingly hard and materialistic people crack under strain, and fall back — or try to — on something that they think is there when they need it but which really isn't, as they never bothered to examine or cultivate it.

Self-interest impels many people to turn to religion. Driven by pain, fear, hope and despair, they embrace religion, and finding some solace and explanation therein, they relax, and sink into the mud of complacency, not knowing why they call themselves 'Buddhists,' 'Christians,' 'Hindus,' and so on. Instead of inquiring, and looking deeper, they rest content with the little they have found so far, and take the apparent for the real, the container for

the contents. Many of them remain like this for a long time — some for all their lives — but some are gently or rudely awoken from their slumbers by one or another of Life's countless methods, and urged to continue their journey. They are the lucky ones; most of them insist on sleeping long and soundly.



*“Courage is simply the willingness to  
be afraid, and to act any way.”*

*“You can love someone and not like  
the way they act.”*

## DRAW NO CONCLUSIONS

**I**N 1991, I WAS able to make several visits to the Vietnamese Refugee Camp at Sungei Besi, just outside Kuala Lumpur, for the purpose of trying to console and inspire people there by Dharma talks.

During one such talk, I had already spoken about how we can, if we wish, change our lives, and the lives of others, instead of merely sitting down and waiting for things to change by themselves, which of course they do and will. I also spoke about how easy it sometimes is to make people happy; all we need to do is to show people that we care a little about them; many people need such an assurance.

Suddenly, an elderly lady got up from her place in the audience and came out to the front with a glass of water, which she politely and respectfully asked me to bless for her. I paused in what I was saying, and complied with her request, by concentrating on the water, and suffusing it with my best wishes; I then gave it back to her, and it was very nice to see how pleased she was with it. She ceremoniously drank some of it, and then returned to her seat, where she shared the remainder with some of her friends, who were likewise happy.

"You see?" I said. "Just what I've been talking about: it isn't difficult to make some people happy! All we need to do is care a little, and be aware of opportunities!" I feel sure that, because I complied with the lady's request, if we ever meet again, she will be predisposed to listen to anything else that I might say; a rapport had been established. If I had been formal and inflexible, and asked her not to interrupt me, but to wait until afterwards, or worse, that I was there to give a Dharma talk, and was not concerned with such things as blessing water, she quite possibly would have felt hurt and alienated, and then any chance of my communicating with her would have been lost. (On the other hand, we must be careful, and know what we are



doing and why, otherwise, we might indirectly increase superstition instead of decreasing it).

Maybe it is natural for me, as a Westerner, to be skeptical, and inclined to dismiss things like 'holy water' as 'just Asian superstition,' and I still think that Buddhism has gathered its fair share of superstition over the ages. But, early on in my life as a monk, by trying to keep an open mind about things that I didn't understand, I came to see that there really is something behind the popular belief in 'holy water;' this is how it came about:

Once, while I was residing in a temple in Malaysia, a young man by the name of Boon Chai came to me and told me that his friends' baby was crying almost non stop, day and night and its parents did not know what to do, since the doctors they had consulted had been unable to help them. Boon Chai — who, I should say, was well educated, and of a scientific bent, and not the type to incline towards superstitious belief — asked me for some 'holy water' for the baby, so, obligingly, I filled a plastic bag with water, concentrated over it, and gave it to him.

The next day, he came again, and told me that the baby had stopped crying. Now, for those people who are skeptical regarding such things, and claim that 'it's all in the mind,' I would like to point out that, in this case, I had not even seen the baby, and didn't know its parents, and even if I had, it is highly unlikely that the baby would have understood anything about what I was doing to the water.

From this, I came to see that by concentrating and thinking positive thoughts over water, while holding it, one's energy passes into it; and this was confirmed by something I later read on the subject, about people who are so sensitive that they can taste the difference between water that has been 'magnetized' or 'energized,' and water that has not, or who can hold an object that someone has used or worn, without knowing to whom it belongs, and by concentrating over it and tuning into the 'vibrations' thereof, are able to tell many things about the owner; it is known now as 'psychometry.' Perhaps this is what lies behind the 'magic wands' that feature so

prominently in some of the old fairy tales: rods or staffs that have been used for so long by high powered individuals that they have become charged with their energy, like batteries; I think this is quite possible.

Reading through Lyall Watson's book, THE NATURE OF THINGS just now, I came across a passage that supports what is written above, and would like to quote it here. He writes about research done by Don Robins (himself the author of The Secret Language of Stone), and says:

"We are, he suggests, tied to our environment, to our buildings, stones and artifacts, by a feedback loop that links the energies of both. We are the 'Children of Stone.' We have the ability not only to imprint an electronic trace on crystal and stone, but the capacity to trigger release of this lithic memory in certain circumstances. Robins believes that the coupling is most often acoustic, and that recording takes place as a direct result of structured sound signals such as those produced by ritual music, chant, prayer, dance, applause and song. This nicely accounts for the atmosphere, the sense of something sacred, common to temples and cathedrals, shrines and standing stones, extending very often to those long in ruin."

This makes a lot of sense, and countless millions of people must have felt inspired and thrilled upon entering holy places, the stones of which — I have been convinced for a long time — must have absorbed the vibrations and higher aspirations of the pious for centuries, and retained them as a battery retains energy. I have felt such power not only at Buddhist sites, but also at Hindu and Muslim shrines, and when I went into Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris in 1985, although it was mid-winter, and crowded with tourists, I was plunged into instant meditation.

Jesus of Nazareth is probably the most well known example of someone who used His energy to help sick people, and He must have been a highly charged person to be able to heal lepers, restore sight and sound to the blind and deaf, and so on. (About the tales of him raising people from the dead, I must admit some skepticism, for the cases that have been reported in the

Bible of him having done so — if they actually happened — might have been cases of people in deep coma, whom he awoke; such cases are not unknown today. And besides, even if he did bring the dead back to life, what happened to them after that? They had to die again, and might have been no wiser or better from the experience of resuscitation. Moreover, we hear only of His success stories, and nothing of his failures, which were probably much more numerous than his successes). But Jesus was by no means unique in having such powers, and the claim that his performance of such miracles proves that he was the Son of God is very shaky, because there have been many people, over the ages (and still are), who could cure people of various diseases through transferring their vital energy into the sufferers; it is, perhaps, something that we could all learn to do, with practice and the desire to help others, since we all have energy in varying degrees.

Now, quite possibly — even probably — you have sometimes had the uncomfortable feeling that someone was watching you, and, upon turning or looking up, have indeed discovered someone staring at you. How can this be explained, since no word was spoken to indicate that someone was staring at you, and there was no physical contact? The explanation, I feel, lies in the power of the mind known as telepathy: the transmission and reception of mental energy. Modern psychology, which approaches things mainly on a physical basis, and with the idea that 'the mind is what the brain does,' is only beginning to understand the powers of the mind, and still cannot explain such things as the yogic feats of levitation, fire walking, psycho-kinesis (the power of the mind to influence or move objects), telepathy, hypnosis, etc., but there can be no denying that such things happen now, as they have been witnessed and investigated for fraud by skeptical and objective observers, and have even been filmed. With all our scientific knowledge and technological expertise, we dare not say that they are fraudulent, but must suspend judgment and keep open minds until we are able to fathom and understand the mechanics of such things.

My first experience with the transference of energy encouraged me to try it on other occasions, and, because of the success I have had — limited

though it is — I am convinced it works, and that it's not a matter of mumbo jumbo.

At least, it works sometimes, when one can get one's energy flowing, or when it flows, which doesn't always happen. I should also say that it works to a certain extent, and not always to the same degree, because there are probably many other factors involved. Sometimes, when people ask Sai Baba — the most famous of India's living holy men right now — why he doesn't use his power to cure all the sick people who come to him for help, he says that he could help them only if their karma permits it, and in many cases, their karma, being heavy, does not permit it.

Undoubtedly, a lot of superstition has grown up around the ability to transfer energy in this way, cure sicknesses, and so on, but the superstition does not negate the thing itself. Some people believe that it is the preserve of only 'special' people, like monks or priests; some believe that prayer or chanting is the power that makes it happen, but personally, I think it is only necessary to concentrate over the water (or the object that one wishes to 'charge;' it can be done with things other than water, like food, articles of clothing, rings, watches, and so on), with the desire of helping the person or persons for whom it is intended, to recover from the sickness or whatever else that is troubling them, or simply to 'bless' them (and come on, you who might be doubtful about blessings: who does not feel happy to receive good wishes from someone, in the form of a birthday card, a New Year card, or merely a cheerful "Nice to see you again"?) Conversely, no one enjoys being scolded, abused, or cursed. Wishes — positive and negative — do have effects, that vary according to the intensity of the will of the wisher, and I sometimes tell people, before I begin a simple blessing ceremony, that the water I will sprinkle on them is a token of my best wishes towards them, and that they shouldn't expect any magical transformation like what happened to Cinderella to take place, otherwise they will be disappointed.

Nothing is lost by this practice, and much might come of it; and it has no harmful side effects, like some chemical medicines, as it is only water; it also doesn't — or shouldn't — cost anything. The most important element in

it is Compassion, or the desire to help others. Here is my 'secret formula' for the preparation of 'holy water':

Take plain water, preferably boiled or filtered. Any clean container may be used to hold it. Mindfully, and perhaps with a little bit of ceremony to create the right attitude, hold the container with both hands, and concentrate over it, thinking that we are all friends in suffering (dukkha), and that other people are just like yourself in wishing to be well and happy and free from suffering. If the person or persons for whom you are doing this are not present try to visualize them — or place a photo of them before you — and wish that they might recover from their sickness or problem; at the same time visualize and try to feel your energy rising — sap like from the tips of your toes to the crown of your head, and then let it flow down through your arms, and out from your finger tips into the object you are holding. You may chant or pray, if you like, and if you find that it helps you to concentrate; you might also try to let your eyes drift out of focus, and then refocus them again. Take deep breaths to facilitate the upsurge and release of your energy. And if, while you are doing all this, you feel a shiver down your spine, and/or goose bumps on your arms, it is a sign that your energy is flowing well.

After doing this, you might feel somewhat tired, particularly if your energy has flowed well; but don't worry about this; it is also a good sign that your energy has gone where you wished it to go; just as, after donating blood, the body soon restores the blood to its normal level, a short rest will restore your energy. It is normal to feel a bit tired after doing this, as there has been some output, but it was for a good purpose, and so, no regrets.

Needless to say, it helps if you have a sympathetic rapport with the person you are trying to help, or if you can establish one, for then the other person will be more receptive to your efforts. Some years back, I was able to help somebody with her migraine, as she was receptive. But another person who was there at that time, and who was suffering from I forget what kind of pain, made fun of my attempt to help her, and there was no effect, as she

was not receptive or serious. The channels of communication must be open, or at least not closed or blocked.

There is ample and irrefutable evidence of 'miraculous,' non-medical cures of illnesses of many kinds, including those diagnosed as 'terminal,' and Science must stand speechless for lack of explanation. Many people attribute such 'miracles' to what they call 'God,' which, to most believers, is a Being or Person of masculine gender. But this raises a serious objection, namely: if 'God' does at times 'heal' the sick, and if, as people also believe, such a 'God' is good, loving, and omnipotent, then why does 'He/It' permit suffering and sickness to exist in the first place? And why, out of all the millions of supplicants who pray desperately for help, does 'He/It' appear to help only very few, and leave the vast majority in their misery? It cannot be — as mentioned earlier in this article — that their karma is too heavy to permit help, because if 'God' were omnipotent, 'He/It' would be able to override their karma.

So the personification of what seems to be a very real force is not a very satisfactory explanation to people who are reluctant to believe in anything without sufficient supportive evidence.

Perhaps, at our stage of development, it would be best to admit our ignorance, instead of pretending that we know, and say, honestly and humbly: "I don't know," for this is really so, and would leave us open to learn; nor would it preclude our being able to 'tap into' the force as so-called 'miracles' happen not just to 'Godists,' but to non-believers, too. And what we call 'miracles' are probably things that we do not understand the principles or mechanics of, and, as our horizons get pushed further back, and we give up our fond superstitions in favor of clear comprehension, more and more 'miracles' will no doubt become part of our everyday experience, as so many already have; are not our lives filled with miracles? Indeed, is not our life itself a miracle?

We seem to be rapidly coming now to the realization that the force we occasionally see manifested is of the mind, or psyche, but as something

shared, that runs through all minds like a thread through beads, rather than as something individual and separate. Some people might think of this as 'God' (it is known as 'Pantheism,' the definition of which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is: "The belief or theory that God and the universe are identical [implying a denial of the personality and transcendence of God]; the doctrine that God is everything and everything is God"); it is, in my opinion, a much better alternative to the belief in an anthropomorphic deity, which gives rise to more problems than it solves.

However, we do not know for sure, we have not yet arrived, so should not draw any conclusions.

## BOREDOM

CLEAN-UP AUSTRALIA DAY has just gone, for the fourth year since it was started, and for the third time, a group of friends and I volunteered to participate in it.

It was raining when I got up at my usual early hour, with more showers forecast for later. The day dawned gray and overcast, and I thought few of the volunteers would turn up, but around the agreed upon time, they began to arrive. Among the first to come was a couple in their seventies, and later came a group of teenagers; so we were a mixed bunch.

When all who were expected had assembled, with no absentees, we dared the sullen sky, and set off to the park where we had been assigned to work. We were met by someone in charge of operations, who showed us where our energies could be most usefully expended: along the road that ran beside the park. We split up into two groups, and began at the extremities of the park, working back towards each other, to meet in the middle.

Not surprisingly, the roadside was littered with garbage that had been flung, for the most part, from passing cars: soft drink cans, beer cans, bottles, junk food wrappers, plastic bags, cigarette packets, etc. We had been issued sacks, and the man in charge came by in his car every twenty minutes or so to pick up the full sacks and give us replacements. Now and then, people beeped and waved as they drove past, in obvious approval of what we were doing.

One boy of about 16, however, who had been press-ganged by his father into coming along, complained several times of how boring it was to pick up garbage, as if he'd been doing it for the past ten years or more without a break, instead of just that morning for the very first time. I told him that it — and anything else, for that matter would be boring if he set out with the



idea that it would be, or expected it to be, but if he hadn't first made up his mind about it, and had understood what was the purpose of picking up garbage, then, far from being bored, he might even enjoy it; all the other people did, and their hands were just as much in contact with the garbage as his were, and they got just as tired as he did. Or did they? On second thoughts, they probably didn't, as they were working with joy, while he was working begrudgingly. If we work with joy, we are able to work longer and more efficiently, and we don't become so tired.

Now, I would like to digress a little here, to explain that for the past few months, I have been a guest in someone's house, and have tried to help out somewhat by doing various light jobs around the place such as mowing the lawn and weeding the garden. Outside the front fence, beside the road, there is a strip of grass that each house owner is supposed to keep mown. The strip outside our house runs, unbroken, outside the house of the neighbors on our right, and so, when mowing our part, I also mow the neighbors' part if it hasn't already been done. Noticing this, someone asked me if the neighbors ever acknowledged this or thanked me, and when I said no, and that I hadn't even met the neighbors, and wouldn't know them if I met them face-to-face on the street, he seemed surprised that I should do it. So I told him that we don't always do things for what we might get in return, but simply because they are there to be done, and not to do them would be to display petty mindedness. In this case, it is immaterial if the neighbors do not reciprocate by cutting our strip while they are cutting theirs; the neighbors are the neighbors, and we are we.

So, picking up garbage was merely an opportunity of doing something — putting something in — without thinking of getting anything in return. Of course, there is a result — immediately: a feeling of satisfaction at having participated in a positive activity for the community, though this is not the reason for doing it; seeing how things are, and taking the opportunity by the hand, we respond, that's all. Hundreds-of-thousands of other people nationwide responded in a similar manner.

Now, as to boredom — which is the main point of this article — is it not self-created? And is it not a form of suffering? And are we not, therefore, stupid? Picking up garbage for a couple of hours is not boring, as the young boy claimed, but, on the contrary, it was he who was dull and small minded, focusing just on himself in isolation, and not understanding — or ignoring — why he was doing what he was doing. Where did he get his concept of boredom from? What standard was he going by? Was it his own, born from his experience and observation, or was it, like the fashions that people follow, merely adopted wholesale from others?

If we set out on an enterprise — any enterprise — with minds already made up about what is going to happen, we restrict ourselves, and block off many possibilities. We should give ourselves a break, and try to be open to the unexpected, instead of sticking rigidly to plans and ideas, for no two days — or two anything, in fact — are the same, and we cannot possibly imagine what's going to happen in the day that lies before us when we wake up in the morning. If we were to treat life as the adventure that it is, instead of trying to plan everything, it would be much more interesting and exciting, and we would have little reason to complain about being bored. I'm not implying that we should live completely without plans, but that whatever plans we have should be held with a degree of flexibility, so that if they don't work out, or if something else comes along to change them, we won't feel so bad about it and might even welcome it; things often work out better when we don't plan them; they have an element of serendipity about them.

It is important that parents expose their children in their early years to a certain amount of monotony, instead of trying to keep them constantly entertained or amused, in order for them to become familiar with something that, later on in their lives, they will certainly encounter plenty of. If children are deprived of opportunities to confront and deal with monotony, they might never develop the ability to do so, for many of our 'survival skills' are acquired during these formative years, rather than afterwards. Overly fond and protective parents actually do their children a disservice by providing too much entertainment, and thereby enhance the propensity in

their children to depend upon things outside of themselves for their enjoyment and happiness.

I have long said that it would be infinitely better to listen more to ourselves than we do, and depend less upon others to teach us, for there are many things which we know naturally, it seems, many things hidden deep in the mind, which, if they are not smothered by so much education, might emerge to stand us in good stead. Lyall Watson, in his book *GIFTS OF UNKNOWN THINGS*, says "I wish there were some way of reconciling formal education and natural knowing. Our inability to do this is a terrible waste of one of our most valuable resources. There is a fund of knowledge, a different kind of information, common to all people everywhere. It is embodied in folklore and superstition, in mythology and old wives' tales. It has been allowed to persist simply because it is seldom taken seriously and has never been seen to be a threat to organized science or religion. It is a threat, because inherent in the natural way of knowing is a sense of rightness that in this time of transition and indecision could serve us very well."

Several times, when I have presented things in a simple, broad, un-dogmatic and non-sectarian way, someone has said, "Is that what it's all about? But I've known that for years already! It's so clear!" Yes, that's just it; there's nothing arcane or mysterious to be learned or mastered; all we must do is return to ourselves, and discover what we've got and have had all along. But we are looking in the wrong direction, ever outward from ourselves, instead of inwards. Is it the 'common sense' that we've heard about all our lives? This term is just one of many that most people have never thought about, and assume that it means something 'ordinary' and commonplace, whereas in fact, it means something that we have in common, like the string that runs through a necklace of beads; we all have it, but few of us are aware of it and in this sense, it is rare rather than common.

With herd mentality, we adopt, unquestioningly, the standards of others only because we are unsure of ourselves and lack self-confidence. As we

become more sure of ourselves, we begin to let go of external supports and go our own way. This sometimes leads to eccentricity, of course, but in my book that is not necessarily a bad thing, as long as it doesn't disturb or hurt others; I am more concerned about conformity than a little eccentricity.

Albert Einstein is famous as a scientific genius, but when he was in primary school, he was regarded by at least one of his teachers as mentally retarded, though this might have been because they did not perceive his potential, and were trying to measure him by their standards, which did not apply to him. Later on in life, when his genius had been widely recognized, all kinds of people vied for the honor of his company, and he was the star guest at many distinguished gatherings. At one such party, he was filmed wearing two different shoes, and without socks! He explained that he had grown tired of holes developing in his socks, so had decided not to wear them any more.

Because of his fame, people accepted his idiosyncrasies and looked up to him, but had he been a social nonentity, they would no doubt have despised him as a bum!

Those of us who are fortunate enough not to live under totalitarian regimes have tremendous opportunities to throw off the fetters of standardization and find ourselves; sadly, few of us avail ourselves of our opportunities, and are content to conform; it's easier that way. But even our nonconformity is often only an inverted conformity, as we hit out blindly and without intelligence or purpose at things we don't like or agree with, failing to see that our rebellion is merely an endorsement of the things we rebel against, and brings about little discernible or positive change. To deny is to affirm.

To sum up: Things in themselves are not boring; it is we who become bored with them, for various reasons, and if we understood this, we would not be the impotent victims of boredom that we often are. I cannot honestly say that I never feel bored, but I do know that there are ways of looking at

boredom which lessen its grip on us, even if it's only to remind ourselves that everything changes and nothing lasts forever; it helps.

Give yourself a break, therefore, by not living as though you know the future. Many surprising things lie in store for you; sit loosely in the saddle, and stay awake!



*“Life can only be understood backwards,  
but it must be lived forwards.”*

*(Soren Kierkegaard)*

## FREEDOM MUST BE EARNED

**H**OW OFTEN DO WE hear people say — or even say it ourselves — "I'm not happy," as if it is their lawful right to be happy? By thinking in this way, we do not give ourselves a chance, and cause ourselves to be unhappy. If we understood this, our minds would be much more receptive to, or capable of, happiness; we would open the door to let happiness come in — if and when it will — instead of barring the door to it.

Now, why should we, in the first place, even think that we ought to be happy? Who says we should? Where is it written? It is an unwarranted assumption, is it not? Observe nature all around you, and you might realize that the only right we have is to struggle, and perhaps to carry forward the torch of human endeavor for a few steps, before passing it on to someone else waiting in line, and then stepping back, having played our parts as components in the unfolding of the great drama whose text is written as we act, instead of before, no one knowing what will happen next.

For, just as we — you and I, and all others like us — have inherited the sum total of human history, so we must pass it on to those who come after us; it does not begin or end with us; we are merely links in a chain that stretches out to infinity on either side of us, but our links, like those on either side, are indispensable for the continuity. Thus, we participate, and in so doing, happiness might be found, or stumbled upon, but as a result and not as something that we deliberately set out to achieve. Struggle, in this sense, might be joyous, and not necessarily something sad or miserable. Our efforts to achieve happiness for ourselves individually are doomed to failure.

There is a saying: "Give him an inch and he'll take a foot," meaning that it is common for people to be discontented with what they have of what they are given, soon take things for granted, and begin demanding more. There is

always a very real risk that when 'rights' such as freedom of speech and movement are accorded to everyone equally without them being sufficiently prepared through education about the responsibilities that accompany them, that some people will not understand and appreciate, and it will not be long before abuse sets in. Just imagine what would happen if food were served on porcelain dishes to a group of monkeys: would it be surprising if some of the porcelain got broken? Or would it not be more surprising if it didn't?

Freedom is not a right but a privilege, and to bestow it on those who do not understand the responsibilities that go with it, or who will not accept them, and who are therefore not ready for it, will only result in the destruction and loss of freedom. Take the widespread and increasing vandalism in our society, for example: the smashing of phone boxes, the slashing of seats in buses and trains, the spray painting of ugly graffiti on any available surface, and so on; this is done by barbarians — and let's call a spade a spade — who have had freedom served to them without earning or deserving it. I am not suggesting that we should have a society with two kinds of people — those who have freedom, and those who don't — like in days gone by when slavery still existed, but that we should be educated about the meaning of freedom, of the struggle involved in achieving it, and of the importance of treating it with respect, as the treasure it is, before being given it; in other words, we should be initiated into freedom. It's too late, in many cases, to do this, but it could be started now, in the hope that future generations will learn from past mistakes. And it is a matter of education; much could be done to correct the situation if we took the time and trouble to explain to kids in school about things like this; if you throw mud at a wall, much of it will fall off, but some of it will stick there. We need not wait for people to evolve and understand by themselves, for though some undoubtedly would, most would not; many of us need someone to explain things to us, or better, to show us.

If I live next door to people who make a lot of noise, I will try to tolerate it as far as possible, without crying about 'my rights,' and will try to avoid doing anything to annoy them; if they annoy me, it is one thing, and I can make allowances in my life for that, because I feel that, having understood

something of the Dharma, I have the moral high ground, and the responsibilities that go with it; but if I annoy them, it is another thing, for which there is no excuse. We cannot expect too much from people who don't understand.

A few years ago, I lived next door to a young couple who frequently quarreled, and sometimes, in the early hours of the morning, I was awakened by screams, shouts, and other loud noises made by the husband beating his wife up. She would then rush out of the house, calling for help, jump into her car, drive off, and wouldn't be seen for a few days. But, after they had both had time to cool off, she would return, and everything would be fine until the next explosion. Needless to say, I didn't feel very good about all this, and contemplated calling the police; perhaps I failed in my civic duty, and should have done. At other times, I thought the wife was a damn fool for staying with such a man. Anyway, I put up with it while I was there, and when it came time for me to move, and I informed my neighbors that I was leaving, they seemed genuinely sorry that I was going, and said I had been a good neighbor! I wish I could have said the same about them!

And, three doors from where I was staying recently, lived a woman who had ambitions of becoming an opera singer; she would spend hours every day loudly practicing her scales, and I felt really sorry for the people who lived next door to her, as it was bad enough from where I was. She obviously felt great about singing like that but that did not mean that everyone else enjoyed it. When we are living in close proximity to others, we cannot do just whatever we feel like doing, but must consider their feelings, too, otherwise problems might easily arise.

The 'rights' that we so fortunately enjoy under the laws that we have made are of recent origin only; moreover, we should take care of them, as they are fragile, ephemeral, subject to change, and are often flouted and bent by those with the power and inclination to do so. And, just as I have said that freedom is not a 'right' but must be earned, so too, happiness is not a 'right.' If it were, we might pass laws commanding everyone to be happy, with the



proviso that anyone caught with a sad or unhappy face would be fined or imprisoned.

The concept of 'rights' has turned our heads, it seems, and we have come to expect more from life than is reasonable, as if life is something that we can control in every way. We would not complain so much about things if we understood more about the nature of life. And what is the nature of life? Can we — dare we — define it? We may try — we have the freedom to do so — if we wish, and I will do so here, in an attempt to grasp it by the heel and make some sense of it. In doing so, however, I will avoid theology (which I do not consider to be a 'logy' [a science or a branch of knowledge], at all, but merely a matter of speculation and conjecture about a God or gods), but will refer to the biological and psychological aspects of life.

It must be realized that Nature is not anthropomorphic (that is, having the form and qualities of human beings), and does not see things through human eyes; it does not operate by our concepts of 'good' and 'bad,' or by our new found ideas of 'rights.' Rather, it is impersonal, impartial, and impervious to suffering, pain, and tears, and cares not who lives or dies, nor how many, or in what manner. If we expect life to adapt to us and our desires, we will surely be disappointed, and it will be useless to complain; it is we who, having understood something of Life's ways, must adapt to it when we cannot change it. Our bodily functions of excretion, for example, are things that we feel rather embarrassed about and perform in private, and no matter how much we would like to be free of such functions, we cannot; each person has to answer the calls of nature, and cannot delegate them to another (some people consider them so 'earthy' that they deny that great Masters like the Buddha or Jesus had any need to perform them, yet perform them they did!)

I would like to quote here from THE LIGHT OF ASIA, Sir Edwin Arnold's epic poem about the Life and Teachings of the Buddha:

The First Truth is of Sorrow. Be not mocked!  
Life which ye prize is long drawn agony:

Only its pains abide; its pleasures are  
As birds which light and fly.

Ache of the birth, ache of the helpless days,  
Ache of hot youth, and ache of manhood's prime;  
Ache of the chill gray years and choking death,  
These fill your piteous time.

Sweet is fond love, but funeral flames must kiss  
The breasts which pillow and the lips which cling;  
Gallant is warlike might but vultures pick  
The joints of chief and king.

Beauteous is earth, but all its forest broods  
Plot mutual slaughter, hungering to live;  
Of sapphire are the skies, but when men cry  
Famished, no drops they give.

Ask of the sick, the mourners, ask of him  
Who tottereth on his staff, lone and forlorn:  
"Liketh thee life?" — these say  
the babe is wise  
That weepeth, being born.

This appears to be a very gloomy picture, but that is not all there is to it; it is merely a diagnosis of the condition of life as lived by most of us, and though this aspect is very real in context, there is much more to life than this. But, even though most of us know little more than this, life is dear to us, and we are reluctant to let go of it and die, even on our death beds; we cling to life out of fear of death and of what lies on 'the other side.' If we had a broader vision of life, and saw more of its opportunities, we might think of it as something to rejoice over.

If we were genuinely concerned about happiness, instead of just superficially, it would help us to know that to search for happiness is the

greatest obstacle to being happy; the more we search for it, the further away we drive it. It is rather like trying to catch the wind in a bottle: you may catch air, but not wind. Open your hand and stretch it out, however and the wind may blow through your fingers, but it can never be yours, as a possession.

The Way is not difficult to understand, but to understand it is not enough; it must be applied in our lives. So, we must begin with ourselves (as there is no other place to begin), and then see others as we see ourselves. This means, of course, applying the Golden Rule, which has been enunciated by all the major religions, in different forms:

### **CHRISTIANITY**

"All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them."

### **CONFUCIANISM**

"Do not unto others what you would not like them to do to you."

### **BUDDHISM**

"In five ways should a man minister to his friends and relatives: By generosity, courtesy, and benevolence, by treating them as he treats himself, and by being as good as his word."

### **HINDUISM**

"Do not unto others, which if done to thee, would cause thee pain."

### **ISLAM**

"No one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself."

### **SIKHISM**

"As thou deemest thyself, so deem others. Then shalt thou become a partner in Heaven."

## **JUDAISM**

"What is harmful to yourself do not do that to your fellow man."

## **JAINISM**

"In happiness and suffering, in joy and grief, we should regard all creatures as we regard our own self."

## **ZOROASTRIANISM**

"That nature only is good when it shall not do unto another whatever is 'not good for its own self.'"

## **TAOISM**

"Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain, and regard your neighbor's loss as your own loss."

The Golden Rule has not been superseded over the ages, and is still an excellent rule to follow; but if, in your attempts to live by it, you do not immediately become happy, don't be discouraged; maybe in the process, you will discover something more important and rewarding than your own personal happiness: you might come to a vision of life such as you never knew before in your narrow concern for yourself alone. And I would like to use some of Christmas Humphries' words, taken from his book, **THUS HAVE I HEARD**, as appropriate to what I am trying to say here, and because they say it better than I could:

"It is because life is filled with suffering that happiness, to one whose eyes are opened by frank, courageous thought, is an Illusion. For even if all the circumstances for the moment unite in a state of 'happiness,' what of one's neighbor lying ill, of one's friend's affairs, of the vast unconquered forces of illusion in one's own mind? Happiness can only exist while the rest of life is, for the moment, forgotten, and as such, is the poorest of the many goals which men have set themselves on the road of life. Happiness in this sense, itself an infrequent product of the pursuit of pleasure, is utterly different from peace of mind, an inner serenity, an illumined joy begotten of the

heart's quietude. This comes from work, a determined treading on the Middle Way to the heart's enlightenment, from obedience to the Buddha's final exhortation: 'Work out your own salvation with diligence.'

We do not live alone, cut off and separated from all other forms of life, so our progress towards enlightenment is not just for ourselves; in fact, whatever we are doing, at any and every time, is contributing to the ocean of cause-and-effect which is our world; it has been said that "nobody can sin, or suffer the effects of sin, alone;" and it is so with every kind of action we do. So, to increase our level of enlightenment (realizing that enlightenment comes in many degrees, like the gradations on a thermometer; it is therefore only right to suppose that everyone is partially enlightened, even if only to a very tiny degree), means adding that much of positive karma to the ocean of collective force.

So much suffering results from our insistence on seeing ourselves as individuals, separate from the rest of existence, whereas if we saw ourselves as part of it, involved with it, and subject to the common conditions ('we are all in the same boat', kind of thing), we would ask far less for ourselves, and, at the same time, try to participate more. The world does not exist for us, but because of us; if we would like to see the world in a better condition, we must do something to make it so, instead of complaining and blaming others for it; there is so much that we could all do, alone, and in cooperation with others.

Yes, we must come back to ourselves, and begin with, and learn from, ourselves; it is the only place we can begin, and if it means starting all over again, so be it; it is never too late to begin. And we begin with ourselves by understanding our feelings, just as they are: What do we like? What do we want? Everybody likes things, and wants to have things, and I think it can be safely said that we all want to be happy — who would disagree with this? We want others to treat us well, to be kind to us, to help us, and not to hurt or disturb us in any way. Right or not? If this is what we want, it is entirely legitimate and understandable, but we should not stop there. Take a

look around you at other people. Having identified what you want, it is then easy to see what they want: exactly the same as you! It's amazing in its simplicity! Who doesn't know this?, you might say. Yes, everyone knows it, but not everyone knows what it means; many people think that anything so obvious cannot be very important; they think that anything important has to be mysterious and difficult to understand; but this is not so.

There was once a truth seeker who went to visit a renowned teacher, and asked for instructions about following the Way. The teacher looked at him, and said: "Cheat and steal from others whenever you have the opportunity without getting caught; lie, deceive, and enjoy yourself without considering others, and you'll be alright." The seeker was shocked to hear this, and went away in dismay. Some months later, the teacher asked his disciples if they had heard anything about this man, and was told that he was living an exemplary life in a nearby town, but that he was telling people that the teacher was a devil in disguise, who had tried to mislead him. The teacher laughed in delight at this, and said: "If I had told him what he expected to hear, he would have paid no attention to it as he had known it all his life; instead, I chose to help him realize, by himself, what he should do, instead of depending upon my answer."

*"The mystery of life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced."*

**THE END**

