

Part I

PRELIMINARIES

It is difficult for one of different views, of a different persuasion, under different influences, with different pursuits and different training to know whether the Dhamma I teach is different or not.

Siddhattha Gotama (D.I. 187)

INTRODUCTION

CONTENT AND METHOD

The title *The Buddha's Way - A Socio-Historical Approach* encapsulates the theme of this study and the method adopted to explore it.¹ The Buddha's Way is often understood and explained as a path to private salvation, ideally to be realized in solitude, away from the everyday concerns of ordinary men and women. If this is true, how can one explain *Magga* – the Way, the Fourth Noble Truth, which is one of the most social of moralities? None of the eight 'limbs' or features of the Way suggests that they were exclusively or primarily intended for persons who had renounced the household life. Right Livelihood is included as an integral and indispensable feature of the Path to Human Liberation. This makes the right ordering of economic and political relationships a central, not peripheral, concern of *Dhamma* practice. Thinking this through, I began to question the validity of the view that the Indian ethos, including early Buddhism, is *essentially* 'other-worldly' or 'spiritual' and that its central preoccupation is with salvation of separate individuals from cosmic existence.

The Social Elan of Early Buddhism

As I studied and reflected on the teachings and practices of the first Buddhists it became increasingly clear that Buddhism has a radical core which challenges and goes against the conventional ideas and values of society. The Buddha's Way was not given as a means to private salvation *from* cosmic existence. In fact, as we shall see in Chapter 10, the assumption of binary oppositions such as cosmic/metacosmic

¹ According to the generally accepted dating, the Buddha was born in 564 and died in 484 BCE. Not all scholars are in agreement about this dating. *'The Date of the Buddha'* according to Heinz Bechert (1991) remains an open question. Since it has been difficult for historians to give an exact chronology to ancient Indian texts, it is impossible, Romila Thapar points out, to be precise or dogmatic as to when particular events or changes took place (1984: 17). Precise dating is not of crucial importance to this study since its focus is on social trends and the interaction between changing social and personality structures. I use "The Age of the Buddha" in a broad sense to cover a period from around the mid-first millennium BCE to the reign of Emperor Asoka (3 BCE). The significance of certain features seminally present in The Buddha's Day, e.g., amoral theories of statecraft and the Brahmanic philosophy of language, are discussed in the light of their later fuller elaborations, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and Panini's *Astaddhyaya*, both generally traced to 4 BCE. In this perspective, things, beings and events are seen as "creative continuities".

is incompatible with the Buddha's epistemology. Buddhism began as a collective movement for the moral transformation of society. Its ethics are *intrinsically communitarian* in character. The Buddha gave his movement organisational form in a Fourfold Community consisting of men and women; renunciators and householders. Sharing the values of a common *Dhamma*² was both the bond and the hallmark of self-governing communes – *sanghas* – which made up the *Catudissa Sangha* or 'The Sangha of the Four Directions'. The popular orientation of Dhamma preaching and the targeting of social abuses by the first preachers captured the imagination of the people and attracted a large following of men and women from all strata of society. Due to their prestige among the people, the mendicant teachers soon attracted the patronage of the rich and the powerful which eventually led to a change in the relationship between the renunciators and householders. A decisive factor which brought about this change was the granting, by kings and landed proprietors, of entire villages together with their inhabitants to the community of 'renunciators' and the subsequent consolidation of monastic landlordism. Thus, while the term *bhikkhu-ni* continued to be used for the renunciators, its signification shifted from 'mendicant' to 'cenobite'. The transition from wandering teachers to a settled order occurred very early and the stages of this transformation can be traced through a diachronic reading of the *Vinaya Pitaka* which contains the rules and regulations laid down for the mendicant order.³ The *Vinaya Pitaka* reflects the face of Buddhism as it "has thus become through action" – *yathabhutham kammam* – to use the Buddha's diagnostic phrase. But if one delves beneath the surface of the text, information can be ferreted out which shows another dynamic at work in the early community. Then, as down the centuries, mendicant teachers, less visible in texts, seem to have continued the campaign for social reform.

Ideas become a social force when they capture the imagination of the masses. We know that the *Buddha Dhamma* did. Did it also become a social force for the moral transformation of society? The answer must be an unambiguous yes when one considers the views and practices of the first Buddhists discussed at length in Chapter 16. This without doubt was the case during the lifetime of the Founder. There is sufficient but seldom foregrounded evidence in the Theravada Canon to justify this assertion. The Buddha's basic principle of explanation is Conditioned

² Henceforth the term *Buddha Dhamma*, rather than 'Buddhism' will be used with reference to what I consider, for reasons explained below, the Buddha's authentic and unique legacy. The connotation of *Dhamma* has to be understood according to the context of its usage. However, the equation of *Dhamma* (*Dharma* Sk) with 'inherent nature' in Brahmin theory was rejected by the Buddha (See Chapters 9 to 11).

³ See Sukumar Dutt (1962) *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India*. There is no indication that the Buddha took up permanent residence in a monastery. He remained a wandering mendicant teacher and died as he had lived, 'on the way'.

Co-arising. He declared that it was an universally valid principle (Chapter 9). The history of the Community he founded is no exception to this Law. History shows us that changes in social conditions have invariably given rise to changes in ideas, practices and social institutions. The shift of emphasis from the building up of a sharing and caring community to the salvation of separate individuals from the ills of the world, may be reflective of the change in the social existence of the renouncers who had come to terms with status quo of society.⁴

The Myth of the Separate Individual

The radical thrust of the Buddha's Teaching is based on his realisation that 'the individual' is a fiction of human craving. His decision to found a community of compassion and sharing was the practical expression of his conviction that individualism is the principal obstacle to human happiness,

Individualism places limits on love and if Buddhism is an attempt to deal with what it sees as the disease of individualism, and is primarily a method of eliminating these limits, as Tagore realized, then it will entail a concern with the social and political dimension (Ling 1985:122).

The Buddha's insight into the fictional character of 'the individual' was not the result of a mystical experience. It was the outcome of methodological procedures which, he stated, could be verified by any intelligent person (Chapter 9). He characterised discourses which assume that a person's identity is based on a unique share of the human essence inherent in each single and separate individual, as *puggalavada*. 'Puggala' means 'individual' and its adjectival form *puggalika* means belonging to a single person, individual, separate (PED). The Buddha diagnosed the average person's delusion he/she is a unique being with an extra-historical origin and destiny, as *puthujjana* consciousness. *Puthujjana* means 'people' as separate individuals. *Puthujjana* consciousness or 'common' sense is the collective delusion like one is a unique and separate individual. Mainstream Buddhism reinforces this belief by holding that each person as a separate individual is subjected to myriads of rebirths. Theologies and philosophies of individualism – *puggalavada*, from the Buddha's point of view, are learned elaborations of a deluded world-view which scholars share with the uninformed masses. The Buddha laid the foundation for a profound schizoanalysis by disclosing that normal consciousness is a pathogenic condition because it imagines that each person is a spirit/matter or psycho/somatic doublet. It turns the living person into a schizoid being. In so far

⁴ See Romilar Thapar's Ethics, Religion, and Social Protest in *Ancient Indian Social History* (1984a) and Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya's Buddhism: Radical Sociology Passes into its Opposite, in *Religion and Society* (1987).

as individuals labour under this delusion, from the early Buddhist point of view – *sabbe puthujjana unmattaka* – “every average person is deranged.”

Consistent with *anatta dhamma* – theory of no-self – I have made a conscious attempt not to slip into the ‘methodological individualism’⁵ which underlies most expositions of the Buddha’s Teaching. Despite the radical implications of *anatta*, Lankan Buddhist scholars, monks as well as householders, generally tend to discuss the human condition with reference to separate individuals. The real self is understood as an ‘identity consciousness’ temporarily lodged in a mortal body and going through endless rebirths in a myriad life forms. The Buddha unravelled the individual as an ever changing pattern of synergies which he distinguished as ‘mental’ and ‘physical.’ These forces, the Buddha realised, exceed what individuals regarded as ‘their own’ - their bodies, perceptions, feelings, life-activities and consciousness. This does not mean that human beings are nothing more than epiphenomena of cosmic processes, the view held by the materialist philosophers of the Buddha’s Day (See Chapter 9 below). The Buddha rejected both materialist and idealist determination and held that humans construct their own reality on the basis of their perceptions. He disclosed how ego consciousness is mediated by culture, in particular by language (See Chapters 9 to 12). Independent of these conditions, there is no sense of personal identity. It is the clinging to culturally constructed identities, personal as well as collective, which is the source of conflict and violence in the world; it is a dangerous delusion to believe that there is a stable foothold on which gender, race or class identity can be erected. To understand *anatta* radically is to give up clinging to self-identity as if it is permanent and unchanging. The first Buddhists understood their “going forth” as a concrete and practical transcendence of the cultural conditions that define personal identity and not as an ontological transcendence to a metacosmic realm (See Chapter 11).

The Buddha’s teaching and the life of the early Buddhists is often regarded as an answer to a personal spiritual malaise, a doctrine of personal salvation ... To speak of Buddhism as something concerned with the private salvation of the soul is to ignore entirely the basic Buddhist repudiation of the notion of the individual soul ... Buddhism could never be a ‘private’ salvation, ‘the flight of the alone to the Alone’ or any other kind of world-rejecting escapism; by its very nature its concerns were with the *public* world ... The Teaching of the Buddha was concerned

⁵ The term used by Anthony Higgins (1979: 94-95) to typify the assumption in the human sciences (religion, philosophy, sociology, psychology, etc.) that societies consist of separate individuals and that social systems are the result of the decisions, actions and attitudes of intrinsically autonomous human beings. Social institutions, he argues, should be comprehended not as the products of self-subsistent ‘actors’ but as the outcome of recursive practices. There is conditioned agency, but no self-subsistent ‘sovereign actors’.

with something wider, the whole realm of sentient being, the whole of consciousness. This inevitably entailed a concern with social and political matters and these receive a large share of attention in the teaching of the Buddha ... To attempt to understand Buddhism apart from its social dimension is futile (Ling, 1985: 93, 122,140 emphasis his).

The Socio-Historical Approach and the Buddha's Method

The socio-historical approach to understanding the origin and the core doctrines of early Buddhism is consistent with the basic assumptions and the methodology of the *Dhamma* itself. After six years of single-minded inquiry, investigation and experimentation, the Buddha came to the conclusion that if anything can be considered 'absolute', it is impermanence. There is perpetual flux, but no 'thing' or 'subject' in flux. There is constant movement but no movers or a Prime Mover. What then is the emotive-cognitive mechanism behind the human tendency to transform kinetic processes into static things? The Buddha broke through to an understanding of the factors which make humans labour under this delusion and why they cling to it. The root of human ignorance was not merely a noetic problem. 'Average' consciousness is a product of desire and it reproduces itself through desire. He formulated the principle underlying this diagnosis as the Law – *Dhamma* – of Conditioned Co-Arising – *paticca samuppada*. This is a first-order psychoanalytical not merely epistemological breakthrough in human self-understanding. The Buddha declared that *paticca samuppada* is his entire Teaching in a nutshell. To understand *paticca samuppada* is to understand his Dhamma and vice versa [See Chapter 10].

The Way (*Magga* P; *Marga* Sk) is a dynamic term. It expresses the Buddha's revolutionary insight into the modality of human action. Conditioned Co-arising is a Law inferred from the actual life-practices of men and women, whose actions produce visible effects in the world. *Magga* is the extension of this Law to ethical practice. It is the practical expression of the Buddha's optimism that humans can liberate themselves from the cultural prisons that hold them in bondage. It is not merely a 'doctrine' to which one may give intellectual assent, but a universally applicable and verifiable Method, based on insight into human action as *Praxis*. The term as Karl Marx defined it does not refer to ordinary practices, but has a very specific technical meaning as Anthony Giddens explains:

The conception of human Praxis emphasizes that human beings are neither to be treated as passive objects, nor as wholly free subjects ... labour refers to the interplay of human activity and material nature: an interplay that is at the root of the 'historical' character of human culture when contrasted to the 'fixed' or instinctive life of animals ... the relationships between human actors and the material world are treated not as ones of passive contemplation, but as active, practical relations (1979:150-151).

The idea that the Buddha taught a method of contemplation for liberating consciousness from cosmic existence is a gross misrepresentation of his Ethical Path. The contemplative method induces a *passive attitude* towards life. It is based on the belief that human beings can do little more than observe and endure their life-conditions with stoic detachment. Conditions are not changed, one learns to change one's attitude to them. It is this misunderstanding, if not misrepresentation, of the Buddha's Way that had led to the widespread belief that it is a form of negative mysticism and a quietist religion.⁶ The Buddha's understanding of the *Praxis* character of human action in the world and his re-statement of the philosophical categories *sankhara - sankhata* – construction - constructed, makes him a – *kiriyavadin* – an advocate of positive action, as he himself repeatedly insisted. The Buddha was the first thinker in history to see and expose the one-sidedness of views which hold that either subjective factors or 'objective' factors (physical or metaphysical) alone determine the situation and destiny of human beings. Humans deal with a world which is a construct of their sensuous and practical activity; they produce the conditions of their existence and are in turn conditioned by the results of their action. They influence 'external' and 'internal' 'nature': in the way they gain their livelihood (work, production); organize their relationships with each other (social institutions) and seek to understand and regulate the processes of nature (scientific experimentation). This is not a speculative view. It is an empirically verifiable fact of everyday life (See Chapters 9 and 11). Since humans historically produce the conditions of their existence they can also historically change them. What is necessary is to understand Conditioned Co-arising of situations in the world. The 'welfare and happiness of the diverse peoples' that make up the human species are possible only if human beings give up the myopic viewpoint of the separate ego and act together according to their social species nature, non-injuringly, comprehending the long-term effects, good or ill, of human action. A truly liberative practice can begin, the Buddha insisted, only when mystical musings and philosophical speculations are left behind and attention is directed to the concrete investigation of real life conditions. *For the Buddha, human liberation is not a contemplative but a practical act.*

'**Social**' is used in a very specific sense. According to ideologies of individualism, society is an aggregate of separate entities who are self-centred or egoistic by nature. At the political level we are told that such individuals entered into 'external' contractual relations with each other to ensure social order. Society from this point of view is a truce in a warfare between individuals to ensure that the pursuit of particular interests does not undermine the general interest. A Bud-

⁶ Max Weber's (1962) discussion of the social origins of Buddhism is a glaring example of such misrepresentation, all the more misleading because it claimed to be a social scientific rather than an Indological explanation.

dhist scholar who accepts the Buddha's rejection of *puggalavada* – theories of individualism – has to shift the paradigm of investigation from 'the individual' to the totality of human relationships world-wide, not as fixed 'systems' but as conditioned conditioning processes, not as Being but as Becoming. Not only human beings, but all living beings have to be comprehended as participants in a common 'stream of life.' 'Human nature' is not a fixed, abstract essence which inheres in separate individuals. It is a species potential which develops historically through social differentiation of human life-energies (See Chapter 11). The human being is a social animal, not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate himself only in the midst of society. In other words, 'the individual' is not a product of nature and the point of departure of history, but is the result of determinate historical and cultural developments.

Individual-centred theories of society and history are rooted in ego consciousness and craving. The ego, the result of complex conditioned processes, falls into the delusion that it is the transcendental subject of these processes and conditions (See Chapter 11). Ego consciousness is produced by craving and is continuously rebirthed by the craving to perpetuate ego-existence. Religions which offer private salvation and personal immortality merely elevate self-seeking to a transcendental project. Once human beings regain insight into the social character of their species nature, they can begin to build up communities of compassion – *anukampa* – and sharing – *dana*. This is the Noble Aim of the Eightfold Path (See Chapter 15).

'**Historical**' is used as a designation for human culture as an evolving process. Historical events are understood as the outcome of *collective and interwoven flows of conduct*. Individuals are the products as well as the producers of history. There are no individuals 'as such' enjoying extra-historical immunity:

History is not only the natural framework of human life; man is a product of history. If one separates man from history, if one tries to conceive of him outside time, fixed and immobile, one takes away his nature (Durkheim 1990:36).

Abstract discussions of the doctrine of *anatta* mystify the fact that in the real world, there are only men and women of flesh and blood and that they necessarily find themselves in a particular period of time, in a particular land and a specific culture. Suffering is not an abstract predicament of the human condition. It is conditioned by specific circumstances. The Buddha sought to liberate not abstract cosmic beings, but real men and women suffering under the weight of oppressive social conditions. He did not promise redemption from miserable conditions but called for their eradication, so that humans could experience the joy of being alive. For this, the centre of gravity has to be shifted from the ego, and the living being re-

sensitized so that he/she could experience the unstructured, exhilarating flow of life. When *anatta* is realised, one *sees clearly* that the stream of consciousness and the stream of life are a single flow. Conditioned Co-arising - *paticca samuppada* in its literal meaning is a *genealogical* understanding of life and events. Michel Foucault provides an excellent clarification of genealogical explanations,

Historical contextualisation needs to be something more than the simple relativisation of the phenomenological subject. I don't believe the problem can be solved by historicising the subject as posited by the phenomenologists, *fabricating a subject* that evolves through the course of history. One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that is to say, arrive at an analysis which *can account for the constitution of the subject* within a historical framework. And that is what I call *genealogy*, that is a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either *transcendental* in relation to the field of events or runs in *empty sameness* throughout the course of history (1980:117 emphasis mine).

The Buddha's key explanatory principle - Conditioned Co-arising - is genealogical explanation *par excellence*.

'Human' A majestic statue of the Buddha looms large in the central nave of the Temple of Awakening at Bodh Gaya. It marks the spot where, according to tradition, Siddhattha Gotama awoke to a clear understanding of actuality. The statue depicts the Buddha, eyes wide open, seated in the *bharmisparsa mudra* – 'touching the earth posture.' The right hand rests on the knee, palm turned inward and has all its fingers almost touching the earth. The left hand lies on the lap, with its palm turned upward. This portrayal is based on the legend of an event that occurred as Siddhattha Gotama was on the verge of attaining liberation. The *Nidhanakatha* of the *Jataka* narrates that Mara and his army were about to attack Siddhattha saying he had no witnesses to whatever hardships he may endured to liberate himself. Gotama stretched his hand towards the earth and called it to bear witness. The great Earth quaked mightily and responded, "I am witness to thee of that." The ancient Sanskrit text (BCE) *Lalithavistara* is more explicit, the Earth goddess Stavara appears in person, bears witness and drives Mara away.⁷ The 'touching the earth' posture illustrates the Buddha's oft-repeated, supremely self-confident assertion that he won his freedom, "by human strength, by human energy, by human striving ...By my earnest endeavour, I won awakening. I won the unrivalled freedom from the bond" (GS 1.45). The Buddha *calls the earth* to bear witness to his truth by touching it with his right hand. This is a symbolic Buddhist reversal

⁷ Cf; *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, Published by Government of Sri Lanka, 1971.

of the custom of raising the right hand to the heavens to testify to the truth or to express militancy. The Buddha's Teaching is 'earthy' and 'feminine' in the sense that it is firmly rooted in the 'this-sidedness' of human experience and knowledge. The Buddha insisted on his humanity to the end; nothing human was alien to him, but he refused to place his hope on anything alien to humanity. The Buddha was a radical humanist,

To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But for human beings the root is *humanity itself*... The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that man is the highest being for man, hence, with the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being (Marx, MECW. 3.182 emphasis mine).

'Liberation' from suffering is the Goal of the Buddha's Middle Way. The possibility of human self-liberation from dissatisfactory conditions in the this-worldly order came to be envisaged in the West only in the last few centuries. The traditional Western view about liberation is influenced by Judaeo-Christian salvation theory. This discourse (soteriology) is grounded in the belief that humans cannot be freed from suffering without the intervention of a Divine Saviour (*Soter*). Myths about external liberators, whether religious or secular, inculcate dependence on external agency at the personal and collective levels. Oppressed people despairing of ever being able to free themselves from desperate conditions have yearned for an external liberator who would irrupt into their midst, crush their oppressors and break the chains of their bondage. Freedom and happiness are bestowed, not achieved, shifting dependence from one master to another.

Compared to the West, the term liberation – *vimutti* (*vimukti* Sk) is of a very ancient vintage in India. The same term is used with reference to a wide range of emancipatory struggles against oppressive conditions: personal, national, class and gender. What is noteworthy is that the term has always been used with regard to self-liberation, individual or collective, not to salvation by an external agent. Thus, whatever the limitations of the perspective, the quest for liberation, not salvation, has been a distinctive feature of Indian 'religions.' Yogis and self-torturers strive to realize *jivanmukti* – living release – through their own efforts, without reliance on any enabling supernatural grace. They are revolting not only against dissatisfactory conditions, but are also refusing to accept the dominant world view of their society, which claims that present suffering is in some way decreed by a divine being or determined by the impersonal Law of *Kamma* (*Karma* Sk). It is against the background of these practices of self-liberation that the Buddha's Middle Path to Self Liberation has to be understood. This exploration of the Buddha's historical project of liberation is not abstract. It focuses on three major sources of suffering in the world, namely, gender, ethnic and class oppression. The Buddha's Way addresses all three issues.

From Radicalism to Accommodation

Teachings and practices attributed to the Buddha in the canonical tradition are not homogeneous in character. They often contradict each other. In some places the Buddha repudiates and condemns resort to the miraculous and to paranormal feats in order to impress householders and to make converts. In other places the Buddha is reported to have performed stupendous feats and used paranormal powers in contests with his opponents.⁸ In many places we come across the Buddha speaking in extremely disparaging terms about women. The circumstances, as reported, surrounding the establishment of a community of female renouncers – the *bhikkhuni sangha*, its subordination to the *bhikkhu sangha* and the five derogations of womanhood *as such* supposedly uttered by the Buddha on this occasion, as if the Buddha regretted his decision, perplex critical students of Buddhism and cannot but be painful to feminine sensibilities.⁹ The Book of the Discipline in particular creates the impression that the Buddha showed a partiality towards social elites from the beginning and that the first converts were drawn from the affluent classes. By the time the canonical tradition closed, not only had the character of the community founded by the Buddha changed, but a considerable evolution had taken place in the doctrines themselves, leading to a scholastic system of Buddhology.

The most far reaching theological trend was the apotheosis of the Buddha. The idea of a Being incomparably superior to all creatures, including gods, and from time to time incarnating, actually or apparently, according to a fixed norm, solely out of compassion, is without a previous parallel. It is quite foreign to the earliest texts and must have developed gradually (Pande 1983: 29).

The changed signification of the word *arahat* exemplifies such deviation from early Buddhist egalitarianism. It was a conventional honorific, meaning ‘venerable,’ ‘honourable,’ ‘sir/madam,’ and was used for anyone of high social status. In a revaluation of values, the first Buddhists reserved it as a term of respect only for persons who had reached the Goal of the Noble Way and lived morally impeccable lives. Later it came to be used for renouncers who had attained ‘higher knowledge’ through the practice of mental concentration and were capable of stupendous paranormal

⁸ Compare for example V II. 112 and Kevaddha Sutta (D I.XI) where the Buddha condemns the performance of superhuman feats and miracles in order to make converts and the Patika Sutta (D III.XXIV) where he boasts of having defeated a rival in a contest of miracles.

⁹ Alan Sponberg (1992) has made a critical examination of the derogation of women in Theravada canonical works, especially in the events narrated with regard to the establishment of the *bhikkhuni sangha*. He attributes this to tensions in the early *sangha* due to ascetic mysogynism, which gave rise to institutional androcentrism after Buddha's death.

feats like levitation and translocation. There was a greater emphasis on sequestered living and scholarly speculations about the subtleties of the *Dhamma* among such arahats than on preaching and guiding householders to realize the goal. These elitist attitudes led to the development of a significant status differentiation between renouncers and householders in some Buddhist communities and eventually led to the ascendancy of the segment of male renouncers to a position of pre-eminence in the unitary and ritually undifferentiated community. “The *arahat* monks formed an elite guild in the early *Sangha* and alienated many other monks and laymen, by insisting that they alone knew the true *Dhamma* and were qualified to pronounce on the correctness of views and the holiness of others” (Robinson, 1984: 40). By arrogating to themselves the status of arahats in this sense, these elite monks were able to justify behaviour which would have been considered deplorable even in ordinary disciples.

The most glaring example of sanctimonious puritanism on the part of self-proclaimed *arahat* monks is the shabby treatment of the gentle Ananda, the Buddha’s trusted lieutenant and ‘Guardian of the *Dhamma*,’ at the Council of Rajagaha (BD IV.11). The participants were hand-picked by Maha Kassapa, a senior mendicant, who advocated the practice of severe austerities and the avoidance of contact with householders, especially women. While the Buddha was still alive the querulous Kassapa threatened to call a meeting and have Ananda publicly reprimanded for consorting too freely with householders and *bhikkhunis*. In the presence of a group of *bhikkhunis* Kassapa dismissed the highly regarded and charismatic Ananda as ‘a mere youngster.’ Ananda, unwilling to be drawn into a quarrel, replied with a smile, “My head is full of grey hairs and yet you call me a youngster” (S 16. X & XI). On these occasions as well as during the Rajagaha meeting, Ananda’s humility and forbearance prevented personal conflicts from escalating into factional strife.

Even though the canon records that many householders and *bhikkhunis* had attained arahathood, neither *bhikkhunis* nor householder arahats were invited to the Rajagaha meeting. The assembled ‘*arahat*’ *bhikkhus* brought petty, puritanical charges against Ananda, three of which related to his enlightened attitude towards women. Whatever the historicity of the events narrated, it reveals that there must have been serious tensions in the first community which broke out into the open after the Buddha’s death. Senior *bhikkhus* like Kassapa held that the ideal way to realize arahathood is through the practice of austerities, reclusiveness and the attainment of ‘higher knowledge.’ Ananda on the other hand, shared the Buddha’s resolve not to rest content until the members of the *Sangha*, men and women, renouncers and householders had become perfect exemplars and disseminators of the *Dhamma*. He regarded this as his path to arahathood (See M I. 213 & D II. 114).

Very early in the history of Buddhism a distinction arose between a *Dhamma* for the ordinary disciples and an *Abhidhamma* – a quintessential doctrine

– which was accorded a higher status than the public discourses of the Buddha – the *Suttantas*. This view continues to be held by some Theravada Buddhists. For example the Burmese Theravada scholar U Ko Lay writes:

In *Suttanta* discourses, the Buddha takes into consideration the intellectual level of his audience. He therefore teaches the *Dhamma* in conventional terms ...But in *Abhidhamma* the Buddha makes no such concessions; he treats the *Dhamma* entirely in terms of the ultimate reality (*paramattha sacca*). He analyses every phenomenon into its ultimate constituents. All relative concepts are reduced to their ultimate elements which are then precisely defined, classified and systematically arranged (1994: 136).

This discrimination contradicts what the Buddha himself told Ananda before he passed away: "I have taught the Dhamma, without making any distinction between 'esoteric' and 'exoteric.' In this respect the *Tathagata* has no such thing as the 'closed fist of the teacher' which holds some things back" (D II.202).

Many of the views and practices noted above have become part of mainstream Buddhism; there is nothing new about them. What, if at all, was unique or revolutionary in the sense of 'turning around' in early Buddhist practice? Was *anatta* merely studied as a 'higher' philosophical truth and *nibbana* (*nirvana* Sk) conceived as a state of mystic oblivion or an 'ultimate reality'? Such speculations have led to ill-informed scholarly conclusions that Buddhism is an inward-looking, world-renouncing religion, obsessed with "the meanness of life and a satiety with death" (Weber 1962: 207). If this were true, how did it dynamize the cultures of the countries where it took root and promote not only scholarship, the spread of literacy, health services even for animals, but also 'material' culture: art, architecture, public works like parks and highways and impressive irrigation works? To what extent might not the 'scientific' outlook fostered by Buddhism in its ascendant-dynamic phase have stimulated technological innovation and the aesthetic creativity of ordinary men and women, peasants, craftsmen, artists, architects and engineers, improving the quality of life for all? Such advances are consistent with the Buddha's view that social wellbeing is a basic condition for human happiness.

The Pali Canon is a tapestry of several interwoven oral traditions. The social elan of early Buddhism can be uncovered if one looks for traces of what could be called the 'Anandian tradition'. The dynamism of this tradition would explain the dissemination of the *Dhamma* among ordinary men and men.

Going 'Against' or Going 'With' the Current?

Since even the earliest available texts are of uncertain date and heterogeneous content (Pande 1983: iii), scholars have found it difficult to pronounce with certainty

what 'original Buddhism' may have been. In the selection of a core of doctrines - *anicca*, *anatta*, *paticca samuppada*, *kamma* and the Four Noble Truths, I have used an evaluative criterion derived from early Buddhist practice itself. The Buddha and the first Buddhists described the practice of the *Dhamma* as a 'going against the current' - *patisotagama* - of conventional views and practices. The opposite of *pati* is *anu*. Thus *anusotan* and *patisotan* mean respectively flowing with or flowing against. (PED 391).

The ideas and practices discussed in the previous section, as already noted, are by no means unconventional. Beliefs in supernatural beings, rituals and placation of the gods, are part of the paraphernalia of cultural practices which are generally classified as 'religious'. Patriarchal values and the legitimization of the position and the privileges of dominant classes are very much in accord with ideologies of domination. They are *anusotagama* - going with the current - of conventional and dominant values. But the basic premises of Buddhist ethics, impermanence, Conditioned Co-arising and non-substantiality, 'go against the current' of conventional ideas, values and practices¹⁰. In this cluster of teachings the Buddha never crosses the threshold of the real world of humans or the 'this-side' of human experience to speculate about the meta-physical or the 'other-worldly'; neither does he claim access to paranormal sources of knowledge to establish the authority of his teachings. What I call 'the core teachings' could be isolated because of their consistency and coherence and the clarity and simplicity of the language in which they are formulated.

Whenever reference has to be made to 'going with the current' views and practices, I preface them with a phrase like, "The Buddha reportedly" to indicate my hermeneutic suspicion of their authenticity. The first Buddhists described those who had gone beyond and reached the shore of freedom as *anagami* - non-returns. I have sought to understand the key categories of the Buddha's Teaching in their own terms without returning them into their supposedly religious or metaphysical antecedents. I also have guarded myself against slipping into speculative thought or trying to show that the key doctrines of Buddhism are in accord with logical

¹⁰ J.G. Jennings (1947) uses the doctrine of *anatta* as the decisive criterion to exclude what he regards as accretions, incompatible with this unique teaching. He filters out, for example, from the canonical tradition, beliefs in heaven and hell, gods and spirits; supernatural powers attributed to the Buddha and *arahats*; invisible merit that could be gained by donations to the *Sangha*. Most importantly, he considers Buddhist belief in individual re-births as irreconcilable with *anatta dhamma*. He sees these deviations as symptomatic of the gradual *Hinduization* of Buddhism. Jennings attempts to recover what he believes is the pristine splendour of the Buddha's Way which presents an ethical ideal of incomparable beauty founded on pure altruism or non-egoism. It promises no other reward than the joy of living which is born of selfless generosity in thought, word and deed.

reasoning. The Buddha pointed out that discursive thought and views “hammered out by logic” (DB 1.I. *passim*), are of little profit when it comes to the eradication of suffering in the world. What is important is not to provide explanations for the universal prevalence of suffering, but to provide a practical way for eliminating it.

The Buddha insisted that the reliability of his Teaching on the eradication of suffering stands the test of practical verification and is therefore a reliable guide for action.

Socio-Historical Reading of Texts

The heart of the Buddha’s Teaching is the Law of Conditioned Co-arising (Chapter 9). Students of the Buddhist canonical tradition cannot therefore dispense themselves from the obligation to inquire whether this Law may not also have been operative in the collation and transmission of teachings attributed to the historical Buddha. The Buddha saw with piercing clarity that all human realities are *sankhara* - *sankhata*, constructing - constructs - or conditioning-conditioned factors. Buddhism cannot therefore claim *a-priori* exemption from this rule for the formation of its canon and thereby come into contradiction with the *central explanatory principle* of the Buddha Dhamma itself. The Pali Canon was handed down orally for centuries before being committed to writing. It, like everything else, is a human construct. Even a cursory reader of the Buddhist scriptures cannot but fail to notice that the Buddha is portrayed as a teacher who dialogued almost exclusively with men and most of the time with male mendicant disciples. One therefore needs to ask to what extent this indicates a ‘monk-handling’ or moulding of the tradition. Scholar monks could think and produce ‘good works’ because they had been socially freed from the necessity of producing their own means of subsistence. Patronage of social elites had become indispensable for life in large, well appointed monasteries. However, the surplus energy to be intellectually productive was and is supplied by manual labourers. The materials used to produce texts like ola leaves and quills are congealed forms of social labour. Who are the disqualified invisible players, the unsung and the unmentioned, behind the production of ‘sacred’ works? The hierarchical division of society into intellectual and manual labourers is the extension into society of the conceit that consciousness is separate from, and superior to, the body. It obscures the fact that intellectual labour, like consciousness, is not unconditioned. Both are subject to the Law of Conditioned Co-Arising.

The Buddha’s insistence on the Conditioned Co-Arising of all realities notwithstanding, Buddhist piety has vested its canonical works with a sacred character akin to the sacralisation of ‘The Book’ in theistic religions.¹¹ If the canon attributes

certain statements to the Buddha, the attitude of devout Buddhists has generally been to assume that they are indeed *Buddha vacana* - the *ipsissima verba* of the Buddha. The Buddha reportedly made derogatory statements about women, but what must one make of the assumption of some Buddhist scholars, particularly monks, that the Buddha must actually have said it, since the canonical tradition says he did? The argument often advanced for this is that the Buddha in his wisdom, must have had 'good reasons' for making such remarks. One must then conclude that his immense wisdom must have tempered his boundless compassion for all livings. May it not be equally probable that what is attributed to the Buddha is precisely what the male transmitters of these views *wanted* to instill and reproduce from generation to generation? Critical thinkers must pose certain questions in this regard: what are the power effects of such 'truths' and how do they function to reproduce (rebirth) the inferior position of women? Whose interests are being served by the claim that iniquitous social systems mechanically repeat themselves, as if this is an act of god or of nature? How do the reproductions of 'sacred' meanings contribute to the rebirthing of a particular social and domestic order?

Textual interpretation is not a simple and innocent exercise of reproducing meanings frozen forever in a sacrosanct language. Textual interpretation is social practice. It is an *intervention* in texts in order to construct meanings to be *communicated* to others. Underlying it are often unspoken, ethico-political choices. The interpreter's privileged position: gender, class, ethnicity, his/her role in society, the subjective stand he/she takes *vis a vis* the social status quo and the scholastic or academic tradition which frames his/her work, are at play in the construction of 'truths' from 'sacred' texts. The canonisation of texts, especially texts which are believed to contain revealed truths, involve scholars who adopt a devotional attitude to them in a kind of 'hermeneutical circularity.' They set out to find what they assume are incontrovertible, 'sacred' or 'salvific' truths. Where the text embarrasses or scandalizes, explanations tend to be apologetic.

The sacralisation of texts, as the Christian theologian Normal Gottwald points out, leaves the devout scholar no other option but to adopt the literalist method in textual interpretation (1979: 3-22). Literalist hermeneusis relies on tools developed in the humanities: grammar, syntax and rules of logic. It is based on the assumption that the relationship between signifiers and significations is eternal and immutable. Literalist readings do not provide access to the social dynamic underlying the ideas and narratives reified in texts. One has only to dissolve religious language into ordinary language to recognize it as the mystified form of everyday language and that neither thoughts nor language inhabit a realm of their own, except perhaps in the imagination of metaphysicians. Gottwald emphasizes the need to

¹¹ For a critique of the sacralisation of the Pali canon see Asanga Tilakaratne (1993).

question texts:

Why are some events remembered and not others? What process of sifting was at work in the inclusion and exclusion of ideas and events? How are newly discovered events and factors uncovered by modern research, to be related to those events and factors which are identified and proclaimed in an overarching cultural and cultic scheme? And what are the transactions by which the events through which a people pass, especially in their beginnings, transmitted into symbolic structures of collective identity and meaning? What are the forms of living together and thinking together about the communal life, which take ever-changing shapes and orientations in the course of historical experience? And how are the social interaction patterns and thought patterns of a people related? The humanities as such give very little help in answering such questions (1979: 7).

Biblical scholars, Gottwald notes, have generally been wary of what he calls "the scandal of the sociological method" (1979: 5). This is understandable because the sociological method attempts to trace ideas to their social and historical provenance. This undermines the assumption in theistic religions that eternal and unconditioned truths have been revealed by an extra-historical, transcendental being. The literalist method is comforting to the devout because it can neither confirm nor refute this claim. The limitations of this approach though discussed by Gottwald in the context of Biblical studies, are equally relevant with regard to the interpretations of ancient Indian 'religious' texts:

Most of the surviving ancient Indian documents are overwhelmingly religious and ritualistic ... Trying to extract history from them without some previous knowledge of the actual structure of Indian society at the time of writing, gives either no results or the ludicrous conclusions that may be read in most histories of India (Kosambi 1977: 16).

The socio-historical method however, need not be a scandal or embarrassment to Buddhist scholars. The *Dhamma*, as its Founder repeatedly emphasized, is not a revealed truth; it was a discovery (Chapter 9). The Buddha defended the right to free and independent inquiry. Bewildered by the 'wilderness of views' in circulation at the time, the people of the *Kalama* clan asked the Buddha how they should test the truth-value of any teaching. The Buddha advised them not to believe in something merely because "it is reported or because it is stated on the authority of traditional teachings." The only valid criterion, he pointed out, is whether any teaching when tested in practice, is conducive to the eradication of suffering and enhancement of well being. If so, they should hold on to it. If not, whatever the claimed authority of the teacher, it should be rejected (A I.188). The same criterion

must surely be applied to what is stated on the authority of traditional Buddhist teachings.

Texts and Contexts

The events and ideas recorded in the Brahmanic and Buddhist scriptures from the Aryan invasion to the Age of the Buddha range across a period of nearly one thousand eight hundred years. If one subscribes to the view condemned by the Buddha, that “conscious itself runs on and fares on, apart from conditions” (M 1. 258) one could write a history of the development of Indian thought, independent of the diversity of social and historical conditions reflected in Brahmanic and Buddhist texts. The *Buddha Dhamma* could then be portrayed as the outcome of philosophical criticism and allocated an honourable niche in ‘the history of ideas’.¹² A critical examination of ancient Indian texts reveals a variety of historical and social contexts: continuities as well as discontinuities; remouldings of older myths and traditions to fit new conditions; reversals of ancient and noble valuations as well as returns to the values of the ancients. Indian society (if such an entity ever existed before the British conquest of the subcontinent) bears out the truth of *anicca*. It has not been eternally stagnant or boringly repetitious. It has known periods of remarkable advance as well as periods of decay and decline.

The earliest Indian literature are the hymns of the *Rig Veda* and the suggested period for the earlier section of the *Rig Veda* is somewhere between the latter part of the second millennium and the early first millennium BCE.¹³ The first and tenth book of the *Rig Veda* are considered by scholars as belonging to a later period. The later Vedic literature, the *Sama*, *Yajur* and *Atharva Vedas*, with their associated texts the *Upanishads*, *Aranyakas* and *Brahmans*, are dated closer to the mid-first millennium BCE. The two epics, the *Mahabharatha* and the *Ramayana* continued to be edited till as late as the first millennium CE, but the core narratives of both could not have taken place much earlier than 800 BCE.

¹² David J. Kalupahana follows this method in *Buddhist Philosophy - A Historical Analysis* (1976). ‘History’ here, is understood as the history of ideas. The evolution of the ‘idea’ of god is discussed along the conventional, animism - polytheism - monism - monotheism trajectory (ibid: 4). The extent to which these may have reflected changes in social conditions is not taken into consideration. The rise of materialist philosophy is attributed to philosophical criticism of the validity of extrasensory perception and yogic intuition (ibid: 9). This overlooks the fact that such theoretical criticism reflects the practical criticism of esoteric views through empirical investigation, critical reflection and active intervention in their life-world by men and women of action.

¹³ The information given in this section is from Thapar (1984: 14-17). For an extensive discussion of the chronological stratification of the Buddhist canon, see G.C. Pande (1957).

Social Transition in Northern India 1750 - 600 BCE

	1	2	3	4
Period	c. 1750 - 1000 BCE	c. 1000 BCE-	c. 600 BCE-	c. 600 BCE-
Society	Normadic-Pastoral Tribes Peasant Communities	Early Monarchies Hierarchically Ranked Society	Tribal Federations Ruling Lineages Wage Labourers	Monarchical States Complex Differentiation
Sources	Early Hymns of the Rig Veda	Late Hymns of the Rig veda. Sama - Yajur - Atharva - Vedas. Upanishads, Aranyakas, Brahmanas, Mahabharatha, Ramayana.	Buddhist Scriptures	Buddhist Scriptures
<div><div><div>1</div><div>Indus Valley Region</div></div><div><div>2</div><div>Brahmarshidesha</div></div><div><div>3</div><div>Majjhimadesha</div></div><div><div>4</div><div>Kosala</div></div><div><div>3</div><div>Sakya</div></div><div><div>4</div><div>Magadha</div></div><div><div>Pancala</div></div><div><div>Malla</div></div><div><div>Vajji</div></div></div> <div>Source Dates - Thapar (1984a: 14 - 17) Locations - Suggestive</div>				

The geographical and social background of these sources are easier to locate (See map, opposite page). The topographical references in the *Rig Veda* relate to the Indus Valley region (which stretches across the Punjab and Sind regions of North-West India and Pakistan). The later Vedic literature generally relate to the western Ganga valley - the Kuru-Pancala region, also referred to as the *doab*, the lands between the Yamuna river and the western banks of the Ganga. The early hymns of the *Rig Veda* reflect the life-conditions of a predominantly nomadic-pastoral people in the Indus Valley region, whereas the later Vedic hymns reflect conditions in a predominantly settled, agricultural society. In the Kuru Pancala region we see the emergence of monarchies presiding over a hierarchically stratified society. The Brahmanic religion originated in this region and is called the *Brahmarshidesha* - the sacred lands of holy seers in the Vedic texts. The later Vedic society seems to have evolved through an interaction between the *Rig Vedic* pastoralists and agriculturalists. The society of the *Majjhima* of North East India in which Buddhism arose was marked by political tension between two types of social formations - the *ganasanghas* - federations of tribal chiefdoms and fully fledged monarchical states. As regards the Buddhist canon, sections of the *Digha*, *Majjhima*, *Samyutta* and *Anguttara Nikayas* are considered early, but a later date is attributed to the *Vinaya Pitaka*, some parts of which possibly date to the Mauryan period. The *Jataka* literature is more difficult to date. Some of the verse sections are believed to be of early origin. From a socio-historical point of view, "the major significance of these sources lies more in the nature of the trends of change which they delineate rather than in a precise dating of the change" (Thapar *ibid*). This study too focuses on trends of change, to indicate influences they may had on changing perceptions and ethical valuations.

Where direct use is made of primary and secondary sources, these are acknowledged in the text. The Pali canon consists of three *pitakas* or 'baskets': *Vinaya* - the Book of Discipline; *Suttas* - Discourses of the Buddha, and *Abhidhamma* - The (philosophical) 'Quintessence of the *Dhamma*.' I have confined myself to the first two *Pitakas*. There are many key categories which are common to Sanskrit and Pali. Where a Brahmin text is quoted the Sanskrit term is used and the corresponding Pali form is given within brackets. In quotations from the Buddhist texts the Pali word is used and the corresponding Sanskrit form given within brackets e.g. *ksatriya* (*khattiya* P); *nibbana* (*nirvana* Sk). Diacritical marks have been added only for Pali quotations in Part III.

Reading this Text

There is sufficient evidence in the Pali canon to show that at least during the Buddha's lifetime, his Dhamma was understood and practised as a message of compassion and deliverance for socially underprivileged groups. This study is an

attempt at recovering the radically humanist character of the Buddha's Teaching and his Noble Way to Human Liberation. The Way encompassed the personal, the social and the ecological; in other words 'everything that lives'. There is not one, but many Buddhisms in the world today. In Buddhist countries it has become part and parcel of traditional culture and is embedded in folk beliefs and practices. In the West many individuals are turning to Buddhism for attaining personal peace through meditation. Buddhist meditation is seen as a stress reducer. Much sought after meditation and spirituality gurus pay little attention to the social conditions which create stress, alienation and loss of meaning in the hyper-industrialised West and the co-arising conditions which produce misery, malnutrition, internecine warfare and environmental depredation in the same world. This study is a 'dissident' or 'going against the current' of mainstream Buddhisms, reading of the canonical scriptures. It is also a 'sub-versive' reading in the sense of being 'from down up'. That is to say, from the point of view of subjugated groups, women, oppressed classes and social minorities. It is on the side of those who struggle to put an end to their suffering. Such a reading of the scriptures can discover many areas of congruence between early Buddhism and ongoing non-violent struggles for liberation from suffering, often local and discontinuous, even in Buddhist countries today. This need not be surprising. The *Dhamma* itself was born of struggle.

The recovery of its radical tradition is a *sine qua non* if Buddhism is to face the challenges of our times. This has to be more than offering palliatives to soothe the distress of separate individuals. Neither can it be done by scholarly vindications of its 'higher truth.' As in the beginning, the response has to be social and contextually relevant. The reality of impermanence is the fundamental assumption of Buddhism. One could remain with one's gaze fixed on a romanticized past and cling to ancient institutions which may have been relevant and functional for their times. We live today in a globalized historical context marked by an accelerated pace of social change which impacts every part of the world, however remote. Astounding advances in the scientific and technological fields, especially in information technology, are transforming social relationships and these in turn affect the way we think and feel about ourselves and the world we live in. Any authentic response to these changes has to come from the depths of what is best in each culture, understood as practices, rather than as an essence which informs national or ethnic groups. Given the unity of the human species, these particular practices must at the same time have an universal and not merely sectarian relevance. This is a challenge which has to be faced not just by Buddhism but by every religion. The age of apartheid is behind us. The task before us is to build a humane society together, worldwide:

All forms of religious faith and practice that fail to grasp and act upon their connection with and dependence upon the material-cultural evolu-

tion of humankind are doomed to irrationality and irrelevance, whatever diversionary consolation they offer at the moment. Forms of religion capable of grasping and acting on that connection and dependence, have something to contribute to the next stages in the long struggle for human liberation (Gottwald, 1985: 709).

For Buddhism, this means a rediscovery of its early radicalism and egalitarianism.

Personal Odyssey

My early intellectual formation was metaphysical or more precisely, Thomistic-Aristotelian. This heritage I soon realized, blocked access to a proper understanding of the *Dhamma*. Given my westernised upbringing and education, the key that unlocked the door was the writings of Western philosophers who had broken free of their intellectual tradition moored in medieval metaphysics. The interaction in my mind between the philosophies of these thinkers and the Buddha's lucid *Dhamma* expositions was a process of cross-fertilization. Exhilaratingly new perspectives opened up for grasping the richness and profundity of the *Buddha Dhamma*. In the opposite direction, however, while helping me to grasp the contemporary relevance of the Buddha's thought, I began to appreciate the significance as well as the limitations of Western philosophies which had broken out of the shackles of metaphysical and onto-theological systems of thought. When I began this seven year long study of Buddhism, I had no in-depth knowledge of the *Buddha Dhamma*. It entailed research into the social context of the period, the study of relevant secondary literature and a grappling with the daunting volumes of the Buddhist canonical texts. It was to become a serendipitous voyage of discovery.

The socio-historical method requires at least a working knowledge of the findings of social scientists and historians. My approach has been *cross* disciplinary rather than *interdisciplinary*. Interdisciplinary work provides interesting exchanges but does not abolish established partitions: "Rather than shaking the disciplinary paradigm", Diane Elam observes, "interdisciplinary work often confirms the boundaries it is supposed to breach ... By contrast, 'cross disciplines' as a way of calling to question the very boundaries of disciplines, can potentially expose the impossibility of containing thought/action within the walls of the ivory tower" (1994:11-12).

This work is no more than what it claims to be - an *Approach*. It is the outcome of a clarification of several unresolved theoretical and ethico-practical issues with which I had been grappling for many years, in the light of the Buddha's Teaching. The major breakthrough in understanding was the realisation of the primacy of the ethical factor in all projects for social transformation, political and/or

economic. It also led to the rejection of all theories which justify the instrumental use of violence for so-called human liberation. Taking up arms may be the only resort to end tyranny and terror, but in the first place, it calls for conscientious concern that the struggle for freedom is waged in accordance with truth and righteousness. Today's weapons of instant and mass destruction have made theories of just war, religious or secular, of the political left or the right, as obsolete as the theory of the divine right of kings. The horrendous spiral of violence and counter violence in the world at the personal, national and international levels vindicates the truth of the Buddha's words:

In this world, hatred cannot be ended through hatred, but only through non-hatred. *Eso dhammo sanantano* - This is the Eternal Truth (Dhp.5).

Brahmins regard the divinely revealed truths of the Vedas as *sanatan dharma* - eternal truth. The Buddha as in many other instances revalues this value and reformulates it in terms of a non-esoteric social imperative.

Self-made Human Tragedy

Human suffering is an existential tragedy. It is not a divine mystery which surpasses human understanding. The cause of suffering may not be mystified by pseudo explanations like the mysterious will of a Supreme Deity or the impersonal workings of a Karmic Law. A theoretical understanding of the laws which govern the actual production and reproduction of suffering in the world can indicate the strategy for eradicating it in practice. The Buddha's understanding of the Conditioned Co-arising of the notion of a non-corporeal Self and its concomitant - *Dukkha* - existential suffering or anguish, enabled him to provide both diagnosis and curative prescription. A self, ego, or a soul, existing outside the body and the world is an alienated being. It clings frantically to the very physical world from which it disassociates itself. The problem of suffering is the problem of the separate individual's alienation from itself, its fellow beings and the world in which it lives and moves, and has its being. The Buddha helps humans break out of this self-inflicted estrangement and experience the exhilarating richness of life as participation in an unbroken flow of vital processes. He offers the possibility of realising one's bliss here and now and not in some hereafter (See Chapter 15). The Noble Eightfold Way begins with Right View and Right Intention. The Buddha teaches that any goal-oriented action must also begin with a clear formulation of objectives and direction of the will to achieve those objectives. Therefore, whether the objective is realisable or not can be verified in practice.

Attempts to understand and communicate the meaning and practical

implications of the *Buddha Dhamma* are beneficial to humankind only if sight of the Goal of the Way - liberation from suffering, and 'the welfare and happiness of the many-folk' - is not lost. This cannot be done by isolated individuals. It is best done together with those who share the same inspiration and aspiration. That is why the Buddha founded a non-discriminating *Sangha* of men and women, renunciants as well as householders.

I hope that this work will stimulate further study on these lines, refine and elaborate it through constructive critique and sharpen its inferences and conclusions. From the Buddha's point of view, what matters in the final analysis is whether academic expositions of his Dhamma are relevant to those for whom suffering is not an academic matter.

CHAPTER 1

THE BUDDHA DHAMMA: A THIS-WORLDLY VISION AND PRACTICE

Academic constructs of Indian religions in the West continue by and large to be conducted within the parameters of a discourse initiated from around the last quarter of the eighteenth century BCE by Western scholars, on the basis of ancient texts. These texts are fragmentary re-presentations from a diversity of times and places, of aspects of 'Indian religion' by people for whom an entity called 'India' did not exist. The study and interpretation of ancient Indian texts became a highly specialized 'discipline' called Indology.

Metaphysical Interpretations of the Buddha Dhamma

Pioneers of the new science of Indology worked with assumptions about the nature of reality and of language which were overwhelmingly metaphysical. This brought about a fundamental distortion of the radical epistemological and psychological breakthrough achieved by the Buddha. Translations into Western languages of specific and precise categories used by the Buddha failed to convey the radical implications of these terms. They brought into currency a particular terminology with metaphysical associations, which as we shall see, even Buddhist scholars tend to follow uncritically. For example, the term 'phenomenon' is used where the Buddha speaks of a 'percept'. 'Phenomenon' immediately evokes association with 'noumenon', the hidden unchanging essence of a 'thing', whereas the Buddha abolished the assumed difference between the appearance of a thing and its hidden reality. In the use of language, the Buddha was very careful to empty words of their metaphysical significations. However, despite the ready availability of two appropriate English words 'name' and 'form', the Pali terms *nama-rupa* are interpretatively rendered 'mind' and 'body' by Maurice Walshe in his recent translation of the *Digha Nikaya* (1987). Similarly Bhikkhu Bodhi in his translation of the *Majjhima Nikaya* (1995), follows scholastic interpretation and renders the very concrete designations 'name' and 'form' as two abstract philosophical categories, 'mentality'/'materiality'. Such renditions are closer in spirit to the Upanishadic understanding of the terms. David J. Kalupahana the Sri Lankan Buddhist scholar, draws a parallel between *nama* and *rupa* with 'psyche' and 'soma' in Western psychology and psychiatry. He equates *nama* with 'psychic personality' and *rupa* with 'physical personality' (1975: 117-118). Kalupahana overlooks the dualistic assumptions of conventional (Western) psychology and psychiatry in his attempt

to make the *Dhamma* comprehensible to a Western readership. He suggests that it is "the psychic personality that survives physical death and in conjunction with the biological contributions of the parents gives rise to a relatively new psychophysical personality" (1975: 118). It must be obvious that the psyche/soma dichotomy in Western psychology is the soul/body dichotomy in secular garb.

The question is whether such a division between a mortal 'physical personality' - whatever that may mean - and a rebirthing meta-physical 'psychic personality' is compatible with the Buddha's unique and distinctive doctrine of *anatta* - no transcendental self. The Buddha used existing terminology but gave them a radically new content. He disclosed that the *nama /rupa* dichotomy is a mental delusion which co-arises with the arising of craving and the notion that the Self or the Ego is 'other-than-the body'. (For an alternative non ontological explanation of *nama-rupa* based on the scriptures, see Chapter 10.)

Similarly the division of a kinetic actuality into spirit and matter or metaphysical and physical is incompatible with the Buddha's core teachings. It is therefore also improper to speak of the Buddha's way as a 'spiritual path'. If he had regarded the pursuit of human excellence as a 'spiritual' quest, he could have used a readily available term - *attaniya* - 'pertaining to the self or soul', 'of the nature of the soul or spirit', 'soul-like' (PED 23). He took a term *ariya* - 'noble'- in currency at the time to denote high social status by birth and revalued it in terms of moral excellence irrespective of a person's gender or birth status. This was a revolutionary overturning of values and an affrontation of the dominant values of his day.

The compilers of the Pali English Dictionary recognized the problem of adequately conveying the meaning of diagnostic categories used by the Buddha like *sankhara-sankhata* (constructing-constructed). But, by referring to them as 'peculiarly Oriental' they side-stepped the limitations of Western philosophical categories:

Sankhara: one of the most difficult terms in Buddhist metaphysics, in which the blending of the subjective-objective view of the world, *peculiar to the East*, is so complete, that it is almost impossible for Occidental terminology to get at the root of its meaning in translation (PED 664, emphasis mine).

Whatever may be said of subsequent Buddhist scholasticism, it is misleading to speak of the *Dhamma* as 'Buddhist metaphysics'. The terms *sankhara-sankhata* are in fact indispensable categories for seeing through the assumed eternal verity of metaphysical constructs (See Chapter 11). The Buddha described the fully liberated person as '*paragu*,' one 'who has gone beyond dualisms' (See Chapter 9). The Buddha used categories with a very specific meaning and they have to

be understood in their own terms within the totality of his Teaching. One must beware of misconceived or mischievous attempts at transforming them back into their supposedly religious or metaphysical antecedents which have been concretely transcended and superseded. Hence the importance of clearing the religious and metaphysical thickets that obscure the sublimity of the Buddha's Ethical Teaching and Practice.

Indian Culture and Religion

Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya's monumental work, *Lokayata A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism*, was a major contribution to the recovery of India's non-theistic intellectual tradition. Chattopadhyaya cites several outstanding Indian philologists who have agreed on the meaning of the term *lokeyata*. It does not refer to 'worldly' in the ontological sense. For example, a Fourteenth Century CE compendium of Indian philosophy, the *Sarva-darsana-samgraha* defined *lokeyata* as *lokesu ayatah lokeyata* – 'It is called *lokeyata* because it is prevalent among the people'. Etymologically and in common usage, the term meant 'what pertains to the people'. *Loka* then, means people and by extension the world of people. In the Indian intellectual tradition, *lokeyata* referred to schools of philosophy which rejected the metaphysical world-view and adopted a 'this-worldly' outlook on life. This interpretation of the term was accepted by no less an authority than S. Radhakrishnan: "Lokayata" - 'directed to the world of sense', is the Sanskrit word for materialism" (Chattopadhyaya 1981: 2). Lokayata philosophers were among the outstanding thinkers of the Buddha's day and in subsequent centuries their views were classified under the general term Carvaka. Chattopadhyaya concludes his discussion of the ancient and contemporary philosophical understanding of the term by calling for a rejection of the assumption that the intellectual tradition of India has been unequivocally idealist or spiritualist (1981: 1-6).

Even though Buddhism has been classified as a 'religion,' it is worth noting that orthodox Brahmanism has never regarded the *Buddha Dhamma* as 'religious' according to their understanding of religion as 'belief in gods.' In Brahmanism (c.q. 'Orthodox Hinduism'), world-views (*darsanas* or *drsti* Sk; *ditthi* P) which accept Vedic testimony to the existence of gods and a supreme being are classified as *astika*, and those which reject the authority of the *Vedas* and the existence of gods, are classified as *nastika*. Carvaka, Buddhist and Jain views, according to brahmin orthodoxy, are *nastika darsanas* (Sharma 1972: 2-3).

The word 'religion' itself is alien to India. Philosophical inquiry in India from ancient times has revolved around a central question. What is the basic reality or, the Law - *Dharma* (Sk) *Dhamma* (P), underlying all sensuously perceived realities? *Astika* as well as *nastika* philosophers used the term *Dharma*. The *astika* tradition privileges the mind and consciousness as in the Greco-Christian tradition.

The mind is considered the faculty of a non-physical or 'spiritual' element which is independent of the body. The *nastikas* do not regard the mind as *atman*, an entity that exists independent of the of the body and the other five 'physical' senses. Life, consciousness and will were considered either material or vital forces which take on a variety of forms, organic as well as inorganic. The Buddha took a position that steered clear of materialism and idealism (See Chapters 9 and 10). The Indian philosophical and cultural tradition cannot therefore, without qualification, be subsumed under the classification 'religion,' as it has been understood in the West.

Genealogy of the term 'Religion'

The word 'religion' is derived from the Latin *religio* and is itself derived either from the word *relegare* (compile, further inquire into, reflect upon etc.,) or, *re-ligare* (to re-link, re-bind). It is in the first sense that Cicero defined religion as "the diligent collation and designation as such of everything which pertains to the cult of the gods" (DLD, trans., mine).¹ As can be seen, Cicero's definition was descriptive, not theological. The definition of religion in the sense of 're-linking' human beings to the source of their existence is theo-ideological and is part of a long Christian heritage. In Christian belief the only true way of re-linking with the One True God is through Christianity. Every other cult of the gods, or what by Christian definition appears to be a cult of gods, are false religion, idolatry and heathenism. However, even 'secular' theories and studies of cultures are burdened with a heritage which is Christo-theological. Terms like 'religion' and 'spirituality' tend to be used even for views and practices which do not have belief in gods or an ontologically transcendental reality as a frame of reference or motivation for ethical conduct. Good atheists, from this point of view, are anonymous theists.

Whatever the realm proper of religion may be, the epistemes for including and excluding cultural phenomena as 'religious' have shifted according to changing historical conditions and interests. For example, ancient Greek myths are classified and studied as 'classics' and the pleasure they give described as 'aesthetic' while the *Rig Veda* is considered 'religious' literature containing 'spiritual' sentiments. As far as moral edification is concerned, there is little to choose between the Greek and Vedic gods. Discussing Vedic Religion, Chattopadhyaya points out that the stories about the behaviour of the *Rig Vedic* gods - incest, abductions of women, divine masturbations and copulations, drunken revelries, celebrations of victory in battle and glorifications of plunder, could hardly be called 'religious' by any standards of decency. Yet it is to these ancient hymns, Chattopadhyaya notes caustically,

¹ "qui omni quae ad cultum deorum pertinerent, diligenter retractarent et tamquam relegerent, sunt, dicti religiosi" (Cic. Nat. De.2.72, DLD).

that orthodox Hindus trace the origins of their religion; and the priests, the power of their mantras (1985: 90 -152). No wonder then that the Buddha and the other 'nastika' teachers of his day flatly rejected the authority of the *Vedas*.

Emile Durkheim questioned the conventional identification of religion with "the totality of beliefs and sentiments of all sorts relative to the relations of man with a being or beings whose nature is regarded as superior to his own" (1990: 22). Many practices regarded as religious, Durkheim points out, are nothing more than food, dress, and marriage customs of particular cultures:

Religion often even governs juridical, and economic relations. Its spheres of action extends, then, beyond the interaction of man with the divine. We know for certain, moreover, that a religion without a god exists - Buddhism. This alone should be sufficient to show that we should not continue to define religion in terms of the idea of god (ibid).

Durkheim recognizes the theoretical problems surrounding the conventional understanding of religion, but like most sociologists and anthropologists, he continues to treat it as a realm of human experience which, for not further explained reasons, is regarded as other than 'secular.'

The Religions called 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism': Western Constructs

In *The Heathen in his Blindness*, Balagangadhara (1994), discloses how Indian culture was baptized into a 'religious' culture in the West, by the West. He traces the site of Western religious discourse to Christianity's triumph over and appropriation of the pagan 'Other' - Rome. For the ancient Romans 'religion' - or the cult of the gods - was '*traditio*' - ancestral traditions. Patricians like Cicero and Plutarch who professed atheism presided over public cults in honour of the gods because they regarded these as *cultural celebrations* which expressed and promoted the unity of the City. The Romans refused to recognize Christianity as a religion in the sense of *traditio*, because it was a recent phenomenon compared to their ancestral institutions. Christianity had constructed itself into a separate sect by establishing continuity and discontinuity with the Jewish religion. Christ was the promised messiah of Judaism and the fulfilment of the promises made to the Jews - a claim which the Jews rejected and continue to reject to this day.

Beginning with St. Paul, Christianity co-opted the Roman understanding of religion as 'traditio,' and gave it a theological signification by resorting to the associated derivation of '*religio*' from *re-ligare*. Christianity was proclaimed as the only way of re-linking the individual with the One and True God. Roman intellectuals maintained that Christianity was irrelevant to them as it was young '*religio*' in the sense of '*traditio*.' In their polemics with the Romans, Church Fathers

countered that Christianity was not a young '*traditio*' since it traced its origins back to Moses. Christianity was (is) the fulfilment and continuation of the Jewish 'religion'. This made the Christian '*religio*'-'*traditio*' older than that of the Romans. The 'fulfilment theory' was extended to Roman paganism. This became the model for Christianities dealings with other paganisms as well. Christianity was the fulfilment of pagan aspirations of 're-linking' with God. This line of thinking continues to be used - even if *sotto voce*, in Christian dialogues with non-Christian 'religions.' Till the coming of Christ, non-Christian religious traditions had served as a '*preparatio evangelica*' – 'a preparation for the gospel' of Christ. They were/ are, imperfect glimpses into the one true God of Christianity, who revealed himself to a people he had chosen by a wholly arbitrary act of divine predilection. This assimilation and redefinition of the 'pagan' or 'heathen' provided and continues to provide the theological framework for dealing with non-Christian 'religions' including Buddhism (Balagangadhara op.cit.). Religion, a Christian theological construct became the term for identifying certain aspects of non Christian culture even by 'secular' scholars. "Neither the missionaries nor the 'rational' thinkers of the Enlightenment escaped its grip" (op.cit.: 150). Western religious and secular thinkers from the Enlightenment onwards believe that there is hidden teleology at work in history. The Christian West has an *a-priori* pedagogical mission to lead 'the rest of humanity' to salvation through faith or reason. (See Immanuel Kant's Manifesto of the Enlightenment, *Was is Aufklärung?* 1784)

The gaze of the European, from the moment of first contact with Indian cultures (there are many, not one), was framed by this prefabricated vizier. In Chapter 4, Balagangadhara discusses how two religions called 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism' were "made in Paris, London, and Heidelberg." By the last quarter of the Eighteenth Century CE, two religions called Hinduism and Buddhism had been constructed in the West through the progressive collection, translation, and interpretation of India's textual past. A millennial civilization had synchronously presented itself through texts to the gaze of Western Indologists, and the last word about India was pronounced in the West. The essential and unchanging truth about Indian culture was fixed forever in the West through the study of these ancient texts. There were no reasons to doubt this 'truth.' By an imperious *fiat mundi* an 'Unchanging India' as a variant of the 'Changeless East' was brought into being.

Balagangadhara explores the vicissitudes of the signifier 'India'; how it 'alighted' on a variety of sites down the centuries, shifting and expanding like the Western mythic imagination, until it enveloped an entire sub-continent. The ancient Persians referred to the people who lived on the other side of the Indus River as 'Sindus'. The Muslim Moguls made the first association of the term 'Hindu' with the idolatrous practices of people who lived in the Indus Valley region. In Portuguese usage this became 'Gentues'. Christianity had known and recognized only three belief systems as religions proper: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Religions proper,

in the theological sense were all monotheistic and were Religions of the Book. The discovery that 'India' had a vast literary tradition going back to antiquity confronted Western scholars, Christian theologians in particular, with an acute dilemma. 'Hinduism' too was religion of books and the sheer volume of ancient literature was stupendous. Brahmin scholars insisted that all their texts, a motley collection of traditions, hymns of praise to warrior gods, ritual books containing prescriptions for the veneration of local and translocal deities, profound and trite philosophical speculations, books on law and grammar, were all 'holy' books. The Indians obviously had a religion but what was their Sacred Book? By default, all the texts that they (Westerners) came across were deemed religious texts (Balagangadhara 1994: 116). On the basis of this arbitrary determination and making imaginative use of the Portuguese Gentue - 'the religion of the 'Gentues' was conjured up. Gentue became anglicized into Gentoo, then 'Hindoo' and finally 'Hindu.' Sikhism too had a sacred book. Therefore people who were neither Moslems or Sikhs were called Hindus and their religion 'Hinduism.' An ironic construct, because the Indus has never been considered a sacred river by the Indians. 'Gangeism' may have been a more imaginative 'idea.' Understandably, the people without a 'Book' were called 'Tribals', even though many of their cultural practices were similar to that of 'the Hindus.' The new container term was a boon to British colonial administrators concerned with doing a 'proper' census of their native subjects. The British introduced the nation-state model to the Raj. Its concomitant, Indian 'civil society' was juridically constituted as a political body made up of a variety of communities differentiated according to religion, with each separate group having equal rights before the state. This fragmentation of India along religious communal lines facilitated the British policy of divide and rule. Hinduism, a Western construct, created the homogenisation of a variety of local and disparate cultures, 'spiritualities' and philosophies on the basis of a putative common religious essence. This essence or 'Hindutva' has provided the rallying cry for a brand of militant nationalism which asserts that the essence of the Indian culture is Hindu. Indian society which had traditionally not only tolerated difference but celebrated difference began to be riven by communal politics of the modern nation state.

Buddha's Way becomes the Buddhist Religion

The Indian essence had hardly been defined in terms of religion, when a second flood of texts - the Buddhist canonical scriptures as voluminous as the Brahmanic 'canon' began to sweep aside Western assumptions about 'Indian Religion'. Here again, the heterogeneity of traditions: legends, references to gods, demons and ogres, to heaven and hell, folk-tales, law books, and brilliant philosophical discourses boggled the European mind. However, a solid core of teachings attributed to a historical person called Siddhattha Gotama the 'Buddha', fell in Europe like a

bombshell. The Buddha, an Indian sage, had rejected the notion of the soul and of the Absolute Spirit - the central tenets of the 'Indian-Hindu religion.' He had also developed a clear and impressive social ethic which did not lean on the authority of a god or on supernatural sanctions. If India is essentially a 'religious culture,' how does one fit Buddhism into this mould? Buddhist cultures had endured for centuries and persisted in an ethical practice without the presupposition of the All Seeing Eye of a Supreme Being. European rationalists found themselves in good company with Gotama. The title Buddha is derived from the Pali nominative 'Buddho,' which means 'Awake.' In their enthusiasm, the heirs of European Enlightenment titled Siddhartha Gotama the 'Enlightened One'. 'The title has stuck and even Buddhist scholars use it.

The Buddha, unlike the misty gods of the Brahmin scriptures, was a historical person. To the Christian establishment under siege by rationalists in the West, Buddhism seemed to have launched an attack on its eastern front. The *preparatio evangelicae* was based on the unquestioned assumption that all people at every and at all times must have a religion (belief in gods) - however imperfect. Buddhism seemed to upset the theological apple cart. A 'religion' without God? What seemed an a-priori impossibility to Christian theologians had happened, was happening, in practice! The Johannine Gospel had heralded Christ as "the Light which enlightens every man that comes into this world" (Jn 1.9). This had to include 'the 'Enlightened One' as well. But Gotama had insisted he realized "unshakable freedom... by human effort and human striving" (GS 1.45). Depending on the gaze of the scholar and colonizer, the Buddha became simultaneously a hero and a menace. Atheistic scholars saw in him an early champion of their cause.

Due to a historical happenstance, the Buddhist texts arrived in Europe after the construction of Hinduism. So it was concluded that Buddhism arose as a reform movement within 'Hinduism'. Projecting European battles onto Indian soil, some European scholars saw the Buddha as 'a religious reformer' who had revolted against the ritual ridden 'Roman Catholic' Brahmanism of India, and dubbed him 'the Martin Luther of India'. Buddhism was hailed as 'Asian Protestantism'. The Buddha was called the 'Saviour of the People' and the term 'Buddhist soteriology' was born. This was the beginning of the various constructions of Buddhism in the West. Observations of Philip C. Almond, cited by Balagangadhara, clarifies the power-effect of the Western discourse about 'the Buddhist Religion'.

There was an imaginative creation of Buddhism in the first half of the nineteenth century, ... the Western creation of Buddhism progressively enabled certain aspects of eastern culture to be defined, delimited, and classified... The discourse about Buddhism ... was created and sustained by the reification of the term 'Buddhism' ... which in its turn, defined the nature of this entity ... It becomes an object, is constituted as such; it

takes form as an entity that 'exists' over and against the various cultures which can now be perceived as instancing it, manifesting it, in an enormous variety of ways... The 'essence' of Buddhism came to be expressed not 'out there' in the Orient, but in the West, through the West's control of Buddhism's textual past... It was possible then, as a result of this, to combine a positive evaluation of Buddhism textually located in the West with a negative evaluation of its Eastern instances (in Balagangadhara 1994: 139-39 & 142).

Balagangadhara sums up his trace of the genesis of 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism' as follows:

The reason for believing that India knows of religion is religious in nature. This was not an empirical question, ever: both the question and the answer are theological. That is why an Augustine can coolly declare Socrates, a 'Christian'; a Thomas Aquinas can 'deduce' true religion from the 'natural light of reason' itself; and a Calvin can begin his 'Institutes' with a declaration of impossibility [of any people, however barbarous not having a religion]. This is an article of faith - no less, but no more either (ibid: 149).

The Indians themselves began to bathe in the saving waters of religion. As in the case of Hinduism - Hindutva, the Occidental gaze and the Indian self-image became one and the same. "From the scholar to the street-sweeper, from the tourist to the television reporter, everyone insists that religion pervades everything in India" (ibid. 136). The discourse on Indian religiosity and the language used to describe it have a specific topology - in the will to define and delimit, as will to power. The post-colonial Christian-Western discourse on non-Western religions has not abandoned this site. It has merely changed its posture within an overall strategy of delimitation, classification and control: inviting to, or excluding from, participation and dialogue, redefining and determining which topics and problematics are religiously relevant for study and for fixing the 'essence' of Buddhism: gnosticism, negative mysticism, monasticism, soteriology, spirituality, folk-religion, puritanism, fundamentalism etc. Western over-determination distracts the attention of Oriental scholars, seeking to advance their careers in a globalized context, from problems in their own societies, to concerns originating in the West.

A confluence of several factors were at work in the determination of the topology of the Western discourse on Indian religions. In the first place, a theological framework, beginning with Christianity's appropriation and reformulation of Judaism and Roman paganism, was at hand to provide a gaze from a distance of the Indian Other. This 'other' was in the process of being transformed in practice to what was held in theory - a sub-alter. Colonial domination enabled unchallenged

appropriation and processing of India's cultural and natural resources. The image of 'the Other' was fixed by Eurocentric faith in the West's transcendental origin and destiny. Transcendentalism was practised by the Occidentalists while being immanent in the East. His right to be there as colonizer, missionary or scholar was regarded as a 'manifest destiny,' part of a 'civilizing mission,' 'the White Man's burden.' The most important factor however, as far as the interpretation of India's textual past is concerned, is the dominant Western intellectual discourse which is saturated with theological and metaphysical assumptions. The philological method applied by Western scholars to study Buddhist texts was founded on these assumptions. The strategy of co-option and redefinition behind the metaphysicalisation of the Buddha's *Dharma* has to be recognized and rejected.

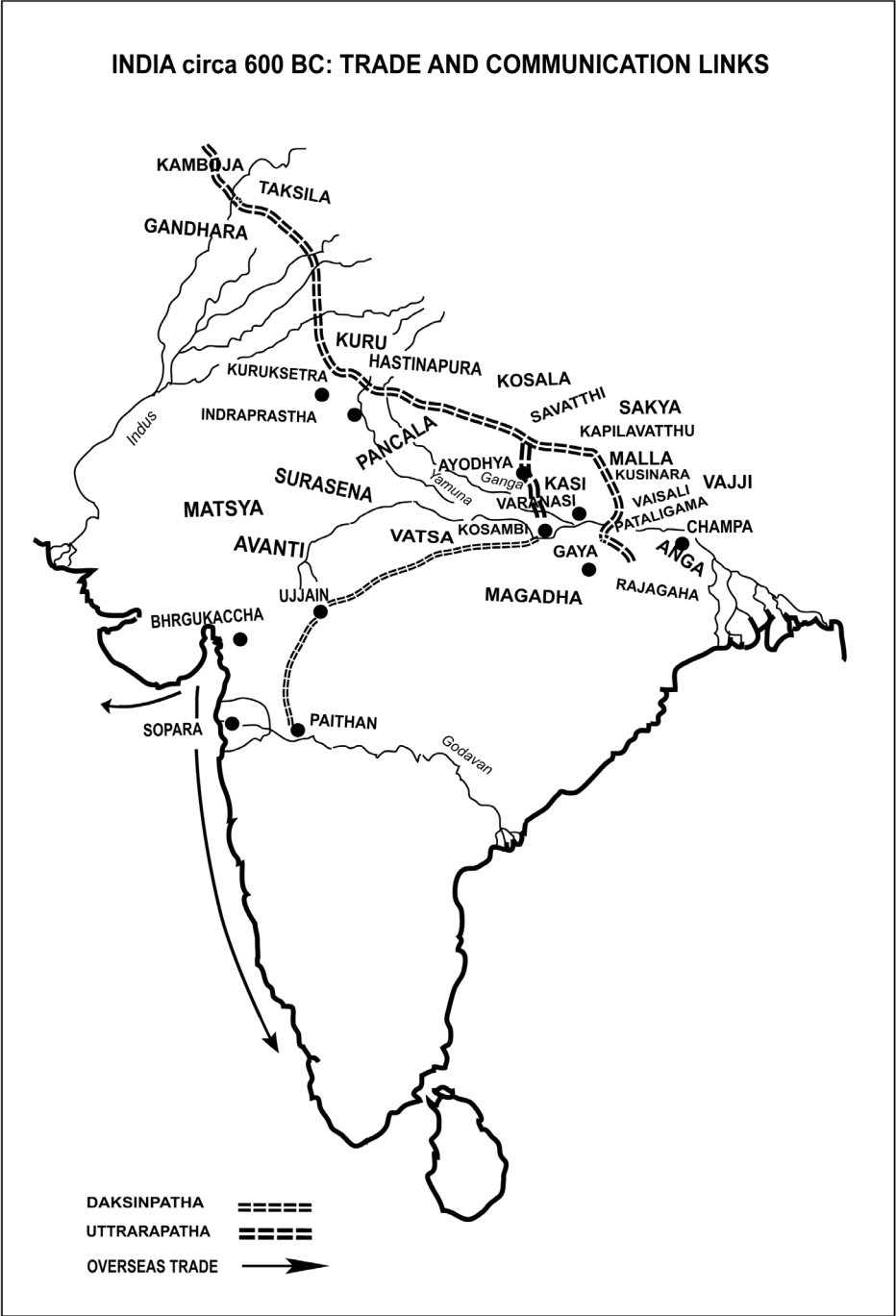
Part II

THE SOCIAL AND IDEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

In many a way I have insisted and reiterated: consciousness is generated by conditions, apart from conditions there is no origination of consciousness.

Siddhattha Gotama (M I. 258)

INDIA circa 600 BC: TRADE AND COMMUNICATION LINKS



CHAPTER 2

THE MAJJHIMADESA: MATRIX OF A NEW SOCIETY

Nineteenth century Western Indologists brought into currency the view that Buddhism arose as a reaction against Brahmanism. If so, its social provenance should have been further to West, in the North West, which had remained the centre of Vedic culture for centuries, or in Kuru-land, which was the locus of the Mahabhratha epic. A critical reading of the Buddhist scriptures shows that Buddhism did not arise as a *reaction* to another 'religion' but as a *response* to a widely experienced social and moral crisis in North East India. The Buddha and his band of followers were by no means a unique phenomenon at the time. They were part of a wider social movement led by outstanding moral philosophers. These new teachers were popularly referred to as *paribbajakas* - peripatetics. D.D. Kosambi provides an interesting explanation as to why "the newest and in some cultural respects rather backward lands of the east took the lead in the most advanced forms of religion".

Obviously, the simultaneous rise of so many sects of considerable appeal and prominence in one narrow region implies some social need that older doctrines could no longer satisfy. This need can be analysed by looking for factors common to all the new teachers (Kosambi 1977: 100).

The issues addressed by the new teachers reflect widely shared concerns: What is the ultimate nature of reality? Are impermanence and change inherent to reality or merely illusory? Beyond the change and decay of a transient world, is there an absolute unchanging reality which could fulfil human hopes and aspirations? What is the nature of human agency - *kamma*, (*karma* Sk)? Are the effects of human agency real or illusory? Birth, sickness, ageing and death are unchanging facts of life irrespective of the type of society or period people live in. But these do not seem to have filled the people of early Rig Vedic society with melancholy and despair. The early hymns are buoyant celebrations of life, power and victory in battles. Why did the mood shift so dramatically after the transition to agriculture? Why did the problem of impermanence, the eternal recurrence of the same and the questions about the efficacy or futility of human action exercise the minds of people in the Age of the Buddha?

By the time that Siddhattha Gotama was born, human ingenuity had radically transformed the physical and social environment of the Middle Gangetic region. People had created their own *loka* - world. However, the inevitable impermanence of all realities must have impinged itself on human consciousness with

particular acuteness when under new conditions, life expectancy increased and the world seemed to offer endless opportunities for the enjoyment of wealth, pleasure and adventure. The process of social change in the Middle Gangetic region from the 8th century BCE onwards is sketched in broad outline in this Chapter, to foreground the conditions which gave rise to the *paribbajaka* movement in general, and Buddhism in particular.

A Turbulent Age

The period around the mid-first millennium BCE saw the rise to prominence of the Upanishadic School of mystic-philosophy, of Jainism, Buddhism and the materialist philosophy of the Carvakas. Outside India, the sixth century produced the reforms of Zoroaster in Persia, the philosophies of Confucius and (probably also) Lao Tze in China, and it saw the beginnings of Greek philosophy with Thales of Miletus and Heraclitus. The Kingdom of Israel was annexed to the Babylonian Empire, the Temple of Jerusalem destroyed and the leading citizens of Israel taken into exile. The intellectual climate of this period of 'storm and stress' was dominated by a quest for universal principles of explanation, as local and particular beliefs were submerged by the tide of events. Joseph Campbell described the Age of the Buddha and the centuries which followed it as a "turbulent millennium..."

... a limited yet sufficiently broad area of the earth's surface, relatively uniform in character, where a large population of closely related individuals [here those inhabiting the broad domain of the late High Bronze and early Iron Age societies] became affected by simultaneously rough and comparable imprints [those of an emergent urban domesticity] and where, consequently, psychological seizures of like kind were everywhere impending (1976: 252).

The Eastward Movement of People

By the first millennium, the centre of historical gravity had begun to shift towards regions east of the Indus Valley. Pottery (Painted Grey Ware) found by archaeologists in areas stretching from the Punjab to the Western Gangetic region indicate an eastward movement of people. A new type of pottery called Black-and-Red Ware represents the main culture prior to the settling of the Mid-Gangetic Valley. This earthenware overlaps, but predominates the earlier Painted Grey Ware in Madhya Desa - the lands between the Yamuna and the Western Gangetic Plain also referred to as the Kuru Pancala region. Unlike the plains of the Punjab, the Madhya Desa (where Brahmanism arose) was covered with forests which had to be cleared by fire - the most effective method known at the time. This would explain the rise to

prominence of the fire-god Agni who is called, "the swallower of forests," "the axe" and "he who leaves a black furrow" in late hymns of the *Rig Veda* (Kosambi 1975: 123). Without an improvement in the means of production, the dominant strata could increase their wealth only by making ever greater demands from the direct producers or by expanding the area under cultivation. Further advance to the East was constrained by ecological factors and technological limitations. It came to a halt on the Western banks of the Ganga. As a passage in the *Sathapatha Brahmana* suggests, even the fire-god Agni was powerless before the ecological challenges of the Middle Gangetic Valley. Agni had burnt along eastwards from the river Sarasvati in Eastern UP, until he was literally stopped in his tracks on the western banks of the Ganga.

Agni burnt over all these rivers. Now, that river which is called Sadanira flows from the northern (Himalaya) mountain, he did not burn over. That one the Brahmins did not cross in former times for Agni Vaisnavara had not burned beyond it... But now many Brahmins dwell beyond it to the east. Now it is very good land, for Brahmins have since made it enjoyable through offerings... At that time the land was very uncultivated, very marshy, because it had not been tasted by Agni Vaisnavara ... Even in late summer that river rages along, so cold is it, not having been burnt over by Agni Vaisnavanara (Sat.Br I.14. 14-17).

The myth is cleverly even-handed. On the one hand, the limitation of the old technique is acknowledged, but on the other hand, it suggests that the fertility of the newly cleared lands depended on the performance of priestly rituals. It is not surprising that the Brahmins at first deemed it a ritually impure region. "Magadha is described (by the Brahmins) as the accursed land with a people of mixed caste status. It was this *mleccha desa*- 'heathen land,' close to Videha-Magadha, which was to play a leading role in Indian history during the subsequent millennium" (Thapar 1984a: 162).

The Majjhimadesa: A Distinct Bio-Region

The Mid-Gangetic Valley, called the Majjhimadesa - Middle Country- in the Buddhist scriptures, is the land of the mighty Ganga. Here, water, symbolised by the River-Goddess Ganga, was more powerful than the Fire-god Agni. Sharma sums up the main topographical and climatological features of the area:

The middle Gangetic plains... cover an area of 62,000 square miles. The rainfall in this area ranges from 40 inches in the west, to 70 inches in the east. But the mass of this region receives 45 to 55 inches of rain, which ... is sufficient to promote thick vegetation and create problems of clear-

ance... As we proceed from the west to the east, sands decrease and loams increase in the central Gangetic plains. But the alluvial soil of Patna and Gaya districts is very heavy, clayey and difficult to break before the onset of the monsoons. However the soil quality of both the upper and middle Gangetic plains is rated high...the rating is proportionately higher in the middle Gangetic than in the upper Gangetic plains (1983: 89-90).

The heaviest rainfall occurs during a period of about four months, from June to September. The torrential rains turn the land into a quagmire, the rivers burst their banks flooding and devastating the countryside. The hottest period of the year is from February to May, when many of the smaller rivers dwindle away almost to nothing (Ling 1985: 39). One river alone did not dry up even during the severest drought, it remained 'sadanira' - eternally with water. A report published in the Imperial Gazette of 1881 confirms the view expressed in the ancient Sathapatha Brahmana, "The Ganges never dwindles away even in the hottest summer... the alluvial silt which it spills over its banks year by year affords to the fields a top-dressing of inexhaustible fertility" (cited in Ling 1985: 39).

The first settlers in the region seem to have moved along the thinly vegetated slopes of the Himalayas in the North and of the Vindhyan outcrop in the South. This is suggested by the trail of Black and Red Ware pottery discovered in these regions (Thapar 1984: 71). Without technological innovations, the tropical rain forests of the plains could not be cleared and their marshy lands drained to make them suitable for cultivation.

Slash and burn cultivation can work in (temperate climates) even with stone axes properly handled. In monsoon India the stumps would send out new shoots and valley bottomlands could not be cleared (Kosambi 1975: 140).

In their eastwards trek, pioneering tribes carried with them the knowledges and skills of the society they left behind, most important of these being plough agriculture and metallurgy. The new sciences of the settlers in combination with the natural resources of the region and the indigenous peoples' knowledge of the terrain led to a significant leap forward in social and cultural evolution.

Discovery of Iron

The decisive factor which made the conquest of the rainforests and the systematic colonisation of the Gangetic plains possible was the discovery, about 800 BCE, of rich and readily extractable deposits of iron ore. This became the major catalyst of social change in the region. Once the ores were found it was easy to extend the chain of foothill settlements to the river by a land route, going as far as the jungle

allowed land-clearing to proceed (Kosambi 1977: 90). The development of technologies to process this hard metal enabled the settlers to clear the dense jungles, drain the marshes, improve methods of food production and to produce permanent agricultural surpluses. As Chakravarti notes:

The expansion of agricultural produce was related to the enhanced use of iron implements, including ploughshares, the sickle, hoe and chopper, which are supported by archaeological evidence. A survey of references relating to iron in early Indian literature has revealed beyond dispute the association of iron with the common people and thus with agriculture in the Gangetic Valley by about 700 B.C. (1987: 17).

The mastery of iron technology produced a whole series of developments in other fields of production. The numerous references to the use of iron implements in the Buddhist scriptures show that the metal had become an important factor in the life of the people.

A New Agricultural Society

Extensive and intensive food production became possible with the development of iron technology. The cultivation of rice crops, discovered in the eastern regions, sugar cane, mustard and cotton, require not only permanently cleared fields but also deep ploughing. Iron tipped ploughshares seemed to have been commonly used, as can be inferred from references in the Buddhist scriptures to ploughshares, "which when heated through the whole day and thrown into water hisses, bubbles steams and sends forth fumes" (e.g. Sn 81). Rice became the new staple diet of the region, "the Buddhist scriptures describe rice and its varieties with as much detail as the *Rig Vedic* hymns refer to cows" (Thapar 1984: 73). From the hills of Rajagaha, the capital of Magadha, a person could enjoy a panoramic view of the countryside covered row upon row with rice fields (BD IV.408). The *Vinaya* contains a detailed description of the various tasks involved in rice production, from ploughing the fields to the storage of the harvested grain. The cyclic character of agricultural production is recognised and bemoaned: once the last chore is done, the same cycle of work has to begin all over again (BD V.235). The Buddhist scriptures make frequent reference to the new 'scientific' outlook on life engendered by irrigation agriculture and other ancillary crafts. Correct understanding of conditions and careful planning became indispensable to achieve a good harvest of crops and increase prosperity.

Without access to land, a peasant population cannot produce its means of subsistence. If the surplus population in the agricultural sector is not absorbed into other forms of gainful employment, people fall into poverty and are doomed to eke

out a miserable living through beggary. Unequal distribution of land had become a common phenomenon in the Buddha's day. Some individuals owned large tracts of land. Hyperbolic terms were used to describe the wealth of some landed-proprietors like the *gahapati* (head of a patriarchal household) Mendaka, who needed "five hundred ox-drawn plough" to get his fields ploughed by domestic servants and hired labour (BD IV.331).

By the sixth century BCE nomadic pastoralism had become a thing of the past (M 1.226). Nomads could no longer traverse the land with their herds as large tracts were taken over for cultivation.¹ The use of oxen for ploughing changed the role of animals in the production of food. Meat was no longer the staple, as it still is in the case of pastoralists. The ratio of food produced by cattle in relationship to land-use changed significantly. The labour *power* of oxen and buffaloes produces more food than what is necessary to feed them. What emerged in the countryside was a domestic economy based on farming and livestock breeding. The staple, rice, was supplemented by vegetables of high nutrient value like legumes, cultivated in gardens. This reduced the dependence on meat for proteins. Cattle were raised principally for milk and other dairy products, changing the relationship between cattle and humans. The large-scale slaughter of cattle for beef-consumption or in ritual sacrifices had become uneconomic and senseless. The Buddha's condemnation of animal slaughter was based not on a superstitious belief that cows are sacred animals, but on sound common sense: "Cattle are our friends, just like parents and other relatives, for cultivation depends on them. They give food, strength, and freshness of complexion and happiness. Knowing this, Brahmins of old did not kill cattle" (Sn 295 - 6).² Rice can sustain a large population in a given area, because it has a higher yield per acre than other cereals; two and a half times more than wheat, two thirds more than barley and one-third more than maize. The consumption of unpolished rice, vegetables and dairy products increased human fertility and health. This, Ling suggests, must have led to a significant increase in the population (1985: 42-43). His hypothesis has been confirmed by archaeological excavations which

¹ Cultivators would have regarded wandering *samanas* as relics from the nomadic past. In the monsoon season, torrential rains turn the countryside into an endless stretch of mud, making it difficult to distinguish between roads and fields. Bands of wanderers often cut across cultivated fields, unwittingly trampling newly planted saplings. After protests by cultivators, sedentarism was prescribed for the duration of the rainy season. What began as a temporary measure in response to a climatological peculiarity led to permanent settlements and monasticism. (See *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries*, Sukumar Dutt 1962).

² This common sense explanation shows that the subsequent transformation of the cow into a sacred animal and the ritual taboo on beef-eating in Brahmanism, had at first a sound economic basis. The first Buddhists raised the peoples' level of critical awareness, whereas the brahmins bred superstitious beliefs in people.

reveal a prolific expansion of settlements in the Mid-Gangetic Valley during the period under review (Thapar 1984: 72).

The Village Structure

Rural settlements were called *gamas*, a term once used for a tribal unit by the nomadic pastoral Aryans. This suggests that entire tribes, clans and families of former hunter-gatherers and nomadic pastoralists had settled down and gone over to agricultural production. The average *gama* was a large settlement, but even a clearance with three huts was recognised as a *gama* (BD 1.74). This uneven pattern of settlements is reflective of the great social mobility of the period. The availability of land and new technology for clearing and cultivating also made it possible for people to break out of traditional allegiances and begin a new life. This is illustrated by the story of Patacara in the *Therigatha*. As a young woman, this former daughter of a minister of state eloped with her lover, a domestic servant, and started a new life in a jungle clearing (Thig XLVII).

The basic unit of production continued to be the family. But ownership of land, the principal means of production in the monarchical states of the Mid-Gangetic Valley, had shifted from the community to the domestic unit. The families which made up a settlement lived in separate households - *agara*. Facing the homesteads were the cultivated fields. These were classified into rice fields and gardens, where subsidiary crops like vegetables and fruit-bearing trees were grown. Since there was little pressure on land, when the population increased or there was tension within a *gama*, part of the community would migrate and settle down in a new jungle clearance (BD.IV.197). It was not unusual for entire *gamas* to migrate elsewhere to escape oppressive taxation or pillage by brigands (BD IV.197). A typical settlement is described in the Buddhist scriptures as: "A populous place, full of grass, timber, water and corn, a place teeming with life" (DB 1.108;144;173). Forest land abutting a settlement was called a *vana* (lit 'forest'). Advances in agricultural production led to social differentiation, which in turn affected the homogeneous character of the early settlements.

Occupational specialisation led to a distinction between two types of rural settlements: those where the principal economic activity was food production and others, where settlers had developed a specialised craft, like weaving, pottery, metal work, or carpentry (Wagle 1966: 14). This latter type of village is referred to as *nigamas* in the scriptures. According to Wagle, the term does not occur in Vedic literature. This seems to suggest that the term was coined to denote a new social reality (1966: 21). "The market town was the gathering point for sale of rural produce and could also be tapped by merchants locating resources. As such it would have impinged on the village economy particularly where production

was specialised. The phrase *game va nigame* is frequently used (in the Buddhist scriptures) suggesting a distinction between the village and the *nigama* and also linking of the latter to a nexus" (Thapar 1984: 90). The villages were visited not only by traders who brought goods from far-flung areas, but also by wandering troubadours, storytellers and itinerant preachers. This last group had become part of the social landscape and were among the 'big travellers' of the time. This indicates that the villages did not exist in rural isolation but were in regular contact with the outside world. The Buddha recognised that agriculture was the primary sector of the new economy. Whenever he referred to the major economic activities at the time, agriculture, livestock breeding, craft-production and commerce, he always gave precedence to the first.

An Extensive and Complex Division of Labour

Social differentiation and inequality cannot develop on any great scale as long as surplus production remains at a low level. Technological advances in the Mid-Gangetic region made the production of permanent and substantial surpluses of food possible. Sustained surplus food - production meant that fewer people were needed for agriculture and animal husbandry. It released energies for improvements in craft production and for the development of new skills. By the sixth century, considerable occupational diversity had developed in North East Indian society. The word *kamma* was used in everyday language as a generic term for intellectual as well as manual labour, whereas the word *sippa* was used with reference to specific crafts and occupations (V IV.6). In a discussion with the Buddha, King Ajatasattu listed a variety of city based occupations which produce what he called "visible fruit" for society. The description gives an idea of the occupational diversity and specialisation at the time, purely in an urban context: elephant riders, cavalymen, charioteers, archers, champion-fighters, scouts, domestic slaves, cooks, barbers, bath-attendants, bakers, florists, weavers, washers and bleachers of cloth, basket makers, potters, arithmeticians and accountants (DB 1.68). Those in royal service, and those with specialised skills, like cooks, barbers and washers, did not directly produce wealth, but provided services which had come to be considered socially necessary or useful. The professions of the arithmetician, accountant and scribe had developed as ancillary services to the activities of traders, merchants and bankers (V IV.6). In addition to the occupations mentioned in an urban context, there was a rich diversity of occupations in society at large. The following is a sample of occupations mentioned in the scriptures: peasants, irrigation engineers, herdsmen, goldsmiths, gem-cutters, carpenters, potters, boat-makers, wheelwrights, seamstresses, surgeons and physicians, shopkeepers, traders (GS V.59) and sea-merchants (D.B.1.83).

The bond that held so heterogeneous a society together, that made it a *society* rather than a set of tribes was not so much common ritual and a common language, as a whole aggregate of common needs satisfied by reciprocal exchange (Kosambi 1977: 120, emphasis mine).

The Proliferation of Trade

By the sixth century BCE an extensive infrastructure of trade routes had become the arteries along which goods and ideas were circulating in the new society. Trunk-routes inter-linked people belonging to diverse cultures and distant regions. The earliest trade would have been riparian. This explains the location of the major cities on the banks of rivers. These would have developed from nuclear settlements (*gamas*) of colonists. As trade expanded these early settlements developed from *gamas* to *puras* (city) as was the case with Pataligama which became Patalipura, the capital of the Magadhan Empire (today's Patna).

Overland trade had begun to surpass river-trade in importance. The most flourishing trade route at the time was the great Northern Route. Starting from Rajagaha, the capital of the Magadhan Kingdom, it proceeded northwards across the Ganges at Pataligama (later Patalipura) into the Vajjian tribal federation and to its capital, Vesali. From there the route extended to Kusinara, the headquarters of the Mallan federation. From Kusinara the route turned North-westwards passing through Kapilavatthu the capital of the Sakyans to Savatthi, the capital of the Kosalan Kingdom and then onwards through Hastinapura to Taxila. This city had already become renowned as a great centre of commerce, culture and learning. The importance of Taxila was due to its strategic location on the Persian border, making it a centre of foreign trade, linking the Persian Empire and countries beyond it with the tribal-federations and kingdoms of the Gangetic Valley. The Southern Route commenced at Savatthi and proceeded southwards through Kosambi on the Yamuna river, to Ujjeni, which had become an important centre for petty trade. The terminus of the Southern Route was at Paithan, located on the northern outskirts of the Deccan. The *Sutta Nipata* (vs 976-1013) speaks of sixteen disciples of the Brahmin Bavari who travelled along the Southern Route to meet the Buddha at Rajagaha. It mentions the names of thirteen important market towns and cities they passed through. This episode sheds light on the social mobility, and the speed with which goods, news and ideas must have circulated at the time.

The peoples of the Majjhimadesa lived in a land-locked region, but do not seem to have been ignorant of far away places and cultures. The Buddha, illustrating an aspect of his Teaching (DB 1 283), referred to seafaring merchants and their practice of taking land-sighting birds. The allusion would have made little sense to his listeners if they were unfamiliar with overseas trade. According to Thapar, the

ascendancy of ports like Bhargukaccha and Sopara on the West coast, in the period under review, can only be explained in terms of a maritime trade with West Asia (Mesopotamia) and the emergence of the West coast, from Sind to Sri Lanka, as a circuit of trade with its own coastal network (1984: 98).

The salient features of North East Indian society sketched above indicate the *direction* of change. Universally, social evolution has taken place according to what Frederick Engels called the law of unequal and uneven development. Changes in North East India did not take place everywhere uniformly, or at the same pace; advances in some fields were accompanied by setbacks in others; while some enjoyed luxuries unknown in previous periods, others lived in extreme poverty:

In the Gangetic valley, about 600 B.C.E., there coexisted distinct sets of social groups in various stages of development. Bengal was covered by a dense, swampy forest. Considerable patches of Bihar and U.P. were still thinly inhabited by tribesmen who did not speak an Aryan language and had little direct contact with the Aryans. Above them were developed tribes in conflict with Aryans. They still retained their own languages. These higher non-Aryans may be grouped under the generic name Nagas. Both sets of tribesmen were scattered throughout the region not settled by food producers. The stage above the Nagas was that of Aryan tribesmen settled along the rivers and trade routes. Many had differentiated into caste-classes. Other Aryan tribesmen constituted an oligarchy which exploited sudra helots...(but) were not permeated by brahmin ritual... The territory was still thinly settled over long distances in difficult country. There was plenty of room for retreat of the tribesmen as well as for expansion of plough cultivation (Kosambi 1975: 148-149).

The cultural zone referred to as Majjhimadesa was therefore by no means homogeneous; it was made up of a plurality of cultural-linguistic groups in various stages of development. The Buddha accurately described the people who inhabited this region as *bahujana* - diverse peoples.

The Circulation of Goods and the Circulation of Money

North East Indian society had reached an advanced level of commodity production and exchange. Specialisation was both occupational and regional. By the sixth century BCE, the capital of Kasi, Benares, was already famous for its fine textiles and cosmetics. The description of the Kosala region as "bright as the eyes of a serpent king may have been due to the fact that it had become famous for its superbly burnished bronze ware" (Wagle 1966: 148). The decisive factor for Magadha's future domination of the region was its near monopoly control of the most important

commodity of all - iron. The environs of Rajagaha was a major mining district and a centre for the production of iron raw material, weapons and tools.

Specialised craftsmen detached from their communities, like the itinerant smith or potter, no longer produced goods for their own use, but for exchange. Anything with an exchange value, goods or services, could be bought and sold for a price. While commodity production differentiated, trade united this large society. Itinerant traders, merchant caravans and shopkeepers were familiar social phenomena. The generic term used for a trader was *vanija* and a shopkeeper was called a *papaniko*. The two terms may have been used to distinguish between wholesale and retail traders (Wagle 1966: 148-149). Shop keeping, petty-trading and moneylending may have been normal occupations for women since *bhikkhunis* set themselves up in these trades, but the practice was prohibited (Vin.III.66).

The development of exchange across a vast region made the use of money as a general equivalent indispensable. Coins found have been dated to around the fifth century BCE, although certain terms in later Vedic literature are interpreted to suggest that the use of money may have begun earlier. Besides the hoards of coins found in the Mid Gangetic region (Sharma 1985: 123), punch-marked coins have also been found far beyond the areas covered by the Northern Route in places like Afghanistan and Iran (Kosambi 1977: 124). The wide area across which Northern Polished Ware (NBP) and coins originating in Magadha have been found, indicate extensive trading activity, especially in luxury items (Sharma 1985: 123). The Buddhist scriptures provide ample evidence of the great variety of goods in circulation at the time. Luxury goods were available in abundance for those who could afford them: gold, silver and ivory ware; jewellery made of gold and silver, studded with pearls and precious stones; costly perfumes and cosmetics; Benares silks and muslin, etc. Descriptions of the dwellings, furnishings and other utilities donated to the *bhikkhu-ni sangha* also shed light on the variety of amenities available at the time. The availability of greater luxuries can be inferred from these gifts, since only those items could be accepted which were in keeping with monastic austerity (see V CV.VI).

The use of money as a means of exchange led to the development of money-lent, and this in turn gave birth to a new profession, that of the merchant-banker or *setthi-gahapathi*. The Sanskrit word *sresthin* and its Pali equivalent *setthi*, Thapar explains, mean 'a person having the best.' The term appears in later Vedic texts in this general sense, but had acquired a specific meaning in the Pali texts to signify those whose wealth was measured in large quantities of money and precious metals (1984: 93-94). The presence of merchant bankers shows that a substantial money sector had developed in the economy. While many of the rich wasted their wealth in extravagant luxury, this class of people ploughed and sowed their wealth back into productive fields to make it grow into a harvest of profits. Lending money

at usurious rates was a *setthi-gahapati's* chief source of wealth. The creation of wealth by this class does not seem to have been confined to lending money to traders and businessmen. A passage in the Vinaya suggests that some invested in the agricultural sector. For example, the millionaire *gahapati* Anathapindhika, a resident of Savatthi, had a large estate in the countryside which was managed by a local agent (V III.162).

Changes in social conditions are accompanied by shifts in ethical values. The notion of gathering and increasing invisible merit, unknown in the early Rig Vedic period, emerges together with the practice of usury. The habit of borrowing, Kosambi writes, is frowned upon in early Vedic texts. The word for debt - *rna* in Vedic texts also meant a moral shortcoming or 'sin' but there is no mention of interest charged on debt (1975: 147). The Buddha's attitude to moneylending was not moralistic. He recognized the possibilities as well as the perils of the new economic system. He did not deplore the practice of borrowing money to start an enterprise (DB 11.83 and *passim*).

The Second Urbanisation in India

Indian historians refer to the urban civilisation which emerged in North-East India, from around 800 BCE, as the 'Second Urbanisation' to distinguish it from the earlier Harappan civilisation of the third millennium BCE. The *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (D 11.161) mentions six major cities Campa, Rajagaha, Savatthi, Sketha, Kosambi and Kasi. All these cities were capitals of Kingdoms. The cities of the Gangetic Valley mark the emergence of a new type of urban settlement. Cities in Mid-Western India mentioned in Brahmanic texts, like Hastinapura, Indraprastha and Ahicchatra were royal residencies and functioned as political and religious centres. The cities of the monarchies like Kasi, Rajagaha and Savatthi were qualitatively different to the old capitals. They were large urban conglomerations referred to as *mahanagaras* or great cities. Capital cities were called *agga-nagaras*. Apart from being the seat of the central government, cities like Rajagaha and Savatthi were centres of trade and commerce, with permanent settlements of craftsmen and merchants. The influential *setthi-gahapatis* - merchant bankers, are always mentioned in an urban context. Besides the residential areas, the cities were also divided into separate quarters also called *nigamas*, occupied by professional groups organised into distinct guilds. The affairs of cities like Rajagaha and Savatthi were managed by municipal councils made up of representatives of the leading citizenry like the heads of the *nigamas* (Wagle 1966: 22).

The cities of the Middle-Gangetic region seem to have grown around the intersection of two main trade routes, which probably explains the origin of the expression: 'the four directions of the earth.' City-planning was functional as

well as aesthetic. The city of Vesali was renowned for its beautifully landscaped parks, with lotus ponds and wooded areas (V I.128) and Rajagaha for its lovely pleasure gardens, woods and lakes (M III.5). The market areas in the larger cities were located at the main gateways (Thapar 1984: 99). These market places seem to have had all the typical features of an Indian bazaar with its bedlam of jostling crowds, the clatter of carts and the cacophony of vendors advertising their wares, street-entertainers, story tellers, troubadours, rumour mongers, soothsayers and religious charlatans claiming esoteric knowledges and magical powers (DB 1.245). The extensive system of roads linking village and city opened up possibilities for adventurous individuals to 'go forth' and seek their fortune abroad, especially in one of the big cities. Physical and social mobility were weakening clan solidarity and strengthening the desire for individual freedom and personal advancement. In the new society the individual appeared detached from the natural bonds which in an earlier period made him/her an organic part of a definite human conglomerate. This gave rise to the spirit of individualism in the social and religious spheres.

The heterogeneity and anonymity of city-life produces a cultural and moral vacuum, which Emile Durkheim identified as *anomie* - an absence of commonly shared values and norms. Urban life involves interaction between people drawn from a variety of places and social backgrounds. Social intercourse in cities therefore necessarily requires a certain relativisation of particular religious beliefs and mores, which define the identity of individuals and groups and the cultivation of codes of behaviour which are recognisable and reassuring. City-life gradually produces a refinement and standardisation of manners. Because of their distinct lifestyle, city-dwellers in the Buddha's day were called *nagarika* or *porin*. The *nagarika* elites regarded themselves as a class of polished and cultivated people and spoke of themselves as '*pori*.' The term, derived from *pura* - city, has the same connotation as the Western 'polite' and 'civilised.' City dwellers derisively referred to village folk as '*gammo*,' which has the same pejorative connotation as the English term 'boorish'.³

The developments sketched above changed the physical and social landscape of North East India. Changes in social structures impacted on human affect structures and the way people perceived each other and their world. As Joseph Campbell remarked:

A broad zone of readiness had been established for the reception of a new approach to the problem of man's highest good... Dislodged from the

³ In his revaluation of values, the Buddha re-defined the two terms. He used them not in the sense of the urban-rural differentiation, but to distinguish between refined and degenerate people in the ethical sense. He characterised superstitious practices and senseless self-torture or boorish and ignoble conduct as *gama dhamma*.

soil as well as from the old necessities of the hunt, a rather sophisticated urban population had appeared, with a certain leisure, considerable luxury and time, consequently, for neuroses (1976:251).

Changing Conditions - New Ideologies

The earliest Vedas contain no reference to the foundational doctrines of orthodox Hinduism and mainstream Buddhism: individual rebirth, *kamma* (*karma* Sk) and *samsara*. The early Rig Vedic hymns celebrate the heroic exploits of chiefs who led their tribes in successful cattle raids and battles. Nomadic pastoralists and hunter-gatherers experienced the production of the means of sustenance as the work of nature. They only had to take and consume. The link between action and its effects was directly perceptible. So too, their images of the world - cosmogonies, theogonies - were collective representations and were invariably projections of their actual life. There was a transparency in the social life of the people and a direct correspondence between their lives and their myths. The early myths were representations of the collective life of the tribes in magnified poetic form - their warfare, their games, their drunken revelries and zest for living. Pessimistic world-views and the notion of 'renouncing the world' were non-existent. The transition to agriculture qualitatively changed the practical relationship of human beings to nature, from mere participation to active production of the means of subsistence. Human action working with the resources of nature began to produce visible long term effects. Agriculture tied the producers of food to the land and locked the rhythm of their lives to the cyclic changes of the seasons. The theory of *samsara* or of eternal cyclic recurrence, accurately reflects the monotonously repetitive character of agricultural production on which everyone's life, prince, peasant or pauper had become dependent. The stabilisation of agriculture as the primary sector of the economy and generalisation of trade and usury, qualitatively changed the character of human action. The interconnection between an action and its effect often extended beyond the lifespan of individuals. The result or fruition - of an action - *kammavipaka* - became increasingly difficult to predict. A man could put much work to preparing a field for cultivation, ploughing and sowing but he could die before he could reap the fruit of his deeds - *kammaphala*. Similarly, a man who lends money to another could pass away before he could see an increase - *vuddhi* - of his wealth in the form of interest charged on the loan. In the new situation it was only with the passage of time that individuals would be able to see the result of their actions and it was difficult to accurately foresee the outcome of an action. Future, long term, and even *post mortem* fruition of deeds gave the connection between human action - *karma* - and its results, an unpredictable, mysterious character. With the proliferation of commodity production and trade, human interdependence was no longer local and transparent. It extended

across vast regions rendering the complex relations of production and exchange opaque. Society took on the appearance of an alien force whose inner workings became incomprehensible to ordinary men and women. Concurrent with the diversification of the types of human labour is the appearance of the division of work into mental and manual labour. Freed from the necessity of doing manual work and elevated above practical productive activity an intellectual stratum could present itself as a privileged group with a birth right to be free from hard labour. Correspondingly, thinkers could now spawn the view that thinking and consciousness exist independent of real conditions. Historically, the earliest form of ideologists were *priests* who vested their position and role with sacrality and claimed that the given social order was the manifestation of a hidden design of the gods or the fates; hierarchical differences between humans were maintained by demarcations of ritual purity and impurity.

New social conditions in the Majjhimadesa broke down clan solidarity and collective consciousness (Chapter 4) and gave rise to individualism and class divisions in society (Chapter 3). A diachronic study of the Vedas shows how the old myths and gods were recombined with new elements and moulded to suit changing conditions (Chapter 5 and 6). The concrete imagery of the Early Rig Vedas gave way to abstract philosophical speculations marked by a lack of local flavour. Local gods of tribes assimilated into the wider agricultural society, were hierarchically incorporated into the Brahmin pantheon (Kosambi 1977: 49). Priest ideologists like the Brahmins who had a vested interest in social inequalities began to mystify the true historical origins of social inequalities by propagating views that these were according to the nature of things. The theories of *samsara*, individual salvation and *karma* as a mysterious moral agency operating in the universe make their appearance in Late Vedic texts only after agricultural production, trade and usury became generalised.

The production and reproduction of the social grid were presented as a function of cosmic and biological processes. This explanation seemed plausible because of the cyclic recurrence of the seasons and of the same biological processes of birth, growth, decay and death from generation to generation. Social reproduction was presented as a function of nature, not culture. In actual fact, the social developments of the period, as we have seen, were the result of increasing human control of the resources of nature. The conditions were ripe to elaborate a non ideological explanation of society and the nature of human action which, as we shall see in this study, is what the Buddha did. Ruling class ideologies had thrown a veil of obscurity over social life. People were confused by what the Buddha called a 'jungle of views,' a 'wilderness of views,' 'a shackle of views'. The Buddha declared he found the people entrapped by views, thrashing about like fish caught in a net. He declared that he had 'netted the net,' caught the spurious views of his Day in a fine mesh to set the people free. He called it, the "supreme net" - *brahmajala*- "the incomparable

victory in [ideological] battle" (Brahmajala Sutta DB I.1.46.).

Sometimes ideologies can imprison humans more dreadfully than iron cages or walls of stone. The doctrines of *samsara*, rebirth and karmic justice as a 'package deal', had become well entrenched ideologies when the Buddha began his teaching mission. His radical doctrine of *anatta* sounded their death knell. His teaching on *kamma* shows that one merely has to dissolve the language of religion into the ordinary language from which it is abstracted to recognise it as a distorted reflection of actual life (See Chapter 11).

Age of Action or Apathy?

Nineteenth century ideologists projected back into the period in which the Buddha lived a condition of stasis and attributed it to the so-called inward-looking mentality which Indian religions inculcate. Buddhism was depicted as a world-renouncing religion, quietist *par excellence*. Ironically, change and the nature of human action were key issues discussed at the time the Buddha lived. Some teachers of the day denied the efficacy of human action - and were identified as *akiriyavadins* - teachers of non-action.' Others, and most notably the Buddha, firmly believed that human beings could act to improve themselves and their life-conditions. Those who believed in the practical efficacy of human action were called *kiriyavadins* - exponents of action. Not only teachers of morality, but also men who harnessed the resources of nature to produce wealth, like the farmer Mendaka (BD IV.333), or those who commanded and led men into action, like General Siha, were called *kiriyavadins* (BD IV. 318).

The society in which the Buddha lived not only produced naked ascetics but also some of the finest textiles in the world. At one extreme, there were individuals who practised bizarre forms of self-torture, at the other extreme were those who pampered themselves with every form of sensual pleasure that wealth could afford or power command. A.L.Basham (1967) accurately sums up the multifaceted dynamic of the period:

The Age of the Buddha, when many of the best minds were abandoning their homes and professions for a life of asceticism, was also a time of advance in commerce and politics. It produced not only philosophers and ascetics, but also merchant princes and *men of action* (1992: 46 emphasis mine).

Systematic observation, investigation and experimentation by ordinary men and women had transformed the face of the Middle Gangetic Valley. Human beings had become the architects of their environment. Conditions were ripe for a person of extraordinary insight to infer the principle underlying the practical activities of

ordinary men and women, raise it to the level of a General Law and apply it to the moral life. The Four Noble Truths abolish the ideologically created separation of moral values which are seen as the domain proper of religion - *dharmasastra* on the one hand, and art of pleasure - *kamasastra* and science of economics - *arthasastra* - on the other. The Buddha formulated a new Science of sciences - Conditioned Co-arising. In every field of human endeavour *right action depends on right understanding of real conditions* (See Chapter 9).

CHAPTER 3

THE MONARCHICAL STATES

By the sixth century BCE society had reached a stage of development when unbridled violence and anarchic conditions came into contradiction with the objective needs of the times. Security of life and property were continually and directly threatened by incessant warfare between petty kings and tribal chiefs. They could unleash savage violence on the socially weak and permit themselves unrestrained indulgence of their passions. Bewildered by the rampant immorality and lawlessness of the times, people believed that their lives had come under the sway of the *matsya nyaya* - 'the law of big fish gobbling up the small fish'. Peaceful and stable conditions were indispensable for the expansion and intensification of agricultural and craft production, and to ensure the free and safe flow and exchange of goods, especially long distance overland trade. The need of the times was for a central authority that had the power and the means to enforce its will on society as a whole to safeguard, at least nominally, the welfare of all its members.

The Monarchical States of the Mid-Gangetic Valley

Brahman theory traces kingship to the conquest and subjugation of a backward people by waves of invaders referred to generically as 'Aryans.' The origin of the monarchy was attributed to the conquest of North West India by these foreigners. The discovery of the sophisticated Indus Valley civilization exploded the myth of Aryan superiority. As early as 1950, assessing the implications of this discovery for the given wisdom about ancient India, Stuart Piggott (1950) pointed out that 'the Aryans' far from being a 'noble' race seems to have been barbaric hordes who destroyed an ancient civilization. The state system which emerged in North East India was not an imposition from the outside by foreign rulers, but an institution based on long-established indigenous traditions. The founder of the Mauryan Empire, Chandragupta (3 BCE),

[was] not a foreigner, nor invader... coming in from the North-West to impose his will on the Indian people, but a product of a long tradition within India itself... He must have based his rule on long-established custom, in which was blended the ancient civic tradition of Harappa, with its bureaucracy and mercantile organization and the more barbarous but militaristic tradition of the Aryan warrior caste to offset the fatal tendency to stagnation and decay that had been Harappa's downfall (Piggott 1950: 228).

A long line of indigenous kings could be traced back from the Mauryas to the Buddha's times. King Seniya Bimbisara ruled Magadha when the Buddha began to propagate his Teaching. Neither he nor Pasenadi of Kosala, according to Kosambi, could be regarded as 'Aryans' by the Brahmin definition of the term (Kosambi 1977). Brahmanic genealogies assigned Bimbisara to the Sisunaga line - the suffix 'naga' implying a non-Aryan background. The priestly tradition does not conceal its contempt for this dynasty which it dismisses as *ksatra-bandhu* - 'ksatriya pretenders' (Kosambi 1977: 127). Brahmin hostility towards these new monarchs is understandable if they did not accept the authority of the Vedas, follow Vedic customs or seek priestly consecration to legitimize their rule.

There is little evidence in the Buddhist scriptures to suggest that a ritually distinct *ksatriya* stratum claiming the right to rule as their birthright, existed in the kingdoms of Kosala and Magadha. The non-Aryan background of these kings shows that the society of the Majjhimadesa region had developed outside the pale of Brahmin influence (Kosambi 1977: 127 – 28). The kings of the Majjhimadesa did not claim that they ruled by divine right. King Bimbisara claimed sovereignty over the Magadhan territories because they were his "*vijita*" - conquests (BD IV.330). State power was imposed through conquest and permanent subjugation. The heterogeneous population - *bahujana* - of a monarchical state were regarded not as kinfolk but as subjects residing in the king's territories. Residence rather than kinship had become the criterion for defining a person's rights and obligations. The supreme right of rulers to exercise power over life and death, to banish whom they wished, to inflict corporal punishment and imprisonment, was formally recognized and undisputed (MLS I.284). Kings were 'gods' in their own right as can be judged by the use of the term '*deva*' as a mode of address for visible and invisible powers. Refusing to subscribe to this divinisation, the Buddha and his renouncer disciples addressed kings by their functional title *raja* - king - or *maharaja* (emperor – lit. 'great king') but never as *deva*.

There is no evidence in the Buddhist scriptures that a king's ascent to the throne was legitimized by priestly consecration. If the throne was not usurped and a king managed to survive on the throne till old age, he formally handed over power to his heir (DB III.61). Pasenadi is reported to have commissioned the odd fire sacrifice - *yanna* (KS I.102). Bimbisara donated prosperous villages to Brahmin notables and to communities of Buddhist and Jain renouncers. This generosity seems to have been prompted more by political expediency than piety. The patronage of religious who could influence the thinking of people was a more economic means for the pacification of the countryside than the use of military force. The monarchs of the Majjhimadesa did not identify themselves with any particular religious sect. They adopted a liberal and pragmatic attitude towards the various schools of thought current at the time and took a keen interest in the ideas being propagated in their kingdoms. The Buddhist scriptures portray Bimbisara as a pious king devoted to the

Buddha and his *Sangha*. But reading between the lines, another picture emerges of the king as an astute and energetic ruler. Bimbisara kept close watch over affairs in his kingdom. A network of spies kept the king informed about any developments that could pose a threat to his position. Unlike the indolent Pasenadi of Kosala, “who squandered his time and wealth on holy men ... Bimbisara [was] a man of a different stamp. The sources show us a resolute and energetic organizer, ruthless in dismissing inefficient officers, calling his village headmen for conferences, building roads and causeways and travelling over his kingdom on tours of inspection” (Basham 1992: 47). Bimbisara’s son, Ajatasattu, was as vigilant and vigorous in the administration of Magadha and more determined than his father to extend his power over neighbouring territories. He personally interviewed the great teachers of the time, including the Buddha, to acquaint himself with their teachings. It is clear that this interest was not prompted by religious concerns. He began his interview with the Buddha by listing what he called profitable occupations and wanted to know how the way of life of renouncers would bring any ‘visible fruit’ to his kingdom (DB I.76), the insinuation being that he tended to see mendicant teachers as parasitic vagabonds.

The State: An Apparatus for Coercion and Control

The state establishes itself as an overarching power above and beyond society, through the monopolization of the means of violence and coercion. The indispensable tool for consolidating state power is the establishment of a professional standing army financed by the state. King Bimbisara of Magadha carried the title ‘*seniya*’ which means ‘with an army.’ The army of King Pasenadi of Kosala was under the command of a *senapati*, commander-in-chief of the army, a term unknown in Vedic times (Kosambi 1977: 128). The establishment of a permanent command structure indicates a professionalisation of warriors. In the tribal federations and in societies under Brahmin influence, the right to bear arms was restricted to the *ksatriya* stratum. In the new monarchies, recruitment to the army was not based on birth status (caste) criteria. What mattered were a recruit’s physical strength and fighting skill (KS I.124). The soldiers were equipped and remunerated by the state. This policy ensured that the primary allegiance of the soldiery was to the king and the state, unhampered by kinship or local loyalties. The army was made up of four specialized forces: elephant brigades, cavalry, war chariots and infantry. Garrisoned brigades were stationed at strategic locations to ensure that the royal will was heeded throughout the kingdom. Military camps located across the kingdom had become a feature of the countryside and were called *sena-nigamas* - ‘army towns’ or cantonments (M I.195).

The financial resources available to the kings of Kosala and Magadha made it possible for them to buy the skills and services of individuals irrespective

of their social background or birth status. This new reality was in itself a threat to the old social order as envisaged by Brahmin ideology. When Siddhattha Gotama arrived in Magadha as a young *samana* ('striver'), King Bimbisara, impressed by his extraordinary bearing offered him a prestigious office in the Magadhan government (Sn 420). The king's offer, which Siddhattha declined, was neither exceptional nor without precedent. Other *ksatriyans* had shifted loyalties and accepted employment in the monarchies. The Mallan Bandulla was appointed commander-in-chief of King Pasenadi's army. His nephew was minister of statecraft in Pasenadi's cabinet (Kosambi 1977: 127).

Great kings of the Buddha's day saw themselves as the centre of a vast circle of power and spoke of their realms as "the great circle of the earth" which they had conquered and controlled (DB I.175). The image of 'a circle of power' appropriately describes the extension of state power along vertical and horizontal axes with the monarch at its hub. Along the vertical axis, the king was assisted by a cabinet of ministers with specialized responsibilities. Vassakara was King Ajatasattu's Prime Minister and minister of war. The Buddhist scriptures mention a Chancellor of the Exchequer and a minister entrusted with several responsibilities (Wagle 1966: 144). A king's chief advisor or the palace chamberlain was called the *purohita* - 'foremost' or 'chief' minister. The vertical chain of command extended downwards from the king, the cabinet of ministers and the commander-in-chief of the army to the village level. Officials remunerated by the state ran the military-bureaucratic apparatus.

Along the horizontal axis, the king exercised power over a variety of local governments and modes of production and exchange: petty kingdoms and chiefdoms, simple horticultural societies, various forms of land tenure, and exchange relationships which extended from barter to developed market systems. Concentric circles of state power extended from the palace and the capital city to the hinterland. Large cities were administered by municipal councils whose membership was drawn from influential citizens of the various wards (*nigamas*) of the city (Wagle 1966: 22). Radiating outward from the capital city, the kingdom was divided into administrative units: *nagaras* - cities; *nigamas* - townships and *gamas* - rural settlements. Royal authority was strongest at the centre and weakest at the periphery. Army detachments were posted in border areas abutting the great forests to defend the country from attacks by robber chiefs, or to quell popular rebellions. Reinforcements had to be sent from the capital when the border troops were unable to crush insurrections in these regions (BD IV.92). The king had little control over forest-dwelling tribes and there was continuous tension between these tribes and the peasant population. Individuals who could not cope with pressures of society or the demands of the state could withdraw into the forest and adopt the life of forest dwellers. Non-conformists and dissidents who joined the *sangha* of a prestigious teacher had the support of an organized group and were less vulner-

able than the solitary renouncer. The growth and spread of these extra societal autonomous *sanghas* would have posed a real threat to the authority of the state.

A 'Secular' Amoral Approach to Politics

Bimbisara and Ajatasattu are early examples of a long line of pragmatic kings who ruled Magadha. An elite cadre of intellectuals specialized in statecraft advised the kings, like the ministers Vassakara, Sunidha and Dirgha Karayana mentioned in the Buddhist scriptures. These men were as capable and brilliant as the best religious thinkers and moral philosophers of the day, but their minds were directed towards the realization of political ambitions untrammelled by ethical considerations. The approach to governance developed by these thinkers became a distinguishing feature of Magadhan state policy. Kosambi suggests that the great Indian treatise on statecraft and political economy, Kautilya's Arthashastra (4 BCE), was the crystallization of a centuries old tradition in Magadha. Kautilya himself in the preface to his treatise acknowledges that he compiled his manual for princes after consulting works on statecraft by earlier masters. "A great deal of the work rests solidly on previous administrative practices and theories of statecraft which can only be pre-Mauryan" (Kosambi 1977: 213).

The emergence of a specialized stratum of political theoreticians shows that outstanding men and women of the period were not all speculative thinkers or inward-looking mystics. Teachers like the Buddha on the one hand, and the political thinkers on the other, were responding practically to the challenges of the time. Though their values were fundamentally different, the theoreticians of statecraft and the early Buddhists shared a common approach to problem solving: gathering and assessing relevant facts and the application of appropriate methods to realize an intended purpose. Both recognized that society could not be changed by fleeing from it or by abstract speculations, but only through realistic and positive action.

The policies of state theoreticians were based on the view held by the materialist philosophers that human destinies are determined by the inevitable clash of opposing forces. The underlying 'truth' of social reality is a will to power. What is 'true' or 'moral' is what might establishes. According to this logic, grounded in a 'law of nature,' a successful ruler is one who is single-mindedly and ruthlessly committed to capture power and maintain himself as the embodiment of invincible power. These new theoreticians held that prosperity and welfare of the masses can be ensured only if the creation of wealth is pursued with ruthless determination. This policy of *real politik* is summed up in Kautilya's axiom: "Material gain alone (*artha*) is the principal aim, for morality (*dhamma*) and pleasure of the senses (*kama*), are both rooted in wealth" (Kosambi 1975: 215).

Teachers like the Buddha and Mahivira, the founder of the Jains, vigor-

ously opposed these philosophies of power. Peace and prosperity, they insisted, cannot be realized through mastery over others, but only through mastery of self. Unbridled craving for power and wealth, both teachers pointed out, are the twin causes of human misery. In a culture governed by greed and violence, the Buddha and the Mahavira addressed themselves to society at large. The reform of political and economic relationships must begin with the ethical reform of society. These teachers and their disciples, Kosambi notes, had to convince the multitude and win over people from all walks of life by open and widely disseminated preaching, whereas advice on state policy could be effective only if kept secret, reserved for the chosen few (1977: 121). These policy makers were not unlike the forest dwelling sages who imparted their secret knowledges only to a select group of initiates admitted to their ashrams, and the Brahmin priests who transmitted their knowledges from generation to generation as the sole possession of an exclusive guild. Monopolization of knowledge, like the monopolization of wealth, had become a key mechanism for exercising power over people.

The Cakkavatti Monarchs and State Ideology

The invention of the wheel and the axle accelerated the pace of development in many parts of the ancient world. In India the wheel became a symbol of state power. The adoption of the wheel, a human invention, as a metaphor of state power, testifies to the brute realism of ancient Indian political theoreticians. The symbol did not refer to wheels in general but to the wheel of the war chariot which rolled in the four directions destroying the forces of anarchy and creating a new cosmo-social order. The wheel of the war chariot is a starkly secular symbol of the state as a machinery of power. Its workings do not, in the final instance, depend on the individual who holds the reins of power. Once the State is established as the impersonal crystallisation of absolute power, ambitious individuals or groups become obsessed by the delusion that human welfare can be promoted only by seizing or sharing state power. The imperial power of the great kings and the great social distance between the rulers and the ruled vested the king and the state with a divine character, transcendental yet immanent. State power takes on the appearance of an awesome quantum of might descending on society from a realm that is above and beyond it:

The state is situated (or appears to be) beyond real life, in a sphere whose distance is reminiscent of that of God or the gods... The relationship of power to society is essentially imbued with sacrality (Balandier, 1970: 100-101).

It is therefore not surprising that the Wheel of Power was revered as a 'heavenly wheel' - *dibba cakka* (D III.63) in the Buddha's Day. This celestialisation of power

is understandable because, as we have seen, the Wheel of State has the awesome power to turn simultaneously along vertical and horizontal axes grinding down anything or anyone that stood in its way.¹ The Buddhist scriptures describe kings of the period as being “intoxicated with power” (KS III.125). Power crazed kings were driven by an insatiable desire for conquest. The Buddha remarked how

A king, having forcibly conquered the earth and ruling over the land from coast to coast, is not satisfied and hankers after lands on the further side of the ocean (MLS III.265).

The Wheel came to be associated with the universal monarchs of the North East. The most important ‘gem’ in the diadem of royal power was the title ‘Wheel-Turner’ - *cakkavattin* (DB III.59). The concept of the king as a ‘Wheel-Turner’ suggests ruling over a vast geographical area, as well as “centering control firmly and securely in a hub of power” (Thapar 1984: 161).² The concentric circle - *mandala* - theory of statecraft elaborated in the *Arthashastra* is a strategic assessment of political relationships in terms of hostility and friendship – the enemy of an enemy was a potential ally. The wheel-turning monarchs, it came to be believed, controlled cosmic and social processes and had the power to ensure that society would not return to a primordial chaos or the anarchy of former times.

‘Gahapati’ - A New Social Class

In industrialized societies, the household is a private residential space for a nuclear family consisting of husband, wife and children. Its basic function is biological reproduction and the reproduction of the dominant relationships and values of society. Income for the support of the family is generally earned outside the household. This concept of ‘the family’ is relatively new and was not the norm in pre-industrial societies. The household was a reproductive as well as a productive unit. In the Buddha’s day this type of household consisted of a large family extending over three or four generations. A household is called an *agara* and the family unit a *kula* in the Pali texts. The head of a property-owning household unit was called a *gahapati*. The term is often inaccurately translated as ‘layman’ - term with Christian

¹ The veneration of the Wheel of War took a bizarre form in the cult of Jaganath (a title of the warrior-god Krishna, believed to be an avatar of Vishnu). On feast days some devotees committed suicide by throwing themselves under the wheels of the chariot bearing the idol of Vishnu-Jaganath. The term Juggernaut for a ruthless war-machine derives from the name of this god. In the Buddha’s revaluation of values, the ‘Turning of the Wheel’ was made to represent Righteous Practice.

² In a radical revaluation of values, the Buddha replaced the Wheel of Might with the Wheel of *Dhamma*. See the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta* (DB II. 59-76).

ritual connotations - even though the Buddhist scriptures use the word *gihin* with reference to a 'householder' or, a person 'living in a household'.

The term *gahapati* was already in use in Vedic times in the literal sense of 'master of the household.' But the head of a household in the nomadic pastoral period was not an owner of private property. Each family tended a small herd but the cattle and the pasture lands were considered the property of the entire clan. With the transition to agriculture, the system of communal ownership gave way to the private ownership of property. The separate household became the basic property owning unit of society.³ Under changed conditions, the referent of the term shifted to signify an executive member of the propertied class. A *gahapati* could do what he pleased with the riches at his disposal. Though obliged to support members of the household and bound by the inheritance laws of the state, his activities were no longer bound by clan obligations (Kosambi 1977: 101). As the *modus vivendi* of Buddhist renunciators changed from wandering mendicancy to property-owning monastics, there was increasing concern to seek the favour of the *gahapati* class. Heads of the *gahapati* household could freely donate their wealth to the *Sangha*. Whereas in the tribal federations - *ganasanghas* - property was held in common and alienation especially of land would require the consent of the entire kinship community. This created problems for *ganasangha* householders as to how they could support the *Sangha*.

Tensions between the Vajjian monks and the Rajagaha monks necessitated the calling of the Second Council of the *Sangha*. Interestingly, Second Council was held not in Rajagaha as was the first, but in Vaisali, capital of the Vajjian federation. Irreconcilable differences led to the first schism in the *Sangha*. The points of contention between the two groups seem somewhat curious, except the proposal by the Vajjian monks that they be allowed to accept monetary donations from householders. This was anathema to the Rajagaha monks. Why this conflict led to a schism can be understood when one understands that the two communities were living in two different social systems. Unable to donate common property, the Vajjians may have wanted to substitute monetary donations for land grants. The tension between the Vajjian and Magadhan monks parallels the hostility between the Vajjian federation and the Magadhan kingdom. The Vajjian federation was eventually destroyed and its territories annexed to the expanding Magadhan empire. The power and wealth of the Magadhan monasteries increased exponentially. The network of well-endowed monasteries had the potential to become a power base independent of and parallel to the state. The Magadhan province was no doubt speckled with monasteries, so that it is to this day called Bihar which is derived from the Pali word *vihara* for monastery. These historic developments are reflected

³ The Buddha identified this as a crucial moment in social evolution (see Chapter 12).

in the prominence given to the *gahapati* class in the Buddhist scriptures, notably in the Vinaya Pitaka. Their wealth and generosity to Buddhist monks are described in hyperbolic terms reminiscent of the Brahmanic *danastutis* (See Chapter 5).

The description of the Mendaka household given in the Vinaya Pitaka may have been typical for any *gahapati* household. All the members of the household, Mendaka, his wife, son, daughter-in-law and labourers work together as a single productive unit (BD IV.331). After the king, the *gahapati* was the most important figure in the monarchical states. The domestic economy was the generator of social wealth. The Buddha reminded King Ajatasattu that it was the *gahapati* who paid taxes and supplied revenue to the state (DB 1.71). The *gahapati* was included among the seven gems of a wheel-turning monarch (DB Suttas 17 and 26). In the fable of the righteous king Mahasudassana, (DB II.199) the *gahapati* miraculously produces wealth and hands it over to the king to be used for the general welfare.

Due to the social mobility of the times, anyone could in principle – though not always in practice – acquire *gahapati* status. A person born into a poor family could, through industriousness and good fortune, improve himself, become a *gahapati* and employ people whose birth status was technically higher than his (M.II.84). Closely connected to the *gahapatis* were the merchant-bankers or *setthis*. This new aristocracy of wealth may have sought to strengthen their class position and influence through political and marital alliances. The major cities were administered by councils whose membership was made up of representatives of the *gahapati* class. This shows a shrewd awareness of common-class interests (Wagle 1966: 22). The *setthi-gahapati* of Rajagha, the capital of Magadha, was married to the sister of the *gahapati* Anathapindika, a citizen of Savatthi - the capital of Kosala. This shows that strengthening class interests superseded local affiliations.

Gahapatis and *setthi-gahapatis* are mentioned exclusively in the context of the monarchies. They are not mentioned as a social category in the *gana-sanghas* - tribal federations. This is not surprising because as noted above, in these societies property was commonly owned and individuals could not arbitrarily sell or donate their possessions, especially landholdings. In the monarchies, private ownership of property was a legally (and morally) sanctioned social institution and individuals could freely dispose of their property. They could enhance their social prestige by lavish gifts to religious groups. This made residing in the monarchies more advantageous for members of the *Sangha* seeking the patronage of the wealthy than residing in clan territories. Residence in well appointed monasteries and dependence on the patronage of the rich and powerful changed the character of the *Sangha* and transformed the movement of social dissent launched by the Buddha into a 'status religion'.

Gahapati as Patriarch

The *gahapati* household was a patriarchy in the strict sense of the term: “a form of social organization in which a male (patriarch) acts as the head of the family/ household, holding power over females and children” (DOS 457). The Vinaya defines a *gahapati* as *yo koci agaram ajjhasvasati*. Horner (1930) translates this as ‘he who lives in a house’. However, Wagle points out,

The term *ajjhasvasati*, has the distinct sense of ownership. The term is to describe King Bimbisara's rules over Kasikosala. The brahmana Lohicca has ownership rights over Salavatika (*salalavatikam ajjhasvasati*) and he has many persons dependent on him for their livelihood. Brahmaa Sonadanda and brahmana Canki are also owners of lands donated to them by kings. A king is informed of a rich country, which he could attack, conquer and rule over (*ajjhasvasayyamatī*). In the light of the above meanings of the term *ajjhasvasati*, which denotes ownership rights, it is most likely that the definition of *gahapati* given in the Vinaya, refers not so much to ‘one who lives in a house, but to ‘one who has the full ownership rights of the household’ (1966:151-52).

The power exercised by the Brahmin notables over villages donated to them was quasi-monarchical. Lands were granted in perpetuity and the recipient had “power over it as if he were the king” (DB I.178). The same could be said of a *gahapati*’s power over his household. The suffix *pati*, ‘lord’/ ‘master’, implies proprietorship and sovereignty. The terms used by a wife when addressing her husband *ayya*, *pati* - ‘lord’, ‘master’ - is an acknowledgement of overlordship. Property was handed down from father to son. The eldest son - *gahapatiputta* and *kulaputta* - who stood to inherit his father’s wealth, is as much a focus of interest in the Buddhist scriptures as the *gahapatis* themselves.

The Position of Women

Apart from courtesans and street prostitutes, women are not mentioned as playing any significant public role. The Buddha reportedly said that women were unsuitable for holding public office because they were “as untrustworthy as evil-smelling black snakes” (GS III.191). The scriptures generally focus attention on the physical appearance of women. An often-expressed view is that a woman’s chances in life depend on her physical beauty or ugliness. This is attributed to good or evil done by women in their previous births (GS II.216). Brides to be are advised that they could win power in this world and be reborn as heavenly nymphs in the next, if they faithfully and docilely serve their husbands and in-laws (GS 176). This reward offered to women would have made ‘going to heaven’ a delightful prospect – for

men.

The *Anguttara* (A III.77) gives a list of the most important holders of power at the time; they are all, without exception, men. Wives and children in the patriarchal household are classified together as a separate, subordinate category and are placed just above the slaves and wage labourers. The status of daughters in the family was low in comparison to that of sons, and parents welcomed the birth of a son more than that of a daughter. The *Vinaya* (III.120) gives a classification of status differentiation between the women in a patriarchal household. The female members are placed after the men and classified in descending order of importance. The senior wife of the patriarch was the mistress of the household and is ranked first. After her came the grown up daughters, the young girls of the family, the daughters-in-law and the women slaves. The daughters-in-law are ranked just above the female slaves indicating their low status. This lowly position was institutionalized by the custom of patrilocality which required that a bride take up residence in her husband's father's home. Once married, a young woman lost her ties with her blood-relatives (S IV.258) and was not regarded as a member of her husband's kin-group (V III.259). Breaking a young bride's bond with her blood-relatives is an essential strategy for consolidating male power:

In requiring a bride to move to the paternal home of her groom, patrilocality separates her from her core, the women who would nourish and sustain her and present a united opposition to any possible male abuse of her. Patrilocality removes her from this web of affection, isolating her in a home in which she is an alien... She may find a sister or cousin in her new home; in polygynous cultures she may have a friendly co-wife. But the political and moral power inherent in a unit of related women is lost (French 1986: 72).

The humiliation women suffered in the homes of their husbands can be gathered from the sad experiences of the Theri Isidasi (Thig LXXII). She was the first to rise and the last to go to bed and, "according to the training given her," she served her husband, his parents, and sisters and brothers as a 'dasi'- slave, might. Despite the toil and service "rendered with a humble mind," her husband treated her with contempt and eventually sent her back to her parents as if she were no better than a useless chattel. Isidasi's experience with two other men to whom she was given in marriage, and the experiences of other *theris* like Sumangalamata (Thig XXI) and Capa (Thig. XVIII) show that male contempt for women did not depend on a husband's class background or religious beliefs. The Buddha showed sensitive awareness of "the woeful lot of women". Being subjected to the authority of in-laws, he declared, is one of the bases of feminine sorrow – *itthi dukkha* (S IV. 239).

Social Stratification in the Monarchical States

An entire chapter in the *Vinaya* (Pacittiya II. BD II. 171ff.) is devoted to the phenomenon of status differentiation by birth and by occupation in the various cultural regions of the Majjhimadesa. The discussion was occasioned by a dispute among the wandering mendicants about the validity of such discrimination. The Buddha did not resort to theological-philosophical speculation to resolve the issue. He urged the disciples to undertake an empirical survey of the notions of “high” and “low” current at the time. The inquiry revealed that there was little unanimity on the matter in the various regions. The Buddha then pointed out that if, as the Brahmins claimed, status differentiations are a function of birth and biology as determined by a creator god, all societies would have developed along similar lines and the same social differences would have manifested themselves everywhere. However, this was patently not the case, demonstrating that the Brahmin theology of each individual's 'own nature' - *svadharma* - is empirically falsifiable and therefore theoretically unsound. The Buddha concluded by pointing out that status differences should be regarded as cultural constructs and that modes of address to discriminate between 'high' and 'low' as mere social conventions. He ruled that his followers should eschew such discriminatory practices.

The Pacittaya survey was restricted to clearly identifiable professions and crafts at the time. It does not include property-less manual labourers who are referred to as the *dasa-kammakara porissa* - the slave-wage labourer masses in the Buddhist scriptures, but never as *sudras*. A *dasa* or domestic slave is defined as a person who is 'not his own master, subject to others, not able to go where he likes' (MLS I. 329). The term *kammakara* - 'doers of work,' with its double emphasis on labour is an interesting designation for manual workers from a sociological point of view. There is an implicit recognition that these labourers are men and women of action (*kriya*) and that their work (*kamma*) produced visible results, also called *kamma*. *Dasa-kammakara* as a social category is an accurate definition of a class of people denuded of all substance except their labour power. The self-employed, however lowly, like potters, smiths, or carpenters have a social identity because of the specificity of their labour and the products of their labour. Separated from property, the *dasakammakaras* were, as the very term suggests, the personification of abstract labour which was at the disposal of those who hired them. The type of work they had to do was determined by the employers who bought their labour power. The visible fruit of their work - *kammaphala* - was appropriated by those who owned them or had purchased their labour power. This is the earthly site and basis of the mystifying doctrine of *kamma* as an invisible mechanism of justice. The socially privileged appropriated the visible fruit of the labouring classes. To enjoy the invisible 'fruit' - 'merit' of a life of hard labour - *kamma* - the *dasakammakaras* had to await another birth. If they performed their chores diligently and

docilely, as atonement for evil done in a previous birth, they may, who knows, even be reborn as a *gahapati* or a *khattiya*, to enjoy a leisurely life and be served by a new generation of *dasa-kammakaras*.

However oppressed, the *dasakammakaras* were considered an integral part of society and its system of production. But there was a group of people who were placed beyond the pale of society. These were referred to by the generic term *candala* - 'untouchable', socially ostracized people, probably of tribal origin, who had lost their lands to the expanding agricultural economy, but had resisted assimilation into the wider society. This would explain the deep hostility and distrust that the settled population displayed towards them. They were denied fixed employment and were only allowed to perform work considered polluting, like scavenging, the disposal of corpses and tending the charnel grounds. The Brahmins used the term *candala* for individuals and groups outside their *Varna* scheme (See Chapter 6). The *candalas* were technically outside society or 'in society but not of it.' The type of work *candalas* may be permitted to do was laid down in Brahmin Law. Strict social distance from them had to be maintained. They were required to be easily recognizable by their dress, accessories and speech. The Brahmin law books laid down that the *candala* should be dressed in the garments of the corpses he cremated, should eat his food from broken vessels and should wear only iron ornaments. Even the sight of a *candala* was considered polluting and inauspicious. No man of higher class may have any but the most distant relations with a *candala* on pain of losing his religious purity and falling to the *candala's* level (Basham 1992: 146).

The first Buddhists rejected all notions of ritual impurity or untouchability. Most information about the *candalas*, Thapar notes, comes from Buddhist sources, the *Jataka Stories*, in particular. The social radicalism of the early Buddhists is reflected in some *Jataka* stories where the Buddha or a *bodhisatta* is said to have been a *candala*. One *Jataka* narrates the story of a king who married a *candala* woman and made her son his successor (Thapar 1984: 108).

There is a fundamental difference between early Buddhist and Brahmin social differentiation and stratification. The first was empirico-descriptive and the second ideological. A failure to recognize this has led to imaginative constructs of society in the Age of the Buddha by most Western Indologists. The Brahmin view was uncritically accepted because it seemed consistent with the type of society that Europeans, beginning with the Portuguese, encountered in India. Given the unquestioned premise of an 'unchanging India,' Western scholars had little difficulty assuming that Indian society in the sixteenth century CE was in every respect no different to society in North East India in 600 BCE. What Western scholars failed (and fail) to understand is that the Brahmin stratification represents a normative social order - what society *should be* according to Brahmin *theology*. The infor-

mation given in the Buddhist scriptures, because of its non-ideological, emprico-descriptive character, provides a more reliable basis for understanding the social dynamics of the period, than Brahmin sources.

The Pacittiya survey referred to above, examines social discriminations current at the time and concludes that there was no unanimity about it in the various districts of the Majjhimadesa. The Buddhist scriptures mention the Brahmins as a social stratum in the kingdoms, but never in the tribal federations. Similarly, the category *khattiya* (*ksatriya* Sk) is mentioned only with regard to the tribal federations. Given the great prestige of *ganasangha khattiyans*, the kings of Kosala and Magadha sought marital alliances with these *khattiyans*, but there is no mention of a *khattiya* stratum in the monarchical states. Here, the *gahapathi* and *setthi gahapathi* are mentioned as the most important social class. In the linkage of occupational status to birth we see the rudiments of the later caste system. But as Rhys Davids pointed out, "*The caste system, in any proper or exact use of the term, did not exist at the time*" (DB 1.101). The Brahmins occulted historical origins in order to lay down a normative hierarchy disguised as a divine ordination. The canonical texts describe a society comprised of a variety of social formations, pluriform and heterogenous in character, a *bahujana* society. "It is time," Uma Chakravarti writes, "that students of the period shed the brahmanic spectacles that have been used for so long. A more meaningful understanding of social reality [of the period] should then emerge" (1987: 121).

Institutionalized Violence

The new monarchical states rose on the foundations of a society riven by conflicting class interests. There are frequent references in the Buddhist scriptures to ordinary people crushed by unconscionable taxes arbitrarily determined by the king to meet the demands of a growing state machinery. Failure to pay taxes was met with swift and brutal reprisals by the armed might of the state. Those who had not inherited wealth or had no access to the means of production had to sell their life-energies commodified into labour power, to buy the barest means of subsistence for themselves and their families. R. Fick's study (1920) of society in North East India as recorded in the *Jataka Stories*, provides a vivid description of the social abuses of the period. The working masses had to endure an oppressive system of taxation on the one hand, and the incessant demands of greedy fire-priests, on the other. Hundreds of animals were killed during lavish public sacrifices (*yanna*) performed to celebrate the glory of kings and due to the greed of fire-priests (BD I.175). This ruthless exploitation of the people became an intolerable burden for the peasant economy:

If the subjects did not pay willingly, or if the king wanted - as often

seemed to happen, according to events narrated - to harass the people by enhancing the taxes, he sent his officials who had to use force in filling the coffers of the king. These tax collectors, according to the Jatakas, were a scourge unleashed on the people. Among the names given to tax collectors was *niggahaka* - 'torturer'. In the *Gagga Jataka* the tax collector is compared to a man eating demon - *yakkha* (Fick 1920: 120-121).

Backed by ruthless rulers, these officers terrorized and plundered the countryside. Oppressed by taxes, villagers stopped cultivation and fled into the jungle, where they lived like beasts. Entire districts became depopulated - where there once was a village there was no village. Such villages were referred to as *amanussa gamas* - villages without humans (GS I.142).

People did not live in their homes for fear of the king's men and of bandits. They barricaded their houses and went after sunset to the forest. By day the king's people plundered and at night the thieves. The excesses of a king could be restrained if he was advised by counsellors who were wise in spiritual and worldly matters. But where this opposite force is absent and the ministers or the *purohita* only helped to carry out the desires of their ruler, there often arose circumstances which forced the people to take recourse to the only method available, namely force, open rebellion (Fick 1920: 101-103; 120-121).

The only evidence on revolts in the literature of this period, Thapar observes, comes from Buddhist sources (1984: 154). This is not surprising considering the popular orientation of early Buddhism. As reported in the Jataka literature, rebellions were most frequent in the border regions and the army was dispatched to crush them. The troops stationed in the frontier regions were often unable to quell rebellions and called for help from the capital. If necessary, the king himself would lead the troops and take to the field. In the *Bandanamoha Jataka* the king refers to the rebels as 'robbers' thereby criminalising those who rose up against unjust rule. The real criminals in fact were the despots who unleashed state terrorism on a hapless people:

Very often we see in the king an unrestricted tyrant guided by his own whims and caprices, who oppressed and put down his subjects by punishment, taxes, torture and robbery, as one "pounds sugar in a sugar mill"; who is as odious to them as a "particle of dust in the eyes" as "a particle of sand in the rice" or as a "thorn that has pierced the hand." To the virtues mentioned in the Buddha's *Dasarajadhamma* (Ten Righteous Duties - NS) of the idealized ruler, there stand in opposition as many

vices: these form, as it were, a legend on the reverse side of the coin, the side which depicts the true picture of the king: drunkenness and cruelty [in the Khantivadi Jataka and the Culla-Dhammapala Jataka], corruptibility [in the Bharu Jataka], untruthfulness and unrighteousness, [in the Cetiya Jataka] (ibid: 101-103).

Subjected to cruel rulers, exploited by heartless employers and exposed to unscrupulous commercial practices, ordinary men and women found themselves unprotected and at the mercy of the powerful. The king was only in name the guardian and guarantor of peace and justice. King Pasenadi once complained to the Buddha about the sad state of affairs in the courts of justice. Men of great wealth, bent on amassing wealth upon wealth, bribed judges and deliberately lied in the judgment hall of the capital. What hope was there, he asked, for fair administration of justice in the rest of his kingdom (KS III.100). Class justice was not unknown in the Buddha's Day. A poor man would be given a heavy prison sentence for thieving, irrespective of whether the sum stolen was a hundred *kahapanas* or merely half a *kahapana*, whereas a person of great means and influence could get himself acquitted if charged for stealing the same amount. A destitute caught stealing a goat would be mercilessly beaten by a butcher, but if the thief happened to be a rich and powerful person, a raja or a minister, the same butcher would fall down on his knees and beg with clasped hands: "Please, give me back my goat or at least the price of it" (GS I.229). Brigands who pillaged villages, highway robbers and other notorious criminals could carry on their nefarious activities by buying the protection of chiefs and ministers. If the price were right, these *eminenti* were ready to lie under oath in a court of law on behalf of notorious criminals (GS II.398).

Privileged Few, Miserable Masses

A wide chasm divided the super rich and the miserably poor. The language of the lineage system was twisted to express a situation that was a perversion of its ancient referent. The rich were called *addha kula* - the lineage of the rich, and the poor *dalidda kula* - the lineage of the poor, suggesting that the reproduction of social inequalities was a function of biology. The rich were classified according to the amount of wealth they possessed. People with great riches and fortunes were referred to as *mahadhana kula*, or *mahabhoga kula* and the super-rich, the *ularabhoga kula*. (A II.385, 497). Chakravarti notes that the Buddhist scriptures use binary oppositions to emphasize the contradiction between the rich and the poor: *sadhana/adhana* - people with/without wealth; *sugata/duggata* - the well-faring and the ill-faring. The Buddhist scriptures report that: "The difference in the life-conditions of the rich and the poor was as great as the difference between heaven and hell" (Chakravarti 1987: 27).

The *Vinaya* and *Sutta Pitakas* contain frequent references to poor people, but the focus of interest, as mentioned above, is on the rich, particularly on the wealthy *gahapati*s and *setthi-gahapati*s. A wealthy *gahapati* or *gahapathiputta* lived in a mansion with a gabled roof, plastered inside and outside, with well-fitting doors and casements. He slept on a luxurious bed with an overhead canopy. The mattress was made of a costly antelope skin or of wool. The bed sheets were of white wool and the coverlets embroidered with floral designs. Scarlet cushions were placed at each end of the bed. Ornate lamps illuminated the room and a rich man had several charming wives to wait upon him (GS 1.89.1.120). The super-rich *gahapatiputta* Yasa had the standard perquisites of royalty: three palatial residences, one for winter, one for summer, and one for the rainy season. During the four months of the rainy season he did not step out of his palace. He lived a life of luxurious indolence, surrounded and pampered by a bevy of beautiful damsels (BD IV.21-22). The wealth of *gahapati*'s and *setthi-gahapati*'s must have seemed fabulous to ordinary men and women. It was reputed, for example, that the *gahapati* Mendaka and the members of his household had miraculous powers to create wealth. In an outburst of religious fervour, he ordered that 1250 cows be reserved to provide fresh milk to the Buddha and the *Sangha* (V I.240ff). The affluence of the rich can be judged by the exorbitant fees paid in gold for the services of the specialist physician Jivaka Komarabhacca (V I.275ff).

The polar opposite of the *gahapati* class were the property-less poor - the *dalidda*. Where mention is made of the poor, the scriptures state that their condition was just retribution for evil committed in a previous birth. This is a clear deviation of the explanation given in discourses like the Kutadanta Sutta (D.I.V) and Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta (D.III.XXVI) about the real cause of poverty - maldistribution of social wealth. Unlike the rich who had bevy of beautiful maids to serve them, a poor man is described as a destitute, with 'an ugly wife,' living in a dingy and dilapidated hovel exposed to the elements; his entire stock of grain could hardly fill a jar (MLS II.123). This description reflects the class and sex prejudices that had crept into the *Sangha*. A poor man is not only destitute but also cursed with an ugly wife because of bad *karma*! The poor were continuously in need, without even the bare necessities of life: food, clothing and shelter. They had none of the luxuries of the rich: fine garments, garlands, perfumes, carriages, beds and well-illuminated dwellings (MLS 215; GS I.92; III.274). The *daliddakula*, the pauper-lineage, is described as people without enough to eat and drink, without even a covering for their back (AN 111.84); their normal fare, like that of domestic slaves, consisted of broken rice and a sour gruel (GS 1.128). Hungry children of the scavenging class, "with begging tray in hand, pleaded for a morsel of food, cringing and assuming an humble mien" (GS IV.250). Callous traders had no scruples about exploiting the extreme need of the poor to drive a hard bargain; a butcher forced a meatless joint on a hungry man and compelled him to pay for it (MLS III.215). The breakdown

of kinship ties exacerbated the plight of the poor. A woman who was compelled to beg and live on the streets explained why she had fallen on hard times: "I have no husband, no child, nor friends, nor kin. Where could I find food or clothing?" (Thig. XLIX) A man gave the same explanation for his slide into poverty: "Formerly I had many relatives, now these kinsfolk have diminished. So it is not easy for me to increase my wealth or to use to advantage whatever wealth I already have" (MLS II.260).

The Way of Pleasure and the Way of Suffering

In the Buddha's Day, socially engendered suffering was a tangible reality. The triumph of the monarchical state was a questionable blessing for the subjugated groups. They were rescued from the arbitrary and unpredictable violence of warring chiefs and petty kings, only to be subjected to the despotism of a single ruler who had at his command the repressive machinery of a powerful state.

Direct violence and oppressive ideologies were used to ensure the submission of the exploited. Among the principal groups that were brought under permanent subjugation were women as a gender, and the *dasa-kammakaras*, as a class. Meek submission to one's lot was regarded a religiously laudable virtue. The endemic violence of society episodically erupted in the form of open rebellion. However, apart from memories recorded in the *Jatakas*, the literature of the period sketches a picture of a docile people, men and women, meekly accepting their lot as a curse for evil deeds done in a previous birth (Thig. vs.447). Karmic theory was (and is) a powerful ideological device to quell the spontaneously arising protest against injustice rising up from the oppressed masses.

Politics and ethics are indissolubly linked: both define the limits of the permissible and the tolerable. The state in the Majjhimadesa represented a new political order and a new ethic. It presided over a heterogeneous society and each separate individual, irrespective of kinship affiliations, was considered a subject of the king. Breaches of public morality were not considered violations of kinship obligations or a 'sin' against the gods, but a crime against the state. A 'jungle of views,' had proliferated in the Buddha's Day, all of them seeking to provide a unitary theory of explanation for a world marked by social divisions and immense suffering. This diversity of views was reflexive of the diversity of experiences and conflicting interests in a complex but inter-connected social formation. Life in the major cities, with their mixed populations, produced an intellectual climate conducive to intellectual curiosity and the questioning of oppressive ideologies and customs. New teachers appeared on the scene challenging the prevalent explanations of cosmo-social order. Far from isolating themselves in the wilderness, these men and women moved from place to place addressing large audiences and debating

among themselves. The issues discussed appealed to the needs of a heterogeneous but inter-related society, such as the universality of human experience, the nature of human knowledge and the moral significance of human action.

The centrality of philosophical disputation and analytical thinking [at the time] is reflective at the ideological level of a shift away from the security of the group, towards the cutting edge of individual endeavour (Thapar 1984: 154).

The solutions proffered were as diverse as the questions raised. Is the given order of things unchangeable? Must human beings, of necessity, vest their hope for happiness beyond the threshold of this world, in another life? Is flight into the wilderness the only meaningful response to the miseries of social existence? The Universal Monarchs had arrogated to themselves power to turn the Wheel, which, it was believed, produced and reproduced the cosmo-social order. Yet, who controlled the Controller? Is there a universally valid ethic which equally binds rulers as well as the ruled, the powerful as well as the weak? According to one oppressive ideology gaining currency at the time, every person born into the world had been predestined to tread either a Way of Pleasure or a Way of Suffering. People had come to believe or were made to believe that this was the manifestation of an immanent law of justice operating in the cosmos. No one could escape its writ. Siddhattha Gotama began the proclamation of his Way to Freedom by challenging this view. He launched a daringly new social movement for the moral transformation of society. There is a Middle Way that can lead human beings through and beyond the two dead ends of Extreme Pleasure and Extreme Misery.

CHAPTER 4

TRIBES, KINGDOMS AND TRIBAL FEDERATIONS

Beginning with the *early Rig Vedic* period, this Chapter examines some of the ideas and values of tribal society in Ancient India as reflected in Vedic and Buddhist sources. Changes in tribal practices and adaptations of the clan-lineage system to suit changed conditions reflected in the earliest books of the Rig Veda, provide important clues to an understanding of the type of social formations which developed in the brahmanised Western Gangetic plains and Middle Gangetic Valley. Abstracted from these specific conditions, a discussion of ideas in Brahmin and Buddhist texts makes little sense.

Nomadic Pastoralism as a Mode of Production

Pastoralism compared to hunter-gathering represents an advance in the human control of nature. Hunter-gatherers *participate* in the processes of nature. They 'forage around' and are compelled to move camp when local resources are depleted. Hunters are animal oriented; they live by killing wild animals; they must stalk and kill their prey. Pastoralists too are killers of animals. But unlike hunters, they are no longer dependent on the vagaries of the hunt for their means of subsistence. Instead of following, they lead the animals that have become a mobile and stable reserve of food.

The practices of social equity among early Rig Vedic tribes is discussed below. The egalitarian character of pastoral tribes has been recognized by anthropologists, but over-romanticized views about this equality has been qualified by well-documented field work done by anthropologists among a variety of pastoral people across the globe.

These studies point both to the complexity of these systems and their diversity - which rules out glib interpretations or sweeping generalizations ...The ideal type of the non-stratified nomadic pastoral society has perhaps survived critical scrutiny - but not unscathed... The egalitarianism of such societies refers not to the equality between young and old, or of men and women. They may be sharply separated in rights and roles. Rather it is the male heads of domestic units who are equals (in terms of their place in the system, not necessarily in wealth) (Keesing 1985:141-42).

Nomads of the Past

The warring nomadic pastoral tribes of the Rig Veda are identified by the generic term '*arya*'. It literally means 'freeborn' (Kosambi 1977:72) suggesting the 'free' nomadic life of pastoralists in contrast to agriculturalists who were literally 'tied to the ground.' Wealth was measured in terms of the number of cows owned by a tribe. A 'man of wealth' was called *gomat*. There is no mention of gold or money as standards of wealth in the early hymns of the Rig Veda (Thapar 1984a: 24-25).

A large tribal unit was called a *gana*. It was an extended kinship group and the people belonging to a *gana* were called *jana* or *vis*. Segments of a tribe on the move were called *grama* (*gama* P). When rival tribes met there were violent clashes and to this day the word for war is *sangrama* in many South Asian languages. The people of a tribe were variously referred to as *vis*, *gana* or *jana*. The numerous verbs formed by adding prefixes to *vis*, to denote movement, to and from, is indicative of the wanderings of tribes from one pasture land (*vraja*) to another (Sharma 1985: 49).

Vedic Views: Eternally the Same?

Orthodox Hinduism, *casu quo* Brahmanism, considers its basic doctrines as *sanatana dharma*, or, divinely revealed eternal truths, which go back to the beginnings of time. This enables an a-historical approach to the interpretations of Vedic texts because it is assumed that the ideas contained in them are eternal and unconditioned. Yet, internal evidence of the Vedas shows that the nature of the Vedic gods had changed with changes in social conditions. In the earliest hymns of the Rig Vedas, natural elements were personified and worshipped as powerful gods. The chief among these gods was Indra. In the religion of the Brahmin priests the supreme deity was Brahma. In subsequent Upanishadic theo-philosophy the three of the elements earth, water and fire became abstract categories - the basic elements which were constituents of the human body. Wind was regarded as the life-breath which animates the body and therefore as the attribute of the Absolute Spirit - *Atman* (See Chapter 6).

The gods of the nomadic Aryans are not local deities. They are personifications of natural forces which the free-ranging tribes experienced wherever they went, like the Indra, the wielder of thunderbolts, Varuna the rain god, or substances they could carry with them, like the fire-god Agni and the intoxicating divine liquor, Soma, poured into Agni's mouth. The early hymns of the Rig Veda contain no reference to doctrines which orthodox Hinduism and mainstream Buddhism regard as defining features of their traditions. If the purpose of such doctrines is to explain the essential and universal nature of human beings they should be mentioned in

the earliest Indian texts, but as Joseph Campbell observes:

In the buoyant life and will to earthly power of these hymns we find nothing either of the spirit, or of the mythological world image of later Hinduism, which, ironically, is supposed to have been derived from the Vedas. There is, for example, no idea of reincarnation, no yearning for release from the vortex of rebirth; no yoga; no mythology of salvation; no vegetarianism, non violence and no caste (Campbell 1976: 184).

These doctrines come into currency after only the transition to agriculture. Property was held in common and the major concern reflected in the early Rig Vedic texts was not with individual immortality but with the collective survival and welfare of the group. The French sociologist Emile Durkheim characterised tribal consciousness as *conscience collectif*. The world-views of tribal peoples, he notes, were *representations collectif*. It is only with historical development of the social division of labour and social hierarchy that one sees the co-arising of individualism and what Durkheim calls the *conscience individuel* (1972: 24-25).

The principal diet of the Vedic nomadic pastoralists consisted of beef and the milk of the cows they herded. On ritual occasions they consumed large quantities of the alcoholic drink *soma*. The Brahmin (and Hindu) ritual taboo on beef eating was consequent to the successful Jain and Buddhist campaign against the senseless slaughter of cattle for Brahmin fire-sacrifices. Abstention from alcohol advocated in orthodox Hinduism also shows Jain and Buddhist influence.

The Social Institutions of the Early Vedic Tribes

Descriptions of kinship relationships in the pastoralist tribes in the *Rig Veda* suggest differences in roles and responsibilities, but there is no mention of social stratification or of ritual status groups as in later class-caste divided societies. Division of labour was biological: men were specialised in warfare to protect the tribe and the herd from enemy attack. Women and girls tended the cattle, and to this day the word for daughter in many South Asian languages is derived from the word *duh* - 'one who draws the milk' (Kosambi 1977: 73). The chief of a tribe was called *raja*. Derived from the root */raj*, 'to shine', *Raja* or 'Resplendent One' initially referred to a hero who led his men in battle or in cattle raids to increase the wealth, power and prestige of his people, his kinsfolk - the *vis*. The word *rashtra* also derived from the same root */raj*, referred to a *raja's* 'resplendent power.' The title *raja* underwent semantic shifts with changing social conditions. The president of a tribal federation - *ganasangha* and monarchs came to be called *rajas*. Emperors were called *maharajas*. Matters relating to the collective welfare of the group were settled in the common assembly - the *sabha* - tribal council. Later it signified

the council of a monarch (Thapar 1984: 34-35). The mastery of the horse gave the Aryan tribes a decided military advantage over peasants who had turned their swords into ploughshares. Aryan military superiority over peasant societies was based on their possession of the most powerful war machine of the period: light and swiftly manoeuvrable horse-drawn war chariots. As we saw in the previous Chapter, the wheel of the war-chariot came to symbolize the state machinery of the great kings of the Buddha's Day.

Egalitarianism in the Rig Vedic Tribes

To understand the egalitarian and communitarian practices instilled into the new community founded by the Buddha, it is important to understand their historical antecedents in ancient tribal practices recorded in the earliest Vedas. With social change, these had fallen into disuse. The Buddha restored these practices to their pristine honour in the *Sangha* he founded to serve as the exemplar and bearer of his Teaching.

Personal and domestic property like weapons, clothing, utensils were not unknown among the nomadic pastoralists. The most valued possessions were what the tribes could take along in their ox-drawn wagons. Items of property were generally the spoils of war or raids, which included abducted women (Sharma 1985: 28). The accumulation of wealth was constrained by the necessities of nomadic-pastoralism. Hoarding and mobility are mutually contradictory practices. Therefore there was no social incentive for hoarding wealth in the nomadic mode of existence. The Aryans took for their own whatever local technique suited them and moved on. Surplus production made little sense, since meat, milk and dairy products are perishable items that had to be quickly consumed (Kosambi 1977: 76).

Egalitarian social institutions and a communitarian ethos were indispensable to preserve the unity and solidarity of the group. The patron gods of the Aryans were cast in the image and likeness of tribal chiefs. The gods Indra, Agni and Savitar are portrayed as powerful *rajas* battling the enemies of the tribe and giving what they plundered to their people. In the Rig Veda the god Tvastar is hailed as "glorious life-giver," "bounteous bestower" and "the first distributor" - *prathamabalam* (Sharma 1983: 42). The relationship between the gods (chiefs) and humans was one of mutual dependence and reciprocity as in the Ancient Hebrew and subsequent Christian religious practice of *do ut des* - 'I give that you may give.' This practice of giving in order to receive is reflected in a verse of the Taittiriya Samhita "*dehi me dadami te; ne me dehi, ni te dadhe*" - "Give me and I will give you; do not give me, I will not give you" (I.8.4.1).

On ritual occasions - called *yanna* (P), *yajna* (Sk) - 'an offering' - an animal would be slaughtered and the meat shared in a communal meal; the products

of communal labour and the booty of war were brought to a common pool and redistributed by the chief, or a person appointed by him. The gatherings of the entire clan for such formal redistributions of wealth are variously referred to in the *Rig Veda* as *gana*, *vidatha*, *samiti* and *parishad* (Thapar 1984: 55). Bards sang the praises of former chiefs and the ancestral gods who had bestowed lavish gifts on the people in the past, particularly through glorious victories in battle. A passage in the *Atharva Veda* urges the people to work together like the spokes of a wheel in deference to the wishes of their elders and speaks of them receiving equal shares in connection with the functions of the *gana* (Sharma 1985: 38-40).

An oft-recurring term in the *Rig Veda* is *vraja* - 'grazing ground' or 'feeding ground.' It also has the secondary meaning of 'herd.' The people of the tribe - the *vis* - are spoken of as moving from *vraja* to *vraja* (Sharma 1985: 47). The word *vrajana* in Vedic signifies, in various contexts, 'the enclosure where the cattle were herded,' 'a cluster of temporary residences,' the 'assembly of people residing together' and in later texts, *grama* - 'permanent residences.' (Sharma 1985: 27). The shift in the significance of the word *vrajana* reflects the transition from pastoralism to sedentarism.

Interestingly, the wandering mendicant teachers who moved around and temporarily struck camp in village, town or city were called *parivrajakas*, lit., 'foragers around.' (See Chapter 8 below, for the ethical implication of this return to a bygone way of life).

Vidatha - A Formal Occasion for Pooling and Redistributing Wealth

Among the assemblies mentioned in the *Rig Veda*, the *vidatha* seems to have been the major institution for consolidating the kinship bonds of the tribe. The *vidatha* as its name suggests was probably a ritual occasion on which the distribution of wealth and sharing took place, among other things (Thapar 1984: 55-56). The redistributive functions of the *vidatha* are clearly expressed in two passages of the *Rig Veda*. At one place the people are asked to gather in the *vidatha* - place of provision, and whatever is brought in by the God Savitar is distributed among them. In another place, Agni is asked to distribute whatever is available in the *vidatha* (Sharma 1983: 40).

Bhaga - A Just and Due Share

Various terms used frequently in the *Rig Veda* derived from the roots */van*, */san* and */bhaj*, provide the clearest evidence of the practice of wealth redistribution (Sharma 1985: 41-45). In its different forms */bhaj* - 'to distribute,' occurs 34 times and the term *bhaga* - share - derived from it, occurs 58 times in the *Rig Veda* (ibid.). Verbs

derived from */bhaj* signified 'to divide,' 'distribute,' 'allot,' 'share with,' or 'to obtain as one's share' (SED 743). In the *Rig Veda*, *bhaga* is used in the sense of sharing the spoils after a raid, or the division of presentations on ritual-public occasions (Sharma 1985: 38-40).

Another derivative of *bhaj* is the word *bhajana*. The term was used in the sense of 'eating,' as well as 'dividing.' In the first sense it is pronounced with an elongated 'a' and the second without it. Cereals, food etc., had to be distributed equitably and the measuring pot used for this purpose was called *bhajana*, literally, 'the sharing vessel.' *Bhaj* was also used in the sense of 'the threshing floor,' where the grain was divided and distributed. The word for 'distributor' of the common wealth was *bhajaka*.¹ The term *bhakta*, literally 'the divided,' is used in *Rig Veda* in the sense of a meal taken together (Ibid: 43-44). According to tribal custom, each gave according to one's ability and received according to one's need. The temptation to steal would have been minimal in a community where giving and receiving was reciprocal. Understandably, the word for luck or fortune was *bhaga* and a fortunate person was called *bhagavant* - 'one who has received his/her rightful share or portion' and was therefore without want (PED).²

Dana originally meant Wealth Distribution

Dana is understood today in Hinduism and Buddhism as almsgiving or charity. The word is derived from, */da*. The verb *dadati* means to give and *dati*, *dyati*, to deal out, thus: distribution (PED). In his path breaking study *The Gift* (1925) Marcel Mauss disclosed that *Dana* in its original denotation of 'gift,' like the Latin 'donum,' referred to a system of gift-exchange functioning as a system of wealth distribution in pre-class societies, Indian and Roman. Subsequent more detailed studies of early Rig Vedic texts by Indian historians, R.S. Sharma, (1983, 1983a) Romila Thapar (1984a) and Vijay Nath (1987) have corroborated the conclusions of Mauss' seminal work. The institution of the Gift embodied the concept of a Social Covenant which is not confined to the political alone. Sharing wealth through gift exchange, in ancient pre-class societies all over the world, was a total institution, encompassing the socio-economic, juridical, moral, religious and mythical. The exchange of gifts was not a mechanical, but a moral transaction bringing about and maintaining social harmony through equitable relationships between indi-

¹ *Bhaj* is particularly noteworthy because of the privileged place that words derived from it were to take in the first Buddhist community. The Buddhist renouncers took the name *bhikkhu/ni*, derived from this root, to indicate their mendicant way of life. The title of the *bhikkhu* entrusted with the equitable distribution of goods held in common was *bhajaka*.

² One of the titles by which the Buddha was (is) venerated is Bhagavato.

viduals and groups belonging to the same society. After her systematic inquiry into practices associated with *dana* as recorded in the Vedic texts, Thapar (1984a: 104 -121) concludes that though etymologically *dana* means 'gift,' the historical origin of *dana* as a social institution can be traced back to the early Vedic practice of wealth redistribution through gift-exchange. With the emergence of class societies, the term remained unchanged, but its connotation shifted to indicate almsgiving and charity. In the new context, the notion of balanced reciprocity was mystified. What is given is visible and tangible. The equivalent share, 'merit,' the almsgiver receives in return became invisible! The idea of religious merit is a deplorable distortion of the ancient custom of Dana as a system of distributive justice. The highest source of merit it came to be taught was giving donations to religious dignitaries and institutions. Thus, charity and aid became a substitute for the imperative of justice. All major religions Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam are implicated in the deflection of the moral conscience by substituting Charity for Justice. This is true for Judeo-Christianity as for Islam. Mauss points out that the terms *sedaqa* in Hebrew and *sadaka* in Arabic today denote 'charity' whereas it originally meant 'justice' without any ambiguity (1988:16). The Buddha as we shall see in Chapter 16, called for a return to the ancient and noble practice of *Dana* as Equitable Distribution of Wealth.

The most frequent references to *dana* in later Vedic texts are in the *dana-stutis* - thanksgiving or eucharistic hymns for offerings freely made. The ritual books suggest that this custom of thanksgiving by priests for offerings made during a sacrifice was a divine institution. However, its historical origins could be traced to the offerings brought to a common pool by the people of a tribe, *jana*, *vis*. They contributed their produce to a common pool and the wealth was redistributed under the aegis of the chief or his delegate. Bards sang the praise of past warrior chiefs and of gods, thanking them for their lavish gifts to the people. The purpose of such *anamneses* and panegyrics was to stimulate even greater generosity by chiefs and gods in the here and now. Mauss suggests that the earliest *Yajna* or fire-sacrifice of the Brahmin may have originated in an earlier institution for which he used the term *Potlatch* which he borrowed from an indigenous North American tribe (1988: 15-16). It was a public occasion when a chief displayed his devotion to his people by res distributing wealth which had been pooled through offerings of the people. The ancient Indian *Vidatha* - Place of Provision - seems to be the counterpart of the *Potlatch* - 'Place of Getting Satiated.'

The changed nature of the ancient *yajna* is reflected in the items offered during the Brahmin *yajnas* as mentioned in the thanksgiving hymns. They indicate transition from a tribal pastoral to a class-based agricultural society. This Brahmin practice of giving public thanks to donors for gifts given to the clergy entered very early into Buddhist practice as well. One reads that permission to do so was given by the Buddha himself. However, in the Kutadanta Sutta (D 1.5) a radical

discourse on political economy, the Buddha calls on rulers and 'lords of wealth' to maintain pools of surplus wealth, or reserves throughout the kingdom, so that it could be distributed among the people in times of scarcity. Here too the Buddha was enacting not so much a new value legislation but returning to an ancient and noble valuation, abandoned and forgotten.

Vijay Nath in *Dana* (1987), shows that in the earliest *Rig Vedic* period, *Dana* far from connoting charity or 'almsgiving', functioned as the system of exchange which ensured equitable wealth distribution. Significantly, references to poor people depending on alms are remarkably few in the *Rig Vedic* texts,

Notices of orphans, disabled and destitutes are however plentiful in the post-Vedic sources. Their number no doubt increased on account of frequent interstate wars and the repeated scourge of famine. Nonetheless their very presence in large numbers shows that the post-Vedic social order had shed its egalitarian character and had begun to manifest all the evils of a class-divided society... As long as kinship relations remain strong, responsibility for looking after the welfare of old and disabled members would lie directly upon the kinship group as a whole. It is only when distant and close relatives cease (or are unable) to discharge their responsibility towards their less fortunate kinsmen, that orphans and destitutes are cast out of the family-fold to fend for themselves by seeking alms from strangers (Nath op.cit.: 114).

Bride Abduction: Transition to Patriarchy

The control and protection of women and cows were co-equal imperatives in nomadic tribes, since the survival of the tribe depended on their numbers and their fertility. Abducting the cattle and the women of hostile tribes struck at the very sources of their fertility and immortality. Abducted women posed a formidable threat; they carry with them the secrets of the tribe, which they could betray to the enemy. The greatest threat by far, from this point of view, was from women who elope with a hero from the enemy camp.

There has been much speculation as to whether the Aryans were foreigners doing battle to conquer indigenous peoples. From a socio-historical point of view, the nature of the conflict seems to have been a struggle between two types of cultures: nomadic-pastoral-patriarchal and early agricultural-matrifocal. To establish themselves as a ruling stratum, fiercely patriarchal nomadic tribes had to crush the autonomy of predominantly matrifocal peasant cultures. The abduction and or subjugation of women by violence was the necessary condition for the transition from gynocentric to patriarchal cultures. It is therefore not surprising that bride abduction is a major theme in Brahmin texts. Traces of the once power-

ful Goddess Mother remain in the *Vedic* texts. Ruth Katz Arabagian (1984) has studied the social dynamics behind the symbolic theme of goddess abductions in Indo-European epics in general, and in *Vedic* literature in particular. Like the theme of cattle stealing, the theme of bride stealing reflected actual practice. The names of goddesses: *Usas* - Dawn; *Ila* -Nourisher; *Vac* - Divine Word, suggest that they must have once been powerful goddesses, associated with the central themes of Prosperity/Sovereignty. In the Indo-European heroic literature, the Goddess is actively turned into the object of the hero's wrath, an enemy against whom he turns:

As such, she may represent the autochthonous religion, which the Indo-Europeans were out to conquer or, more generally, a female power, which the male hero defies in claiming fertility-power for himself. Such a version of the Goddess is more terrible than beautiful, although as always powerful. The dying and rising god gets to take revenge upon her. So as to be a suitable enemy, the female figure is often assigned warrior attributes and that of an army (Arabagian 1984: 119).³

The *Rig Veda* (R V IV.30) celebrates the total destruction of *Usas*, the Dawn Goddess: the Great Mother and Queen of Heaven. On the other hand, the Creative Divine Word the Goddess *Vac*, is not destroyed but her creative power is co-opted. She is not abducted but is reported to have eloped to the patriarchal side, passing on her secret knowledge to the enemy.

For men from patriarchal cultures marrying women of gynocentric Goddesses cultures meant surrender of progeny to the mother and would mean the 'death' of patrilineage. The *Mahabharatha* narrates that the custom of bride abduction was inaugurated in the North East by Bhishma. He crossed over to the Aryan patriarchal side, carrying with him the secrets of his maternal side, namely the traditions of the Goddess cultures. In these cultures women married husbands of their choice. Abduction denied women this choice. We also read in the *Mahabharatha* that Arjuna, already married to Draupadi, coveted Krishna's sister Subadhra. Noticing it, the 'divine' Krishna tells Arjuna, "Ksatriya girls choose their own husbands but... I doubt my sister knows what's good for her. Run away with her. Don't give her a chance. Abduct her ! ". (Lal, 108)

These myths and legends can be read as stories that delineate the transition from matrifocal to patriarchal cultures. At the ideological level, it discloses the process by which, to use Arabagian's term, the Goddess was "remoulded" in

³ Cf., the Biblical, "Girls have seen her and proclaimed her blessed. Queens and concubines have sung her praises. Who is this, arising like the Dawn, Fair as the Moon, Resplendent as the Sun, Terrible as an Army set in battle array?" (Songs of Songs 9.10).

order to consolidate the triumph of patriarchy (Arabagian 1984). The once beautiful and terrible Goddess could safely be negotiated by transforming her into a de-sexualized Virgin-Mother and a Handmaiden (*dasi*)-Wife. Goddesses figure predominantly in the Hindu pantheon. This seems to suggest that Indian religions are more androgynous than their Semitic counterparts. However, temples dedicated to the goddesses throughout India are invariably under male control. The Goddess could safely be negotiated after her subjugation by the gods. The truth of the heavenly family thenceforth would sanction and sanctify relations in the earthly family. As Arabagian comments, in Hinduism, "the Goddess was able to attract unalloyed praise precisely because mortal women had ceased to be much of a threat to men" (Arabagian 1984: 21).

Transition to Settled Agriculture

With the transition to agriculture, many of the institutions of the mobile tribes were adapted to suit the new situation. The territory occupied by a large tribe was called a *janapada*, literally - the foothold of a tribe. The term *vis*, as noted above, designated the clans which made up the *gana* - the extended kinship group. In the early sedentary period the term *vis* continued to be used for all the members of a clan, but it took on the connotation of 'settled people' or 'cultivators.' Male and female members of a clan were called respectively, *ves* and *vesya*. Similarly, a tribesman was called *ganika* and a tribeswoman *ganikā* (elongated a). Both terms, masculine and feminine, were honorifics. The segments of a clan, *vis* continued to be called a *grama* (*gama* P). The domicile of a family unit of the clan was called *grha* (Sharma 1985: 48). In time a status differentiation developed within the clans, between the senior (*vrddha*) lineages and the junior (*yuvan*) lineages (Thapar 1984: 79). The senior lineages were referred to as the *rajanya* (*rajanna* P). The term *vis* came to be used for the junior lineages. The emergence of this differentiation did not immediately lead to a break of kinship ties between the *rajanya* and the *vis*; the land continued to be the common property of the entire clan (Thapar 1984a: 79). Political functions were concentrated in the hands of the *rajanya*, who gradually freed themselves from direct production. Cultivation was done by the *vis*. They brought their produce to the tribal assembly in the form of presentations, which were then redistributed, under the supervision of the *rajanya*.

Hierarchisation of Society

Over time a gradual bifurcation of the undifferentiated *vis* into higher and lower took place. The *rajanya* of the *Rig Veda* were gradually replaced by the *ksatriya* of the Later Vedic period. "The power (of the *ksatriya*) was based on a greater control over the *jana* and its territory, which is partly expressed by the territory being named

after the dominant *ksatriya* lineage" (Thapar 1984: 32). The use of two new terms for the dominant kinship groups and the direct producers, *ksatriya* (*khattiya* P) and *vaisya* (*vessa* P) respectively, mark a permanent change in the relative positions and power of the *rajanya* and the *vis*. The separation of former kinfolk was formalised by rules of inclusion and exclusion with regard to marriage and commensality. Etymologically, the word *ksatra* from which *ksatriya* is derived means 'power.' In its functional significance it referred to actual lordship over territory. *Ksatriya* became a social category referring to a permanent ruling stratum (ibid).

After the *ksatriya* emerged as a ruling class, further development appears to have branched out along two distinct trajectories. The first in the Kuru Pancala region and the second in the Middle Gangetic Valley, the Majjhimadesa of the Buddhist scriptures. The latter was the *ganasanghas* or tribal federations where the entire land-owning class were also the ruling class and where the *ksatriya/vaisya* bifurcation did not exist. This was the type of society into which Siddhattha Gotama was born.

In the Kuru Pancala region, the development of the *ksatriya/vaisya* bifurcation was paralleled by the emergence to power of the Brahmin priesthood as a permanent social stratum. It was in the class interest of the *ksatriya* to break lineage links with the direct producers - their former kinfolk, and to present themselves as a kind unto themselves. Groups who had preserved ancient traditions and had specialized in ritual activities as a hereditary occupation were at a strategically advantageous position to exploit the new situation to their benefit. They were able to enhance their social position by conferring ritual status to the *ksatriya* as a class and by portraying the new social stratification as the manifestation of a divine intention. Gradually, they were able to establish themselves not only as a distinct social stratum, but also as the highest rank in the social hierarchy - the *Brahmana*. The willingness of the priests to serve the interests of the ruling classes is reflected in views expressed in the *Sathapatha Brahmana*. The *ksatriya* are glorified as *vismatta* - 'the eater of the vis' (III.3.2.8.). The *ksatriya* are told that it is as natural for them to eat the *vis* as it is "for a deer to eat the grain" (VIII. 7.1.2.). Social hierarchy, a product of culture, was reified and re-presented as a creation of the god Brahma.

The constant wars between *ksatriya* chiefs led to the emergence of the monarchy to end social anarchy. The monarchies which arose in the brahminised Kuru Pancala region must not be confused with the later monarchies of the Majjhimadesa or the Middle Country where the Buddha began his teaching ministry.

In the brahminised societies kings were expected to be *ksatriyas* by birth, but monarchs stood above the hierarchical stratifications of the Brahmins according to a Doctrine of Colours or the *Varnadharma*. Each rank was associated with the colours white, yellow, red and black (Thapar, 1984:44) It is obvious that these

colours in no way refer to skin colour.⁴ Then, as today in India there were dark skinned Brahmins and light skinned 'low caste' people. The caste system which Europeans encountered, developed centuries later. Brahmin ideas made little headway in North East India especially because of Buddhist opposition.

In the Brahmanised Kuru-Pancala region, monarchs drawn from the ksatriya aristocracy and enjoying the religious sanction of Brahmins ruled over this social pyramid. In the period under review, kingdoms and chiefdoms of North East India were ruthlessly destroyed and their territories annexed to the powerful monarchical states of Magadha and Kosala.

The Ganasanghas of the Majjhimadesa

Failure to pay attention to specific socio-historical conditions led to the belief that Siddhattha Gotama was a *ksatriyan* prince as defined by the Brahmanic *Varnadharma*. But it must be remembered that he was born into the Sakyan *ganasangha*. He was not a prince but the eldest son of a tribal chief.

The *ganasanghas* or tribal federations represent a type of social formation that was qualitatively different to the Brahmanic monarchies of the Kuru-Pancala region on the one hand, and the monarchical states of North East India on the other. Without understanding the social traditions in which Siddhattha Gotama was raised and which he practised as a young man, it is difficult to understand the values and practices on which the Buddha established his *Sangha*. According to the Buddhist scriptures, the West Gangetic and Middle Gangetic regions had been settled by sixteen *mahajanapada* or large scale settlements (A I.213). The term *janapada* literally means 'foothold of a tribe,' and suggests that these regions were originally settled by various tribal groups before they evolved into different types of stratified societies. By the mid-first millenium, only four of the sixteen *mahajanapada* had retained any importance in the ongoing struggle for dominance between the various *janapada*: the monarchical states of Kosala and Magadha and two powerful *ganasanghas*, namely Vajji and Malla. At the time Siddhattha Gotama renounced household life, the Sakyan federation to which he belonged had been annexed and reduced to the status of a semi-autonomous district of the Kingdom of Kosala. Sakya was obviously not a *ganasangha* of any significance, since it is not included in the contemporary listing of *mahajanapadas*. Magadha rose over the ruins of other *janapadas* and later became the greatest empire in ancient India. Historically however, the renown of Sakya would surpass them all since it produced an extraordinary human being, Siddhartha Gotama.

⁴. The Brahmin social stratification - *Varnadharma* is further discussed in the next Chapter.

The Social Organisation of the Ganasanghas

The *ganasangha* system has been variously described as republican or oligarchical, but it could perhaps be more accurately defined as *sangha* - federations or unions of *ganas* - tribes. The location of these *ganasangha* along the lower slopes of the Himalayas suggests tribes who may have settled down in this region before the dense forests of the Mid-Gangetic Valley were cleared (Thapar 1979: 50). The origin myths of some of these *ganasangha* suggest an abrupt break with ancestors and the beginning of a new lineage after banishment or voluntary exile (Thapar 1984a: 310-311). Thapar suggests that these *ksatriya* settlers may have rebelled against the increasing authoritarianism of the monarchies and moved up towards the hills to preserve their time-honoured traditions (1979: 50). This explanation is quite plausible, considering the egalitarian practices of the *ganasangha-khattiyas*. (See below). They fiercely opposed the monarchical system and held in honour the ancient, pre-brahminic traditions of their ancestors. All the members of these *ganasangha* are called *khattiya* in the Pali scriptures. There is no mention of a *vessa* (*vaisya* Sk) stratum. The senior lineages had a hereditary right to sit in the tribal assembly. They are referred to as the *rajanna* - (*rajanya* Sk). The heads of the *rajanna* families met regularly in the tribal moot hall or the *santhaghara* - to settle administrative and judiciary matters through common consent. The president of the federal council was called the *gana raja* (BD V.255); the presidency was rotated among the heads of the *rajanna* lineages (BD *ibid*). He did not enjoy monarchical power but was regarded as *primus inter pares*. The desire of later piety to elevate the status of Siddhattha Gotama to that of a prince or king is based on a misinterpretation of the title *rajanna* attributed to him in the scriptures. In the specific context it meant the eldest son who had a hereditary right to sit in the tribal council on the death of his father. It certainly did not mean 'prince' and heir to a monarch's throne.

There is no indication of the existence of a tax-collecting agency which operated independently of clan-control. Even in the most powerful of the tribal federations, Vajji, there is no reference to the presence of a salaried standing army. *Khattiyan* warriors came into action in times of conflict with other groups (Thapar 1984: 81). The *rajanna* do not appear to have taken part in direct production. The *Vinaya* mentions the lament of a sitting *ganasangha* chief, the Buddha's cousin Mahanama, about the never ending cyclic character of rice cultivation. Mahanama's wish to join the Buddha's *Sangha* was motivated by his desire to escape this samsaric boredom. His use of the causative form "must get [X,Y,Z, tasks] done" (BD V.253-4), suggests that the role of the *rajanna* stratum in production must have been managerial and supervisory.

Social stratification in the *ganasangha* consisted of a simple two-tier system: the property owning ruling *khattiya* stratum and the property-less manual

labourers, the *dasa-kammakaras*. The subordinated status of the working class was reproduced by the prohibition of marriage between the *khattiyas* and *dasa-kammakaras*, thereby automatically excluding the latter from property rights.

Kinship as Social Amalgam

Maintaining strong bonds of kinship preserved social cohesion in the *ganasanghas*. The plural was used when referring to the people of a *ganasangha* or a clan, Mallas, Sakyans, Vajjis, Kalamas. While individuals in the monarchic states were identified by their occupations, in the *ganasangha* they were identified in terms of their kinship group, for example, Siddhartha Gotama the Sakyan, Roja the Mallan, Mahapajapati the Gotamid. Respect for family obligations was a defining feature of the *ganasangha* social ethic. The organizing principle of the lineage system was *nati* - kinship. *Nati* duties and obligations were acknowledged and fulfilled with familial piety. Many *khattiyans* joined the Buddha's *Sangha* because their *nati* had already done so. The Buddha's sister acknowledged that her principal motive for becoming a *bhikkhuni* was because her brother and mother had joined the *Buddha Sangha* (Thig. 55). Six first cousins of the Buddha joined the *Sangha* together in an act of kinship solidarity (BD V.256). A distinguished Mallan openly expressed scepticism about the Buddha's Teaching, but nonetheless went to greet him in deference to the wishes of his kinsfolk who held the Buddha in high esteem (BD V.343).

After the Buddha's remains were cremated, the Licchavis, Bullis, Mallas, Kolliyas, claimed a share of the relics, because they were all *khattiyas* like the Buddha. The Sakyans stated that they had the foremost right because they alone were the Buddha's *nati* - kinsfolk (D II.165). The Buddha stated that it is common knowledge that *ganasangha khattiyans* valued their kinship ties and were "foremost among people who put their trust in lineage" (DB I.122). Kinship solidarity made Brahmin penetration into the *ganasanghas* difficult. "The social nucleus of this society was much more closely integrated with the kin group and the lineage and less so with ranking based on *varna*. It was doubtless this, together with the rejection of Vedic rituals, which made the area into a *mleccha-desa* [barbarian lands] in brahmanical eyes" (Thapar 1984: 87).

The Buddha and the Ganasanghas

Having grown up and participated in the management of Sakyan affairs as a young man, the Buddha had first hand knowledge of *ganasangha* traditions. The *Vajjians* would therefore have taken his counsel seriously, when he instructed them on seven cardinal principles which would ensure the continued unity and welfare of their *sangha* (DB II.79-80).⁵ These provide insight into the ideals that formed the

basis of a quasi-democratic⁶ type of government in ancient India. The Vajjians, the Buddha said, would not decline but prosper, so long as:

1. they foregather often and frequent the public meetings of their clan
2. they meet together in concord and carry out their undertakings in concord
3. they act in accordance with what has been thus enacted and abrogate nothing that has been enacted and act according to their ancient institutions

These three principles encapsulate the corporate and democratic traditions of government in the *ganasangha*. The strength of the *Vajjians* lay in their unity; regular meetings and full participation in the tribal assembly and collective decision-making in concord was indispensable for resolving social tensions amicably. Otherwise, dissatisfaction would fester and erupt in factional strife, weakening the internal strength of the federation. The other four principles are specifications of 'ancient institutions' which the Buddha regarded as hallmarks of a civilized *ganasangha*.

4. they honour, esteem, revere and support their elders and make it a point of duty to hearken to their words.
5. no clan women and girls are detained among them by force or abduction.

The inclusion of this condition as a *sine qua non* for ensuring prosperity and preventing social decline, is the most remarkable of the seven conditions. Its contextual significance can be appreciated if one compares this to the advocacy of bride-abduction in the Brahmin tradition and the repeated injunctions by Brahmin lawgivers to keep woman in subjugation.⁷ By urging the Vajjians to hold this principle in high honour, the Buddha anticipated by centuries what Marx regarded as the litmus test of a civilised society:

⁵ In the same Sutta the Buddha instructed his own disciples to conduct affairs in the Sangha according to the norms he recommended to the Vajjians. These are translated into specific rules and regulations in the Vinaya Pitaka - Book of Discipline. For example, transparent governance, democratic decision making, free and fair election to office, public and fair trial by peers.

⁶ The qualification 'quasi' is made because the property qualification excluded the *dasa-kammakara* from political participation. In the first Buddha *Sangha* this disqualification was abolished; men and women irrespective of their former birth status enjoyed equal rights and property was commonly owned.

In the approach to *woman* as the *spoil* and handmaid of communal lust is expressed the infinite degradation in which men exist for themselves, for the secret of this approach has its *unambiguous*, decisive, *plain* and undisguised expression in the relation of *man* to *woman* and in the manner in which the *direct* and *natural* species-relationship is conceived ... From this relationship one can therefore judge humankind's whole level of development (EPM *MECW* 3. 296-96 emphasises his).

The *khattiya* women of the *ganasangha*, as this condition suggests, seem to have been freer than their counterparts in brahminised regions. They also seem to have been women with minds of their own as can be judged by the events that led to the establishment of a female branch of mendicant teachers in the Buddha *Sangha*. It was the result of an initiative taken by Sakyan (*ganasangha*) women. This is perhaps the earliest known example of a group of women organizing themselves to publicly demand and win the same right as men. The policy that women should not be detained against their will was put to the test by the Buddha's own kinswomen. By founding a female branch of mendicants, the Buddha honoured in practice a principle which he had strongly advocated: women should not be detained and held captive in domesticity by force. The formal establishment of the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* was a public event and the ceremony that took place in *ganasangha* (Vajji) territory. This decision would not have evoked surprise or resistance in republican territory, as it certainly would have in brahminised countries.

6. they honour and esteem and revere and support Vajjian *cetiya* shrines at home and abroad and do not allow the proper offerings and rites, as formerly given and performed, to fall into desuetude

This is a concomitant of the fourth condition which relates to clan elders. *Cetiyas* or *stupas* were large dome shaped burial mounds, containing the bones of tribal ancestors. These were impressive constructions built outside the residential area, on aesthetically landscaped grounds. The cults mentioned refer to ancestor worship. The *ganasangha* origin myths trace the beginning of a lineage to an earthly, but never to a heavenly ancestor. The operative phrase in the sixth condition is, *at home and abroad*. In clan societies, kinship, rather than residence in a given territory, determines social affiliation, rights and obligations. The sense of corporate unity was symbolically expressed by the veneration of *cetiyas*, at home and abroad. When there was pressure on land due to natural increase, a segment of the tribe would migrate taking with them a share of the bones of their ancestors,

⁷The Brahmin attitude to women is summed up in the Lawgiver Manu's axiom: "Day and night a woman must be kept in subjection by the males of their families" (Law of Manu IX.2).

and a *cetiya* housing the relics would be built in the new territory. The funerary mound functioned as a concrete expression of the organic unity of the clan in a space-time continuum. It symbolized the presence of a clan segment which other kinsfolk could see and recognize. Wherever or whenever a clan or clan member was in need or threatened by outsiders, they could claim and expect the support of their kinsfolk. Hence the importance of holding these *cetiyas* in high esteem 'at home and abroad.'

Another characteristic feature of *ganasangha* tradition was the veneration of a tree as the particular totem of each clan. Sacred enclosures were built around the groves of these hallowed trees. The Sala and Kol trees were the totems of the Sakyans and the Koliyans respectively (Kosambi 1977: 109). The Buddha was born, spent the day before his Awakening, and passed away in a Sala grove. According to tribal belief this expresses the simple return from earth to earth. There is no mention of belief in the cyclic rebirth of a 'soul' or individual consciousness in the *ganasanghas*. As noted above, these beliefs were also unknown among the tribes of the early *Rig Vedic* period.

The *ganasangha khattiyans* did not subscribe to *Vedic* beliefs and practices. When a proselytizing Brahmin visited the Sakyan *ganasangha*, he was allowed to address the Sakyans in their moot-hall. But when he began to hold forth on Brahmanic doctrines, it caused much hilarity and he was literally laughed out of court (D.B.I.113). The Brahmin *ganasanghian* antagonism was mutual. "One brahman source describes republican tribes as degenerate *ksatriyas* and even as *sudras*, because they do not honour the *brahmanas* and observe Vedic ritual" (Thapar 1979: 50).

Several *cetiyas* adorned the environs of Vesali and their tranquil surroundings were very dear to the Buddha. During visits to Vajji he retired to these spots for rest and meditation and commented on their beauty and charm (DB II.111ff). During his last journey the Buddha passed through many villages and towns teaching his disciples who resided there. The departure from Vesali was particularly poignant. He may have sensed its impending destruction, for we read that when he left the capital city, he turned back and gazed wistfully at Vesali. He told his companion: "This will be the last time, Ananda, that the Tathagatha will behold Vesali. Come, Ananda, let us go on" (DB II.131). The Buddha died in the territory of the Mallas and his funeral rites were performed according *ganasangha* tradition. The khattiyans who received a share of his relics built *cetiyas* over them in their territories saying, "Come let us build a *cetiya* over the remains of the Exalted One and celebrate a feast!" (DB II.188)

The veneration of *cetiyas* (or *stupas*) and of the Bodhi Tree was to become a distinct feature world-wide of Buddhist cultic practice (See Chapter 16).

7. rightful protection, defence, and support shall be fully provided for the *arahats* among them, so that *arahats* from a distance may enter the realm, and the *arahats* therein may live at ease.

The seven conditions are presented in ascending order of importance. Last, but not least is the injunction that *arahats* be defended and supported. The first six conditions relate to the proper ordering of society. This last condition emphasizes that social decadence can be prevented only if a society has built-in safeguards to maintain high standards of public and private morality. Every society needs men and women who would be models and standard bearers of moral excellence. The Buddha does not suggest his own *Sangha* would automatically measure up to this demand. Respect and support should be given to men and women for their unimpeachable moral conduct and not because of any *a-priori* claim of privileged treatment. In Theravada Buddhist countries, the designation *arahat* is associated with men who possessed astounding praeternatural powers like levitation and miraculous translocation by flying across the skies. This later development notwithstanding, the Buddha was very clear about what true *arahathood* is. True *arahats* he insisted, are those who

abstain from slaying creatures, ... (are) modest, show kindness, abide friendly and compassionate to all creatures... abstain from taking what has not been given, live chaste lives, abstain from falsehood, stay aloof from frivolous activities and shun luxurious living (GS I.190-2).

The Destruction of the Ganasangha Way of Life

The *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* (DB II), dramatically situates the Buddha's discourse on Vajjian traditions in the context of an imminent war. The narrative begins with a declaration of war unto destruction of the Vajjian *ganasangha* by Ajatasattu, who killed his father and usurped the throne of Magadha. He sent his minister of war Vassakara to gather information from the Buddha that might be useful in planning the campaign against Vajji. The Buddha refused to become a party to such machinations. In a pointed rebuff to the royal emissary, he turned to his companion and aide Ananda, and expressed confidence that the Vajjians would be invincible if they persevered in their ancient traditions. The astute Vassakara was quick to perceive that superior force alone could not bring about the downfall of Vajji. They would have to be weakened from within by creating internal dissension before launching an offensive. The war continued for several years after the Buddha's death, before Vajji, weakened from within, and overwhelmed by superior force, finally fell into Ajatasattu's hands. Ajatasattu was not alone in the drive for territorial expansion. Several years before the fall of Vajji, King Pasenadi of Kosala was ousted from

the throne and forced into exile by his son Vidudhaba. The Buddha was probably still alive when the young king invaded Sakya and destroyed even its relative autonomy. In a wanton massacre, "he literally washed his throne with Sakyan blood" (Kosambi 1975: 160).

Sensitive observers must have read the writing on the wall, long before these dreadful events occurred. The days of the *ganasangha* system were numbered. The expanding Magadhan war machine would grind under its wheels any autonomous tribes that stood in its way. "The few surviving *ksatriya* tribes were systematically wiped out by about 350 BCE by King Mahapadma Nanda of Magadha, who completed the work of Vidudhaba and Ajatasattu. Their internal collapse was certain because of changed economic conditions. The new tribeless kings could not allow such dangerous examples of democracy to survive (Kosambi 1975: 162). Those were frighteningly violent times, indeed.

"Life even among the best of the free tribes no longer offered full satisfaction to the ablest and best of the tribesmen" (Kosambi 1977: 130). Dissatisfaction with a culture marked by violence and desire for power must have prompted outstanding *ganasanghians* like Nigantha Nathaputta (Mahavira), Makkhali Gosala and Siddhattha Gotama to opt out of society and embrace the life of renouncers. Mahavira and the Buddha predeceased their younger contemporary Gosala. He was the last of a group of eminent teachers who had practised severe asceticism in order to cleanse the self of moral impurities and to escape the horrors of samsaric existence. But in later years he succumbed to fatalism and taught the futility of moral endeavour (See Chapter 8). The last days of Gosala's life are described in A.L. Basham's study on the Ajivakas (1951), the school founded by Gosala. His fatalism finally led to despair. A disciple who came upon him and was shocked to see that the Master had decided to commit ritual suicide by starvation. Makkhali became a prophet of doom proclaiming the imminence of Five Finalities, among them, The Final Battle and The Last Catastrophe. He died believing that life had neither meaning nor purpose. There was little else to do, but eat, drink and be merry, because he was convinced that human beings could not avert their predetermined fate. Nothing could prevent the total destruction of Vajjii by Ajatasattu's army. "But why" asks Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, "should Gosala have at all looked at the battle as a 'finality' and 'the last catastrophe'?" The answer has to be sought in the nature of the destruction effected. The Vajjian federation was the last of the important free tribes in the region. Gosala was a native of Vajji, and in its destruction he would have seen the death of a way of life that he dearly cherished" (1981: 523). A similar sense of tragic loss underlies the carnage unleashed by the Great War of the *Mahabharata*. Irawati Karve (1969) appropriately titled her study of this epic *Yuganta - End of an Epoch*. Romila Thapar shares this view,

The intrinsic sorrow of the battle at Kuruksetra is not merely the death

of kinsmen, but also the dying of a society, a style, a political form. The concept of the present as Kali-yuga, 'Dark Age', combines a romanticisation of the earlier society with the intense insecurity born of a changing system (1984a: 141).

Ancestral institutions were crumbling on all sides, giving rise to an acute sense of moral collapse and loss of meaning. Ordinary men and women would have felt that they were caught up in a tragedy of gigantic proportions which they could not comprehend and whose dreadful denouement they could not prevent. Birth, decay and death are unchangeable realities of life. But when senseless violence and death were rampant everywhere, when seemingly stable institutions, traditions and beliefs that make life reassuring, are shattered and the familiar landmarks on the road of life swept aside by a tidal wave of change, the impermanence of the order of things would have made human existence itself seem absurd. Where could anguished people turn to? It is in this pervasive climate of pessimism that the Buddha came with his message of hope. As the concrete manifestation of that hope he founded a *Sangha* modeled, as we saw above, on the egalitarian values and traditions of the *ganasanghas*. The Buddha clearly rejected the monarchical organisation model. Neither did he wish to be remembered and glorified as a king. This notwithstanding, Buddhists in Sri Lanka worship the Buddha as *budhura-jananwahanse* - 'Venerable King Buddha'

CHAPTER 5

BRAHMIN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Buddhism, after having flourished for nearly a millenium, has almost completely disappeared from the land of its birth. Brahmanism, which met strong resistance from the early Buddhists, eventually triumphed in India. This chapter is a critical examination of Brahmanism, which from its inception has functioned as the ideology of the ruling elites in societies which came under its influence. This is done for two reasons. In the first place, an exposure of the oppressive and obscurantist features of Brahmanism will bring into sharp profile the enlightened and emancipatory character of early Buddhism. Brahmanism was vigorously resisted by the Buddha and his disciples. If the early Buddhist radicalism was sustained, Indian culture would have been rid of Brahmanism and its dehumanising institutions:

Buddhism raised the slogan of revolt. Everything changes. Nothing is permanent. The varna system is not permanent. Buddha openly attacked in hundreds of his sermons brahminical tyranny: the varna system, its theory of monarchy and inequality. All the oppressed and downtrodden - the low castes, the women, the poor, the indebted, the slaves - looked upon Buddha as a great liberator (Balaramamoorthy 1981: 42).

The second purpose of this exposition is to let the readers judge for themselves how much the lines may have blurred between Buddhism and Brahmanism even before the Buddhist canon closed. Buddhism, like Jainism, began as a movement of social protest. But once these two movements became institutionalized and very similar in practice to Brahmanism, there would have been little for the people to choose from among the three traditions.

The literature of the Buddhists and Jains is strongly coloured: first by the struggle against late Vedic Brahmanism and later by Brahmin penetration (Kosambi 1975: 101).

A combination of several factors may have contributed to the eventual triumph of Brahmanism in India: i. Its extraordinary resilience in accommodating any culture as long as it could be fitted into the overarching Brahmin framework of belief in gods and the caste system; ii. Buddhist and Jain accommodation of conventional values; iii. Co-option into Brahmanism of elements in Buddhism and Jainism which

had popular support and iv. The large number of Brahmins who joined the *Sangha* may have influenced the seepage of Brahmin ideas into Buddhism¹.

The Brahmins as a Ritual Status Group

The Brahmins are characterised as a 'ritual status group,' because their real position in society did not always correspond to their claimed superior status. The Brahmanic texts themselves contain records of Brahmins reduced to poverty (Kosambi 1975: 134). The Brahmins had, as discussed in the previous Chapter, emerged as a distinct social stratum through a monopoly control of ancient traditions and rituals. The Buddha exposed Brahmin mystification of the origin and social function of the priesthood. He regarded the priestly office as just another way of earning a livelihood no different to that of a farmer, trader or soldier or even, "He who lives by priestcraft is a ritualist, not a *brahmana*" (Sn 112). Public sacrifices performed by Brahmin priests became obsolete due to the sustained campaign against them by the early Buddhists and Jains. Brahmanic ministrations became confined to the domestic sphere and related to individual rites of passage. These rites are not standardized and vary from place to place, depending on the local cults the Brahmins were able to take over and 'brahmanize.'

The Sociogenesis of the Male Priesthood

In their encounters with the Buddha, the Brahmins often began by asserting the divine origin and purpose of their office. They were, they claimed, "repeaters of sacred words, knew the mystic verses (*mantras*) by heart; had mastered the Three *Vedas* with their indices; the ritual, phonology and exegesis, and the legends; were learned in the idioms and grammar, versed in *Lokayata* sophistry, and in the theory of the signs on the body of a great man" (DB I.110 and passim). From their own self-description, it is clear that the brahmins were 'priest-theologians' in the

¹ Former Brahmins are given prominent representation in the Pali scriptures. They form the largest group of disciples mentioned, followed by *khattiyas* and *gahapatis*. People from low status groups are under-represented (see Chakravarti 1987, Appendix C for a detailed analysis). H.W. Schumann (1989: 189) gives the following percentage-wise breakdown of the social backgrounds of *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*: Brahmins (m) 48.2, (f) 38.4; *Khattiyas* (m) 28.6, (f) 33.2; *Vessas* (m) 13.5, (f) 25.8; Casteless (m) 6.6, (f) 2.6; *Suddas* (m) 3.1 (f) 0. Rhys Davids was of the opinion that the proportion of people from low occupational groups is reflective of their actual representation in the rest of society (DB I.102). This is an unlikely conjecture because it would mean that the majority of the population were social elites! All pre-industrial societies have rested on a large peasant and artisan base. It is more probable that former Brahmins may have played a major role in the compilation and moulding of the oral traditions. Understandably, they would have been inclined to give prominence to members from their own ranks.

classic sense of the term. Linguistic expertise was a *sine qua non* for this profession since the brahmins, like all theologians, believed that by analyzing the sacred language in which their traditions had been transmitted, they could discover the hidden, divine meaning and purpose of the cosmos. The arcane chants - *mantras* and rituals of the priests were beyond the average person's comprehension and would have reinforced their magical consciousness. The social developments that led to the emergence of the Brahmin priesthood were discussed in the previous Chapter. Here, I look at the cultural and mythical factors that were re-combined to legitimize the position of the male priesthood.

The Ariyan-Patriarchal Tradition

Along the Aryan trajectory, the Brahmin stratum could be traced to the bards and officials who, under chiefly aegis played a prominent role in the assemblies of the *gana* and the *vidatha*. According to Thapar:

As priests attached to the clans, the ancestry of the brahmins went back to the shamans, mantics and seers of earlier times (the *vipras* and *rishis*) to which were added the reciters of hymns and the living manuals on rituals (1984a: 53).

There are continuities as well as discontinuities between shamanism and the professional priesthood. Like the shaman, a priest exercises his role on behalf of society, but there is an important difference in the source of power, and the motivation behind, these two social functions:

Society worships certain deities in a certain way, and the priest becomes ordained as a functionary to carry out that ritual. The deity to whom he is devoted is a deity that was there before he came along. But the shaman's powers are symbolized in his own familiars - deities of his personal experience. His authority comes out of a psychological experience, not a social ordination (Campbell 1988: 100).

The Brahmin priesthood based its authority on the subjective religious experiences of ancient *rishis*. Knowledges derived from the mystical experience of the ancients, the rituals of shamans, and ancient oral traditions were appropriated, reified and made independent of the person who holds the priestly office. Priestly power, according to priestly theory, is derived from a contractual relationship between a god and his appointed priest-sons. Once the gods transfer their power to the priesthood, they cannot take it back; when the ritual acts are correctly performed, accompanied by the proper utterance of the right mantras, the gods obey the priests. This idea is also basic to Roman Catholic sacramentology:

Effects follow *ex opere operato* - that is to say by the very performance of a ritual act not *ex opere operantis*, or to put it in other words, irrespective of the sanctity of the officiating minister or the merit of the recipient but by the very application of the matter and form of the performed rite (Tanqueray 1903: 176).

It is on the basis of the supposedly divine power of their *mantra* and their ritual actions that the Brahmins arrogated to themselves the title *Brahmana* - 'the most excellent.' The Buddha called this a shameless usurpation of a title, which in the past had been reserved only for men of excellent moral character (See below Chapter 12).

The Non-Aryan Goddess Cults

To understand how an exclusive male priesthood gained credence among ordinary folk, it is necessary to understand the earlier understanding of the sacred and the mysterious which it co-opted. The 'Idea of the Holy' is derived from the early human *experience* of motherhood as 'a tremendous and fascinating mystery'. In pre-patriarchal times, the fertility of the land and of women were regarded with awe as sacred realities. We still speak of 'Mother Earth.' In a period when the processes of nature were directly experienced and the process of child-birth was not considered ritually unclean, Earth Magic and Woman Magic were regarded with equal awe. Just as the Earth miraculously gives birth to and nourishes various forms of life, so too women reproduce human life out of themselves and nourish them from their own bodies. The period of pregnancy as a woman's belly grew was seen as a mysterious process and people awaited with great expectancy to see the mother reveal the fruit of her womb, as if it were a divine epiphany. The genealogy of */brh* - 'power to make grow or increase,' from which the names Brahma and Brahman are derived, may be an allusion to the power of women who have within themselves the ability to 'make grow and increase.' It is not without significance that the personal name Brahma would subsequently be replaced in *Upanishadic* theology by the neuter term Brahman. (In Greek too the word for 'spirit' is the neuter term *pneuma*. The 'Holy Spirit' is veiled in neutrality).

A legend handed down in the *Kena Upanishad* (III.IV) dramatizes the first encounter between the patriarchal Aryans and Goddess worshipping peasant cultures. As they sped Eastwards across the plains of North India, the free-booting Aryan warrior-gods Indra, Agni and Vayu are literally stopped in their tracks by a curtain of mist rising from the damp earth. The powerful heroes are unable to penetrate this mystic 'veil' and are thrown into confusion. The gods beseech 'the power-behind-the-veil' to reveal itself. The mist disappears and a beautiful young woman reveals herself as Uma Himavati - [*'Uma'* from */va* - flax - 'she who

weaves' the destinies of humans; '*himavati*' - daughter of the snowy realm – *Himalaya*. She is the Goddess who feeds the rivers and fertilizes the earth. She instructs the warrior gods about the hidden truth of their much vaunted manly powers. All men are born of the very women they later hold in contempt. The physical power they use to subjugate women comes from Her - the Goddess. The power they could not conquer, Uma Himavati tells them, is Brahman. It is through the power of Brahman, she reminds the warring gods, that they have become great. Their male bravado notwithstanding, their strength comes from the Goddess-Mother, she from whom they came and to whom they must return. This text could be dated to about the seventh century BCE according to Heinrich Zimmer. It discloses

that it was the Goddess, and not the seemingly dominant masculine divinities of the Vedic pantheon, who was the real knower of the hidden, central, holy power of the universe by which all victories are won in the unending drama of the world-process. For she herself was that self-same power. She is brahman, the life force of the universe that secretly dwells within all things... She, womanhood incarnate, becomes the guru of the male gods. She is represented as their mystagogue, their initiator into the most profound and elementary secrets of the universe, which is in fact her own essence (Zimmer in Campbell 1976: 205).

"There can be no doubt about it: an alien constellation has made itself known to the Brahmins and is in the process of being assimilated" (Campbell *ibid*). Thereafter, the source of this power was occulted and presented in neuter terms.

Banishment of the Goddesss

The Goddess *Usas* mentioned in the *Rig Veda*, must have been a powerful deity. She is portrayed as Indra's main enemy in the heavens, and her defeat is celebrated with undisguised glee:

This heroic and virile deed didst thou do, O Indra, that thou didst strike down the evil-plotting woman, the daughter of heaven, *Usas*... Her wagon lay completely smashed to bits on the (river) *Vipas*, she (herself) fled to the furthest distance (RV IV.30.8-11 – trans. Kosambi 1992: 63).

Usas is the Dawn Goddess - the Gate of Heaven – her Sun-Son comes forth through her portals - her nether mouth. In pre-patriarchal times, from Mesopotamia to India, the moon was venerated as a goddess symbol. It is the coincidence of the cycles of the moon and the fertility cycle of women which made the powers of women seem a tremendous yet fascinating mystery. In the Goddess myth, the sun is a weak phallic symbol. The moment it rises to the zenith of its power and glory at noon, it

begins its descent to be swallowed up the by the jaws of darkness. But the Dawn Goddess brings him again and again to new life. She is the 'Womb' and 'Tomb.' The Mother Goddess was once the Queen of Heaven. With the triumph of patriarchy, this primeval sense of the holy was turned upside down. The Sun-son comes from the mouth of a Heavenly Father and returns to his breast. In Goddess-Mother cults, women were the priestesses of the Holy. Kosambi (1992: 48-67) through a critical reading of Early and Later Vedic myths and legends provides insight into the earthly trace of *apsaras* - shimmering celestial beauties celebrated in Brahmin and Buddhist legend, art and poetry. They may originally have referred to the priestesses of non-Aryan Goddess cults. These beautiful women were regarded as 'priestesses' and earthly representatives of the Celestial Goddess Mother. *Gandharvas*² - *gandhabbas* (P) supernatural beings always mentioned in association with *apsaras* may originally have been the males chosen to copulate with these 'priestesses' - during a sacred fertility rite - *hieros gamos* (sacred marriage). They were also the consorts and protectors of these sacred women. In this context, an event narrated in the *Mahabharatha* is of particular interest. During their period of exile, the five Pandava brothers and their common wife Draupadi, disguise themselves and become servants in the court of King Virata of Matsya. When the general of Virata's army, Kichaka, persistently attempts to ravish the beautiful Draupadi, she warns him that she has "five *gandharva* husbands to protect her" (Lal, 178).

Under patriarchy, the realm of the holy and the celebration of sacred mysteries become the exclusive preserve of a male priesthood. According to Chattopadhyaya (1959) and Kosambi (1962) the historic success of the Brahmin priesthood is due to the fact that it was modeled on earlier goddess cults. In the transition period, "Men could become priests only by changing their roles to that of women" Chattopadhyaya (1981: 277). Kosambi draws attention to a curious rubric in a *Rig Vedic* ritual which warns newly initiated priests: "Gaze downwards not up; hold your feet together; let not your rump be seen; for thou O priest art become a woman" (RV VIII.33.19).

The male priesthood established itself by occulting its maternal trace. The activities of the male priesthood, can be decoded as 'ritual mummery', as for example, in Roman Catholic sacramentology: the ritual activities of priests are mimetic of what mothers do in the 'profane' order; give birth, nurture the newborns, prepare and serve the daily meal and care for the sick. The sacrament of matrimony however, retains the character of *hieros gamos*. The priest is only a witness, presiding and blessing the public ceremony by which the marriage is ratified. The husband

² The *gandhabbas* reappear in Buddhist myth as discarnate consciousnesses hovering around the bellies of women during their fertile period, waiting to enter when intercourse takes place!

and wife are the actual 'ministers' of the sacrament. The public rite must be privately consummated in carnal union for it to become a sacrament. The everyday domestic order is brought under male control and confined to the private sphere. The maternal functions once considered awe-inspiring mysteries are ritualised and transferred to the public sacred realm and performed as sacred signs pointing to hidden mysteries. If women were permitted to perform these public rituals they would be celebrating the realities of their own lives and the mystified difference between sign and reality - *signum et res* - would disappear. When one rends the mystic veils of the male priesthood, one sees clearly that the 'mysteries of faith' are simulacra of Mother-religions. For an exclusively male priestly order to be able to thrive on 'mysteries' it must banish woman into the realm of ritual impurity, just as Usas 'was banished to the furthest distance.'

The Myth behind the System: A Hymn to Him

The doctrine of the four colours discussed in the previous Chapter was provided divine sanction by a creation myth recorded in a late hymn of the *Rig Veda*, the *Purusha Sukta* or The Hymn of Man.

It is the Man who is All, whatever has been and whatever is to be. He is the ruler of immortality.

They (the gods) anointed the Man, the sacrifice born at the beginning

When the gods divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him?

What did they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs and feet?

The head became the Brahmana, his arms were made into the Ksatriya, his thighs the Vaishya, and from his feet the Sudra was born (R.V.X.90).

The myth is a comprehensive, divine charter for the maintenance of an unequal social order, in which the priests arrogated to themselves the role of sacred cosmocrats. In the beginning was the Male. A male is portrayed as the victim of a primeval sacrifice. A hierarchically stratified society was created from his killed and resurrected body. The masculinisation of society, through the sacrifice of Man is total. Woman is completely excluded or, more correctly, erased from the public, ritual order. If in real life, there had been anxiety of the phallus being enveloped and swallowed up by the female, it is overcome in an imagined reality in which the female is subsumed in the male and erased. In the myth, the male body is sacrificed and dismembered. The limbs are then put together. The dead male is resurrected

from the dead and the limbs of this mystical (male) body are made to represent a ritually stratified new society. As in the sacred realm, the female is subsumed by the male body and rendered invisible in the new body politic. The polar opposite of the most honoured organ the head are the feet. They are made to represent the ritually unclean, “the foot-people,” whose rights could be trampled upon with impunity. It is the *svadharma* - inherent nature - of the *sudra* to be at the bottom of the social heap bearing all the burdens of society.

Ideology of Ritual Impurity

The *Purusha Sukta* is a classic example of the use of the human body for exclusion/inclusion by ritual purity/impurity. Roger M. Keesing observes that as anthropological studies accumulate, it is becoming clearer that symbolic and sociological structuring based on the human body are quite common. In the myth-makers' imagination, cosmology and social structure are intimately intertwined and the one cannot be understood without the other:

Public rites and collective concerns can dramatize private psychological conflicts. If in the past the private fantasies and fears of men who played a role in the evolution of such ritual and cosmological systems, had not struck a responsive chord with their fellows - perhaps arising and acting out the psychic conflicts shared by many of them - they would never have been institutionalized in the first place... If rituals were simply public performances that were no longer meaningful in terms of individual psychic experience, they would not have endured, but conversely, once such a belief-system is institutionalized, it perpetuates the anxieties that may have given initial rise to it, and creates new ones. Ritual behaviour and cosmological beliefs, cast in cultural terms, undoubtedly evolve. But so do customs and belief-systems that sustain male dominance, oppress women and the young, traumatize and torment (Keesing 1985: 341-2).

The injunctions against and the negative stereotyping of women handed down in the Brahmanic and Buddhist scriptures must have “struck responsive chords” in the men who were the prime collators and transmitters of these traditions. Otherwise they would not have been incorporated into their respective religious-systems.

The Brahmin Theory of Kingship

According to Brahmin theory, the monarchy is a divine, not human institution. The people assembled together and appealed to the gods for a king to end widespread conditions of social anarchy. The gods appointed Manu, the legendary lawgiver as

king. He was at first reluctant to accept the office, but agreed after striking a bargain with gods and humans. He demanded and was guaranteed one-tenth of the grain produced, one fiftieth of animal wealth, the most beautiful of young women and a fourth part of the merit earned by his subjects. In another version, the origin of kingship was traced back to Prthu, the earth god. He was consecrated by Vishnu and Indra, after which Vishnu entered his body. In yet another version, the gods on their first attempt created a dark, ugly, short-statured man whom they called Nisada. Dissatisfied with their creation, the gods banished him to the forest, to live among wild tribes. Prthu was created after the failure of the first attempt (Thapar 1984: 118-120). In this latter origin myth, a clear demarcation is drawn between forest dwelling tribes and the agriculturists. It also suggests that at least some of the forest tribes may once have been a settled people defeated by an invading force and forced to retreat into the forests. Vishnu, the Creator God, is associated with Prthu (Earth), suggestive of a mythic substitution of the Goddess-Mother. Manu and Prthu are divine sons and are the products of separate acts of creation.

Theoretically, the king is placed outside the *varna*-scheme. Even where a *khattiya* may have become *de facto* ruler by conquest, the theory projects *de jure* legitimacy and sovereignty as a divine right, which can be conferred only by priestly consecration. The Brahmin myths of origin formulate an ingenious theory of political power. Sovereign power descends on the king from above. It is not derived from the people. As in other theories of divine right, kings are sovereigns - *ex gratia dei*- by the grace of God. The king has his own *svadharma*. He is therefore, in essence, or formally, not responsible to the people but to the Gods for his conduct. According to the priests, the sacred mystery behind the cosmo-social order was the power of their sacred rituals – *samskaras* – a set of coordinated actions and words. The priestly discourse about the power of their *mantras* and rituals to automatically produce effects in the world is based on an assumed premise – that the ultimate reality on which all reality is grounded, is “Great Brahma, the Supreme One, the Almighty, the All-seeing, the Ruler, the Lord of all, the Controller, the Creator, the Chief of all, appointing to each his place, the Ancient of the Days, the Father of All that Are and To Be” (DB I.281). Since the divine being is omnipresent, his power saturated all of reality - the cosmos, social institutions and, as the *Purusha Sukta* claims, the very bodies of people. This discourse about a God who is an Almighty Father can be deconstructed and disclosed as quintessentially a patriarchal power discourse.

The Fire-Sacrifices: Religious Celebrations of Greed

The Brahmin priesthood had developed a variety of public sacrifices which were referred to by the generic name *yajna* (*yanna* P). In its verbal form, *yajati* means ‘to revere or worship’ in a specific sense, through gift or almsgiving as a formal

act. It therefore has the same connotation as the Latin *sacrificio* - to make sacred by setting apart and offering (PED 546). Socio-genetically, as we saw in the previous Chapter, the *yajna* can be traced back to the formal prestations of the *vis*, the chief at the tribal assembly.

The Buddha explained to a group of wealthy Brahmins the true genesis of the term *Brahmana* - 'the excellent.' Brahmanas of yore had lived simple and virtuous lives, but some began to covet the great wealth, the gold, palaces and the beautiful women of *rajas* (chiefs, kings). They devised human and animal sacrifices and persuaded *rajas* to commission these liturgies to increase their wealth and to receive the blessings of perpetual youth and longevity from the gods. As payment for the performance of these sacrifices the Brahmins demanded gifts of corn, gold, women adorned in gold and many chambered palaces. When the moral leaders of society became inflamed with greed and began to commit crimes of injustice and violence, the moral standards in society declined and ordinary men and women too succumbed to the power of sensual desires. The Buddha called the sacrificial system of the Brahmins "a cruel dhamma" (Sn 297-313).

The institution of *danastuti* - giving thanks, for the generosity of chiefs to their people, had degenerated into a device for satisfying the insatiable greed of the fire priests. These thanksgiving hymns commemorated lavish gifts given to priests in the past in order to stimulate the congregation to even greater generosity. These reports were highly inflated; for example, the *Aitareya Brahmanas* (8.20) recalls that kings in the past gave a thousand pieces of gold, plus fields and quadrupeds to priests, for performing the ceremony of royal consecration. Another verse (8.22) goes on to speak of tens and thousands of female slaves and tens of thousands of elephants that were gifted. About the gift of elephants, Kosambi drily comments: "The fantastic nature of this supposed gift will be recognized by anyone who has to feed one elephant, let alone a thousand" (1975: 133). The greed of the fire-priests, particularly for gold, was inflamed as new sources of wealth became available. Again and again the Brahmanic rituals eulogize the gift of gold, for as the *Taittiriya Samhita* (5.2.7.) declared: "Gold is immortality." The greed of the fire-priests was personified in the greedy fire-god Agni. Brahmins had turned the greed for gold into a sacred hunger - *sacra auri fames*.

The central figure of the fire-sacrifice was the fire-god Agni. Burning, as explained in Chapter 3, was the method used in the Kuru-Pancala region for forest clearance. The Fire-God Agni became a powerful deity in the public and domestic spheres. The fierce will-to-power, the violence, the blood and gore celebrated by this rite can be comprehended by the legendary origin of fire-sacrifice, described

³ Quotations and summarized narrative from P. Lal's abridged transcreation of the *Mahabharatha*.

in the *Mahabharatha*.³ Krishna and Arjuna were seated in a secluded spot on the banks of the Yamuna, when Agni the fire-god appeared before them in the form of a Brahmin. Agni told the two warriors that he was famished and demanded: "Give me food! The heroes inquired how they could satisfy this divine hunger. The fire-god pointed to the Khandava forest and told them: "I would like to eat this forest." Arjuna and Krishna mounted their war chariots, and placing themselves at opposite ends of the forest raced around, setting fire to it in a wide circle. Their movements were so swift that the divine Krishna and the human Arjuna blurred into a single person. (In patriarchal sacramentology, at the moment when the ritual act is performed priest and God become one). As the forest burned, animals and humans rushed helter-skelter, screaming in panic. Some died calmly, without fleeing, unwilling to leave their children behind; others wailed, as the forest rivers began to boil and the burning verdure roasted the fish and tortoises. Birds began to fly to safety, but were mercilessly shot down by Arjuna and they fell screaming to the ground to be consumed by the flames. The noise of the burning forest was like the divine churning of the ocean; the flames rose to the skies and made the gods anxious. They approached Indra, asking, "Is this the end of the world? Why is Agni burning everything below?" The flight continued - *rakshashas* and *nagas*, wolves, bears, bruised elephants, lions, deer, buffalo and hundreds of birds saw Krishna and Arjuna standing armed and were paralysed with fear. Then mercilessly, Krishna hurled his divine discus at them cutting them down in hundreds. Protected by Krishna and Arjuna, Agni burned the forest for a full fortnight, sparing only six dwellers. Then, "Agni feasted happily on rivers of blood and marrow." The satiated fire-god told his human servitors, "You did something for me even a god could not have done. Ask a boon." Arjuna asked for all the divine weapons of Indra, and these were granted to him.

Irawati Karve (1961) points out that the entire episode provides a glimpse into the larger struggles between the Aryan and non-Aryan people who were the original inhabitants (*adhivasis*) of the region. What was the message, Karve asks, that was being conveyed through the glorification of this fierce and ruthless holocaust of an entire forest population? Why was the forest burned so mercilessly? The probable historical explanation, she suggests, may be that this 'holy war' was waged as a ritual act of ethnic cleansing. The *Mahabharata* states that the forest territory was ruled by a *Naga* king called Takshaka. But who were the *Naga*?

The word *naga* is generally used for serpents. However in the *Mahabharata*, the Nagas seem to be humans... The land was usurped after a massacre, a massacre which is praised as a valorous deed. This was because the victims were not Ksatriyas or their Aryan subjects. All the high-sounding morality of the Ksatriya code was limited to their own group. Here again, Krishna and Arjuna played the familiar role of the conquering settler. Did Krishna and Arjuna feel that they had to kill every

creature in order to establish unchallenged ownership of the land?... Their sole aim was the acquisition of land and the liquidation of the Nagas. But the cruel objective was defeated. All that they gained through this cruelty were the curses of hundreds of victims, and generations of enmity (Karve 1991: 113-118).⁴

The Horse Sacrifice: A Barbaric Liturgy

The Horse Sacrifice was an adaptation of rites going back to the pastoral period, to suit the interests of kings 'desirous of conquest' to expand their territories. In essence, the Horse Sacrifice is a ritual enactment of a perverse theology of territorial sovereignty, established by conquest and subjugation. The *Sathapatha Brahmana* (X111.1-5) has a detailed description of this Sacrifice. It was performed in the open and the sacrificial ground was specially prepared and consecrated for each occasion. "Every aspect of the sacrifice had its counterpart in the structure of the universe, every act a cosmic reference: the power of the rite to work effects upon the world derived from the precision of these analogies. This altar is the farthest end of the earth; this sacrifice is the navel of the universe; this Brahman, is the final abode of Speech" (Campbell 1976: 193). The expropriation and appropriation of goddess functions are clear: the sacrifice becomes the umbilical cord which nurtures life. The Goddess of Speech - *Vac* is resurrected as the Word of the Father God Brahma(n).

The *yajnas* though veiled in sacrality, had a clearly profane function - to legitimize gender and class oppression and to discipline the subjugated groups. During the entrance and exit processions of these liturgies, the *vaisyas* and *sudras* were hemmed in between the Brahmins and *ksatriyas*, "to make them submissive" (SB 6.4.4.13). One of the purposes of the sacrifice was to ritually enact and legitimize the exploitation of the two lower *varnas*. The purpose is clearly stated in the *Aitareya Brahmana*.

Like a *vaisya* ... tributary to another, to be eaten by another, to be oppressed at will. Like a *Sudra*, the servant of another, to be removed at will, to be slain at will (AB 7.29).

The prelude to the Horse Sacrifice was warfare. After the consecration of a king, a ritually purified pure bred stallion was driven out of the kingdom and allowed to roam free for an year. The ritual expressed the king's role as a *vijigisu* - 'he who desires conquest.' The driving of the stallion into foreign territory was intended to

⁴ It is in the context of such glorification of violence and militarism that we must understand the Buddha's and Mahavira's *ahimsa* campaign.

provoke a *casus belli*. A *khattiya* chief whose territorial rights were violated was honour-bound to fight the aggressor. After a victorious campaign, the horse was brought back to the sacred enclosure to be sacrificed to Indra, the warrior-god. The king presided over the Horse Sacrifice performed by the fire-priests. The animal was stretched on the ground, covered with a cloth and suffocated to death. The method of killing by suffocation may have been adopted to ensure that the death struggle would force out seminal fluids from the phallus of the horse. This was followed by an obscene fertility rite, probably an inversion of the fertility rites of goddess-cults.

The *mahishi* or senior consort of the king, accompanied by four female companions, was led to the dead horse and made to lie down beside it. *Mahishi* and beast were covered with a golden cloth and the senior priests invoked the gods so that the stallion would deposit his seed inside the queen. The rubric prescribed that the queen should take the equine phallus and press it into her vagina. While doing so she was required to beg the Goddess-Mother to assist her by a triple invocation, "O Mother! Mother! Mother!" (*Amba! Ambika! Ambalika!*). This rubric seems to have been included to serve as a salutary warning to independent-minded women present at the sacrifice. Amba, Ambika and Ambalika were three noble sisters, from a matrifocal culture. They were abducted by the warrior-hero and proto-lawgiver of the *Mahabharatha*, Bhishma, as they were about to marry the husbands of their choice. In a perverse anamnesis and ritual re-enactment of this event, the *mahishi*, as senior lady of the realm, is required to recall the violence which marked the transition to patrilocality and patriarchy. The 'spiritual climate' for the rite was prepared by the priests who took the initiative in titillating sexual desire in the attending women, by engaging them in luridly obscene exchanges. When the young *sudra* woman accompanying the queen impudently joined in the saucy exchange, she was reminded of her position by one of the priests:

When the deer eats the corn, it does not think of the village cow. When the *sudra* woman is taken by the *ariya*, she does not think of wealth.

A priestly exegete clarifies the meaning of this rubric: "The grain is the people and the deer is royal power."

The Horse is the homologue of the god Indra and his earthly representative,

⁵ For obvious reasons, the seminal fluids were associated with male potency. The ghee-like seminal fluids were considered the secret source of male potency and right to sexually overpower women. In Brahmin fantasy, the erect phallus swollen by 'marrow' becomes a hard bone-like rod - *danda* - a powerful 'weapon' to 'whack' women: "Ghee is actually a thunder bolt. Gods disciplined their wives by beating them with the thunderbolt like ghee. Wives who are weakened by such assaults do not even own their bodies. They have no claim for any other heritage either" (Sat. Br IV.4.2.13).

the king. Once the copulation was enacted, the marrow of the horse⁵ was extracted, cooked by the priests and offered to the king who inhaled the steam of the marrow, drawing in to himself the potency of the stallion. The 'marrow in the bone' here, is a metaphor for the seminal fluids, which it was believed, gave the erect phallus its bone-like hardness. Symbolically, the power of the dead stallion, part of which was pressed into the vagina of the *mahishi*, was transferred to the king. Thereafter, the remains of the beast were burnt and offered to Indra as a fire-offering.

It is in the context of such cruel fire-sacrifices that the Buddha's unrelenting opposition to the spread of Brahmanic ideas and practices has to be appreciated. His debates with Brahmins were not mere abstract exercises in comparing and contrasting two doctrinal systems. These public disputations had to do with either support for, or protest against, a particular social order. This can be seen if we critically examine the theoretical and practical implications of *yajnas* like the Horse Sacrifice. The place of sacrifice becomes the axial point of the cosmo-social order. The Brahmin rituals - *samskaras* are ideologically projected as 'the wheels' which kept it going. The Horse Sacrifice was not a mere commemoration of a myth understood as a fantastic tale. Its co-references were to actual events: bride-abduction, war and violence inflicted on women and the working classes and animals. Social hierarchy was sacralized through these events. The enactment of mythicized events functioned as an anamnesis and actualisation of past events. An unjust social order was dramatized as the manifestation of an awesome mystery of faith. Its immediate pedagogical purpose was to instill discipline and submission in the subordinated sections of the population.

Particularly noteworthy is the ritual celebration of the subjugation of women. In the patriarchal religion of the Brahmins, the sexuality and fertility of women, which in the earlier Goddess cultures were seen as the *forces propres* of women, are brought under male surveillance and control. The priests initiate sexual arousal in the women but it is channeled and confined to fertility and reproduction. The *sudra-dasi* is reminded that she could be had for mere pleasure. She should consider it an honour, a reward in itself, to even be raped by an Aryan man. The women attending the sacrifice could hardly have missed the message of the rite, performed by the leading lady of the realm and her consorts. The public debasement of women, ritually enacted, was total. Public and domestic violence towards women was religiously justified. Sexual pleasure was depicted as a sacred male prerogative. The lesson was clear. No virtuous woman, but only a whore, would take the initiative to arouse sexual desire in men. Religious rites such as these reflected and reinforced the patriarchal values of society. As the sacrifices grew more elaborate and extravagant, and with no corresponding development in the forces of production, the greed of rulers and priests could only be satisfied by ever increasing demands - by literally eating what the people needed for mere subsistence, "like wild deer feeding on the corn."

Secular Theology of Sacrifice.

Agni, the God of Fire is a powerful metaphor for insatiable greed. Of the four elements (Earth, Wind, Water and Fire), fire can sustain itself only by consuming any and every combustible object it touches. Its very existence is based on insatiable need. The crudity of Brahmin Fire Sacrifices may seem cruelly exploitative today, but the inhumanity of today's 'advanced' globalized economic system, equally driven by greed (profit motive) are veiled by 'golden cloths' of civilised' rituals and rational and 'scientific myths.' Whether presented in fantastic imagery or in rational language, the mythology of 'sacrifice' endures. Whether one calls it the will of a Brahmin god, like Agni, the awesome Law of Karma or, the workings of the neo-Brahmin 'invisible hand,' these myths are unanimous that social inequality is the manifestation of an immanent justice at work in the world. From this point of view, it is a necessary law that people have to make sacrifices: that immiserisation is a necessary precondition for economic growth. Not human beings, but impersonal 'market forces,' order all things sweetly towards a historically pre-determined consumer paradise for all. The Place of Sacrifice is the stock market. Shopping malls are the new cathedrals of consumerism. Wealth accumulated at the top, secular 'theologies' assure us, will trickle down like a redemptive flow of blood to the poor. What drives this system is the religiously sanctified 'profit motive' which is a euphemism for an endless spiral of infinite wants and the demi-urge of profit maximisation and 'healthy' competition. Without these there would be no economic growth and no welfare. The civilised world has erected a new sacrificial altar to infinite wants.

The Buddha diagnosed the root cause of this madness. The world is re-birthed again and again - *samsara* - because of craving - *tanha* - a repetition compulsion. The world has become an ocean of desire. In such a world, the real religion of Man is not in the Temple but in the Market Place.

In India to this day, beggars stretch out their hands and plead, *Bhakshi!*, *Bhakshi!* The plea literally means, a Share!, a Share!, and is derived from the same root as the word *bhikshu* (m)/ *bhikshuni* (f); 'one who asks for a share' was the Buddha's chosen title for his renouncers. The title has remained unchanged though nowadays Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka hardly ever beg their daily meal from door-to-door. In Sri Lanka however, as it was in the Majjhimadesa of the Buddha's Day, hungry children "stretch out their hands and with humble mien" beg on the streets for a morsel of food to still their hunger, pleading: "*Aney, pin sindhu venna, mokak hari denna bada ginna nivanna* " – "Have pity and to gain merit, give something to put out the fire in the stomach.' *Ginna* is derived from *agni*; *nivanna* - to 'put out' is has the same meaning as the Goal of the Buddha's Way - *Nibbana*, extinction of the Fire of Craving!

"The World is Ablaze! All the Senses are Ablaze! Ablaze with the Fire of Craving (*Tanha*)!" the Buddha declared in his Fire Sermon (See Chapter 13). For those millions the world over, who daily suffer the pangs of hunger - the '*agni* (fire) in the stomach' can be put out only if the *tanha* of those who have much and want ever more is extinguished. Meanwhile the Greedy God of Fire will continue to "feast happily on rivers of blood and marrow."

CHAPTER 6

PRIVATE SALVATION-SEEKING (I) THE MYSTICAL AND METAPHYSICAL WAY

In this and the following Chapter, two forms of self-liberation practised in India during the sixth century BCE are looked at: yogic concentration and the practice of physical mortification. The generic term used in the Buddha's Day for individuals who withdrew from society to realise self liberation was *samana* (*sramana* Sk) - literally, 'striver'. It has been translated into Western languages as 'ascetic', which is derived from the Greek *asketos*. In Ancient Greece it referred to a person who trains himself to be skilful, as for example, an athlete or gymnast. The term was later divorced from its everyday connotation, subsumed into religious discourse and used with reference to persons who practice self-denial and mortification of the 'flesh' to purify themselves from all taints of evil. In the Buddha's Day the term *samana* had a connotation similar to the Ancient Greek *asketos* and referred to anyone who trains himself-herself to master a skill. The Buddha was referred to as the *samana* Gotama by outsiders. This is translated as 'the ascetic Gotama' reinforcing the view that he was a religious recluse, who practised self mortification. Individuals who became disciples of the Buddha pledged that they would freely train themselves to become skilful in practising the good life. The terms 'sinful' and 'virtuous' are absent from the Buddha's moral lexicon. His preferred terms were *kusala* and *akusala* - skilful or unskilful responses to the predicaments of the human condition. The Buddha urged his disciples to summon up their energies and to become skilful exponents of the art of living.

The Way of Oblivion

This Chapter examines practices of individualistic salvation-seeking which aim at attaining mental tranquility and ecstatic 'union with god' through systematic regulation of physical and psychic processes. Indian ascetics have developed a variety of techniques to realize this goal which could be classified under the generic term, 'Yoga'. Yogic techniques are not 'religious' or 'spiritual' exercises *per se*. They can be learned and mastered by anyone with the necessary motivation and determination. "Yoga is a good system of exercise in a hot climate for people who do not live by muscular exertion and hard physical labour" (Kosambi, 1977: 105). Today yogic meditation is practised by believing Western Christians and even by individuals who are not *per se* 'religious'.

Techniques for attaining intense states of mental concentration have been

part of a very ancient tradition in India and are very probably a legacy of ancient *shamanic* techniques. The earliest mention of individuals practising extraordinary feats is in the *Rig Veda* (V I.5.4; VII. 56.9; X.109, 136, 154.2). The terms most frequently used in the *Rig Veda* to describe these individuals, are *yati*, *muni* and *rishi*:

The etymology of these words indicates magic, mystical rites and the ecstasy which comes with vision and inspiration. In short, the kind of activity which is more associated with shamanism. The long-haired *muni-kesin*, flying through the air, suggests shamanising techniques, as does also the reference to magical heat *tapas* (Thapar 1984a: 67).

Shamanism is common in tribal societies still in the stage of subsistence economies. With the transition to agriculture, *shamanism* began to lose its social function, (Campbell 1988: 100) but many of these techniques seem to have subsequently been adapted for purely personal goals. The Indian ascetic practices and the Brahmin priesthood could be seen as two offshoots of *shamanism*. Given the extremely uneven and unequal character of social development in India, some people are still at the stage of hunter-gathering and survive on subsistence economies; *shamanism* and magical practices have survived to this day, alongside various practices of self-torture and self-debasement, some of them extremely bizarre (See following Chapter).

A Technique for Private Release

In the *Upanishadic* tradition, techniques for reaching transic states are considered the path for attaining union with the transcendental reality, *Atman-Brahman*. An event narrated in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* shows that these were originally not part of the priestly tradition. Here, as in the encounter with the goddess-figure Himavati (see previous Chapter), the knowledge of Brahman is revealed to a Brahmin priest by a non-Brahmin.

A proselytising Brahmin named Gargya Balaki approached King Ajatasatru of Kasi and offered to reveal to him the nature of the Ultimate Being. Gargya's understanding of ultimate reality was still materialistic and had not developed beyond the *Rig Vedic* personification of the forces of nature. He identified the Ultimate Being with various natural elements like the sun, the moon, wind, fire and water and even the reflection of himself in a mirror. Unimpressed by these conjectures, King Ajatasatru told Gargya that he had a more profound understanding of the Ultimate Reality. The Brahmin missionary asked to be instructed by the king: "Let me come to you as a pupil." The priest was led to a person who, to all appearances, seemed to be in a state of profound sleep. The king awakened the sleeper and asked Gargya:

When this man was thus asleep, where was then the person (*purusha*), the intelligent? And from whence did he thus come back?

Gargya could offer no explanation and had to plead ignorance. The king then proceeded to teach the priest:

When this man was thus asleep, then the intelligent person (*purusha*), having through the intelligence of the life forces (*pranas*) absorbed within himself all intelligence, lies in the ether, which is in the heart. When he takes in these different kinds of intelligence, then it is said that the man is asleep (*svapti*). Then the breath is kept in, speech is kept in, the ear is kept in, the eye is kept in, the mind is kept in. But when he moves about in sleep (and dream) then these are his worlds. He is, as it were, a great king, a great *Brahmana*; he rises, as it were, and he falls. And as a great king might keep in his own subjects and move about, according to his pleasure, within his own territory, thus does the person, who is endowed with intelligence, keep in the various *pranas* and move about, according to his pleasure, within his own body, while dreaming (Brh. Up. II.16-18).

The instruction sums up the key elements of *Upanishadic* theology:

- The practitioner was a male and the true self is gendered; the Absolute Being is identified as *Purusha* - Man.
- The person is in a comatose state. The mind seems to be detached from the body and apparently in a state of pure consciousness.
- The attainment of *svapti* (ecstatic oblivion) is conceived in terms of power. The mind has, as it were, acquired extra-corporeal privilege and controls its body as a king exercises sovereign power over his kingdom. This mystic power eludes the control even of a powerful king like Ajatasatru.
- The concentrator's power and seeming bliss is personal.
- No reference is made to the sleeper's level of moral advancement.

The new power and knowledge, as in the case of *shamans*, was achieved through personal effort unmediated by priestly rituals. To maintain its position as the visible representative of the invisible Brahma, the professional priesthood had to integrate and redefine this technique for union with the Absolute. As we shall see below, the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* contains traces of the process by which the opposing claims of mystic knowledges and magical powers of priestly rituals was syncretised.

As the very term '*upanishad*' suggests, the forest sages revealed their esoteric knowledges to select groups of initiates 'seated around' them. In striking contrast, during his last illness and knowing his life was nearing its end, the Buddha told Ananda that whatever knowledge he had discovered he had shared with his fellow human beings without discrimination. In obvious reference to the *Upanishadic* tradition, he said that as far as he was concerned there had been "nothing like the closed fist of the Teacher which holds back some things"(D II.102). His *Dhamma* was proclaimed in simple language, "for the benefit and welfare" of the pluriform popular masses - the *bahujana*. The techniques used by *rishis* - seers, to attain transic states and esoteric knowledges entailed gradual reduction of breathing and metabolic processes so that the senses are deactivated and the adept remains oblivious to everything happening within and around him. This could be sustained for long periods. In blissful oblivion, the unkempt yogi's nails grow long, his hair and beard too grow long and become matted. This self-neglect and indifference to the world was/is projected and seen as a sign of holiness. In striking contrast, instead of advocating mortification of the senses, the Buddha called for the cultivation of the senses so that having overcome self, the senses would become skillful and capable of true enjoyment without the craving to possess and hold on to the transient (See Chapter 14).

The Buddha's Criticism of the Via Mystica

After the Buddha renounced household life, he began as he put it, a 'Noble Quest' and became a seeker for whatever is good, searching for "the incomparable, matchless path to peace" (MLS I.207). In his quest for liberation from suffering, nothing but the best seems to have been good enough for the young Siddhattha Gotama. He sought out two of the finest yoga masters of the time and took up training under their guidance. Under the first guru, Alara Kalama, he soon reached the ultimate state of concentration and bliss to which this master could lead his pupils, the plane of 'no thing.' Siddhattha realised that this was not the freedom he was seeking:

Then it occurred to me that, this *dhamma* does not lead to dispelling of illusion, to dispassion, to cessation, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to end craving, but only as far as reaching the plane of no thing. So I not being satisfied with that *dhamma*, disregarded and turned away from it (M.I.166).

He then underwent a course of training under another guru, Uddaka Ramaputta, and learned to reach the plane of 'neither-perception nor-non-perception.' But this too did not satisfy him,

So I, not being satisfied with that *dhamma*, disregarded and turned away from it (M I.167).

After his Awakening, Gotama explained the underlying reason for his dissatisfaction with these forms of release from suffering. They produced temporary relief and were transient, subject, like everything else, to the law of Conditioned Co-arising. The Buddha warned his disciples that they could fall into the error of hypostatizing transic experiences. With regard to all the stages of *jhanic* concentration; the plane of infinite consciousness, the plane of nothing, the plane of neither perception nor non-perception, the Aryan disciple should remind himself, "This too is constructed - *sankhatam etam* - and not cling to them" (MLS III.291).¹ Once the conditions under which such ecstasies are experienced cease, the practitioner returns to normal consciousness, including the dissatisfactory conditions of existence. Gotama was not looking for an escape from life.

In the *Kevaddha Sutta* (DB I.XI), the Buddha tells a hilarious story about claims made about heavenly visions seen by people in transic states. They insisted that what they experienced existed objectively, outside the body and independent of the experiencer. One of his own *bhikkhus*, the Buddha said, was an expert in the practice of levitation and attaining transic states. The *bhikkhu* wondered what happened to the four 'material' elements which constitute the body when he is was in celestial ecstasy and seemingly 'out of the body.' Was consciousness then without any physical support, however minimal? The good *bhikkhu* decided to get into the state of ecstasy, soar into the realm of the gods who, according to popular belief are discarnate beings, to get an answer to the question that intrigued him. The *bhikkhu* flew higher and higher from one heavenly plane to another asking the various gods the same question, "Friends, where do the four great elements cease without remainder?" For all their supra-human knowledge, the gods were unable to answer this 'elementary' question. The *bhikkhu* finally decided to ask the Supreme Being - the Great Brahma himself. Brahma was seated on his throne in his celestial palace attended by a retinue of lesser gods. The *bhikkhu* put the same question about the four elements thrice to Brahma and each time Brahma tried to dodge the issue by thundering out loud the well-known theologian's litany of divine attributes:

¹ The Buddha and some of his first disciples were adepts at attaining states of *jhanic* concentration. But the Buddha had discovered and taught a distinct method for establishing Right Mindfulness or to be awake and to arrest deluding perceptions. For an illuminative discussion of early Buddhist use of 'yogic' techniques, see Winston L. King (1980). The Buddhist attitude to these as to other views and practices current at the time, King points out, was not a-priori, dogmatic rejection. It was informed by a strategic principle: testing their practical value, then acceptance/rejection, use-transcendence.

I am Brahma, the Great Brahma, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, All Powerful, The Lord, the Maker and Creator, the Ruler, Appointer and Orderer, *the Father of All* That Have Been and Shall be (emphasis mine).

Unimpressed, the *bhikkhu* politely told Brahma that, these imposing claims notwithstanding, he had not received an answer to his question. A person in ecstasy believes he is out of the body. But what happens to the four physical elements which make up his body? Have they also disappeared without remainder? Brahma realized that the *bhikkhu* might call his bluff and embarrass him in front of his *devas* - the lesser deities. He led the troublesome *bhikkhu* aside out of earshot of the minor gods, and confided in a whisper: "Listen, these *devas* believe that there is nothing Brahma does not see, there is nothing he does not know, there is nothing he is unaware of. But frankly, I don't know where the four elements cease without remainder. Please return to earth and ask the Blessed One. Whatever answer he gives, accept it". This humorous story depicts Brahma as an anxious god who is painfully aware that his existence is a product of wishful thinking. Brahma would cease to exist as soon as a person stops imagining he exists or shift allegiance to another god. In the *Brahmajala Sutta* (D I.I), the Buddha pointed out that 'Brahmas' are as diverse as the fanciful desires of human beings. When a particular Brahma ceases to satisfy human desires people discard him and he ceases to exist, "Brahma's throne is empty." They then turn to another supreme being who they believe will alleviate their fears and fulfil their yearnings. And so, the Buddha concluded, "Brahma's throne is filled again."

In the *Potthapada Sutta* (D I.IX), the Buddha uses a diagnostic approach to expose the fallacy that the real self is the consciousness element or the 'soul.' A group of philosophers were unable to agree as to what happens to consciousness during states of trance. Does it cease to exist? If so, is consciousness one thing and the body another? Are they the same? and so forth. They turned to the Buddha for an answer to these questions. He began by stating his basic premise: all knowledge and forms of consciousness are conditioned by perceptions. Percepts 'mental' or 'physical' are products of specific conditions. The meditator imagines after he has returned from trance to normal consciousness that he had supernatural knowledge through union with a transcendental reality. However, such states of consciousness or unconsciousness are very much dependent on the training and techniques practised. Therefore both are conditioned states. Specific perceptions or cessation of perceptions are based on specific conditions and arise or cease with the arising or cessation of these conditions cease.

Those who teach that perceptions arise and cease without a cause or condition, are totally wrong . Perception arises first, then knowledge and

from the arising of perception comes the arising of knowledge. And one knows: thus conditioned knowledge arises.

In the *Mahali Sutta* (D VI) the Buddha explains why mystic revelations are not a reliable guide to true liberation. By following a particular technique an individual might see heavenly visions but may not hear heavenly sounds, or vice versa. Following one technique a person could experience one type of bliss, whilst another, adopting another technique could experience another type of bliss. The one does not experience the ecstasy of the other; neither could the one verify the claims of another, since these are all subjective states. The type of ecstasy experienced would correspond to what the meditator *desires to experience*. If mystic knowledges are accepted as the basis for moral guidance, disciples would have to submit in faith to the mystic's authority, since they would not be able to reproduce for themselves his/her unique experience. The Buddha did not get into debates about the reality or non-reality of mystic experiences. He probed beneath the symptomatic to uncover the secret breeding ground of these quests and exposed the sublimated desires that fuel them. Transic visions or sounds are nonetheless perceptions, and perceptions are conditioned by feeling and touch.

The Buddha and the first Buddhists did not deny the 'reality' of the *jhanic* experience of oblivion. In fact they were adepts at attaining states of *jhanic* concentration. Setting aside philosophical speculations, eminent teachers like Sariputta Thera were able to provide a wholly empirical explanation of this phenomenon. In the highest stage of concentration, feelings and perceptions cease. Bodily motion, vocal and mental activities are stopped and have subsided. But vitality and heat (*tapas* - energy) are not destroyed. Even in ordinary consciousness, one experiences the effects of vitality and heat through the senses, but heat and vitality are not directly felt. Heat and vitality are mutually conditioning factors. "Just as when an oil lamp is burning the light is seen because of the flame and the flame is seen because of the light, vitality depends on heat and heat depends on vitality" (MLS I.355). During *jhanic* concentration, when there is a cessation of perception Sariputta Thera clarified, a person may appear dead, but his vital forces are not exhausted, heat is not dissipated and he can re-emerge from that state. But with death, not only do all physical and mental activities cease, but the vital forces are exhausted, heat is dissipated, the sense organs breakdown and "the body lies senseless like a log of wood" (MLS I.357). To ask where consciousness goes when heat and vitality ceases, the Buddha pointed out, is like asking where the flame and the light went when the fuel is exhausted (M I. 487). The Buddhist view reverses the conventional assumption that it is consciousness which animates the body; on the contrary, consciousness is dependent on physiological processes, which are fuelled by vital forces and energy. The Buddha's Way aims at liberating the whole person from craving which is the root cause of suffering. For the Buddha, human liberation is a *practical* and not a contemplative act.

The Upanishads: From Mysticism to Metaphysical Speculation

Literally speaking, the word '*upanisad*' means 'sitting around near'. "Gradually the word, "Upanishad" itself came to mean what was received from the teacher; a sort of secret doctrine, '*rahasya*'... In his *Philosophy of Upanisads*, Paul Deussen maintains that the term '*Upanisads*' means "Secret Instructions" (Sharma, 1972: 29). This is in striking contrast to the *Dhamma* proclaimed by the Buddha and his disciples. Some scholars of comparative religion however, have drawn parallels between the Buddha's Wisdom - *panna* - with the *gnosis* - lit., 'knowledge', claimed by the early Christian sect of Gnostics. For them, *gnosis* denoted a system of salvific knowledge reserved for a privileged élite. "In this religious context, 'Gnostic' should be understood as being reliant not on knowledge in a general sense, but as being specially receptive to mystical or esoteric experiences of direct participation with the divine" (Wikipedia Encyclopedia).

The equation of the Buddhist *panna* with Gnostic wisdom is a serious distortion of the Buddha's message which was a public proclamation for the "wellfare and happiness of the *bahujana* - or, the diverse people. Anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of the Theravada Canon must know that during his entire lifetime the Buddha was greatly concerned to distinguish his teaching from the secret knowledges being imparted by the forest teachers of his Day. During his last illness the Buddha again returned to this subject and told Ananda, " I have taught the Dhamma, without making any distinction between 'esoteric and 'exoteric' . With regard to the teaching, there is no "closed fist" of the teacher which holds somethings back" (D. II.102). The Buddha did not expect his Teaching to be accepted solely on his authority. He himself stated that its validity could be tested in practice by any open-minded individual (See Chapter 9). If at all, early Christian Gnosticism should be compared with the Upanishadic teachings. Many of the views preserved in the Upanishads were 'in the air' in the Buddha's Day. He debated with the exponents of such views and refuted them. The most important of these was the belief in an Absolute Spirit - *Atman* and its incarnation in the human individual - the little *atman*.

In the *Upanishads* there is a wide range of philosophical speculations (mixed with many mystical notions) into the nature of ultimate reality, the human person and the foundations of human knowledge. They are not philosophical treatises in the modern sense but rather, a collection of philosophico-theological inquiries by various sages and are often mutually contradictory. Even though they do not present a unified doctrinal system, the general thrust of the inquiries is to understand ultimate reality. This section is largely based on excerpts from V. Brodov's survey of Upanishadic doctrines (1984: 69-78). Underlying the philosophical speculations and disputes among the Buddha's contemporaries was a widely shared world-view that reality was made up of two primary substances – the one 'spiritual' and the

other 'material'. Philosophical idealists held that the human personality is made up of a spiritual essence (*Atman*) which has fallen into matter and given form to it. By mental concentration or by mortification of the senses the individual *atman* or life-force - *jiva*, could be released from its material bondage.

On the basis of their investigations, the *Upanishadic* philosophers concluded that the discarnate consciousness is the true self. During the awake state the true consciousness is dormant; during dreams the consciousness or *atman* awakens and is active, while the body sleeps. During transic experiences the *atman* is completely oblivious to the physical world and the body. It has merged with the Absolute Self - *Atman* and has become one with it. In making transic consciousness and dream states more real than ordinary experience, the *Upanishad* philosophers canonized the somnambulisms of the mind. In the passage from the *Brhadaran-yaka Upanishad* quoted above, we see the move from mystical experience to the inference of a Transcendental Self - *Atman-Brahman*. King Ajatasatru tells the Brahmin priest,

Verily, it is unnatural that a *Brahmana* should come to a *Ksatriya*, hoping that he should tell him the Brahman. However, I shall make you know him clearly (Brh.Up. II.1.15).

The king resorts to earthly metaphors to illustrate celestial realities:

As the spider comes out with its thread, or as small sparks come forth from fire, thus do all the senses, all worlds, all Devas, all beings come forth from that Self (*Atman*). The *Upanishad* (the true name and doctrine) of that Self is the True of the True. Verily, the senses are true, and he is the True of the True (II.1.20).

Atman-Brahman is a neuter term, but on closer examination 'it' has a masculine trace

The true Brahman, the Self (*Atman*), is made up of intelligence, endowed with a body of spirit, with a form of light, with an ethereal nature, which changes its shape at will... is the golden Purusha of the heart, that Self of the spirit (breath) is my self. On passing away from hence, I shall obtain that Self (Sat.Br. X.6.3.1-2).

Brodov notes that the speculations that led to the formation of the *Atman-Brahman* category were neither homogeneous nor consistent. The *Chandogya Upanishad* (V III.7-12) presents two diametrically opposed views about the *Atman*. According to the first, the body and the *atman* are the same. This was a materialistic view, since the *atman* is conceived as a 'life-principle' which ceases with the cessation of

physiological functions. The second hypothesis was that the *atman* is an immaterial substance which is not identical with the body:

There are two forms of *Brahman*, the material and the immaterial; the mortal and the immortal; the solid and the fluid - *sat* (being) and *tya* (that) i.e., *sat-tya* - the True (Br.Up.II.3.1.).

Ultimately the second view triumphed. The *atman* was deemed to be identical, not with matter, but with the ethereal. The Absolute Spirit was identified by the hyphenated term *Atman-Brahman*. This the Real; the world perceived by the 'physical senses is illusory - *Maya*. Brahman designated the common properties underlying a group of homogeneous objects. That which unifies phenomena and creates them is the Word of Brahman.

Speech is the *Brahman* of all works, for all names came from Speech; *Atman* is the *Brahman* of all works, for it upholds all works (Br.Up.16.).

Brahman is an absolute substance, the ultimate basis and first cause of all that is, the beginning and the end of all things and beings. It is

that from where all living beings are born, where they live after being born and in which they ultimately dissolve at death. Try to know that that is *Brahman* (Tait.Up III.1.).

Here the Absolute Being is conceived as the creator, conservator and destroyer of all beings. Thus, the attributes of the personal male god Brahma mentioned above, are transferred to the impersonal *Brahman* through a philosophical manoeuvre.

The category *Atman* with which *Brahman* is identified has different nuances of meanings in the *Vedic* texts. These meanings very probably reflect the historic process of their formation - the various discussions among thinkers which eventually led to a definitive identification of *Atman* with *Brahman*. The hyphenated *Atman-Brahman* suggests the syncretization of two traditions – the mystical and the priestly. The personal self or soul, it is stated, is similar in nature to the Absolute Spirit - *Atman-Brahman*:

It is this, thy Self, who is within all (Br.Up III.5.1). The *Brahman* which is the visible, not invisible Self (*Atman*), is *Brahman* (Br.Up III.5.1).

The mind conceives a fantastic reality through pure speculation. This imagination is made more real than the world of direct experience. Everything solid melts into the ether of metaphysics - they become shadowy and ephemeral reflections of the Immortal and Unchanging Self (*Atman-Brahman*):

Now with regard to the body. Everything except the breath and the ether within the body is material, is mortal, is solid, is definite. The essence of that which is material, mortal, which is solid, which is definite is the Eye, for it is the essence of *sat* - the definite. But breath and the ether within the body are immaterial, are immortal, are fluid. Are indefinite. The essence of that which is immaterial is the person in the Right Eye, for he is the essence of *tya* - the indefinite (Br.Up. II.3.5).

The breath which enters and leaves the body is portrayed as a separate substance - the living self or soul.

It is the Self who breathes in the up-breathing and in the down-breathing.
He is thy Self within all (Br.Up. III.4.1.).

Breath does not enter and leave because humans inhale and exhale. Humans inhale and exhale because the self works the lungs as if they were bellows. The strategic move to the metaphysical is patent. From a range of physical activities, one aspect is selected. Breathing is attributed to wind-power, which is vested with transcendental signification. It is transmuted into an immaterial, immortal and infinite reality. Since the true self is the mind in ecstasy, only the mind can have knowledge of this Absolute Consciousness. True knowledge, which is knowledge of *Atman-Brahman* can be achieved through yoga which produces a cessation of ordinary consciousness (*Katha Upanishad* II.3.; *Mundaka Upanishad* III.2.).

The Upanishads provide fascinating insight into the gradual development of Brahmanic theology through the welding together of mystical experiences, the philosophical speculations of forest sages, the traditions of *Rig Vedic* bards and Late Vedic ritualism.

As clouds of smoke proceed by themselves out of lighted fire kindled with damp fuel, thus verily... has been breathed forth this great Being - what we have as *Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda* , etc. (Br.Up II.4.10).

Once the existence of the *Atman-Brahman* is posited, everything, including personal gods and goddesses, are subsumed within it. The *Atman* is dearer than the *devas* (Br.Up II.4.12), but unlike the gods and goddesses of popular devotion, the *Atman* is inexorable and can be spoken of only in negative terms.

The Absolute Real as Pure Negativity

The text where the Absolute is defined as a pure negativity is particularly interesting because the context is a male/female encounter. The philosopher Yajnavalkya tries to convince his wife Maitreyi, a pundit in her own right, that the absolute can

be conceived only as a 'not' or 'wholly other.' The strategic move to positing an 'wholly other' is by denying true reality to every experience on earth!

Next follows the teaching of Brahman by No! No!, for there is nothing else higher than this: It is not so. Then comes the name of the True and he (the Brahman), the True of them (Br.Up. II.3.6).

Since the exposition is abstruse mystic talk, Yajnavalkya must perforce resort to metaphorical language, using the real to explain the ethereal.

As a lump of salt, when thrown into water, becomes dissolved into water and could not be taken out again but whatever we taste (the water) it is salt - thus verily, O Maitreyi, does this great Being, endless, unlimited, consisting of nothing, rise from out of these elements and vanish again in them. When he has departed, there is no more knowledge (name) I say O Maitreyi. Thus spoke Yajnavalkya (Br.Up. II.4.13).

Yajnavalkya, like the other *Upanishadic* philosophers, takes examples drawn from everyday experience and turns them into metaphors of invisible realities. Maitreyi finds this rhetorical *tour de force* mind boggling: "How could loss of consciousness in the departure of trance, lead to knowledge? Sir, you have landed me in utter bewilderment." Yajnavalkya presses on regardless, while Maitreyi doggedly refuses to be persuaded: "Here, you have bewildered me Sir, when you say that having departed, there is no more knowledge [name]" (Br.Up. IV. 13-14). In sheer exasperation, she turns to those 'seated around' and were no doubt were following the debate with keen interest: "Indeed I do not understand him" (Br.Up. IV.6.1).

A sexist reading of this text could suggest that Maitreyi's keen-witted ripostes are nothing but an example of a woman's inability to grasp profound truths despite patient male initiation. But what if the assumption that the male is the privileged subject and dispenser of knowledge is put to question? Maitreyi can then be seen as the more perceptive partner in this dialogue. She refuses to be the passive recipient of a non-knowledge masquerading as knowledge. She had in fact 'check-mated' Yajnavalkya. At wit's end, he takes refuge in a 'typical' male put down to silence his wife:

How should he know him (the Self) who knows all this? That Self is to be described by No! No! He is incomprehensible, for he cannot be comprehended; he is imperishable, for he cannot perish... . How, O beloved should one know the Knower? Thus, O Maitreyi, you have been instructed. Thus far goes immortality. Having said so, Yajnavalkya went away into the forest. (Br.Up IV.6.15).

Yajnavalkya's arguments are purely tautological. The Absolute is incomprehensible, because it (he) cannot be comprehended, immortal because it (he) cannot die! Most significant is the resort to No! No! This strategic move to the True, the Brahman, is nothing but verbal virtuosity - a metaphysical gesture, even if negative, by which Yajnavalkya posits a nothing dissimulating itself as something, as a mysterious being in the occult of a non-knowing. He makes the No! No! a transcendental principle that can be pinned down and named as such - Brahman - making provision for a basically masculine theological discourse. A pure negativity is posited as pure positivity, an absence as a presence - a void as the ultimate object of desire.

Yajnavalkya longs for union with *Atman-Brahman* - the religious aim of yogic concentration. Yoga means yoking together - con-jugating, an interesting term for union with the Absolute One. Yajnavalkya in fact resorts to the sexual metaphor to explain meta-physical union and ecstasy with the absolute. He seeks a union that transcends the orgasmic bliss he experienced with Maitreyi - a non-phallic bliss:

Just as a man fully *embraced by his wife* does not know anything at all, either external or internal, so does this man (*purusa*) embraced fully by the knowing Self, not know anything at all, external or internal. This indeed is his (true) form, in which his wishes are fulfilled in which Self is the only wish, in which no wish is left - free from any sorrow. Then .. a thief is not a thief, a murderer is not a murderer, a *sramana* is not a *sramana*, a *tapasa* not a *tapasa*; unattended by virtuous works, unattended by evil works, he has fully crossed over to the other shore, beyond the sorrows of the heart (Br.Up IV.3. 21-23 emphasis mine).

This "crossing over" is fundamentally different to the declaration of crossing over to the further shore of freedom'. In the Buddhist case 'the crossing over' is practical and concrete - a moral going, from the society and culture as it is constituted to a new state of affairs in the here and now (See Chapter). In the Upanishads, the 'crossing over' is ontological - the passage from one realm of existence to another. The significance of the substitution of physical sexual union and bliss for mystic union and ecstasy by a male mystic needs to be disclosed. The little *atman* of Yajnavalkya is absorbed and dissolved in the Absolute *Atman*, just as the female envelopes the male element and dissolves the male seed within herself. In orgasmic ecstasy, in the 'little death', the identity boundaries of the one and the other disappear. There is blissful oblivion and the sense of external and internal disappears as the two become one flesh. How could one imagine an 'other' bliss without any experience of 'this'? The need for moral endeavour becomes superfluous because the dissolution is also an absolution. Just as a woman's womb can absorb and assimilate the seed of any male, his 'soul,' so too, the Absolute absolves and dissolves the good and the evil : a thief is not a thief, a murderer not a murderer, and no dif-

ference between those who practice self mortification and those who do not. The use of the sexual metaphor is crucial for understanding the strategic move from the corporal to the Spirit. Yajnavalkya's union with the Absolute is superior to the temporary ecstasy a man experiences with a woman. This is why he abandons his wife Maitreyi. The displacement and substitution has all the elements of a sexual transaction behind the veil of mysticism - union with the Absolute Spirit - which is no longer sexual. Union with the Absolute (masculine, veiled in neutrality) is nothing but a celestialised simulacrum of male sexual union with a woman. The will to 'Spirit' conceals a masculine will to power over the sensual power of the female and the ephemeral. The bliss a woman gives a man is illusory - *maya* and transient - *anitya*. The 'Spirit' can be deconstructed - *visankhara* - and disclosed as a masculine construct - *sankhata* - beyond the realm of the carnal feminine - unreal, dark, mortal. Hence the *Upanishadic* yearning is for happiness in another realm,

Lead me from the unreal to the real
 Lead me from darkness to light
 Lead me from death to immortality (Br.Up I.3.27)

Name and Form as a Metaphysical Theory of Being

As we saw in the previous sections, according to *Upanishadic* theory, the universe is made up of separate entities which have their own specific form - *rupa*. What gives each form its distinct identity is its unique inner-essence or nature, conceived by the Absolute Mind - *Cit*. The human mind which is a finite fragment of the Absolute Mind recognizes the essence of all things and labels it by its proper name, which again is originally a divine utterance. The *Upanishads* carry the traces of the various philosophical speculations that led to this theory of knowledge. Central to these inquiries is the relationship of the mind to 'external' reality. According to the view that eventually prevailed, the physical senses provide only a partial and illusory image of reality. Even these sensations are activated by the mind: a person sees, hears, smells, tastes and touches with the mind. To understand the nature of ultimate reality therefore, one must know the mind of the Primal Self or *Atman*.

He who understands Spirit - *Atman* - becomes an *ativadin*, i.e., one who declares what is beyond declaration - the Highest Being, the True, the One, Being itself, [*to ontos on*] (Br.Up VII. 1-18).

In the beginning, according to the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*, the Self was alone, in the form of Man - *Purusha*:

In the beginning this self was alone in the shape of *purusa*. He looking around saw nothing but his Self. He first said "This is I", therefore he

became by Name. Therefore even now if a man is asked, he says "I am". Then he pronounces the other name he may have (Br.Up I.4.1.).

The assertion "I am" - the self-creation of Atman, is supported by Name - the recursive presence of the linguistic sign "I" to the "who Am." *Atman-Brahman* is the One and True Being - the substratum of all that is.

Verily this is a Triad, name (*namam*), form (*rupam*) and action (*karma*). Of these, that which is called Speech is the origin, for from it all names arise. It is their Brahman, for it supports all beings... Verily, this is a One, namely the Self. The origin of Name is Speech, The origin of Form is Eye and the origin of Action is body (Br.Up I.6.1).

The sound-word is privileged as the arche of all reality, by reversing the order of everyday perception - the act of perception by the eye produces an image or form which is named by a sound symbol - speech. These speculations reflect the attempts by philosophers in ancient India to probe beyond the appearance of things to understand the underlying principle or the nature of reality *as such*. What are the *skandhas* (Sk) of all 'things?' In *Upanishad* usage *skandhas* refer to underlying relatively stable 'supports' of all contingent and transient realities. The authors of the philosophical category *skandha* believed that all the individual foundations taken together have a foundation of foundations which supports, unifies and expresses all other phenomena. This was believed to be the case however great they might be, like the personalised gods - Prajapati, Purusha and other names given to the Supreme Being. The ultimate and final ground of reality was the *Atman* - a neuter denomination for the Transcendental Self - Absolute Spirit or Divine Mind.

With regard to human beings, the unquestioned premise of philosophical speculations was the assumption that the human being is a schizoid entity made up of a material form and an immaterial essence, not unlike the Cartesian scission of the *res cogitans* (mind) and the *res extensa* (physical 'things'). Consciousness it was believed exists independent of things 'out there.' Debates among *Upanishadic* philosophers indicate that the *Nama/Rupa* - Name/Form dichotomy was generally accepted, but that opinions varied as to the nature of each entity. The materialists stated that it is dynamic matter which temporarily takes on different forms and are identified by names. There is no inner substance apart from moving material elements. The idealist view was that immaterial essences inform and shape formless matter. The material forms are reduced to the four great elements: earth, water, wind and fire. These were the material *skandhas* or substrata of a perceived form. Wind however was also conceived as the life-breath - *prana* - which comes from the Absolute Spirit. The life-breath vivifies inert matter. The *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* (1.5) considers the connection between sensation ('feeling') and thinking ('thought'). These are the active senses.

The *Nama/Rupa* theory shows how much intellectual investigation had advanced from the crude personification of the forces of nature in the early hymns of the *Rig Veda*. Earth, wind, fire and water are no longer perceived as deities, but have become abstract philosophical categories. The *Upanishads* reflect the development of thought from particular concepts to general ones, from concrete representations to abstract ones and to the formation of philosophical categories. According to the theo-philosopher Uddalaka (Ch.Up VI. ff), it is necessary to distinguish between the idea of a thing and the thing itself, the names of phenomena from the phenomena themselves. Knowledge of the right name of a thing gives the knowing one power over it. To know the hidden substance of things is to know the true, divine intention behind their creation.

By one clod of clay all that is made of clay is known. Individual difference being only a name, arising from speech. But the truth being that all is clay. Similarly, by one nugget of gold the truth of gold is known. By one pair of iron scissors the truth of iron is known (Ch.Up VI.1.4-7).

The difference between perceived realities is acknowledged, but particular differences, like different pots of clay - are merely formal modifications of the same substance or substratum - clay 'as such.' All differences are subsumed in the Only One, since the particulars are only manifestations of the Universal One.

It is the Only One (*to on*) which brought into being that which was not (*to me on*) (Ch.Up VI.2.1. Translator's parentheses).

The *Nama/Rupa* theory posited a contradiction between 'surfaces' and 'depths,' between the appearance of things (phenomena) and their true reality (noumena). Every perceived form is a manifestation of a hidden truth. In other words the forms which present themselves to the gaze of the observer are signs - *sanna* of a hidden reality. Nothing ever fully represents itself. Particular things are merely signs of universal ideal realities. The mind alone is capable of representing - in the mind, and to itself the true reality of a 'thing.' This representation or a 'concept,' an idea in the head was stamped and fixed by a linguistic sign - a word - indicated the path to the fixed and permanent ultimate reality. Since the right name has a divine origin, to know the correct name gives power over the named. The 'material' form of the named on the other hand is continuously undergoing change, decay and dissolution. The numinous reality behind changing forms is real and permanent, despite apparent changes. The new philosophy effectively split up experience into two orders - a transcendental, conceptual-linguistic order, and an ephemeral order in which self-consciousness is temporarily immanent.

Nama/Rupa as Linguistic Theory: Signification/Sign

Consciousness depends on the Brahmin *nama/rupa* theory for sustaining the illusion that it is a self-subsisting entity by making phonology and ontology support each other. Name and form support each other, the Buddha observed, "just as two bundles of reed stand, the one supporting the other" (S II.114). Brahmin linguistics were comprehensively formulated in the classic work, *Ashtadhyayi* of the fourth century BCE brahmin scholar Panini.

Heinrich Zimmer explains that Brahmin phonology and grammatology as formulated in the *Upanishads* are based on

[a] technique for discovering not only the meaning of a term (*namam*) and but also the essential nature of the denoted object (*rupam*) by a review of the etymology of the vocables in question (Zimmer 1953: 83).

The *Upanishads* provides insight into a process which culminated in an ingenious theory of language. Here again, observed empirical phenomena are transmuted into metaphysical realities. Breath, it was observed, is necessary for life and for speech - *rik*. When the in-breathing and out-breathing ceases, life ceases. During speech, breathing is suspended and the out-breath is transformed into sound (Ch. Up I.3. ff). These empirically verifiable facts provided a basis for non-verifiable speculations. The breath-sound seemed to exist independent of the act of breathing. The breath that is inhaled has the capacity to make sounds when it is emitted through the throat. It seems that the inhaled air brings to fruition its latent potential to become verbal signifiers within the chest. It was further noted that certain sounds (vowels) could be articulated in sequence if they were not broken up by sibilants or consonants. After taking a deep breath, the mouth could be fully opened and closed while emitting a continuous, unbroken sound A-U-M. The pithiest exposition of *Om*, Zimmer writes, is given in the *Mandukya Upanishad*, which consists only of twelve verses:

OM! This imperishable sound is the whole of this visible universe. What has become, what is becoming, and what will become- verily all of this is the sound - *OM* and what is beyond these three states of the world of time, that too, verily, is *OM* (vs 1) ... [It is] is neither knowing nor unknowing – because invisible, intangible, devoid of characteristics, inconceivable, undefinable, its sole essence being the assurance of its own Self ... the coming to rest of all differentiated, relative existence; utterly quiet, peaceful-blissful without duality: this is Atman, the Self (vs. 7).

Zimmer discloses the empirical basis of the flight into metaphysical speculations:

In Sanskrit the vowel O is constitutionally a diphthong, compounded of A + U + M; hence Om. The Mandukya Upanishad explains that A is the waking state, U the dream state and M deep sleep and Turiya. A and U are essential to the sound M - the Silence against which all sound appears (1953: 376-77).

Thus, sounds and silence are both aspects of the Absolute. Sound comes from silence and returns to silence. Silence is the permanent; sound is the transient. The move to the imaginative construct of the Transcendental Signifier *Om* was made by speculations about empirical realities. The unbroken pure sound *Om* could be broken up into different sounds by bending the tongue inside the mouth. These physical sounds could be made to represent 'immaterial' ideas in the head. From this it was concluded that sound and signification must be inherent to breath. In the silence of breath all sounds seemed to be 'seminally' present in a pure undifferentiated state represented by *Om*. Speech breaks the silence but it is latent in silence. *Om* is sound and silence. When breath is exhausted sound ends in silence. So too the human spirit - *prana* - the finite expression of the Absolute Word-Breath-Spirit *Om* will return to the undifferentiated pure silence of *Om*.

Breath, *Prana* (Life-Breath) is the true Atman or Self. When the breath, *Prana*, leaves the body, it dies (Ch.Up I.2.9.).

Om is the Indian equivalent of the Greco-Christian Transcendental Signifier - the Logos. The entire discourse about the transcendental *Om* starts with the body and passes through the body, but creates separation from the body. The body is used as a springboard for diving into the pool of the Absolute Spirit.

The study of the sacred verses is only the study of names (*nama*). But speech (*rik* - word) is higher than names and Mind (*manas*) is higher than Speech. It is Mind which links Speech and Name together. But the highest is *prana*, breath or spirit. Mind is indeed the self. Mind is the world. Mind is *Brahman* (Br.Up VII. 1-3).

Upanishadic theory acknowledges at the empirical level that speech is made up of significant sounds, phonemes or names. Perceived forms are subject to continuous change and impermanence. On the other hand, the theory contends that the relatively stable concepts, fixed in the mind by linguistic signs, are signifiers of transcendental truths. The *Upanishads* reveal the 'Oriental' trace of the Occidental interest in etymologies. The meaning of a word is made up of primal sound-elements - *aksaras*. At this point, the investigation shifts from empirical observation to metaphysical speculation. How could the right name establish a fixed identity between signifier and its signification? The answer is sought in the metaphysical. Each separate sound is a fragmentation of the Pure Sound and Signifier - *Om*, which is Eternal

and Changeless. Vowels alone were considered to be of divine origin. Sibilants and consonants are a fall from purity. They are the body, the imperfect 'dumb' sounds, perfected by vowels - the 'soul' of language. All words in usage are differentiations and corruptions of pure and undifferentiated sound, the imperishable element, the *Aksara* of *aksaras*, the Transcendental Signifier - *Om*. In trying to make his case, the myth maker's imagination appropriates the feminine into the masculine as in dream states, in a melange of images, male and female:

Prajapati (masculine) brooded on the worlds... He brooded on them and from them, thus brooded on, issued the *Om*. As all leaves are attached to a stalk, so is all speech (all words) attached to the *Om* (Brahman). *Om* is all this, yea, *Om* is all this (Ch.Up II.23. 4).

These speculations about the nature and power of speech, however ingenious, were prompted by magico-ritual concerns. Chapter II of the *Chandogya* stresses the need for the correct and powerful pronunciation of vowels. Thereby the priest and Indra give strength to each other. When words are properly articulated together with the right rituals, even the gods would obey the commands of the priests, because in the priestly rituals the priest and Indra, the Chief of Gods, 'give power to each other.' The utterance itself produces effects. The notion that language emanates from the Absolute Mind, but is corrupted by usage, became the model for an imaginative construction of reality and society in which grammar, ontology and sociology sustained each other. Right Speech is the correct use of words according to formally determined rules (grammar). Similarly, right morality is living in accordance with the essential order of things determined by *Atman-Brahman*, a masculine ultimate reality and ground of all being, veiled in neutrality. The priest reproduces this order of gods and things by the power of his mantras and ritual acts. In an exclusively male priesthood the word of the ritualist is the word of God Himself. This can be unmasked and exposed as the celestialisation of actual social power. The more power an individual has, the greater his ability, as competent speaking subject, to create the object-other to his image and likeness.

The aim of the Buddha's Path to Liberation is the total renunciation of the desire for power and mastery over others - things and beings. He rejected the notion that language is derived from a transcendental source. Language, he disclosed, is a social convention. Just as language is based on a system of differences heard between separate sound symbols or phonemes, the deluded person believes on the basis of perceived difference between the 'I-who-am' and 'other others,' that he/she is a unique self-subsisting individual in the social system. Due to the deluded craving for ego-existence the self believes it exists by-itself and for-itself. It has lost awareness that the notion of self co-arose with the notion of the other and both are co-arising and mutually conditioning relationships. Language or the

naming process reinforces this deluded belief (See Chapters 10 to 12). The belief that language is derived from a transcendental source provides reassurance that the real individual self too originated in a Transcendental Being. In the patriarchal tradition, both the source of all being and His Creative Word are masculine.

Buddha's incisive diagnosis of the origin of language undermined the celestialisation of language. The power of the Male Creative Word is neither 'cosmic' nor 'metacosmic,' it is historically and socially usurped and concentrated power projected to the Heavens. The voices of the powerless, subjugated women and the poor, for example, not only have no power, they are not heard even when they cry out in pain. It does not need much mystic musings to realize that there are indeed 'silent voices,' and 'unseen sights' in the dominant discourse about 'reality.'

CHAPTER 7

PRIVATE SALVATION SEEKING (II) THE WAY OF SELF TORTURE

Alongside yogism, Indian ascetics have from the earliest times practised various forms of physical mortification to achieve 'spiritual' purification and power. Some of these practices extended to extreme self-chastisement and self-debasement which, from a socio-psychological point of view, verges on exhibitionistic display behaviour. The practitioners of these disciplines are referred to in Vedic literature and the Buddhist scriptures as *tapasvin*. The ascetic guarded the 'heat within' - *tapas*. The *tapasvin* were summoning up inner heat or energy to control and subjugate the impulses of the body. It was concentrated and directed towards 'burning out' the taints of sensuality in the trans-mortal soul or life-principle just as a smith burns out the dross in order to extract pure and imperishable gold. How much the significance of inner heat had changed with changed social conditions can be judged by comparing the way *tapas* is spoken of in the *Rig Vedic* creation hymns (RV X.129):

Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that one arose through the power of heat (*tapas*).

Desire (*kama*) came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of the mind. Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence and non existence.

Their cord was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? There were seed-placers; there were powers. There was impulse beneath; there was giving-forth above (RV X.129).

Order (*ta*) and truth (*satya*) were born from heat (*tapas*) as it blazed up. From that was born night; from the heat (*tapas*) was born the billowy ocean (RV X.190.1).

The cosmos evolved through heat - *tapas*, which is seen as creative energy. It stirs up *kama* - sensual desire, a generative power. Heat (*tapas*) and desire (*kama*) are outwardly expended to bring forth the cosmos. The reference to the union of heat and water, 'seed-placing,' 'impulse beneath' and 'giving forth above' are clearly agricultural-sexual metaphors. The 'seed' is the expended male 'semen,' 'sperma.' It is the association of heat and energy with an economy of power which is the common denominator in shamanising and ascetic techniques. When we turn to the *tapasnin*'s ascetic use of heat, we find ourselves in a cultural climate that is quite

alien to that of the early *Rig Vedic* hymns. Instead of the exuberant sensuousness of those hymns, a pall of pessimism seems to have descended on human existence: the stirrings of *kama* are regarded as a disturbance of the 'flesh.' Heat is turned against *kama* - erotic desires - to purge them. The priest controls *Agni* - cosmic fire; the ascetic protects his *tapas* - the cosmic heat within. The senses are seen as the primary root of evil. Denying the senses, cutting them off, mortifying the body, are considered a secure path to freedom. The *tapasvin* stores up heat or energy within himself to purify the 'spiritual' self - *atman* - or the life principle - *jiva* - to release it from the body, which keeps the Self entrained in samsaric existence. According to this melancholic world-view, the sexual impulse is the most powerful and threatening form of sensuality. The ascetic renounces sex and 'embraces' a life of 'continence.' He is no longer a 'seed-placer.' Energy stored up in the seminal fluids is not allowed to escape or 'spill out.' It is no longer 'wasted' to create new life, but used to release the self from the body.

Many of the practices of the *tapasvins* have and are employed in other religious traditions as well to mortify the senses (for example; fasting, self-flagellation, wearing hair-shirts, eating bitter herbs, plunging into ice-cold water, and minimizing the period of sleep). There was a group of ascetics - whom the Buddha called self-torturers - who carried mortification to bizarre extremes. The *Kassapa Sihanada Sutta* (D I.VIII) and the *Mahasihanada Sutta* (M XII) list some of these practices: going about stark naked, covered in dirt, hair and beard uncut and unkempt; wearing hair shirts, sleeping on a bed of thorns, going without food for days on end, imitating animal behaviour, eating animal dung etc. Other forms of self mortification practised to this day in India are standing on one leg or holding an arm stretched upward with fist clenched until the limb atrophies and the nails grow into the palm, lacerating one's flesh, piercing it with sharp implements, hanging upside down from trees like bats, letting oneself be hanged on iron hooks, walking on fire, sleeping on a bed of nails, self-mutilation and self-castration. These self-torturers were not unaware of the fact that they were making a spectacle of themselves; that they were held in awe by people because of these virtuoso feats. In this we see a continuation of the veneration given to the tribal shamans. There was a general belief that by transcending the normal, these individuals had acquired power greater than that of the priests, kings or even the gods. It was feared that these ascetics could use these powers to curse and harm. However, if venerated and supported they would, it was (is) believed, shower blessings on lesser mortals.

In the great discourse on suffering - *Maha-Dukkakkhandha-Sutta*, (M I.XIII) the Buddha describes the great mass of suffering at the time. In that context, he mentions some of the horrendous forms of physical punishment and torture inflicted on criminals at the time: flogging, beating the soles of the feet with batons, bludgeoning, cutting off of hands and feet, opening up the skull and pouring molten metal into it, burning alive, throwing a victim to starving dogs to be eaten

alive, hanging the victim up by double hooks, etc. (vs. 87). Those condemned to death were bound and paraded through the streets before being publicly executed. There is a remarkable parallel between these punishments and the type of punishment self-torturing ascetics voluntarily inflicted on themselves.

The Buddha and the Way of Self Torture

According to the *Nidhana Katha* - Legend of the Buddha's Lineage - the Buddha turned to investigate the efficacy of self-torture after he found the Yogic way dissatisfactory. During trance, the yogi seems to have reached a state of pure consciousness, but as he returns to everyday consciousness, he realizes that he had all the while been in the body. However tenuous, consciousness still had a foothold in the body. Siddhattha Gotama, relentless in his quest for liberation, was ready for more drastic measures. He later recalled:

Gladly would I have my skin and sinews and bones wither and my body's
flesh and blood dry up, if only I could hold on till I won what may be won
by human strength, by human energy by human striving (GS I.54).

Siddhattha seems to have practised self-torture in order to find out if the general belief was true, that the true self is *other than the body*; where in the body does the self temporarily reside? If the immortal self is non-corporeal, should it not be possible, by running down physiological processes, to reach a point when the self or soul is released and it would be in a state of body-less pure consciousness? He decided to test whether this belief in the body/consciousness duality could be empirically verified. The Buddha told his good friend and able lieutenant Sariputta Thera, the extents to which he went - even neglecting the demands of personal hygiene - to test the proposition that consciousness is one thing and the body another. He tried some of the most rigorous techniques of *tapas* known at the time: "I became an ascetic, the foremost ascetic; I became loathsome, the foremost loathely one; I became aloof, the foremost aloof one" (MLS I.103). While he suffered much physical discomfort, these practices did not of themselves produce clearer consciousness. Finally, he undertook systematic starvation, gradually reducing the intake of food, but observing all the while, the effect of this procedure within himself. He himself describes how his body was ravaged by this experiment:

I ate so little, and all my limbs became like the knotted joints of withered creepers... my gaunt ribs became like crazy rafters of a tumbledown shed, the pupils of my eyes sank deep into their sockets like sparkles of water in a deep well... all my limbs became like the knotted joints of withered creepers; my scalp became shrivelled and shrunk as a bitter white gourd cut before it is ripe becomes shrivelled and shrunk when exposed to the

hot wind; ... the hair, rotted at the roots, fell away from my body as I stroked my limbs with my hand ... When I thought 'I will answer the calls of nature,' I fell down on my face then and there, because I ate so little ... (MLS I.107).

In a conversation with another *samana* he recollected how, when holding his breath for long periods - it produced terrible sweating, loud roaring in the head, severe headache, sharp pains in the stomach, intense bodily heat and a feeling that his head would explode. He struggled to keep his mind alert:

Although, Aggivessana, unsluggish energy stirred up in me, unmuddled mindfulness set up, yet my body was turbulent, not calmed, because I was harassed in striving against that very pain. But yet, Aggivessana, that painful feeling arising in me, persisted *without impinging on my mind* (MLS I.299 emphasis added).

This was 'clinical observation' at its best. Siddhattha was determined not to allow fear or anxiety about death overwhelm him. Like a scientist who might test a vaccine that he had invented, first of all on himself, Siddhattha held on, observing the inter-relationship between action and effect. In these experiments we see the empirical origin of the unique method of establishing Right Mindfulness - *Sat-thipatthana* - developed by the Buddha; a technique for dispassionate mindfulness of physiological processes, feelings, mental states and thought contents. Siddhattha was on the threshold of the insight of insights - *paticca samuppada* - Conditioned Co-arising: "When this arises, this arises; this not arising, this ceases to arise."

Starvation to death did not bring Siddhartha to a point when consciousness left the body and began to exist as an unconditioned, discarnate entity. Utterly exhausted, his body drained of energy, he collapsed and *lost consciousness*. He did not attain a state of pure discarnate consciousness. The five men who were his companions in self torture thought he was dead and abandoned him.

The Buddha's Critique of Self-Torture

In a discussion with a group of self-torturing Jains (*Devadaha Sutta* MLS.III. 3-13), the Buddha asked them whether they could empirically demonstrate the post-mortem benefits of their practices. Did they know, for example, which amount of self-inflicted pain would purge which quantum of evil *karma* performed in the past? They had to answer that they did not know. The Jains had hypostatized *karma* - action - into an impersonal law - *karman*. They were determined to defy the iron rule of *karman* through iron determination of the will. Far from being an expression of virtue, the Buddha pointed out, their own theory and practice had put them back into the clutches of *karman*. They believed that the individual life-principle - *jiva*

was tainted by past evil *karma*. But how could they reconcile this deterministic view with their personal freedom, which they were obviously exercising? After all, if present suffering is retribution for evil committed in a previous birth, were they not perhaps unconsciously acting according to the promptings of *karman*, by inflicting suffering on themselves? Thus, were not the Jains, while claiming to be holy men, according to their own theory and practice, acknowledging that they have been very evil people in their past births? If, on the other hand, they, at least implicitly, believed that pleasure and suffering were due to the will of a creator god, they foist themselves on the horns of another painful dilemma. Since god is believed to be the fountain and source of all reality, is not this god then, in the final instance, an evil god who either wills or permits evil? How could one believe in such a god?

In the *Udambarika Sihanada Sutta* (DB III.33-52), the Buddha elucidated the psychological aberrations that may lie concealed beneath the recourse to virtuosic practices of self-torture. The will to self-abasement invariably turns into its opposite and becomes a will to self-aggrandizement. Performers of astounding feats become self-complacent, exalt themselves, tend to despise others and become intoxicated with feelings of their own importance. They start exhibiting themselves in public to get attention, especially from the well-to-do sections of the population. They begin to disparage other practitioners of similar feats, and start playing the role of great oracles. They become shrewd and calculating about ways of soliciting and acquiring material benefits and start making pronouncements on metaphysical subjects by appealing to the authority of their exceptional experiences. What matters, the Buddha explained, is not the ability to perform extraordinary feats, but exemplary moral conduct, which is beneficial to oneself and to others.

The Great Reconciliation

Siddhartha, utterly exhausted by the torments he inflicted on himself, weak and emaciated, collapsed and *lost consciousness*. His companions thinking he was dead, abandoned him. Was it the end of his determined quest to find answer to the mystery of human suffering? Siddhattha was saved by not by divine, but by human intervention. In his Sanskrit Epic Poem, *The Buddhacarita*, the poet monk Ashvagbosa describes the encounter between a young herderess and the near-dead Siddhattha in lyric language, using images drawn from the tradition of goddess myths.

She was wearing a dark-blue cloth and her arms were brilliant with white shells, so that she seemed like Yamuna, best of rivers, when its dark-blue water is wreathed in foam. Her delight was enhanced by devotion; her blue lotus eyes opened wide, as, doing obeisance with her head, she *caused him* to accept *milk rice* (xii.110-111, emphases added).

Reminiscent of the classic theme of goddess bride-mother/dead hero, the herderess tenderly nourishes the near-dead Siddhattha, with milk-rice and raises him to new life. Asvaghosa then articulates a distinctly 'Buddhist' truth. The senses are not in themselves a source of evil, on the contrary, the cultivation of the senses is the way to perfection:

By partaking of it he secured for her the full reward of her birth and himself *through the satisfaction of his senses, became capable of awakening* (XII.112 emphasis added).

The men who tortured their 'flesh' to quell their carnal desires abandoned Siddhattha. The female in ascetic misogyny is seen as the embodiment of sensual enticement. She is Maya - Dangerous Illusion. Yet, in this hero epic it is a beautiful young woman that nurses Siddhattha back to health. With the taking of nourishment the spiral of conditioned processes were reversed. Siddhattha observed how, with the restoration of his strength, his consciousness became active and clear again. He had exhausted the ways of self liberation available at the time. He had to find his own way. Soon the accumulated experiences would lead to a qualitative leap of awareness. The Buddha recalled:

But by this severe austerity, I did not reach the states of further-beings, the excellent knowledge and vision that befit the noble. Could there be another way to awakening? (MLS I.301)

The lessons learnt during this period of austerity left a lasting impact on the *Buddha's Dhamma* - a great reconciliation with bodily existence, which was regarded as the impermanent. It was also a reconciliation between the Female (Body) and the Male (Spirit). Turning against the body and physical punishment was totally excluded by the Buddha from his method of self-training. Caring for the body became a distinguishing feature of his Teaching (See Chapter 16). When his body was ravaged by hunger and racked by pain, he realized, he could not concentrate or find the energy to work out his liberation. It is worth noting that the body debilitated by deprivation is described in exactly the same terms as the wretched hovels of the extremely poor, "tumbledown shed." Another way to awakening and freedom from suffering "befitting the noble" had to be found, and it was found.

Most religious traditions praise the purifying or redemptive power of suffering. Buddhism is a notable exemption. The Buddha summed up the various attitudes to suffering in the world:

- i. masochistic infliction of pain on oneself - *attantapa*;
- ii. sadistic infliction of pain on others - *parantapa*;

iii.sado-masochistic infliction of pain on oneself and others - *attantapo ca parantapo ca*.

The Buddha never ceased to emphasize that his path to liberation did not require inflicting pain on oneself or on others - *neva attantapo na parantapo* (M I.341). The notion of punishing oneself to atone for sins is alien to Buddhist ethics. What is necessary is to realize the harmful effects of one's thoughts, words and deeds for oneself and others and to resolve to refrain from them in the future. The *Vinaya Pitaka* contains hundreds of case histories of violations of *Sangha* discipline by *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* but no corporal punishments are laid down for them. For very serious transgressions, the severest penalty was expulsion from the community. The Buddha did not believe in goading people into a slave morality of reward and punishment. One does what is right because it is right. When people praised the first renouncers for their exemplary lives, they replied, "Birth is destroyed, the good life has been lived - *katan karaniya* - what has to be done is done" (M I.7.40). The joy of a pure conscience was reward enough.

The Strategy of the Sacred and the Strategy of Power

There is a pervasive belief that pleasure is for the beautiful body and that suffering is for the beautiful soul. What is the mythic site of the discourse that suffering ennobles the human spirit and that it has a religious or sacred significance – that it has redemptive powers?

Violence and the Sacred

The phenomenon of renunciation, the ascetic disciplines of yogism and the debates among the wandering mendicant teachers have to be related to the social conditions which engendered them, as well as to the *Weltanschauung* which had become generalized in the Buddha's day. As Heinrich Zimmer explained:

Release (*moksa*) can become the main preoccupation of thought only when that what binds human beings to their secular normal existence affords absolutely no hope - represents only duties, burdens and obligations, proposing no promising tasks or aims that stimulate and justify mature ambitions on the plane of the earth. The propensity for transcendental pursuits in India and the misery of Indian history are certainly intimately related to each other; *they must not be regarded separately*. The ruthless philosophy of politics and the superhuman achievements in metaphysics represent two sides of a single experience of life (1953: 83 emphasis mine).

The theories of *samsara*, *kamma* and the dread prospect of endless rebirths, were unknown in the *Rig Vedic* period. By the sixth century BCE they had become part of an integral world-view. This cosmology conditioned the psychology and ethical attitudes of people in cultures which had developed outside the pale of Brahmanic influence. In the Buddha's day, salvation-striving was motivated by a determination to break out of the grid-lock of *samsara*, a mysterious and tremendous law. The ascetic, seeking to purge himself of all moral taints, was defying and seeking to thwart the invisible hand of *Kamma*.

Rene Girard (1977) argues that there is an intimate link between violence and the sacred. Practices like gambling, the casting of lots and belief in the wheel of fortune are, in their archaic essence, imbued with feelings of cosmic sacrality and religiosity. In unstable conditions of existence, the cosmos appears to humans as a mysterious reality governed by capricious powers. Fortune and misfortune seem to be the result of chance happenings. But even in conditions of extreme powerlessness, humans have sought to shape their destinies. Casting lots or playing the lottery, for example, were stratagems for forcing the hand of chance. If the fates are given free play, chance alone would determine the resolution of human problems. Girard sees religious rites as attempts to control chance and the caprice of the gods.

Modern man flatly rejects the notion that Chance is the reflection of the divine will. Primitive man views things differently. For him, Chance embodies all the characteristics of the sacred. Now it deals violently with man, now it showers him with gifts. Indeed what is more capricious in its favours than Chance, more susceptible to those rapid reversals of temper that are invariably associated with the gods? The sacred nature of Chance is reflected in the practice of the lottery. In some sacrificial rites the choice of a victim by means of a lottery serves to underline the relationship between Chance and generative violence (1977: 314).

One way to break out of the possible sufferings that *Karma* might secretly hold in store in a future birth is to strike first, as the Jains attempted to do. The voluntary self-infliction of suffering might prevent a terrible fate in the future. Freely adopting the condition of a dog or bull in the here and now, might forestall the involuntary regression into a canine or bovine existence in a future birth. Self-torture is the fierce, yet free and conscious exercise of human power against the power of the unknown. Humans try to take suffering into their own hands.

Belief in the efficacy of ritual sacrifice was older than the theory of *kamma*. Ritual practices are an articulation of the human determination to make the gods who apparently enjoy seeing animals and humans suffer, submit to human demands. Such pre-emptions were made on behalf of the entire community in tribal societies.

In popular legends, Chance is often invoked to “find” some one to undertake a difficult or perilous mission, a mission that might involve self-sacrifice for the general good - someone, in short, to assume the role of *surrogate victimhood* (Girard *ibid*: 310, emphasis added).

The hope that sacrifice might force the hand of chance or the capricious gods to be benevolent, is founded on a deep-seated generalized belief in, what Girard calls, *generative violence*. One of the strategies of power is to make its operations invisible. In order to retain its structuring influence, generative violence must remain hidden; misapprehension is indispensable to all religious and post religious structuration. His theory of surrogate victimhood, Girard explains, is an attempt to offer an explanation of the primordial role that religion plays in primitive societies, as well as of man’s ignorance of it (*ibid*).

Mythic beliefs and their corresponding rituals will continue to exercise the imagination of people, so long as the conditions which produced and reproduce them remain opaque. Implicit in the belief that suffering and victimhood must have a purpose that is not directly perceptible, is the submerged historic memory that the prevailing cosmo-social order was *structured through violence*. The average person cannot fully comprehend the hidden mechanisms of power, but experiences its effects in everyday life. When society becomes divided into classes, the character of surrogate victimhood changes. The sacrificial rite is performed to ensure the maintenance and continuation of a societal order hierarchised along gender and class lines. In this changed context, sacrificial rites, Gerard argues, provide an outlet and a catharsis for the endemic violence of society. It renders suffering and victimhood religiously meaningful. The threat of a return to primordial chaos and anarchy by spontaneous outbursts of violence by the victims of a given social order are ritually forestalled and channeled. The endemic violence of society is vested with a sacred character. This is the basic mechanism behind the sacrificial principle:

The modern mind still cannot bring itself to acknowledge the basic principle behind that mechanism which, in a single decisive movement curtails reciprocal violence and imposes structure on society (*ibid*: 317).

Surrogate victimhood or vicarious suffering embodies the principle that it is better for one or a few to suffer and die than let an entire people perish. Victimhood ritually enacted, imbues the sufferings of people with sacred significance. They are made to believe that their suffering has a redemptive value and is teleologically oriented towards an eschatological vindication of this value.

The mystic and the ascetic defy this belief in predestination. Their self-reliance is a rebellion against the power of the priest who ritually controls the

deployment of suffering. It is also an act of social protest, because the priesthood is a professional stratum which, in general, seeks to maintain and reproduce social order by vesting it with sacrality. The ascetic in particular, co-opts the powers claimed by the priest by, as Joseph Campbell puts it, *interiorizing the sacrifice* (1976: 211).

The mystic's and ascetic's solution of the problem of suffering however is individualistic. Both renounce society, but their actions do not in any way change the social conditions which produced their sense of dissatisfaction.

Self-Sacrifice and the Will to Power

It is remarkable that the religious discourse on the spirit is acted out on the body. More ingenuity has been devoted to devising punishments and tortures for the body than on improving its condition. On the other hand, despite talk of spirit and spirituality, the wealthy spare no expense to pamper, beautify and rejuvenate the body! Barrington Moore in *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt*, discusses forms of Indian asceticism that arise not only from a wish to repress desire and to escape the endless cycles of rebirth, but also from a drive to control the outside world (1978: 51). The power drive is extraordinary in that it is rooted in an effort to control the controlling deity. Moore (ibid), sees voluntary embrace of crucifixion as an act of aggression against deity - a device for compelling the divine will. Heinrich Zimmer unravels the drive behind Indian asceticism in a similar fashion. In the Indian tradition, Zimmer explains, asceticism is presented as the most effective way to control the Supreme Being:

The practice of *tapas* ... is a technique for winning complete mastery over oneself through sustaining self-inflicted sufferings to the utmost limit of intensity and time; also, it is the way to conquer the powers of the universe itself, the macrocosm, by subduing completely their reflection in the microcosm, one's own organism. What it represents is an expression of an extreme will for power, a desire to conjure the unlimited hidden energies that are stored up in the unconscious vital part of human nature (1953: 400).

With the creation of the spirit/flesh dichotomy, the disturbances of the flesh become 'another law in the members,' hindering the ascent of the spirit towards the Absolute Spirit. If sense desire is a weakness of the flesh, which the spiritual gods do not have, the self-torturer displays a godlike ability to rise above the clamourings of the flesh. Within such a power discourse, Barrington Moore points out, sexuality is the greatest fear of the male ascetic. "The ascetic could, in an hour, in a night, spill out the whole charge of physical force that he had spent a lifetime striving to ac-

cumulate” (ibid: 53). He has to constantly evoke revulsion for women and persuade himself that the pleasures of a woman’s body are deceptive and ephemeral. She becomes the incarnation of the fleeting pleasures of life. Denigrating and degrading her and evoking disgust for her body are part of the strategy of the male ascetic’s striving for holiness. The hidden ‘truth’ of ‘asceticism’ as a struggle against the flesh is not holiness, but a will to power. Behind the ascetic mortification of the flesh is a conflict between the desire for power and the power of desire.

A World of Voluptuousness and a World of Woes

The bizarre practices of self-torture against which the Buddha and the first Buddhists campaigned have continued to this day in India. Ancient religious practices have not become obsolete because the conditions which engendered them have not changed. The extremely unequal and uneven pattern of development in India - the co-existence and interaction of people enduring the hardships of the stone age with those enjoying all the luxuries of the electronic age, explain in great measure the coexistence and inter-penetration of superstitious beliefs alongside secular and scientific attitudes to problem solving in India. Who knows? The fates might hurl today’s billionaire into the lot of the scavenger tomorrow. The oscillation between two extremes, unbridled pleasure and unmitigated pain, is reflected in Indian religious culture. Karl Marx was struck by the extraordinary capacity of Indian religiosity to accommodate and legitimize extreme pleasure and extreme pain.

From a social point of view, [the religion of Hindostan] is a strange combination of ... a world of voluptuousness and a world of woes - That religion is at once a religion of sensualist exuberance, and a religion of self-torturing asceticism; a religion of the Lingam and of the Juggernaut; the religion of the monk and of the Bayadere (The British Rule in India *MECW* 12.126 emphasis mine).

In making this observation Marx however, was guilty of a sweeping generalization about ‘the religion of Hindostan.’ He subscribed to the erroneous assumption that Indian culture at all times and in all places has eternally been the same. He was obviously unaware of the fact that in the sixth century BCE Siddhattha Gotama the Buddha raised the banner of revolt against a state of affairs that allowed a few ‘to enjoy all the benefits of society while condemning others to bear all its burdens.’ He saw his fellow human beings saddled with a choice between two extremes, both religiously justified - a way of sensual self-indulgence - *kamasukhallikanuyoga* - which he called “vulgar, ignoble and profitless;” and a way of self-torment - *atthakilamathanuyoga* - which he called “painful, ignoble and profitless.” He regarded these as two dead ends - *antas*. He began the promulgation of the Four Noble Truths, with the declaration that he had found a Middle Way that went through and beyond

these two extremes. Humans need not be imprisoned in social conditions which offer them two dead ends: uninhibited sensual indulgence or unalleviated deprivation of the senses. The Buddha's Middle Way project opened up the possibility for the eradication of suffering, personal as well as social.

Buddhism has become a status religion and many teachings and practices rejected by Buddha and the first Buddhists has become the warp and woof of culture in Buddhist countries. What is called for, is a return to a critical understanding of the radical teachings and practices of the first Buddhists - a Buddhism purified of the dross of subsequent accretions and accommodations. The Buddha's humanizing and civilizing mission (Chapter 16) begun over 2500 years ago, remains an unfinished task.

CHAPTER 8

THE WANDERING MENDICANT TEACHERS: A NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENT

The Age of the Buddha witnessed the rise of a new social movement launched by moral reformers who were identified by the generic name *paribbajaka-samanas*—‘wandering-around strivers.’ These were ‘ascetics’ of a new sort. They renounced household life like the traditional ascetics, but the liberation they sought was not individualistic; their quest was directed to a wider purpose. Their peripatetic way of life distinguished them from the traditional sages who lived sequestered in forest *ashrams*. They did not go to the people. Individuals who sought inner peace and relief from social stress had to go to them. The *paribbajjikas* on the other hand, moved from place to place, alone or in the company of colleagues, propagating their views and debating with wandering teachers of other schools.

The Wandering Teachers

The phenomenon of wandering teachers was without precedent in ancient India and seems to have been a response to the turbulent changes taking place in the societies of the Majjhimadesa.

Urban life released a degree of curiosity and freethinking which was made use of by some of these *sramanas* and far from isolating themselves in the wilderness they were anxious to address large audiences. The teaching was open to everyone and because it was aimed at a large audience, was less esoteric than the doctrines of forest dwellers (Thapar 1984: 153).

A remarkable cultural institution in the cities of the Majjhimadesa was the *kutuhalasalas*. These were pavilions for relaxation and expression of views erected at public expense in the central parks of the major cities. They were frequented by *paribbajaka* schools for proclaiming their views and debating with each other. This remarkable social institution and the topics debated indicate the level of cultural development at the time:

There was then the most complete and unquestioned freedom in religious matters that the world had yet witnessed (Rhys Davids DB I.166).

As a rule, the wanderers were not expounding their private views. Most of them were adherents of a particular school of thought founded by a prestigious teacher

When these wanderers met they would inquire: “On account of whom friend, have you gone forth, who is your teacher, whose *dhamma* do you profess?” (MLS I. 214). The Buddha’s insistence that his *Dhamma* should be preached in the languages-in-use in the various regions, without affectation and departure from accepted parlance, underscores the popular orientation of the Teaching (M III. 234).

The canonical writings, almost all supposedly from the Buddha’s discourses and dialogues, were in everyday language and plain style, without mysticism or lengthy speculation. This was a new type of religious language addressed to the whole of contemporary society, not reserved for a few learned initiates and adepts (Kosambi 1977: 113).

The atmosphere of these open-air debates can still be felt in the longer discourses of the *Digha* and *Majjhima Nikayas*, like the Ambattha, Kutadanta, Cakkavatti Sihanada, Vasettha and Assalayana Suttas. The topics dealt with in these public exchanges related to important philosophical and social issues, but were cast in popular form to capture and hold the attention of large audiences. All the skills of oratory are marshalled to win the assent of the gathered masses: good-natured humour, satire, irony and hyperbole; legends, folk-tales and examples from everyday life are made use of to illustrate a difficult point of the teaching; political and religious potentates are subtly pilloried. Even though the style in which these oral traditions are handed down may seem unfamiliar at first, one gradually begins to get a feel of the excitement generated by these public meetings: the thrust and parry of debate, the laughter and the exclamations of assent when a protagonist scored a point: *Sadhu! Sadhu! - Aye! Aye!*

Some Distinguishing Features of the Paribbajaka Movement

Before examining the teachings of the main schools of philosophy in the Buddha’s time, it is useful to note some of the general characteristics of *paribbajaka saman-ism* as an extra-societal cultural movement.

Nomadism

The term *paribbajaka* has an interesting genealogy. Etymologically, it is derived from *pari* ‘around’ like the Greek *peri*, and *vraj*. The compound term has been translated ‘a wandering man,’ ‘a wanderer,’ ‘wandering religious mendicant, not necessarily Buddhist’ (PED 430). However, as we saw in Chapter 4, the *vraja* refers to a cattle enclosure and the temporary settlement of a nomadic tribe in the *Rig Veda*. The peripatetism of these ascetic teachers suggest a nostalgia for the life style of nomads who moved around - ‘*pari*’ - from ‘*vraj*’- grazing ground - to

'vraj' - grazing ground with their herds of cattle. Embracing a wanderers way of life was a demonstrative rejection of sedentarism. The necessity of moving from one area to another in search of food resources made the accumulation of goods among hunter-gatherer tribes a hindrance to their freedom of movement. By renouncing a fixed residence, and becoming peripatetic mendicants, the new teachers were in effect reverting to an earlier mode of life when humans were dependent for bare subsistence on the gifts of nature. The wanderers were 'tent dwellers' who travelled light, depending either on the gifts of nature or of their fellow human beings for simple sustenance; sufficient for the day was enough. They were affronting the values of a society in which acquisition and accumulation of wealth had become an obsessive preoccupation.

Beyond the Grasp of Society

The *paribbajakas* lived outside the areas of permanent settlement, in huts or caves in the forest, and camped temporarily in the parks of large cities. Forest dwelling was not as forbidding as it may seem today since the forests were inhabited by hunter-gatherer tribes. These nomadic 'strivers' placed themselves outside the imperatives of settled society by opting out of the social system of production.

Symbolic Exile and Triumphant Return

A wanderer's act of renouncing household life made one a *pabbajitā*, 'one who had gone from home to the homeless life' to wander about as a mendicant-teacher. *Pabbajita* is the Pali form of the Sanskrit *pravrajati*, derived from *pra* + *vraj*. The operative term here again is *vraj*, literally 'leaving a settlement.' The causative form *pabbajeti* means 'to make to go out, to exile, to banish.' The adjectival form *pabbajaniya* means 'belonging to banishment,' 'deserving to be exiled.' *Pabbajita* has a formal or juridical signification, meaning 'officially banished.' In early Buddhist usage it referred to a man or woman whose 'going forth' had been formally recognized through admission into a community - *sangha* of renunciators (PED 414). This distinguished the *sāmana pabbajitā* from a common vagrant. By banishing themselves, the *paribbājakas* were effecting a transvaluation of values, since they voluntarily embraced the condition of socially outcast or marginalized groups who – due to social necessity or determination – were reduced to vagrancy and beggary.

In Ancient India, as in other ancient cultures, exile and return is the central theme of hero-epics. The self-exiled, like the epic heroes, returned to society with the gains of the victory won during the period of forest exile. The Buddha projected himself and was seen as a *jīna* - conquering hero (M I 171). He declared that he was a Raja of *Dhamma*, without peer: "I roll the Wheel of *Dhamma*, yes, the Wheel

which no one can roll backwards” (Sn 554). Nigantha Nataputta, the founder of the Jains, was revered as a *jina* by his followers, hence his title *Mahavira* - The Great Hero. The Ajivakas (see below) too referred to a person who had overcome himself as a *jina* (M I.171).

As we saw in Chapter 2, in the Buddha's Day, wandering troubadours and story tellers moved around telling tales of heroes and kings, of battles won and lost. The exploits of the heroes of the *Mahabharatha* and the *Ramayana* (the narratives of both epics are dated at around 800 BCE) may have been in circulation at the time. In the *Nidhana Katha* of the *Jataka* as well as in Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacarita*, the legend of Siddhattha's self-Exile, Awakening and triumphal Return is cast in the form of a hero-epic. This *ksatriya* is a new type of warrior-hero, the polar opposite of a warrior-heroes of the *Mahabharatha* and *Ramayana*, respectively, Arjuna and Rama. The driving ambition of Arjuna, the bride-abducting hero, was the conquest of territory. He spent the period of exile beseeching the gods to give him the ultimate weapon of destruction. Rama waged war to regain wife and kingdom. In the Buddhist epic, Siddhattha is not portrayed as an escapist abandoning wife and child but as a mighty hero going forth to do battle to overcome himself and to find an answer to the problem of human suffering. Just as Siddhattha is no Arjuna, so too, Siddhattha's charioteer Channa is no Krishna. Channa plays a crucial role in Siddhattha's decision to give up his warrior-knight status and embrace a life of non-violence by becoming a *samana*. As Kosambi observes, "His (Krishna's) advice to Arjuna at crucial moments of the great battle, ran counter to every rule of decency and fair play (Kosambi 1977: 114). Arjuna was the reluctant hero; Krishna was the demigod who insisted that winning the war at any cost is his sacred duty, his *dharma*. Siddhartha's charioteer Channa on the other hand, takes Siddhattha out of the Palace of Delusion and opens the young prince's eyes to the true realities of life. Though grief-stricken by his master's decision to renounce his title to chiefdom, Channa does not try to prevent it. In the *Mahabharatha*, heroes like Bhima leap in the air and utter a lion's roar when they challenge their opponents to single-handed combat. Many discourses by the Buddha are titled *Sihanada* or *Mahasihanada Sutta*, Lion's Roar or Great Lion's Roar evocative of the hero theme. Discourses thus titled were 'challenge proclamations' made on their own initiative by the Buddha or one of his leading disciples (Manne 1992). The Buddha referred to himself as "a leader who roars his lion's roar in assemblies and sets the *Brahma* (Excellent) wheel rolling" (MLS I.93). Instead of rolling the wheel of the war chariot, he set in motion the Wheel of Righteousness.

The *samana-paribbajakas* have therefore to be seen as alternative role models who presented society with a new ideal of heroism and power - mastery over self. Kosambi, aware of the chicanery that so often cloaks itself in the robes of religiosity in India, draws attention to the historical significance of the *samana* movement in forceful terms:

The great almsmen-teachers of the sixth century were far above the all-too-common parasitic beggars and thickheaded cult leaders of later India, because the former participated vigorously in the formation of a totally new type of society (1977: 121).

A Tribal Model of Organisation

The nomadic way of life was accompanied by a return to practices common in lineage or tribal societies. In the Buddha's Day tribes (*ganas*) and tribal federations (*gana-sanghas*) existed alongside monarchies and monarchical states. Some of the leading teachers of the time, Nigantha Nataputta or Mahavira, the founder of the Jain School, Makkhali Gosala, the founder of the Ajivaka School and Siddhattha Gotama hailed from *gana-sanghas*. The first two were *Vajjians*. They referred to the extra-social communities they founded as *ganas* or *sanghas*. In the context of the times, the concrete denotation of these terms was 'tribe,' not 'order' in the sense of a religious 'order' or 'congregation' in the Christian tradition. Admission to an extra-societal *gana* or *sangha* was marked by a radical break of blood-ties and the exclusivity of the kinship group, as well as a transcendence of former social status, high or low. At least in the initial phase the *samana sanghas* and *ganas* were open to all, irrespective of social background or gender. The social proximity of *samana* communities comprising men and women of different social origins, living a collective way of life and practising celibacy, was a direct challenge to the *jati* systems and their custom of clan endogamy. Begging the daily meal from householders irrespective of their *jati* flouted the taboo against commensality with non clan members. The wandering mendicant teachers belonged to a quasi-tribal association and were taken up into the kinship of the *dhamma* they professed. What bonded them was a common teaching and discipline. The a-societal *gana-sanghas* returned to the tribal practice of holding property in common. This renunciation is formally and publicly made in the Jain rite of initiation:

I shall become a *srāmana*, who owns no house, no property, no sons, no cattle, who eats only what others give. Master, I renounce the taking of anything that has not been given (JS XI.7.1).

The *sāmana* (m)-*sāmanis* (f) break with the existing order of things was radical. They 'died' a civil death and were born again to a new life free of property and greed. To symbolize their 'rebirth' they often took a new name. The liberation offered was not individualistic, but communitarian. The *sāmana gana-sanghas* were alternate societies with an egalitarian ethos which challenged the prevailing social discrimination and unequal distribution of wealth. The very existence of *sāmana* communities was an affront to the dominant values of society and an invitation to men and women to opt out of society without fearing the hazards of

solitary existence like the common beggar, the banished criminal, or the individual renouncer.

This-Worldly Philosophers

The great thinkers and moral reformers of the sixth century BCE left a lasting impact on Indian culture and an indelible stamp on what is called 'the Indian ethos.' What distinguished the wandering teachers of the sixth century BCE, some of whose basic teachings are given in the Buddhist scriptures, is that all of them without exception rejected a theistic or 'religious' frame of reference in attempting to explain reality. Discussing the philosophies of this period Jawaharlal Nehru writes:

There is an emphasis on truth, dependence on it, a passion for it, in these early adventures of the Indian mind. Dogma or revelation are passed by as something for lesser minds, which cannot rise above them. The approach was one of experiment based on personal experience. There was an insistence that true knowledge (*vidya*) alone could bring human beings to wisdom (*prajna*) - an enlightened attitude towards reality (1951: 67).

The *samana* philosophers radically questioned Brahmin theology, belief in a supreme god, the authority of the *Vedas* and the efficacy of priestly rituals. The *samanas* and brahmins were so bitterly opposed, Patrick Olivelle notes, that Patanjali - the second century BCE grammarian - used this tension to illustrate coordinative compounds - *dvandva* - where two terms are each other's polar opposites. Greek visitors to ancient India also noticed this bitter opposition: "Kleitarches quoted by Strabo, says the *pramanai* (sramanas) are philosophers opposed to Brachmanes ... They ridicule the Brachmanes as fools and imposters" (Olivelle 1974: 4).

Popularisation of Critical Thought

The wandering preachers took their message to ordinary men and women. In this they were unlike Plato who discussed philosophical subtleties with his aristocratic friends or Aristotle who was a 'peripatetic' teacher, but within the groves of academe. Both these intellectual giants held that women and slaves are inferior due to their inner essences or inherent natures. The Greek philosophers, as Kosambi remarked, make excellent reading, but none succeeding in translating the ideals of the 'street philosopher' Socrates into reality. Whereas the Indian political philosophers and the wandering teachers of the Age of the Buddha, each in their respective fields, were concerned with the practical transformation of society (Kosambi 1977: 141). These important differences must be kept in mind, Jawaharlal Nehru notes, when comparing the Greek and Indian intellectual traditions:

It must be remembered that the business of philosophy in India was not confined to a few philosophers or highbrows. Philosophy was an essential part of the religion of the masses; it percolated to them in some attenuated form and created that philosophic attitude which became nearly as common in India as in China. That philosophy was for some a deep and intricate attempt to know the causes and laws of all phenomena, the search for the ultimate purpose of life, and for the many, it was a much simpler affair, which yet gave them some sense of purpose, of cause and effect and endowed them with courage to face trial and misfortune and not lose their gaiety and composure (1951: 67).

While the extant scriptures place most of their activities in an urban context, the Buddha and the early Buddhist preachers were equally active in rural areas. Max Weber advanced the view that from its inception the *Buddha Dhamma* was directed predominantly, if not exclusively, towards sophisticated urban elites - particularly the mercantile class. This turns the *Buddha Dhamma* into a doctrinal system whose appeal was primarily to the ruling classes. Such an assumption fails to explain the success of Buddhism and Jainism among the masses. To this day, rural presence is a noteworthy feature of Buddhism. The Weberian suggestion that Buddhism "inculcates a satiety with death" and seeks escape in the euphoria of apathetic ecstasy" (1962: 207-208); that it engenders a negative outlook on life, goes against the very nature of Buddhist culture,

If Buddhism – a typical product of Indian thought – had merely been a doctrine of life negation or denial, it would surely have had some such effect on the hundreds of millions who profess it. Yet, as a matter of fact, the Buddhist countries are full of evidence to the contrary (Nehru 1951: 66).

Social Dissidents

The *samanas* as freethinkers and doers were able to assert the right to an alternative lifestyle from a position of collective solidarity. Their social impact would have been considerable since they had outstanding leaders who could confront political authorities as the heads of a powerful social movement (Thapar 1984a: 86). The influence of the *samanas* as public dissenters would have been threatening to social order since they demonstratively refused to subscribe to the values and norms of conventional society. Once their power was consolidated, the monarchical states were not sympathetic to the wanderers. The *Arthashastra* prohibited any public assemblies in *sita* lands (settled and farmed directly under royal supervision); no form of public assemblage whatever was permitted, except for matters pertaining to production in *sita* villages. The proselytizing wandering teachers were forbid-

den entry into these territories. Before joining a *parivrajaka sangha* a man had to make provision for his dependents and distribute all his property. Women were strictly prohibited from joining a *sangha* (Kosambi 177: 148-150).

The *samanas* left behind a standard for measuring human greatness which has been valued down the centuries. "In India, learning and erudition have always stood in high esteem, for learning was supposed to imply both superior knowledge and virtue. Before the learned man the ruler and warrior have always bowed" (Nehru 1951: 69). It is the combination of abstemious life style and exemplary morality with social dissent which enabled renouncers to win the respect of the masses.

The Social Impact of the Wandering Teachers

The rapid dissemination of the teachings of the Buddha and of Mahavira can be explained sociologically. Their teachings would have appealed to ordinary men and women particularly because they denounced violence and advocated *ahimsa* - non injuriousness, towards all sentient beings. When first propagated it was not merely a 'spiritual' or 'ascetic discipline,' It was a powerful social campaign, like the campaign against the use of intoxicating substances. The *ahimsa* campaign was directed against the rampant violence of the times in general and the senseless killing of animals in Brahminic sacrifices in particular. In the new society of the Majjhimadesa, Brahmin sacrifices were regarded as an obsolete relic from the past. Livestock breeding had become part of the domestic farm-economy. Nomadic pastoralism had become outmoded as the fields were taken over for cultivation and wandering across cultivated fields, even by peripatetic teachers, met with popular resistance. The religious demand of animals for sacrifice had become an intolerable drain of resources for the agricultural economy and an unbearable burden especially for poor peasants. The new teachers practised celibacy and had no fixed home, so their needs were few. They lived on a simple meal, which they begged from day to day.

So thoroughly successful was the *ahimsa* campaign, that it revolutionized Vedic morality. The eating of beef has become a religious taboo in orthodox Hinduism. Good Hindus regard beef eating as revolting a practice as cannibalism, but one wonders whether they realize that they have inherited the legacy of the Mahavira and the Buddha. Beef was part of Brahmin diet. As we saw in Chapter 6, Yajnavalkya, the great sage of the Upanishads renounced the carnal pleasures of marriage to realise spiritual union with God. Nonetheless he was an unabashed beef-eater. Faced with the growing protest against the slaughter of cattle, the holy man, having examined the pros and cons, concluded that he could find no moral objection to beef eating: "It is said, 'let him not eat the flesh of either cow or ox, for the cow and the ox support everything here on earth' ... Nevertheless, I for one, eat it, provided it is tender" (Sat.Br. III.1.2.1).

Brahmanism would have been rejected by the people unless it incorporated the new ethic into its system. Characteristically, beef-eating was turned into a ritual taboo, and the cow into a sacred animal. Due to the sustained campaign of the Buddhists and Jains, the fire-sacrifices became few and far between. T. Rhys David notes,

Vedic sacrifices of animals had been practically given up when the long struggle between Brahmanism and Buddhism reached its close. Isolated instances of such sacrifices are known down to the Muhammadan invasion. But the battle was really won by the Buddhists and their allies (Rhys Davids DB II.165).

An official ban on animal sacrifice was decreed during the reign of the Buddhist emperor Asoka (269-233 BCE), “The *yajna* was forbidden by decree, as were certain forms of saturnalia (*samaja*) which led to heavy drinking and public orgies with crime or deplorable excesses ... It was completely prohibited to burn down forests for driving the game to slaughter or to clear the land. This was not some Buddhist vagary, but absolutely necessary to protect settlements and to conserve natural resources” (Kosambi 1977: 162).

The Major Samana Schools of the Sixth Century B.C.E.

The *Samannaphala Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya* (DB I. 69-74) gives in summary form the teachings of the main *samana* schools in the Buddha’s Day. Admittedly, the main features of these teachings are handed down by an ideological rival and without doubt reflects Buddhist bias. Nevertheless they provide an idea of the views discussed and debated at the time. The brilliance of the epistemological and ethical breakthrough (See next Chapter) achieved by the Buddha can be appreciated by comparing his teachings with views held by his contemporaries.

Methodical Scepticism

The confusing welter of views and religious practices of the time, the instability of the period, when yesterdays deities and certitudes were replaced by today’s gods and dogmas, must have led some wise and prudent thinkers to advise an attitude of healthy scepticism towards all teachings and practices. An outstanding representative of this school of thought was Sanjaya Belatthaputta - a former Brahmin. When asked to give a categorical yes or no answer to a philosophical question he responded:

If you ask me whether there is another world - well, if I thought there was, I would say so. But I do not say so. And I don’t think it is thus or thus.

And I don't think it is otherwise. And I don't deny it. And I do not say there neither is, or is not, another; [the same as to, whether phenomena are chance happenings or not; whether actions have verifiable effects or not, and whether there is personal survival after death]. To each or any of these questions I give the same reply (DB I. 75).

The Sanjaya was advocating an attitude of healthy reserve in the face of much superstition, obscurantism, dogmatism and fantastic speculations. The Sanjaya made systematic doubt an epistemological method. It represented a major step forward in Indian philosophy. Suspension of one's judgement amidst a wilderness of views prevalent at the time, was the necessary precondition for unbiased and systematic investigation. It paved the way for a critical method which would shift the field of inquiry from the speculative to the empirical. Two of the Buddha's most illustrious disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana, were earlier disciples of Sanjaya. Their intellectual training would have equipped them to approach any doctrinal system with an open mind and subject it to impartial and disinterested inquiry. It is therefore not surprising to read that they were able to grasp the import of the Buddha's key discovery - Conditioned Co-arising - when its gist was communicated to them in a pithy formula. (V MV 1.23).

Metaphysical Materialism

The widespread violence and greed of the times, often justified by Brahmin theory and ritually celebrated in public sacrifices, led some thinkers to reject all theistic views. Remarkably, the fiercest opponents of the Vedic world-view and morality were former Brahmins. Purana Kassapa propagated a theory of outright materialism. According to him, all talk of morality was empty talk:

To him who acts, or causes to act, to him who mutilates or causes another to mutilate, to him who kills or gets another to kill,.. takes what is not given, commits highway robbery, adultery or lies, there is no guilt. If, with a discus with an edge as sharp as a razor, a man should make all living creatures on the earth one heap, one mass of flesh, there would be no guilt thence resulting, no increase of guilt. Were he to go along the south bank of the Ganges striking and slaying, mutilating, oppressing and having oppressed, there would be no guilt. Were he to go along the north bank of the Ganges giving alms, ordering gifts, offering sacrifices or causing them to be offered, there would be no merit thence resulting, no increase of merit. In generosity, in self-mastery, in control of the senses, in speaking truth, there is no merit, nor increase of merit (DB I.70).

Purana Kassapa was in the first place, targeting Brahmin sacrifices, which canonised

violence and invested sacrifice and suffering with divine value, and secondly, the theory of rebirth which linked the practice of morality to a system of post mortem rewards and punishment. By juxtaposing 'South-bank' and 'North-bank' morality, he was attacking the double morality which allowed evil deeds to be covered by the incense smoke of religiosity. North- and South-bank moralities were not fantastic products of Kassapa's brain. They accurately described the horrors and the hypocrisy of the times. Men of violence commissioned lavish religious ceremonies on one 'bank' and paid for it with the very wealth they had expropriated through violent and unjust means, on the other. Kassapa was undoubtedly articulating the cynicism of the people who had seen their oppressors parading themselves as pious patrons of religion. To the peasants and artisans who saw the wealth they had created expropriated and wasted on extravagant *tamashas*, such religions offered little comfort and hope – except in an after life. Kassapa's biting cynicism is indicative of the moral vacuum into which society was plunged at the time. It also foregrounds the context of the discussions among the wandering teachers about the problem of human suffering. It was not just a psychological state of distress, or a philosophical conundrum of the leisured classes. It was a tangible social reality. The moral platitudes of the religious leaders of the time, Kassapa must have felt, provided no real solution to this problem. It would have seemed to him that human beings were living in a morally absurd universe.

Two other teachers, also former Brahmins, Ajita Kesakambali and Pakudha Kaccayana, were as materialist and as cynical as Kassapa. They sought to give this attitude a philosophical basis. To try and make moral sense of the world and of events, according to them, was an exercise in futility because human consciousness and human activity are mere reflections of blind material processes, just as the fermentation of certain material substances in combination produces alcoholic 'spirits.' According to Ajita:

A human being is made up of four elements. When he dies, the earthly in him returns and relapses to the earth, the fluid to the water, the heat to the fire, the wind to the air and his faculties pass into space. Four men take up the bier and carry the corpse to the cremating ground, gossiping all the while about the dead person and when his body is burnt his bones turn the colour of a dove's wings, and that is the end of it all - virtue, sacrifice and the rest... Fools and wise alike, on the dissolution of the body, are cut off, annihilated, and after death they are not (DB I. 73).

To Ajita's four basic elements, Pakudha Kaccayana added three more: pleasure, pain and consciousness. Thus those factors which, in the Nama/Rupa scheme were regarded as non-corporeal, were also material sensations. A human being is a fortuitous aggregation of these elements. What is called 'death' is merely the falling apart of these elements briefly aggregated into seemingly stable forms.

There is neither slayer nor slain, speaker or hearer, knower or explainer. When one, with a sharp sword cleaves a head in twain, no one thereby deprives any one of life; the sword has only penetrated into the interval between the seven elementary substances (DB I. 74).

Kassapa, Kesakambali and Kaccayana were articulating the general mood of a period in which human life had lost all value. Their philosophy is the polar opposite of the Upanishadic view that consciousness is a property of the immortal self which is distinct from the body. We have here an early atomistic theory of the universe: there is only matter in motion. Sensation and consciousness are produced by the interaction of forces – external and internal (the sense organs) – both material. For the *Upanishadic* philosophers, phenomenal realities are pale reflections of the Absolute Mind. For the materialists, consciousness and the products of the mind, including the notion of an Absolute Spirit, are reflections of material processes. The *Upanishadic* philosophers held that the substances in the cosmos are moulded and named by a Cosmic Potter: that individual pots are mere modification of the essence 'clay' conceived by Him. The materialists retorted that the Potter and the pots are equally fragile forms shaped by earth, water, fire and wind. By declaring that all human beings are material substances, these philosophers attacked the notion of the post-mortem survival of a spiritual element or soul. Fools and the wise, rogues and *rishis* alike come to the same end. These three philosophers belong to the *Lokayata* - pertaining to the world - school of Indian philosophy. The most outstanding name in Indian materialism is Carvaka. The scriptures of the Carvakas were destroyed by Brahmins according to some. There are only a few stray references to their views:

In the famous Arthashastra, it is mentioned as one of the major philosophies of India. We have to rely on the critics and persons interested in disparaging this philosophy, and they pour ridicule on it... That is an unfortunate way for us to find out what at all it is (Nehru 1951: 79-80).

It is perhaps to the Indian school of materialists that one has to attribute the tremendous achievements of Indian mathematics, science, technology and architecture. As a social philosophy, it functioned as a dominant ideology as well as a form of radical social criticism and protest. The critical materialist philosophers campaigned to raise awareness of the people. They were unrelenting in their attack on religious beliefs: there are no supernatural beings; the gods are inventions of the priests; sacred rituals are pure priest-craft; the religion of Brahmanism distracted the attention and the energies of the people towards the gods. The materialists' radical assertion that life is meant to be enjoyed by all was at the same time a demand that human beings should devote their energies to create prosperity for all in the here and now. This was an indictment of religious leaders who asked the people to live

for an afterlife, while living comfortably secure lives off the contributions of the people. The materialists also rejected the theory of *karma* as a dominant ideology intended to dupe the people. Rather than mystifying the source of suffering by explaining it as a predetermined condition, they maintained that people should trace the cause of suffering to the cruelty, injustice and the violence engendered by society. These sixth century *samanas*, unlike latter day materialists, enjoyed credibility before the people, because they were renouncers who had no vested interest in society. Ajita's second name Kesakambali means 'hair-shirted' – which suggests that he and his followers practised severe austerities.

Indian materialism has been underplayed by the dominant intellectual tradition of India and by Western students of Indian (religious) thought, who have generally preferred to repeat the parrot cry that what defines Indian culture is its religious or spiritual 'essence.' To some, India's very backwardness and poverty epitomizes its enduring romance with other-worldliness. Jawaharlal Nehru, however, wrote of the materialist tradition with critical appreciation:

The materialists attacked authority and all vested interest in thought, religion and theology. They denounced the Vedas, priestcraft and traditional beliefs and proclaimed that belief must be free and must not depend on presuppositions or merely on the authority of the past. They inveighed against all forms of magic and superstition. Their general spirit is in many ways comparable to the modern materialist approach...With the Carvakas, Jains and Buddhists, systematic philosophy, not the intuitional approach of the Upanishads, but based on close reasoning and argument, begins to appear (1951: 80).

The Buddha agreed with much of the materialists' critique of theological world-views, priest-craft, magic and superstition, but did not share their view that human action had no efficacy. Humans can intervene in the order of gods and men and change it (See Chapter 11).

Extreme Voluntarism

Over and against the rigid determinism of the materialists, a doctrine of extreme voluntarism was taught by Nigantha Nataputta or Mahavira. According to Mahavira, not only human beings, but animals, plants and even inanimate matter are endowed with *jivas* (life-energies). Mahavira's stress is not on 'mind-particles,' but on packets of vital energy trapped in inert matter. *Jivas* pass through different forms until they escape the trammels of impure matter and attain a state of perfect rest. Cosmic energy in Jain philosophy was hypostatized into a governing principle called *Karman* - Action. In their ethics, the Jains stressed the importance

of Right Views, Right Knowledge, and Right Conduct. They recognised that right understanding was necessary for liberation. But the emphasis in their project of liberation was on the will. The residue of impurity inherited from evil actions in the past could be purged by severe asceticism and self-restraint. The Jains were more consistent in their striving after liberation than the yogis, who, after having achieved 'living release,' passively awaited the running down of *karmic* forces. For the Jains, the ultimate assertion of the will to freedom, once the individual felt that he/she was cleansed of material and sensual impurities, was ritual suicide. The preferred method was slow death by starvation.

The focus of Jain interest - the *jiva* - was on what might today be called the *elan vital*. This vital impulse was active not only in living beings but also in what one conventionally calls 'matter.' Actuality seemed to be moved by an *Actus Purus*, but like the other *samanas* of the day they did not believe that there was a personal agent behind pure activity or energy. Human beings fed on plants and animals, but they in turn become food for other life forms – the 'biosphere' exceeded the human: human pretensions of a hierarchically ordered world of 'essentially' different beings. Sustenance of human life would not be possible if the stream of life-energy - or life (*jiva*) in nature was not continuous. The Jain, like the Ajivaka world-view, was Dionysian in contrast to the Brahmin-Upanishadic Apollinian view of an ordered and stable universe.

Consistent with their world-view, the Jains advocated an attitude of scrupulous respect for all forms of life, even unseen life-forms. They did not drink water without straining and filtering it. They wore a cotton gauze before their noses, and swept the floor before them, lest they harm any living creature. This may seem to be extreme 'acting out.' However, it has to be understood in terms of the Jain philosophy of the unity and harmony of the entire universe and the extreme and unbridled violence of the time when human and every other form of life was being destroyed with impunity. The contemporary science of ecology has proved the correctness of the Jain (and Buddhist) insight: the entire universe is a single living organism and what one does to the web of life, one does to oneself. Perverted by desire and the spirit of acquisitiveness, humans had become violent beings. The Jains sought to eradicate the power of desire by the power of the will. Given their total commitment to non-violence, the choice of a right livelihood was problematic for Jain householders. Even agriculture entailed the involuntary killing of worms and other life-forms in the soil. Not surprisingly, trading which does not entail shedding of blood, became (and continues to be) the preferred occupation of Jains.

Fatalism

The most colourful, as well as the most tragic of the Buddha's contemporaries was Makkhali Gosala, the founder of the Ajivaka School. He had been a colleague of the Mahavira but had despaired about the efficacy of human action to change life-conditions. He gave up the action-theory he once held with the Mahavira and taught a doctrine of absolute fatalism. Life-energies (*jivas*), he taught, are doomed to go through a vast number of life-forms impelled by an inner dynamic. The materialists held that blind matter is the ultimate reality. They held that there was no discoverable meaning or purpose to life. Beings and things hurtled through a dizzying number of forms, until their inner forces were spent and they relapsed into a state of inertia. Gosala's view approximates the theory of entropy in contemporary physics: the disorganisation or degradation of a system's energy through transformation into work. He formulated it as follows:

All animals, all creatures, all beings, all *jivas* are without force and power and energy of their own. They are bent this way and that by their fate (*niyati*), by the necessary conditions of the class to which they belong, by their individual nature; and it is according to their position (in one or other class) that they experience ease or pain... (DB II. 71).

Failure to recognize this predetermination is what gives rise to false expectations and constant frustration :

Just as when a ball of string is cast forth, it will spread out just as far and no farther than it can unwind, just so fools and wise alike, wander in transmigrations exactly for their allotted term, shall then, and only then, make an end of pain (DB II. 73).

According to this theory, humans could do nothing to eradicate suffering. Makkhali's teaching was born out of a sense of frustration and futility probably in the face of events which seemed to be beyond human control. The destruction of his beloved Vajjian *ganasangha* must have confirmed him in his pessimism that human beings could do little to prevent what seemed to have been an inevitable fate. His basic message could be summed as, "Eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow we must die." Despite his cynicism, Gosala was not a prophet who advocated blind submission to the iron will of fate. Gosala's answer to the problem of suffering in what seems to be an absurd universe, like that of today's existentialist philosophers, was defiant life-affirmation.

Gosala was not the only philosopher in antiquity to advocate this attitude. The Ancient Hebrew preacher Qoheleth believed that humans could do nothing to change their allotted position in life. He urged his fellows: "Enjoy life while

you have it.” Even though it is framed by a theistic outlook, the view of this anonymous sage is *samsaric*; Qoheleth shares Gosala’s cynicism as well as his life-affirmation.

There is a season for everything, a time for every occupation under heaven. A time for giving birth, a time for dying. A time for planting, a time for uprooting. A time for killing, a time for healing. A time for loving, a time for hating. A time for war, a time for peace...

I know there is no happiness for a human being except in pleasure and enjoyment through life... We do not understand either love or hate. Where we are concerned, both of them are futile. And for all of us is reserved a common fate - for the upright and the wicked, whether we are ritually pure or not, whether we offer sacrifice or not, it is the same for the good and the sinner ... There is nothing new under the sun... So eat your bread in joy, drink your wine with a glad heart, since God has already approved your actions... Spend your life with the woman you love, all the futile days God gives you under the sun (Ecclesiastes 3.1.10; 9. 1- 10).

Gosala’s view, like that of the materialists, would have been grist to the mill of the ruling powers. There is no universally valid ethic binding all. It would have justified the position of those who had the privilege of enjoyment- of the *matsyajanaya* - 'the natural law of big fish gobbling up the small fish.' Why have scruples about one’s wealth and luxuries if the losers in ‘the battle of life’ are merely living out their predetermined fate? On the other hand, if power is the ultimate truth, the oppressed could only liberate themselves by building an even more powerful countervailing force. Even this dialectic dynamic offered no real solution in the final instance: the defeated in turn will rise up in revolt in an endless spiral of violence. Gosala seems to have realized the futility of moral endeavour when he declared: “There is no agency, no effective action and no meaning in effort.” The Buddha condemned Gosala because his scepticism about the effectiveness of human action inculcated apathetic submission to one’s lot or mindless indulgence of the senses:

I know not of any other single person fraught with such loss to the many-folk such discomfort and sorrow to gods and humans as Makkhali, that infatuated man (GS I. 29).

The Old Order Changeth

The great drama being enacted in the sixth century BCE was the disintegration of the autonomous tribes and the collapse of a traditional value system. Out of the womb of the old, a new society was struggling to be born. The great question was whether human beings should cling to a disappearing society, their faces firmly

turned backwards towards a romanticized past? Should they struggle to prevent the world from changing, or strive to humanize a changing world? These were the questions which exercised the minds of sensitive persons in the Buddha's Day, as it must today. In the words of A.K. Warder:

Good men found themselves without a place and without freedom, in an increasingly centralized society in which greed and power had become the dominant forces. For a time hopes seem to have centred on Vaji republic, which was based on old traditions of social harmony and respect for the individual, but in the struggle for survival against Magadha it became clear to men such as the Buddha that its position was precarious, that it was only a matter of time before the greater wealth of Magadha overwhelmed it. The Buddha admired the Republic's ancient customs, its democratic government, its respect for wise men, but he did not see in it a political solution to the problem of human happiness. He and other philosophers of the time looked elsewhere for a solution, not primarily in society, but in the first place away from it. In effect, they contracted out of society in order to preserve their freedom; they abandoned the quest for wealth and power and sought peace of mind and spiritual experiences. Only from an independent vantage could they hope - as they certainly did hope - to exercise any influence on the society they had left, to infuse into it better ideals than money and violence (1980: 30-31).

Analyzing the conditions which gave birth to philosophical inquiry in Ancient Greece, beginning with Socrates' public questioning of the relevance of the Olympian gods, Ronald Fletcher writes,

It was because of this mythical representation of the gods that philosophers like Xenophanes and Plato began to criticize such religious and mythical theories and to offer what they thought were better theories in terms of qualities of human excellence and reason... They could not accept that what was divine was of a lower standard of excellence than that which man himself was aware... it was, in part, in terms of this dissatisfaction with myth and religion, that critical philosophy began. Firmer foundations were now sought for theories of man and society (1972: 88).

Joseph Campbell gives a parallel explanation for the rise of the schools of experimental psychology in the Majjhimadesa:

The high and holy fairy tales of creation from nothing, magical verbalisation, masturbation or the intercourse of divine beings, the early pranks of gods upon each other and their creatures, floods, miscreations etc., and the rest - now at last; the one point not previously conceded even so much

as a place on the agenda, namely the moral problem of suffering, moved to the centre of the stage, where it has been ever since ... New initiators appeared, who had themselves in their own experience, faced out the new anxieties: *the first systematic psychologists of all time and in many ways, perhaps, the best*. For when the sensibilities of man himself developed... it inevitably became presently apparent that man himself had more kindness than God, more love, honour, justice and more heart... The highest concern of mythology, ritual and human wisdom now shifted from the old magical interests of the nature cult, - which were in fact now being gradually assumed by an improved agrarian technology anyhow - to the more intimately psychological task of achieving peace, harmony, and depth of soul in this 'vale of tears' ... And as the realisation of this truth increased, the axiom of the Buddha came gradually to mind - *There is release from sorrow!* ((1976: 144, 250 emphasie added)

Part III

THE WAY

There is a way in the following of which, one will, by oneself know, by oneself see, that the teacher Gotama speaks opportunely, speaks of that which is beneficial, speaks of what is in accordance with actuality; speaks on leading out.

Siddhattha Gotama (D I. 165)

CHAPTER 9

THE GREAT AWAKENING: CONDITIONED CO -ARISING

The Buddha taught that *dukkha* (existential distress, frustrations and suffering) is caused by a failure on the part of humans to recognise three marks - *tilakkhaṇa* - of the human predicament. He formulated these as follows:

sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā

All constructs are impermanent

sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā

All constructs are sorrow

sabbe dhammā anattā

All realities are without substance (Dhp 277-279).

These are marks or symptoms of a diseased condition. Failure or refusal to recognise these symptoms is the root cause of suffering in the world. Suffering is not inherent to human nature 'as such;' neither is it due to a punishment of God for violating some primitive taboo. Existential anguish and frustrations arise together with the notion that the real self or ego exists outside the body and has merely external relationships with others and with nature 'out there'. As a result, the living person becomes alienated from himself, his fellow human beings and from the living environment in which he lives and moves and has his being. The first two marks are defined as 'constructs,' however, the third is a significant departure. All *dhammās*, not constructs, are *anattā* - bereft of substance. One is repeatedly staggered by the clinical precision of the Buddha's formulations. Few would deny that earthly 'realities,'¹ be they divine creations or human constructs, are impermanent and therefore cannot fully satisfy human desires. All religions would agree. But this is the *moment metaphysique* or the moment of hopes beyond the threshold of this life. The sigh of the dissatisfied creature down the ages has been, what if, beyond the impermanent, beyond this valley of tears, there is a realm which is eternal, permanent, unchanging and without the imperfections of earthly existence? In fact even some Buddhist scholars too have speculated that Nibbana, the goal of Buddhist striving, might be a transcendental state. The Buddha shuts any

¹ 'Actuality' is a more appropriate term than 'reality' to denote the kinetic character of the 'world' 'reality', derived from the Latin word 'res' bearing the connotation of 'thinghood.' The German '*Wirklichkeit*' and Dutch '*werkelijkheid*' for 'reality' on the other hand, evoke the notion of 'working-ness,' activity, *dunamis* etc.

and every window of opportunity for such onto-theologies. All *Dhammas* - that is to say, all realities temporal or eternal, finite or ultimate, and all theories and laws pertaining to such realities are without substance.

People at all times, places, in a variety of situations, high or low, are born, grow up and generally reproduce their kind programmed by instinctive impulse. They suffer illnesses, the infirmities of old age and they eventually die. They repeat the expectations of culture from generation to generation with *samsaric* boredom. The vast majority of individuals cling doggedly to a shared belief that the cycle of birth, growth, decay and death is limited to their bodies alone - that their real selves are not corporeal but spiritual, that they come from an unconditioned and infinite source of being and that their final destiny is to enjoy inexorable bliss through union with this infinite and eternal source. The Buddha's Teaching shakes this paradigm. The premises from which his Teaching departs are wholly empirical: the undeniable fact of the birth, growth, decay and eventual dissolution of all things and beings - *aniccā* - the impermanent and ephemeral character of actuality. Every historical person has died. The persons one reads of in the Buddhist scriptures, including the Buddha, are dead. All the great men of great actions in the past have died. Popes, prelates and princes, like any unsung commoner, have died. Death awaits the empire builders and tyrants of today, just as in the past tyrannies and empires have risen and fallen. Impermanence is the Great Leveller: the Egalizing Law from which there is no reprieve.

The essence of the Buddha's Message, is simple but confrontational: "Knowing that we must all die, how must we live?" Whatever one's belief system may be, every person who seeks to live authentically must come to terms with this question. The Buddha's answer is what sets him apart from other religious teachings and moral philosophies: "You can experience your bliss in this very life. You do not have to postpone it and wait till you die for it."

Gotama's Formulation of the Problematic

In an autobiographical reminiscence, the Buddha recalled the central problem which impelled him to go forth from home to the homeless life:

Yes, I myself too, before awakening, while I was still the *bodhisatta*, not fully awakened, being liable to birth because of self, sought what was liable to birth; being liable to ageing, sought what was likewise liable to ageing; being liable to sorrow sought what was likewise liable to sorrow; being liable to stain because of self, sought what was liable to stain... Then it occurred to me, Why do I seek what, like myself, is subject to birth, ageing and the rest? (MLS I. 207)

"I myself too," like any person, then, today and in the future, who goes through life sleep walking and imagining that the cloudy castles of the mind are built on secure foundations. Siddhattha Gotama was troubled by the paradoxical character of the human condition. Individual human beings in all places and at all times have been, and are confronted with incontrovertible, tangible evidence that despite difference in ethnicity, gender or class, they are born into specific conditions of place and time. They grow old and they die. Yet, the existential paradox which Siddhattha courageously confronted is this: if our real selves are not physical and mortal, why do we cling to the perishable as if our very being depends on them? By so clinging, humans put themselves into a double bind. On the one hand they cling to themselves in this present existence and to everything around them knowing that both are ephemeral and cannot ultimately satisfy them. On the other hand they believe that their real selves are not their bodies but cling to what the body needs for its survival. They are like a man who, caught in an avalanche, clings to a boulder which like himself is being hurtled down a precipice, in the deluded belief that clinging to this 'solid' boulder is his security and salvation.

Humans not only cling to things around them for their survival and pleasure, but also turn fiercely on anything and anyone who is perceived as a threat to their existence or identity. They are ready to hurt and kill any one who threatens their individual or collective 'self' identities. This belief in a permanent self, the Buddha disclosed, is the root cause of violence in the world. The human paradox could be formulated thus: 'each day people see other people die, yet they live as if they are immortal.' The Buddha discovered the root cause of this common delusion and found a way to cure what is basically a commonly shared psycho-pathological condition.

The Perfect Vision

Siddhattha Gotama's Awakening occurred the moment he saw with supreme clarity that all was becoming: constant arising and ceasing. Behind or beyond the appearance there was no impermanent 'ground of being' or 'ultimate reality.' This is recalled in a passage of the *Digha Nikaya*:

Samudāyo! Samudāyo! - Co-arising! Co-arising! ...Vision arose into things not called to mind before, knowledge arose, reason arose, wisdom arose, light arose (DB II. 33).

Gotama 'fully awoke.' The nominative '*buddho*' from the root */budh* means - 'awake'; *buddha* is its adjectival form. Note well, that vision, knowledge, wisdom arose within, as result of entirely human effort. They did not descend like a flash of divine illumination from on high. Being awake is the polar opposite of the deep

sleep of the yogi in trance. The average person – whom the Buddha called the *puthujjana* - goes through life believing that the seemingly static world of separate things and beings is the real.

Conditioned Co-Arising

The Buddha awoke to the realisation that the widely shared belief that the world consists of independently existing objects is based on a naive and deluded view. The major breakthrough in perception is expressed in the exclamation, *Samudāyo! Samudāyo!* Co-arising! Co-arising! The formulation is meticulously precise. The Buddha does not say “it” or “he” is “co-arising.” There is only an endless impersonal process of coming to be, becoming, flux, or co-arising and co-cessation. The average person sees the rise and fall of ‘things’ and birth and death of humans as physical phenomena which do not affect their inner spiritual selves. Hence the philosophical notion of ‘things-in-themselves’ - a theoretical formulation reinforcing the average person’s uncritical perception of the world. Whereas there is merely continuous process but no transcendental subject, finite or infinite, behind the process. This realisation, the Buddha declared, was an exhilaratingly liberating experience. The Buddha is perhaps the first thinker in human history, who shifted the focus of investigation from Being to Becoming. He is historically, the first consistent process thinker.

This displacement of the premise of thinghood by process was a *first order* ‘epistemo-psychological breakthrough.’ The shift of focus from ‘being in itself’ to ‘such-becoming’ or ‘suchness’- *tath*, abolishes the contradiction between the impermanent form and a permanent essence, between phenomenon and noumenon. It is a supersession of all previous and future assumptions about the nature of actuality - in the sense of arriving at a new way of knowing. It is a *suspension* in the dual sense of the term: an abolition, as well as a placing above and beyond.

Conditioned Co-arising in Everyday Life

The Buddha and the first Buddhist teachers used literally thousands of examples from everyday life to clarify difficult aspects of the Teaching to ordinary people. Each volume of the Pali Text Society translations of the Buddhist canon, lists them in an appendix. Most of these examples are ineptly called ‘similes.’ A simile is “a descriptive term or phrase applied to an object or action to which it is imaginatively but not literally applicable” (COD). We have seen in Chapter 6 how the Upanishadic sage Yajñavalkya used similes to explain his mystical union with the Absolute: sexual union with his wife, a lump of salt dissolving in water. Such language is metaphorical and a projection of real experiences into the heavens. By contrast, most of the examples in the Buddha’s discourses are not similes or

metaphors. They are illustrations, in the strict sense of the word, and are drawn from practical everyday life. The principle of Conditioned Co-Arising the Buddha himself acknowledged, was difficult for the average person to understand. So he used illustrations which were drawn from the peoples' own everyday experiences to explain the basis of his entire Teaching. The illustrations he used were specific instances of the general law. It is not an esoteric truth or a divine mystery requiring submission in faith. It was something humans were already doing in their everyday lives without fully comprehending its theoretical implications. The Buddha drew attention to the principles underlying the practical activities of people, and formulated it as general, verifiable law so that it could be applied to other fields of human endeavour as well, especially to the field of ethics. The Buddha's principal concern, with which he had personally grappled, was the moral problem of suffering in the world. He based his entire moral teaching on it. He called it the *Dhamma* of *Paṭicca Samuppāda* - *Conditioned Co-Arising* .

Biological Reproduction of Life

Brahmin teachers often accosted the Buddha and tried to indoctrinate him that an individual's position in society is determined by his/her birth and biological nature as been determined by God. The Buddha did not get drawn into a theoretical debate about the miraculous powers of gods. He remained at the level of directly verifiable facts. The Buddha pointed out that birth is a conditionally co-arising event.

- In the first place, there has to be a man and a woman.
- Secondly, they must have intercourse.
- Thirdly, the woman must be in her fertile period. If intercourse takes place, but the woman is not in her fertile period, there would be no childbirth.
- Fourthly, even if intercourse takes place in the fertile period, a new life develops only if conception takes place and a foetus develops.²

If these conditions are not fulfilled a couple would remain childless and prayers and vows to the gods or recourse to magicians would be

² This matter of fact statement is in striking contrast to the violent metaphors used in Vedic texts for sexual intercourse. For example, in the *Atharva Veda* the metaphor of the fire drill, where a vertically held stick is vigorously rubbed against a horizontally held down stick, is used to describe the act of copulation: "The *asvattha* (*ficus religiosa*) has mounted the *sami* (*mimosa suma*) then a male child was produced. That forsooth, is the way to obtain a son" (Sacred Books of the East xlii. 97).

of avail (MLS II. 311-324).

In striking contrast to Brahmin male-dictions, the Buddha does not ascribe agency to the male and passive receptivity to the female. The female and the male must co-act in order to produce a child. When there is a male and a female 'co-itus,' during the fertile period, there is potential for conception, the development of a foetus and child birth. The birth process is an instance of Conditioned Co-arising. (In the Great Discourse on the Destruction of Craving, the Buddha's reiterates the conditions necessary for biological birth, but places the birth of the sense of the Self or Ego consciousness at a later stage in the process of development from infancy to childhood. That too is explained in the light of Conditioned-Co-arising. See Chapter 12).

Cultural Reproduction of Life

Sexual intercourse is indispensable for the reproduction of the species. The production and consumption of food is indispensable for the reproduction of life. Production of food through agriculture too is subject to the law of Conditioned Co-arising. An intelligent farmer, the Buddha pointed out, knows that a good harvest can be reaped only under certain necessary conditions.

- First, he must have an intelligent understanding of different types of soil and of soil conditions. Only a fool would sow seed in unsuitable ground and expect a good result.
- Secondly, he must also have a good knowledge of different types of seeds. Bad seed, or seed that has not been protected from the elements would yield a poor harvest.
- Thirdly, a skillful farmer first ploughs the field and properly irrigates it before sowing the seed or planting the saplings. The right understanding of conditions, and the use of right methods, are indispensable for skillful, goal-oriented action. (GS I. 219; GS IV. 163).

Those who tell peasants that only magic, mantras and divine blessings are the real enabling-powers behind a good harvest prevent the peasants from realizing the truth of their own creative powers and keep them in dependence on the ministrations of those who do not work, but reap the 'fruit of their toil' - their *kammaphala*. The *mantras* of wizard-craft and priest-craft are made to appear more powerful than the *yantra* (technology) of the real workers - the *kammakaras*.

The Buddha also used the example of the fire-drill to illustrate Conditioned Co-arising of consciousness (See next Chapter). The blacksmith and the housewife

starting a fire with a fire-drill are engaged in creative cultural activity. By making people critically aware of their taken for granted creative powers, the Buddha reminded them that they could act together to transform themselves and their life-conditions. The Buddha was *a pedagogue of the people*. He did not mystify, he conscientised.

Theoretical Formulation and Clarification of *Paṭicca Samuppāda*

The basic explanatory principle or law, the Buddha discovered, is summed up in the formula with which the Buddha often begins his diagnosis of a specific event,

When this is, this is - *imasmim sati idam hoti*

This arising, this arises - *imassuppāda idam upajjati*

Where this is not, this is not - *imasmim asati idam na hoti*

This not arising, this does not arise - *imassa nirodhā idam nirujjhati*

The Buddha clearly states *imasmim* - 'this,' and *idam* which also means 'this,' *imasmim* being the locative of *ida*. The sentence is however, often ineptly translated as: When This is, *That* is, and clarified as, When A is, B is.³

This detracts from the precision of the formulation and introduces linearity into the law of Conditioned Co-arising, as if it were establishing a sequential link between 'this' and 'that.' It assumes a 'deferral' or interval in a space-time continuum. Such translations and the use of the term 'causality' with reference to Conditioned Co-arising easily evokes association with Aristotelian Causality which is a linear chain of causes and effects. The Buddha rejected theories of uni-or mono-causality. He went beyond the simplistic 'billiard ball' theory of explanation - of one 'thing' externally moving another 'thing.' Moreover, a process cannot be reversed in linear causality; very often the effects remain long after their cause has ceased. This theory based on a naive concept of 'thinghood' enabled the Aristotelian positing of a 'Primary Cause' or Unmoved Mover. Aristotle argued that an endless, infinite series of effects and causes is 'repugnant to reason'. Logical reasoning demands that it must end with an 'unmoved mover'. Aristotle provided a 'rational' argument for faith in a personal creator god. The Buddha rejected the truth value of views "hammered out on the anvil of logic" (D I. 32), independent of practice. He called for an empirical investigation of *events*, not of isolated 'things.' He discovered not through logic but through empirical investigation that events occur conditioned by other co-arising factors. His theory of Dependent or Conditioned Co-arising calls

³ As for example by Walpola Rahula (1982: 53).

for the study of patterns or clusters of events, not of isolated things and individuals. Independent of conditions there are no 'things' or 'individuals.' The Buddha did not proclaim a new 'truth' which had to be accepted on his authority. He was describing *what happens*. His theory can be tested in practice. Apart from that, the Buddha made no further claim:

I will teach you the conditioned co-arising and the conditioned co-arisen
- *paṭicca samuppādaṇca* - *paṭicca samuppanna* (S II. 20).

The Buddha's breakthrough insight has been confirmed by the contemporary sciences of ecology and quantum physics. One cannot grasp the 'essence' of a tree by isolating it from its environment. Kill the trees and vegetation and you kill the environment. The environment - the flora and the fauna - mutually condition each other. That is why the Buddha declared that, "In protecting oneself, one protects others and in protecting others, one protects one self" (S 47.19). Quantum physicists tell us that, at the sub-atomic level the subject/object dichotomy disappears. The very act of observation affects the perceiver and the perceived. They mutually condition each other. The Buddha was not opening up a vision to another world; he opened up the possibility for deeper perception, for knowing *the same world* by seeing through the veils of illusion and delusion.

A Contemporary Example

An everyday example from contemporary electronics may help clarify this. When a television set functions well and is properly tuned, one sees clear images on the screen. They provide information and entertainment. These are real experiences which provide knowledge, pleasure and provoke anger or sadness. We are so captivated by the surface images that we become unaware of the millions of moving particles of light which condition this enjoyment. However, if the transmission is interrupted, or the television is not properly tuned, the images disappear but millions of light particles continue to bombard the eyes as long as the set is not switched off. There is also ear jarring atmospheric noise. When clear transmission is restored, the receiver is properly tuned and the signals emitted are within the range and scope of our eyes and ears, we see and hear clearly. The clear screen and the 'snowy' screen and statics are not two realities; they are aspects of the same reality. Without the kinetic particles and waves in the atmosphere which our senses can code and decode there are no visual forms or sounds. No 'tele-vision.' Contemporary theories of communication clarify the roles played by the sender and the receiver and the contact between them, the 'ether' which mediates this contact, and enables human communication. We do not see or hear 'things.' We perceive and read 'signs.' In the next Chapter we shall see how accurately the Buddha and his first disciples grasped this subtle yet simple truth – and this more than two thousand years ago!

The eminent Russian Buddhist scholar writes that when some Western Buddhist scholars realised the profound implications of Conditioned or Dependent Co-origination, they found it a hard truth to accept,

Although the literal translation of the Sanskrit and Pali words which have been framed for its designation cannot be anything else than Dependent Origination, the majority of scholars imagined for it every meaning, possible and impossible meaning, except the meaning dependent origination. The reason for this partly lies in the circumstance that it seemed highly improbable, beside sheer logical possibility, that the Indians could have had, at so early a period in the history of human thought, a doctrine of Causation so entirely modern, the same in principle as the one accepted in the most advanced modern sciences (1962: 141-142).

Universality of *Paṭicca Samuppāda*

Paṭicca samuppāda is a law which governs human perception, consciousness and action. It is a universal principle that was not *revealed* to the Buddha. He *discovered* it.

Whether, brethren, there be an arising of Tathagathas, or whether there be no such arising, in each, the nature of things just stands, this conditioned status, this conditioned orderliness, the relatedness of this to that. Concerning that, the Tathagatha is fully enlightened, fully understanding; he declares it, teaches it, reveals it, sets it forth, manifests, explains, makes plain, saying: “Behold, conditioned by this, this arises” (KS11. 21).

Whether future Buddha’s arise or not, the conditionality of human knowledge and action remains. The Buddha had discovered a law which pre-existed him and would continue to operate long after he was gone. It is a law like the law of radiation which Madame Curie discovered. It gives a vision into things not perceived before. Curie did not create the laws governing radiation; actuality had always been ‘such.’ An oft repeated scriptural phrase expresses this well, it enables humans to see *what was already there to see*. This ‘suchness’ is stressed by the Buddha in another passage:

Thus, brethren, that which here is: such-wise - *tathatā*; not else-wise - *avitathatā*; invariable - *anaññathatta*; thus conditioned - *idapaccayatā*; this bretheren is called conditioned co-arising - *paṭicca samuppāda* (Kindred Sayings 11.22).

Tathatā- ‘such-ness’ or ‘such wise.’ It is the general characteristic of actuality. It marks the paradigmatic shift from ‘such-being’ to such-becoming, from substance-

thinking to process-thinking. Consistent with this way of perceiving actuality, the Buddha's preferred way of referring to himself was *tathāgata* - the such-come and such-going, because his awareness fully coincided with his existence. He re-emphasizes this suchness through the reverse formulation - *avithatā* - it is not otherwise; *anāññathatta* - stresses that this is not a freak event. It is invariable. The Buddha simply states, 'This is the way it is, whether we like it or not.' It is the deepest reality principle.

Specificity of *Paṭicca Samuppāda*

The most important qualification of *paṭicca samuppāda* is *idapaccayatā* - 'thus-conditioned' or, specific conditionality. *Ida* is an emphatic demonstrative adverb expressing modality - location, time as (i) in this, here; (ii) now, then; (iii) just (this), even so, only. *Idapaccayatā* means, 'thus,' 'so,' conditioned (PED. 120). The crucial importance of the qualification *idapaccayatā* is explained by Bhikkhu Bodhi as follows:

What it teaches is specific conditionality... dependent arising, as a teaching of specific conditionality, deals primarily with structures. It treats phenomena not in terms of their isolated connections, but in terms of their patterns - recurrent patterns that exhibit the invariableness of a law (1984: 2).

The qualification *idapaccayatā* keeps the mind close to actuality; *paṭicca samuppāda* does not exist as an abstract law-by-itself, just as the law of gravity does not exist independent of particular falling objects. Unfortunately, this first order epistemological breakthrough is mostly explained in abstract terms, as a philosophical concept, and applied for introspective reflection on mental and psychological processes. The confinement of Buddhist discourse within a 'religious' paradigm blunts the critical edge of a great science which could be applied for practical investigation and social criticism. A true follower of the Buddha is liberated from superstitious beliefs and adopts a 'scientific' attitude to the investigation of any phenomenon. He/she does not comprehend it as the manifestation of a hidden essence, but investigates the mutually dependent conditions which give rise to a seemingly stable thing or event. The 'concrete' is understood not as a 'thing in itself', but according to the literal meaning of the term - as the concentration of many determinations. A dissatisfactory state of affairs can be abolished by abolishing the conditions which give rise to it. With the premise of Impermanence and Conditioned Co-arising as a guide for social analysis, it can be shown that institutionalized inequalities and injustices have not eternally existed; neither are they cyclically re-birthed according to a mechanical law. On the contrary, it can be shown that they were historically produced by human beings under specific conditions. The Buddha used this method

in the *Agganna Sutta* (See Chapter 12).

Verifiability of *Paṭicca Samuppāda*

The universality, goal-orientedness and verifiability of his Teaching was stressed by the Buddha when he urged his disciples to progress along the Path to Perfection:

*iminā sandhiṭṭhena dhammena akālikena ehipassikena opanayikena
paccattam vedītabbena viññuhi*

through this clear dhamma, which is a-temporal, directly perceptible, goal-oriented and personally verifiable by any intelligent person (M I.265);

Sandhiṭṭhika - ‘clear,’ ‘transparent,’ ‘perspicacious’- there is nothing abstruse, esoteric or mystical about this law.

Akālika : is often translated as 'eternal' and can be misleading, if eternity is understood as ‘everlasting’ - a long period of time. The term is used by the Buddha in a very specific sense. *A-kālika* in the literal sense of the term means ‘a-temporal,’ that is to say, outside the categories of time. The Buddha is stating that his *Dhamma* is not confined to the historical period in which it was discovered and formulated.

Ehipassika: 'Come and See!' as it is ‘verifiable.’ This is where the *Buddha Dhamma* is radically different to philosophical propositions and theological doctrines. It is an invitation, a challenge to come, see and test the Teaching through practice. The Buddha refrained from entering into debates about speculative and a-priori dogmatic propositions. When he engaged in debates with the Brahmins about their doctrine of inherent natures - *svadharma*, it was always with reference to its oppressive practical implications. For the Buddha, the litmus test of any moral theory is whether it would lead to the alleviation of the mass of suffering in the world - not just for this or that individual but for the *bahujana* – the many-fold or diverse peoples.

Opanayika: ‘Goal oriented,’ or ‘conducive to reaching the goal.’ Here again the Buddha’s formulation is precise. He clearly states what the goal of his Noble Way is, so that those who take it Way can see and experience for themselves if the assured outcome - liberation from suffering and the realisation of bliss - is a false promise or not in this very life. Whereas promises of happiness in another life after death cannot be empirically verified and have to be accepted on faith.

Viññu: Intelligent. The only requirement is intellectual honesty and moral

disponibility.

Breaking the Bondage of Dualisms

The Buddha broke through to an understanding of the conditioned co-arising of human consciousness, and by extension, the fallacy of the idea that the 'world' or 'nature' exists outside and independent of the mind. It is this fundamental delusion which is at the root of all dualistic ontological views:

This world usually bases its views on two assumptions: Being and Non-Being. "Everything exists" - this is one extreme. "Nothing exists"- this is the other extreme. Not approaching either of these two extremes, the Tathagata teaches *Dhamma* through the Middle Way (KS II. 12-19).

In this declaration, the Buddha sums up the two mutually opposed positions assumed in most philosophical systems. These habitually proceeded in an oppositional way, proposing binary pairs of concepts. Some of the most pervasive being Spirit/Matter; Mind/Body; Male/Female; Fullness/Void; Pure/Impure; I/the Other; We/Others; etc. While presenting these pairs as descriptive and neutral, these systems determine the first of these terms as primary or privileged, and the other as secondary, derived, inferior or parasitic with respect to it. Hierarchies are established and the order of things fixed in a 'higher' and 'lower' scale of values. Caught in the turbulent whirlpool of dualisms, human beings are tossed between one dead end and the other.

Once *paṭicca samuppāda* is understood, the alienation produced by the division between the transcendental and empirical self, between man and woman, the individual and society, between human beings and nature, disappears. Dyads or binaries are seen not as conflicting opposites, but as mutually conditioned-conditioning relationships. The Aristotelian principles of identity and contradiction are superseded. The 'other' is no longer seen as a threat or a means to one's existence but the very condition of one's existence. Ego consciousness dissolves as one 'goes against the current,' and arrests the dyad-making process. There is no vortex, into which the hapless self can be sucked. The alienated, transcendental self is seen for what it is - a delusion produced by craving

Where from, do currents turn back; where whirls no more the whirlpool?

With (its) one root and twice-turning...

The quaking abyss, the sage has crossed (S I.1.5).

The 'root' is craving. The 'twice turning' is the notion of self and the other which

is birthed and re-birthed by craving. The Middle Way of the Buddha is often understood as a halfway position between two extremes - a golden median; a pragmatic compromise. However, this is to fix the mind on the word 'middle' in a spatial sense. The Middle Way however, is based on the clear comprehension of the conditioned co-arising of paired opposites or binaries. It is not a third position arrived at by a dialectical clash of opposites. It is a movement, a practical going through and beyond mentally and culturally constructed dualisms. It is cessation of the opposition of 'this' to 'that' and a 'crossing over to the further shore of freedom'. Two verses of the *Dhammapada* affirm that liberation comes with insight into the Conditioned Co-arising of paired opposites and by practically going beyond them,

When the brahmana becomes 'one who has gone beyond' - *pāragu* - with regard to the things-forming dyads - *dvayesu dhammesu* , then all fetters - *sabbe samyogā* of the knowing one pass away (Dhp 384-385).

Pāragu - 'gone beyond' and ending the former mode of living: *dvayesu dhammesu* - all constructed dualities, all binary opposites; *sabbe samyogā* all 'yoked together' things, which hinder the free movement. Verse 385 goes on to state that a person who has gone beyond has become,

One for whom, 'one's-own,' 'not- one's- own' and 'neither-one's own- nor another's', no longer hold sway -
yassa pāram aparam vā pārāparam na vijjati

With *paṭicca samuppāda* as a guide for understanding, it becomes clear that such mutually counter-posed dyads feed on and sustain each other, creating and perpetuating conflict in the world. Dialectical logic, for example, is based on a clash of paired opposites. Each position (thesis) engenders its opposition (antithesis). Their clash produces a new position (synthesis) which in turn engenders its opposition (antithesis) and so on *ad infinitum*. Applied for historical explanation, dialectical conflict becomes 'an iron law' governing change. Violence is written into the very process of history. Once this pitting of the one against the other is superseded, human beings can begin to see actuality in its suchness - a many splendoured pattern of ever changing, mutually conditioning and interdependent forms. Nothing is eternal. Nothing is now as it was in the beginning, and shall be forever.

CHAPTER 10

ANATTĀ: BEYOND THE CRAVING FOR SELF PERPETUATION

What sets the Buddha's Teaching and Ethical Path apart from the generality of theological and philosophical moral systems is his radical rejection of the belief in a non-corporeal self, a soul or an identity consciousness which exists independently of the actual life processes of human beings. He placed this premise of *anattā* as the corner stone of his entire Teaching and Ethics synthesised in the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha did not suggest that the empirical existence of things and beings is illusory, but he rejected on empirically demonstrable grounds the belief that the real self is an immaterial or non-physical spiritual entity that is wholly other than the 'physical' body and the world, and that it remains unchanged despite physical changes and the vicissitudes of life.

If the radical implications of *anattā* are evaded or diluted, the Buddha *Dhamma* becomes just another religious system. Yet all mainstream Buddhisms propagate the view that there is a self or an identity consciousness that perdures through various cycles of re-birth or *Samsara*. Belief in rebirth has even entered the Theravada Canon. This belief is expressed in statements attributed to the Buddha himself. Thus Theravada Buddhism, whatever its claim to doctrinal orthodoxy in theory, bases its moral teachings on belief in the pre-natal and post-mortem existence of individual consciousness. The majority of people in Sri Lanka are Sinhala Buddhists. The Sinhala term used by Christians in Sri Lanka for the soul is *Ātmaya*. The Holy Spirit is *Āthmayāno*. Both translations are derived from *Atman* of the *Upanishads*. The Buddha unambiguously rejected *Atman* belief. The term for Christianity in Sinhala is *Christhiani Agama*. The term *āgama* is explained as an acronym for *Āthmaya Galavagenimey Mārgaya* - 'The Way to Save the Soul.' It must therefore sound very familiar to Christian ears, when most Sri Lankan Buddhist monks in sermons, broadcast on television and radio, routinely speak of the *pūṛva ātmaya* and *idiri atmaya* - 'previous and future soul' of individuals. Any suggestion that belief in the post mortem survival of the *ātmaya* is incompatible with *anattā* doctrine is vehemently denied. Buddhist scholars, monks and householders proffer the ingenious argument that what is reborn is a so-called 'identity-consciousness.' A more sophisticated and 'updated' version claims that what rebirths is the individual baggage of energy inheritance. When the Buddha was asked his opinion on a variety of metaphysical and ontological views, he repeatedly insisted till his dying day that all he taught was 'the arising of suffering and the cessation of suffering.' Today, millions of people, including innocent children, are victims of unspeakable, heart-rending suffering due to the iniquities of a globalised economic system and of cruel wars. It is disconcerting that Buddhist leaders circumvent *anattā dhammā* and present *karma* and rebirth theory as if they are the instruments of justice in a

world of institutionalised injustice and unspeakable violence.

The commonly held belief notwithstanding, there are many devout and scholarly monks and householders in Sri Lanka who hold that rebirth of individuals through aeons of *samsāra* is incompatible with *anattā*. Throughout his teaching career, the Buddha insisted that 'consciousness arises under specific conditions and ceases when these conditions cease.' This has proved to be a hard saying. Very early in the history of Buddhism, teaching on post-mortem survival entered the tradition - so deeply rooted is the human yearning for immortality. The practice of priest-like mediation by monks has become an integral part of Buddhist devotion. Merit is conferred on those who give alms to the needy and generous donations to the monks. Monks perform rituals to transfer merit to the dead to shorten their *samsaric* existence.¹ In its original usage the term for merit - *punna* - referred to the visible and tangible benefits of an action in the here and now. In the new dispensation donations given to the ritualists remained visible and tangible, but no one, including the monks can compute which quantum of invisible merit will guarantee which amount of time will be shortened from the period of the *samsaric* peregrination. This theory of merit transfer is similar to the Roman Catholic doctrine of 'indulgences' which could shorten a departed soul's stay in the half-way house of Purgatory until it is pure enough to see God face to face. Subsequent deviations from the Buddha's unique and distinct Way notwithstanding, his radical teachings on *anattā* have been preserved in the Theravada Canon. This Chapter considers some of the Buddha's unambiguous discourses on *anattā* and their psycho-sociological implications.

Self: Architect Within

After clear comprehension of Conditioned Co-arising and through dispassionate observation of his physiological and sensuous activities, Siddhattha 'awoke' to the realisation that "consciousness is generated by conditions and that apart from conditions there is no consciousness" (MLS I. 314). He understood that the salvation-seekings of his day were based on a commonly shared delusion that consciousness is a non-corporeal or metaphysical entity that subsists amidst changes in the 'physical' world. Many, including some of his own disciples, clung to the view that "it is consciousness itself (which) runs on, fares on and not another" (MLS I. 311). Siddhattha tracked the self-clinging consciousness to its genetic source and eradicated it. This eradication of self was not a simple intellectual or philosophical manoeuvre - a mere question of dialectically replacing error with truth in the head.

¹ For a critique of this belief, See *Transference of Merit – The So called* by C. Withanachchi (1987).

It was pre-eminently a practical, ethical move. The craving of the self to perpetuate itself as a self-subsistent entity with a unique identity was destroyed.

Siddhattha's entire being was suffused with joy when he realized that belief in a transcendental self is based on a fundamental failure to recognise the true character of actuality. He broke into song to celebrate the joy of his great eureka:

House-builder you have been found out

You shall build no house again

Your rafters lie shattered

Your rooftop lies in ruins.

Consciousness is de-constructed - *visankhāragatam cittam*

Desire is destroyed - *taṇhānam khayam* (Dhp 153-154).

The Buddha's entire Way to Liberation is encapsulated in two simple, yet powerful lines: Consciousness is Deconstructed - Desire is Destroyed! To understand this is to understand that the *Dharma* the Buddha gave the world is primarily an ethical praxis, not a body of doctrines to which one may or may not give intellectual assent. Siddhattha realised that the cunning architect of the empirico-transcendental doublet called 'self' was the self itself. There is no self that exists independent of conditions. Such a 'self' is a fiction, in the sense of a 'construct,' of craving. Harold Coward accurately sums up the momentous implications of the Buddha's discovery:

All notions of continuing substance or self are illusory thought-constructions formulated under the spell of ignorance or wrong belief. The empirical outcome of such illusory belief in a self is ego-selfishness for material goods, sensuous pleasures, political power over others and, worst of all for a philosopher, ego attachment to one's own theories, thus rendering all thought corrupt (1990: 8).

The Buddha realised that his discovery - *anattā* - was (is) bad news for immortality-seekers, learned and unlearned alike. As he explained:

A man has the following view: The universe is the *Ātman*, I shall be that after death; permanent abiding, everlasting, unchanging, and I shall exist as such for eternity. He hears the Tathagata or a disciple of his, preaching the doctrine aiming at the complete destruction of speculative views, aiming at the extinction of craving, aiming at detachment, cessation, Nirvana. Then that man thinks: I will be no more! So he mourns, worries himself, laments, weeps, beating his breast, and becomes bewildered. Thus O *bhikkhus*, this is the case where one is tormented when something permanent within oneself cannot be found (MLS 1. 136-137).

However, tradition tells us that the Buddha “out of compassion surveyed the world with eyes of an awakened one, saw beings with little dust in their eyes, with acute faculties ...” (BD IV. 9) and decided to teach his *Dhamma*. The Buddha’s confidence was not to be disappointed. During the last weeks of his life, he looked back on a teaching career of over forty years with satisfaction. Not hundreds, but thousands of men and women had, through single-minded effort, reached the same freedom and bliss as he had (DB II. 105).

Beyond the Binary Opposition Name/Form

The Buddha gave his first instructions to his former companions in self-mortification. Having grasped the sublimity of the teaching, they accepted discipleship of the Buddha. Thereafter the Buddha undertook a systematic examination of the *Nāma/Rūpa* theory in circulation at the time during his second instruction. The belief that reality is split into ephemeral material forms - *rūpas* and permanent non-material entities reinforced the naïve, common sense of the average individual - the consciousness of the *puthujjana*. The mind, it was believed, could see through the appearances of a thing, perceive its true essence and *name* it. This is the view propounded by the *Upanishadic* sages (See Chapter 6). According to this view, the active, ‘spiritual’ element or consciousness, a fragment of the *Atman*, enters amorphous matter, gives the body its form - *Rūpa*, vivifies it, and lodges itself temporarily inside the perishable physical form. The Buddha examined the theory on its claimed merits and subjected it to internal criticism. It could be empirically demonstrated, he told his first disciples, that none of the supports of this personality theory - the body, feelings, life-activities and consciousness, are permanent or eternal. If the *Atman* or ‘self’ is a transcendental being acting within the body, the Buddha continued, it would be easy to pin it down in one of the five constituent element of the *nāma/rūpa* doublet. His new disciples agreed that no such base could be found. If the self is a hidden agent in the body, the Buddha continued, it should be all powerful *vis a vis* the body. However, this is patently not so. Can a person, by thinking, determine what his body should be or how it should function, by saying “Let body become this for me, let body not become thus for me?” If so, the self could, merely by thinking and willing, prevent the decay and dissolution of the body. The faculties which are attributed to the transcendental self, are even more unstable than the body: feelings, perceptions, activities and above all consciousness, are highly volatile and unpredictable. Therefore how then could these be indications of the existence of a permanent transcendental self? Is not the impermanent unpleasant for a person who believes he/she is essentially permanent? Is this not, in the final instance, the root cause of human frustration and distress - *dukkha*? (BD IV. 19-21).

The Buddha’s first two instructions were given to a group of renouncers

who had been practising severe austerities to release the life principle - *jīva* - from the body. Once the old *nāma/rūpa* paradigm was discarded, they saw through the folly of their exertions and broke through to perfect understanding. Soon “there were six perfected ones in the world.” Together with the Buddha they became a community of caring and sharing (BD IV. 19). This was the historical nucleus of the *Buddha Saṅgha* that spread in the ‘four directions’ of the earth – hence the name that came to be used for this universal community of renouncer and householder men and women – the *Catudissa Saṅgha* or ‘the community of the four directions.’ The socio-ethical counterpart of *anattā* - no self, is a transformed humanity united in a new community, the *Buddha Saṅgha*.

The Buddha’s Deconstructive Method

With the classification of Buddhism as a ‘religion,’ the precise terminology the Buddha used to formulate his *Dhamma* has been comprehended as ‘religious’ language. That is to say, lofty and ‘other-worldly’ language that is associated with a separate field of human experience regarded as the domain of religion. The teachings of the Buddha are believed to be based on a mystical enlightenment. The term the *Brahmins* used, and still use for their rituals is *saṅkhāras*. The Buddha demystified it, and used it with reference to the ordinary practical activity of human beings. If one understands the Buddha, remaining close to his unique break-through Teachings, one may not depart from the Buddha’s revaluation of the category *saṅkhāra* and its past participle *saṅkhata* and discuss them as if they are religious or metaphysical terms. Yet as we saw in Chapter 1, the compilers of the Pali English Dictionary referred to *saṅkhāra-saṅkhata* as “one of the most difficult terms of Buddhist metaphysics (sic), peculiar to the East.” I have used the translation ‘construct (v)-constructed’ (n), rather than the archaic ‘confections’ to bring out the connotation the term ‘construct’ has in contemporary human sciences. A brief look at its contemporary usage may be a useful exercise in demystification. ‘Construct’ as understood in the human sciences today no metaphysical connotation.

Jacques Derrida, among contemporary anti-metaphysics Western philosophers, has perhaps come closest to the Buddha’s point of view *at the theoretical level*. There is a remarkable congruence between the Buddha’s use of the term *visaṅkhāra* (See the *Dhammapada* verse quoted above) and Derrida’s neologism – *deconstruction*, with this difference. Derrida applies his deconstructive method to unpack the ideological content of linguistic and other symbolic constructs. The Buddha went further – for him *visaṅkhāra* is an ethical praxis, which is intrinsically related to the eradication of craving. Derrida’s clarification of his use of the term *deconstruction* however, is helpful to understand the strategy of *visaṅkhāra*:

Deconstruction is neither an analysis nor a critique. It is not an analysis

in particular, because the dismantling of a structure is not a regression toward a simple element, toward an indissoluble origin. These values, like that of analysis, are themselves philosophemes subject to deconstruction ... It does not return to an individual or collective subject, who would take the initiative and apply it to an object... (Letter to a Japanese Friend *Reader* 1991: 273).

Deconstruction is not *destruction*; Derrida demolishes metaphysics and onto-theological constructs of the world with sledge hammer blows. That ill named 'thing,' he insists, is a construct. On the 'this-side' of the imagined metaphysical - the non-conceptual actuality, in the realm of *anicca* - deconstruction *happens*. It does not await an angel of destruction.

It is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness or organization of a subject. It deconstructs itself [*Ca se deconstruit*]. (Therefore), it can be deconstructed. The 'it' [*ca*] is not here an impersonal thing that is opposed to some egological subjectivity. It is in deconstruction to deconstruct itself [*se deconstruire*] ... to lose its construction. And *se* of *se deconstruire* which is not the reflexivity of an ego or of a consciousness, bears the whole dilemma (Letter to a Japanese Friend, *ibid.* emphasis his).

Derrida underscores the event-like or transient character of actuality: 'things' deconstruct themselves. The Buddha declared, *sabbe saṅkhāra anicca* - all constructs are impermanent. 'Constructs' deconstruct themselves because of their constructed character and underlying impermanence. They are not solid and unchangeable 'things'. Therefore they can be deconstructed. The Buddha declared that humans could escape the snare of 'things' by recognising their constructed or fabricated character. Seemingly eternal and unchanging 'things' had a birth and will cease. What was 'made' and can be 'unmade;' what was 'constructed' can be 'unconstructed' (See Chapter 14).

Deconstruction does not consist in passing from one truth to another, but in overturning and *displacing a conceptual order*, as well as the non-conceptual order with which the conceptual order is articulated (*Margins* 1986:328 emphasis mine).

Derrida deconstructs texts and other symbolic representations produced by human beings as an intellectual exercise. For the Buddha it is an ethical practice.

Before Derrida, George Kelly introduced the term 'construction' to social psychology. Lawrence Wrightsman in his review of contemporary theories of perception, discusses at length George Kelly's theory of personal constructs published in *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* [1953]:

Of all theories of personality, this is the one par excellence, to apply to the area of social perception, for it is built entirely around man's efforts to interpret and understand his world. It is a cognitive theory of man's behaviour, and *it stresses connections between an individual's perception of stimuli, his interpretation of them, and his behaviour* (Wrightsmann 1972: 452, emphasis added).

Kelly explains his concept of personal constructs as follows:

Man looks at his world through transparent patterns or templates, which he creates and then attempts to fit over the realities of which the world is composed. Let us give the word *constructs* to these patterns that are tried on for size. They are *ways of construing the world* (in Wrightsmann *ibid.* emphases added).

'Construct' for Kelly is a way of interpreting the world, the way a person apprehends events to guide his behaviour. Such constructs are psychologically and culturally conditioned: 2

Kelly's fundamental assumption about the nature of man is that man is a scientist. That is, just as a scientist tries to understand, predict and control events, each human being tries in the same way to choose constructs that will make his world understandable and predictable... A person's processes are psychologically channelled by the way in which he anticipates events... Every construct (such as 'likeable') gives a basis for classifying similarities and differences of people, objects or events. Each person has developed a limited number of constructs. One person's constructs are never completely identical to another person's. If one person's constructs are similar to another's, their behaviour will also be similar. Finally, if one person understands another person's constructs, he will be able to behave appropriately towards the other person (Wrightsmann 1972: 453).

As can be seen, there is not one but several constructions of reality.² Each of these constructs compete with each claiming as the Buddha put it, "This alone is true. Every other view is false." Such battles around 'truth' are in fact battles for power and inevitably lead to conflict (*Sutta Nipata* XII).

The Buddha's Deconstruction of Nāma/Rūpa

The Buddha's use of the terms 'name' and 'form' have to be understood in their

² For a discussion of such constructions of reality, see *Construction of Reality* by Arib and Hesse 1990.

own terms. He took two theoretical terms in currency at the time and re-deployed them. He retained their denotation but shifted their connotation. A perceived form becomes a sign when perceived as such and named. A name is a practical social convention. Every Sinhala child in Sri Lanka has heard the Buddhist story of a man who, not satisfied with the name given to him, went around looking for a name that would accurately denote his real nature. He encountered individuals whose reality contradicted their names. The story concludes with the morale, *nāmayanam pragnaphthimāthrayaki* - 'a name is merely a conventional device.' In the Buddha's breakthrough diagnosis, the terms *Nāma* and *Rūpa*, no longer refer to two separate entities, one supposedly spiritual and the other material. He uses them as designations for mentally distinguishable processes, conventionally divided into mental and physical. Staying close to the Buddha's elucidation, they must be understood as – *distinctiones in mente* - distinctions in the mind and not as distinctions in the thing – *distinctiones in re*.

At the end of the deconstructive move - *visankhāra* - the linguistic signs 'nama,' 'rupa' have been stripped of their former ontological significations. The term *nama* is understood in its literal meaning - 'name.' A name as the Buddha's unravels the term, is a sound used as a sign to identify a particular form outside the mind, and to fix a form - a mental image or concept - inside the head. Language which is made up of words, the Buddha insisted, is a social convention. The fixed relationship between a 'thing' and a word is only within a particular linguistic community. The same 'thing,' for example a 'bowl,' he pointed out, can be named by different sounds in different linguistic communities. No linguistic community can claim that its word alone is the only right designation for 'bowl.' Since his disciples hailed from different linguistic communities, the Buddha arrested any tendency towards linguistic chauvinism which could lead to conflict. The *Sutta* in which this startlingly modern discourse on language was given is called *Araṇavibhaṅga Sutta* - 'Exposition on Non-Militancy.' Even with regard to the use of language, the Buddha advocated a non militant path - *araṇapatipada* - in contrast to a militant path - *saraṇapatipada* (M.L.S.III. 282). Thus there is no intrinsic relationship between a name - *nama* - and the form - *rupa* - as the *Brahmin* linguists claimed. The word-name chosen is an arbitrary social convention, but the named-form 'out there' is continuously subject to processes of change. When a form - *rupa* - is named, it seems pregnant with signification and substance. However, looked at dispassionately and without naming or labeling, a form - physical or mental - is empty of signification and permanent substance. Thus, when the Buddha uses the categories 'name' and 'form,' it has to be understood that he does so by putting the *Upanishadic* significations of the terms *nāma/rūpa* 'under erasure.'

As early as 1927, Robert Chalmers warned that much misapprehension is due to a failure to recognize the Buddha's distinct approach to language as a social convention and a practical tool for communication. This misapprehension

has enabled metaphysical and ontological interpretations of *Nāma-Rūpa* even by Buddhist scholars.

With practical sagacity, the Buddha appropriated current terms and familiar nomenclature... But in each instance he altered the connotation of familiar terms, which he retained from the past, while importing into them his own novel content. The old labels were reassuring, even though the wine was a new brand (FDB I. xxiv).

The Buddha's use of the term Khandha

The human person is the organic unity of five *khandhas* - a perceptible form with active life processes of feeling, perceiving, actively constructing its world and consciousness. *Khandha* is the Pali form of *skandha* (Sk). In *Upanishadic* philosophy it was used to designate the underlying support or substratum of a thing (See Chapter 6). The Buddha rejected the view that percepts and concepts have fixed footholds and that they are shadowy signs of an 'Ultimate Reality' or a 'Ground of Being.' Unfortunately, the Buddha's revaluated use of the term *khandha* is translated into English as 'aggregate'. Derived from Aristotelian usage, the term refers to, i. (n) 'separate things collected into one body'. ii. (v.t.) 'collect together' (COD). Aristotle held that separate things and beings could be broken down to their basic constituent elements. The study of these underlying elements helps to understand the whole substance. Hence the Aristotelian definition of 'analysis' - the study of a 'thing' by isolating it and breaking it up into its basic constituents. To speak of the 'Buddha's analysis' or 'Buddhist analysis' is to evoke association with a substantialist-creationist 'building-block' theory of the world. To avoid misunderstanding, I do not use the term 'analysis', but the more accurate term 'diagnosis' with reference to the Buddha's discourses on the source of suffering. Diagnose = 'Determine from symptoms the nature of a disease' (COD); Symptom = 'sign' or token of the existence of something' COD. Hence the accuracy of the Buddha's identification of *tilakkhaṇa* - three symptoms in the previous Chapter. Failure to recognise or acknowledge these symptoms is the source of suffering.

The term 'category' is less open to misapprehension than aggregate. A category is a conventional classification of percepts on the basis of common psychologically or culturally relevant attributes. For example, priests, kings, trees, animals, masculine, feminine, outcastes, etc., are conventional categories. They are not 'signifiers' of universal substances or ideas stored up in mental pigeon holes. Categories are 'sets' around which we draw mental lines to structurise our perceptions. As constructs, categories do not have a universally normative character - they can differ from culture to culture and even from person to person. The term *factor* is also a useful translation of *khandhas* because it underscores the active processes

involved in feeling, perception and cognition. The *khandhas* are best understood as classifications of different types of cognitive activities of the human person. The mind is the faculty of the brain. It produces mental consciousness, just as sight, the faculty of the eye, produces visual consciousness.

i. *Rūpa*: Form - Formation

Rūpa is generally interpreted as ‘material’ or ‘physical’ form. The Buddha used ‘*rūpa*’ for all perceived forms ‘internal’ as well as ‘external.’ He called the latter ‘gross’ forms. But this does not refer to an objective quality (‘grossness’) in the thing itself. The sense of grossness co-arises with a specific type of touch. The concept ‘matter’ (as in the case of other concepts) co-arises conditioned by this sensory impingement. It evokes a feeling of ‘solidity.’ When we see a blue flower, for example, we tend to imagine that the colour ‘blue’ is an inherent quality of the flower. But, as the Buddha explained,

The blue flax flower, blue-coloured, signalling blue, shining blue (A V.61.3).

There is no suggestion that the colour blue is an intrinsic quality of the flower. On the basis of a sensory impression a representation ‘blue’ arises in the mind. The sensation of ‘blueness’ co-arises through contact between light waves reflected from a flower and the visual scope of the retina. Conditioned by this interaction, the mind conceives the colour blue. The metaphysical view that the colour blue is the manifestation of a universal essence of “blueness as such” is an imaginative construct, passing off as a logical certitude. Similarly, ‘matter’ and ‘spirit’ are human constructs based on particular experiences - the ‘tangible’ and the ‘intangible’ are not ‘signs’ of ‘matter as such’ and ‘spirit as such.’ It is not without significance that the word ‘spirit’ in Western and Indian religious discourse is genealogically related to breath, wind and air. The movement of air can be felt but cannot be seen like the other elements. Thus in some languages, for example, in Hebrew, the word for ‘wind’ - *ruah*- doubles for ‘spirit’ as well. The Buddha did not assert that only what is visible to the eye exists. Neither did he fall into the opposite error and claim that what the eye cannot see, but which the mind can imagine, is the true reality.

An Ignored Discourse

The *Mūlapariyāya Sutta* (M I. 3-8) is the first discourse of the Buddha in the *Majjhima Nikaya* or the Collection of Middle Length Discourses. It contains further elucidations of *Dhamma* by the Buddha and some of his senior disciples, who had realised the goal and seen and experienced *Dhamma* by themselves. Here the Buddha clarifies how sense perceptions are conceptualised and reified into ‘things-in-themselves,’ by naming them.

Depending on sensations, the average person experiences hardness, fluidity, heat and invisible forces. The sources of these sensations are conceptualized as beings and things or as abstract realities and designated as 'earth,' 'water,' 'fire' and 'wind' elements. As the Buddha explains:

Having perceived earth, he conceives earth, he conceives himself, 'apart from earth': he conceives, 'earth is mine', he delights in earth. What is the reason? Because it has not been fully understood by him, I declare [The same is repeated for water, fire, and air] (MLS I.3.).

The stages of the process are uncovered step by step, perception; conceptualisation; differentiation and reification enabling delight in possessing. By the same token, when the objectified 'thing' eludes one's grasp, there arises frustration. Lest the disciples imagine that the process of reification applies only to 'physical' objects, the Buddha immediately went on to explain that the reification of purely mental constructs - concepts, is equally if not more pernicious. One may spurn clinging to 'physical' images but could tenaciously cling to one's mental images - or 'idols of the mind' - that is to say - to ideologies in which underpin one's desires and interests. That is why a person 'delights' in them. The Buddha gave examples of some of the mental forms (*rūpas*) to which ordinary men and women, as well as the learned, clung : '*Pajāpati*' - the Lord of Beings; '*Brahmā*' - the God of gods; Radiant Gods; Lustrous Gods; and abstract concepts like the Incomprehensible, the One, the Many, the Plane of Infinite Consciousness, the Plane of No-Thing, etc. as if they are 'things-in-themselves.' By rending the veil dividing the physical and the mental, the Buddha capsized the binary opposition 'matter/spirit.' He disclosed that the materialist position - ideas are epiphenomena of material forces - and the idealist position - ideas are immanent in an autonomous mind - both fail to recognise that human knowledge is based on active constructs of the senses, that is to say it is the product of *practical sensuous activity*.

The Buddha is relentlessly consistent and honest in unmasking the delusions and the conceits of the mind. He did not substitute '*Brahmā*' with his own transcendental reality - '*nibbāna*'. His own disciples, he did not hesitate to warn, could fall into *puthujjana* conceits, if instead of striving to realize *nibbāna*, they conceptualize and reify it. Conceptualisation and reification leads to a fetishisation of *nibbāna*. The deluded disciple then goes on to relate himself or herself to *nibbāna* in much the same way that members of other schools relate either to personal gods or philosophical constructs:

"What is the reason? Because it [*nibbāna*] has not been fully understood by him, I declare" (MLS I.5).

Remarkably, this is the only *Sutta* which ends with the observation, "This is what

the Blessed One said. *But these bhikkhus did not delight in the Blessed One's words*" (emphasis mine). Such a relentless deconstruction of *nāma rūpa* would be resisted by many more disciples in time to come. They would prefer a return to the dichotomous Brahmin-Upanishadic exposition of *nāma/rūpa*.

The category *rūpa* in the Buddha's distinctive use of the term refers to the entire range of perceived forms which are transformed into 'signs': external 'solid' things, graven images, as well as the images or 'idols' of the mind. The term *formation* is a more appropriate translation of *rūpa* than 'form,' because it draws attention to the con-structuration of processes into permanent mental representations of physical or mental 'things.'

Nāma: The Naming Process

The Buddha begins with *feeling* to track down the genesis of consciousness.

ii Vedanā: Feeling

Vedanā refers to the whole range of sensations which arises when a stimulus reaches the tactile range of one of the senses, eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. Feelings proper to each of these senses are included under *vedanā*. The mind is a faculty that *feels* and thinks. The sensuous basis of knowledge is stressed again and again by the Buddha. Instead of the conventional dichotomy between the 'five physical senses' and the mind, the Buddha always classifies the mind as a sensory organs and speaks of knowledge as being conditioned by a six-fold bases of touch and feeling,

salāyatana paccayaphassā - phassapaccayā vedanā - conditioned by the six fold sense base contact - conditioned by contact [there is] feeling (Sn 111.61).

Each sense makes a different contact and engenders a different sensation. Sensations therefore are conditioned by touch and feeling. No contact, no feeling.

iii. Saññā : Perception-Signification

This is the moment when external and internal impulses (forms, colours, smells, tastes, touches and percepts) are co-ordinated and assembled by the mind. *Sañña* is a compound word made up of *san* (con) + *jñā* - 'co-knowledge.' A form is recognized, identified and named as a specific object. In the act of perception, the senses 'filter,' 'refract' or 'bend' reality. It is this refracted and reflected reality that the mind conceptualizes or represents to itself. The act of conception distorts the

'thing' conceived, as the Buddha pointed out:

In whatever way they think of it, it becomes otherwise. And herein lies its falseness - the deceptive thing (*mosadhammam*) that it is (*Sutta Nipata* vs 757)³.

The distortion occurs because the mind, by conceiving and naming constructs, creates seemingly static images out of a kinetic actuality. To underscore this process of 'refraction' and distortion, the 6th century BCE Buddhist scholastic Buddhaghosa coined the term *namana* - by associating *nama* - name - with the verb *namati* - 'to bend' (PED 346). The mind conceives 'reality' by constructing images from refracted signals it receives. The mind is a distorting mirror.

With perception, conceptualisation and designation, two *rūpa* come into being, the thing 'out there' and, the mental image or 'concept;' this latter is a representation. The form 'out there' remains in the realm of *anicca* - impermanence subject to change processes. The form conceived by the mind, the concept, can be held and reflected upon by the mind by fixing it with a verbal sign - *sanna* or *nimitta*. Signs however are not limited to phonemes alone; all mental representations, images or forms are also 'signs.' The relationship between a form as sign and its signification can be fixed by formal definition (the function of a 'sacred' or 'official' language). This identification of a sign with a fixed signification can create the delusion that the signification pertains to the essence of a perceived form and that the *signum* and the *res* are one and identical. This is a function of truth as power and of power as truth. Languages are systems of signs or symbols. As we saw above, the different sounds can denote the same thing in different linguistic systems. Moreover, the same sound can denote one thing in one linguistic system and another thing in another linguistic system. More importantly, even if the denotation is the same, the connotation of a perceived form could differ from person to person and from culture to culture: a glittering stone is a pretty bauble for a 'savage,' a vendible 'gem' for a merchant and an interesting crystalline formation for a mineralogist. Even physical features could be marked to serve as 'signs' of significant difference between individuals. A little child (not yet fully acculturated) sees differences in the body, but is innocent of the worlds of meaning attached by words to differences in skin pigmentation or in the genito-urinary organs. As we shall see below, conceptual proliferations (discursive thought and fantasies) begin

³ More than two thousand years after the Buddha, Nietzsche arrived at a similar conclusion, reflecting on the Latin word *mentire* to lie or make something up; the word is derived from the word for mind – *mens*, he comments: "*Mentiri* - Watch out! He reflects – in a moment he will be ready with a lie. ...Just consider what the Romans meant when they used the word *mentiri*!" TGS 3.137 For Nietzsche whatever is *Gedacht* - thought out, is *Verdacht* – suspect.

inside the head only when things are 'marked' (fixed) and signed. Signification and fixed identities can be re-birthed by 're-calling' them from the cellar of memory and 're-cognizing.' Sariputta Thera's brilliant exposition of the process of signification as a function of desire is presented in Chapter 14.

iv. *Saṅkhāra-Saṅkhata: Constructing-Constructed*

Saṅkhāra, as used by the Buddha, is a generic term to designate the totality of synergies and life-activities of the human organism. *Saṅkhata* is its past participle. *saṅkhāra-saṅkhata* together designate the dual aspect of practical human life-activity. In the first place, it is conscious life-activity. What is called the mind is not a *tabula rasa* which passively registers external forms. It is conscious and practical activity. The products of the mind are internal as well external. Thus all exteriorisations of human activity (language, tools, technologies, artefacts etc.) are *saṅkhata*. Secondly, *saṅkhata* designates the sedimentations of past activities of the individual which condition his/her habitual dispositions and determine his/her specific character. Thus according to the context in which it is used, *saṅkhāra-saṅkhata* could mean volitional activity (constructions), habitual dispositions and *karmic* sedimentations within and outside the actor: that is to say, the personal and historical effects of recursive actions, wholesome or unwholesome. *Saṅkhāra-saṅkhata* are mutually conditioning factors. For the theoretical brilliance of this insight into the dual aspect of human action, see the following Chapter. The results of human action do not disappear into an absent past; the heritage of past actions endure and condition human action in the present.

v. *Viññāna: Ordinary Consciousness*

The term *viññāna* is translated as consciousness. But it has a specific meaning in Buddha's diagnosis of mental activity. Consciousness is not seen as an entity that exists independent of the body and actual life conditions. As we have seen in the discussion of the process of feeling and perception, the human sensory organs are touched by stimuli reaching them. The feeling which arises through touch can be experienced as co-naturality of the sense faculties and their appropriate stimuli. However, the average person has a stronger impression of a sense of difference between itself and the stimuli which activate sensations. This sense of difference is experienced as a difference between two separate 'things'. Hence the belief that the perceiving subject is self subsistent and separate from the objects it perceives. This difference is further reinforced when a mental image of the form (*rūpa*) perceived is 'conceived' in the mind. At the same time the delusion arises that perceived and conceived images belong to an external reality existing independent of the perceiving mind. Thus a dichotomy is posited between the knowing subject and known object, whereas they have both conditionally co-arisen and are mutually

conditioned by each other. Consciousness assumes that it is the real self because it can 'reflect' on its mental images, comparing, contrasting them to one another and producing conceptual elaborations inside the head. Consciousness detaches itself from the thinking act and makes itself the transcendent subject of the thinking process. Thought is experienced as inhabiting a realm of its own and that it is the thinking self that engenders its own world. The thinking self conceives the notion 'I am.' The Buddha's entire being was suffused with joy when he realized that the notion 'I am' was based on a delusion or *meconnaissance* – a failure to recognize the conditioned co-arising of consciousness. The dissipation of this delusion co-arose, as we have seen, with the eradication of craving:

Happy is the freedom from malice in the world. Happy is the freedom from lust in the world, getting beyond all desires; putting away the pride which comes from the thought "I am". This truly is the highest happiness! (DB IV.5)

Deconstructing Descartes

The Buddha's rejection of the belief "I am" was based on wholly empirical investigation. Centuries later Rene Descartes on the basis of logical reasoning asserted the opposite *Cogito ergo sum* - "I think therefore I am". The 'Ego' that is clearly present to the thinking mind, he argued, must truly exist. On the basis of 'clear and distinct' ideas he proceeded to prove his own existence, God's existence and much else. But Descartes leaned on his priori belief that, God whose existence he deduced by reason, would not endow humans with a mind that would deceive them! Cartesian certitude is therefore sustained by a theological postulation. Descartes posited a fundamental dichotomy between the thinking mind - *Res Cogitans* and external 'material' reality - *Res Extensa*. The Buddha's diagnosis of the thinking process, makes clear that consciousness is not self subsistent but begins with touch and feeling. Therefore there is no such thing as value free, emotionless reasoning and unconditioned 'pure' thought. The Buddha laid bare that all Ego-based thinking is desire-driven.

Friedrich Nietzsche dismissed the Cartesian 'Cogito' as a learned attempt to substantiate a popular delusion,

As for the superstition of the logicians, I shall never tire of underlining a concise little fact which these superstitious people are loath to admit - namely that a thought comes when 'it' wants not when 'I' want, so that it is a *falsification* of the facts to say: the subject 'I' is the condition of the predicate 'think'. 'It' thinks: but that this 'it' is precisely that famous old 'I' is, to put it mildly only an assumption, an assertion, above all not an immediate certitude (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 17 emphasis his).

Sigmund Freud's clinical findings sounded the death knell of the concept of the soul and of the Ich or Ego as the transcendental subject of thought: the notion of the 'I' develops during an infant's development to childhood. Jacques Lacan, Freudian Psychoanalyst and Philosopher, writes,

The ego is a function. The ego is a synthesis, a synthesis of functions. It is autonomous! That's a good one!.. The ego like everything else in the human sciences is an o-pe-rational notion... of so little use it that I shall undertake to show-that the discourse concerning the ego and this desk coincide point by point (*Ecrits* 1977: 132).

Lacan's assertion echoes the Buddha's practical realisation of *anattā*: both the Self and the objects of its desires are equally without substance. Following Freud and Lacan, Professor of Philosophy, University of Utrecht, Rosi Braidotti unravels the Cartesian *Cogito ergo sum* as *Desidero ergo sum* - "I Desire therefore I am."

Descartes' speculative system underlies the desire for mastery which animates the Cartesian subject and which drives him/her (the subject) to justify the ontological foundations of his/her knowledge ... The Cartesian position, as paradigm of the subject of knowledge, has to do with obsessionality and desire for mastery... the cogito finds its legitimacy not in the transparency of its perception of itself but rather, in the fact of being able to *say* it (Braidotti 1991: 23).

Despite the conclusions of Nietzsche, Freud and Lacan's famous 'Return to Freud' the will to an autonomous and sovereign Self or 'Soul' persists. According to Nietzsche, belief in the Ego has deep roots in "the will to power as will to illusion." He observes, "Truth is the kind of error without which a certain kind of creature could not live...a belief can be a condition of life and nevertheless be false" (*Will to Power*, 493, II.506).

A Genetic Explanation of Consciousness

The generality of Indian and Western thinkers have assumed the existence of an autonomous mind and 'external' objects as separate entities. They implicitly or explicitly assume the divine filiation of thought. They then proceed to examine the relationship between the mind and 'external' reality. This unquestioned assumption is the basis of the Aristotelian definition of truth: 'Adequation of the mind to the thing.' The definition assumes a dichotomy between the mind, as subject of knowledge, and the 'thing' – as the object of knowledge. The Buddha is the first psychologist in history to disclose the genesis of consciousness in a process that is empirical and verifiable. It is a brilliant application and elucidation of conditioned

co-arising.

A clear, stage by stage trace of the physiological-sensuous and practical origins of consciousness is given in the *Madhupindika Sutta* (MLS I. 141-148). This discourse is an elaboration of a shorter discourse which the Buddha gave to a group of *bhikkhus* on the relationship between ego-craving, the clinging to views and violence in society which is rooted in "obsessionality and desire for mastery". When people give up their obsessive clinging to the Self or Ego, the Buddha concluded,

There is nothing to rejoice at, to welcome, to catch hold of, this is itself an end of a propensity to views, this is in itself an end of a propensity to perplexity, this is in itself an end of the propensity to attachment, to becoming; this is in itself an end of the propensity to ignorance, this is in itself an end of the propensity of taking the rod, of taking a weapon, of quarrelling, contending, disputing, accusation, lying speech.

The Buddha then retired and left the disciples to reflect on what he had said. They were perplexed by the connection the Master made between violence and dogmatic views. They turned to the senior *bhikkhu* present, Maha Kaccana and requested him to give them a detailed explanation of the Master's brief exposition. Maha Kaccana did not embark on a pedantic abstract disquisition. He began by drawing attention to ordinary life-experience common to teacher and pupil alike. "Listen, pay careful attention and I will speak".

Maha Kaccana's Scintillating Diagnosis

Maha Kaccana begins with basic empirical prerequisites for any type of knowledge or consciousness. For the genesis of consciousness, a person must be endowed with six sense faculties – eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. These six faculties must be healthy and unimpaired. Secondly, stimuli appropriate to each faculty must be present. Thirdly, the appropriate stimuli and the sensory organs must come into contact with each other. For example, if the eyes are healthy and they come into contact with optical stimuli, visual consciousness arises. None of these three necessary factors by themselves, **i.** the healthy organ, **ii.** the stimulus, **iii.** the contact, are by themselves the efficient cause of consciousness. Consciousness co-arises only if there is a concurrence of all these three conditions. If any one of these conditions is absent there is no arising of consciousness. This principle applies to all the six senses. Different types of sensory impingement engender different forms of consciousness. Contact between the eye and visible stimuli engender visual consciousness; between the ear and audible stimuli engender auditory consciousness. Contact between the nose and 'smellable' stimuli engender olfactory consciousness; contact

between the surface of the body and tactile stimuli engender tactile consciousness and contacts in the brain with mental stimuli engender mental consciousness. Tactility is a crucial factor in the arising of all forms of consciousness. It must be noted that as far as tactility is concerned, Maha Kaccana makes no exception for the mind. Mental consciousness too is engendered by sensory impingement, “When there is a mental object, when there is mental consciousness, one will recognize a manifestation of *sensory impingement*”. This has been confirmed by studies of brain activity in contemporary neurology with aid of electronic instruments. And to think that the Buddha discovered this and his disciples, like Maha Kaccana corroborated it, by skillful self observation in 600 BCE!

Having set the scene with the three basic conditions, Maha Kaccana proceeds to explain the process of the *birth of consciousness*. He emphasises the primacy of touch:

Cakkhuncāvuso paṭicca rūpe uppajati cakkuviññānam, tiṇṇam saṅgati phasso, phassa paccayā vedanā

Conditioned by eye and form there is visual consciousness; touch joins these three; conditioned by touch feeling arises.

The same is repeated for all the other senses, including the mind, mental forms and mental consciousness. Here too touch plays the key role. What links together - *saṅgati* the three factors; faculty, a perceived form and consciousness is touch. As mentioned above, contemporary neurology confirms this. It tells us that the world is perceived by coded messages [electrical impulses] sent to the brain by the other five sensory organs.

A verse in the *Samyukta Nikaya* draws attention to this primacy of co-touching, which escapes the average person's awareness:

Who touches not is not touched. Touching he is touched (K.S.I.19).

The seemingly enigmatic Zen koan, "What is the sound of one clapping hand?" statement bears on this necessity of co-touching. There is no arising of any type of sensation without co-touching. The feeling and the felt are conditioned-conditioning factors. This is expressed in a terse formulation *phassa-phutṭha* - “touched by touch” (Thag vs.783). The ‘toucher’ is not an autonomous subject touching a passive object - ‘out there,’ or a transcendental ‘idea’ in the head. The ‘toucher’ is touched in the very act of touching. This emphasis on mutual touching is of utmost importance. The Buddha's diagnostic method avoids the two extremes of Materialism - the mind is passive and is impacted by matter in motion, and Idealism - ideas are latent in the mind and it is through these ideas innate to the mind or soul that individuals perceive and conceive their knowledge of the world. Having

emphasised the impersonal character of the initial stage, Maha Kacana continues with his exposition,

phassa paccayā vedanā - conditioned by contact *there is* feeling (M I.111).

The point of departure for tracing the birth of consciousness is described as an impersonal event - *there is feeling*. In other places, this is more precisely formulated as - *patigaha samphassa* - frictional co-touching between the faculty and the stimulus.

Contact *happens*. It is event because the eye sees, the ear hears, the nose smells, the tongue tastes, the body feels, thoughts come up, even when there is no conscious attention. These are impersonal events because there is perpetual flux, movement activity 'within' and 'without.' If there were no movement and no life-activity, if reality were static, such mutual contact would be impossible. Sensation *happens* as long as the sense organs are active and not deadened.

Having drawn attention to the basic, impersonal character of the initial stage, Maha Kaccana shifts from the impersonal to the personal or subjective mode.

Yam vedeti tam sanjanati - What *One* feels, *One* perceives

When a contact is felt, the attention of the mind is alerted and the transition is made to the subjective mode - perception. The Matrix, not patrix, of consciousness is mutual touching *samphasso* - 'co-touching' - not one-sided touching - as commonly believed. It is also *patigaha* - 'striking against' or 'friction'. The impulses and energies flowing from the senses - 'sensors' - and from another source, 'rub each other.' It is this friction of counter-flows which produces sensation and gives birth to the perception of a form. This co-touching implies a '*con*-naturalness' of the senses with their appropriate stimuli. This aspect of knowledge of rising together is expressed in the Frenchword for 'knowledge' - *connaissance*.

A form 'as such' does not pre-exist the act of perception; it arises when there is contact, feeling and perception. The proposition that subjects and objects exist prior to the act of perception is a falsification of the factual situation. Without the friction produced by counter-flows 'nothing' could be sensed - through friction a form is felt and perceived - *rūpasaññā*. Mutual contact is the genetic moment of consciousness. Thus the belief that consciousness and thoughts exist before contact with an appropriate stimulus of the senses is fallacious. (Memories stored in the brain can be retrieved and when there is contact between ideas and images from the past and the mind, one is conscious of the past. When there is Right Mindfulness there is awareness of this often spontaneous upsurge of memories and the

spontaneous reactions they memories evoke.)

There is constant co-touching because one lives in an ever pulsating actuality. This can be experienced as sym-pathetic co-vibration. This experience is conveyed by the term *anu-kampa* – ‘compassion,’ but literally, ‘vibrating along with’ due to ‘a kinetic harmony’ in the universe. However, this sense of harmonious resonating is generally not experienced. The development of ego consciousness coincides with a sensation of difference, or of the otherness of the other. The attention is fixed on the sense of difference evoked by touching and is conceptualized as a difference between two ‘things’ - the Self and an ‘other.’ The growing child becomes ignorant (ignore-ance) of the touch which unites and splits experience up into differences of ‘this’ and ‘that’ and ‘yours’ and ‘mine.’ It forgets that the sense of ‘I’ and ‘Not-I’ is a co-arising experience. It falls into the delusion that these perceived differences are substantial differences between separate ‘things’ which existed before they interacted with each other. Consciousness, which initially arises through contact between a sense organ and its connatural stimuli begins to imagine it is an unconditioned subject of thought (See Chapter 12 on the birth of the Self or Ego). Self consciousness now complacently clings to the notion that it alone “runs on, fares on and not another” (MLS I.312). However, as life-energies diminish or their flow is impeded, the sensory organs are impaired and perceptions are dulled. Correspondingly, consciousness diminishes. When life-energies can no longer be renewed, physiological processes break down; the organism ‘dies.’ A corpse can be touched and felt but it cannot touch and feel. Consciousness, which arose with touch and feeling, ceases with the cessation of touch and feeling. The Buddha illustrated the co-arising (birth) and co-cessation of consciousness using the example of a fire drill:

Just as from the coming together of two sticks by way of friction, there arises heat and, fire is produced, and by the separation, the laying aside of these two sticks themselves, whatever heat was born thereof ceases, subsides. Even so, feelings are born of contact, rooted in contact, arisen out of contact, dependent on contact. Dependent on a specific contact, specific feelings arise and with the cessation of a specific contact, specific feelings cease (KS 1V 145).

Mind as Ersatz Womb

After clarifying the initial stages of contact, sensation and perception. Maha Kaccana proceeds to identify the genetic moment of subjectification: *yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti* - "what one feels one perceives ". The illusion of duality and substantiality which arose through touch, feeling and perception - *saññā* - is now consolidated at the conceptual and linguistic level. *Saññā* in the case of the average person, is not

bare perception or pure feeling; it is 'signing.' Here, phonemes - sound-symbols, that is to say words, come into play. What is perceived is *named*. The mind now has the seed to become a fertile womb producing 'concepts.' It is important to note that in the Buddha's diagnosis, feeling and perception are the strictly mental activities - *mano saṅkhārā*. He classifies reasoning and discursive thought as verbal activities - *vaci saṅkhārā*. We can reflect and reason even in silence only with the help of words - language. Maha Kaccana continues,

yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vitakketi

What one perceives, one reasons about (M I. 112).

Vitakka is used invariably with *vicāra* for deliberative activity taking place in the mind and is distinguished from the direct awareness of forms unmediated by concepts and words. *Vitakka-vicāra* are the 'fixing of the mind on mind-objects' or ideas 'reflecting on them,' 'investigating them,' 'reasoning about them' (PED 620). *Vitakka* is a compound word made up of *vi* - differentiation + *takka* - 'turning and twisting about' (PED 292); it denotes a clash or dialectic thought. *Vicāra* likewise is a compound term: *vi* - differentiation + *cāra* 'to move about' (PED.264). It is discursive thought. *Vitakka* and *vicāra* denote a turning back and forth; a to and fro movement, relating 'concepts' in the mind through the mediation of words. Thought systems are elaborated by investigating the correspondences or contradictions between concepts. The mind becomes a womb-like prolifically fertile organ. Eventually, the exteriorisation of concepts through words will disqualify, replace and render unclean the creative power of the womb and its concepts.

*yaṃ vitakketi taṃ papañceti, yaṃ papañceti tato nidānam purisam
papañcasaññāsaṅkha samudācaranti atītānāgatapaccuppannesu cakkhu-
viññesu rūpesu.*

What one ponders, one mentally proliferates; with this as the source prolific concepts assail a person with forms cognizable through the eye belonging to the past, the future and the present.

The same is repeated with perceptions of the ear, tongue, nose, body. Thinking takes on the appearance of independent activity of the mind. In order to give thought an independent existence theologians and philosophers had to transfer language into an independent, celestial plane. In a precise formulation *papañcasaññāsaṅkha samudācaranti*. Maha Kaccana exposes the move by which the mind with the aid of language *conceives* the meta-physical. *Papañca* from *pra+pañc* means, 'to spread out,' 'expansion,' 'diffuseness,' 'manifoldness.' In its verbal form it means, 'to proliferate or to have illusions, to imagine and fantasize, to be obsessive' (PED 413). Bhikkhu Nananda (1986) after examining the contexts in which the term is used in the Pali scriptures, renders *papañca* as 'conceptual proliferation;' the

proliferation of views through 'concepts' with the aid of sound symbols or words. Consider closely Maha Kaccana's formulation.

The word *saṅkhā* derived from *san* + */khyā* - 'to call,' signifies 'denomination,' 'definition,' 'word,' 'name' (PED 664). Nananda suggests that *saṅkhā* together with *saññā* could be understood as 'designations' or 'linguistic conventions;' 1986: 5) in other words, sounds as phonemes or verbal signs. The verb *samudācaranti* is derived from *sam* + *uda* + *carati* (PED 688). *Sam* - 'con' - 'together with'. Words beginning with *ud* express an 'upwards', 'rising up out of' (PED 132), in this context the *upsurgence* of concepts in the mind; *carati* means 'to move about' 'turn round and round;' the phrase *papañcasaññāsaṅkha samudācaranti* taken together describes the prolificity of signed-concepts related to the past and future surging up in the mind and assailing a person - *atītānāgatapaccuppannesu*.

The thinking and imagining self falls into the delusion that it is permanently present to itself, because of its ability to shuttle back and forth from a lost past, to a not-yet future. The knots by which this 'internet' is held together are linguistic signs. Percepts and concepts are reified by signing them with words – *saññasaṅkha*. They can now be recalled or 'leak out' from the cellar of memory. They can be projected into the future, or held before the mind and pondered about. It appears that the self, the 'I,' is ever present to itself in the 'am' of an eternal present.

The proliferation in the mind of sign-sounds - *papañcasaññāsaṅkha* - through referral to the past and projection to the future in an ever present now fuels the delusion of self-presence in an extra-corporeal realm. Language is a system of different symbolic sounds (words) with specific meanings within a particular linguistic community. The establishment within a system, of a fixed relationship between a linguistic sign and its signification, is a *sine qua non* for sustaining the delusion that 'things' named by different sounds are differences in the things themselves. The 'I' of the self differentiates itself from the 'Not-I' and, as 'other-than-my-body' and 'other-others'. The so called unconditioned, non-corporeal, self-subsisting self, deludes itself by ignoring the 'tangible' processes by which the notion of the 'I,' and the 'Not-I' arose. Nananda clarifies this as follows:

The latent illusion of the ego awakens at the stage of '*vedanā*' and thereafter the vicious duality is maintained until it is fully crystallized and justified at the conceptual level. Thus what has been a complex, conditionally arising process, tends to be resolved into a direct relationship between the ego and the non-ego (1986: 11).

Nananda also underscores the crucial role that language plays in *consolidating* this illusion:

Nouns, abstract nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs - in short, the whole

repertoire of language, assumes a certain substantial character by virtue of their relative stability. ...the proliferating tendency weaves a labyrinthine network of concepts connecting the three periods of time, through the processes of recognition, retrospection and speculation (1986: 7).

Language is the immediate actuality of thought. Thoughts are elaborated using language. Reasoning and discursive thinking *vitakka*, *vicāra* are therefore correctly classified as *verbal* activity by the Buddha. There is no such thing as wordless thinking in the mind (M.I.301). Due to conceptual proliferation in the head, thought and language seem to circulate in an independent realm. In speech, words follow each other in linear sequence creating the notion that language is an aggregate of separate units each of which has a specific 'meaning' attached to it. Language therefore reinforces the average uncritical person's view that the world consists of independently existing separate objects, capable of precise, observation and classification. As we noted in the Introduction, the Buddha described individuals with such a deluded world view as the *puthujjana*.

Maha Kaccana ended his exposition by pointing out that once one has insight into the conditions which give birth to perceptions and thoughts, which begin proliferate in the mind as if they inhabit an independent and unconditioned game realm, one sees the games the mind plays on itself. One realises that there is nothing substantial in mental constructs, however prolific or profound. Nothing to delight in, to hold on to dogmatically and nothing to kill or die for. The thinking self as an autonomous agent and its proud mental constructs arise under specific conditions and apart from these conditions, there is no arising of 'self'. "This", Maha Kaccana concluded, "is the end to the tendency to lust, the tendency to aversion ... the tendency to ignorance; this is the end to resorting to rods and weapons, of quarrels, disputes etc."

The Tyranny of Signs

The Buddha and the first Buddhists disclosed how things are perceived as 'things-in-themselves' and named as such. They diagnosed what routinely happens during the ordinary process of human cognition (perception and conception). Signification and valuation of 'things' take place at the moment of perception.

The Pali *saññā*, like the Latin *signum* and the Greek *semeion* or *sema* share the same meaning of 'mark' or 'sign.' *Saññā* is the moment of marking or signing. In early Buddhist psychology, signing - *saññān karoti* (J.II.71) is also measuring - *pamānan karoti* (M I. 298). Desire insinuates itself into the act of perception and evaluates a perceived form in terms of 'good' and 'bad,' and is fixed as such using a linguistic sign.

The denotation of a perceived form as determined by language and culture does not always coincide with the connotation of a form for the unconscious. The more an individual identifies himself with the symbolic world of his/her linguistic community, the more power he/she has if his/her culture happens to be the dominant culture. Once a form is reified and signed ('candala,' 'woman,' 'negro,' 'beautiful,' 'ugly') it can be turned into an object of lust or hatred. The witchery of 'signs' hinders the dispassionate perception of things and of living beings as impermanent psychological and cultural constructions - *sabbe sankhara anicca* and that all 'things' are without substance - *sabbe dhamma anatta*.

To have the power to name a thing is to determine its 'inner essence' or 'nature' and to exercise power over it; to subjugate it by defining its 'the final truth.' Down the centuries, 'In the name...' (the names are legion - the power discourse is the same) has been used to bless and to curse and to justify the genocide of entire peoples. The Buddha understood the violent character of the desire to name, grasp and control, common to all cultures,

What is it that overwhelmed everything?
 What is it that naught else surpasses?
 What is that one thing to which
 Everything else its course doth bend?
 'Tis name that has overwhelmed everything
 Naught else has overwhelmed everything
 Naught else exists that surpasses name
 And name itself is that one thing
 Beneath whose sway all others come (KS I. 55).

Name has soiled everything, higher than name there is none.
 To name - to this one thing - is everyone subject (S I.39). 6
 Beings aware only of what is told by names,
 Take up their stand on what is thus enunciated
Failing to discern the naming process,
 They are subject to the reign of death (KS I.16-17 emphasis mine).

The Buddha's teaching of non-injuriousness - *ahimsā* - is intrinsically linked to his diagnosis of the will to power, which masquerades as the will to name - to enunciate - in order to impose truth and order.

Demolishing Thresholds of 'Self' and the 'Other'

The Buddha explicitly refers to liberation as the destruction of thresholds and chasms: "the moat is filled"; "the barrier is removed", 'the post is pulled out', "bolts are withdrawn", "doors are flung wide open", "the flag is lowered". As a result, "the burden has been lifted" and "fettters sundered" (MLS I. 178) The sacred mists of mysticism and metaphysics dissolve in the open skies where there are no boundaries. The maps of desire are seen for what they are, imag(e)inations projected into the innocent skies which have been imagined as the abode of gods and of those who want to be like the gods or to be with the gods.

There is no track in the sky (Dhp 254).

This sky is without form and without representations; it is not easy to paint an image there or to make manifest pictures there (M I. 127).

All celestialisations are comprehended as inverted projections of mundane realities. It is not heaven, but desire which is infinite. The base - *upadi* - on which the self erected itself, is made to self-destruct. Once the trace of the 'I' - *apara* as *sui generis* is traced to the 'other' - *para* - which co-arises with the self. The preoccupation with *para/apara* is seen for what it is, a conceit and a craving for self-identity and self-perpetuation. The 'I' and 'me,' the 'we' and 'us,' and the 'they' and 'them,' disappear like dew in the morning sun. The construction of significant difference is seen for what it is - a vicious stratagem to provoke hierarchy and to construct a pyramid of power with some Absolute Self or 'Other' at its pinnacle:

‘Equal’ (am I) ‘better’ and ‘worse’ (than thou art).

Hereby are conflicts provoked

But who in all three ways holds his mind unshaken

‘Equal’ or ‘Different’ occurs not

He has renounced bondage to name (*nama*) and designation (*sankha*).

His mind is not set to vain imaginings (KS I.17).

When the obsessive need to differentiate, classify and hierarchise, disappears, there is no trace of the self or any of its self-constructed footholds. The cultural prisons of self-identity, which erect thresholds between 'I-you' and 'you-they' are demolished.

The I-making, mine-making, proclivity and mental conceit - *ahamka-ramamakara mananusaya* - is eradicated (M I.486).

It is the ending of binary oppositions which posit substantial difference in order to

privilege one of the two differentiated terms. No more Male/Female; Master/Slave; Black/White; Occidental/Oriental; Christian/Buddhist; Hindu/Muslim; Sinhala/Tamil. Every substantial difference has as its patrix the creation of a threshold between the mind ('male') and the body ('female'). In practice, human beings can and do cross, 'transcend' and 'transgress' these thresholds. Men and women of culturally or religiously segregated groups defy the 'Law' (Thou Shalt Not), marry and produce normal human offspring. The stomach can ingest and digest any 'ethnic' food and renew life just as the womb can ingest any 'ethnic' seed and reproduce human life. Profane, 'below-the-navel' practice explodes the sacred fabrications of the head. Despised corporeality bears witness to the truth of *aniccā*.

The Buddha referred to himself as *Tathāgata* – 'such going' and the 'traceless.' He had no 'trace' or 'foothold' in an 'other' or a 'wholly other.' He offers humans the possibility of realising their bliss in this very body, in this very life and before death. For this one must not merely deny one's 'self' but realise that the so-called 'self' itself is a fiction of desire.

By what track can you trace the Awake-One, who is 'trackless' and whose range is endless and to whom there is not that craving to lead anywhere? (Dhp 180)

When non-representative, lustrous consciousness arises, long and short, subtle and gross, pleasant and unpleasant, name and form are all cut off without exception. The range is endless (D I.223).

No more cultural barriers to hamper vision; no boundaries; no thresholds. Frontiers are abolished so that people can freely traverse back and forth. *Anattā* is radically subversive of the order of gods and men. It exposes the false logics upon which social and cultural institutions produce (birth) and reproduce (rebirth) their pomp and power.

CHAPTER 11

KAMMA: THE CREATIVE LIFE-FORCE OF HUMAN BEINGS

The doctrines most associated with Buddhism by non-Buddhists, are belief in *karma* (Sk)/ *kamma* (P) and re-birth. The problem of suffering has exercised the minds of sages from the beginnings of civilisation. For those who actually endure unspeakable suffering, without any hope that it will ever end, their miseries may seem like some divine curse or an evil fate. Similarly, those who are born into conditions of wealth and privilege may believe that they have been blessed by the gods or the fates. This crude evaluation of 'good' and 'evil' has been typical of most religious beliefs. But the agonised cry rising up from suffering masses down the centuries has been, "Why do the ways of the wicked prosper?" Dominant ideologies seek to provide pseudo explanations to assuage the protests of the oppressed against their condition by assuring them that wrongs will be righted and justice vindicated, in another world or in a future life after death. Georges Balandier clarifies the ideological function of such explanations.

They *explain* the existing order in historical terms and *justify* it by presenting it as a system based on right. Those myths that confirm the dominant position of a group are obviously most significant; they help to maintain a superior situation (1972: 118 emphasises his)

Orthodox Buddhist ethics explains social differences through a trinity of doctrines, *samsāra* - *kamma* (P) *karma* (Sk) and rebirth. These beliefs were in circulation in the Buddha's Day. There are many places in the Theravada canon where the Buddha himself reportedly expounded *kamma* as a law of retribution. However, there is also sufficient evidence in the canonical scriptures to conclude that the Buddha and the first Buddhists rejected such a view. The Buddha proclaimed that the separate self with a unique non corporeal self or soul was a delusion and a fabrication of craving. The Buddha exorcised the reincarnation cosmology of his Day of its terrors. "The nightmare of the same individual's repeatedly enduring poverty, disease, and death for aeons of time or imprisonment for centuries in the torture chambers of demons, came to an end in the realisation that there is *no one* to endure it" (Alan Watts, 1973: 62).

Karma in ordinary everyday language simply means labour, work, deed, practice, to this day. Its ordinary meaning was (is) transparent to people who actually work to earn a living. In Sri Lanka workers are called *kamkaruvo*, lit., 'doers of work', 'labourers'. This designation is similar to the term - *kammakara* used for

wage labourers in the Pali scriptures. Poor Sinhalese Buddhists who believe their lot is due to bad *karma* refer to themselves as *karumakkarayo* - wretched people cursed by karma. Very early in the history of Buddhism, the theory of *karma* as an Iron Law of Immanent Justice was incorporated into Buddhist orthodoxy. The ordinary word for work - *karma*, *karma* (*P*) was hypostatized into '*Karma*' - an 'Agency' or impersonal system of justice which good deeds and punishes evil deeds. *Karma* operates in the interregnum between births and deaths. It is based on primitive notions which associate 'good' with 'good life' and 'evil' with poverty and misery. In Karmic justice, good deeds are rewarded by birth as a male, enjoyment of power and privilege, (in India and Sri Lanka) high caste, physical comeliness, good health and worldly pleasures. Evil is punished by birth as a female, ugliness, physical deformities, poverty, low social status (low caste), poverty and servitude. The only way the wretched of the earth can change their woeful lot is to accept their plight as just punishment for evil done in a previous birth, and perform their lowly tasks without a murmur as expiation for sins committed in a previous life, with the hope that at the next toss on the roulette table of *samsāra* they will be born into a more propitious social situation. All women, not just Buddhist women, must docilely fulfil their domestic duties praying that they will be re-born as men and then work their way up the samsaric ladder until they will be predestined to join the Order of Monks - the surest guarantee of realising *nibbāna* - *nirvana* (Sk) - total liberation from *samsāra*. The insidiousness of this system of justice is that the social grid of inequality and of 'high' and 'low' has to remain unchanged to make sure that the good will be rewarded and the evil punished. The theory mystifies and leaves undisturbed a patently unjust social-system. Buddhism as taught and practised today is a religion for the private salvation of individuals. Caste is very much a part of the social fabric of Lankan Buddhism. Caste is the belief that people are what they are by their birth or biological determination. Today, even the one, undifferentiated *Sangha* founded by the Buddha is divided into monastic sects divided along caste lines.

Collective Kamma

J.G. Jennings (1949) argues that the theory of karmic rebirths is not compatible with the Buddha's teaching on *anattā* and suggests what is rebirthed is craving which sustains Ego or 'self' consciousness:

If the epithet *pono-bbhabvika* be applied to *tanhā* (thirst), and translated as 'tending to arise again and again', repeating itself, recurring' (that is causing the rebirth of itself, not of the individual), it is fully in accord with the doctrine of altruistic responsibility (ibid. xxxvii).

This application of *pono-bbhabvika* to - *tanha* - craving - as a *proclivity to repeat*

or re-birth *itself* is consistent with the Buddha's declaration quoted in the previous Chapter that ego consciousness ceases with the destruction of craving. Centuries later Sigmund Freud on the basis of clinical studies arrived at the conclusion that '*Ego*' is a fiction - a functional compromise between primal desires - *Id* - and the demands of society - *Super ego*. Striving to realise self-less-ness, writes Jennings,

[an] ethical ideal of complete altruism of such beauty that it would be worth presenting in a concrete form even if that form were not strictly historical. Of its historical truth, however, in the life of Gotama Buddha, there appears to be sufficient proof (ibid. xxii)

If the notion of the individual self is a fiction and there is no transcendental self, how should one understand effective human agency? Jennings suggests that we should understand the Buddha's Teaching on *kamma* as a *theory of collective kamma* (ibid. xxxvii). According to him, the individualistic theory of *kamma* is the work of 'after-men,'

This reconciliation savours more of his metaphysical successors than of Gotama himself who declared he did not deal in metaphysical questions but with the Eightfold Path of Conduct ... Gotama calls for self-dependence and eager activity in the present, not however on behalf of the self, since such grasping, whether for immediate or ultimate reward, is the source of all sorrow, therefore necessarily on behalf of others. (ibid. xxxvii; xlv).

Jennings regards the attempt to reconcile *anattā* with individual rebirth as a key element in "the Hinduization of Buddhism" (ibid. lviii).

In the Hindu view the same individual acts and suffers in different lives; the usual modern Buddhist view is the same ... Allowing that the reconciliation is later, it may be assumed that Buddha, teaching the doctrines of no-permanent soul, moral responsibility and altruism, taught a doctrine of altruistic responsibility or collective Karma, according to which every action, word and thought of the individual, transient though he may be, brings forth inevitably consequences to be suffered or enjoyed by others in endless succeeding generations (ibid. xxxvii).

Jennings' proposal that *kamma* be understood as the collective *kamma* of human beings opens up a theoretically refreshing perspective to look at *kamma* or human agency as the distinctive potential of the 'species nature' of human beings, as such, irrespective of gender, race, class or historical period. The theoretical concept 'species nature' needs to be clarified for the average student.

Human Agency - A Species Potential

To understand what is meant by the 'species nature' of humans, one must turn to Karl Marx who introduced the concept. This recourse to Marx may seem like an attempt to read into the Buddha's teaching on interpretation of *kamma* which has no basis in the canonical scriptures. I ask the reader to bear with me, follow the theoretical clarification and see its relevance to understand the Buddha's extraordinary elucidations of human nature and human agency.

In contrast to a teleological or predetermined movement of history, Marx insisted that humans make their own history under specific conditions they have inherited. There are no 'iron laws' of history working independent of humans who think, plan and act. The totality of human activity may not always achieve the intended goal. The uniqueness of human beings, writes Marx, may be variously defined, theologically or philosophically, "[But] they themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence" (*German Ideology* MECW 5. 31). Humans are unique because of their action in the world. All other living beings are circumscribed by their environment. Their lives are naturally adapted to suit their environment, whereas humans have historically adapted their environment to suit their own ends. They are culture producing animals. There is no such thing as 'pure nature' once humans become architects of their own environment. Marx clarifies the difference between humans and animals as follows,

A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver and a bee puts to shame many an architect. But what distinguishes the worst of architects from the best of bees, is this, the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourers at its commencement (*Capital*, I. 174).

Spiders have not changed the webs they weave or bees the hives they build. Every generation mutely repeats what was done by the previous generation, whereas humans have changed their life conditions during a long process of cultural evolution. It is this ability to produce effects in the world that vests human action with a moral quality. This ability, Marx points out, is not due to an abstract essence,

The human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its it is the ensemble of the social relations (*Theses on Fuerbach*, VI. MECW, 5.7)

For Marx, society does not exist 'alongside' or 'outside' nature - "Nature is the inorganic body of human beings... humans must remain in continuous metabolic interchange with nature if they are to die". (*EPM*, MECW 3.276). The totality

of social relationships is in fact a social division of the species nature or capacity of human beings. In other words, it is a diversification or a branching out of the same species potential. With social division of work, humans begin to produce for, and to serve each others needs. It is through social co-operation that the primitive human group survived and it is through social co-operation that humans have historically enhanced their life-conditions,

The fact that the need of one can be satisfied by the product of another, and vice versa, proves that each of them reaches beyond his own particular need, as a *human being*, and relates to one another as human beings; that their common species being [*Gattungswesen*] is acknowledged by all (Marx, *Grundrisse*, 1973:243, emphasis his)

I produce the need of an other because I know it from my own natural needs. This type of production does not happen in the animal world. Writes Marx, "It does not happen elsewhere that elephants produce for tigers, or animals for other animals" (*Grundrisse*, *ibid*).

Animals are diversified into different species. From generation to generation they act according to their natural instincts. A bee hive may seem to be bustling with collective activity, but all the bees perform the same task for the same purpose - building hives in order to produce honey. Century upon century has passed but bees have not changed the architecture of their hives. "A hive of bees comprises at bottom only one bee, and they all produce the same thing" (*Grundrisse*, *ibid*). All the bees perform the same task to produce the same thing - honey. They do not have a social division of labour and do not produce different things. The lives of animals are adapted to their environment. They have not and do not adapt their environment to suit their needs. Human beings have and continue to adapt their environment to satisfy their needs. History is the process by which humans over hundreds of thousand of years progressively adapted the resources of their environment to suit their needs. Thereby they have changed their relations to their environment and to one another. But always under specific conditions.

The division of labour which began as an expression of social cooperation became exploitative and a source of suffering when one group - a minority - began to live off the work or the expended life-energies of other human beings. Social exchanges ceased being characterised by balanced reciprocity and become negative and unequal. To maintain these unequal and exploitative relationships, ideologists developed the view that the labouring masses belonged to a species different to that of the privileged few and that they could be exploited in the same way an ox or an elephant is exploited for production.

The Buddha was once asked if he subscribed to any of the various views current in his day to explain the cause of suffering in the world, namely:

- i) *adhiccasamuppanna* - happiness and suffering are chance happenings - the strictly materialist position.
- ii) *paramkatan* - they are due to an external cause. For example, divine predestination, fate, etc.
- iii) *sayamkatan* - suffering and happiness are self-caused. In contemporary terms, the view of liberal individualism.
- iv) *sayamkatan-paramkatan* - they are due to a concurrence of one's own action and an external cause. This corresponds to the conventional explanations of karmic law or the Christian theological explanation of the co-action of divine grace and free will to perform supernaturally meritorious deeds.

The Buddha stated that none of these explanations were his own. He said what he taught was *paṭicca samuppannā sukha-dukkha* - happiness and suffering conditionally co-arise (KS II. 7-19). Note, the Buddha does not introduce the participle *katan* into his formulation. Human agency takes place *within* the law of conditioned co-arising and instances it. By situating *kamma* within the law of *paṭicca samuppada*, the Buddha ends the false dilemma created by the opposition: freedom or necessity. Freedom can be realised through insight into this necessity not by hubristically defying it. Human agency does not take place in a cosmic void or social vacuum. It takes place, as we saw in Chapter 9, under specific conditions - *idapaccayatā*. We shall see below how the Buddha applied this principle to explain the origins of the various occupational groups of his day. Social practices condition, and are themselves conditioned by other social practices.

Marx pointed out that, [each stage of social development produces] "a historically created relation to nature and of individuals to one another, which is handed to each generation from its predecessor, which on the other hand is indeed modified by the new generation... It shows that circumstances make humans just as much as humans make circumstances" (GI MECW 5. 54). Substitute the word 'circumstances' with 'conditions' and we have insight into the application of the principle of Conditioned Co arising in the Agganna Sutta (See next Chapter), to explain the change in social relationships brought about by changes in social conditions produced by human beings themselves. Now, if circumstances are produced by humans, not gods, fates or blind matter, humans can change what other human beings have produced. The Buddha grasped this centuries before Marx. He applied

the principle of Conditioned Co-arising to ethics in order to eradicate craving and end suffering in this world. All doctrines which obfuscate the problem of suffering with mystic mumbo jumbo can be refuted through human practice and in the right comprehension of this practice as conditioned and conditioning activity.

The Vāseṭṭha Sutta

This discourse was a response to a question put to the Buddha by two young Brahmin students of theology, *Bharadvāja* and *Vāseṭṭha*. They asked the Buddha whether there was any truth in the doctrine they had been taught that an individual is a *brāhmaṇa* by birth and another a *non-brāhmaṇa* by birth. The Buddha replied:

Let me explain to you in gradual and in simple terms the differentiation by *jāti* (birth) of living things, for there is species-differentiation (*jātitivibhaṅgam pāṇānaṃ*) according to 'other-other' species (*aññāmaññā hi jātiyo*) (vs. 600).

A Morphological Classification of Living Beings

The Buddha begins with a general morphological classification of the various forms of life in the world according to habitat and behaviour in vs. 601-606:

- There is a variety of plant life from grasses to trees.
- There is a variety of animals that live in the earth and dust, like worms and ants.
- There is a variety of four-footed beasts.
- There is a variety of long-backed creatures, like reptiles.
- There is a variety of fishes.
- There is a variety of winged animals, who fly through the air.

After each of these classifications the Buddha observes that among these life forms there are distinct species-making marks (*liṅgam jātimayam*). These species-making marks indicate 'other-other' species – *liṅgam jātimayam tesam, aññāmaññā hi jātiyo*. There are several noteworthy features in this system of classification. First, life forms or *rūpas* are generically classified according to the modality of their life-activities and habitats: moving in water, air, on the earth, or rooted to one place (plant-life), and common observable external features: all birds have beaks, feathers, claws etc. fish have scales and gills etc. But within each genus, significant differences could be noted in the common features or marks - feathers, beaks, scales; manner of movement - swim, slither walk, etc. On the basis of these different marks, one could distinguish different sub-species among plants, reptiles,

insects, fish, birds and quadrupeds. Unlike Aristotle, the Buddha does not conclude that distinguishable behaviour patterns and external features are signs of underlying permanent substances. Neither does he hierarchise life-forms according to a Great Ladder of Being. The discourse is not propelled by a human will to power over the universe by which Man (sic) is placed at the apex of a pyramid of being. The Buddha undercuts the possibility of constructing such hierarchies. He totally rejected the Brahmin theory of *svadharma* - 'innate nature'.

Human Beings : One Undifferentiated Species

After dispassionately examining the diversity of life-forms and recognizing species differences among them, the Buddha turns to the human form or *rupa*.

*Yathā etāsu jātisu liṅgam jātimayam puthū,
evam n'atthi manussesu liṅgaṃ jātimayam puthū*

Whereas in these species there are distinct species-making marks, in humans there are no separate (or distinguishable) species-making marks (vs. 607).

To substantiate this general conclusion, the Buddha proceeds to a detailed examination of the external features or 'marks' of the naked human form. There is no - *linga* - mark that could be singled out as signs of substantial differences among human beings which could be attributed to their own distinctive natures - *svadhamma*:

Not in the hairs, nor in the head
Nor in the ears or in the eyes
Nor in the mouth or in the nose
Nor in the lips or in the brows
Nor in the shoulders or the neck
Nor in the belly or the back
Nor in the buttocks or the breast
Nor in the anus or genitals;
Nor in the hands or in the feet
Nor in the fingers or the nails
Nor in the knees or in the thighs
Nor in their colour or in voice;
Here there are no distinctive *jāti* marks
As with other kinds of *jātis* (vs. 607).

This item by item listing of the parts of the human form, without calling it male or

female, is a *tour de force* of de-signification. The mind is focused and concentrated on the perceived form without letting it be biased by pre-‘conceptions.’ The naked human form is clinically examined without prudishness. There are no ‘marks’ to indicate any species difference. There is only a differentiated organism.

On the basis of this clinical examination of the human form, the Buddha formulates a general principle:

*liṅgaṃ jātiimayam n’eva yathā aññāsu jātisu
paccattam sasarīsesu manussesu – etam na vijjati
vokāraṇ ca manussesu samaññāya pavuccati*

Here, there are no species-constituting marks as among other species. Looked at individually this does not apply to the human body differences among human beings are designations of speech (vs. 610 -611).

The Buddha acknowledged that there are indeed perceptible physical differences among human beings, but none of the physical differences are indications of belonging to different species or sub-species. No single feature of the human form – the genitals, pigmentation, the timbre of the voice, the shape of nose, the colour or texture of the hair, is singled out as a – *liṅgaṃ* – ‘mark’, or sign of ontological, sexual and racial differences in the human – *manussa* – species – *jāti*. All humans belong to one species - the human species or *jāti*. Most importantly, the Buddha does not say there are 'male' and 'female' marks on the human form (See the extensive discussion of this in Chapter 12). Differences within the human species, the Buddha insists, are significations constructed by "designations of speech", that is to say, by the use of words or *names*. However, these are not ‘intrinsic’ differences, but conventionally *spoken about differences*.

Men and women share a perceptibly similar form. Differences in the genitrary organs are not seen as signs of biologically different natures. Similarly, people belonging to various ethnic (cultural-linguistic) groups share an undeniably similar external form and common physiology. The best proof of this, the Buddha pointed out in another exchange with Brahmin scholars, is that men and women belonging to different classes and ethnic groups though separated into different species or *jātis*, do have intercourse with each other and produce human offspring, not some hybrid creature. Whereas when a mare is mated with a donkey the offspring is a mule, the Buddha pointed out (M II.153). It is social convention that prohibits persons of one social group or religion from marrying one another, as if they belong to different species. Buddha undermines all ideologies which attempt to create eternal and significant differences based on religion or pseudo biological arguments. Human conflicts arise when historically and culturally constructed differences are regarded as natural and unchangeable.

When discussing the marks which constitute *jāti* difference among other living forms, the Buddha used the term *aññamaññam*: *aññā* means 'other,' 'opposite,' 'contrary,' 'different.' The term *aññamaññam hi jātiyo* is used by the Buddha to distinguish between different species – they are 'other-other' species. The word *samañña* used for differences among humans is compounded from *san* (*con*) 'with' + *añña*. It denotes: 'with the other' (PED 13). In other words, the Buddha uses this term for the human *rūpas* to indicate shared common features. The differences among humans are differences among likes - *samañña* not differences between un-likes - *aññañña*. The Buddha does not single out perceived differences to name - *nama* - to classify and hierarchize beings sharing a common form - *rūpa*. All humans belong to the one and same *jāti*. There is no divine intent or evolutionary biological goal which has stratified the human species in terms of 'higher' and 'lower.' As R. Chalmers observed,

Herein Gotama was in accord with the conclusion of modern biologists, that Anthropidae are represented by the single genus and species, Man¹.

The affirmation by the Buddha of the biological unity of the human race is not a platitude – an egalisation *sub specie aeterni*, or in some celestial kingdom after death. This unqualified insistence of the equality of all human beings, irrespective of perceived gender, class and ethnic differences, was part of a social campaign against the hierarchisation of society and against man's inhumanity to man. As O.H. de A. Wijesekera points out:

The Buddha was the first thinker of India, not to say of the whole world, to give up the theological approach and adopt a rational attitude in such matters... If one believes that he revolutionized the theological and metaphysical standpoint of Brahmanist religion and philosophy, it would be absurd to hold that the Buddha failed to condemn their sociological implications (1951: 4).

Human Differences through Differentiated Practices

Having established the biological unity of the human race, the Buddha proceeds to answer the inevitable question. If all human beings are members of the same species – *jāti* – how is it that humans seem to be permanently divided from generation to generation into different upper and lower classes, occupational groups and races? The question continues to be asked to this day, and the Buddha's answer is as relevant today, as when it was first given 2,500 years ago. In the Buddha's

¹ Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1894: 396

Day, a historical development - the social division of labour - had taken on the appearance of a natural phenomenon, because it was reproduced from generation to generation. People had come to believe, and Brahmin ideology reinforced this delusion, that some individuals are divinely pre-ordained by their natures to labour, to serve and to provide pleasure; other individuals pre-ordained to conquer, subjugate, exploit and enjoy as a birth rite. The Buddha unravelled this mystery of social life to the two young Brahmins who prided themselves on being '*brāhmaṇa*' – the most excellent of beings by birth:

Know well that whoever among humans makes a living from farming is a farmer, *not a brāhmaṇa*.

Know well that whoever among humans makes a living by crafts is a craftsman *not a brāhmaṇa*.

Know well that whoever among humans makes a living by trading is a trader *not a brāhmaṇa*.

Know well that whoever among humans makes a living by serving, is a servant, *not a brāhmaṇa*.

Know well that whoever among humans makes a living by stealing, is a thief *not a brāhmaṇa*.

Know well that whoever among humans makes a living of weapons, is a soldier, *not a brāhmaṇa*.

Know well that whoever among humans makes a living by priestly craft, is a ritualist *not a brāhmaṇa* (vs.119-120).

The Buddha did not exclude the 'blue-bloods' of the period from this general law:

Know well that whoever among humans governs the city and realm, is a *rājā*, *not a brāhmaṇa*.

The Brahmins had constituted themselves the normative speaking subjects on the order of things and humans. The Buddha exposes the strategy behind this will to power. The Brahmins had established themselves as a different species -*jāti* - of human beings by way of negation - they are *not* another *jāti* identified as *khattiya*, *vessa* or *sudda*. They presented themselves as *unique* creatures born out of the mouth of Brahma. They had appropriated the term '*brāhmaṇa*' as a designation for themselves as the ritually pure and *most excellent* of status groups. As the Buddha discloses, the Brahmins did this through verbal jugglery: a *brāhmaṇa* is *not* a *vessa*, a *dasā*, a *khattiya* etc. They then argued that there was an intrinsic identity between the linguistically differentiated *brahmaṇa* and the notion 'excellent.' They claimed that as skilled philologists (vs.595) they alone could know

and define the proper relationship between a sound and its signification. This was, they proudly asserted, a natural endowment of birth, not an acquired skill. They were the mouth-born sons of Brahma, the ultimate source of all signification in heaven and on earth. The Buddha exposed the spurious character of the Brahmin claim. The meaning attached to words are social conventions, there is no intrinsic, divinely determined, necessary relationship between a word as sound-sign and its meaning. Moreover,

Whoever makes a living by priestly craft
is called a ritualist *not* a *brāhmaṇa*.

The Buddha then added :

I do not call anyone a *brāhmaṇa* because of birth from a particular
mother, even if he may be addressed as ‘Sir’ and may be wealthy.

This last statement would have touched the raw nerve of brahmin pride. The Brahmin’s traced their origin to a Heavenly Father. The Buddha sticks close to more certifiable facts. A person’s paternity could be dubious, but never the maternity. The Buddha drives home his point unrelentingly. Even if the Brahmins founded their claim on the surer ground of being born of a Brahmin mother, he still saw no reason why this should be a basis for pride and for demanding respect and subservience. In a radical revaluation of values, the Buddha returns the ancient use of the term *brāhmaṇa* as a designation for those who lead morally unimpeachable lives:

Who has cut off all fetters
And is no more by anguish shaken,
Who has overcome all ties, detached:
He is the one I call a *brāhmaṇa*,
Who cut each strap and thong,
The reins and bridle as well,
Whose shaft is lifted, the awakened one
He is the one I call a *brāhmaṇa*.

...

Who does not flare up with anger,
Dutiful, virtuous, and humble
... Who has laid aside the rod
Against all beings frail or bold,
Who does not kill or have killed

Who leaves behind all human bonds
And bonds of heaven...
Whose destination is unknown
to gods, to spirits, and to humans,
An arahant with taints destroyed
He is the one I call a *brāhmaṇa*...

The Buddha sweeps aside all claims to sacred superiority based on birth, ritual performance or esoteric knowledges. What matters is not what a person *thinks* or says he/she is, or is believed to be, by gullible people. What is important is the moral quality of a person's life. The rites performed by a priest are just as much routinized practices as the activities of a 'herdsman,' a 'soldier' or a 'trader.' It is just another way of earning a living! Any one who lives by stealing is a robber, no matter by what name society may think fit to call him – 'priest,' 'king' or 'merchant.' If social convention does not prevent it, any person, male or female, could learn, for example, the bag of tricks and practice priest-craft. The Buddha did not spare his own renouncer disciples. The shaven head and yellow robes may signify *bhikkhu/ni* – mendicant - but this does not necessarily imply that he/she is a person of excellent moral character:

There are many ill-natured, unrestrained imposters who wear yellow robes (Dhp 307).

The Buddha explains that the social division of labour is the result of a division of practices (*kammavibhaṅga*) within the same species. It is not due to a diversity of natures (*jātivibhaṅga*). This truth is mystified to make people ignorant of their own creative potential. The fixation of activity into ever recurring sets of relationships within a more or less unchanging system made society appear as an alien force existing outside human beings. Ideologists used ignorance of the true beginnings of things to tell people that their lowly social condition is the product of their inherent natures or a punishment by an invisible hand of natural justice. The Brahmin theory of social order reversed the historical order of events and presented social practices as the exteriorisation of ideas conceived by the divine mind of Brahma. The concepts *khattiya*, *brāhmaṇa*, *vessa* and *sudda* were made anterior to the life-practices of these social classes. A pre-existing essence - a concept is made to determine existence. However, it is by abstracting from repeated practices that the notion or 'essence' priest, aristocrat, peasant or slave is conceived.

Brahmin lawgivers like Manu, used their social power to impose a rigidly herarchized order on society and claimed it was divinely intended; the Buddha dispelled the aura of sacrality surrounding this 'law'. He revealed that a social

identity is not a ready made soul or essence which enters the mother's womb at the moment of conception: "I do not call anyone by any name, because he/she is born from the womb of a particular mother." A person is called a servant (*dāsā-dāsi*) because the circumstances of life has forced him/her to practice subservience to another. A person is called a master because he is able to exercise power over another. The practices of two individuals relate them to each other in a servant-master relationship. A servant is *not* a master and a master is *not* a servant, due to their respective social practices and roles, not because two mutually negating concepts have entered their beings and fixed their inner essences or natures. The Buddha ended this section of the *Vasettha Sutta*, by summing up his disclosure of the basis of social differences. A pre-existing conceptual order did not produce the social division of labour. The conceptual order is an abstraction from and an inverted reflection of practices, repeated from generation to generation, creating the illusion that these occupational specialisations have been determined by birth. Dividing members belonging to one *jati* - species and calling them individuals of different *jatis* or natures is a perverse misrepresentation of actual origins. The different names given to various occupations are a purely social convention. These names do not in anyway indicate differences in nature:

For name and clan are assigned
As mere designations in the world
Assigned here and there
and originate in conventions.

Names are conventional designations for different modes of activity, not different natures. People act out social roles by following conventionally laid down rules of procedure like forms of dress, uniforms and modes of address. These are ways in which we 'dress up' people and invest their roles and ranks with meaning and power or powerlessness. Behind the veil of appearances, everyone is the same. Male, female, prince, priest and pauper alike are subject to the same law of impermanence – change, decay and dissolution. The overriding law of *anicca* - impermanence - which no one can escape, equalizes all. Thus all talk of unique and unchanging natures is without substance - *anattā*. Things are changeable, because no thing is permanent.

A Flow of Interdependent Practices

In the final section of the *Vasettha Sutta* (vs. 649-652) the Buddha moves from the examination of particular practices to formulate a general theory about the character of human action in the world. The so called fixed biological order of intrinsic differences turns out to be, on closer examination, a mental abstraction from the

relatively stable social practices of individuals sharing the same species nature:

For those who do not know this fact [the naming process]
Wrong views have long underlain their hearts;
Not knowing, they declare to us:
‘One is a brahmin by birth (*jāti*)
[But] One is not a brahmin by birth,
Nor by birth is one a non-brahmin
By action (*kamma*) is one a brahmin.
By action is one a non-brahmin.
For by action is one a farmer
One is craftsman by action
Or a merchant by action
One is a servant by action.
Or a priest, by action
And by action is one are ruler

A social identity depends on social practice not on birth. The rejection by the Buddha, of identity by birth and his assertion of the role of action in the present - *kassako kammanā hoti* - by action is one a farmer - makes it absolutely clear that occupation is not determined at birth by action in a previous life. The last two verses of this section sum up this grand and panoramic view of human agency in a precise and succinct formula:

*Evam etam yathābhūtam kammam passanti paṇḍita paṭiccasamupā
dadasā kammavipākkakovidā* - (vs. 653).

These indeed are thus become action, which the wise clearly see as conditionally co-arisen results of action.

The Buddha does not say things are what they are - *yatha-attha* - 'thus being.' That would have implied a hidden 'essence,' an inherent nature, 'being as such,' or 'underlying meaning.' It would also have implied that all beings have an innate, predetermined goal in life, since the word *attha* (*artha* Sk) has a dual connotation of 'meaning' as well as 'goal.' To avoid any such misconceptions the Buddha states without ambiguity - *yathābhūtam kammam* - 'thus-become-action.' The death knell of onto-logics is sounded with the declaration - *kammavipākkakovidā* - the result of actions. Egocentric individuals imagine that the world revolves around themselves. The Buddha shakes people awake from this delusion: the world (society)

is reproduced through repeated practices. The term *kamma* is used with reference to everyday practices and not to a hidden law of *kamma*:

Kammanà vattati loko

Kammanà vattati pajà

Kammanibandhanà sattà

Rathassāṇiva yāyato (vs.654).

Action makes the world go round

Action makes generations rotate

Beings are held together by action

Like the chariot wheel by the linchpin.

On another occasion the Buddha hammered home the centrality and the all-encompassing character of human practice by emphatic repetition:

Kammasakā sattā, kammadāyādā, kammaṇi, kammabandhu, kammaṇṇasaraṇā, kammam satte vibhajati yadidam hīnappaṇītatayāti (M III.203).

Beings are Action-accompanied, Action-heritaged, Action-born, Action-bonded; Action is their refuge, Action divides beings into high and low.

It is easy enough to see in this a reference to the hidden 'law of kamma', but the use of the plural, 'beings' underscores the fact that *kamma* is first and foremost the collective interrelating practices of beings sharing the same species potential. The social division of labour and the stratification of people into 'high' and 'low' is therefore neither a divine design nor a manifestation of the intrinsic nature of beings. There is no mechanical cyclicality which holds human destiny in its grip. Human beings reproduce relationships (social structures and institutions) by repeating social practices under specific conditions. Social practices alone continue to produce and reproduce people as masculine/feminine, priest, monk, aristocrat, peasant, landless labourer, trader, professional soldier, etc. It is not the rituals of the priests or the action of a heavenly or earthly cosmocrat (Brahma or a Wheel-Turning Monarch), but the everyday practices of ordinary men and women who produce (birth) and reproduce (rebirth) social order. Masters and slaves, priests and devotees, kings and subjects are not separate individuals. Their identities are mutually conditioned-conditioning relationships, and they reproduce each other by their respective practices. Not by birth or divine blessing is one a king and not by birth or a divine curse is one a slave. Human perfection or human degeneration is

ultimately a human responsibility. The key to the Buddha's revolutionary ethical practice is his penetrating insight into the 'nature' of 'things':

*yathabhutam kammam - paticcasamuppadadasa kammavipakako-
vida*

Thus-become action - conditionally co-arisen, results of action.

Ideologists had blinded the people by presenting their oppressive conditions as the product of cosmic or metacosmic necessity, whereas, the Buddha pointed out that these were humanly produced conditions, and as such the miserable 'heritage of action' can be changed by changing the conditions which engendered it. Every human is a wheel-turner. His/her actions can produce either a world of woe or a world of happiness. The Buddha unfolds the vision of a new possibility:

Sharing, kind words and benevolence,
And treating all alike as each deserves
These bonds of sympathy, are in the world,
Just as the linch pin of a moving chariot (GS II.36).

All the skills the Buddha mentions in this verse are social skills. This is not a vision seen from the narrow perspective of the separate ego and its preoccupation with personal reward and punishment. The Buddha is speaking of the historical possibility of living in peace and harmony in a reconciled world. To do this, humans have to reverse the motions of the Wheel of Samsara by turning the Wheel of *Dhamma* together.

Kamma - Constructing-Constructed

The Buddha insisted (passim) that he was a *kammavadin*, a *kiriya-vadin*, a *viriyavadin* - a teacher of action, a teacher of effective action and teacher of energetic action. We could, following Nanajivako Thera, understand *kamma* in early Buddhist usage as,

a designation for the whole range of problems concerning the organic connectedness of vital processes whose ripening results in creative activity (1990: 122).

Kamma is creative vital process or *saṅkhāra*. The word *saṅkhāra* is derived from *sam-s*, plus the root */kr*. Its indeclinable participle *samskritya* corresponds to the Pali *sankhata*. *Sam -s- kr* has the meaning of 'to put together, forming well, join

together, compose;' thus *samskāra* refers to 'putting together, forming well, making perfect, accomplishment, embellishment.' *Kāra* is derived from the same root as the word *kamma* and signifies "to do, make, perform, accomplish, cause, effect, prepare, undertake" (SED 301). The root /*kr* has the same connotation as the Latin 'create.' *Kata* (past participle) is 'what has been done;' 'accomplished' (SED 1120-1121). *Saṅkhāra*, as the Buddha uses the term, is the co-ordination of synergies in practical activity. Even thinking alone, for the Buddha, is *kamma* - practical action. Physiological, verbal and mental activities are 'constructions' - *kāyasāṅkhārā*, *manōsaṅkhārā*, *vacīsaṅkhārā*. The Buddha classifies, not speech, but discursive thought (*vicāra*) and logical reasoning (*vitakka*) as verbal activity. This is because even before one speaks or even if one thinks in solitude, one thinks and reasons with the help of words. Therefore thought has a social quality because as the Buddha pointed out, language is a social convention.

Sankhata, the past participle of *saṅkhārā* refers to the product; what has been 'co-done' - as in the Latin 'con-creatum,' in other words what has been 'constructed' by practical sensuous action. The senses actively construct the forms seen, heard, smelt, tasted and cognised. Therefore, what humans perceive and conceptualize are not the simple imprints of nature. What we call 'nature' is a human construct - a human *lōka* - world. Humans are also capable of exteriorizing their ideas through speech and actions. Rice growing in a paddy field is qualitatively different to its kind growing in the wild. The former is a cultural product and expresses a changed relationship between human beings and nature and between themselves. Humans however do not create out of nothing. They combine their capacities and the resources available to them in their environment to produce effects that fulfil their needs. In the allegorical tale *Mahasudassana Sutta* (DB II.152-162), the Buddha describes not only 'natural' phenomena like elephants and horses, but also artefacts like cities, royal treasures, palaces and carriages as *sankhata*s. The most elementary forms of language, the simple tools of labour, imaginative and symbolic representations of the world of gods and humans, texts sacred and profane, works of art, irrigation works, temples and palaces, are *sankhata*s or crystallisations of the forces of nature and human labour - *kamma*. Human ingenuity harnesses inner and external resources and rearticulates them in a creatively new fashion.

Categories like *kamma*, *saṅkhārā-sankhata* understood within the underlying principle of *paticca samuppada* are indispensable for formulating a revolutionary theory about the specific character and potential of human action in the world.

Heritage of Action

In a verse quoted above, the Buddha spoke of 'the heritage of action,' 'origin in

action' and of humans 'bound together' through action. Often, in English language commentaries, the Pali word *kamma* is retained while explaining re-birth. Pali verses quoted and explained in the vernacular gives expositions of *kamma* an esoteric character. *Kamma* and heritage of *kamma* are always understood and explained as the *kamma* (sic) or the *karmic* heritage of separate individuals carried through from birth to birth. But if *kamma* is understood as the generic capacity of human beings, the formulation 'heritage of action' takes on a profound significance. 'Heritage of action' underscores the fact that humans are not born into a social vacuum. They inherit a world, that is to say physical and social *conditions* bought into being, by the generations that preceded them. They themselves will leave behind what they inherited either unchanged or significantly changed for the next generation. Humans can change conditions produced by others. This is not an abstruse theory. The world around us gives overwhelming proof of its practical truth. This is the breakthrough insight of *paticca samuppada*. Human beings have historically and practically 'gone forth' (*pabbajjā*) from limiting conditions, cultural as well as environmental, in which they have found themselves. Instead of being totally determined by pre-given conditions, they have reshaped these conditions through innovative action. Right Understanding is the precondition for Right Action. Humans unlike animals have a species capacity to correctly understand and create new life-conditions by 'putting together, to form, to make' (in thought, imagination and exteriorized works) so that the world in which they live is their own 'accomplishment' or their *sam s kritya*. Interestingly, the Sinhala word for culture is *sanskruithiya*. The term *saṅkhārā-saṅkhata* must therefore be understood not just as mental formations but also as cultural practices and cultural products. Culture understood here not in the elitist sense of the 'fine' arts or as 'high' culture, but in the fundamental sense of everything human beings produce in and through nature. The peasant is as much a cultural being as the poet and the artist. In fact the accomplishments of the latter are very much dependent on the farmer's agri-'culture.' *Saṅkhārā-saṅkhata* cuts through the conventional and taken for granted division between 'nature' and 'culture;' between 'human nature' and 'external nature;' between 'nature' and 'super-nature'. The Buddha disclosed these as 'constructions'- *saṅkhārās*. One cannot speak of a 'natural law' or 'The Law of Kamma' as if they exist independent of the people who perceive recurring patterns of relationship between events (not things). Humans have conceived 'nature' in a variety of ways according to the level of their mastery of external forces, as gods, as exteriorisations of a divine mind, as a rational logos, or as the workings of objective scientific laws. In each case, an imaginative construct of the mind is projected on to nature or supernature. The naturalization or supernaturalisation of culture has been an ideological strategy of dominant groups to reproduce their privileges from generation to generation, as if these were as recursive as the cycles of nature. This naturalization of culture (naturalistic sociology), Zygmunt Baumann points out, denies the possibility of social change in the historical order:

[It] is fed by the predicative experience of the life-process as essentially unfree, and of freedom as a fear-generating state and it aptly supplies apposite cognitive and emotional outlets to both intuitions... It assists the individual in his spontaneous efforts of disposing of the excessive, and therefore anxiety-riddled freedom of choice, by either positing this freedom as illusion or, advising him that such freedom is supported by reason which has been delimited and defined before hand by society, whose power of judgement he cannot challenge (cited in Giddens 1979: 196).

The Buddha understood the momentous responsibility humans carry for the world and for themselves, because of the effects of their actions which are independent of their subjective intentions. They can overcome themselves or live like herd animals mutely reproducing the world as they find it, or degenerate into a condition lower than that of beasts by turning against their own kind. Samsaric repetition is not a mechanical law of nature. It is human beings who birth and rebirth the world (society) by their repeated practices. They leave behind the heritage of their actions - benign or baneful - to the generations that follow them. Human beings are not the pure products of conditions; neither are they sovereign agents who are totally independent of conditions. The Buddha taught that conditions are not results of chance, the fates or the creation of gods. Human conditions have conditionally co-arisen - thus become through the action of other beings. The processes that produce suffering in the world can be reversed. What has been constructed can be unconstructed, if through proper investigation, one tracks down the conditions which engender them. This is the basis of the Buddha's optimism. To understand *kamma* as collective action and potential is to understand the importance of collective action for freedom.

Kamma as Liberative Praxis

The mutually conditioning *saṅkhārā-sankhata* - constructing-constructed foregrounds the dual character of human agency, and has anticipated by centuries Marx' concept of Praxis as defined in his Theses on Fierbach: humans are neither passive objects of circumstances nor are they wholly free subjects of circumstances. They find themselves in conditions made by other human beings and therefore they can change them through right understanding of the conditions which give rise to them. The interaction of human beings with 'nature' has historically been not mere contemplation, but active appropriation and transformation. This is not just a philosophical notion. It was everywhere evident in the Age of the Buddha.

Intrepid pioneers had transformed the rainforests of the Majjhimadesa by collective action (Chapter 2). The transition to agriculture and sedentarism led to

the development of advanced technologies like metallurgy and irrigation agriculture so that the land yielded two or three crops a year. Surplus production created *conditions* for the development of a host of ancillary technologies that enhanced and diversified the productive capacity of human beings. The mighty elephant and the wild buffalo had been tamed to serve human ends. The region produced fine textiles which had become famous throughout the then civilised world. The tragic irony of human history is that so-called material progress has not been accompanied by a corresponding development of human moral sensibilities. This, as we saw in Chapter 3, was everywhere manifest in the society of the Buddha's Day. Greed and violence were the ruling values of the time. Humans had mastered the powerful forces of external nature, but had become the slaves of craving for ever more - *tanha daso*. However, in the very capacity to develop techniques for regulating the forces of nature towards envisaged ends, the Buddha discovered the key to resolve the problem of suffering. He developed a 'technology' (theory and practice) for human beings to understand themselves, overcome their passions and channel their energies to realise wholesome ends. The false dichotomy between 'value-free' technology and moral values was abolished.

The human situation is a hundred thousand times worse today than it was in the Buddha's Day. Unimaginable luxuries for the few and unrelenting misery for the many have become a monstrous global phenomenon, leading even to the degradation of the living environment of the entire planet. The fundamental challenge of the Buddha's noble ethical practice is more urgent today than when it was first proclaimed. Harnessing of nuclear energy, space travel, mass instant communication and all the marvellous masteries of science mean little if the same ingenuity cannot be deployed to lift the burden of suffering from the shoulders of millions who belong to the same species and inhabit the same planet.

A world in which two-thirds of its people starve while the rest wallow in luxury and go on wanting more, must be lacking an elementary degree of global compassion and justice. Things will not change unless humans discover their humanity and apply the creative potential of their species-being to the sphere of morality, learn to overcome themselves and become compassionate to others. The perennial relevance of the Buddha's teaching on *kamma* will be evident if we apply his insight into the human potential for good, and apply contemporary technological capacities to solve the moral problem of globalised suffering today,

Canal diggers divert the waters
Smiths hammer shafts into shape
Carpenters fashion the wood
The wise control themselves (Dhp 145).

CHAPTER 12

THE SOCIOGENESIS OF IDENTITY CONSCIOUSNESS

The principle focus in all the various schools of Buddhism is on the birth of individual consciousness. The personality traits of an individual, his/her gender and social position, it is taught, have been determined by an individual's *karma* in a previous birth. In other words, the life conditions into which an infant is born and his/her psychological dispositions are believed to have been predetermined by the Law of Karma. This explanation of the birth of individual consciousness begs questioning on several issues. First, if the identity consciousness of an individual has been carried over from a previous birth and one is supposed to have undergone myriads of births in the past, including in bodies of animals, what was the original identity consciousness? How did that arise? In the absence of a verifiable explanation must one trace the origins of consciousness to a transcendental source? Secondly, the theory makes the identities of individuals in their current existence quite relative. Yet why do individuals cling tenaciously to their identities in the present life - their personal and collective gender, religious, ethnic and class identities etc and are ready to kill or die for it?

As we saw in the previous Chapter, Maha Kaccana Thera provided an empirically verifiable explanation of the genesis of current consciousness. He also unravelled the role that language plays in the formation of consciousness. It is through language that the consciousness of a child is assimilated into the culture into which it is born and its personal identity moulded. It forgets that 'identities' which establish difference between the self and the other are, to use the Buddha's words, "verbal designation". The most powerful and pervasive of these designations is the concept and word "I".

The label "I" superimposed on a complex contingent process, serves as a convenient fiction of thought or a short hand device, and is in fact one of the shortest words in many a language. But paradoxically enough it is the outcome of *papanca* (conceptual proliferation) (Nanananda 1971: 11).

Because of the assumption of permanence inherent in the word 'I', the Buddha referred to himself in the third person as *Tathagatha* - 'Thus-going'. The Buddha rejected the notion of the separate individual and theories based on it - *puggalavada*. However, liberation in Buddhism has become liberation of individuals from samsaric existence. All theistic religions too focus on the individual and the private salvation of souls. The human and social sciences are also based on a 'methodological

individualism', as the point of departure for investigation and discourse (See Introductory Chapter). After examining the spuriousness of this unquestioned assumption, this Chapter looks at key Suttas of the Buddha which provide a *sociogenetic* rather than psychogenetic explanation of human consciousness.

The Spurious *Homo Clausus*

Norbert Elias has traced the so-called *Process of Civilisation* in Europe on the basis of an empirical-historical study (1982). He shows that what is called European civilisation was not the evolution of a unique European essence or 'spirit.' It was the outcome of gradual and determinate historical changes in social structures which were accompanied by changes in the personality or affects structures of individuals. In other words, he argues that social structures and personality structures are not separate things but mutually conditioning factors.

Elias points out that the notion of the separate individual hermetically sealed by its skin from the outside world is an ideological construct which has no relationship to existing men and women of flesh and blood. He questions the validity of the entrenched view that the individual as Ego is a self-subsisting monad and that society is a system outside individual members of a society. Elias calls the unquestioned assumption of the separate individual who enters and leaves the world, in religion, philosophy and the social sciences, the *Homo Clausus* premise: "The conception of the individual as *homo clausus*, a little world in himself who ultimately exists quite independently of the great world outside, determines the image of man in general. Every other human being is likewise seen as a *homo clausus*... But what is the nature of the invisible wall that separates the individual self from the outside world? Is the body the vessel which holds the true self locked within? Is the skin the frontier between the "inside" and the "outside"? What in man is the capsule and what the encapsulated?" (1982: 249)

This question of the "inside" and "outside" intrigued the first Buddhists as well. This is how Nandaka Thera (M III. 146), unravelled the puzzle of "inside" and "outside" to a group of *bhikkhunis*. The 'wall of separation' is a sensory illusion", consolidated by craving at the theoretical level. "The flesh within" explains the Thera, "is another expression for the six internal senses; just as the skin is an expression for the six external senses". A person is not a heap of disconnected organs inside the skin. Nandaka Thera does not say 'the five physical senses and the mind.' If he did, the external and internal would be two different 'things'. Nandak Thera speaks of the six internal senses as "the *flesh within*"! The impression of *internal* and *external* arises because external stimuli impact the surface of the skin giving rise to a sense of 'the outside' and of 'self' and 'not self' - "*phassa paccaya vedana* - conditioned by touch there is feeling." As Bhikkhu Nananda pointed out (Chapter 10):

The latent illusion of the ego awakens at the moment of *vedanā* - feeling, and thereafter the vicious duality is maintained until it is fully crystallized and justified at the conceptual level (Nanananda 1986: 11).

This is how the ego conceives the notion of the body and other individuals ('society') etc., as external realities. This *puthujjana* illusion is reinforced by scholarly theories. What is divided into two separate 'things': the individual and society, have to be understood as mutually conditioning interweaving flows of conduct.

Changes of personality structures and social structures are mutually conditioning factors. The focus on individual intentions, as in most Buddhist manuals, may be useful to allocate moral responsibility. But it is wholly inadequate to understand long term social changes. The total outcome of human actions are not what was intended by separate individuals. To understand social processes one needs a general theory about the nature of human agency as such. Elias notes that in the 'process of civilisation' with changes in social structures, the social moulding of individuals changed and with it the "affect structures" of individuals. In other words, people's self consciousness and personality structures change as society changes. This phenomenon was observed by the Buddha. In the *Aggañña Sutta* the Buddha pointed out, as we shall see, that as society changed, the affects and moral sentiments of people also changed.

Most expositions of *nāma/rūpa* are abstract and provide *psychogenetic* explanations of the birth of individual consciousness. Explanations of personal distress and immoral tendencies are confined to abstract analyses of the internal psychic processes of individuals. What is necessary in order to understand real as opposed to abstract individuals, is to work out a *sociogenetic explanation* of human identities and consciousness. The Buddha provides such an explanation in the *Aggañña Sutta*.

The Buddha's genealogical explanation in this discourse may seem naive and fanciful to contemporary individuals who study it as a *text*. But one must bear in mind that this was a public oral exposition given to the popular masses of his day. Though conveyed in poetic and popular language it is a narrative that stands the test of contemporary social sciences. The stages of social development traced in broad outline by the Buddha have been corroborated by field studies of contemporary anthropologists. The *Aggañña Sutta* is the application of the principle of Conditioned Co-arising to socio-historical explanation.

***Aggañña Sutta*: A Discourse on Historical Origins**

The 'beginning' in the *Aggañña Sutta* does not refer to an absolute beginning - *ex nihilo* - 'out of thing.' The Buddha is not tracing a cosmogyny. Using the poetic

language of myth, the Buddha speaks of the development and decline of *lokās*. In the Buddha's usage the term *lokā* does not mean 'world' in an ontological sense but to the 'world' as a human construction of reality. In other words he is not speaking of a 'cosmos' existing independent of human perceptions and conceptions (See *Rohitha Sutta* (S II.3.6). The Buddha begins his narrative with the words: "When this world - *loka* - began to devolve." The 'beginning' is the initial stage and point of departure to explain the evolution of the society of his period. The Brahmins were propagating the view that this 'world' had been created and hierarchically fixed by the god Brahma. If it could be shown that social and personality structures were not the same at all times in the past, if things have come to be as they are through human practice - *yathābhūtam kammam* - people could change themselves and their life-conditions. The realisation that history is a process of continuous change, can help awaken people from the slumber of apathy to the awareness that what human beings make, can be unmade by humans. This is the importance of historical explanations. Events do not occur accidentally or appear out of nothing. History is a story that people themselves write.

The Context of the Agganna Sutta

The interlocutors of the Buddha here, as in the *Vasettha Sutta*, are the same two brahmin youths, Vasettha and Bharadvaja who after receiving instruction from the Buddha had become his disciples. They had become, they told the Buddha, the object of vilification by their former colleagues:

You have renounced the best rank, gone over to that low class, to shaven, mean *samanas*, to the vulgar, dark fellows, to those born of Brahma's foot. Whereas, we are, a clean *vanna*, the genuine sons of Brahma, born of his breast (*oraso jāto*), born of his mouth (*mukhato jāto*), created by Brahma and the heirs of Brahma (vs.3).

Instead of engaging in a theoretical debate about divine creations, the Buddha's response was a direct rebuttal of brahminic claims. The brahmins had developed a peculiar amnesia, he told his listeners, about their true origins. In a radical reversal of values, the Buddha in a single masterly stroke demolished patriarchal myths about almighty divine fathers begetting word-sons out of their mouths:

Surely, these brahmins cannot have forgotten their true origin, when they say this? Because can we see brahmin women, wives of brahmins, menstruate, are fertile, become pregnant, give birth and suckle their babies. And yet it is these very womb-born - *yoni jāto*- brahmins who say that brahmins are genuine sons of Brahma, born from his mouth; his offspring, his creation and his heirs!

There is not even the slightest suggestion by the Buddha that menstruation, pregnancy, birth and nourishment from the bodies of women are unclean. These are mentioned in a matter of fact way. By radically overturning the concept of a transcendental patrix and by reminding his listeners of the matrix of life, the equality of all humans on a biological and maternal premise is established. All human beings share a common birth process, irrespective of whether a mother is of a particular ethnicity, high caste or low, rich or poor, a princess or a peasant. The mundane birth process, like death, radically egalises. This 'democratising' fact is based on physio-logics! It is ideology, not biology, that divides members of the same species into high and low, ritually clean and unclean, making one birth essentially different to another. How then can one explain the development of social differences and hierarchy among members of the same society? From the poetic beginning, the Buddha moves to verifiable events.

An Initial Undifferentiated Stage (vs. 10 -11)

The Buddha begins with the initial undifferentiated stage of the primitive human group. At that period "there was no male and female, beings were reckoned just as beings." He uses the plural, beings - *sattā*. Human origins are not traced back to a solitary individual - a male roaming in the wilderness. In the beginning there was the human group. Paleontology and anthropology confirm this. The further we go back in time, we see humans living in small cooperative groups; females and males; young and old. Unlike scholars who study the text today, the Buddha's listeners would have immediately understood this as classless hunter-gatherer tribes still inhabited the *mahavana* - great forests - surrounding cleared and settled areas.

A Long Period of Food-Gathering (vs. 11-15)

Initially, the human group stood naked before nature, without even the crudest of tools. Human beings had only their bare hands and their sense faculties to interact with and appropriate the resources of their environment. "Then those beings began to feed on the savoury earth and breaking off lumps with their hands, tasted the delicious earth" (vs.12). This poetic description is historically accurate. To this day forest-dwelling food gatherers dig up their food from the earth: roots, tubers, mushrooms, fruit, berries, etc. The Buddha mentions a progressive discovery of nourishing vegetation, edible creepers, herbs and plants. He does not refer to any type of social differentiation or stratification during this long period of food gathering. Conceits had arisen because groups who fed better were comlier than others and considered themselves more favoured than those who had less access to food. But no mention is made of social conflicts, private ownership and hoarding of resources. People foraged in the same area for long periods and food sources

became depleted (Law of Diminishing Returns). They then moved elsewhere. This foraging from place to place lasted for a long period until rice was discovered on open plains.

***The Transition to a Settled Way of Life* (vs. 16)**

Then after the creepers disappeared, rice appeared in the open fields.

An axial point in cultural development is reached with the discovery and cultivation of rice. People began to *produce* their means of subsistence. With food production people no longer needed to forage around. Permanent settlement in one area became possible.

***The Sexualisation of the Human Form* (vs. 16)**

Permanent settlement, an stable food production, became the genetic stage of further developments. It also began to have an impact on the perceptions and affects of people. The whole social mould, the code of conduct, began to change and with it also the whole pattern, the whole structure, by which the drives of individuals are triggered and steered:

And then those beings feasting on this rice in the clearings, feeding on it, nourished by it, so continued for a long while. And in measure as they, thus feeding, went on existing, so did the bodies of those beings become even more solid, and the difference in their appearance more pronounced. *Itthiyā ca itthi-lingam patur ahosi; purisasa purisa-lingam* - On women *female marks (linga)* appeared; on men, *male marks (linga)*. Then women became excessively preoccupied with men and the men with women. Owing to this excessive preoccupation with each other, passion was aroused and their bodies burned with lust. They in consequence gave themselves up to their lusts. And in as much as those beings at that time incurred blame for immorality, they set to work to make households for themselves - *agārāni upakkāṃisu kātum* - to cover up just that immorality (emphases mine).¹

In the earliest period, beings were reckoned as beings and there was no male and female. But here too, in the prelude to signalling a historic transition, the Buddha begins with "beings" - *satta*. He then dramatically shifts terminology to note that

¹ Engels in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* discusses the transition from group to pairing-marriage. For an updated critical discussion of this transition, see Eleanor Burke Leacock's Introduction to the 1972 edition.

in the female, feminine 'marks' - *itthi-lingam* appeared, and that in the male, masculine 'marks' - *purisa-lingam* appeared. Production of the means of subsistence and improved nourishment saw enhanced the physical appearance and features of the people. Along with it the way men and women saw each other changed. It led to arousal of sexual lust. The yearning for mutual carnal pleasure led to the practice of men and women pairing off and setting up of separate households for exclusive enjoyment of each other. The passage suggests that setting of private households was initially motivated by this. The reason the Buddha gives for a shift in moral sentiment is expressed in remarkable terms. He attributes the change in perception to the appearance of female and male 'marks' - *linga* - on the human form. How is one to understand this? Maurice Walshe (1987) bases his translation and interpretation of this verse on scholastic commentaries. Deviating from the PTS translation of *linga*, according to its literal meaning, as 'marks', Walshe following scholastic exegesis interprets it as 'sex-organs'. His footnotes intended to clarify what the Buddha may have meant by the appearance of marks are quotations from scholastic speculations: in their original state human beings were "sexless like the gods" (n. 827); before adopting sexual practices "people led celibate lives"(n.849) and people were "spontaneously born" (n. 835) by a-sexual-reproduction, one must presume. Walshe quotes scholastic conjecture, that "beings were previously sexless". Having translated 'marks' as 'sex-organs' following scholastic fantasy he notes that female sex-organs appeared on "those who were women in a previous life"!(n. 834). This begs the question as to how they were recognised as women in previous birth-dispensations if 'they' did not have 'female' marks on their bodies. Walshe does not tell us whether male marks appeared on beings who had previously been men. Commentarial interpretation may not convey what the Buddha meant when he spoke of the appearance of 'marks.'

Fantasies about an original a-sexual reproduction of humans cannot be reconciled with the Buddha's repeated reminder of the actual necessary conditions for childbirth. In fact, he begins this discourse by reminding the Brahmins of their real birth process. The Buddha knew this from personal experience. He himself was married, had intercourse with his wife and had a son. So he did not have to speculate on how children come into the world, unlike latter day monks who may have been recruited when they were little boys. Scholar monks seem to have imagined that humans in their pristine state did not, like themselves, have sexual intercourse - that they lived in an angelic state untroubled by sexual stirrings. Understandably, sexual indulgence must have been regarded as a 'fall' from celibacy; which is of course true - for the ascetic. In the *Agganna Sutta* itself, the Buddha speaks of the monogamous family and of separate household as a *historical development*. They were instituted *after* food production began (vs 17). Celibate institutions need the institution of marriage for supply of new recruits. It is understandable if some monastics may have speculated about the possibility of sexless reproduction. To suggest that there was once an idyllic period of sexless reproduction is to mythicize

the entire *Agganna Sutta* which is a credible historical explanation of the origins of the family, private property and the state.

Is there a way of understanding "the appearance of marks" that stays close to the Buddha's principle of *paticcasamuppada*? Let us first call to mind the systematic investigation of the human form in the *Vasettha Sutta* presented in the previous chapter. This was also a discourse given to Vasettha and Bharadvaja. The Buddha could hardly have given two contradictory instructions to the same two youths. In the *Vasettha Sutta*, he stated unambiguously, "[Among humans] there are no species-constituting marks as among other species. Looked at individually this does not apply to the human body; differences among human beings are designations of speech" or cultural conventions (vs. 610-611). The Buddha did not single out the sexual organs and say they were 'marks', of a negative development as subsequent commentaries suggest. What could he have meant when he says in the *Agganna*, *Itthiyā ca itthi-lingam patur ahosi, purisasa purisa-lingam* - on women female 'marks' appeared, and on men, male 'marks' (vs. 16)?

The central problematic in the *Vasettha* and *Agganna* was about the validity of the Brahmin claim that humans are divided into separate kinds by their birth or biology. The Brahmins held that women were by nature inferior to men and that they are ritually impure. Demolishing this view, the Buddha explicitly stated in the *Vasettha Sutta* that not even in the genitals or in the breasts are there 'marks' - *linga* - to indicate significant differences among humans. In the *Agganna*, he says male and female 'marks' appeared in men and women at a determinate stage in social development. Now, the *Vasettha* and *Agganna Suttas* were given to the same two Brahmin youths at a period long after the appearance of distinct male and female marks as spoken of in the *Agganna*. Initially, the Buddha says, "There was neither male nor female; beings were reckoned as beings only." He continues to refer to "beings" during the long period of food gathering. The 'marks' appeared only after agricultural production began and people settled down in cleared areas. But in the forests abutting villages and towns there were many tribes still at the stage of hunting and food gathering. If in the earlier, pre-agricultural period, people did not have sex-organs people would have known this from their encounters with hunter-gatherer tribes. The Buddha would hardly have made an extraordinary claim that could have been empirically falsified. Hunter-gatherers living in forests; men and women, boys and girls, to this day, go about either nude or semi-nude. Women like men are generally bare-breasted. There is no indication that men and women in these societies are sexually inflamed by the mere sight of each other. This has been true until recently in traditional societies, in Sri Lanka, for example. (See illustration, page 226). One important conclusion could be drawn from this: the perception of the female and male body as sexually arousing is not due to the nature of the bodies as such. The perception of the female form as a lust-object is a malady of 'civilised' societies.

The seeming contradiction between the *Vasettha* and *Aggañña Suttas* can be resolved, if we stick to the literal meaning of *linga* as 'mark.' In the *Vasettha Sutta*, the Buddha stated that there are no 'marks' - *linga*, even in the genitals and the breasts that could be selected out as 'signs' of separate natures. However, in the *Aggañña* he says that at a particular stage in social evolution, human perception changed, when certain physical features appeared to be 'marks' of sexual incitement. It is interesting that the Buddha mentions the appearance of 'marks' in women first. Perception of these 'marks' went further than simple recognition of gender difference. Gender features became a source of sexual arousal. The focus of the male gaze on the distinct features of the female form as lust objects has become normal in 'civilised' societies. In most Western cultures people speak of "having sex." The genito-urinary organs are called 'sexual organs'.

A Contemporary Reading of vs.16

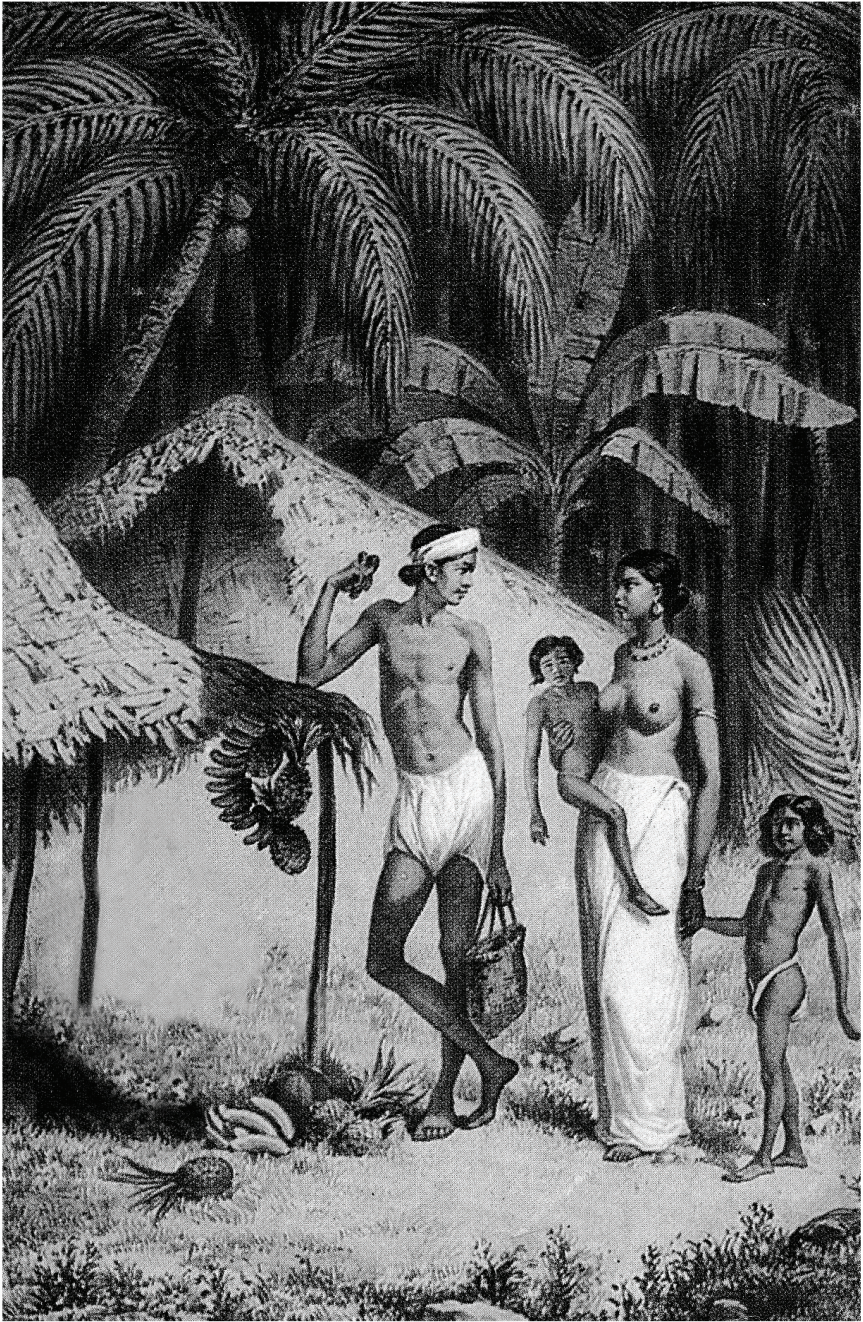
When the Buddha observes that at a certain stage of human development the female and male marks came to be associated with sexual arousal, he seems to be 'marking' the threshold of a shift from one epistheme to another - the beginnings of what could be called the *sexualisation of the human form*. In his investigation into *The History of Sexuality* (1986), Michel Foucault argues that

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power (1986: 105-6).

For Foucault, 'sex' must be understood as a way of talking about and of deploying a very specific type of pleasure. Sex has become a thing-in-itself. It has less to do with enjoyment and more to do with pleasure and power. By fighting against sex the ascetic seeks to overcome the power of sex. By unbridled sexual indulgence the libertine defies the powerful prohibitions surrounding sex.

By creating the imaginary element 'sex', the deployment of sexu

Before Sexualisation



Wayside Scene: Colombo - Kandy Road by Prince Soltykoff, 1841

ality established one of the most essential internal principles: the desire for sex - the desire to have it, to have access to it, to discover, to liberate it to articulate it in discourse, to formulate it in truth. It constituted itself as something desirable. And it is this desirability of sex that attaches each one of us to the injunction to know it, to reveal its law and power; it is this desireability that makes us think we are affirming the rights of our sex against all power, when in fact we are fastened to the deployment of sexuality that has lifted up from deep within us a sort of mirage in which we think we see ourselves reflected - the dark shimmer of sex... sexuality is a very real historical formation (ibid. 157).

Foucault discusses the history of sexuality in the West. In the *Aggañña Sutta* the Buddha seems to be tracing the beginnings of the sexualisation of bodies in his own culture. The *Vinaya Pitaka* - Book of Discipline - has numerous examples of the sexual obsessions and delicts of *bhikkhus*. The Therigatha - Songs of the Sisters - contains stories of *bhikkhunis* who were professional women of pleasure. They recall how men lusted after their bodies. The Therigatha also mention the sexual harassments to which *bhikkhunis* were subjected. With the sexualisation of the female body, all its features could be mapped out and registered as 'marks' of sex. 'Woman' began to exist for not in her own right, but as metonym, as symbolic representations of sexuality. In the masculine gaze, the female body becomes the object of a dual deployment - of sensualist lust or ascetic revulsion. Women discovered they can use the alluring power of their beauty and sensuality to overwhelm men. Men began to use their physical power to dominate and possess women. The natural and social relationship between men and women which can be mutually enjoyable became fraught with power differentials and struggles.

In the *Aggañña Sutta* the Buddha seems to suggest that sexual obsession began with the singling out of certain features of the bodies of men and women and marking them as signs of lust. The illustration on the previous page shows that in Sri Lanka, until recent times, a bare breasted woman could appear in public without being accused of 'provocative' behaviour. The breasts were not regarded as sexual. Today even the covered breasts of women are ogled by the generality of men as lustful - *lingika* - objects. *Linga*: which has the general meaning of 'characteristic', 'sign', 'attribute', 'mark', 'feature' came to be specifically used for: 'mark of sex', 'sexual characteristic' (PED). Jacques Derrida discusses the possibility of transcending this sexual marking of the human form:

At the origin, on this side of and therefore beyond any sexual mark, there was humanity in general, and that is what is important. The possibility of ethics could be saved, if one takes ethics to mean that relationship to the other as other, which accounts for no other determination or sexual characteristic in particular.... This raises the following question: what if

we were to reach, what if we were to approach here the area of a relationship to the other, where the code of sexual marks would no longer be discriminating? The relationship would not be a-sexual, far from it, but would be sexual-otherwise: beyond the binary difference that governs the decorum of all codes, beyond the opposition feminine-masculine... (1991: 450-451, 455).

These Foucauldian and Derridian insights show that sexualisation of the human form is a determinate historical formation. This provides a refreshing perspective for understanding the Buddha's observation as follows, at a determinate stage in historical development: "on the woman, marks of femininity appeared, and on the man, marks of masculinity appeared and burning entered their bodies". The Buddha developed a method for realising in practice what Derrida understood in theory. That is to say a way of achieving "bare perception" and realising "signless freedom of the mind" (See 'Seeing through the Semiotics of Desire', Chapter 14).

This reading of the *Agganna* passage, I suggest, is a more meaningful way of understanding the Buddha's observation on the change in the way men and women perceived each other. He is marking the threshold of a new moral discourse. Men and women, the Buddha says, paired off to indulge in exclusive sex. The people who saw this new practice, condemned it as *asuci* - unclean - and asked: *Katham hi nāmā satto sattassa evarūpam karissati?* - Why do beings do such a thing to one another? (vs. 17). People standing at the threshold of a new epoch regarded this new practice, setting up separate households to indulge in sex, as deplorable.

The pairing off and departure from the community for exclusive sexual activity, the Buddha points out, was exceptional and at first only for brief periods. Gradually the period was prolonged became longer and the custom of the practice of pairing-couples setting up separate households became the normal. A relic of the earlier social disapproval has survived, in the custom of people playfully buffeting a newly wedded couple with sand, ashes or cow dung when they depart to set up a separate household. The Buddha concludes his trace of the origins of the family and of separate households with the observation:

That which was reckoned to be immoral - *adhamma* - at the time, is now reckoned to be moral - *dhamma* (vs 16-17).

The perception of what is considered 'normal' and 'abnormal' practice had shifted and with it the affects and the moral sentiments of people. The Buddha's archaeology of sexuality discloses that sex consciousness and sexual politics are not part of our inherent natures. They are socio-historical constructs and, as such, we can liberate ourselves from 'the regime of sex;' go beyond it, that is to say, transcend it in practice. What is needed in the first place is the demolition of the masculine/

feminine discourse. The first Buddhist *arahats* actually lived it out. They no longer perceived either the male or the female form as bearers of sexuality. Liberated women, in particular, challenged the sexist view that their bodies are either pools of perdition or gardens of delights for men (This is discussed in *A Space Beyond Gender*, Chapter 16).

The 'immorality' deplored by the people according to the Buddha was the new practice of men and women setting off to begin separate households - *agara*. This may be an allusion to the transition from group-marriage to pairing-marriage, which anthropologists suggest occurred with the transition from horticulture to plough agriculture. Group-marriage should not be confused with sexual promiscuity. It is bound by strong social sanctions and is linked to the communal ownership of property in clan societies. Group-marriage was considered 'normal' morality in horticultural and early agricultural societies, which were generally matrifocal. Patriarchal contempt for this type of family is reflected, as Kosambi pointed out, in the two words that came to be used for 'courtesan' and 'prostitute' - *ganika* and *vesi*. Used previously as honorifics, the terms meant 'woman of the tribe' and 'clan-wife' respectively. "In most developed societies whose primitive stages can still be traced, it is generally seen that prostitution arises as a consequence of the abolition of group marriage" (Kosambi 1992: 67). The terms *ganikā* and *vesi* came to mean 'common women' who serviced the sexual pleasure of men for a fee.

Social conflicts and violence began, according to the Buddha, after the setting up of separate households. The group egoism of the family, the new "corner stone of society", eroded the kinship bonds of the clan.

Hoarding: A New Immorality

The establishment of separate households made privacy and secrecy possible. In the hunter-gathering and nomadic pastoral period, the accumulation of goods is limited to the carrying capacity of the entire group. In early *Rig Vedic* society, as we saw in Chapter 4, the entire clan was engaged in co-operative labour and brought their common produce to a communal pool, the *vidatha*, where wealth was redistributed - *dana*. With the establishment of separate households a new social condition arose which enabled the hoarding of goods as private stocks. This in turn brought about a qualitative change in the character and objects of desire. Goods were accumulated for private enjoyment. To free themselves from manual labour, some individuals began to hoard up enough supplies that would last for days and weeks on end. When asked by the others to join in gathering the harvest they refused, saying that they had gathered more than enough for themselves. We see here the origins of a class of people who freed themselves from labour and began to live off the surplus produced by others. Accumulated and inherited wealth became an

index of social power and prestige.

To briefly recapitulate developments up to this stage: sexualisation had led to pairing marriage and separate households; the desire to maintain the family as a distinct libidinous unit fuelled the desire to acquire and hoard wealth in separate households; despite protests against the immorality of hoarding, some individuals persisted in the practice; this led to tensions and conflicts in the community.

Institution of Private Property

To control and curb the arbitrary grabbing and hoarding of wealth, the people met and made a covenant with each other:

Come now let us divide off the rice fields and set boundaries thereto.
And so they divided off the rice fields and *set boundaries round it* (emphasis mine).

A new set of conditions brought about the breakdown of the communal ownership of land, the setting up of enclosures in what was once common land and the stabilisation of the institution of private property. The separate household substituted the clan as the property owning unit of society.

The Primal Theft: Taking What Has Not Been Given

The sanctioning of private property did not end greed. It actually inflamed the greed for having more.

Some being, of greedy disposition, while guarding his own plot, grabbed another's share belonging to others and made use of them
aññataram bhāgam adinnam ādiyitva paribhu-ji (vs 19).

Individuals added plot to plot and became large land owners. The Buddha uses a very specific, term - *adinnam ādiyitva*; the formulation is remarkable; *adinnam* - 'ungiven'; *ādiyitva* 'taking by force.' This is not theft in the ordinary sense of the term. It means *taking what belongs to another*. The second of the five disciplines *pancha sila* Buddhists pledge to practice is *adinnādāna veramani sikkha padan samadhiyami* - "I pledge not to grab or expropriate what has not been given." It is ineptly translated as "I shall not steal". It means taking what *belongs* to another. The concept of theft is based on the assumption of private property as an inherent right. This is not what the Pali term implies. The compound term *adinnādāna* is made up from '*a* - *dinna*' - not given and '*ādāna*' - taking, by force, seizure, appropriation

(PED). In a just society there is a presumption that wealth is shared. The crime is in expropriating and holding on to what was meant to be shared. Poverty is not a small quantity of goods. It is a social relationship of injustice, which arose when some began to expropriate for themselves land, the principal means of production, instead of equitably sharing it.

The original meaning of the term *dāna*, as we saw in Chapter 5, was ‘sharing’, ‘the equitable redistribution of wealth’ - not charity or almsgiving. The grabber took another person’s just share (*bhaga*). In the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta*, the Buddha stated in no uncertain terms that social degeneration began with the proliferation of poverty: "With wealth not being distributed, poverty arose. With poverty, theft and violence grew apace... ", and there followed a whole host of social evils, leading to widespread promiscuity and breakdown of family life and social life. People no longer saw each other as fellow humans, but taking sharp swords said "This is a beast. Kill!, Kill!" (DB III.66ff). The Buddha’s analysis of the cause of poverty is crystal clear. Poverty is not a naturally arisen phenomenon. It’s historical genesis is a social crime which co-arose with the expropriation of the powerless. When land-grabbers were caught they were at first censured, then beaten up, but the practice continued. There is a touch of sadness in the Buddha’s comment:

With such a beginning, Vasettha, did stealing, recriminations, lying and coming to blows become known.

Something had to be done to curb this spiral of violence and counter violence.

The Emergence of a Ruling Stratum, the Monarchy and the State

Among the early *Rig Vedic* tribes, there was a harmony of particular and general interests. Now a situation had arisen in which particular interests clashed continuously with the general interest, plunging society into violence and anarchy. The people realized that the administration of rough justice and the spontaneous eruptions of violence needed to be curbed. They met together, as they did in the tribal *sabha* in days of yore and decided to elect someone from among themselves, a certain being (*ekam sattam*) who would be wrathful when wrath is rightly called for, censure that which should rightly be censured and would banish him who deserves to be banished. And we will give him in return a share - *bhāga* - of the rice.

The Buddha does not make gender a qualification but simply states “a certain being.” The pursuit of individual interest is not attributed by the Buddha to the natural egoism of humans, but to a historically arisen new *social* conditions created by humans themselves - separate households and the institution of private property. At a given stage of social development there was a general consensus

about the necessity of a central controlling agency, which would impose restraint on individuals on behalf of the general good. The person appointed to this office was freed from productive labour. This person's function was to ensure the maintenance of proper social order. The origins of the political realm, in the strict sense, is traced to historically arisen conditions. It must again be emphasised that there is no suggestion that human beings are by nature egoistic and that a social contract was necessary to end this 'state of nature' or a natural 'war of all against all,' or as Hobbes believed, *homo lupus homini* - humans are by nature wolves to each other.

The signification of the word *bhāga* - equitable share - shifted to 'tax' and 'tribute' - the 'share' given in remuneration for political functions performed at the behest of the people, on behalf of the people. The people decided to elect someone who had charismatic qualities to win the hearts of the people and the capacity to govern effectively. They gave this person the title *Mahājana Sammata* - 'Great Consensus of the People'. By emphasising election, the Buddha traces the origins of political power to a social convention. This, the Buddha explained, is 'the first constituting element' *pathamam akkharam upanibbattam* - in the political sphere. The term *akkhara* is the same as the Sanskrit *akshara*. In Brahmin philology it refers to the stable sound elements of which words are formed. Instead of etymology, the Buddha unravels the sociogenesis of terms in use. Thus, political power was historically constituted by the will of the people. The second constituting - *akkhara* - of political power, was the designation *khattiya* - 'Lord of the Fields'. He was given overlordship over territory rather than ownership rights.

The great kings of the day claimed their right to own and rule over territory on the basis of conquest. The Buddha traces the origin of political power along another trajectory; the peoples' consensus and a social contract. Michel Foucault (1980: 53), discusses two models of political power. The first is war-subjugation. The great kings of the Buddha's Day were exponents of this model. The peoples' lot was one of submission. Oppressive rule is not abuse of power, but merely the logical effect and extension of warfare, a perpetual relationship of force within a pseudo peace. The second, is a consensus-oppression model. It is proposed by the Buddha's and is based on contractual power with oppression as its limit. When a ruler's exercise of power is oppressive, it loses legitimacy. No wonder that the Jataka stories of all ancient Indian literature record instances of popular rebellions against oppressive rule.

The 'third constituting element' - *akkhara* - of the title *raja* defines the criteria of legitimacy. The Buddha revalues the term '*raja*' which had come to mean 'resplendent power' and replaces it with 'radiating gladness.' By transferring power to a chosen leader, people expect him to promote their welfare and happiness, not oppress them.

This Buddhist account of the origin of the state was ...possibly the earliest expression of the theory of social contract (Thapar 1979: 53).

Through this stage by stage trace of the origins of the monarchy and the state, the Buddha provides an *ascending analysis of power*. Brahmanic theories of divine right mystify the source of political power. Power is portrayed as a quantum of might that descends from a Sovereign and Almighty God onto the head of a sovereign and trickles down to the sub-ordinated ranks of society. Buddha exposes this mystification. Power was historically appropriated by violence and had ascended, beginning with patriarchal control of property, wife, children and domestic slaves to the pinnacle of a social pyramid. The Buddha dispelled the mystification of aristocrats and kings as biologically superior beings, with a natural birth-right to rule. He Buddha, emphasized:

Their origin was from among those very beings, and no others; like unto themselves, not unlike themselves.

The First Renouncers

With the proliferation of unwholesome conduct, stealing, lying and killing, some individuals became disenchanted with life in society and decided to renounce the household life and withdraw to the forests. They embraced a life of mendicancy and begged their daily meal. They gave up unwholesome practices and devoted themselves to meditation and to living non-injurious lives. These renouncers were held in high esteem by the people who called them *brahmana* - because they had put aside (*bahenti*) evil and immoral customs. This was the first constituting element - *akkhara*, on which the moral leadership was constituted. The second constituting element of this way of life was identified by the term *jhayaka* - practitioner of meditation. It is noteworthy that no ritual activities are associated with them. The first renouncers are not identified in terms of their gender, occupation or social rank. The Buddha simply states, 'certain beings' - *sattanam ekaccannam*. Interestingly enough, the tasks mentioned as renounced are those generally associated with the household chores of women, in the *Therigatha* (XV, XXV): "Extinct for them the burning fire, vanished the smoke, fallen lies the pestle and mortar."

The phenomenon of 'world-renunciation' is not portrayed by the Buddha as the innate propensity of a *homo religiosus*, but as a response to dissatisfactory social conditions and is situated at a certain stage in cultural evolution: after sexual and social differentiation and after the emergence of settlements, private property, townships and cities.

The Brahmanic Stratum

The Buddha presents the emergence of the circle - *maṇḍala* - of institutionalised priesthood as an aberration from the ranks of the original *brāhmanas*: those who strove after moral perfection and practised meditation. Some of them found meditation, mendicancy and forest-living too austere. They moved to the outskirts of villages and towns and began "to collect ancient traditions and legends" - an obvious allusion to the way the Vedas ('knowledges') were accumulated and hoarded by the Brahmins as their monopoly possession. The Buddha acknowledges the Brahmanic claim that their Vedas could be traced back to ancient *rishis*, but he turns this boast against them. They had become hoarders and repeaters of the knowledge of holy men in the past, and lived off the experiences of others. They discussed and gave expositions about things they themselves had not experienced. They neither practised meditation nor devoted themselves to the pursuit of moral perfection. Thus they had laid down a norm of excellence - *brāhmana* - which had little to do with edifying moral conduct. The 'brahmin' as the Buddha describes him, fits the classic image of the priest-theologian - a man with 'bookish' knowledge and a bag of rituals. At the same time the Buddha criticises the people who held these degenerate *brāhmanas* in high esteem on the basis of false values like ritual power and social status. He sees this as a sign of moral decadence, a reversal of ancient values: "Those who were once regarded as the lowest are now looked upon as the best". Here again the Buddha registers a change in moral sentiments under changed social conditions.

The Property-Owning Producers of Wealth

The Brahmins had divided human life into three realms: the religious (*brāhmana*), the political (*khattiya*) and the economic (*vessa* and *sudda*). Having explained the genesis of the political and the religious elites, 'from among ordinary people,' the Buddha turns his attention to the economic sector. First, he explains the genesis of the *vessas* - (vaishya Sk) the class of property owning producers:

Those who paired off for sexual practice adopted various trades.

This, the Buddha explained, is how the constituting element - *akkhara*, of the term *vessa* arose. This social group came into existence not by nature, but through the proliferation of occupational practices. The Buddha explicitly links the diversification of occupations with the emergence of pairing marriage. The family, not the clan, became the corner stone of society, its basic economic unit and principal means for the reproduction of social differentiation and stratification. In the *gana-sangha* society to which Siddhāttha Gotama belonged there was no *vessa* stratum. Property was held in common by the *khattiya*. The propertyless workers, excluded from kinship were referred to as *dāsakammakāra*, but not by the ritually excluding term *sudda* (*sudra* - Sk).

The Property-less Labourers (vs. 25)

The Buddha provides a very interesting genetic explanation of the basic meaning - *akkhara* - of the designation *sudda* (sudra Sk) in Brahmin stratification: the property-less working people were degraded by the Brahmins degraded to the ranks of the ritually impure. The Buddha attributes the origin of the term *sudda* to changing social perceptions of a group of people: *luddacara khuddacara ti kho sudda* - "Those engaged in hunting activity, low activity, are called *sudda*,- this is the basic constituting element - *akkhara* - of the term *sudda*."

This explanation is not based on 'fanciful' etymologists as some scholars have suggested. Consistent with his view that language is a social construct, the Buddha, as already noted, is providing a *genealogical* - not etymological - explanation of terms. As we saw in Chapter 6, agricultural expansion was accompanied by the destruction of the habitat of forest-dwelling tribes. Former forest dwellers and conquered peoples were either assimilated into the agricultural economy as property-less land labourers or were reduced to dire poverty and compelled to sell their labour power to the property owning classes. The *candalas*, as Thapar suggests, may have been members of uprooted tribes (1984: 107). The course of Indian civilisation, as Kosambi observed, has been marked by the assimilation or destruction of tribal societies; it can be easily shown that many castes owe their lower social and economic status to their present or former refusal to take to food production and plough agriculture (see Chapter 5).

The Samanas

The Buddha speaks of emergence of the *samaṇas* as a new phenomenon and not as a further branching out along the trajectory of the meditators and collectors of ancient traditions. He locates it a stage when a hierarchised and iniquitous society had emerged and presents it as a reaction against this system. Individuals from all four strata, *khattiyas*, *brāhmaṇas*, *vessas* and *suddas* and from both genders became disillusioned with their particular occupations - *sakam dhammam* - and went forth from the household to the homeless life saying to themselves: "I will become a *samaṇa*. The Buddha makes it a point to note that the *samaṇas* broke out of the Brahmin segregation of people in ritual ranks.

Many sankharas but One Dhamma

The Buddha concluded his discourse on the origins of different occupational status groups by restating his basic premise:

tesam neva sattānam anaññesam sadisānam no asadisānam dham-

mení eva no adhammena.

Their origin was from among these same beings, like themselves, no different, and in accordance with *Dhamma*, not contrary to *Dhamma*.

The morphological examination in the *Vasettha Sutta* and the genealogical explanation in the *Agganna Sutta* drive home the same lesson. All humans belong to the same *jati* - different social ranks and occupational groups developed from among the same people, according to the one *Dhamma* - Conditioned Co-arising. In Brahmin doctrine *dharma* is the preordained duty of each individual, determined by his/her innate nature - *svadharma*. The Buddha formulated a new *dharma*. He revealed that what seems to be a natural determination is in fact the heritage of social practices developed by a succession of past generations. The occupational diversity one sees in society are themselves products of human actions - *yathābhūthamkammam* - thus become action. The fixation of these differences is not due to a divine will or nature but social determination. They are 'spoken of differences' maintained by those who have the power to enunciate "what is true."

The Buddha's explanation of functional differences in society was revolutionary compared to ideas of Aristotle who is regarded as an intellectual giant. His philosophy was declared the basis of Roman Catholic theology. In his *Politics* (trans. 1948: 1-22) the Greek philosopher formulated a hierarchical theory of society based on his belief in fixed substances or natures. The head of a patriarchal household exercises by natural right patriarchal power over his children - *patrike*; wives are subordinated to their husbands by the nature of the marital relationship - *gamike*; and slaves are by their nature subject to the despotic power - *despotike* - of the patriarch. Two centuries before Aristotle, the Buddha examined the theory of substances and found it baseless. He provided an explanation of social differences that is liberating.

12.1. Development of Identity Consciousness in Children

In the *Agganna Sutta*, beginning from an initial undifferentiated stage, the Buddha explained how various social identities developed in the course of historical development. In the *Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta* (MI 38. 257-271) he clarifies how these historically developed identities are internalised by the human young as they develop from infancy to childhood. Conditioned by this developmental process, the consciousness of a self with a unique social identity arises in a child.

The *Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta* is a lengthy instruction given by the Buddha to dispel the confusion created among his followers, by one of his own disciples, Sati, the Fisherman's Son. The Buddha summoned and questioned him, "Sati, is it true that the following pernicious view has arisen in you, 'As I understand the *Dhamma*

taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness that runs and wanders through the round of re-births, not another?' Sati confessed that it was indeed the view he had attributed to his Master. The Buddha reprimanded him, "Misguided man, to whom have you ever known me to teach the *Dhamma* in that way? In many an instruction have I not stated, consciousness arises dependent on conditions and that independent of conditions there is no arising of consciousness?"

To dispel any confusion by wrong interpretations of his *Dhamma*, the Buddha first gave an abstract, stage by stage, exposition of how consciousness is birthed and suffering arises under specific conditions.

So, listen *Bhikkhus*, i) conditioned by ignorance, constructs - *avijjapaccaya sankhara*; ii) conditioned by constructs, consciousness - *sankharapaccaya vinnanam*; iii) conditioned by consciousness, name and form - *vinnanampaccaya namarupam*; iv) conditioned by name and form, the sixfold sense base - *namarupapaccaya salayatanam*; v) conditioned by the sixfold sense base, contact - *salayatanapaccaya phasso* vi.) conditioned by contact, feeling - *phassapaccaya vedana*; vii) conditioned by feeling, craving - *vedanapaccaya tanha*; viii) conditioned by craving, clinging - *tanhapaccaya upadanam*; ix) conditioned by clinging, becoming - *upadanapaccaya bhavo*; x) conditioned by becoming, birth - *bhavapaccaya jati*; xi) conditioned by birth, decay, death etc. - *jatipaccaya jaramaranam*... (MI 261-2).

Since this process is cyclic and repetitious, the Buddha repeats the series of conditioned-conditioning factors in reverse order, beginning with birth, ageing, death, etc. It is important to note that since the co-arising factors are mutually conditioning and the process is reversible, the conditions which give birth to the self and suffering can be eradicated. This would not be possible if the conditions *are not co-arising* but are a *sequential*, linear chain of causes and effects.

In this series of conditioning factors the Buddha is tracing the sensuous processes that gives rise to consciousness and 'a birth' - *jati* - which begins with contact and feeling and culminates in craving, clinging, becoming and 'birth'. This surely is not biological birth. Confusion with biological birth arises because the same word *jati* - 'birth' - is used. But this birth has to be understood as the birth of the 'self' or self-consciousness and the birth of existential anguish - *dukkha*.² The Buddha is describing a sensuous and psychic process which begins with feeling.

² The renowned Thai scholar monk the late Bhikkhu Buddhadasa discusses this in a monograph titled, *Visuddhimagga is Impractical: Which Meaning of Jati Do We Use?* 1964, (Trans. Santikaro Bhikkhu, unpublished.) He points out that *jāti* in the *Paṭicca Samuppāda* cycle has to be understood as the birth of suffering, not biological birth.

If 'birth' here is understood as physical birth then human suffering becomes an ontological condition and can be ended only with physical death or eventual *nibbana* understood as the extinction of being, not craving. This surely makes the Buddha's claim that suffering can be ended in this very life meaningless. On the other hand, liberation from suffering in this very life can be achieved once one realizes that suffering or existential anguish arises with Ego consciousness. The Buddha's central concern during his entire life was a moral problem, the problem of suffering and the eradication of suffering. Suffering arises with the birth of a consciousness that the self enjoys an independent and unconditioned existence. It is worth reiterating *Bhikkhu* Nanananda's summing up of the central thrust of Mahakaccana Thera's exposition in the *Madhupindika Sutta*, "the latent illusion of the ego awakens at the stage of *vedana* - feeling and thereafter the vicious duality is maintained until it is fully crystallised and justified at the conceptual level. Thus what has been a complex, conditionally arisen process, tends to be resolved into a direct relationship between the ego and the non-ego" (1986: 11).

After clarifying in abstract terms the chain of conditions leading to the birth of ego consciousness, the Buddha, in order to dispel any remaining confusion in Sati's mind, locates it in the developmental process of the human young, from the prenatal stage and *after biological birth* to childhood when identity consciousness arises.

Conditions for Conception

The Buddha reminded Sati and the *bhikkhus* present, the three conditions necessary for physical birth; a) intercourse between a man and a woman; b) the woman must be in her fertile period; c) the conception must take place and a foetus develop.

Gestation and Physical Birth

Having established the necessary conditions for biological birth, the Buddha continued his instruction:

The Mother for nine or ten months carries the foetus in her womb with great anxiety for her heavy burden. Then at the end of nine or ten months the mother gives birth with great anxiety for her heavy burden. When it is born, she feeds it with her own lifeblood. For according to the Noble Norm - *Ariya Dhamma*³ - mother's milk is lifeblood (M 1. 266).

³ 'Noble' because the mother suckling her babe epitomizes the spirit of *Dana* - selfless sharing, the pivotal social ethic of the Buddha Dhamma.

Infancy: A State of Amoral Dependence

Sati, the Fisherman's Son (M I.54 ff), on another occasion, suggested that human beings are chained *by nature* to the lower-life by five fetters, namely: "one's own body's views (*sakkaya ditthi*), perplexity, attachment to observances (customs, rituals, roles etc.), to lust and malevolence." Sati had to be summoned again and reprimanded for passing this off as the Buddha's Teaching. How could this be, asked the Buddha, since:

- A new born infant lies helplessly on its back. It has no sense of itself as a separate self. So how could an infant have a view about 'one's own body'? It merely has the potentiality to develop such a view.⁴
- An infant does not have the faintest notion of views circulating in the world. So how could it be perplexed by them? It only has a potentiality to develop mental confusion.
- An infant is not conscious of social rules of conduct. So how could it develop attachment to them? This is a latent potentiality.
- An infant does not as yet have a consciousness of 'other human beings,' so how could it have lust or malevolence? This is a latent potentiality.

One of the Buddha's contemporaries, a *samana* named Uggahamana taught that an individual who does no evil, speaks no evil, thinks no evil, and does not earn his livelihood by evil means, has realized moral perfection. The Buddha was asked what he thought about this theory. He pointed out that if virtue merely consists in not doing evil, a little baby must be a saint,

- A baby lying on its back has no idea of 'its own body.' How then could it do an evil deed with its body, except for a little kicking about?
- It does not have an idea of 'its own voice.' How then could it utter an evil speech, except for a little crying?
- It does not think about 'its own intentions.' How then could it have evil intentions, except for a little excitement?

⁴ This is a clinically precise observation. An infant has no idea of its body being male or female. Gender consciousness, the Buddha points out in this discourse, develops in early childhood. It is a powerful refutation of the view held by re-birth theoreticians that an identity consciousness enters a woman's womb readymade at conception.

- A baby lying on its back does not think of ‘its own livelihood’, except suckling at its mother’s milk. How then could it lead an evil mode of life? (M II.78)

A little baby lying on its back, kicking about a bit, seems to be in a state of excitement and leads a more or less vegetal existence – a digestive tube open at both ends. Its principle activities are consuming milk and passing out waste matter. The Buddha then went on to enunciate ten wholesome habits that a person should cultivate and ten unwholesome habits that a person should give up to be considered accomplished and perfected in what is wholesome. According to re-birth theoreticians a person’s gender and social status, even physical qualities, are determined by his/her deeds (*kamma*) in a previous birth. This moralises individuals from the moment of conception. Whereas a little infant lying on its back, in Buddha’s lucid exposition, is neither moral nor immoral, *it is amoral*. The new born baby is in a primordial state of un-integratedness. It is through a process of interaction with its environment that the child learns to organise itself as the subject of its thoughts, words and deeds. As psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan points out,

the child at the *infans* stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other and before language restores it, in the universal, its function as subject (1977: 2).

The canonical texts quoted above, clearly indicate that the Buddha did not regard a little baby lying on its back as an autonomous ‘self’-conscious subject. In other discourses, the Buddha describes the state of infancy as a state of helplessness and dependence. A baby has to be watched over, fed, washed, clothed and constantly protected by grown ups, until it grows up and is able to look after itself (GS III.5; 256; MLS II.238). Speculators like Sati projected onto an infant their personal speculations about a consciousness migrating from body to body. Disregarding observable facts, they engaged themselves in profitless speculations such as “Is the self the same as the body or is the self one thing and the body another?” (MLS I.97).

Emergence of Personal Identity

The Buddha traces the birth of identity consciousness by taking the example of how a biologically male infant develops masculine consciousness,

As a boy grows and develops his faculties he plays childish games such as toy ploughs, tip-cat, head-over heels, toy windmills, toy carts and toy

bows (M I.266).

Here, the Buddha, centuries before contemporary development psychologists, indicates that the gender consciousness of children develops through imitative role playing at a very early age. It is not attributed solely to the biological unfolding of an innate essence. Social factors, from the beginning, mediate the growth of self-consciousness. The child in its development constructs self-identity by modeling its behaviour on adult behaviour. It imitates what society considers is appropriate behaviour for each gendered form and social class.⁵ The development of identity consciousness, the Buddha explains, goes hand in hand with the development of a child's sense organs. Through interaction with its surroundings the process of subjectification is set in motion and culminates in ego consciousness.

Moralisation of Children

When that boy has grown up and has developed his sense organs he enjoys himself, endowed with and possessed of the five strands of sense-pleasure: forms cognisable through the eye, sounds cognisable through the ear, tastes cognisable through the tongue, touches cognisable through body, agreeable, pleasant, enticing, connected with sense pleasures, alluring (M I.267).

From an initial stage of chaotic sense impressions or undifferentiated experience, the child gradually begins to develop a differentiated experience of actuality. Vague impressions are actively organised into recognisable forms. Passive impressions become conscious perceptions and active responses. These responses are subject to social sanction, initially of the parents. The child is held answerable for its behavioural responses vesting them with a moral character. In that process the sense of self is born.

⁵ George Herbert Mead, a pioneer of the school of symbolic interaction, noted that the self-identity of children develops through role-playing. Children at play, take on personalities, play roles and in this way control the development of their own personalities. The child develops its self-image by looking in the Mirror of Society. The notion of self arises and is reproduced through interaction with the 'Other', particularly with 'society', which Mead calls 'the Generalised Other'. Self-identity is not in-born; it is acquired during childhood (*Social Readings*: Coser and Rosenberg 1965:2 60-275).

⁶ 'Clinging' is a primal unreflected response. "A new born infant reflexively grasps and clings" (Kagan 1984: 50). A key category in the Buddha's ethics is the infantile reflex transformed into psychological 'clinging' - *upadana*

Birth of the Self

When he [the little boy] has seen a form through the eye, he feels attraction for agreeable forms, he feels repugnance for disagreeable forms and he dwells *without mindfulness aroused as to the body, with a mind that is limited....* Possessed thus of complacency and antipathy, whatever feeling he feels - pleasant or painful or neither painful nor pleasant - he delights in that feeling, welcomes it and persists in clinging⁶ to it. From delighting in that feeling of his, from welcoming it, from persisting in clinging to it, delight arises; whatever is delight amid those feelings, that is grasping, conditioned by grasping is becoming; conditioned by becoming is birth; conditioned by birth, old age and dying, grief, sorrow, suffering lamentation and despair come into being. Such is that arising of this entire mass of anguish (MLS I.322).

The Buddha in this discourse first traced the cycle of factors that gives rise to suffering in an abstract summary. He then went on to enumerate the conditions necessary for biological birth. Thereafter he disclosed the process by which the process of conditioned co-arising of suffering becomes activated as a new born infant develops to childhood and consciousness of self arises in it. The growing child begins to differentiate between different sense impressions registering them as pleasant and unpleasant. Contacts which do not impinge consciousness as pleasant and unpleasant are ignored as the child oscillates between the pleasant and the unpleasant. As result, it begins to live *without mindfulness* as to the body which registers these multiple sensations, that is to say, mindless of the frictional co-touching - *patigaha samphasso* - which conditions feeling and engenders consciousness. The self fixes its attention on the source of the pleasant, delights in them and clings to them as if they are external things-in-themselves. The notion of a self as the subject of these feelings co-arises with the notion of other-others as objects of pleasure or pain. The infant's attraction to the pleasant and repulsion from the painful becomes attachment to the pleasant and antipathy for the unpleasant. The child delights in the pleasant and clings to it. Clinging gives rise to becoming, the process of becoming conditions the birthing and rebirthing of the clinger as well as the objects it clings to. This fixation on the self and the other, as the Buddha puts it, limits the mind; the range of consciousness is circumscribed. Its imaginations about reality are conditioned by a mind that is limited to inputs registered in terms of pleasant/unpleasant. A desire arises to rebirth the pleasant which is experienced as the very condition or foothold of its sense of self as the subject of experience and knowledge. The child is no longer aware that subject and the object of craving are mutually conditioned-conditioning relationships.

The Buddha in this discourse is clearly talking of a birth that is qualitatively

different to the biological birth with which he began to trace an already born infant's developmental process. According to re-birth theory a human being's gender and social position at birth is the moral result of good or evil actions done in a previous birth. This moralises human beings from the moment of the conception. The Buddha is clearly indicating that a human being becomes a moral agent only with the birth of self consciousness. He is describing a conditioned-conditioning process that culminates in consciousness of a separate self existing independent of conditions. Initial instinctive, reflexive physical reactions of attraction and repulsion becomes transformed into conditioned *psychic* reactions of lust and hatred and take on a moral character.⁷ The illusion of duality originates with contact and feeling. As the infant begins to differentiate itself from 'others,' - initially the (m)other who suckles it. It becomes ignorant that consciousness of the 'I' and the 'other' co-arose through touch and feeling. The 'I' and the 'other', the 'this' and 'that' take on the appearance of separate forms which it learns to name. Thus the impression of thinghood is consolidated at the conceptual level through language which establishes a fixed relationship between a perceived and conceived form and a word - a linguistic sign or sound symbol. The Buddha repeatedly pointed out that language is a social convention and that there is no necessary or intrinsic relationship between a sound symbol – 'word-name' and what it signifies. Thus the various identities are cultural constructs, not articulations of their innate natures. The Buddha asked a group of Brahmins if they knew for sure whether the embryo in a mother's womb is a brahmin, *khattiya*, *vessa* or *sudda*. They could not, they replied (M II.136). On another occasion discussing the matter of individual identities with the brahmin Esukari, the Buddha said,

On recollecting a person's ancient family lineage on the paternal and maternal sides, wherever it is that there is a production of an individuality, *it is reckoned in accordance with that*. So if there a *production of an individuality, in a khattiya family, it is reckoned as a khattiya*. (He repeated the same for a child born into a *brahmana*, *vessa* and a *sudda* family) (MLS 11. 369 emphases added).

⁷ One of the fundamental problems addressed in social psychology is the moralisation of the individual in the society into which it is born. William McDougall, who wrote one of the first books on social psychology, conceptualises this process sequentially as follows: 1 The stage in which the operation of the instinctive impulses is modified by the influence of reward and punishment. 2. The stage in which conduct is controlled by the anticipation of social praise or blame. 3. The highest stage, when conduct is regulated by an ideal enabling a person to act in the way that seems right, regardless of the praise or blame of others (in *Wrightsmann* 1972:100). One of the signs of moral maturity in the Buddha's Teaching is *upekkha*. A person is no longer swayed by the desire of reward and praise or the fear of punishment and blame. He/she is firmly established in skilful living as a joy in itself.

"Reckoned or referred to as....," in the *Vasettha Sutta* the Buddha insisted that the differences among humans are 'spoken of conventional designations' - *vocaran ca manussesu – samannaya pavuccati*. That is to say, due to conventional and linguistic usage. Even before it has a sense of its self or learns to speak, a child's identity or individuality is determined by the way it is spoken of by adults. Subsequently it will cling to and reproduce this identity. A child of course has no choice but to learn the language of the community into which it is born. And it is through language and upbringing that a child is acculturated into the values of the social group into which it was born. A boy assimilates social identities and is socialised to be 'masculine' in its behaviour. Similarly, little girls play games of adult women and are socialised to behave in a 'feminine' manner. Samsaric repetition of social identities begins.

Anticipations of Contemporary Development Psychology

The Buddha's instructions were given orally and mostly in face to face encounters. These instructions were committed to memory and preserved by monk disciples for over two thousands years. It is anachronistic to expect these expositions to be structured like modern written dissertations. One has to look behind the archaic form to discover its 'scientific' content. Then one can make the startling discovery that the Buddha gives in rudimentary form the stages of development of the human beings from conception through infancy to childhood that are described on the basis of clinical observation and experiments in contemporary development psychology. The literature on this subject is enormous.⁸

The following are the main developmental stages outlined in contemporary studies. Comparative comments from the Buddha's instructions are given parenthetically.

Stage 1. The Prenatal. The initial stage of the prenatal period is the germinal stage which begins when a sperm penetrates an egg in the act of conception, normally, the result of sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. (The Buddha began with this).

Stage 2. The Period of Pregnancy (Also noted by the Buddha).

Stage 3. Birth and Infancy. From birth until the onset of speech, the child is referred to as an infant. (The term 'infant' derived from the Latin *infans* means 'without language'). An infant as mentioned above is in a state of motoric

⁸ For a summary survey of the findings of contemporary developmental psychology, See, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/developmental_psychology.

un-integratedness. Its observed activities are, being startled, jerky movements of arms and legs, sucking, and the 'grasping' or 'clinging' reflex, which can be activated by scratching the infant's palm. (Among infantile activities mentioned by the Buddha are consuming milk and kicking about and excitement. Clinging is a key psychic reflex in the Buddha's diagnosis of craving).

A new born infant is bombarded and overwhelmed by chaotic sensory impingements from the outside world. The infant gradually constructs images out of this chaos and begins to recognise them when they recur. Light waves refracted by the retina produce upside down images as in a *camera obscura*. The brain corrects this as the child turns on to its belly, slithers, crawls and begins to walk.

Child psychologists have noted that infants have a fully developed sense of touch at birth. The Buddha emphasizes the primacy of touch and feeling, conditioned by touch there is feeling - *phassapaccaya vedana*; what one feels, one senses or 'signs' - *yam vedeti tam sanjanati*. But in the Buddha's explanation, the images an infant forms or constructs are conditioned by ignorance because it imagines that the 'things' and 'beings' exist independent of its contacts and feelings. Language plays a crucial role in reinforcing this impression. The Buddha points out that consciousness is conditioned by constructs, and name and form are conditioned by consciousness. And it is name and form which conditions the six fold sense base. Here language comes into play as constructed forms are named.

At first an infant makes incoherent sounds. Gradually it learns to articulate its impressions and thoughts with the language of the culture into which it is born. Even a child's use of the vocal chords to make word-sounds is conditioned by its linguistic community. Adults find it difficult to pronounce some word-sounds of other linguistic communities because they had not heard these as children in their mother tongue. Culture in the form of language plays a defining role in the development of 'Self' identity, especially the sexual identity of a child.

Sex and Gender

Development psychologists make a distinction between Sex and Gender. Sex refers to the biological distinction between males and females. Genetic factors and hormones are decisive in determining biological difference and according to some researchers also the behavioural traits of boys and girls. Gender describes the characteristics that a society or culture delineates as 'masculine' or 'feminine.' The biological differences in physiological functions related to reproduction certainly influence gender specific behaviour. However, the inherited biological propensities are moulded by the cultural norms about the gender identities of males and females. Role expectations of males and females may differ from culture to culture.

Almost universally though, children learn the roles appropriate to boys and girls by role playing. Boys appropriate robust and aggressive behaviour of adult males by role playing, for example, of soldier and playing with toy guns and trucks. While girls imitate 'mother-like' roles, playing with dolls and cooking with toy pots and pans. (The Buddha noted this with regard to the development of identity consciousness in a boy. The infant's physical clinging shifts to psychic clinging. Clinging to self and to objects of desire conditions a process of becoming. Becoming conditions repeated birth of self and the objects of its desires and antipathies).

This brief look at contemporary development psychology shows how very much the Buddha had anticipated the theoretical insights of modern clinical psychologists. It confirms the Buddha's discovery that the architect of the house of 'Self' is Self itself, and that it does not enter the womb ready made. The Buddha makes this absolutely clear in the *Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta* (M I.38) discussed above: "consciousness arises dependent on conditions and that independent of conditions there is no arising of consciousness". Stimulated psychic factors mediated by culture play a crucial role in the development of identity consciousness. It is then cyclically rebirthed through craving for ego maintenance. The Buddha provided a relentless psychoanalysis or rather, a schizo-analysis of the way the human person splits into a body and a consciousness that is 'other-than the-body.' This is due to ignorance or a failure to remember and recognize that this split is the product of the illusion of 'otherness' which arises with contact and feeling. This sensory illusion gives birth, because of craving, to the psychic delusion of the separate Self.

It is not birth, ageing and death in themselves which are the source of suffering. They *become* the source of suffering once the notion of the separate Self arises and is consolidated in consciousness.

CHAPTER 13

MORPHOLOGY AND SOURCE OF SUFFERING

From the moment of first contact, the West's perception of Buddhism has been flawed by misapprehension. Buddhism was seen a pessimistic 'religion' because it supposedly regarded suffering as endemic to the human condition. This is largely due to a fixation on the first of the Four Noble Truths of Suffering and ignoring the other three. Mainstream Buddhist teaching also contributes to this misapprehension by understanding 'birth' in the series of conditioned conditioning- conditioned factors as *physical birth*. Whereas as we saw in the previous chapter, 'birth' referred to in this series, is the birth of the Self or Ego. As we shall see in this chapter, the Buddha is speaking of a suffering that is peculiar to human beings. Humans suffer frustration and anguish because they live in denial of impermanence - *anicca* and cling to what is - *anattā* - without substance. The Noble Ethical Way is unique in that it is a systematic and consistent application of these two premises. The Buddha's message which he lived out, is that if humans come to terms with impermanence and live in a way that their consciousness coincides with their transient existence, not only they, but all living beings with whom they share this outlook could live in a peaceful and reconciled world. Suffering - *dukkha* - is not merely private pain or grief: it is a dissatisfactory state of affairs in the world. The conditions which produce this unhappy state of affairs, is entirely a human creation. Only humans, not the gods, can change it. One lives in the hope that the gods would reward humans who live good lives with eternal happiness beyond the threshold of death. But on the this-side of contingent existence, conditions which engender suffering remain unchanged. The Buddha opened up the possibility of being happy in this very life. Friedrich Nietzsche understood the unique character of the Buddha's Way:

Buddhism no longer speaks of the struggle against *sin* but, quite in accordance with actuality, of 'the struggle against *suffering*'.... It stands in my opinion beyond good and evil...against a state of depression that has arisen, Buddha takes *hygienic* measures (AC 20).

The Buddha's Noble Ethical Way is a Therapeutic Ethic intended to *heal* and restore wholeness to socially fragmented and tormented human beings. The Buddha applied the basic principles of ancient Indian medicine to ethics. i. Acknowledge the diseased condition. ii. Track down the source of the disease. iii. Clarify the envis-

aged aim - eradication of this source. iv. Follow the prescription which leads to the cure of the disease. The Buddha justly spoke of himself as , "The Incomparable Physician and Surgeon am I" (*Ituvuttha* vs 100).

The Four Noble Truths

Siddhattha Gotama, 'Awoke' by his own effort. He developed a methodology so that others too could follow the same path and see for themselves and experience for themselves what he through experimentation and struggle had personally discovered. He called this the Middle Way of 'The Four Noble Truths' - *Cattari Ariyasaccani*:

1. *Dukkha Ariyasacca*: The Noble Truth of Suffering
2. *Dukkhasamudaya Ariyasacca*: The Noble Truth of the Co-arising of Suffering
3. *Dukkhanirodha Ariyasacca*: The Noble Truth of the Eradication of Suffering
4. *Dukkhanirodhagāminīpattipadā Ariyasacca*: The Noble Truth of 'Going-along-the-Way which leads to the Eradication of Suffering

The Buddhist canon contains hundreds of discourses delivered by the Buddha. They are either clarifications of these Four Truths in their theoretical aspects, or are practical instructions for living according to them. The Four Noble Truths are the organic unity of a Vision and a Practice.

A Radical Revaluation of 'Nobility'

Why did the Buddha call his Teaching and Practice Four 'Noble' Truths? Here again Nietzsche provides valuable insight. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche discusses the conclusions of his inquiry into origins of our notions of good and evil, "Under what conditions did man construct the value judgements of *good* and *evil* ? And what is their intrinsic worth?" Being a trained philologist he investigated the etymological meaning of the two terms and traced their genealogy to crude moral evaluations. In the Indo-European family of languages,

The basic concept [*good*] is always noble in the hierarchical, class sense, and from this had developed, by historical necessity, the concept of good... This development is strictly parallel to that other which eventu-

ally converted the notions *common*, *plebeian*, *base* into the notion *bad*. Here we have an important clue to the actual genealogy of morals (*GM* .I.IV emphasis his).

People are goaded into morality by what Nietzsche called the 'slave morality.' They practice virtue and avoid evil in order to be rewarded and not to be punished. They are good and faithful as long as they believe the Eye of God or of Society is on them. According to the crude evaluation of 'good' and 'evil', wealth, prosperity and beauty are regarded as rewards for virtue and poverty, misery and ugliness are regarded as punishments for sin. Needless to say these are crude materialist evaluations of good and evil.

In the Buddha's Day, Brahmanism had not become a dominant ideology in the Majjhimadesa. However, Brahmins had begun to penetrate the monarchical states and attempted to win the favour of the socially powerful by providing religious sanction for their privileged positions. They proposed an ingenious theology which stratified society according to a Doctrine of Colours - the *Varnadharma*. They constructed a hierarchy of four ranks, Brahmins, Khattiyas, Vessas and Suddas. Males of the first three ranks had the right to own property and were classified as *ariya*, while the lot of the Suddas was to serve the four upper ranks. The *suddas* were deemed ritually unclean and were called *anariya* - ignoble.

The Buddha shattered this hierarchy of colours. He declared that language was a social convention and vested the term '*ariya*' with a new signification. It was a radical *bouleversement* or overturning of values. The Buddha taught that nobility is not a function of birth but of practice - striving after moral excellence: "Not by birth, is one *ariya* and not by birth is one *anariya*. It is by practice - *kamma* - that one is *ariya* or *anariya*". The real *candala*, the untouchable, whom the Buddha's disciples should shun is the grossly immoral person.

Morphology of Human Suffering

The Buddha investigated the various manifestations of human suffering and classified them into three universally observable types.

Dukkha-dukkha: Physical Suffering

This refers to suffering people endure due to injury, sickness, discomfort, ageing and death, etc. That is to say, all suffering arises due to being corporeal. The Buddha was no stranger to this type of pain and the canonical tradition does not hide this fact. The Buddha did not return after the Great Awakening with a transfigured body. He suffered from a chronic stomach ailment and graciously accepted the

ministrations of a physician (BD IV.394). He lived to the age of eighty and experienced the infirmities and dependence of old age. He joked about it with good grace, comparing his body to a ramshackle old cart that was kept going only by holding it together with straps. During his last illness he told Ananda that when his pains were unbearable, he practised jhanic concentration to get some relief (DB II.107). His final illness was brought on by food poisoning (DB II.138). The Buddha's last human experience was one of intense pain and Ananda, who nursed him to the end, remembered how "he bore with fortitude the sharp pain, even unto death" (DB II.139). In all this, the Buddha was human, all too human. While the Buddha urged his disciples to devote themselves to improve life conditions for themselves, he offered no reprieve from *anicca* - impermanence. In the *Cakkavatti Sihanada* (DB III.26) the Buddha envisages the possibility of human beings renouncing greed, violence and licentiousness and acting together to establish a Kingdom of Righteousness by creating conditions conducive to virtuous and prosperous lives. But even in such a perfect Kingdom of Righteousness people will continue to experience three kinds of *abadha* - limitations: namely, *iccha* - wants *anasanam* - indispositions and *jara* - decay. The realm of freedom can blossom forth only within, not beyond, the realm of necessity, *anicca* - impermanence.

It is clear that the Buddha had not found a Way of Liberation either for himself or for others from ageing, sickness and death. He did not cure the incurable or raise the dead to life. The only miracle he believed in, he said, was "the miracle of instruction" (DB I.212). Before his death, he did not tell his disciples that he was going to a place where those who believed in him would eventually join him. During the Buddha's last illness Ananda, prompted by concerns of followers still caught up in *puthujjana* consciousness, inquired where disciples who had predeceased the Master might have been reborn. The Buddha was deeply disappointed that Ananda, who had been his constant companion for nearly two decades had, of all people, asked such a question.

Now there is nothing strange in this, Ananda, that human beings should die, but that, as each one does, you too should come to me and inquire in this manner, that is wearisome to me. (DB II.99).

Obviously, speculations about rebirth would have been rife (as now), even among the Buddha's first disciples and not long after his death, answers would be found for questions the Buddha refused to entertain.

Knowing that his death was imminent the Buddha his disciples that the *Dhamma* and the discipline he left behind should be their guide after his demise. The Tathagata's last words were: *vayadhamma sankhara* - *appamadena sampadetha* - evanescent are constructions - strive on with alacrity. This is the challenge of core Buddhism. Live well and happily, for life is transient and will end. Do not pin

your hopes for happiness in a life after death. The Buddha did not make promises he could not keep.

Viparinama Dukkha - Suffering due to the Vicissitudes of Life

The Buddha began the proclamation of the Four Noble Truths with the declaration:

To be separated from what is dear is suffering. To be united to what is not dear is suffering (BD IV.16).

Here, the Buddha touches the heart of emotional distress: the pain experienced by human beings due to the vicissitudes of life. The Buddha warned that even the euphoria experienced during states of concentration (*jhanas*) could be a source of sorrow, if one clings to it, since "this too is constructed - *sankhatam etam* " (MLS III.291) - that is to say, dependent on the performance of certain exercises. It will lead to frustration if one imagines that such ecstasies are intimations of a permanent, transcendental state of bliss. Feelings of ecstatic bliss remain nonetheless feelings,

And what is the peril of feelings? In as much as feelings are impermanent, they are fraught with *dukkha*. This is the peril of feelings (MLS I.11).

For the few disciples gathered around him the Buddha's approaching death was an acute reminder of *viparinama dukkha*. Seeing their grief, the Buddha, physician to the end, urged them:

Do not let yourselves be troubled; do not weep. Have I not already, on former occasions, told you that it is in the very nature of all things, however near and dear to us, that we must divide ourselves from them, leave them, sever ourselves from them? How then can it be otherwise? Whereas anything born, brought into being and constructed, contains within itself the inherent necessity of dissolution - how can it thus be possible that such a thing should not be dissolved? (DB II.159).

The Buddha did not make himself an exception to the law of impermanence.

Saṅkhāra Dukkha - 'Self' Constructed Suffering

The first two forms of *dukkha* are universal experiences. They are not 'Buddhist' truths. Whatever one's gender, nationality or social status, whether one is pope, prel-

ate maharishi, saint, prince, peasant or pauper one cannot escape the gnawing teeth of time and the inevitability of death. Yearning for the permanence of what is good and beautiful is a common human dream. As a poet expressed it, "The beauty of this world has made me sad, the beauty that will pass." It is quite human to believe that an object must exist because the heart desires it. The dread of impermanence is the *moment metaphysique* - the moment for day dreaming and wishful thinking. Desire for immortality spawns religious hope. It is the disappointments, the frustrations, the uncertainties of life and the thought of death - 'that undiscovered land from which no traveller returns,' which makes people 'religious.' This is where the *Buddha Dhamma* parts company with 'religion.' The Buddha declared that he had broken through to the 'birth-less - *ajatam* - and the 'a-mortal' - *amatam* (passim). By this he did not mean that he had found a way to an immortal life beyond death. The Buddha died. But there is a deathlessness in the sense of the abolition of the 'self' by the destruction of craving. That 'thing', the 'I', which is birthed and reproduced by craving is a delusion. There is no substantial self which 'death' can be attributed. The life process merely ceases, just as the flame of a lamp goes out when the fuel is exhausted. Apart from the lamp, the fuel and the wick there is no flame. It is meaningless to ask where the flame went (M.I488). The Buddha did not use the first singular 'I' but always referred to himself in the third person as *tathagata* - 'thus going', because life forms are processes which arise, flow, ebb and cease. They are impersonal events, independent of the will. We can at best become aware of these processes and regulate them. All human beings are in this sense *tathagata* - 'thus going.' The difference between the average person and the Buddha and an arahat disciple is that they lived fully awake and mindful of this. Their consciousness fully coincided with their existence experienced as - *vayadhamma* - evanescent. That is why they were not overcome by anxiety. *Sankhāra dukkha* literally means 'constructed suffering' - suffering arising from the failure to recognise the constructed character of the Self and of 'things' which like the self are liable to birth, decay and dissolution. *Sankhāra dukkha* is 'self'-constructed suffering. From the Buddha's point of view, it is not the invisible divine which is mysterious. It is the human attitude to life which is the mystery of mysteries. Each day we see people die, yet we live as if we are immortal. Even those who believe in a life after death with a God, must also face the pains of sickness, old age and inevitable death on the '*this-side*' of life. Belief in an after life does not provide immunity from impermanence. What a radical change would there be, if people relinquished clinging to the security of institutions like religion, nation, family, property, etc., as if they are permanent and eternal - if people lived ever mindful of the impermanence and the emptiness of 'things'.

Saṅkhāra Dukkha: Existential Anguish

The Buddha recognized that by making themselves ‘consciousnesses’ or ‘souls’ in bodies and, by putting themselves between gods and animals, humans have got themselves into big trouble; they have developed existential anxieties which neither the animals or the gods of their imagination seem to have:

Just as it does not occur to flies [enjoying nectar of fruit] being borne along on a pingo or a basket: “This is permanent or steadfast or eternal for us” and moreover, wherever it may be that these are living, it is there that these flies enjoy themselves. In the same way, householder, it does not occur to those gods either to think: This is permanent or steadfast or eternal for us (MLS II. 93).

Joseph Campbell, in his last recorded television interview - he was terminally ill of cancer at the time - explained this viewpoint of the Buddha as follows: human beings torment themselves about the meaning of life, what matters is the rapturous experience of *being alive*:

The mind has to do with meaning. The Buddha called himself ‘the one thus going’. There’s no ‘meaning’. What’s the meaning of the universe? What’s the meaning of a flea? It’s just there. That’s it. And your own meaning is that you’re there. We’re so engaged in doing things of outer value that we forget that the inner value - the rapture that is associated with being alive - is what it’s all about. That is basic Buddhism. You either experience your bliss here or you don’t (1988: 5-6).

This needs clarification. Once a split arises between consciousness and the actual life-process, individuals experience dis-stress. Their consciousness is experienced as ‘other than’ their actual life-processes. The ‘I am’ produces the delusion that the ‘I’ is always present to itself in an unchanging present. This belief that the present is all there is and will be, engenders the belief of an eternal presence - ‘be-ing as such.’

‘I am’ is the move by which I transgress empirical existence, factuality, worldliness etc. - first of all my own empirical existence, factuality, worldliness etc... Therefore *I am* originally means *I am mortal*. *I am immortal* is an impossible proposition. We can go further: as linguistic proposition “I am the one who am” is the admission of a mortal” (Derrida 1991: 13-14 emphasis his).

Thus, ‘I Am’ cannot be anything more than what I, by self-reflection contemplate as ‘I am present to myself.’ Thus, ‘I AM’ by its very utterance implies mortality since

the 'Am' of presence is wider than the 'I.' Before 'I' was things existed and after 'I' dies things will continue to exist. The 'I am' is acknowledgement of finite existence. This causes panic because the presence of self to self is not permanent. To put it another way, the particular being that conceives 'Being-as-such,' *sein*, realizes it is only a 'such-being,'- *dasein*,- a limited being and as such is *an existence unto death*. 'Being as such' is an abstract imagination with 'such being' as its foothold. 'I am' becomes an anxiety-ridden balancing act on a tight rope stretched across an imagined 'being and 'non-being'. Life is experienced as an existential *Manque* - a Lack or a Void. The ego feels '*Angst*' (derived from the Latin verb *angere* - 'to constrict') because everything seems to be slipping away from it, the emptiness of death closing in on it, hemming it in. When the particular being takes this *Angst* fully into himself it becomes morbid in the most literal sense of the word.

The Buddha described the panic that overwhelms an individual when the notion 'I Am' arises in him. For the Buddha, the clearer the idea 'I Am,' the greater the agitation in the one who would be '*other-than*' the conditions of its existence. The Buddha used the name Mara for Delusion personified. He is not a 'tempter' but a code word for the vacillations of the mind:

He who imagines, is bound by Mara.

He who does not imagine, is freed from Mara

"I am" - this is an imagining.

"I shall not be" - this is an imagining.

"This "I am" - that is an imagining.

"I shall be" - this is an imagining.

"I shall not be" - this is an imagining.

"Embodied shall I be". "Formless shall I be".

"I shall be conscious". "I shall be unconscious". "Neither conscious nor unconscious shall I be" are imaginations.

This imagining is a disease, imagining is an abscess, a barb.

"I am" is an agitation

"I am" is a palpitation.

"I am" is a delirium.

"I am" is a conceit (KS IV.133 -4).

The belief that the 'I' is always presents to itself is enabled by the mental distinction created between the past and the future, with an ever present in the middle. But the ego is painfully aware of the fact that the 'AM' of the present is slipping away

from it. 'Today' will be the 'Yesterday' of the past and 'Tomorrow' will be 'Today' passing into 'Yesterday' in the passing passage of time. Since existence itself is continuously slipping out of its grasp, it feels anxiety. The 'I-Am' is a mirage which tantalises and frustrates. The hope of union with a 'Being-in-itself' does little to alleviate the Ego's existential anguish. The Buddha called the 'I am' the product of a sleight of mind - "a conjurer's trick entire" (S III.142). *Bhikkhu* Nanananda exposes the magician's bag of tricks as follows:

[The Ego] is no longer a mere contingent process, nor is it an activity deliberately directed, but an inexorable subjection to an objective order of things ... What has been a complex, conditionally arisen process, tends to be resolved into a direct relationship between the ego and the non-ego ... The label 'I' superimposed on the complex contingent process, serves as a convenient fiction of thought or a short-hand device and is in fact one of the shortest words in many a language ... The ego notion is an extension in thought not faithful to facts, being a mental aberration ... From one aspect, the notion 'I' with its concomitant notions of 'my' and 'mine' develops towards craving. Viewed from another aspect and inextricably bound up with the notions of 'not-I' of 'thou' and 'thine', it is a form of measuring or value-judgement. Yet another aspect is the dogmatic adherence to the concept of an ego as a theoretical formulation (Nanananda 1986: 6 - 11).

The Source of Suffering : Craving

Etymologically, the word *taṇhā* means 'thirst'. unlike physical thirst this psychic need cannot be satiated, because this existential 'Craving for the Other and other-others', is a craving that is *anatta* - bereft of substance. *Taṇhā* is a fire which consumes everything it touches to keep itself alive. It is a distortion of the instinct for survival into a ceaseless drive, which reproduces itself as well as the subjects and objects of desire.

The Dynamics of Craving

On the basis of his systematic studies, the Buddha distinguished between three manifestations of craving,

Craving is threefold; namely, *kama tanha* - craving for pleasure; *bhava taṇhā* - craving for being ; and *vibhava taṇhā* - craving for non-being (DB III.208).

Since basic human drives are universal and beyond the categories of time, it is

not surprising that centuries later, Sigmund Freud on the basis of clinical observation of neurotic patients came to the conclusion that the Ego is assailed by three powerful drives which he identified as *Sexualtriebe*, *Ichtriebe* and *Todestriebe*: the Sexual-Drive, the 'I' -Drive and the Death Drive. Freud's use of the term 'sexual' led to misunderstandings and charges that Freud reduced everything to sex. Freud singled out the sexual aspect because it was and (is) regarded as the most powerful of human drives, the one most subjected to repression and therefore the cause of much neurotic and even violent behaviour. He subsequently used the less controversial terms 'The Pleasure Principle' or Eros. Eros, understood in the sense of the blind drive towards the pleasurable, corresponds to the Buddha's term *kāma*. The attraction towards the pleasant gets vitiated under the sway of craving and becomes *raga* - lust. Just as perceptual illusion under the impulse of *tanha* becomes delusion - *moha* and instinctive repulsion from the painful becomes hate - *raga*. *Kāma taṇhā* includes everything the self delights in and clings to as well as everything it fears and to which it feels antipathy and hatred. Freud developed his theories while studying and treating the mentally sick. However, he also recognised that differences between the 'mentally disturbed' and the 'normal' person is one of *degree* not kind. The Buddha realised that the average person who under the sway of craving regards himself as a mind-body doublet is internally split and therefore subject to suffering. This idea is expressed in the Buddhist scholastic axiom *sabbe puthujjana ummataka* - 'every average person deranged.' For the Buddha the healing process is fundamentally ethical, whereas modern psychiatry sees mental ailments as a medical problem. Moreover, this science operates within an egological discourse and seeks not to eradicate but patch up and fortify the Ego so that it can function 'normally' in a society which is largely pathogenic. The Buddha's Ethical Path is preventive therapy which seeks to eradicate conditions which produce suffering and psychic problems. People cling to their delusions, these fulfil a need however misconceived. Buddha realised that merely denouncing them for their deluded beliefs and hopes would be meaningless; what is necessary is to abolish the conditions which make delusions necessary.

Kāma Taṇhā: Craving for Pleasure

Padmasiri De Silva in his comparative study of *Buddhist and Freudian Psychology* (1978), like most Buddhist scholars, identifies *kāma* with "the five senses." Sensual pleasure is seen as physical pleasure. If one remains faithful to the unambiguous elucidations given by the Buddha on the genesis of consciousness, one can no longer speak of the five 'physical' senses and the mind. This insinuates into Buddhist discourse the metaphysical assumption that the living human being is a mind/body, empirico/transcendental doublet. Western ego psychology subscribes to this metaphysical assumption when it speaks of the human being as a psycho/somatic

doublet. This assumption is the basic of the science of psychiatry developed in the United States and is erroneously attributed to Freud. To avoid association with the Judaeo-Christian division of the human person into body (*soma*) and soul (*psyche*), Freud turned to the other formative influence of Western culture, Greek mythology to clarify the human drive economy. The distinction he made was between Psyche and Eros, not *soma*. The terms were borrowed from the mythic story of Psyche and Eros. Here Eros refers to the dark and hidden impulses which assail the conscious self. Psyche refers to the Ego which tries to hide, repress or keep under control its spontaneous impulses in keeping with the demands of 'normal' society.

The Buddha, one cannot repeat this often enough, speaks of *six* senses. He emphasised that contact and feeling have a *six-fold sense base*. All the six senses touch and feel (See Chapter 10). The mind therefore has an emotional base. Through the felt in-puts of the 'external' senses the mind constructs various forms: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and sense of hard, soft or fluid. It then reifies these conceived forms by naming them. The Buddha underlines the role that language, which is made up of separate words, which are *named* sounds, plays in creating the illusion of a world made up of separate things. Grammar supports Ontology. What holds a name and a form together in Consciousness, is Craving.

‘Name’, friends, is one end, ‘Form’ is the other end; consciousness is in the middle; and craving is the seamstress, for it is craving that stitches it into the arising of ‘this’ and ‘that’ existence (A III 400).

Bhava Taṇhā : Craving for Being

Craving - Desire - produces a sense of self and the other, prompting it to say, "*This is mine*". Self-rebirthing and the craving for self and others are inextricably bound to the re-birthing the craving for the other as other, be it solid as the earth, or ethereal as *Brahma*. The ego and its objects are mutually conditioning ‘factors’ or ‘fabrications.’ The hidden genitor of both is craving in its triple form delusion, lust for the pleasureable and aversion for the unpleasant. The ego sees reflections of his/her desires and revulsions in every other thing and being. This absorption of the self in itself is diagnosed by the Buddha as *asmichanda* - “I” excitement” - (M I.109) or narcissism. One of the great ironies of human self delusion is that those who believe that the real self is the 'immaterial 'Self' or Soul temporarily lodged in the body is their obsession with the body. People yearn for immortality outside the body but they cling to the body and everything the body needs to be kept alive and healthy. This is the existential ambiguity of the ego. It is also remarkable that despite much talk about the 'spiritual' and 'spirituality', all the desires, ambitions

lusts and hatreds of the 'spirit' are acted out on the body and through the body, one's own and those of others. People literally spend billions of dollars on cosmetics to beautify the body, on elixirs to stave off the signs of ageing, to preserve a youthful appearance by undergoing cosmetic surgery and on body building contraptions to 'sculpt' their bodies according to whatever current ideal of the human form that society holds before them in the mirror of desire. In the same way, human hatreds too are acted out on the body. It is the body of hated other that is tortured, maimed and killed. Wars are officially sanctioned and even religiously sanctified killing. They are fought because the collective Ego or Self feels that its territories and institutions are threatened by equally self-seeking other collective selves. Thus the Self or the Ego is not merely the source of personal distress but is also the cause of unspeakable suffering in the world.

• ***Vibhava Taṇhā : Craving for Non-Being***

This is desire for what is devoid of substance. This applies both to the Self and the objects of its desire. The young Siddhartha Gotama's decision to renounce household life was motivated by his determination to find an answer to an existential dilemma which assailed him: Why was he, being himself subject to birth, decay and the rest seeking what like himself was subject to birth decay and the rest? (MLS I. *This* 202)

He found the answer - it is due to craving which co-arises with the birth of the notion of Self. This entanglement in two impermanent entities he realised creates frustration. When the clamourings of the Self are repeatedly frustrated, when the hopes on which it has set its heart turns to ashes, despair sets in and one is driven to self destruction. Such despair is caused not only by the frustration of worldly hopes and desires. It can also happen in the case of striving after moral perfection, if this seemingly laudable ambition is prompted by vanity. This type of aspiration can be more insidious than worldly ambitions, because those who are determined to achieve sainthood may consciously or unconsciously be motivated by a will to power - the desire to be different from, and superior to, the rest of their fellows. When such obsessive perfection seekers realise their powerlessness when trying to master their passions despite fierce determination, they see it as a falling short, in their own eyes of their basically self-centred ideals. Self love turns into self hate and makes them want to destroy themselves. The Theragatha and Therigatha contain reminiscences of *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* who did not succeed in achieving the Goal of Perfection as rapidly as they wished. Disgusted with themselves they decided to commit suicide. But just at the moment a *bhikkhu* was about to commit *hara kiri* (Thag 405-410) and a *bhikkhuni* about to hang herself (Thig 76-81), realisation came to them in a flash. They realised they were disgusted with a chimerical self. Once attachment to the self was relinquished both became arahants

or fully perfected ones and celebrated their liberation in songs of joy. Obsessive clinging to self and others, the Buddha taught, is a destructive force.

Centuries later Freud too was puzzled by the phenomenon of suicide. Since the instinct for survival is a powerful drive, what pushes people to the edge of suicide? The Buddha's penetrating insight into *vibhava tanha* anticipated the diagnosis proposed by Freud,

Observations shows us that an instinct may undergo the following vicissitudes, Reversal into its opposite, Turning round upon the subject's own self, Repression, Sublimation... The turning around of an instinct upon the subject's own self is made plausible by the reflection that masochism is actually sadism turned round upon the subject's own ego (Freud 1984: 205-6).

The Buddha realized that delusional clinging to self produces lust and hatred. Frustration of egoistic desires and ambitions can engender self hate and self destruction as well destructive behaviour towards others. He urged humans to live non-injurious; tormenting neither themselves - *attantapo* - (masochism), nor others - *parantapo* (sadism), nor themselves and others - *attantapo ca parantapo* - (sado-masochism). Following the Buddha's Path one abides in peace tormenting neither oneself nor others - *neva attantapo na parntapo*. This is achieved by extinguishing the flame of *tanha* (M I.341). The truly peaceful abide in bliss having gone beyond victory and defeat (Dhp. 201).

Upādāna: Having and Holding till Death

Coactive with *taṇha* - craving, is its twin reflex *upādāna*. *Upādāna* is derived from *upa* + *ā* + *dā* - i. (lit.), that substratum by which an active process is kept alive or going process is kept going, fuel, supply, provision. ii. grasping, holding on to (PED).

Upādāna identifies the manner in which *taṇha* - functions. It is a fire in the belly of the ego, a ceaseless drive to have and to hold - the spirit of acquisition and possession. Once ego-consciousness arises, sense experience is over-determined by reactive responses of lust, revulsion. The six senses become tentacles which lash out to grasp and wrap themselves around whatever excites desire, to suck them into the octopus-like ego. They also lash out to strike and destroy whatever threatens ego-existence. Grasping is initially an infantile reflex. A baby instinctively wraps its tiny fingers around any object that touches its palm or pushes it away if the external stimulus is experienced as painful. The instinctive infantile reflex of attraction and repulsion are in the process of growth to childhood and adulthood converted into blind psychological reactions: lust/revulsion, love/hatred.

Upādāna is a disease which perverts all the senses. Nothing is enjoyed as it is; it must be possessed. Not *being* but *having* becomes the reason for existence. Everything and every one is evaluated or measured in terms of one's egoistic needs. When this need cannot be fulfilled there is frustration and suffering. Instead of simple *com-placentia* of the six senses with their co-natural objects, they become perverted and dehumanized,

Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it ... when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc, - in short, when it is used by us ... In the place of all the physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of *all* these senses, the sense of *having*... The human being had to be reduced to this absolute poverty in order that he might yield his inner wealth to the outer world (Marx EPM. MECW. 3.300 emphasis his).

The senses are no longer capable of seeing a percept as it is and relating to it dispassionately and is therefore incapable of true enjoyment. The sense of proprietorship begins with the illusion of thinghood. The triggering mechanism of *taṇha-upādāna* produces and reproduces reification and fetishisation of transient experiences. All sentient beings have faculties to sense *their* world and to deal with it for their survival. In human beings under the sway of craving, all perceived forms - *rupa* and the active processes by which the world is cognised - *vedana*, *sanna*, *sankhara* and *vinnana* incite grasping and clinging to an ephemeral actuality, engendering suffering for oneself and others: "To put it succinctly suffering is the five factors of grasping" (SV 421). The Buddha's Way of Liberation as originally disseminated was not a 'religion'. It was a hygienic prescription to help humans beings understand the diseases within themselves and in their world and to take measures to heal a sick condition. The Noble Eightfold Path is a Therapeutic Ethic.

Priesthood of Greed

The conversion of three Brahmin fire-priests - the Kassapa brothers - was among the earliest and most spectacular achievements of the Buddha (BD IV.43-48). Particularly astounding was the conversion of the eldest, Uruvela Kassapa. To appreciate the significance of these conversions it is necessary to recall the oppressive character of the fire-sacrifices described in Chapter 6. They were institutionalized celebrations of greed and violence. The fire-priests had turned greed into a 'sacred hunger', personified by Agni - the Fire-God to whom burnt offerings were made. The priests satisfied the greed of the Fire-God and their own, with wealth expropriated from the working people. These were in fact public sacralisations of greed.¹

When the Buddha entered the royal city of Rajagaha for the first time after

his Awakening, surrounded by his first disciples, the people rushed to welcome him as a returning hero (BD IV. 47). King Bimbisara was astounded when word reached him of the conversion of the fire-priests. He went out to meet the Buddha who was surrounded by a milling crowd. The king inquired: "How has this happened? Instead of answering the question himself, the Buddha turned to the converted high priest and bade him: "Speak and tell". Uruvela Kassapa explained how, blinded by desire and greed, he had not seen the emptiness of priestly rituals:

It is of visible forms and sounds and also tastes, pleasures and women
that the sacrifices speak of ... therefore I take no more delight in rituals
and offerings... I have seen the peaceful path without footholds, stainless,
non-attached to sensual existence (BD IV. 48).

The Buddha then delivered one of his most famous expositions. Craving is a conflagration of that rages across the world like a wildfire.

Institutionalized Craving : The World is on Fire

Burning, burning.
All is burning.
The eye is burning, visual forms are aflame...,
The ear is burning, sounds are aflame..;
The nose is burning, smells are aflame ...,
The tongue is burning, tastes are aflame ...
The body is burning, feelings are aflame ...,
The mind is burning, mental consciousness is aflame ...,
Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of lust, with the fire of hate,
burning with the fire of delusion (DB IV 45-46).

The Buddha's proclamation, "The World is on Fire," was a frontal attack on a diabolic institution masquerading as religion. It was a denunciation not merely of private lusts, but especially of the sacralisation and institutionalisation of greed. The Fire Discourse is not a moral zealot's denunciation of the senses. It describes a constructed condition. The senses of themselves rest with what is pleasant and can deal with what is unpleasant without paranoia. It is *taṇhā* which inflames them and *taṇhā* co-arises with Ego consciousness.

"All is burning," The Fire Discourse is a powerful indictment of culturally inflamed cravings. Culture institutionalizes, inflames and reinforces personal and collective greed. The Buddha's moral teaching unmasks the moral duplicity which attributes greed, lust, hatred and violence to the moral depravity of individuals, while leaving unscathed the cultural institutions which foster false values and incite

people to want more and to have more, cost what it may.

Various forms of Buddhist meditation have become fashionable in the West among individuals seeking relief from private stress. From movie stars and business executives to individuals lost in the lonely crowd, appetites jaded by the surfeit of consumer 'goods', turn to the 'East' for 'spiritual goodies.' And the 'East' is ready to kindle and fuel what the 'West' desires. In the mystic bazaars of the Orient, highly stressed or burnt out individuals are offered that most auto-erotic of occupations – solitary meditation. Rapt and wrapped in themselves these type of do-it yourself private salvation seekers are seldom concerned about the wretched of the earth who do not have the leisure for meditation and whose major concern is mere survival. Alan Watts observed that in the 'New Age' of the Spirit, Asian religions, divorced from Asian conditions, have become "... exportable units, like bales of tea or coffee," processed and packaged to suit Western palates (1973: 48). However, he added, Buddhist 'missionaries' themselves must share the blame for this treatment of the *Buddha Dhamma*:

They do not seem to realize that social institutions constitute the Maya from which they should offer release... Thus it strikes the uninformed Westerner that Buddhism could be an alternative to Christianity: a body of metaphysical, cosmological, psychological and moral doctrines to be believed and substituted for what one has believed before. It also seems that the actual practice of these ways of liberation is almost entirely a matter of one's private life (1973: 49).

Individuals are not autonomous actors that unilaterally project their mental confusions onto society as if it were an external reality. They are as much products as producers of the society they live in. With regard to the view held by some Buddhist scholars that the mind unilaterally projects its confusions on to the world, Watts provides a salutary reminder,

[And] that is just the paradox of the situation: society gives us the idea that the mind or ego is inside the skin and that it acts on its own, apart from society ... What needs to be analysed or clarified in an individual's behaviour is the way in which it reflects the contradictions and confusions of culture (1973: 41,23).

Meditation, understood as a method of gaining inner tranquility, may provide temporary escape from stressful conditions for separate individuals. But unless meditation melts the heart and flows over into action, it will do little to *change* the world. At a time when mainstream ego-therapy is failing dismally, new oriental healers are flooding the market with ego-spiritualities. Buddhist meditation gurus would do well to grasp the profound insight of the Buddha into suffering in the

world it is based on an understanding of the Co-arising of Conditioned-Conditioning factors.

There is a tangle within and a tangle without, beings are tangled in a tangle (S I.13).

There is a sickness within and a sickness without (Sn 530).

It is not just separate individuals who are sick. Religious leaders, comfortably cushioned from the harsh realities of everyday real life, seem to be in ignorance that ordinary people are compelled to live in pathogenic conditions. The Buddha's 'within' and 'without' express the conditioned-conditioning character of social and psychological pathologies. This penetrating insight cuts through the delusion under which the average person labours, seeing himself as a *Homo Clausus*, a unique, separate individual, hermetically sealed within a tegument of skin. Delusion, lust and hatred are forms of *taṇhā* - a web we repeatedly weave together and in which we are all caught up. About his mentally confused disciple, Sati the Fisherman's Son, who persisted in the belief that the mind or consciousness runs on, independent of conditions, the Buddha remarked: "Sati is caught in the great net of craving, the tangle of craving" (MLS I.324). Society is the net; the tangle are its contradictions. Emotional conflicts and tensions reflect the conflicting claims that society makes on the individual; it dictates what is fashionable and desirable to have and what individuals must learn to hate and abhor. Culture raises expectations and frustrates them. The system can inflame *taṇhā* only by continuously creating dissatisfaction with what one is. People are pressurised to feel inadequate, 'guilty' before the all-seeing Eye of the Other - the dominant culture and its demands. The Buddhist psychiatric social worker David Brandon, points out:

Cravings have become cemented into all forms of social structures and institution ... These structures and their protective institutions continue to exacerbate and amplify the basic human inequalities in housing, health care, education and income. They reward and encourage greed, selfishness and exploitation, rather than love and compassion ... Certain peoples' lifestyles, characterized by greed and over-consumption, become dependent on the deprivation of the many. The oppressors and oppressed fall into the same trap of craving (1976: 10).

Everyone becomes *taṇhā* - crazed. The one who desires and the one who submits to desire. Both see desire as life's incentive. If desires are not immediately realisable they turn into hope as substitute. Since *taṇhā* is an Infinite Want, a sense of Lack, that is object non-specific and restless, nothing can ever satisfy it. It shifts from

this this object to another. everything is disposable when its particular desirability is exhausted.

Taṇha and Consumerist Culture

Karl Marx exposed the profit motive as the engine of market economics. But he did not sufficiently explore the subjective aspect to explain why humans are *motivated by profit*. There is an attempt to do it from the side of the vendible object in his discussion of the 'Fetishism of Commodities' (Section 4. *Capital I*). Today there is a global explosion of the fetishism of commodities (an atavistic regression to primitive religiosity in secular garb). Marx could hardly have imagined the dizzying forms that the fetishism of commodities would take in the age of electronic mass communication. The media blur the lines between goods that are needed and goods for which a need is created by tantalising commercial images. This is an age when fetishism has become the religion of the masses. But, what is the secret process by which an object is fetishised? What inner proclivity holds individuals enthralled by the witchery of commodities? The Buddha's microscopic investigation of the mechanisms of craving provides the answer. It helps us to unmask the insidious workings of craving in today's globalised economy of greed and the immense suffering it spawns. Craving is not the impulse of one individual *vis a vis* another individual or thing. Craving *constitutes* the 'other' as an object of lust or hate (See section, 'Semiotics of Desire', next Chapter). Craving is a circuit that runs in and through individuals, social and cultural institutions, and is inscribed into our very bodies. Consumerist culture inflames all the senses - eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind, with fetishised objects. It sets the World on Fire. The stages of this process can be summarised as follows: 1. Consumerist culture produces commodities which, as fetishised objects function as signs of desire. 2. It does so by perverting the true character of the projected images. 3. It masks the absence - *anatta* - of a basic reality and suggests they are pregnant with signification. 4. These significations bear no relation to any reality whatsoever: they are pure simulacra or fakes, because the glamorous images cannot give what they promise; beauty, youth, virility, social prestige, power, etc. Craving deludes people, making them chase after illusions. In other words, the culture of consumerism is generalisation of delusion. It is glamorised, collective lunacy. Craving is the fascism within which makes people submit to the very things that enslave them - *taṇhā doso*.

The economy of infinite growth is fuelled by infinite desire. Desire magnified to the nth degree. Today's secular religions of instant worldly gratification and the sacred success-religions, which promise instant answer to prayers for worldly betterment, reinforce each other on the Market of Craving. In this scheme of

things, *The End of History* will be a Paradise of Mass Consumerism. It is in fact, the ultimate degradation of the human being. 'The Final Man' - reduced to the state of a consuming herd animal. Is this a consummation to be desired?

CHAPTER 14

NIBBĀNA: REALISED FREEDOM

After a careful study of the symptoms the Buddha tracked the disease to its source. In the Third Noble Truth he states what the cure should be:

This is the Noble Truth of the stopping of *dukkha*; the utter passionless stopping of *tanhā*, its renunciation, surrender, release, the lack of pleasure in it. (DB IV.16)

The Buddha used the term *nibbāna* for the total cessation or the extinguishing of the triple forked fire of Craving. When Craving is extinguished, there is not a Void. One is filled with a feeling of dispassion towards self and compassion for others.

Dukkha Nirodha: Cessation of Suffering

The Buddha's Way is aimed at the dissolution of the fictional Self through eradication of Desire in order to come to a direct experience of life as a process of physiological activities, feeling and perceiving, unfettered by concepts and signs. Freedom from desire makes consciousness *non-representative*. Awakened awareness sees through the codes by which culture computes actuality, but does not replace them with a new code. Walpola Rahula explains that in the Buddhist tradition a distinction is made between two types of knowledge: "*anubodha* which is 'knowing according to'; that is to say knowledge according to a particular view or with the aid of concepts and *pativedha* – 'counter knowledge' without names and labels" (1978:49). Counter knowledge 'pierces through' the veils of concepts. Middle Way perception goes between and through either/or categories of conventional thought and stays on the 'further shore' of direct experience and knowledge. The liberated person is one "who goes against the stream, who has crossed over and stands on dry land" (GS II.5).

Nibbana in Mainstream Buddhism

The neglect in Mahayana Buddhism and the side-stepping in Theravada Buddhism of *Anattā Dhamma* is one the most serious deviations from the original teachings of the Buddha in mainstream Buddhism. This is paralleled by an equally serious deviation; the misrepresentation of the early Buddhist understanding and experience

of the practical realization of the Goal of the Buddha's Way to human liberation from suffering - *Nibbāna* (P) or *Nirvāna* (Sk). All 'orthodox' Buddhisms suggest that *Nibbāna* is a state of extinction to be attained after myriads of re-births in *samsara*, when the individual has finally purged himself or herself of craving. This implies that *nibbāna* is realized with the ultimate extinction of being, not the extinguishing of craving in the here and now - before death. In this doctrine of Buddhist eschatology, *nibbāna* is postponed to an indeterminate future. Craving instead of being extinguished, keeps asserting itself as the longing for ever more propitious rebirths. The doctrinal revisionism with regard to *anattā* and *nibbāna* is understandable because they are homologues for the same experience.¹

In Sri Lanka, obituary notices and wall posters announcing the passing away of a Buddhist carry the pious wish, "May he/she attain *Nibbāna*". This is similar to the Christian prayer: "May he/she obtain eternal rest." In many aspects mainstream Buddhism shares the beliefs and practices of theistic religions, in particular belief in deities, heavens and hell. Buddhist monks have become priest-like mediators of invisible merit which can be accumulated like credit in a bank for a life after death (See Chapter 10, introductory section).

***Nibbāna* is NOT a Transcendental State**

Speculations as to whether *nibbāna* is a transcendental state or not abound in the writings of Buddhist and non Buddhist scholars despite enough evidence in the Theravada canon that it is not. The early Buddhist understanding of *nibbāna* is very clearly handed down in the Theravada Canon. A lucid exposition based on the experience of a liberated *bhikkhuni* is given in the *Cūlavedalla Sutta* (M I. 44). It should be sufficient to end speculations by Buddhists as well as non Buddhist scholars about the 'nature' of the nibbanic experience. The Sutta consists of a question and answer elucidation of the step by step progress towards realising *nibbāna*, given by Bhikkhuni Dhammadinna to a male disciple of the Buddha named Visakha. According to a tradition handed down in the Therīgāthā (XII), he was her former husband. When he heard that she had won arahathood, perhaps sceptical of his former wife's accomplishment and fame, he went to meet her and interview her about her understanding of the Dhamma. The culmination of the question and answer session was approached when she was asked, "What is the counterpart *patibhāga* - of ignorance"? Let us follow it from here on to the climax.

¹ For a scholarly discussion of the early canonical meaning of *Anattā* and *Nibbāna* see respectively *Anattā as Via Media* (1987) and *Nibbānic Experience: A Non-transcendental Interpretation* (1992) by Y. Karunadasa.

The counterpart of ignorance - *avijja* - is knowledge - *vijja*; the counterpart of knowledge - *vijja* - is deliverance - *vimutti*; the counterpart of deliverance is *nibbāna*". When asked, "What is the counterpart - *patibhaga* - of *nibbāna*"? Dhammadinna replied, "Friend, you are pushing your questions too far; taking the Excellent Path is for culmination in *nibbāna*, for abiding in *nibbāna*". The doubting Visakha checked the correctness of the answers with the Buddha. The Buddha told him, "Of great wisdom is the *bhikkhuni* Dhammadinna. If you had asked me, I too would have answered exactly as the *bhikkhuni* Dhammadinna answered and so should you remember it" (MLS I. 367-368). It may well be asked whether Dhammadinna was fudging when she refused to speak about a counterpart of *nibbāna*. Or was it cryptic mystical talk? Was Dhammadinna putting off her husband Visakha, the way the Upanishadic sage Yajnavalkya put off the persistent questioning of his wife Maitreyi, by saying 'The Atman is 'inexorable' and has to be described by No!, No!?' (See Chapter 6). Is *nibbāna* too an inexorable experience like Yajnavalkya's experience of Atman?

Such speculations must be set aside because the Buddha fully agreed with the *bhikkhuni*'s exposition, her refusal to discuss a counterpart of *nibbāna* and her insistence that one takes the Excellent Path "for culmination in *nibbāna*, for abiding in *nibbāna*". There are several noteworthy features in this narrative. In the first place it reverses the roles of the protagonists in the Upanishadic narrative. Here it is the husband who is instructed by his former wife. Consider the astonishing character of discipleship in the Buddha Sangha. A young woman has experienced *the same liberation* as the Master. Any claim that a follower has had the same core experience as the Master and Founder would in the three semitic religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam be denounced as an outrageous blasphemy. Yet this was regarded as quite normal in early Buddhist practice! And, the Buddha says, he would have instructed the sceptical man in exactly the same way as the *bhikkhuni*! This is unthinkable in the Brahmanic tradition where it was forbidden for women to learn, let alone teach, the Vedas. *Nibbāna* is a share-able experience in the here and now. The experience of a mystic like Yajnavalkya could not be duplicated by a disciple. Whatever knowledge, he may have gained in a transic state, had to be accepted on his authority alone.

Note well that Dhammadinna does not say that *nibbāna* is inexorable. She says there is *no counterpart* to *nibbāna*. To understand why Dhammadinna says there is no counterpart to *nibbāna* one must take off one's onto-theological spectacles and understand it in the terms of the early Buddhist experience. Visakha's entire line of questioning was about the relationship between paired opposites seen as each others counterparts, the one conditioning the arising or cessation of the other. Dhammadinna stops with *nibbāna*. No more counterparts. The Middle Way goes through the play of paired opposites and rests on "the further shore of

freedom". There is just the pure experience of bliss and the individual rests in it. Through training in right mindfulness and moral perfection, the disciple realises self-liberation. The mind is brought back to its origin in feeling and perception and remains there. Forms are perceived in their transient 'becomingness'. The tendency to conceptualise is arrested. Percepts and concepts are fixed by *naming* - that is to say by using sound-symbols or words. This reifies experience which is flux. The vicious distorting process against which the Buddha warned in the *Mūlapariyāya Sutta* is halted (See Chapter 10 above). A well meaning a disciple could, after perceiving *nibbāna*, instead of experiencing it, conceive '*Nibbāna*' and begin to speculate about it. Now there is a counterpart to the experience - a concept of '*Nibbāna*'. The disciple then conceives himself 'apart from *Nibbāna*', conceives himself 'in *Nibbāna*'. This triggers craving and clinging. The disciple says to himself, '*Nibbāna* is mine' and 'delights in *Nibbāna*.' "Why"?, the Buddha asks, and answers, "Because he has not fully understood it, I say ". The experience of *nibbāna* is liberation from the bifurcation of the seemingly permanent 'I' and the 'am' - of ever transient existence. The contradiction between 'essence' and 'existence' is superseded. On the other hand, once the concept '*nibbāna*' is constructed, the thinking self turns itself to an autonomous subject and makes *nibbāna* an object of thought 'other-than-itself'. It becomes vain, wrongly believing he has grasped it.

An example may help clarify this. Someone who is deeply absorbed listening to a beautiful piece of music is lost in it, is one with it. There is no 'self' consciousness, only pure enjoyment. The music and the enjoyment are one. The moment the person steps out of the experience to think about it, he-she is one step removed from the experience. If the person begins to speak about it he-she is two steps removed from the experience. One is three steps removed from the experience when one begins to talk about it. The listener who did not have the experience, can only imagine it and speculate about it. Enjoying music comes closest to the exhilarating experience of passing passage. We can enjoy music oblivious of everything around us, but we cannot freeze the experience and cling to it. The joy *is* in the sweet harmony of flowing sounds. Our 'views' (sic) of the world are visually overdetermined, making us see and conceive a kinetic actuality in terms of static or moving images or *rupas*. Concepts are mental images fixed by words. Discursive and dialectical thought, Dhammadinna pointed out, are *verbal* activities (MLS I. 301-302). This elucidates why the Buddha observed,

In whatever way they think of it, it becomes otherwise. And herein lies its falseness - the deceptive thing (*mosadhammam*) that it is (*Sutta Nipata* vs 757).

Once one begins to think about it, the living experience has a counterpart in the

head - the concept. The play of binary opposites of 'this' and 'that' begins. Once *nibbāna* is conceived as a transcendental state, speculations can begin as to whether 'this' is like 'that' - a mystic's blissful experience of God, or an inexorable God beyond God or an arid experience of a Void or of some Divine Abyss. In the early Buddhist nibbanic experience, life flows. It is - *anicca* - passing passage. It does not flow into a God or a Void. It flows. The 'it' here is a linguistic convention not an impersonal subject of movement.

Seeing through the Semiotics of Desire

The Buddha's Dhamma did not seek to satisfy human curiosity about how the world and every 'thing' in it came into existence. His sole concern was to disclose the cause of suffering and to help humans to eradicate this cause by their own effort. Humans suffer because of their ignore-ance of the true character of actuality as impermanent and without substance. Ordinarily, we do not see mere things or beings. We perceive them in terms of what they *mean* to us - 'good for me'/'bad for me'. In other words see not things, but signs, and we measure everything in relation to our interests. As a result beings and things trigger lust or hatred in us. We are not aware of what transmutes perceived forms into signs of lust or hate. It is therefore far more important to understand, not so much how things come into existence - *ontogenesis* - but *semiosis* - the processes by which everything in the universe is converted into 'Signs'. People live under the sway of signs which are identified by names. The Buddha said, "Failing to discern the naming process, they are subject to the reign of death"(S.I.1.39). The Buddha also declared, "Name has overwhelmed everything ... and name itself is that one thing, beneath whose sway all others come" (K.S. 55). Since everything in heaven and on earth is signed and named, we live, to use Roland Barthes' phrase, in an 'Empire of Signs'.

The Witchery of Signs is unmasked in a brilliant exposition of the Dhamma by Sariputta Thera, in the *Mahavedella Sutta* (M.I XLIII). He was asked by a colleague, among other questions about the *Dhamma*, what the Buddha meant by "*animitta ceto vimutti* - signless liberation of the mind". Sariputta's answer is a masterly exposition of what could be called the *semiotics of desire*. Sariputta elucidates the process by which an innocent percept (*rūpa*) is turned into a sign by a name - (*nāma*); a name being a sound - *sadda* - functioning as a sign. The hidden demiurge of this trickery, Sariputta discloses, is craving in its triple form: "*rago pamāṇakaraṇo; doso pamāṇakaraṇo; moho pamāṇakaraṇo* - lust is a measurer; hate is a measurer; delusion is a measurer". The mind measures - or passes value judgements on percepts - "equal, better or worse" (K.S. I.17). Sariputta explains how and why this happens: perceived forms are measured by reifying them - "*rāgo kiñcano; doso kiñcano; moho kiñcano* - lust is something; hate is something; delu-

sion is *something*". It is by turning an ephemeral form into a fixed 'thing' that it can be made an object of lust, hatred and delusion. The diagnosis is illuminating. Lust, hate and delusion are not the result of qualities intrinsic to what is perceived. It is the gaze of the beholder which, under the sway of craving, transforms perceived forms into lustful, hateful or delusive 'things'. Two verses in the Samyukta Nikaya state this unambiguously,

Ne te kàma yàni citràni loke - sankappa ràgo purisassa kàmo
Tithanti citràni tatheva loke - athettha dhirà vinayanti chandam (S.I.
 22).

What is beautiful in the world are not in themselves sensual - what provokes lust is man's sensuality. The beautiful remain as they are in the world. The wise control desire for them

Interestingly, in this instance the Buddha does not use the generic term, *sattha* - beings. He speaks of the lustful intent of *men* - *purisassa*. Craving transforms what is pleasant into lustful objects. But how does craving achieve this? Sariputta lays bare the stratagem - "*rago nimittakarano: doso nimittakarano; moho nimitta karano* - lust is a sign-maker; hate is sign-maker; delusion is a sign-maker". We discussed in Chapter the import of the Buddha's observation that men and women began to lust after each other when the marks of 'male' and 'female' appeared on the them. These 'marks' were perceived as signs of lust. How then can one liberate oneself from the bondage of signs? By emptying the mind of signs and by arresting the intrusion of signs into the mind. When the mind is thus well trained, one is well established in the "unshakeable liberation of the mind - *animitta ceto vimutti*, concludes Sariputta.

An illustration borrowed from Roland Barthes may help clarify how this process of sign-making functions even in today's world of rampant commercialisation. A bunch of red roses in Western culture is a sign of passion and as such it has become a vendible commodity. They are 'passionified', writes Barthes, "But on the plane of analysis one cannot confuse the roses as a signifier and the roses as a sign. By themselves the roses as a signifier is *empty*.- they "remain as they are in the world". As a sign it is *full*, it is a meaning" (1995:113 emphasis added). A red rose growing in the wild and "blushing unseen", is not a sign and is therefore empty of signification. As Edward Said explains on the back cover of Barthes' book *Mythologies* (1995), "For Barthes words and things have the organized capacity to say something; at the same time since they are signs, words and objects have the bad faith always to appear natural to their consumer, as if what they say is eternal, true, necessary, instead of arbitrary, made, contingent... Each of the little essays in this book wrenches a definition out of a common but constructed object, making the object speak its hidden, but ever present, reservoir of manufactured sense".

When Barthes speaks of 'emptiness' he is not indulging in abstruse mystic cant, neither is he talking of an ontological emptiness. Yet, when the Buddha and the first Buddhists speak of *suññatā* - 'emptiness', many Western Christian scholars have attempted to introject into the term the theological meaning of an ontological emptiness. *Nibbana* is imagined as abiding in a mystical Void.

What then is the 'void' that the Buddha and his first disciples spoke about? Sariputta explains, It is being devoid of craving - "*suññā rāga* - empty of lust; *suññā dosa* - empty of hate; *suññā moha* - empty of delusion". When the mind is concentrated, Sariputta explains, the well trained disciple arrests the intrusion of signs which distort perception. The mind is freed of the tendency to vest things with signification and is thereby liberated from craving. They are no longer 'passionified'. The mind is 'empty'. Empty of what? Empty of 'signs'. Empty of *Craving*. This is not an experience of a transcendental ontological Void. It refers to continued and concentrated mindfulness - *sati*. It is emptying the mind of signs and liberating it from its sign-making proclivity - the habitual compulsion to project significations on to percepts. Overcoming this compulsion, says Sariputta, is *animitta cetovimutti* - "signless liberation of the mind". It is nibbanic freedom. It is liberation from what the Buddha called "the tyranny of names" (K.S.I.55)

Does this mean that all life has to be denuded of significations and symbolism? No, it means that one recognises the conventional character of signs and clearly comprehends their non substantiality. A red light is a useful social convention to warn of danger. The red light in itself is not a carrier of danger. A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. Language a symbolic system, is made up of words or phonemes - symbolic sounds. Names are sound symbols. The definitions in a dictionary do not refer to intrinsic and objective meanings. They are determined by the conventional laws of lexicology and in different linguistic communities the same object can be named by different word-sounds, as the Buddha pointed out using the example of the various sounds by which a bowl was named in his day. (MLS.III.282). Also, the same sound can be used for different objects in another linguistic community. Thus the choice of a phoneme is arbitrary and it is only within a particular linguistic system that a sound has a fixed meaning. This creates the impression that the relationship between a sound as a sign and its signification is necessary, natural and eternal. A new born is *infans* - 'without language'. Language takes on the character of a power which invades a child's mind from the outside. This primal experience lodged in consciousness is activated by ideologists who claim that meanings descend into the head from a Transcendental Signifier - a Logos or an OM. What is important is to see the conventional character of language and signs and see percepts in their suchness, in their becoming-ness and not as permanent be-ings.

By establishing oneself in Right Mindfulness, consciousness is decon-

structed and craving is destroyed - *visankhāragatam cittam; tanhanam khayam* (Dhp 154). The role of craving in creating a fixed relationship between a form and a name is seen for what it is, "a magic show - a conjurer's trick entire" (See next section). The magician is craving:

‘Name’, friends, is one end, ‘Form’ is the other end; consciousness is in the middle; and craving is the seamstress, for it is craving that stitches it into the arising of ‘this’ and ‘that’ existence (A III 400).

Once craving is destroyed, "consciousness is signless - *anidassanam* - limitless and luminous on all sides" (D I. 223). This is nibbanic liberation and bliss, here and now.

Matrix of the Mind

People of all ages and in diverse places have nursed the belief and hope that, in spite of their fractured life-experience, there exists a redeeming and justifying wholeness and that they would one day come face to face with this final, objective and infinite ‘totality.’ Some of the Buddha's disciples wondered whether such an all encompassing totality exists. "What is the All?", they asked. The Buddha replied,

Listen carefully, I will teach reach you. What is the All? It is the eye and visible objects, the ear and sounds, the nose and odours, the tongue and tastes, the body and tangible objects, the mind and mental objects. This is the All. Now if anyone were to say: “Apart from this All, I proclaim another All, it would *be mere talk* on his part and on being questioned, he would not be able to proceed ... For what reason? *It would be beyond his scope* (S IV.15. emphasis added).

The Buddha diagnosed the mind as a faculty which *feels* and thinks. There is nothing in the mind which had not first been felt by the senses. Even when one thinks of and imagines a Supreme Being, there is always an empirically existing mind that does the thinking and the imagining. The thinker engages in self deception by thinking a thought, and then convincing himself and others that his thought-product exists independent of his act of thinking. The ‘All’ is an imagination of the mind. Metaphysicians will readily concede that perceived forms - *phenomena* - are based on sensory impressions. But they posit a disjunction between the five physical senses and the mind. They then assume that it is the mind alone which comprehends the inner, unchanging essence - *noumenon* - of a perceived form. Since they proceed from the assumed premise of immanent ideas or essences latent in the mind, they must of necessity trace the origin of ideas to a metaphysical source. The Upanishadic philosophers believed in the divine origin of consciousness

and attributed the active part of knowledge: feeling, perception and conception to a 'spiritual self' which is a fragment of Absolute Being Mind and Bliss - *sat-cit-ananda* - temporarily trapped in the body. The whole argument rests on the premise that consciousness is independent of the body and that the ideal is the real. The Buddha burst this bubble of fantasy and exposed its airy nothingness.

Whatever consciousness - be it past, future, or present, in oneself or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near - a keen sighted person sees it, is mindful of its source - *yoniso manasikara* - ..., and he would find it empty; find it hollow; he would find it void of essence. What *essence* would there be in a consciousness?

Form is like a mass of foam and feeling, but an airy bubble.

Perception is like a mirage and constructions (*sankharas*) a plantain tree.

Consciousness is a magic show - a juggler's trick entire (S III.142).

When the bark of a plantain tree is unpeeled layer by layer, one does not come to a solid indestructible core. So too, when all the constructs (labels and names) by which an identity is constituted are unpacked one does not come to a fixed essence. An individual's identity is built up with layer upon layer of names indicating, gender, ethnicity, caste, religion, occupation, etc. But the 'I' which says "I am this" or "that", develops the conceit that all these refer to an unchanging inner essence. The very word 'identity' derived from the Latin words *idem* + *entitas* - 'same' + 'entity' - assumes that behind the changing appearance of a form, there is a permanent unchanging essence. "What *essence* would there be in a consciousness?", the Buddha asks. He uses the diagnostically sharper term *anannatha* - 'not otherness' to underscore the fact that the sense of the 'one' arises conditioned by, and is dependent on, the sense of the 'other'. However, *anannatha* is persistently and incorrectly translated as 'identity', smuggling into the Dhamma an ideological assumption alien to it.

Individuals begin their lives through birth into circumstances they did not pre-determine. So they cling to the comforting notion of predestination; that their 'unique' identities must have had its origins in a metaphysical intent. However, all that an individual needs to do, is to descend from such celestial day dreams to 'mother-earth' - to the womb, where identity consciousness was birthed through co-touching - *samphassa*, feeling - *vedana*, and perception - *sanna*. The Buddha calls the method by which the mind is made to descend to actual life, *yoniso manasikāra*. It is a very graphic term. It literally means 'making the mind work at its *yonī*'. The concrete referent of the term *yonī* is, i. 'womb'. ii. 'origin', 'way of birth', 'place of birth', 'matrix' (PED). Its derivative *yoniso* (ablative) means 'down to its origin' or 'foundation'. Its opposite, *ayoniso* means 'muddled', 'disorderly

thinking' (PED). This is remarkable language, when one considers that patriarchal ideology has regarded reason and rational thought as a masculine prerogative. Western ideology has regarded women as irrational 'hysterical' creatures - *husterikos* (Gk) endowed with wombs! In metaphysical and theological discourse the origin of the mind is attributed to a divine Patrix, or a 'Spirit' veiled in neutrality (the Vedic *Atman-Brahman* or the Greco-Christian, *Pneuma*). The patriarchal assumption always has been of a divine filiation of thought and of the Word (*Logos*). The Buddha shattered this pretentiousness in the Agganna Sutta - word-sons do not come from the mouth of a Father-God. Sons and daughters come from the *yoni* of their mothers. They are *yoni jato* - 'womb born'. The disciple is made 'mindful' of the actual maternal filiation of thought. The rootlessly meandering prodigal mind is made to return to its Mother's Home. It is no longer an alien in the body, which, in patriarchal discourse has been condemned and relegated to the realm of the 'feminine-impermanent' - *anicca*. The mind is brought down to source and remains close to its origins, in the undifferentiating unity of a kinetic actuality. It feels *anukampa* - 'pulsates along with' - everything that lives. The liberated person experiences bliss here and now.

Affirmation, not Negation of Life

Alan Watts describes the freedom and bliss which arises when the constructs of craving are destroyed,

Nibbāna is a radical transformation of how it feels to be alive: it feels as if everything were myself, or as if everything including 'my' thoughts and actions were happening of itself. There are still efforts, choices and decisions, but not in the sense that 'I' make them'; they arise of themselves in relation to circumstances. This is therefore to feel life not as an encounter between subject and object, but as a field where the contest of opposites sites is perceived as a play of opposites. Buddhism associates insight (*prajna*) with compassion (*karuna*), which is the appropriate attitude of the organism to its social and natural environment when it is discovered that the shifting boundary between the individual and the world, which we call the individual's behaviour, is common to both. My 'outline', which is not just the outline of the skin but of every organ and cell in my body, is also the 'in-line' of the world. The movements of the outline are my movements, but they are also movements of the world - of its in-line. Seeing this, I *feel with the world* (Watts 1973: 66 emphasis added).

In striking contrast to Watts, Christian-Western scholars generally have tended to regard the Buddha's Way to *Nibbāna* as a *via negativa* a *negativa mysticism* or as a form of life-denying nihilism. Such misinterpretations or misconceptions of *Nibbāna* are not new. The Buddha himself was accused by his adversaries of being "a perverter who lays down the cutting off, the annihilation and destruction of essential being". He resolutely denied the charge:

Though this is what I affirm and, what I teach, yet some *samanas* and brahmins - wrongly, erroneously, and falsely - charge me, in defiance of facts, with being an annihilationist and with preaching the disintegration, destruction and extinction of existing creatures. It is just what I am not, and what I do not affirm is wrongly, erroneously and falsely charged against me by these good people who make me out to be an annihilationist. Both in the past and today, I have consistently explained *Dukkha* and the ending of *Dukkha*. If people abuse, revile and denounce the Tathagata for this, - it begets in him no resentment, annoyance or dissatisfaction (M I.180).

With regard to the suggestion that Buddhism inculcates a negative attitude to the world which is evil in itself, one can do no better than quote the Master himself:

Certain *samanas* and brahmins wrongly, vainly, lyingly and falsely accuse me saying: The samana Gotama is on the wrong track and so are his disciples. He has declared that: Whoever has attained to the stage of deliverance called 'the Beautiful' finds everything else repulsive. But I do not say this. What I say is that, Whenever anyone has attained to the stage of deliverance called 'the Beautiful', he knows that everything is beautiful (D III. 34)

Is the Buddhist ideal as taught by the Buddha really life-negating? It is difficult to surpass the moving language in which this question is answered by the American Buddhist and scholar, Nolan Pliny Jacobson:

Buddhism is the first system of orientation and devotion to affirm that individual men and women embody an aim, largely hidden from conscious thought, towards greater freedom of quality in their experience. Buddhist meditation is a discipline that unravels the ego-dominated life by reconditioning one's *bodily-sensitive self* and shifting the centre of gravity over to the flow of unstructured quality in the passing *now*... For those who are able to maintain their centre of gravity in the passing *now*, nature confers on them the one sign they succeeded. That sign is joy - not pleasure, but joy celebrating the wonder of being everyday alive... This is what it means to be free, free to celebrate the aesthetic richness which comes as a gift beyond the claims of the self (1986: 86-88)

Living in the passing *now*, experiencing life as *passing passage* does not produce existential *Angst* or *ennui* but bliss, because one flows with the flow of life, realizing with the Buddha that, “nothing is worth clinging to” (M I.255). The Buddha saw with total clarity that the totality as it presents itself to human perception and conception is a product of a thinking head, which appropriates the world in the only way it can. Onto-theological or philosophical appropriation is different from the artistic, religious and scientific appropriations of the world. They remain nonetheless human appropriations. Failing to recognize this constructing-constructed - *sankhara-sankhata* - character of consciousness and its 'realities', humans cling to them and create their own frustrations and distress and spawn violence in the world. People live in the delusion that their representation of reality is reality itself, and cling to them declaring: "This alone is true, everything thing else is false". The will for 'Truth' as Ultimate Reality is Will to Delusion as Will to Absolute Power. Thus what is important is not to get involved in debates and conflict about 'truth' but to understand the power of desire and desire for power behind truth claims. Ultimately the one or the other 'Truth' prevails not because it is 'objectively' true but because of the power to impose it on others. People cling to views because they correspond to their desires or assuage their fears. When craving is destroyed, views are seen for what they are 'constructs' for self perpetuation, for pleasure and for power. The Awake Person has shed the scales of delusion - *moha* - and sees actuality in its *suchness*. He/she is established in concentrated and continuous mindfulness, which is a moral disposition - the "signless delivery of the mind".

The Buddha's Way to Freedom is based on a wholly verifiable premise: the 'self' and what it clings to are both fictions, in the sense of fabrications. Hence the Buddha's song of celebration when he broke through to freedom: "Consciousness is deconstructed - Craving is destroyed - *visankāragatam cittam, tanhānam khayyam*". (Dhp 153-154) The Builder was discovered and the House of Ego demolished.

Nibbāna is not happiness in another reality beyond the threshold of death. *Nibbāna* is extinguishing the fire of craving and the experience of freedom, peace and bliss in the HERE and NOW.

CHAPTER 15

MAGGA: THE BUDDHA'S WAY TO HUMAN LIBERATION

The Buddha decided to launch his movement for human liberation from Varanasi, the capital city of Kasi. The choice was undoubtedly strategic since Varanasi, located on the banks of the River Ganges, had become an important commercial and religious centre by the sixth century BCE. On the way to Varanasi the Buddha met a *samana* of the Ajivaka School (V.P.m.v.6.10, M 1.171). Impressed by the Buddha's extraordinary bearing, the stranger asked: "On account of whom have you gone forth, who is your teacher and whose *dhmma* do you profess?" The Buddha replied with supreme self-confidence:

Victorious over all, I am all-wise,
I am free from blemish in every way,
I have left everything
Obtained deliverance by the destruction of craving
To turn the Wheel of Dhamma
To found the kingdom of Dhamma
I go to Kasi's city, (Varanasi)
I will beat the drum of the immortal
In the darkness of the world.

"According to what you claim, worthy one", the wanderer responded, "you ought to be Victor (*Jīna*) of the Unending". To which the Buddha replied supreme self confidence:

Victors indeed are they
Who have won to destruction of defilements
Vanquished by me are evil things
Therefore am I indeed a *Jīna*.

The Buddha saw himself - as a *Jīna*. As we saw in Chapter 8, this image of Victorious Hero, is the transference to the moral plane of the classic theme of hero epics - Exile, Battle and Return. The Buddha presents himself as a New Type of Hero. The great kings of the period were *Cakkavattins* - Wheel-turners. Kings 'desirous of conquest' led their fourfold army to invade neighbouring kingdoms and subjugate their inhabitants. The Buddha is a new type of wheel turner, who turns not the wheel of violence and greed, but the Wheel of Righteousness. As a counter model

to the violent fourfold army, he founded a new fourfold non-violent band of men and women, yellow-robed mendicants and white-robed householders,

The Buddha's declaration that he is going to Kasi to inaugurate a Kingdom of Righteousness, shows that he intended to launch a social movement to bring about a new state of affairs in the world, not merely to teach a way of private salvation for self-seeking individuals.

Fourth Noble Truth

The Fourth Noble Truth: The going-along-the-Way that leads to the eradication of suffering (Vin I.10).

The content and the outreach of the Eightfold Path clearly shows that it is not a negative morality. It is *the most positively formulated* of all known ethical teachings, religious and secular. Each of the practices of the Eightfold Path is prefaced by the word *samma* generally translated as 'right', but its meaning is richer than 'right' as opposed to 'wrong'. Like the Latin *summum*, it indicates 'consummate', 'perfect', 'excellent'. The Eightfold Path is not a list of prohibitions or a table of 'Thou shalt' and 'Thou shalt not's', laid down by a divine legislator or his intermediary. It is a positive morality given to all human beings so that they could perfect themselves. "The supreme goal of Buddhism is cheerfulness, stillness, absence of desire, and this goal is *achieved*. Buddhism is not a religion in which one merely aspires after perfection: perfection is the normal case" (Nietzsche, *AC*, 21 emphasis his).

The Eight-spoked Wheel of *Dhamma* blazed a new trail. It is a dynamic symbol of the Middle Way which entails sustained effort, practice and perseverance in the pursuit of moral excellence for its own sake. Each turn of the Wheel takes the 'wayfarer' forward on the Road to Perfection, until he/she becomes a skilful 'Wheel-turner', self reliant and self-warded. The last of the eight practices is not the end of a linear series in which one stage is left behind in order to pass on to the next. Due to the linearity of speech they are mentioned one after the other, but they are the eight 'limbs' or spokes of the Wheel of Righteousness. Progress along the Way has to be understood as a spiral like forward movement of the Wheel of Dhamma. The Eight-limbed Way is an organic unity of theory and practice. As with every type of organic growth, the next and the final stage is seminally present in the first stage; the earlier stages are the conditions for the next stage; they are carried forward, contained in, and perfected at the highest stage. The highest stage is not a last brick placed at the top of a moral pyramid, it is rather the blossoming of energy well-directed, just as the lotus flower is what its seed potentially was. The culmination of the Way is *Nibbāna*. Laboured effort is no longer necessary. Just as a skilled craftsmen or artisan no longer thinks of his technique as he creates a work

of art, so too, a skilled disciple, does what is good and beautiful spontaneously as if it were a 'natural' flair. The Wheel of Dhamma becomes self-propelling.

The Eightfold Path was first explained to five ascetics, but there is nothing in the Path to suggest that it was given primarily or exclusively to renunciators. The Buddha recognized that renouncing household life facilitates the striving after perfection, but he did not state that renunciation was the 'higher way'. There is only One Way. The Buddha was once asked if a *pabbajjita* (one who has left the household life) is more likely to attain the goal than a *gihin* (householder). He did not make a categorical statement about the two ways of life as such:

On this matter, young man, I make a distinction and do not speak categorically ... If either a householder or one who has gone forth is faring along rightly, then as a result and consequence of his right view, he is accomplishing the right path and is skilful in *Dhamma* (M.L.S. II. 386).

For the Buddha, what mattered was not a person's inherited or adopted social status but his/her conduct. In the first Sangha, neither the Buddha nor his renouncer disciples lorded it over the householders. Neither were the householders required to prostrate themselves like serfs before *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*. There were indeed differences within the community, but, as Bardwell Smith points out:

these [were] of training, role, function and opportunity - not necessarily of dedication. The latter distinctions do exist among men, but Buddhism has a name (*savaka sangha*) for those who have attained high levels of spiritual growth and it is not restricted to the monastic disciples (1972:96).

The canonical writings report that there were *puthujjanas* as well as *arahats* among renunciators and householders. The ritual status difference that exists today between *bhikkhus* and householders is a later development.

The Noble Eightfold Path

I. *Samma ditthi* - Consummate View

The first step is Right Understanding of the Four Noble Truths. This is in accordance with the principles of any scientific, goal-directed activity: without a correct theory or vision there can be no correct practice. Thereafter a goal, which accords with this vision, has to be clearly defined. The next methodical step is the formulation of work principles and a programme of action to achieve step by step, the intended goal - the realization of the values and norms, which underlie the shared vision.

Since the Buddha warned that clinging to views is one of the most common sources of conflict in the world, it could be asked whether the Buddha was not doing exactly what he deplored. After rejecting other views as 'untrue' did he not begin by positing his own as *the* 'Right View'? The objection might be valid if the it is understood as a set of doctrines propositions and not as a guide for action and righteous living.

For the Buddha, debates about the truth or falsehood of views independent of practice, is a profitless preoccupation. The first limb of the Eightfold Path is called 'a view' in a very specific sense. The *Dhamma* is a 'Come and See' Teaching. Come, listen and see with an open mind. Understand and test it in practice. The problematic - truth of suffering, its diagnosis and the prescription for the eradication of suffering are clearly stated. Whether this goal can be realised or not has to be tested in practice, not turned into a matter for debates about doctrinal truths. The Buddha explained this at length in *The Parable of the Poisonous Snake* (MLS.I. 167-182). At first glance, this title might create the impression that the 'poisonous snake' refers to heretical views of other schools. In fact, the Buddha is warning his disciples about the dangers inherent in the wrong understanding of his Teaching by his own mendicant disciples. The *Dhamma* wrongly comprehended could become as dangerous as a serpent wrongly grasped. The Buddha had to issue this warning, because he had observed how a spirit of contentiousness and competitiveness about the theoretical meaning of his Dhamma had crept into the ranks of his mendicant followers. Instead of practising *Dhamma*, some *bhikkhus* had begun to treat it as a doctrinal system and entered into disputes among themselves about its true meaning,

Some misguided men learn the *Dhamma* - discourses, stanzas, verses, exclamations, sayings, birth stories, marvels and answers to questions. They learn the *Dhamma*, by rote but do not examine the meaning of those teachings with wisdom. They do not gain a reflective acceptance of them. Instead they learn the *Dhamma* by rote only for the sake of criticising others and for winning in debates, and they do not experience the good for the sake of which they learned the *Dhamma*. Those teachings being wrongly grasped by them, conduce to their harm and suffering for a long time (M.I. 133)

In this discourse the Buddha used a variety of illustrations to clarify what correct and incorrect grasping of *Dhamma* is. The most remarkable of these is The Parable of the Raft: a man seeking to escape from highly dangerous territory comes to a great lake. There is no bridge or a boat to ferry him across to the further shore of safety. He uses his ingenuity, gathers some sticks and branches and having bound them together with grass and creepers he builds himself a raft and crosses over to the safe shore. Would it not be consummate folly, the Buddha asked, if the man

were to say to himself:

I, depending on the raft and striving with my hands and feet, crossed over safely to the beyond. Suppose now that I, having put this raft on my head, or having lifted it on to my shoulder, should proceed as I desire?

The raft becomes a hindrance rather than a help to the man's further progress. A wise person on the other hand, the Buddha pointed out, would either beach the raft or sink it in the water and get on with his journey unencumbered by a useless burden,

Disciples, the *Dhamma*, is like the Raft in the parable. *Dhamma* is taught by me is for crossing over, not for retaining [in the head]. By understanding the Parable of the Raft, you should get rid even of right mental objects, all the more of wrong ones.

The disciple accepts the Teaching with devout respect and then vindicates its practical by living according to it. Having "known dhamma and seen dhamma for themselves - *evam jananta evam passanta* - they would bear testimony to it, and not merely out of respect for the teacher" (M 1.262). In fact the Buddha would not have regarded it as an honour to him if the pupil always remained a pupil. About the Buddha's unique attitude to his own Teaching, Nolan Pliny Jacobson writes:

No exemplar of Western religions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - would make such a statement... In the West, the names and especially the sayings of the spiritual leaders of the past are savoured and lingered over and, as in the figure of the Parable of the Raft, people commonly walk around with the Raft upon their head (1968:38).

Dhamma practised and realised is self dissolving of its own authority.

II. *Samma sankappa* - Consummate Intention

Sankappa designates a thought, intention, purpose, design, plan, motivation for example, sensuality, enmity and cruelty are called unwholesome intents - *sankappa* (DIII.215). *Samma sankappa* is the second indispensable practical step in any systematic goal-oriented action. First a clear vision of the envisioned goal must be formulated. Then a step by step plan of action formulated. The will is directed to take the steps necessary to realise the goal. Without this, Right View will remain what it is an impressive theory.

III. *Samma vaci* - Consummate Speech

Abstaining from harmful speech: idle chatter, gossip, slander, backbiting harsh and hurtful words; avoiding all misuse of the tongue that creates mischief and more often than not, escalates into violent conflict. But Right Speech is pre-eminently the cultivation of *piyavacana* - pleasant speech. The Buddha devoted an entire discourse to the right use of speech and language (M.III.139) in a discourse called the Exposition of Non-Militancy - on taking the non militant way - *aranna patiipada*. Pleasant speech goes beyond the demand that one should not lie and avoid harmful speech. It consists in the avoidance of unprofitable speech and the cultivation of profitable speech. Even when speaking the truth one should exercise discretion and caution. A statement may be true and correct but not beneficial. Even when stating what is true and beneficial one should consider whether the time is right and whether the listener would be receptive to it. Pleasant speech is not loud or hurried, but, "gentle deliberate, discrete, well considered, modest and without pomposity" (M.I.234).

IV. *Samma kammanta* - Consummate Action

In the first place, the cultivation of behaviour that is worthy of refined and decent people. This means a rejection of superstitious and deluded practices condemned by the Buddha as *tiracchana* - 'animal like' behaviour (See next Chapter). Those who enter the stream of righteousness, be it renouncers or householders, undertake to abstain from five basic misconducts. These are not laid down as commandments to be obeyed; they are freely undertaken with the pledge: "I shall train and establish myself - *sikkhapadam samadiyami* - to abstain from taking life, from taking what has not been given, from wrong speech, from misuse of sense-pleasure and from intoxicating substances". These are not presented as strictly 'Buddhist' disciplines, but as basic moralities that should be practised in any civilised society.

What the Buddha gave the world as uniquely his own ethic, is the Noble Eightfold Way. Practising the five basic moralities - *silas* - is not the final goal of moral striving. It is a precondition. The Buddha did not think that he deserved special praise if his disciples confined themselves to this negative morality. Compared to the sublime Goal of the Way the regarded the *silas* as "trifling matters, the minor details of mere morality, of which the unconverted man, when praising the *Tathagata*, might speak" ((D.B.I.26). Those who pursue the good life, go on to live up to the Noble Eightfold Path and the cultivation of "the four bases of sympathy namely, generosity, kind words, concern for the welfare of others and the promotion of social equity" (G.S.II.136)

V. *Samma ajiva* - Consummate Livelihood

The choice of a righteous occupation is not considered an adjunct of Right Action. It is explicitly presented as a distinct and integral 'limb' of the Way. This is a unique feature of the Buddha's ethical Teaching - when compared to other religio-ethical systems. All of them enjoin doing good and avoiding evil. The Buddha does not ask his disciples to be merely good citizens within a given social order. In the *Vas-settha* and the *Aggañña Suttas* he explained how occupations are repeated social practices, which produce and reproduce the social system, that is to say, a society is constituted by structured interpersonal relationships between social beings. Human practice keeps a given social system going, just as the linchpin keeps a cart in motion (Sn. 654). Individuals may separately live moral lives but, irrespective of their pious intentions, the sum total of social relations in which they are enmeshed may produce morally unwholesome conditions for the many, making a travesty of private piety. By prescribing Right Livelihood an indispensable limb and situating it at the middle of his Path, the Buddha quickens the social conscience of his followers. Most conventional moralities consider the head of a household 'a good family man' as long as he looks after the welfare of 'his own' and performs odd charitable deed out of his largesse. Moreover, the motivation for doing charity is vitiating when done with an eye on gaining 'spiritual' merit. The Buddha condemned some occupations as intrinsically harmful: trade in human beings; the production of and trade in weapons and intoxicating substances, and the slaughter of animals for religious or commercial purposes. The condemnation of these occupations testifies to the Buddha's profound insight into the ethical implications of wealth production. One has only to consider the monstrous growth of the occupations listed above, into mega industries which threaten to destroy not only human and animal life, but the living environment itself. The Buddha mentions non-injurious occupations among the - *maha mangala* - great good fortunes - of a society (Sn. 261).

The inclusion of Right Livelihood, as an integral feature of the Way, is the clearest indication that the Buddha's Way was not given primarily or exclusively to world renouncers. The first *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* renounced every form of livelihood and cast themselves into dependence on the householders for bare subsistence. The Buddha asked his *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* to turn down their begging bowls if an immoral person offers them alms. Today most religious leaders accept lavish and ostentatious donations without questioning the source of a donor's wealth. They thereby provide religious cover for immoral livelihoods, which are in fact, institutionalized forms of theft, corruption and violence.

VI. *Samma vayama* - Consummate Effort

This is not one 'step' among others. Summoning up energies for conscious effort,

self-training and self discipline is an indispensable feature of the Way. Far from encouraging a quietist and contemplative approach to life's problems, the Buddha again and again urged his disciples to overcome sluggishness, to strive untiringly to become skilled in doing what is good and beautiful. *Appamada* - alacrity - is a key watchword in Buddhist practice. The Buddha's last words were an exhortation to be alert and energetic:

vayadhamma sankhara appamadena sampadetha

Ephemeral are all constructions - Strive on energetically (D.II.120).

VII. *Samma sati* - Consummate Mindfulness

If any attribute could be singled out as characteristic of the Buddhist attitude to life, it is Mindfulness or Bare Attention. Establishing oneself in consummate mindfulness is the goal of the system of self-training which is unique and proper to Buddhist 'meditation'. This is not passive contemplation. It is a method or exercise developed and perfected by the Buddha which he called *satipatthana*- establishing mindfulness. The aim of the exercise is to bring the restless mind under control, which for the Buddha is an emotionally driven faculty. Instead of taking flight into airy castles or being dominated by feelings and impulses the mind is trained to become dispassionately aware of the conditions, the upsurge of thoughts feeling and clamourings of which individuals have little control, but with which they identify as 'mine', 'myself', etc. The individual is made aware that it is a totality of life-activities, which the Buddha distinguishes into physiological processes, feelings, mental activities and mental objects. The so called sovereign Ego is made aware how very much it is not a free subject but the hapless object of its impulses, that it is not the master in his own house. This method, the Buddha said, is the only way - *ekayano maggo* - for human beings to understand and take control of their lives (D.I.I.290). Consummate Mindfulness - *Samma Sati*, keeps the disciple 'awake' to see through the mists of mysticism and metaphysics and to shed the scales of delusion produced in the average, culturally conditioned consciousness. *Sati* is a positive science of 'actuality' - the understanding of living, growing, decaying and dying as a conditioned process - *sāṅkhāra* - and not as changes which happen to a transcendental permanent subject. Consummate Mindfulness is not merely intellectual knowledge. It is an ethical disposition engendered by the eradication of desire. As explained at length in the previous Chapter, it is the "signless delivery of the mind, emptied of delusion, hate and lust - *sunna dosena*, *sunna rāgena*, *sunna mohaena*.

CHAPTER 16

A MOVEMENT FOR THE MORAL TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETY

The community of wandering teachers founded by the Buddha was not envisaged as a means for private salvation. He founded an association of men and women, householders and renouncers, which would serve as their refuge in a dangerous world. The renoumcer men and women - *bhikkhu/nis* - formed self-governing communes, but shared a common *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* - Code of Discipline. They lived a communitarian life, renounced private property and collectively owned their few possessions. The Buddha was once asked by Ananda if the life of friendliness and mutual support in the *Sangha* was half the life of perfection. He answered:

Say not so, Ananda! Say not so! It is the whole, not half of the life of perfection. Of a brother so blessed with fellowship with what is beautiful - *kalyana* - association with what is beautiful, intimacy with what is beautiful, we may expect this, that he will develop the Ariyan Eightfold Path, that he will make much of the Ariyan Eightfold Path (S.V. 2).

The first Buddhists, especially the *bhikkhunis* who needed sisterly support, gave thanks for the beautiful friendship- *kalyana mittatata* - they found in the *Bhikkhuni Sangha*. Theri Kisagotami sings of the bonds of friendship in the *sangha* which freed her and her sisters from “the woeful lot of women” (Thig 213-215). The *Vinaya Pitaka* reports that in the commune led by Anuruddha, the *bhikkhus* blended harmoniously “like milk and water ... regarding each other with eyes of friendliness” (B.D.V. 502). The Buddha told a *bhikkhu* who expressed preference for a life of solitude, that *kalyana mitta*, *kalyana sahaya* and *kalyana sampavanika* - beautiful friends, beautiful companions and beautiful comrades are indispensable conditions for making progress in moral endeavour (A.IV. 357).

When, after much deliberation the Buddha resolved to propagate his *Dhamma*, he made a strategic choice about the best means to achieve this end. He did not, like the forest hermits of the period, found an ashram or hermitage, to which individual salvation-seekers could repair for instruction and guidance. He had personal experience of this model but did not consider it a suitable vehicle for spreading his message. He sought out his former companions in the practice of austerities and persuaded them to accept his *Dhamma*. He began a movement for the moral reform of society on a communitarian basis. In the first mini-commune of six persons, three would go out on their daily begging round and shared whatever

food they brought back (B.D.IV 19). Sharing - *Dana* - was established from the beginning as the amalgam of the new society. Of the leaders of this new society, Trevor Ling writes:

The *bhikkhu* was certainly not someone who lived apart from the world like the Christian monk. Traditionally in India, the search for salvation from the evils of human existence meant a life of solitude. For the Buddhist it meant a life in community ... It was among the Buddhists that there soon emerged for the first time in human history an ordered community of those who were seeking salvation from the human malaise as they saw it ... The Sangha provides the environment in which a new dimension of consciousness becomes possible as a result of the denial, not only in theory but also in practice, of the idea of absolute and permanent individuality (Trevor Ling 1985: 124, 127).

The New Dhammic Society

After the Buddha trained his first band of disciples, he sent them out with the following mandate:

Go around for the good of the many-folk (*bahujana*), for the happiness of the many-folk, for the welfare of the many-folk, out of compassion for the world *lokanukampaya*. For the gain, and for the welfare of gods and men. Let not two of you go the same way. Preach the doctrine which is glorious in the beginning, glorious in the middle and glorious in the end, in the spirit and in the letter. Proclaim a consummate, perfect and pure life of holiness! (D.B.IV. 15)

The Buddha does not ask his emissaries to go around 'making disciples' in order to increase the number of followers. The aim of *Dhamma* instruction is to promote the happiness and welfare of the *many-folk*. The term *bahujana* - 'manyfold people', used to characterise the broad masses to whom the *Dhamma* was given, is very significant. The human species does not manifest itself as a uniform type. While humans are morphologically and physiologically the same, there is a fascinating diversity in physical appearance. There is as an equally fascinating diversity of cultural and linguistic groups spread across the globe. The Majjhimadesa of the Buddha's Day included the present day State of Bihar and parts of Uttar Pradesh and Nepal. There is a great diversity in the physical appearances, the languages and cultures of people who live in this vast region. The canonical scriptures indicate that this diversity existed in the Buddha's Day as well. In spreading the *Dhamma*, no discrimination was to be made with regard to gender, ethnicity, class or creed. The Buddha used the term *jāti* - only for the biologically one human species - *manussa*

jati. For the diverse peoples who belong to this *jati*, he used the term *jāna*. Thus the Buddha called persons who believe they are the embodiment and incarnation of a unique and separate identity the *puthujjana*. However, when he looked at the masses with whom the *Dhamma* was to be shared with compassion, he referred to them as the *bahujana*. The first Buddhists campaigned against the *puthujjana* delusion that physical, cultural, linguistic and class differences among people reflect inherent differences determined by nature or a divine will. In accordance with this noble objective, he instructed his disciples to respect cultural pluralism and to teach the *Dhamma* everywhere in the own language - *sakaya niruttiya* - of the diverse people. He firmly rejected the proposal by two bhikkhus who were former Brahmins to preserve his Teaching in elegant language. The Buddha realised that it would be tantamount to the creation of a sacred 'master language' to be imposed on various linguistic communities (Vin II.139). Thus, the *Dhamma* dissemination, while respecting cultural diversity, was intended to morally unite people while respecting their cultural diversity.

The objective of the Buddha's teaching mission, as he himself stated, was to make his *Dhamma* '*bahujanna*' (D.II. 114), which is the adjectival form of *bahujana*. In other words, what had to be accomplished is ensuring that the *Dhamma* was spread and indigenised among diverse peoples.

The Buddha's message was to spread far beyond the land of its birth; its universal character transcended 'Indianness', in a way that neither Jainism or any 'ism' of Ancient India has. The *Dhamma* was not spread by the sword or accompanied by Indian political or cultural imperialism. Wherever it took root, Buddhism has universal taken on a native habitation. The new society began with just five disciples. Compassionate concern to reach as many people as possible is reflected in the exhortation to the first band of missionaries: "Let not two of you go in the same direction." (V.I. 11) The message caught on and soon a fourfold community emerged in the larger society: male and female mendicant-renouncers and male and female householders. It was a New Community bound by sharing and caring.

Going Against the Stream: A Practical Reversal of Values

In the *Nidana Katha* - The Story of the Buddha's Lineage- Siddhattha's unshakeable determination to find a Way of Liberation from suffering is portrayed as the moral battle of a new type of epic hero. After he fully recovered from his austerities, he bathed in the Neranjara River and stood on its bank pondering: is it possible to go against the stream of *samsara* which eternally births and rebirths human suffering? In a dramatic gesture Siddhattha hurled the pot he had used to bathe himself into the river with the challenge:

If I shall this day be able to become an Awake One, let this pot go against the stream *patisota*; if not, let it go with the stream - *anusota* (N.K. 188).

The River Goddess gave him a powerfully affirmative answer: the vessel raced upstream "against the current, as quickly as a fleet horse" (NK, 189). That night, bathed in the cool and gentle light of the Moon Goddess, Siddhattha awoke to understanding, freedom and bliss.

Going against the current became a privileged term to express the radical reversal of values set in motion by those who entered the stream that flowed to the 'further shore' of liberation. The first Buddhists stopped going with the current of events - *anusotagama*; they went 'against the current' of conventional society and its dominant value system. They no longer considered 'things as they are' as unchangeable fates determined by the mechanical turnings of the wheel of *samsara*. The radical Buddhist is not a blind follower, an *anugamin*. The social message of the *patisotagamins* was embodied and exemplified in the lifestyle of the peripatetic mendicants. The *Bhikkhu-ni Sangha* became the 'sign' as well as the catalyst of a new society. The dispersed, self-governing local communes were envisaged "in terms of 'cells' or growth-points," characterized by the respective principles of corporate existence which each sets out, and devoted to the dissemination of these principles in theory and in action" (Ling 1985: 152).

***Pabbajja* - Going Forth as Concrete Transcendence**

In the Buddha's Day, individuals who had no means of production and were forced to sell their life-energy to others as labour power were called the *dasakammakaras* - domestic slaves or wage labourers. The Brahmins referred to this social group as *sudras*. They, together with women of all classes, were de-classified and declared ritually impure. To be born as a *dasi* or *sudra* woman was double jeopardy. These de-classified people were marginalised groups, '*within-the-system*.' The tension between the haves and the have-nots, the powerful and the powerless *within* society, is dialectic. Both groups are structurally related to each other and participate in the production ('birthing') and reproduction ('re-birthing') of the social system. The *gahapati/dasa kammakaras*, husband-lord (*pati*)/ wife-servant (*dasi*) relationships are binary oppositions conditioned by property and power. The power and super-ordinated position of the first, are founded on the powerlessness and subordinated position of the second. Binary oppositions engender dialectic tensions because the growth of the one comes into contradiction with the growth of the other. True emancipation is possible only by seeing through such dialectics as dialectics of desire and power, and by going beyond conflict ridden social systems founded on paired opposites.

The first *bhikkhu-nis* contracted out of this oppressive social system - they put themselves *outside-the-system*. The tension between them and those *within-the-system* was, a countervailing or *analectic* - not a *dialectic* tension. The possible emancipation of those 'within-system' was creatively exemplified by those who had consciously placed themselves 'outside-the-system' as the 'wholly-other' - the '*candala*' of the system. Not being part of the system, they had no vested interest in patchwork reforms which would save the system. The decision to opt out of society is first and foremost an *ethical move* because the root cause of social inequality, in the final instance, is not economical or political, but moral. Only a morally healthy society can create just economic and political relationships at all societal levels. Societies cannot produce men and women leaders of moral probity by wishful thinking. The leaders they elect or catapult into power are, in the literal sense of the term, their *representatives*. The leaders 're-present' or mirror, the level and degree of a society's ethical and cultural development. A pathogenic culture will produce leaders who are fundamentally flawed. Political and economic reforms become mere tokenism unless they are accompanied by a broad-based movement for the ethical transformation of society.

Impatient activists may criticize the Buddha and the first Buddhists for not agitating and mobilizing the masses for militant action. However, what social reformers who advocate violence fail to grasp is that any work undertaken for social change is vitiated at source if one loses sight of the primacy of the ethical factor. A qualitative transformation of society will bear fruit *in the long term* only by creating a social movement which has no vested interest in capturing state power. Born into a *khattiya* family, trained in the skills of warfare and of governance, the Siddhattha Gotama knew from direct experience the dead end (sic) of violent politics.

The first *Sangha* must be seen as a social experiment - and as a model for non-violent social change. It was a creative project of concrete and historical transcendence - a living out of something that had not been attempted before. The Buddha redefined the theo-philosophical project of transcendence, which is a passage to an imagined metaphysical realm of 'freedom.' 'Concrete transcendence,' on the other hand, is the practical overcoming of limiting situations and a 'going beyond' the totality of relationships which produce and reproduce suffering here and now, in the realm of history. The first Buddhists called it 'going against the current'. This cultural action for freedom has to be understood as an *analectic* or *countervailing, non-violent, dynamic* generated especially by those who had placed themselves *outside-the-system*.

The term used by the first renouncers to describe their opting out of the cycle of social reproduction was *pabbajja* - 'going forth' or 'stepping out.' A person who had entered into the new way of life was called a *pabbajita* - which literally meant 'exiled' or 'banished' in everyday usage. The renouncers considered

themselves persons who had voluntarily banished themselves from civil society. They made themselves ‘outcastes.’ These self-exiles returned to the society they had left with the gains of their victory in the good fight against immorality and, as we shall see below, openly flouted those culturally imposed taboos which divided human being from human being. They passed through various societies with inner freedom, feeling at home everywhere, because they had no permanent domicile and no foothold in any society. They functioned as the *moral vanguard* and paradigm of a New Humanity. The goal was not contradicted by the means adopted to realize it. To quote Warder again:

[The Buddha] and other philosophers of the time looked elsewhere for a solution, not primarily in society, but in the first place away from it. In effect, they contracted out of society in order to preserve their freedom; they abandoned the quest for wealth and power and sought peace of mind and spiritual experiences. Only from an independent vantage could they hope, as they certainly did hope - to exercise any influence on the society they had left, to infuse into it better ideals than money and violence (1980: 31).

The Brahmins were quick to see the threat to their hierocratic social system by these voluntary ‘outcastes.’ The Buddha and his *bhikkhu-nis* were regularly abused by Brahmins as, “a base class of shaveling *samanas*, servants, dark fellows, born of Brahma’s foot” (D.B.111. 27). On one occasion when the Buddha, on his begging round approached the house of a *brahmin*, the latter, outraged by what he considered was an attempt to pollute his household, shouted:

Stop there, you shaveling, you wretched *samana*, you *vasalaka* - outcaste! (Sn. 115)

But such denigrations did not touch the core of a true *samana-samani*’s being, because they no longer weighed their personal worth in society’s scale of values. To be an outcaste and to be dependent in trust was experienced as a space for freedom and joy. Without any hypocritical pretence of self-debasement or self-effacement a *bhikkhu-ni* could say:

I am now a *vasalaka* - outcaste, my life is dependent on others. I must now conduct myself differently (G.S.IV. 148).

In a superstitiously religious society, the early Buddhist contestation of dominant values took the form of a radical redefinition of the meaning of true religion. It was therefore a threat to the established sacred, as well as profane order. The *bhikkhu-nis* were not individual dropouts. Their collective lifestyle was an organized form of social dissent led by a charismatic leader. It therefore posed a real challenge to

the status quo. As Warder observed, “A *samana* community of any size and influence in the country would clearly be a disruptive element in a centralised state” (1980: 38).

Renouncing the Father-House

The Buddhist act of renunciation is formulated in very specific terms: *agārasma anagariyam pabbajati* - “he-she goes from the household to the homeless life” (M II. 92 and *passim*). There is no reference to ‘renouncing the world’ anywhere in the scriptures. What was renounced was not merely sex, family, children and ‘home-life’ in the abstract, but a concrete social order, whose corner stone was the male dominated household. The term *ajjhāvasati* as we noted in Chapter 3, was used to describe the power of kings, feudal lords and *gahapati* over their respective dominions. The *gahapati* household was patriarchal in strict sense of the term.

Thomas Paine pointed out that “Despotic states rest on, and presuppose despotic households, in which the arbitrary exercise of power by fathers over wives, children and servants (bequeathing property to their first-born sons, for instance). State despotism in turn reinforces family tyranny and injustice” (cited in Keane 1988: 45). The first Buddhists reversed the values of the patriarchal household. The wealthy patriarch Dhaniya described his *gahapati* status as ‘a secure foothold’ and prided himself about his wealth and “his obedient, not wanton, wife.” An encounter with the Buddha became a turning point in his life. Dhaniya became a follower of the Path and announced the new state of affairs in his household as follows:

We take refuge in the Blessed One. Both my wife and I are *obedient to Dhamma* (Sn 21-33, emphasis mine).

In a masterly play of words, the Buddha urged - *dhanapatis* - ‘Lord’s of Wealth’ - to turn themselves into - *dānapatis* - ‘Lords of Sharing’ (A III. 40). In the ideal Buddhist household the role of the *gahapati* is revalued. He divests himself of patriarchal domination:

*ariyasavāko vigatamalamaccherena cetasā agāram ajjhāvasati mutta
cāgo pāyatapāni vossarāgato, yācayogo dānasamvibhārato*

the noble disciple having conquered the taint of miserliness presides over his household, accomplished in generosity, open-handed, freely giving; a yoke-mate to the needy and a distributor of wealth (A IV. 6).

Here, the *gahapati* who has become a noble disciple rules through benevolence and wealth distribution. The principle formulated here is worked out in detail in

the *Sigālovāda Sutta* - a discourse given to a young *gahapati*. The Buddha calls it the *Ariya Vinaya* - Noble Code of Discipline for a *gahapati*. He is placed at the hub of balanced and reciprocal relationships. The discourse is a comprehensive social charter and spells out the mutual responsibilities of parents and children; teachers and pupils; between friends; husbands and wives; employers and employees; the moral guardians of society and ordinary citizens. The *gahapati* is advised to treat his wife as his companion and to hand over to her the management of the domestic economy. The Buddha spells out in detail the mutual responsibilities of employers and employees (DB II. 182-3). His guidelines for the treatment of wage labourers embodies the principle: "From each according to his/her ability and to each according to his-her need."

In the *Brahmin* religion, the domestic fire symbolized male power. Women cooked the family meal on the home-fire but the ritual fire of the household was under the control of the patriarch. In old age, he transferred authority over the sacred fire and thereby over the household, to his eldest son. The household, according to brahmanic law, was by definition a patriarchal institution. The 'divine' law giver Manu warned that women should be held under the constant guard and control of men: as a child, by her father, as a wife, by her husband and as a widow, by her eldest son (LM V.148); "By a girl, a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, not even in her own house" (ibid. V.I.I. 47). From birth to death, a woman was reduced to the condition of a slave. It is against the background of such misogynistic attitudes that the impact of the 'free men and women' of the *Buddha Saṅgha* on society, needs to be appreciated.

The *bhikkhu-nīs* provided men and women living in society with a new ideal that concretely and practically transcended the 'brahminisms' which keep men and women in the bondage of gender-based desires. The women laid aside "the smoking fire, pestle and quern (Thig XI) and working class men "the sickle, plough and spade" (Thag XLIII). The liberated women of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* were living testimonies to what women can achieve once the space and opportunity was made available to them. They challenged the conventional assumptions about the 'innate incapacities' of women by their very presence. As celibates engaged in a public ministry, they demonstrated that the sole meaning and purpose of womanly existence is not merely to serve as vessels for the production of children or as the handmaidens of male lust.

Many of the *bhikkhunīs* saw a refuge from the various aspects of domestic oppression in the *Saṅgha*. Having to leave relatives behind, submitting to virilocality and having to wait upon a man, were among the aspects of feminine *dukkha* enumerated by the Buddha (KS IV.III. 3). Theris like Mutta and Sumangalamata celebrated their freedom from "quern, pestle, mortar and crooked husband;" from

“kitchen smells, cooking pots and domestic drudgery.” For them, joining the *Sangha* was “indeed a glorious freedom” (Thig II & XXI).

A Space Beyond Gender

The relationship between the sexes become fundamentally vitiated when it is grounded on lust and power. As we saw in Chapter 12, the sexualisation of the human form distorted the way men and women perceive each other. Women use the power of their sex to entice and entrap men, and men use their physical and social power to subjugate and control the sexual power of women. Each sex, as the Buddha observed goes into the bondage of the other:

A woman marks femininity in herself: the feminine occupation, attire, manners, whims, voice, charm. She is excited by that, delighted by that and being excited and delighted by that, she marks masculinity, about her: the masculine occupation, attire, manners, whims, voice, charm. She is excited by that, delighted by that and she desires a bond with those about her and desires likewise whatsoever happiness, wellbeing comes of the bond that she desires. Delighted by, attached to her own sex, she goes into man's bondage and thus escapes not from her own sex. Truly, this is the *Dhamma*-discourse on bondage and bond-freedom. [*The same is repeated in exactly the same words for men*] (GS IV.32).

This remarkably perceptive observation discloses the root cause of what is today called the sex-gender problematic. It is not being a male or female (sex) as such that is problematic, it is the cultural constructs of masculinity/femininity (gender) that trouble relations between men and women. It entraps both sides, the Buddha observes. A modern feminist could not have better identified the socio-psychological root of feminine oppression and *dukkha*. Women who try to captivate and keep men by projecting the image of womanhood constructed by masculine desire, play a game in which the cards are stacked against them. Their 'tyranny', is as brief as their ephemeral youth and beauty. Rampant male lust is not object specific. It will find ever new youthful beauties as age diminishes the blossom of youth. The Buddha's insight into the 'folly of women' (and men), is shared by Mary Wollstonecraft, the eighteenth century CE champion of the rights of women.

Men not content with their superior physical strength, endeavour to sink us still lower, merely to render us alluring objects for a moment; and women intoxicated by the adoration which men under the influence of their senses pay them, do not seek to obtain a durable interest in their hearts ...My own sex, I hope will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces, and viewing them

as if they were in a perpetual childhood unable to stand alone... the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of sex... And how can a woman be expected to cooperate unless she knows why she ought to be virtuous - unless freedom strengthens her reason till she comprehends her duty, and see in what manner it is connected to her real good? (1985: 80-86 emphasis her's)

The *Bhikkhunī Sangha* is the earliest example history has to show us of an autonomous organisation of women. Similarly, the first *Bhikkhu-nī Sangha* is the first known example of a cultural institution which attempted to transcend sexual and gender delimitations. The first Buddhist renunciators were rejecting in practice the ideology of 'innate natures' - *svadharmā*. The so-called 'masculine nature' and 'feminine nature' were seen for what they are, *sankharas* or cultural constructs. The *bhikkhū-īs* were not working out their sexual emancipation in solitary isolation. The *Sangha* was both a project of transcendence and an institutional support for living out this renunciation of sex and gender. The *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* had shed the 'marks' by which they could be signed as 'masculine' and 'feminine'. They transcended in practice hierarchical evaluations of 'inferior'/'superior' provoked by sexual differentiation and signification. They saw through the patriarchal delusion which perceives the relation between the sexes as based on a power differential.

The *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* wore identical garments. There is no stipulation in the *Vinaya* that the *bhikkhunīs* should wear a blouse to cover their breasts. Renunciators, men and women, were forbidden to wear adornments or embellish their garments in a manner that would draw attention to, or accentuate, their gender and sex. The *bhikkhu-nīs* shaved their heads and eyebrows, a practice that was in striking contrast to that of many male ascetics of the Buddha's day, and as indeed even today in India, who let their hair and beard grow, or wear it in matted braids to signify their sacred status. Brahmin men shaved their heads but left a tuft of hair uncut as a sign of their priestly office. Men grow moustaches and beards to signify their virility. Such display was forbidden to *bhikkhus*. Attempts by some misguided *bhikkhunīs* to indulge in fancy hair styles and clothes were nipped in the bud. In short, the *bhikkhu-nīs* were required to give up attachment to and delight in the marks of femininity and masculinity.

The first *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* presented a non-sexualized image of the human person free of sex-gender marks. The sexualisation especially of the female form inflames lust in the sensualist and triggers revulsion in the ascetic. This dual deployment of the female form (*rūpa*) was transcended in practice. When attempts were made to seduce attractive young *bhikkhunīs* by men who found their composed demeanour irresistible. Unwavered by blandishments and promises of worldly luxury the *bhikkhunīs* would reply,

Know me as her who has renounced the life of sense; shorn of hair, wrapt in yellow robe, the food from hand to mouth, gleaned here and there, the patchwork robe - these things are good enough for me (Thig 348).

The common unisex garb freed the *bhikkhunī* from the vexations that women engaged in a public profession often have to face. Their external form compelled attention to them as rational beings and not just as “alluring objects for a moment”. In the *Agganna Sutta*, the Buddha recalled how men and women began to be sexually inflamed at the sight of each other when certain features of the human form came to be perceived as ‘marks’ of male and female (Chapter 12). In the *Buddha Sangha* this symbolic transaction was erased. When a member of the *Bhikkhu-nī Sangha* entered the gaze of a spectator, it would have been difficult at first sight, to ‘mark’ a difference between ‘male’ and ‘female’ forms. The yellow-robed, shaven-headed form - *rūpa* - compelled the senses to see and ‘sign’ ‘*bhiksha*’ ‘mendicant’, not ‘*itthi bhāva*’ or ‘*purisa bhāva*’.

[The bhikkhunis], had laid down all social position, all domestic success; they had lost their world. But in exchange they had won the status of an individual, in place of being adjuncts, however much admired, fostered and sheltered they might have been. With shaven head, wrapt in their robe - a dress indistinguishable, from the swathing toga and swathed undergarments of the male religieux - the Sister was free to come and go ... Moreover, to free mobility she could wed the other austere joy of being recognised, at least by her brother ‘arahants’, as a rational being, without reference to sex (Caroline Rhys -Davids, *Psalm of the Sisters* xxv-xxvi).

But temptations there were, to fall into what the scriptures call the snares of ‘Mara’. Mara, the deluder, was not a devil or a satan. It was a Buddhist ‘codeword’ for the delusions of the mind which produce vacillation and distract attention from the one thing that matters - right mindfulness. Preoccupation with conventional evaluations of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ was one such source of vacillation. According to a sexist folk-saying at the time, “the intelligence of a woman is two-fingers wide”. This sexist sneer was a reference to cooking, which is regarded as the ‘natural’ occupation of women. Women in South Asia to this day, pick up a few grains in a ladle as the rice comes to the boil and press them between thumb and forefinger to check if it is fully cooked. The implication of the taunt is that breadth of a woman’s knowledge is not wider than the space between the two fingers pressing a grain of rice. There is a similar folk saying in Sinhala - ‘A woman’s brains are not longer than the handle of a kitchen ladle.’

Folk sayings such as these, are ideologies in popular form. They not only ridicule women but are also calculated to dissuade them from aspiring to acquire

knowledges and skills, which are considered masculine preserves. Under the persistent onslaught of proverbs, jibes, and jokes, ('Mara') women embarking on a new venture could vacillate, succumb to self-doubt and give up. Such conventional views and attitudes briefly assailed Theri Soma's mind. Was she, with "her two-finger knowledge", Mara taunted, capable of understanding the depths of *Dhamma* or of reaching its sublime Goal? But she promptly refocussed her attention and restored her "signless freedom of the mind",

What should a woman's nature do to them
 Whose mind's are firmly set, who ever move onward in the Path?
 What can that signify to one who
 Truly comprehends the *Dhamma*?
 To one in whom the question arises.
 Am I a woman, in these matters, or
 Am I a man, or what not am I, then?
 To such a one is Mara fit to talk (S V.2)

This is a brilliant move, which goes beyond theoretical deconstruction. Soma had eradicated desire and was no longer attached to her femininity. Not only is the dialectic tension masculine/feminine superseded, but there is no move to a third position by way of negation -'not male', 'not female', but, for example, - androgynous. This retains the difference but recombines it. The temptations of Mara - internal delusions - produce mental vacillation. When vacillations occur, the mind is promptly refocussed, with the watchword "Tis Mara"! and "Destroyer, You shall not prevail!" (Thig passim).

The Middle Way through and beyond binary oppositions, to the shore of freedom, is a strategy for the emancipation of both sexes. Those who have understood *Dhamma* have transcended sex-gender categories and there is no attempt to conjure up a new subject. There is no feminine or masculine 'identity crisis'. Unfortunately, this understanding seems to have died with the first Buddhists and sexual prejudices and discrimination have seeped back into Buddhist cultures within the first two centuries after the Buddha's death. There are harsh denigrations of women in the Theravada Canon.

The demise of the *Bhikkhunī Sangha* in Theravada Buddhist cultures has deprived women of the -*sarana* - refuge, as obviously intended by the Buddha. He himself sent traumatised and helpless women like Kisa Gotami and Patācara to find sisterly support and healing in the Bhikkhuni Sangha. Here again we see the compassionate insight of the Buddha into the "woeful lot of women". The *Bhikkhunī Sangha* was an unique historical first. It is only in recent times that the

need for refuges run by women for women who are victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse has been recognised. The Therigatha - Songs of the Sisters - has stories of women who had suffered domestic abuse like Isidasi and Capa; of a mother and daughter who were sexually abused by the husband and father, courtesans and harlots finding rehabilitation and a new purpose in life in "the beautiful friendship" of the *Bhikkhunī Sangha*. Today Buddhist women have only an androcratic institution, the *bhikkhu sangha* to turn to, when they devoutly chant "*sangham saranamgacchami*" - 'I go for refuge in the sangha'. It is therefore not surprising that the Theri Sumedha urged women of her day, to seize the 'space' and the 'opportunity' which had opened up for them to liberate themselves from the woeful lot of women,

The 'Best', the Buddha has revealed to us. They, the majority, know not ... Now is the Age of Buddhas! Gone the want of opportunity! The moment's won! (Thig 453, 459)

Beyond Ethnicity and Class

Buddhist renunciation was not merely a renunciation of property but also of all footholds of human pride and conceit. The Universal Sangha - *Catuddissa Sangha* - 'Sangha of the Four Quarters', was made up of men and women drawn from various ethnic groups, social classes and 'castes'. Queens and princesses like Khema and Sujata, aristocrats like the Founder himself, Ananda, Anuruddha, Mahapajapati, and Sundari Nanda; sons and daughters of wealthy *gahapathis* like Yasa and Punna; renowned brahmin men and women like the Kassapa brothers, Bhadda Kapilani and Rohini as well as 'low-caste' men and women like Sunita and Punniika demonstrated in practice the truth asserted by the Buddha in the *Aggañña Sutta*: "their origin was from among the very same beings, like themselves, no different, and in accordance with *Dhamma*, not otherwise". It was strictly forbidden to make any reference to a renouncer's former station in life or *jāti* (Vinaya 1. Pacittaya II).

This commitment to overturn the conventional scale of values in practice, was dramatically expressed the manner that Ananda and his kinsmen, members of the senior lineages of the Sakyan clan, sought admission into the Sangha. They requested that the *dasa* - domestic servant - who chaperoned them - the 'low-caste' barber Upali, be ordained first so that in the new dispensation, their former inferior would be their senior: "Thus shall Sakyan pride be humbled in us Sakyans" (BD V.254).

Abolishing the Varnadharmā in Practice

As the saying goes ‘clothes make the man’. Dress codes are social conventions, which signal gender status, office, class, wealth and ethnic differences. People discriminate, honour or look down on others on the basis of their external appearance. The ‘uniforms’ people wear, function as ‘signs’ of group affiliation and social difference and deference: ‘equal’/ ‘inferior’/superior’. By refusing to conform to society’s dress codes, the Buddha and his disciples acted out their nonconformity with, and affrontation of, conventional values. The Buddha’s disciples constituted a ‘yellow-robed’ (renouncers) and ‘white-robed’ (householders) community. When they assembled on days of observance, the householders donned simple white clothes, shedding all external ‘marks’ (make-up, jewellery, ornaments, coloured garments perfumes, etc.) that signify differences in class, wealth and social status. This remained an unbroken practice until recent times in Sri Lanka. Nowadays it is not uncommon to see young men and women clad in coloured Western dress saunter into temple premises, even on days of observance.

The radicality of the choice of the colours yellow and white by the Buddha needs to be contextualised. Among the Brahmins, the Jains and the Ajivakas, the colour white symbolized the highest rank - that of the leadership. In the *Buddha Saṅgha*, this colour-hierarchy was overturned. White was the symbolic colour of the householders, whereas the robes of the leadership was saffron coloured - the colour of the *caṇḍālas*. As outcastes, the *caṇḍālas* were required to wear saffron or dark brown garments to denote their untouchability. The first Buddhist renouncers wore patchwork robes made from rags picked up from charnel grounds, boiled to disinfect and dyed in saffron. Saffron symbolised their ‘*outside-the system*’ status. The external form - shaven head, saffron robes and begging bowl - was a practical living out of *anattā dhamma*. This *Rūpa* was ‘empty’. It was neither male nor female and neither *brahmana* nor *khattiya*, nor *vessa* nor *sudda*. Each of these social groups were identified as positive existents by way of negation - a male is *not* a female; a *khattiya* or *sudda* is not a *brahmana*. etc. These negations were negated without positing a third position. It therefore left no room for the ‘semiotics of desire’. At best, the sight of the *bhikkhu/n*’ would evoke associations of a ‘Not’, or a ‘Wholly Other’ of society - a voluntary *candala* or outcaste. Like the Buddha, the first *bhikkhu/nis* when asked who they were, could reply “We know the lineage of the common folk and of nobodies” (S III. 455). They renounced the codes which defined social status by dress. The Sign/*Rupa* ‘*Bhikkhu-ni*’ signified *Zero Craving* and exposed the emptiness of the significations/signs - *nāma/rūpa* Game.

The radical egalitarianism of the first Buddhists, is exemplified in the life of Sunita. Before he ‘went forth’, he earned his living as a street sweeper - a hereditary ‘low caste’, ‘polluting’ occupation. In India today, he would have been

contemptuously referred to as a 'harijan' or 'coolie' - a man from a disqualified social group, hereditarily compelled to do 'dirty work'. After joining the *Sangha*, Sunita attained the Goal of the Path and was revered during his lifetime as an *arahat*. This former coolie's song of freedom has been preserved in the canon. It stands as a powerful indictment of Buddhist cultures which have come to terms with the dehumanizing caste system:

Humble the clan wherein I took my birth.
And poor was I and scanty was my lot;
Mean task was mine, a scavenger...
One for whom no man cared, despised, abused.
And then I saw the All-Awake come,
Begirt and followed by a retinue of bhikkhus.
I laid aside my baskets and my yoke,
And came where I might due obeisance make,
And of his loving-kindness just for me,
The Chief of Humans halted upon his way.
Low at his feet I bent, then standing by,
I begged the Master's leave to join the Rule
And follow him, of every creature Chief.
Then he whose tender mercy watcheth all
The world, the Master pitiful and kind,
Gave me my answer: COME BHIKKHU ! he said.
Thereby to me was initiation given (Thag CCXLII vs.620 - 625).

Such was the Buddha's commitment to social equality that he ordained Sunita on the spot. Admission to the Sangha meant the erasure of all former personal identities. The Upanishadic sage Yajnavalkya, as we saw in Chapter 6, used the metaphor of salt dissolving in water to explain the ontological dissolution of the self in the Absolute Self. The Buddha used the same metaphor but the dissolution expressed a radically new social reality.

Just as the great rivers - that is to say, the Ganga, the *Yamunā*, the *Aciravati*, the *Sarabhi* and the *Mahi* when they have fallen into the great ocean, lose their name and lineage and are thenceforth reckoned as the great ocean just so, O Bhikkhus, do these four vannas - the *Khattiyas*, the *Brahmanas*, the *Vessas* and the *Suddas* - when they have gone forth from the household under the *Dhamma* and the *Vinaya* proclaimed by the Tathagata, renounce their names and lineage and enter into the number

of the Sakyaputtiya Samanas. Just as the great ocean has only one taste, the taste of salt - just so, O Bhikkhus this *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* have only one flavour - the flavour of freedom - *vimutti rasa* (BD V.335).¹

Nomadic Freedom

The first Buddhist renunciators who embraced the *samana* way of life were referred to as *paribbājakas* by their contemporaries. The term is derived from the Sanskrit *parivrājaka*, which, as we saw in Chapter 4, has a very specific historical provenance. As the *samanas* wandered through village, town and city, they either gleaned a meal in the forests or begged for it from door to door. The *samaṇa saṅghas* and *gaṇas* would have evoked memories of a bygone period when nomadic pastoral *gaṇas* and *saṅghas* roamed freely across the earth along well-beaten trails, 'foraging around', leading their herds of cattle from grazing ground - *vaja* to grazing ground - *vaja*. The first Buddhists had renounced sedentarism and had no permanent household or lodging; they were in the literal sense of the word 'foragers around'. The *Vinaya* speaks of the early wandering teachers as 'dwelling in a *vaja* - camp, or temporary settlement during the rainy season. At the end of the season the group broke camp and moved on (V 1.6). In the *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta*, the Buddha explains the factors which led to the social disintegration and moral decadence of his day. The discourse begins and ends with an exhortation to *bhikkhu-nis* to cherish their *paribbājaka* way of life.

Wander along the cattle ranges (*gocara*) of your forefathers, O mendicants. If you wander along the cattle ranges of your forefathers Mara will find no lodging and no foothold in you (DB III.60).

The Buddha makes explicit use of the nomadic metaphor in this discourse. In *Stone Age Economics*, Marshal Sahlins discusses the attitude to life in mobile food gathering tribes. They do not hoard goods, because it is a hindrance to their mobility. Nevertheless there is little anxiety about the future among them. When resources are depleted they could trek for days without food without anxiety, because of an optimistic "expectation of greener pastures elsewhere which are not usually disappointed" (1972: 30-31). In the *Aggañña Sutta*, the Buddha traced the practice of hoarding to the transition from food gathering to sedentarism, food production, the emergence of separate households, which then led to "taking what was not been

¹ Sad to say, in Sri Lanka, Buddhist monastic orders (*nikayas*) are divided along caste lines. The highest *nikaya* is restricted to males of the Goyigama ('landowning peasant') caste. This is the Lankan Buddhist equivalent of the Brahmin *vaishya*. The Goyigama have for centuries positioned themselves at the pinnacle of the social, political and religious pecking order of caste. The equivalent of the Goyigama among the predominantly Hindu Tamils are the Vellalas.

given", to conflicts and violence. The Buddhist mendicants renounced sedentarism and returned to the mobile food-gathering mode of existence. This precluded the possibility of accumulating wealth, personally or collectively and was reflected in the actual lifestyle of the wandering mendicant teachers. Beyond the clothes on their back, their begging bowl, needle and thread to repair their robes and a few simple medicaments, the first *bhikkhu-nis* carried little. They were literally free as the birds of the air who neither gather nor hoard in barns:

As a bird on the wing, wherever it flies, takes it wings with it as it flies,
so too a *bhikkhu* contented with the robes protecting his body, with the
almsfood for sustenance, where ever he goes, takes these things with
him, as he goes (MLS I.I.226).

The nomadic life-style expressed in concrete form the truths of *anicca* - impermanence, and *anattā* - non substantiality. This simplicity of life is not the same as 'embracing a life' of poverty. Food gatherers, writes Sahlins "have few possessions *but they are not poor*. Poverty is not a certain small amount of goods, nor is it just a relationship between means and ends; it is above all a relation between people. Poverty is a social status. As such it is an invention of civilisation... it was not until culture reached the height of its material achievements that it erected a shrine to the unattainable: *Infinite Needs* (Sahlins 1988: 37,39 emphases his). We saw in Chapter 4 that in the nomadic pastoral tribes of the early Rig Vedic period where *dana* functioned as an institution for redistributing the common wealth, there was little mention of beggary and poverty. The Buddha and those who had attained arahatship, went beyond the binary opposition, property/poverty and the dialectic tension it produces.

The *Cakkavatti Sīhanāda*, a discourse on righteous politics, ends with a masterly revaluation of values. If his renouncer disciples keep to the cattle trails of their forefathers, they would "grow in length of years, in comeliness, happiness and power." Each of these are restated in terms of the new Ariyan scale of values. The noble disciple seeks self-mastery not power over others:

What is power for a disciple of the noble? Here, a *bhikkhu* by the destruction of the cancerous cravings enters into and abides in that 'canker-less' liberation of the mind (*anasava cetovimuttim*) and liberation by wisdom which he has attained in this very life, seen by his own pure knowledge and realized by himself (D III.177).

The first Buddhist mendicants were nomads who had no foothold in society and as such they eluded the grasp of society.

Mendicancy: A Catalyst of Sharing

The terms *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni* are translated with consistent ineptness as ‘monk’ and ‘nun’, so that the difference between early and later modes of life in the Sangha become blurred. As Ling pointed out, the word ‘monk’, derived from the Greek *monachus*, originally meant a religious hermit or solitary; later on it came to mean a member of a community or brotherhood living apart from the world. Similarly, the word ‘nun’ does not convey the status and the mission of the *bhikkhunis*. In the Christian hierarchy, monks and nuns are ritually subordinated to the priests and are dependent on the mediation of the latter for the bestowal of divine grace through ritual acts. Women, until recently, were excluded from positions of leadership and denied an official mandate to teach, in all Christian Churches. The Buddhist renouncers, men and women, were engaged in a public ministry. They were not sequestered ‘monastics.’

The term *bhikkhu* is derived from *bhikṣ*. It is the irregular desiderative form of the root */bhaj* - and denotes ‘the wish to share’ (SED 756). The word *bhaga* derived from */bhaj*, as we have seen in Chapter 4, was a privileged term in the early *Rig Vedic* tribes and occurs frequently in the *Rig Veda*. *Bhagha* was the portion that was a person’s just due in the clan-system and the person who received his/her just share or portion from the common pool was ‘a *bhagavant*’; the term has been celestialised to mean a person who enjoys heavenly bliss, but genealogically it referred to a person without craving, because he/she has his/her due share. There was quiet contentment and no anxiety because of the spirit of sharing in the community. The mendicant’s bowl was referred to as *bhiksha patra* - literally ‘the sharing bowl’. The etymological and sociogenetic meaning *bhikkhu-ni* rendered accurately is ‘sharer’ rather than ‘mendicant’. The *bhikkhu-ni* catalyses the spirit of sharing among the haves that wealth has to be shared with the have-nots. In Ancient India, a distinction was made between ordinary beggars ‘*bhikshaka*’ and ‘*bhikshu*’ - those who had voluntarily embraced a life of mendicancy as a moral option.

A *bhikkhu* is an almsman. He is differentiated from an ordinary beggar by the sacramental character of his begging. His beggary is not just a means of subsistence, but an outward token that he has renounced the world and all its goods, and thrown himself for bare living on the chances of charity (Dutt 1962: 36).

The forest dwelling recluse (*aranyaka*) depended on the gifts of nature or on gifts brought to them by devotees. On the other hand the *bhikkhu-nis* went to the people and by that very fact, established their way of life on a pivotal social relationship with the householders. They made themselves the dependants, not the overlords of those who provided them with their most elementary needs. The pauper’s beg-

ging bowl was transformed into a symbol of a new value. The *bhikkhu-nis* only possession, an empty bowl was a 'sign' which affronted all the other signs of property, power, privilege and pleasure. Just as food gatherers were optimistically depended on the free gifts of nature, the Buddhist mendicants placed their trust on the generosity of the their fellow human beings,

Men of this community are recognised by others by the token of their Begging Bowl. The Begging Bowl has to them a certain sanctity as the visible symbol and token of the almsman's calling. People are aware of their difference in standing from vagabonds and beggars and recognize that their wandering is not willful vagabondage, but a quest controlled by a purpose and direction: it is *Brahmacariya*, a spiritual quest (Dutt 1962: 46).

The saffron-robed mendicants moving daily from house to house, standing before the door with downcast eyes, holding out their begging bowls, were a disquieting presence in society. He/she was a daily reminder of the inescapable realities of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*, and an affrontation of ambitions and aspirations, heedlessly pursued by ordinary men and women. Society had become immunized to poverty, to socially engendered suffering and carried on as if these were natural, not man-made calamities. The presence of the voluntary mendicant, pursuing nobler ideals than those of wealth and power, must have made at least a sensitive few, to 'awaken' to an awareness of harsh social realities. Those who were content 'to take only what is given' must have challenged the morality of those who grabbed and hoarded what was not given. The begging bowl, like the *bhajana* - the sharing bowl of the threshing floor, invited the people to share their wealth (See Chapter 4). The mendicant at the door prodded the calloused heart to *anukampa* - to 'feel along with' the bereft.

Dana - sharing, just redistribution of wealth - is the Buddha's antidote for *tanha* - greed and *upadana* - clinging. The Buddha condemned miserliness - *macchhariyani* - with regard to material and immaterial assets as a cancer which destroys the spirit of generosity - *caga*. He singled out five kinds of greed, which hinder the welfare and happiness of people: i. *avasa macchhariyani*- greedy accumulation of houses; ii. & iii. *kula* and *vanna macchhariyani* - jealous protection of family privileges and social status, iv. *labha macchhariyani* - greed for profit-making v. *dhamma macchhariyani* - hoarding knowledge without sharing it (B III.235).

As we saw in Chapter 2, gift-exchange in lineage societies was a total social phenomenon: the just circulation of goods was a totality of exchanges which was at the same time economic, juridical, and moral. The compartmentalisation of life into the religious, political and economic spheres was unknown. The Buddha restored to honour the ancient institution of *dana* - the pooling and redistribution

of wealth - as it was known and practised in ancient *ganas* and *ganasanghas*.

In the Jataka we read of a 'Buddhist' king, Sivi, who was ready to share not merely out of his largesse, but even when it entailed great personal sacrifice. He donated one of his eyes to give sight to a blind beggar. The beggar in question was a Brahmin and the story is obviously intended to juxtapose the difference between the early Buddhist and the Brahmin concept of *dana*. When asked why his generosity knew no bounds, the king replied:

I give according to an ancient and righteous tradition - My heart rejoices
in sharing (Sivi Jataka J 499)

The average person constructs 'things' in his mind, delights in them and clings to them. The dhammafaraer understands non-substantiality, unclenches the fist, shares and rejoices. *Dana* as originally practised in the *Savaka Sangha* seems to have had a more radical significance than mere charity, philanthropy or almsgiving. The notion of giving alms and donations to the *Bhikkhu Sangha* in order to accumulate invisible merit seems to have been a later development, a transference to the religious field of mercantilist exchanges, where each party treats the other as a means for making profit.

Mendicancy: Disruption of Established Order

In the Buddha's Day *jāti* differences and group rights were maintained and perpetuated by the practice of endogamy and commensality. Excluding people from food-sharing ritually expressed exclusion from the rights and privileges of an in-group. The begging bowl, circulating through society, publicly flouted the rules governing commensality, particularly the strict rules governing ritual purity/impurity with regard to food, especially the impurity of food cooked by low caste people, in Brahmanism. When the Buddhist mendicants entered a village, town or city, they moved from house to house making no discrimination between rich or poor, high or low. They often joined the poorest of the poor in collecting their meals from scraps thrown on to garbage heaps.

The Brahmins accepted only dry rations as alms, which they cooked for themselves on their ritually sacred fire. The Buddhist mendicants accepted only cooked meals. This precluded the possibility of hoarding foodstuffs. Accepting cooked meals from all and sundry, even from the most 'polluting' of castes was from the Brahmanic point of view an abomination. With reference to the early Buddhist flaunting of food taboos, Kosambi writes:

What this means is difficult to explain to anyone who does not know that most Indians would rather go hungry, and many have preferred death by

starvation to eating soiled food or that prepared by a person of a lower caste (Kosambi 1977: 103).

Like the early *Bhikkhu-nī Sangha*, the Buddhist householders were drawn from all walks of life and ethnic groups. Sharing the daily meal with each other was the central liturgical act, which celebrated the undifferentiated unity of the *Saṅgha*. This was a hearkening back to the practice of commensality in clan societies. Marshall Sahlins notes that the internal solidarity of clans maintained by wealth sharing "is magnified when it takes form of eating together in a daily ritual of commensality *that consecrates the group as a group*" (1988: 94 emphasis added). In the cultural context of the times and according to the concrete logic of lineage societies, the early *Saṅgha* was celebrating its unity in the *Dhamma* and consecrating itself as one kinship group - sons and daughters of the Sakyan - through the practice of *dana*.

Moral Exemplars not Parasites

One of the principal reasons for the success of Buddhism among the masses was sociological. The leaders of the Buddhist movement were not an insupportable burden to the producing classes, especially wage labourers and poor peasants. Unconscionable kings plundered the wealth of the people through unjust taxation and greedy fire-priests demanded exorbitant payment for their ritual services. In a perversion of the ancient custom of wealth distribution, the offerings to the priests were called *dana* - 'voluntary' gifts. Wealth acquired through the labour of the people was channeled via the king to the priests (Thapar 1984a: 111). In return the priests conferred religious legitimacy to kings. In this cultural context, the *bhikkhu-nis*, like the other *samanas*, appeared among the people as moral leaders of a new type. Their needs were simple and minimal. The renunciation of marriage meant a renunciation of an institution which is perhaps the most powerful generator of group egoism - the family. The *bhikkhu-nis* had freed themselves from the exclusive preoccupation with the welfare of only their own flesh and blood and made themselves free to serve all without discrimination.

The young Brahmin woman Rohini, who later entered the *Bhikkhunī Sangha*, became aware of the parasitic character of her ancestral religion, when compared to the simple life of the *bhikkhu-nis*. She became a devout supporter of the *Buddha Saṅgha*. When her father reprimanded her for her generosity to *bhikkhu-nis*, whom he contemptuously referred to as "a lazy bunch, making their living off what others give and greedy of titbits" (Thig 272), Rohini retorted,

Full of good work are they; no sluggard crew.
The noblest task they fulfil; they drive out lust

And hate. Hence are they dear to me.
Their work in action's pure, pure is their work...
They clutch no coin; no gold their hand doth take, nor silver.
For their needs sufficient yields the day...
From many a clan and many a countryside, they join the
Saṅgha mutually bound in love.
Hence are they dear to me (Thig LXVII vs. 275-285).

Max Weber's view that early Buddhism was a product not of the under privileged but of very positively privileged strata and that its appeal was primarily to urban elites, the princely and mercantile classes (1962: 227), fails to explain why it captured the imagination of the urban poor and the peasantry and why Buddhism to this day has a very strong rural presence. Weber did not need to explain what he did not want to see, whereas, the Russian scholar of Indian religion V. Brodov recognizes that the early Buddhists must have had considerable impact on the masses:

Reflecting as it did the dissatisfaction of the free commoners and the lower urban castes, which were ruined and oppressed, Buddhism succeeded in winning the support of many oppressed people suffering from lack of rights, poverty and hunger. In referring to early Buddhism it should be remembered that it succeeded, under the definite socio-historical conditions of the time, in expressing in a specific form the aspirations of the people for a better life (1984: 110).

The First Sangha: A Civilising Movement

The Buddha lived in a period when more and more people were drawn into the maelstrom of a single society. The old gods and local customs could no longer meet the needs of a translocal culture. The new towns and large cities as centres of trade and commerce brought together people from various regions, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This produced a new and unique life style - a certain refinement of manners which was called *pori*, 'urbane' or 'civil'. There was a socially felt need to establish universal codes of conduct and forms of behaviour which would make interaction between strangers easy and assuring. There was increasing pressure on individuals to control themselves and to adopt socially esteemed codes of conduct. The 'specific transformation' of human behaviour from the Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century in the West is described by Nobert Elias (1982) as a 'process of civilisation'. This process was accompanied by the process of State formation which imposed external constraint compelling increasing self-restraint. We see a similar process at work in the Buddha's Day. But this concept of civilisation, Elias notes, referred primarily to refinement of manners or external codes of conduct and did not necessarily mean inner refinement.

In the Buddha's vision of a transformed humanity, the ideal of refined behaviour is combined with the ideal of inner moral refinement. Those who joined the *Bhikkhu-ni Saṅgha* underwent a period of training that would enable them to live up to the ideals of their new avocation. This included training in wholesome moral practice, self cultivation (*bhavana*) and codes of conduct appropriate to men and women engaged in a public mission and who would be expected to be exemplars of the type of nobility which could be attained by those who followed the Eightfold Path. The *Sekhiya Dhamma* - Training Guidelines of the *Vinaya Pitaka* is a Manual on Manners for those who join the *Bhikkhu-ni Saṅgha*. It is part of the *Patimokkha* ('Chapter of Faults') which scholars agree, is the oldest section of the *Vinaya*. This means that the tradition of paying great attention to personal and environmental cleanliness in the *Saṅgha* all over the world to this day have had its origin in high standards of refinement set by the Founder himself. Codes of etiquette were developed and adapted to suit the needs of community life in monasteries.

The *Buddha Saṅgha* was a microcosm of the larger society: members of royalty, aristocrats, delicately nurtured young men and women; rough-hewn rustics and polished urban elites; uneducated manual labourers and distinguished intellectuals. Many of the first recruits had been, either brahmins, independent ascetics or members of other *samana* schools. Some of them may have been mavericks who had engaged in practices bordering on the bizarre. It is this motley band of men and women that had to be moulded and refined into a company of peaceful ones, cordial in their ways and refined in conduct - a *Saṅgha* which would "illumine the world like the full moon freed from clouds" (Dhp 376-81).

The detailed guidelines given in the *Vinaya Pitaka*, with regard to personal hygiene, deportment and etiquette, may surprise some. They may even ask: "What has this to do with 'religion'? We have to appreciate these rules of politeness in the context of real social conditions then, and one may add, even now, in India. Poverty, subhuman levels of existence and the lack of basic amenities can make humans lose all sense of their humanity. The Buddha did not drag everyone down to the level of the crude and the uncultivated in the name of 'religion' or 'asceticism.' Instead of self-neglect he encouraged self-cultivation and a refined lifestyle. He devised a system of training, which would raise the general cultural level of all who joined the *Saṅgha*. He and other aristocratic men and women had been raised in gentility and civility and had the background and the skills to train the new 'nobility' on how to conduct themselves in a refined and dignified manner. As Robinson perceptively observes:

The *Saṅgha*, it must be remembered, accepted recruits from all social classes and peoples. It had to refine vulgar boys [and girls] and uncouth barbarians. Etiquette alone does not suffice, of course, but it is a necessary

part of the complete discipline through which character is shaped, good habits built, and external observances converted into inner discipline (Robinson 1984: 51).

Following the norms of refinement laid down by the Buddha, new rules must have elaborated as the community changed its mode of existence from the peripatetic to residence in monasteries. The following is a sample of the rules of politeness and etiquette laid down for members of the *Bhikkhu-ni Saṅgha* in the Sekhiya Dhamma of the Vinaya Pitaka.

i. External Deportment. The members of the Sangha were required to be properly clad at all times. Their robes should be kept clean and in good repair. In a significant break with gender roles, even the *bhikkhus* carried with them needle and thread for repairing their robes. On their begging rounds the mendicants were required to walk in a dignified manner: without rushing or dawdling; without peculiar mannerisms, swinging their limbs or tossing their heads about. They were trained not to gawk around but to keep their eyes modestly cast down as they walked down the streets of villages, towns or cities.

Without regard to social intercourse, they were taught not to rudely interrupt a conversation; not to obtrude themselves into company nor eavesdrop, but to indicate their presence by a gentle cough. It was forbidden to burst into a room when the door was closed. The proper thing to do was to first knock on the door and wait for an answer. Even if a door was open, one should still knock and wait to be invited in. The members of the *Saṅgha* were not only required to practise personal decorum, they were also forbidden to preach the *Dhamma* to anyone whose deportment and behaviour was disrespectful or indecorous.

ii. Eating Manners. When partaking of a meal, the noble disciple should sit upright and not bend over the alms bowl. The food should be brought to the mouth in a dignified manner. It food should be delicately mixed with the fingertips and gathered in small portions; it should not be squeezed with the palm into limps and tossed into the mouth. Food should not be heaped up in the bowls or pressed down to make room for more. ; the mouth should not be opened till the food is brought to it and the tongue should not be stuck out to lap up the food and to guzzle it down "like dogs ". The mouth should not be stuffed with large helpings and one should not speak with food in the mouth. Licking the fingers or palms; smacking the lips or belching to express relish were considered bad manners. When eating together, the senior *Bhikkhu-ni*, who according to protocol would be served first, should wait till everyone was served, so that all could commence the meal together.

iii. Personal and Environmental Hygiene. *Bhikkhu-nis* who knew that they would

have to instruct or counsel others shortly after a meal, are advised to abstain from food (like garlic) that would make their breath offensive to their listeners. The use of toothpicks was allowed for dental hygiene and to keep the breath fresh. Personal hygiene is also emphasized in rules requiring regular bathing (the earlier restrictive practice was subsequently relaxed). To keep their nails short, recruits from simple backgrounds tore or bit them off or rubbed the nails against rough surfaces. They were taught how to clean and trim their nails.

Living quarters and surroundings had to be kept clean and tidy - no mention is made of servants. Wandering teachers could not avoid soiling their feet. So they were instructed not to carry mud and dirt into the residences. Before entering a residence they were required to wash their feet; footwear had to be cleaned and left outside. The training included the cultivation of proper toilet habits, which took into account environmental hygiene; the *bhikkhu-nis* were forbidden to ease themselves on grass or into water.

This sample of the numerous rules of politeness and personal hygiene shows the high level of refinement and culture that was required of the men and women who joined the *Sangha*. What we see here is a social moulding of men and women with the conscious purpose of producing highly cultured social and sociable human beings, whose visible refinement mirrored an inner refinement of mind and heart. The presence of such refined men and women would have provided the householders with models of civility and sociability worthy of emulation, especially because their lifestyle was projected as an index of moral refinement. The civilising elan of the *Sangha* as it spread far and wide must have been considerable. It is worth mentioning that the rules of politeness especially 'table manners', personal hygiene practised in traditional Lankan Buddhist homes are similar to the norms handed down in the *Vinaya Pitaka*.

The First Sangha: A Humanising Project

The first of the recorded discourses of the Buddha, the *Brahmajala Sutta* (DB I.I), could be regarded as the Manifesto of Early Buddhism. It is a compendium of practices and views rejected by the Buddha and the first Buddhists. The crudest beliefs and practices are listed first, then those that would be dissipating to and unworthy of renunciants; thereafter, the major speculative views in circulation at the time are critically examined and rejected. The first section of the *Brahmajala Sutta* reads like an inventory of folk religiosity in Sri Lankan Buddhism. Many practitioners of arts like astrology, are Buddhist monks. From Presidents down to the simple villager 'good Buddhists' hardly undertake any activity of importance without getting an astrologer to fix an auspicious time. The Buddha attempted to wean his disciples away from belief in auspicious times and places by educating his

disciples on what are truly auspicious - '*subha mangala*' - times, places and persons in the Mahamangala Sutta (Sn 2.4). There is today, as Trevor Ling observed, "a large practicability gap, between the ideal envisaged and the reality" (1985: 133). Confidence tricksters succeed by exploiting the gullibility, the fears and desires of the people. Sadly, religious leaders to reinforce superstitious beliefs of ordinary people. In a world which produces anxieties and yearnings, the fastest way for charlatans to earn a fast buck is to promise a quick fix.

The Brahmajala Sutta is deliberately structured for a pedagogical purpose. Superstitious beliefs and practices are listed first. These are followed by theosophical views rejected by the First Buddhists. Finally, the Buddha's demystifying diagnosis of the cause of suffering and the way to eradicate is explained. Obviously, the dissipation of superstitious consciousness and development of critical consciousness was seen as a prerequisite for understanding the Buddha's sublime Teaching.

The Buddha stated that he taught *Dhamma* using a gradual method. As long as people have not come to an awareness of themselves and their species potential they will experience the forces of nature as alien, all powerful and capricious forces. This magical consciousness of nature is transposed to society and ignorant people are made to believe that the position of the high and mighty are part of a natural - 'karmic'- or divine dispensation. In the *Vasettha Sutta* the Buddha patiently explained that the totality of occupation which link people to people is a totality of social practices. But as society became complex and the chains of interdependence extensive and opaque, society appeared to people like an alien force existing outside them like nature itself. They had fallen into ignorance of the historical origins of social differences. The *Aggañña Sutta* was intended to explain true origins.

The Buddha recalled that before his 'Awakening' he himself was subject to fear and dread of the unknown. However, he had decided to face up to it with courage and overcome his fears. He went on a dark night deep into a thick jungle and to a place which it was feared was infested with demons and other terrifying beings. In the pitch-dark he was filled with terror as he heard the breaking of twigs and the rustle of branches suggesting the 'dread' was approaching him. He resolved not to panic or be terrified, "I neither moved nor stood nor sat, till I had subdued that fear and dread". In the event he discovered that the sounds that filled him with dread were made by a wild beast and a peacock (See Bhayabherava - Fear and Dread - Sutta M I.4) So the Buddha was not taking a superior attitude when he condemned occult and superstitious practices which feed on popular fears and anxieties in the *Brahmajala Sutta*. He tested them in practice and realised their emptiness. They exacerbated the peoples' fears and desires keeping them enslaved in delusion. If their magical consciousness is replaced by critical awareness, they

would not be gullible to the pseudo explanations and solutions offered by charlatans. Here is a sample of occult and superstitious practices against which the first Buddhists campaigned:

i. Divinations and Predictions: interpreting strange phenomena as omens of good or evil; the practice of astrology; interpreting dreams, and the behaviour or the cries of animals. Reading bodily marks, palms and finger tips; using precious stones, sticks, javelins, mirrors, human mediums etc. for divination; predicting the outcome of battles, business undertakings or farming activities, calculating auspicious times for arranging marriages, divorces or beginning business ventures; predicting longevity future good or bad health, or good or bad fortune, etc.

ii. Rites and Rituals: worshipping the sun and other natural elements, or the Absolute Being (c.q. Brahma), invoking the Goddess of Luck, ritual rinsings and bathings; offering *pujas* to the gods in order to obtain favours, etc.

iii. Black Magic: resorting to diabolical practices in order to hurt enemies; to gain virility and fertility or to make others impotent or sterile, etc. It was an offence for members of the *Bhikkhu-ni Saṅgha* to display or even to tell householders that they have paranormal or miraculous powers. It was strictly forbidden to perform 'miraculous' feats with a view to making converts. The Buddha compared the resort to such tricks for proselytisation, to the cunning of a harlot who exposes her body to lure clients (BD 151).

After listing the various practices of folk-religiosity common in his day, the Buddha condemned them as - *tiracchana vijja* - animal knowledge'. Human beings who do not have a critical understanding of their world, have, as Marx observed in *The German Ideology* "a consciousness of nature as a completely alien, all powerful and unassailable force - a purely animal consciousness of nature"(CWME 5. 44). The Buddha used exactly the same characterisation centuries ago. When people are ignorant of the workings of nature they are also overawed by the social powers that be. With such a lowly understanding of themselves, they can easily be treated as animals by ruling classes. Ruling class ideologies serve to reinforce this notion of natural inferiority.

'The translation of *tiracchana* as 'animal-like', does not fully convey the very graphic significance of the term. It literally means 'horizontal.' Animals are *tiracchanagata* - 'those who go horizontally.' Humans are the only animals that can carry their heads held high and stand upright on an erect backbone. This capacity, despite differences of gender, colour, caste, class or creed is what immediately identifies the human form and distinguishes it from other animal forms. Whether born to a prince or a pauper, the helpless little infant lying at first on its back, struggles

to turn around on to its belly; it slithers, crawls on all fours and, after many a rise and fall, it accomplishes the determination of its species-nature to stand and walk on its own two feet! Around the fourteenth month: "The child enters the human commitment to walk upright" (Bronowski 1973: 31). This is the first step on its personal journey towards full hominisation.

The *Rig Veda* (3.62.14) speaks of the *dasas* - slaves - as two footed cattle - *pasu*. The Brahmin ruling class ideologists regarded the labouring classes as beasts of burden. The Buddha on the other hand spoke with compassion for the slaves and wage labourers who were "driven to hard labour by threats and intimidations their rough faces covered in tears". He urged kings to create conditions which would free labourers from such misery. (D I.143). In oppressive cultures, the poor and lowly are compelled to diminish themselves, to become semi-human or subhuman, by the demand that they genuflect, fall down on their knees or, grovel on all fours like animals, before the high and the mighty. This dehumanisation is religiously reinforced by requiring humans to fall down in adoration - on all fours, or on their knees, before invisible gods and their vicars on earth. The protocols of the palace and the of the temple mirror and reproduce a ruling class domination; power is written into social institutions and into the very bodies of human beings. The *tirachana vijja* condemned by the Buddha are the products of the consciousness of human beings who have not yet found themselves or have been made ignorant of their true selves through dominant ideologies. Human beings can be helped to find their true selves through a criticism of world-views, which make them look to the heavens for a realization of themselves and their true happiness. The criticism of delusions - *moha* - religious and secular is the first step on the Way, which helps human beings to eradicate the conditions which make delusions necessary. They can begin to think and act and shape their own freedom and happiness.

The *Dhamma* is a challenge to human beings to ennoble themselves, not to descend to the level of predatory beasts or to turn their fellow humans into beasts of burden. In a world where desperate people turn to the heavens for help, the Buddha teaches that conditions can be created for all humans to walk the earth in dignity, as the only biped with an upright backbone:

The best of paths is the Eightfold Path. The best of bipeds is the seeing one. This is the only Way. There is none other. The *Tathāgatas* are only teachers. You yourselves must make the effort (Dhp 273- 276).

Beyond the Waters of Religiosity

The Brahmin Lawgiver Manu forbade the teaching of the *Vedas* to the *sudras*; even the recital of the *Vedas* in their presence is prohibited. The ears of a *sudra*

who hears the *Vedas* are to be filled with molten lead. His tongue is to be split if he recites it; his body is to be cut through if he preserves it in his memory (LM I.88; III. 156; IV.99). It was forbidden for women to gain knowledge of the *Vedas*, “since women are impure as falsehood itself. This is a fixed rule” (ibid. IX.18). The first Buddhist campaigned, by preaching and by example, to create egalitarian conditions which would engender a social humanity and a humane society. The memory of this experiment has been handed down.

The transformation of consciousness and the social revolution that the Buddha brought about is exemplified by the courage and the daring of the Theri Punnika. She had once been a domestic slave - thus, a woman with no education and from an inferior ‘racial’ background - a *sudra* by Brahmin definition. The Buddha ordered that *bhikkhunis* be taught to commit his *Dhamma* to memory and hand it down to their sisters in the Bhikkhuni Sangha. Punnika not only found refuge and freedom from domestic oppression in the *Bhikkhuni Sangha*, she also became a skilled exponent of the *Dhamma* and an arahat. One winter morning, she watched bemused as a Brahmin worthy performed his ritual ablutions in the waters of the Ganga, shivering in the bitter cold. Punnika remembered a time when each morning at the crack of dawn she was awakened, perhaps with a kick, and ordered to fetch water from the river. She had braved the morning chill, she recalled, through fear of beatings by her mistress. Now as an emancipated woman, she was puzzled by the sight of an ‘educated’ man plunging himself into the ice-cold waters of the river with frenzied fervour. She approached the Brahmin and inquired why he inflicted this suffering on himself. The holy priest, with supreme contempt for the ‘ignorance’ of a ‘low caste woman’ turned *samani* asked if she did not know that the waters of sacred rivers cleanse people of their sins? Punnika’s response to this obscurantist belief in ‘holy water’ was bold and devastating. She demolished the Brahmin view that women are impure as falsehood itself, by exposing the ‘truth’ of ritual purifications and priestcraft:

Now, who, ignorant to the ignorant, has told you this? If water can wash away the effects of evil deeds, then fishes, tortoises, frogs, watersnakes and crocodiles would go straight to heaven! Give up this practice at least to save your skin from frostbite (LXV. vs. Thig 239-244).

The River Ganges flows across the Majjhimadesa where the Buddha spent his life helping people to liberate themselves from their deluded fears and desires. On major festival days, millions flock from all over India to plunge into the Ganges in a collective frenzy driven by the belief that its polluted waters would cleanse them of their sins. From the further shore of freedom, the irreverent laughter of *arahat* Punnika echoes across the ages, like ripples on the surface of the Mother of all Indian rivers.

More than 2,500 years have passed since the Buddha and the first Buddhists crisscrossed the districts of the Majjhimadesa preaching and bearing witness to the *Dhamma*. The Ganges and its tributaries continue to flow to the ocean, where their sacrality turns into the taste of salt. Considering the inhuman conditions in which the suffering millions of India live, one cannot but wonder, whether Indian society to this day might have been suffused by the sweet flavour of freedom - *vimutti rasa*, if the campaign for human liberation launched by Mother India's Greatest Son, Siddhattha Gotama, had been sustained.

CONCLUSION

NOMADS OF THE PRESENT

The twentieth century began with great expectations that it will usher in the Golden Age of humanity. Two mutually antagonistic social systems presented themselves as highways to the fullness of human freedom: an individual-centred liberal system propelled by market forces which would lead all of humankind into a consumer paradise, and a command economy controlled by a totalitarian system which would sickle down the old and hammer into shape an international classless society. The salvation of humanity, it was assumed, depended on the triumph of the one or the other of these systems. Both have betrayed their promise. Here and there a moral sensitiveness, new and ancient, is awakening that we are living in a global village; that we belong to a single tribe; that the age of competing religions and conflicting nationalities is an anachronism and that unless we build the earth together according to a humane plan, we are heading towards a cosmic cataclysm. As a new millennium unfolds, concerned thinkers on both sides of old divides and hostilities are beginning to ask themselves what constitutes authentic human freedom and to explore new strategies for human liberation which do not contradict the values of this ideal.

The focus of most traditional projects of human emancipation in the past has been on economic and political reforms. Perceptive, non-ideological students of social change in the twentieth century have observed that qualitative changes in society have taken place not as a result of the solitary pirouette of individual conversions of the heart, the dramatic capture of power and imposition of structural changes by a band of determined revolutionaries, or by technocratic fixes on behalf of the status quo by social engineers. The dashed hopes of the last century have made one thing clear to those who are concerned with alleviating the mass of suffering in the world: what the world needs is not an economic vanguard (capitalist) or a political (communist) vanguard, but a moral vanguard of men and women who collectively live out the values of the hope that is in them. The truly revolutionary moment is when self change and the change of conditions coincide. The most significant changes in society in the recent past have taken place not at the commanding heights of the economy or of political power, but at the nodal points of society, where individuals began to become aware of the dissatisfactory nature of their life-conditions and began to question taken-for-granted values and aspirations and the routines of everyday living. From small beginnings, sometimes through the public defiance of the dominant social system by courageous individuals. Collective nonviolent action has set in motion movements for cultural change

which gradually had a mass impact and brought about qualitative shifts in human understanding and practice; for example, the women's movement, the mother's movement, the civil rights movement in the United States of America, the peace movement, the ecological movement and perhaps, the most dramatic of all in recent times, the movement for human rights and civil liberties in Eastern Europe.

Alberto Melucci is one of the foremost researchers of twentieth century social movements. He has attempted to distil the implicit assumptions and values of these movements and to propose a new theoretical model for understanding them. In his essay, *Social Movements and the Democratisation of Everyday Life*, (John Keane eds., 1988: 245-60) Melucci argues that what significantly distinguishes these social movements from traditional projects is that they do not proceed from a totalising plan or a prefabricated blueprint for the ideal society of the future. Contemporary social movements are initially responses to locally felt dissatisfactions, are discontinuous, have limited aims, and are not directed by a militaristic command centre. They are not fuelled by the ultimate fantasy of seizing state power in order to monopolize the means of violence. The wariness about capturing power even for a good end is born of a critical awareness of how revolutionary movements for human liberation, when triumphant, have time and again flagrantly violated the aims of the revolution in the name of safeguarding the gains of the revolution. New social movements concentrate rather on the less dramatic task of transforming the values of everyday life in civil society. These dissident movements share a common conviction: if civil society is not 'civilised,' it cannot miraculously produce religious, political and economic leaders of moral probity and cultural refinement. There are dimensions of social phenomena - affective or symbiotic relationships for instance, which, Melucci observes, could be understood as fundamental politics, because they operate at ground level. It is at this level that qualitative changes in society need to take place. The new social movements concentrate on the *democratisation of everyday life*. A necessary condition for such a democracy is public spaces independent of the institutions of government, the party system and state structures. Confrontation takes place principally on symbolic grounds by means of challenging and upsetting the dominant codes upon which social relationships are founded. The mere existence of a symbolic challenge is in itself a method of unmasking the dominant codes, a different way of perceiving the world.

In his path-breaking study, *Nomads of the Present* (1989), Melucci argues that for qualitative long term transformations of society what is needed are people whose collective action differ from the conventional models of political organisation; people who operate increasingly outside the established parameters of the political systems, such collective action creates new spaces, which function as a genuine subsystem. These social spaces are the products of different forms of behaviour which the system is unable to integrate, and include not only confron-

tational action but also deviant behaviour and cultural experimentation.

Melucci characterises social actors engaged in collective actions which go against the current of dominant values and practices as *nomads who dwell within the present*. Expressed in theoretical terms, the present is the locus of current confrontation. Most important at the theoretical level is Melucci's rejection of the conceptualisation of social movements as objective agents or privileged vanguards (religious or political) with a historical mission:

Even from a theoretical point of view, the image of a movement as 'character' is inadequate and dissolves along with the metaphysical essentialist idea of an actor with his own spirit, with a soul that moves it and provides it with objectives ... In other words, collective action [has to be] seen as a social product, as a set of social relationships, and not as a primary datum or given metaphysical entity (1988: 247).

The peripatetic mendicant teachers of early Buddhism were, in a very real sense, *Nomads of the Present*. As *paribbajakas* - wanderers - in the literal and moral sense since, they had no footholds in fixed views and fixed assets. They were, however, daily witnesses to 'another possibility' - something creative which had not been tried before. The begging bowl circulating through society reversed the circuit of desire, which made people cling to the very things that reinforce and entrench their bondage. The autonomous communes of mendicant men and women could respond flexibly to specific or local conditions and needs but, as sharers of a common *Dhamma* they were committed to the same goal, the creation of a righteous and non violent culture.

The first *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhunis* were credible moral elites because they had no vested interest in the status quo and no ambition to capture power, amass wealth or lord it over the people. The high visibility of the communes of peripatetic mendicants signalled what was possible in society at large. There was cultural action for freedom and the production of a new set of social relationships - 'a going against the current.' It was a counter cultural movement, but it was not a historically privileged collective agent-actor acting on behalf of a hidden teleology. The goal envisaged was the movement itself: taking of the Way that leads to the eradication of suffering. As the first *Bhikkhu-nis* realized, the *Saṅgha* was a 'space,' a 'happy conjuncture,' for embarking on a way of life that was 'wholly other' - not in a future, metaphysical realm, but in this world and *within the present*. The first *Bhikkhu-ni Saṅgha* has therefore to be understood in its socio-historical context as a concrete, collective response to the social evils of the period and not a-historically, according to an abstract typology of religions. It was not a loose aggregation of individuals who had turned their faces against the world. It was a disciplined organisation, but the discipline did not contradict the goal, which was

authentic freedom for all. The yellow robed shaven headed men and women on their daily begging rounds, went 'against the current' and posed a symbolic and practical challenge to the dominant codes of normative conduct and presented a different way of perceiving the world. The *Savaka Saṅgha* was a creative project of practical transcendence of limiting conditions, launched by a social realist and brilliant strategist who knew family life, conjugal love, political power, palatial pleasures as well as the pains of hunger and deprivation, through first-hand experience. He realized that mystical flights and ascetic self-mortification did not lead to true liberation after testing their efficacy in practice. When society becomes divided into "a world of voluptuousness and a world of woes", people tend to vest pleasure and suffering with religious significance, whereas unbridled enjoyment and unspeakable deprivation are the effects of rampant immorality.

The Buddha envisioned a society in which humans lived reconciled with themselves and their world. What we call the 'world' and 'society' are not outside us. They are the very conditions of our existence. The Buddha sought to free people from their alienation from themselves, their fellow human beings and their life-world. He understood that the welfare and happiness of human beings can be achieved only by a durable balance, a better attunement between the overall demands of society and the personal needs of each individual. It has become an article of faith today that prosperity can be achieved only by producing more and more and inciting people to crave for more and more, even if it means human degeneration and environmental degradation. Today, the infinity of human desires has come into contradiction with finiteness of resources. The Buddha indicated another possibility. A high quality of life is not incompatible with a moderation of means. The root cause of human suffering is delusion, which is the inability to recognize the difference between pleasure and joy. Everyone's needs can be satisfied and the welfare and happiness of all realized by extinguishing the fire of craving for more. Today craving is the fuel that drives the engine of 'growth.'

The Way of the Buddha has been detoured into a hundred deviant paths so that wayfarers have lost sight of the original goal: the realisation of the welfare and the happiness of the many folk out of compassion for the world. However, the Vision and the Method are there for those who wish to try it. It was tried and vindicated by the first Buddhists. The original invitation remains: *Ehi passa!* Come and See! Share the sweet taste of freedom - *vimutti rasa*. The Buddha's Way is a process; its goal an unfinished task. The Torchbearer of Humankind spoke from experience and had every human being, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, colour, caste, class or creed in mind when he declared:

Painful is all subjection
Bliss to be in control (Udana 2.9)

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