

Change

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Preface

Whatever is great in the sphere of the universally human must not be communicated as a subject for admiration but as an ethical requirement.

– Soren Kierkegaard[1]

When we first hear the Buddha's Teaching we listen, each of us, already imbued with our own set of views and opinions. Some of these views will harmonize with this Teaching. Others, just as surely, will not. Were it otherwise the Teaching would be quite needless, for either there would be nothing for us to learn from it or else everything. And if everything then there could be no avenue of approach, no common ground upon which we might make a beginning. It is because of this partial match that it is possible for us to benefit from the Buddha's right-view guidance if we wish to and will allow ourselves to do so. And it is because of this partial mismatch that we fail to see how to do so.

Commonly, the initial reaction is to judge the Teaching in the light of what we already accept as true. We try to understand it in terms of our own views. Some will be uninterested in doing otherwise. They will have no greater use for this Teaching than as a device for confirming to themselves what they have already decided to be the truth. To such people nothing useful can be said. Yet there are also those who genuinely desire to learn — i.e. to change themselves — but who do not see any way to proceed other than to evaluate the Teaching in the light of their own beliefs. But it can be said that in a sense the whole of this Teaching is a caution to do the opposite. Right-view guidance is offered as the standard by which we may judge our own views. By accepting that criterion we can understand those views fully, and thereby perceive the conditions upon which those views depend.

The Teaching, after all, informs us from the start that there are such things as “right view” and “wrong view.” Wrong view, the Teaching insists, is as inextricably tied up with craving and suffering as right view is with their absence. But right and wrong view, it seems, are not just a matter of a difference of opinion. They differ more fundamentally in that the former is a seeing of what the latter is blind to. And we, who are not free from craving and suffering, are not free precisely because we fail to understand what is meant by “right view.” Thus we are faced with a dilemma. For if we do not understand what is meant by “right view,” then how is it possible for us to judge our own (wrong) views by that standard, and thereby come to understand wrong view as being wrong view?

This essay is not an effort to answer such a question. It is, rather, an attempt to indicate a way in which each of us can resolve the dilemma for himself; for it cannot be resolved in any other way. Each of us must see for himself what it is that he is blind to.

That blindness — so the Buddha's discourses repeatedly assert — is involved centrally with our failure to see, to know, the nature of impermanence. And yet in our own experience everywhere we look we see that things are indeed impermanent. If the Buddha is correct then what have we missed?

This question provides us with the basic strategy of our essay. Our procedure will be first (in

sections 1, 2, and 4) to critically examine one common response to this question, “What have we missed?” This reply derives from a misconception about the Teaching which is both common and pernicious. We shall discuss not only the unsatisfactoriness of this response but also the nature of that unsatisfactoriness. Then, after taking our bearings (in section 5) by means of some relevant discourses, we will suggest an alternative understanding (already introduced in section 3 and developed more fully in section 6) and discuss its implications.

It is a feature of this alternative understanding that it is organically connected with our first question, “How is it possible to understand wrong view as being wrong view?” In order to illuminate this connection we will discuss (in sections 7 through 11) impermanence and the failure to recognize it for what it is. We shall do this using light shed by the central doctrine of this Teaching, the four noble truths. When we understand the nature of blindness, or wrong view, there is then the possibility of ending that blindness by seeing.

However, if we aim at changing ourselves in a fundamental way it would surely be ineffective to merely substitute one view (however “right” it may be) for another (however “wrong”). Such a task would be more-than-Herculean, inasmuch as Hercules was only required to clean out the Augean stables and was never required to replenish them.

Even more fundamentally, it would fail to be fundamental. To achieve a basic change we need to understand not only specific views. We must also comprehend the general mode in which we perceive the world. This mode or attitude is the context dependent upon which all specific views, right and wrong, arise. For views, like everything else, arise with condition, not independently. If therefore we can come to see the general attitude dependent upon which there arise fallacious views about impermanence, then that attitude can be relinquished. And with its abandonment all views which persist dependent upon that fallacy will be automatically abolished.

We will find, then, that this thorough discussion of impermanence, and of the failure to see it for what it is, will also be a discussion of the requisites for an examination, each for ourselves, of the human dilemma — ours. We shall then conclude our study with a consideration (in section 12) of the overview by means of which there arises a wrong view of impermanence, and we shall compare it with the overview by means of which there arises right view. In doing so we shall have set forth a method whereby one can see for oneself what is meant by “wrong view” and “right view.”

The mode of expression of this essay is essentially descriptive, analytical, and comparative. The analytical descriptions offered herein — particularly those of the structures of ignorance, of craving, and of experience-in-general — though straightforward, may strike readers variously as intriguing, exotic, alien, or even objectionable. If the objection is no more than a rigorous insistence that anything radically different from one’s already-familiar outlook must necessarily be mistaken, then (as has already been observed) nothing can be said. Nothing, that is, except that with such an attitude one will in any case never be able to make proper use of the Teaching. But others, though wishing to understand, may still find the mode of expression foreign to their own way of thinking and therefore baffling. This is the same problem as that of changing oneself: however willing, one may yet not see how to do so. In such a case the first change that is necessary is a change in the way one sees the problem.

If the mode of expression of this essay is foreign it might be possible to use that very alienness as a tool in achieving for oneself a primary change. For although the essay employs a discussion of impermanence as its base, its real concern is not just the problem of change but the problem of changing oneself, in a radical manner. Such a change is difficult to see and difficult to achieve. But if we would put an end to craving, to blindness, to suffering, and to all the unhealthy states that are involved therein, then it is utterly necessary that we see the utter necessity of such a change. Only

by doing so can we make a beginning.

Reliable source material is to be found in the four major collections (Nikāyas) of the Sutta Pitaka, in its companion, the Vinaya Pitaka, and in a few other short texts: the Sutta Nipāta, the Dhammapada, the Udāna, the Itivuttaka, and the Theragāthā. In this essay these texts are referred to collectively as “the Suttas.” In this essay no other texts are relied upon as representing the Buddha’s Teaching.

Sutta references are firstly to discourse number and, after a colon, to volume and page of the Pali Text Society edition, except that for Theragāthā, Dhammapada, and Sutta Nipāta primary reference is to verse number. Vinaya references are to the Khandhaka number of the Mahāvagga or Cūlavagga, in roman numerals, followed in arabic numerals by subsection and paragraph as well as volume and page number.

Vin. : Vinaya Pitaka

D. : Dīgha Nikāya

M. : Majjhima Nikāya

S. : Samyutta Nikāya (Roman numerals indicate Samyutta number, according to P.T.S. enumeration.)

A. : Anguttara Nikāya (Roman numerals indicate Nipāta number.)

Thag. : Theragāthā

Dh. : Dhammapada

Sn. : Sutta Nipāta

Ud. : Udāna

Footnotes:

1. Concluding Unscientific Postscript (London: Oxford University Press, 1945) tr. by D. F. Swenson, p. 320.

1. Impermanence is central

We will no doubt all agree that the notion of change, or impermanence (anicca), is central to the Teaching of the Buddha. We are told repeatedly, in the oldest texts as well as later ones, that attachment to the impermanent results in woe. Purity, desirelessness, freedom from unhappiness in all its forms — in short, full enlightenment — is achieved by non-attachment. Non-attachment is inseparable from perception of impermanence. And conversely, it is through failure to perceive impermanence that beings continue to cling to this and that. Thus we remain mired in the slough of greed, hatred, delusion, and misery .

But what exactly can all this mean? For it is plain from the start that we already perceive impermanence, all of us. I see a sheet of white paper gradually fill with black marks. I hear various sounds (chirps, hums, gurgles) begin, endure for some time, and then fade. I perceive bodily percepts (warmth, a faint giddiness, an itch) change in character or cease altogether either rapidly or slowly. I think a succession of thoughts, images, ideas. All manifestly impermanent. And all of this is, undeniably, perception of change. “But,” it must then be asked, “if you’re so perceptive why aren’t you enlightened?” So it is clear at once that the Buddha’s Teaching, if it means anything at all, must mean something other than this by the term “perception of impermanence.” What is that “other than this?”

The usual reply — the answer we find in almost all accounts of Buddhism, both popular and scholarly — is to the effect that this perception of change is merely conventional (sammuti). There is a higher, or ultimate (paramattha) truth, a perception other than this which we must develop: not only do things change; they always change, i.e. they are in flux. By “flux” is meant either of two essentially equivalent ideas. “Pure flux” asserts that all things always change: they do not endure unchanged for any time whatsoever. “Impure flux” holds that just as matter is composed of basic units, known as atoms, so too, time consists of basic units, known as moments. These moments are the rate at which everything changes. They are, it seems, extremely brief. Various figures are bandied about, but a common one is 176,470,000,000 moments (more or less) “in a single flash of lightning.” With such phenomenal speed material phenomena whiz past our awareness. Mental events, it seems, occur about seventeen times faster.

Clearly, only enlightened beings could hope to perceive such a flux. We commoners must live out our lives in blissful (or not-so-blissful) ignorance of this truth. Nevertheless we can hardly refrain from trying to imagine what the world must be like when everything — everything! — is seen to change and flicker and dance about always, and in all ways, with such incredible rapidity that its very reality seems to be at best merely tenuous. Yesterday I wrote some words, black marks on white paper. Today that paper melts into an evanescent and fluctuating whirl. No longer white — no longer even rectangular (for both color and shape now change ceaselessly) — it seems indefinable, perhaps even impalpable. And those black squiggles, now illegible, are no longer meaningful or, the same thing, they contain all meaning, O paradox!

The wall, once so solid and immobile, now resembles a broiling impasto, as vermiculative in its ceaseless and pervasive mutations as a seething mass of maggots shrouding an overripe corpse. And this chair, once so firm and supportive: how is it that I don’t now plunge through its insubstantial flimsiness to fall endlessly down some unutterable abyss? Could this be the perception we are admonished to strive for, as being valuable above all else? In such a world how could we even brush our teeth, let alone experience the unalloyed bliss of non-attachment? Before such a vision we can readily develop a sympathy for the view, sometimes encountered, that enlightenment may be all very well and good as a future aspiration, but not now!

Of course it might not be that way at all. Imagination is not reality. A perception of universal flux

might be but a gentle rippling of the surface, so to speak. A sort of universal vibration more akin to, say, a mild acid trip than to the demented visions of a psychotic madman. This would be a vast improvement over the former conceptualization, to be sure. But it is not at all clear that it would be an improvement over our everyday perception, however drab and mundane and conventional that perception might be.[2] But even if we allow that it is (as we are assured) quite free from any such disquietude as arose when we tried to imagine what perception of universal flux might be like, and even if we allow that such a perception might be (in some way) beatific, yet as a vision of reality it is still unsatisfactory.

It is not just a matter of declining to accept that perception of impermanence is co-extensive with a disdain for common sense. More importantly, the Buddha proposes, does he not?, that perception of impermanence stands in an organic relationship with relinquishment (as does non-perception of impermanence to attachment). And leaving aside (for now) the question of whether flux is a valid concept in its own right we still must ask: In what way is this notion holistically connected to letting go? After all, an ordinary person, even were he to assent to the doctrine of flux, would not thereby see (even conceptually) a connection with the ideas of attachment and unhappiness. This is demonstrated by the many non-Buddhist thinkers, from Heraclitus to Henry Burlingame III, who are in exactly this position. Of course one can argue a connection. But the fact that an argument is needed is already evidence that the connection is more a matter of reasoning than of self-evidence. And however reasonable the argument may seem it is still an argument.

This is in striking contrast to the notion of conventional or “everyday” change. Even an ordinary person (let alone an enlightened one) can readily see how that notion is connected to attachment and woe. No argumentation is necessary (for who has not loved and lost?), albeit he might not thereby see the way to free himself from such attachment, or even wish to do so. When non-Buddhists write about impermanence in its “everyday” sense it is common for them to conclude their remarks with cries of “Alas!” and “Alack!” however much they may then increase their distress by advocacy of strategies of attachment and indulgence — “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,” “Eat, drink, and be merry...,” and so on.

To give a concrete example, if I accept that this concrete slab (which is dear to me) is changing “all the time” there is in that no arising of anxiety. My ownership is not thereby affected. Nor is there any a priori reason why this belief in (or even perception of) flux should induce in me an attitude of relinquishment. It could as well lead me to cling all the tighter. If, for instance, I were to choose to regard this concrete slab as “always changing” then that very “always” could lend it (in my eyes) a sort of backhanded permanence which discrete change would not. But suppose I see that my slab could be broken or stolen, that it must be polished and protected, and that in any case it will inevitably be destroyed like all concrete slabs before it. Then it is clear at once, to enlightened and unenlightened alike, that attachment to such a thing must lead to disappointment. And, on a subtler and more immediate level, the awareness that this is so must necessarily produce in me a present apprehension of that disappointment even though the concrete slab may now be undergoing no apparent (or even actual) change.

The common man may neither wish to nor be able to apply the observation of discrete change to the generality of his experience. But he is certainly capable of applying it at least to the specific case, and may even succeed thus in freeing himself from a debilitating dependency on concrete slabs. But however much he may strive to apply a belief in flux to his experience, it will necessarily remain separated from that experience by a gulf of rationalization. For flux differs from discrete change not only in that its connection to dissatisfaction is (at least for you and me) a matter of concept, not of percept, but also in that its relation to experience itself is ultimately a matter for conjecture.

Footnotes:

2. “Most of us want some kind of deep, marvellous and mystical experience; our own daily experiences are so trivial, so banal, so superficial, we want something electrifying. In that bizarre thought of a marvellous experience, there is this duality of the experienced and the experience. As long as this duality exists there must be distortion....” — J. Krishnamurti, *The Impossible Question* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 75.

2. The usual argument for flux

The usual argument for flux runs like this: We can see that comparatively major changes (the manufacture and eventual destruction of my concrete slab, for example) occur infrequently. Subsidiary changes (e.g. cracks; chipping around the edges) are more common events. Minor changes (scratches on the surface, accumulation of dirt) can be noticed yet more often. It is easy enough to perceive in this progression a principle: less significant changes tend to occur more frequently than more general ones. There is the temptation to leap from this to the notion that below the threshold of perception changes are occurring, though we cannot observe them, with yet-greater frequency. It requires only one further extrapolation to reach the conclusion that ultimately (as opposed to merely conventionally) everything is changing, on an atomic level, all the time: flux. And, it is explained, it is because we fail to see this truth that we form attachments to the impermanent, thereby exposing ourselves to misery.

It is seen at once that this argument (which is certainly *reductio*, if not *ad absurdum*) bases itself upon the observation that things change at diverse rates, subsidiary changes occurring more frequently, and that it concludes with the view that things change at the same rate, constantly. Not everyone will accept a conclusion which contradicts its own premises, but those who will do so once must be prepared to do so twice. For the whole purpose of this double extrapolation from observed discrete change to hypothesized continuous change — based as it is upon analogy rather than upon necessity — is to then use this very flux as an explanation of that same discrete change. Manifest discrete impermanence is taken as the gross outcome of the extremely subtle hypostasized changes that constitute a Reality as yet hidden from our perception. Flux is thus conceived as a sort of primordial essence.

The histories of science and religion are littered with the failed remains of similar efforts to discover such a base. The 19th century scientific notion of an all-pervasive “ether” and the Christian concept of an all-pervasive “God” are examples. All such essences are self-contradictory, flux no less than the others. Out of uniformity we can never arrive at the diversity of the world we actually experience.

If everything changes at the same rate then how is it that we are aware of slow and fast, and base our lives upon this perception? Ketchup pours slowly, but a shooting star flashes across the sky. Are we to ascribe this to a misperception of reality? Do meteors fall slower for enlightened beings? Does ketchup pour faster? But if an enlightened being perceives different rates of change he cannot also perceive continuous universal change. If some things change faster then necessarily there must be some moments (if we insist upon this concept of “moments”) when other things do not change at all. Therefore if we posit a relationship between constant and variable change then that relationship is necessarily self-contradictory. However, if the relationship is severed then either the notion of flux must remain divorced from the realm of experience or else we must suppose a world in which continuous and discontinuous change are operative independently — a schizoid world!

Rather than such an impossible world, some — particularly those inclined towards mysticism — prefer none at all. They assert an essence — the Absolute, the All, or some other capitalized Concept — and deny the mundane lower-case reality which is our common lot. They find flux a handy and simple garb with which to conceal naked reality. After all, if everything is always changing then how could such evanescent ephemerae have more than an inferred or second-hand existence? Is not Ultimate Reality — a really real Reality — to be found by perceiving flux, or even by going beyond it?

Yet however much the evidence of immediate experience is denied, the world continues to exhibit, in the face of our will, the characteristic of resistance. Therefore, to lend support to the denial, recourse is sometimes had to a willful misreading of the texts, and in particular of the doctrine of not-self (anattā). After all, it needs but a slight familiarity with the Suttas to recognize their major concerns. Conceit, (mistaken) concepts of immutability and essence, the will to possess — these, and not a mere denial of the self-identity of the various things in the world (“a rose is not a rose is not a rose”) are their recurrent themes. The relevance of the notion of selfhood, and of the Buddhist response to that notion, is made clear in verse 62 of the Dhammapada:

“I have sons! I have wealth!”

Thus the fool concerns himself.

He has not his very self.

Whence sons? Whence wealth?

To transmogrify this notion of selfhood into a mere denial that things exist is an attempt to avoid the impact of the Teaching. Such a denial is the sort of wisdom the Suttas avoid: see S. XII,48: ii,77. They unequivocally assert that things (e.g. pleasure and pain — S. XII,18: ii,22) exist. “Matter (Feeling...; Perception...; Conditions...; Consciousness...) that is impermanent, woeful, and liable to change is reckoned to exist by the sages in the world; and of that I too say ‘It is.’” — S. XXII,94: iii,139.[3] “‘Everything exists:’ this, Kaccāna, is the first extreme. ‘Nothing exists:’ this, Kaccāna, is the second extreme. Avoiding these extremes the Tathāgata [= the Buddha] teaches the middle way...” — S. XII,15: ii,17 = S. XXII,90: iii,135. In other words, “This is mine” is illegitimate because “mine” is illegitimate, and not because of the supposed illegitimacy of “this is.”

Footnotes:

3. F. L. Woodward’s translation of this passage — Rūpam (etc.) bhikkhave aniccam dukkham viparināmadhammam atthisammatam loke panditānam aham pi tam Atthīti vadāmi — in vol. 3 of *Kindred Sayings* (London, Pali Text Society, 1955) entirely misses the point.

3. The structure of time

The doctrine of flux is often associated with the notion that time consists of particles (“...at this point in time...”) which move sequentially past something known as “the present.” While only one point (or “moment”) “at a time” is co-synchronous with “the present” (a concatenation of concepts reminiscent of a tangle of rusty barbed wire) other points, equally real, exist in the past and the future. This is sometimes extrapolated to an extreme in the simplistic notion that we can perceive only “one thing at a time” — as if things were incapable of appearing within a context. In this model time is often compared to a river, and the various phenomena of experience to floatage.

However, if we understand time to be not a thing within (or upon) which all other things exist, but a characteristic of phenomena, then confusion need not arise. Things exhibit, variously, the qualities of blueness, of clangorousness, of sweetness, of pungency, of warmth, or of calmness (to name but one quality perceived through each of the senses). But we do not suppose (unless we are Platonists) that there are therefore universal qualities, “Blue,” etc., from which these various characteristics are derived. Why, then, need we assume that temporality (or, the same thing, impermanence) is different?

True, it is universal, unlike all other qualities.[4] But it is not thereby any the less a quality inherent to phenomena rather than something imposed externally. The notion of time being external to phenomena, of things existing in time, brings us back to the search for some basic essence (“Time is Nature’s way of preventing everything from happening all at once.”) which is simultaneously both within and outside the range of human experience. Such a model is not merely suppositions but pernicious.

When such notions are set aside we shall be able to see that there is a basic and observable temporal structure to experience: it is organized hierarchically. This has already been implied in the observation that subsidiary changes occur more frequently than general ones. Things exist not in isolation but against a background of what they are not. For as long as we differentiate between a figure and its background the figure remains itself. Each figure greater than a point (a perceived point, that is, and not the ideal and suppositious points of mathematicians) is necessarily a construct of subsidiary components, for each of which the figure serves as background. And each background is in turn subsidiary to and defined by a yet more general level of experience. When change occurs it does so on a particular level of generality, and against a background of non-change at the next higher level.

Thus, a song is a sequence of notes of defined intervals. The notes change, but the song (which is the context within which the notes are characterized) remains the same song until it is finished. It would be meaningless to say, as the notes follow one another, that the song is changing. Our very sense of what a song is is that it is, precisely, an organized sequence of notes. It is because the notes change (and not their organization) that there is a song at all, let alone the same song.

Change always occurs at a specific level of generality. But at any level the change is total: what is ceases to be and is replaced by something else, or by nothing else. But on the next higher level there is no change at all: what is remains what it is until it ceases to be what it is. If the song is part of a more general performance then we can say that though the song has ended and another has begun there is still the same concert, for the concert is the background to the songs. The note is finished but the melody lingers on. The song is over but the concert continues. The concert is concluded but there is still the fag end of the evening to go. How long “the present” lasts depends upon our perspective. It is for this reason that in common language there is quite properly a plasticity in the scope of the word “now.”

The present can mean this very second (the nick of time), the next sixty seconds (while this song — “The Minute Waltz” — is playing), today (“What a difference a day makes...”), a season (“Summertime, and the livin’ is easy...”), or even the last million years or so (“In comparison with the Tertiary period, then, the Pleistocene is marked by...”). How long “now” lasts depends on its context, and context is a matter of perspective. It is only against a background of sameness that change can be perceived. This is “change while standing” — *thitassa aññathattam*, A. III,47: i,52. Without difference we cannot speak of change; but without steadiness how can we speak of difference? Change requires non-change as its background, as what it is not.[5]

Again: this sentence remains “this sentence” and not “a different sentence” until such time as (within the terms of experience of it) it ends. It remains “this sentence” even though its subsidiary parts, namely the words which comprise it, arise and cease in an organized sequence as experienced entities. And even though that sentence has now come to an end, has ceased utterly, has been replaced by another sentence, namely this one, yet this is still the same paragraph, specifically the eighth paragraph of the third section of an essay called Change. And on a yet more general level, until it demonstrates its own title by concluding, this essay will remain the same essay, Change, even after this paragraph has come to an end. To wit:

Since on each higher level of generality there is no change at all we can say that from a point of view within any one level the next higher level is eternal. Or, better, extra-temporal. Just as change is perceptible only against a background of non-change, so too impermanence (temporality) is perceptible only against a background of extra-temporality. But that extra-temporality exists only in relationship to its less general foreground, and it is thus not independently extra-temporal. Its extra-temporality is due entirely to a particular point of view. And since points of view are invariably temporal, that extra-temporality will cease and be utterly ended when the perspective of the experience changes and no longer gives support to eternality. Thus, the extra-temporal exists only with temporality as its condition — a point to which we shall return.

Absolute eternality — eternalness quite independent of any point of view — is another matter. All that can be said is that, since experience necessarily requires a point of view, absolute eternality is outside the realm of any possible experience. It is inherently unknowable, unrealizable. But it would be a mistake to go farther by raising questions of its “existence.” This is all that can be said of absolute eternality, but it is not all that can be said of the desire to discover an absolute eternality. Since this desire is bound up with the inability to understand what is meant by “perception of impermanence” we shall have much more to say about it in the course of this essay.

In normal experience we are skilled at skipping between points of view based on different levels of generality. So accustomed are we to these leaps that we seldom notice the transition. In developing a reflexive attitude we can become skilled at not so leaping, or at least in looking when we do. It is in reflexion that the hierarchical is seen to be fundamental to experience in ways that our primitive examples do not illustrate. But to everydayness this relative extra-temporality may seem paradoxical, inasmuch as its very existence is entirely dependent upon there being a temporal foreground. We expect our eternities to be made of sturdier stuff. We expect them to be absolute. It is disconcerting to find that every eternity exists dependent upon its temporal foreground, without which it would simply cease to be eternal. To be extra-temporal, then, is a quality which inheres in a thing (by virtue of endowment) now. It is eternal at this minute. In other words, a thing can be eternal, but only until it comes to an end.

Thus, if one adopts the point of view of the notes, the song is eternal. It does not merely outlast any particular note (for by that reckoning it would be merely temporal); it is on an entirely different plane of being than the notes. The song is what the notes are for: it is only by virtue of there being a song at all that the notes can be characterized as notes. Were there no song then the individual

sounds could not be regarded as music: there would be no notes. In other words the note qua note exists only by virtue of the song, which is the note's purpose in life.

Things always appear in a context, however rarefied. It is this context which allows us to distinguish "this" from "that." In order, then, to identify a thing, to "name" it, we must know (among other things) what it is for. Therefore the song is necessarily on a higher level of being than the notes, and cannot be regarded as having the same sort of temporality. (The door will also outlast the notes, but we do not therefore say that from the perspective of the notes the door is eternal. No, for the door is unrelated to the notes, not part of their noteness.)

Of course, the song is extra-temporal only from the point of view of the notes. From the point of view of the song itself it is the concert that is extra-temporal. (Extra-temporal, that is, within the hierarchy we have constructed here. We should observe, though, that this hierarchy — notes, song, concert, evening — is but one of numerous possible hierarchies, many of which could exist within an experience simultaneously, cutting across one another at various junctures.) And from the perspective of "an evening on the town" the song may seem interminable, but it would never seem eternal. From this perspective it is but one feature, to be followed by others, as notes are features of the song.

The song could cease to exist only when the next more immediate level (the notes) ceases to exist. As long as there are notes from which there could be that point of view the song must endure. But when the song ends there is no longer the possibility of regarding its non-existence from the viewpoint of the notes. In this sense the song is (always from the viewpoint of the notes) quite beyond temporality.

But observe that although in this example the background^[6] (the song) actually does last longer than the foreground (the particular notes) this is not always the case. If a thing exists or an act is performed for some purpose, then that purpose is (from the viewpoint of the thing or the act) extra-temporal regardless of how long it endures "by the clock." If we do something merely for the pleasure of doing it, then even though the pleasure lasts not a whit longer than the actual doing, nevertheless from the point of view of the doing the pleasure is extra-temporal. It is endowed with a substantiality which the action does not possess. And it is "the point of view of the doing" that we normally adopt while involved in an activity .

"The eternity which man is seeking is not the infinity of duration, of that vain pursuit after the self for which I am myself responsible; man seeks a repose in self, the atemporality of the absolute coincidence with himself."^[7] As soon as a thing is taken up as being "this, my self" it is immediately accorded the status of being what everything else is for. It is thus regarded quite literally as extra-temporality personified.

Footnotes:

4. Spatiality can be present in any single-sense experience (and a fortiori in any multi-sense experience), but it need not be. It is thus actually not entitled to its privileged position alongside temporality ("the space-time continuum") as a universal characteristic. Anguish, for instance, is not spatial, though it is certainly temporal. In this limited sense we can say that it is time that is of the essence. (By the way, according to The American Heritage Word Frequency Book, compiled by John B. Carroll et al., the word "time" is the most commonly used noun in modern English.)
5. The relationship between particularity and rate of change is such that in some hierarchies we can arrive at a level of immediacy wherein change is so rapid that it is apprehended only irrationally, as a blur. No doubt with practice the threshold at which perception of discrete change degenerates into an indiscriminate blur can be lowered, but it cannot be eliminated any more than one can eliminate a horizon by running towards it, however fast a runner one may be. [Back to text]
6. The use of the terms "figure," "background," etc. are here given a more restricted meaning than their equivalents in

Gestalt psychology. In Gestalt the figure is not necessarily “for” the ground; it is merely that part of experience which receives primary attention. Though ground may validly be understood thus, our present interest makes it convenient to use terminology with a more restricted meaning, wherein the background is the “for”-ground. [Back to text]

7. J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London: Methuen, 1957), trans. by Hazel E. Barnes, pp. 141-2.

4. Impermanence and desire

Philosophically, then (as well as conceptually), flux is an utterly unsatisfactory doctrine, inasmuch as it totally ignores the fundamental hierarchical nature of experience. It fails to see the difference between the forest and the trees. If, however, one adopts the attitude, “So much the worse for philosophy,” then it must be noted that flux was intended to explain not only discrete change but also attachment and its resultant unhappiness (“...it is because we fail to see flux that...”). Thus, it is not enough to assert that the small cracks on my concrete slab are the result of its being of the nature to be “always changing.” We must also say that had I only been aware of this flux (as distinct from my indubitable awareness of perceivable changes) I would have known how pointless it must be to choose attachment to what is so changeable. Only thereby would I now be impervious to any apprehension that might be occasioned by the deterioration of the slab.

However, it is not the case that apprehension (which is internal) would be mitigated by a perception of flux (which is external). Flux neither gives rise to apprehension nor accounts for it: we need to look towards attachment for that understanding.[8] Further, if flux is to explain unhappiness due to one sort of change then it must explain it with regard to other sorts of change as well. Wear is not the only hazard to my concrete slab. It might fall and shatter irreparably. And while we might accept the explanation of sub-perceptual change, or even of flux, in the case of the gradual appearance of cracks, it is more difficult to do so in the case of breakage by sudden impact. The connection to an accumulation of a vast number of infinitesimal changes is tenuous. But this is not all. It is also possible that the slab could be stolen: slab-thieves lurk everywhere. Are we to suppose that the unhappiness occasioned by the theft of what is dear to me is also explicable meaningfully in terms of flux? But if flux is not relevant to the unhappiness resultant from loss by theft then it also cannot be relevant to loss by wear or tear, for both the loss and the unhappiness are in each instance of the same order.

After all, it is not change as such that is a source for unhappiness (in which case there would be no escape from sorrow), but change from the way I want things to be. A skillful repairing of my concrete slab is a change, but it is of itself cause not for anxiety but for gladness.

My electronic clock functions dependent upon a vibration rate of some thousands of cycles per second (admittedly, a long way from the enormous figure of 176,470,000,000, but not bad for all that), and the rapidity of its vibrations causes me no alarm (unless the alarm function is switched on). Rather, I would be perturbed if the clock were to stop vibrating, to stop changing (and registering) “all the time:” to become other than the way I want it to be.

A hundred-rupee note is no less negotiable today than it was a month ago, for all that it may be said to have changed 457,410,240,000 times in the interim. Where is the sorrow in that sort of change?

The sun courses daily across the sky; the seasons progress annually; and this in itself does not induce anxiety. Rather, I should be disconcerted and grieved if the sun were to stop transiting the sky, or if it were to remain always winter, or even always summer. This would be truly upsetting. Yet this is not so much a matter of change as of becoming otherwise, i.e. other than the way I want or expect things to be. The sun’s position has stopped changing “all the time;” the seasons have ceased their advancement. This is the sort of change I turn from and wish to deny. For even if matters were not arranged in their most perfect possible order they were at least arranged: day followed night, winter followed autumn. There was not the threatening anxiety of uncertainty: if this, what next?

But the doctrine of flux is a doctrine of certainty: everything is always changing. It is therefore a

falsification of our manifest awareness of the world's unreliability: things change when we expect (and wish) them not to. The need to hold to and proclaim this doctrine is thus revealed for what it is: not a coming to truth but a fleeing from it. In the face of the world's insecurity the doctrine of flux is an attempt to retreat into a position of certainty.

Yet despite our efforts we cannot change the fact that things change and become otherwise. What can be altered is our attachment to the things of the world whether or not they are in a state of flux. To make observance of flux the basis of one's efforts, then, at minimum misses the point by going too far (*atidhāvati*: to overshoot the mark). It is a misdirection of effort. It diverts us from the task of recognizing our own inappropriate efforts to appropriate the world, steering us to a less relevant (but far easier) effort to perceive in the world our own notions about the world.

Rather than perceive impermanence as the decay and decrepitude of old age, as the weakening of the faculties, the loss of control over the body, the gasping for air as life ebbs, the fearsome uncontrollable slide from light to darkness as our very identity — body, perception, consciousness, all — fades away and breaks up — rather than perceive impermanence as that, how much more comfortable to blandly assert that everything is always changing, and thereby to move from the threatening and vertiginous perceptual realm to the safely exorcised sphere of the conceptual, while at the same time concealing this entire movement by a dialectical dance of complacency. No, change is involved with suffering not because of change per se but because things do not remain the way we wish them to remain even when the way we wish them to be is “to be changing.”

So then, even if conceptual and philosophical considerations carry no weight there are still other difficulties that must be faced by any who would have their beliefs (and disbeliefs) based on something more profound than somnolence. For we have seen that at the very least the question, “What is meant in the Buddha's Teaching by the term ‘impermanence’?” is not so easily answered as has been sometimes supposed.

And yet, this same Teaching repeatedly insists that perception of impermanence is a necessary condition for uprooting the basis of human dissatisfaction. So it is clear that regardless of difficulties, complexities, or the length of our inquiry, we must explore, with openness and diligence, the question: Does the Buddha's Teaching of impermanence mean a teaching of flux, or does it not? For if it does then either we shall have to find a way to accommodate the objections already raised, or else we shall have to abandon the Buddha's Teaching as untenable. And if it does not then we shall have both to decide what it does involve, and also to account for the widespread and long-lived endurance of a misconception which cannot be regarded as trivial.

For it is not only nowadays that we find expositors setting forth the doctrine of continuous change as being what the Buddha taught. As far back as fifteen centuries ago we find this doctrine already firmly embedded in the perspective proposed in various expositions that have come down to us. But what do we find if we go back yet another ten centuries, to the oldest Buddhist texts extant? To those texts which represent, if any at all do, the actual Teaching of the Buddha?

Footnotes:

8. He who is subject to craving, alas!,
his sorrows increase like abounding grass.
But he who surmounts this base craving sheds pain
just as the lotus sheds droplets of rain. – Dh. 335-36

5. What the Suttas say

It is generally agreed by both traditionalists and scholars alike that no Buddhist texts predate the four major Nikāyas of the Sutta Pitaka, and that these Nikāyas originate either with the Buddha himself or within a few score years of his decease.[9] Therefore the way to discover what the Buddha meant by change (or for that matter any other doctrinal concept) it is necessary to examine these texts and learn what is said therein.[10]

Rather than trying to be exhaustive (and perhaps exhausting) it will be adequate herein to offer but one quotation from each of the four Nikāyas, chosen from a host of congruous alternatives. Those who read the Suttas will discover for themselves the additional evidence that is to be found therein. Those who do not may prefer to consider the discussion which follows rather than peruse numerous citations of Canonical authority.

1) And which, friends, is the development of concentration which, developed and made much of, leads to mindfulness and awareness? Here, friends, feelings arise known to a monk, known they persist, known they go to an end. Perceptions arise known, known they persist, known they go to an end. Thoughts arise known, known they persist, known they go to an end. Friends, this is the development of concentration which, developed and made much of, leads to mindfulness and awareness. – D. 33: iii,223.[11]

2) And those things in the first meditation — thinking and pondering and gladness and pleasure and one-pointedness of mind, contact, feeling, perception, intention, mind, wish, resolve, energy, mindfulness, equanimity, attention — these things are analyzed step by step by him. These things arise known to him. Known they persist, known they go to an end. He understands thus: Thus these things, having not been, come to be. Having been, they disappear. – M. 111: iii,25.[12]

3) Friends, the arising of matter [...of feelings; ...of perception; ...of conditions; ...of consciousness] is manifest, ceasing is manifest, change while standing is manifest. – S. XXII,37: iii,38.[13]

4) But indeed, sir, whatever is existent, conditioned, intended, dependently arisen, that is impermanent. What is impermanent is unpleasurable. What is unpleasurable is [to be regarded as] “This is not mine; I am not this; this is not my self.” Thus this is correctly seen with right understanding as it really is. And I understand as it really is the uttermost refuge from that [suffering]. – A. X,93: v,188.[14]

All these statements are positive assertions that things not only arise and pass away but that they also endure. They are not statements that everything (or even anything) is in a state of flux. Indeed, although the four Nikāyas occupy some 5,500 pages of print in their abbreviated roman-script edition, there seems to be not a single statement anywhere within them that requires us to

understand thereby (in opposition to the above passages) a doctrine of flux. On the contrary, the Suttas are wholly consistent on this point (as on others). Therefore even in precisely those passages where we would most expect to find such a doctrine, if it were to be found in the Nikāyas at all, the assertion is conspicuously absent. Thus for example at M. 28: i,185, we find:

There comes a time, friends, when the external earth element is disturbed, and then the external earth element vanishes. For even of this external earth element, great as it is, impermanence will be manifest, liability to destruction will be manifest, liability to decay will be manifest, liability to become otherwise will be manifest. What then of this body, which is held to by craving and lasts but a little while?...[15]

Here the impermanence of even the earth element (and, farther on, of the elements of water, fire, and air) is emphasized precisely to demonstrate the yet-greater impermanence of this body. If the notion of flux was congruent with the essence of the Buddha's Teaching would this not be a perfect opportunity to point out that even the four elements (let alone this body) are so impermanent as to be changing all the time? But no, all that is asserted is that even this body lasts "but a little while." Is "a little while" more than a single moment? Apparently so, for — apart from what is implicit in this Sutta — at S. XII,61: ii,94-5, it is said that, in contrast to the mind, "this body, formed of the four great elements, is seen enduring one year, two years, ...fifty years, a hundred years or more...."[16] And if the body lasts more than a moment, what then of the four external elements (i.e. external to the body), which the M. 28 passage asserts by implication to be longer-lived than the body? Why, if these elements were believed to be changing all the time, would it be said that "there comes a time?" Why too would the liability to change be asserted, rather than the posited moment-to-moment change itself? Why, if these elements were taken to be changing right now, is the future tense used, "will be manifest?"

Again, when we turn to S. XXII,99: iii,149-50 we find.... Ah, but let us not seek further, for in this matter of textual evidence examples could be multiplied almost endlessly. Yet in spite of such evidence (or perhaps because of it) there will still be those who will assert that the doctrine of flux is nevertheless central to the Buddha's Teaching. They will point to passages which, in speaking of impermanence, do not absolutely disallow an interpretation of flux. And it is certainly true that not every reference to change is so rigorously qualified as to eliminate every possible mis-reading. Unlike this essay, each Sutta was addressed to a known audience, with known attitudes and ideas. There would have been no need to correct misconceptions that those particular individuals did not hold. (And, unlike today, it seems that in the Buddha's time the notion of flux was neither widespread nor deep-rooted. This is evidence of the influence scientific materialism has had on contemporary thought, if not evidence of the "inevitable progress of mankind.")

That some texts do not specifically disallow a certain understanding, then, is insufficient as evidence that such an understanding was intended. What is needed if flux is to be demonstrated as centrally important to the Teaching is at least one single passage somewhere in those 5,500 pages of text which requires us to accept impermanence as meaning continuous change. This, and also a reconciliation between flux and the passages (such as those just quoted) which would seem to rule out such an understanding. Both of these things, and also a satisfactory response to the objections, both conceptual and philosophical, already raised to the doctrine of flux. All of these, and also a rigorous demonstration of the relevance of flux to attachment, and to the experience of dissatisfaction.

In as much as a straightforward reading of those Suttas clearly requires an understanding inconsistent with the notion of flux an argument has been concocted to get around this difficulty.

The Buddha, we are told, certainly did speak of impermanence in terms of discontinuous change, which, after all, is an aspect of the ordinary experience of ordinary people. But when he did so he was speaking in conventional terms, whereas when he taught about flux he used ultimate terms, a distinction which herein we have failed to make.

The acceptance of this dichotomy between conventional and transcendental language is widespread today, as is the suppositious parallel distinction between conventional and absolute truth, or reality. Therefore some may be surprised to learn that such a distinction (whether with regard to language, truth, or reality), like the notion of flux itself, is of later invention and is not to be met with in the Suttas. Quite the contrary, it is specifically and repeatedly condemned. At M. 99: ii,202, for instance, the Buddha goes out of his way to lead his listener to acknowledge the superiority of conventional speech (as well as of speech that is well-advised, spoken after reflection, and connected with the goal) over unconventional speech (and also over speech that is ill-advised, etc.). And consistent with this, at M. 139: iii,230 the monks are advised that when teaching they should (among other things) “not deviate from recognized parlance.”[17]

The Suttas, then, clearly assert that they are to be understood as saying what they mean. They are not to be interpreted, for to do so must result in misunderstanding them. Inasmuch as the texts themselves advocate the use of everyday language, and nowhere suggest the validity of some superior form of expression (known, like some arcane password, to only the few) such a dichotomy must be rejected.

Footnotes:

9. This point is discussed in detail in my essay, *Beginnings: The Pali Suttas* (Buddhist Publication Society, Wheel series no. 313/315).
10. This procedure is not proposed as a substitute for the practice of the Teaching but as a part of it. For only thus may we be confident that we are proceeding correctly and in accordance with right-view guidance. [Back to text]
11. Katamā ca āvuso samādhībhāvanā bhāvitā bahulīkatā satisampajaññāya samvattati? Idhāvuso bhikkhuno viditā vedanā uppajjanti, viditā upatthahanti, viditā abbattham gacchanti; viditā saññā uppajjanti, viditā upatthahanti, viditā abbattham gacchanti; viditā vitakkā uppajjanti, viditā upatthahanti, viditā abbattham gacchanti. Ayam āvuso samādhībhāvanā bhāvitā bahulīkatā satisampajaññāya samvattati.
12. Ye ca pathamajjhāne dhammā vitakko ca vicāro ca pīti ca sukhañ ca cittekaggatā ca phasso vedanā saññā cetanā cittaṃ chando adhimokkho viriyam sati upekhā manasikāro tyāssa dhammā anupadavavattitā honti, tyāssa dhammā viditā uppajjanti, viditā upatthahanti, viditā abbattham gacchanti. So evam pajānāti: Evam kira ‘me dhammā ahutvā sambhonti, hutvā pativentīti.
13. Rūpassa [Vedanāya; Saññāya; Sankhārānam; Viññānassa] kho āvuso uppādo paññāyati, vayo paññāyati, thitassa aññatthattam paññāyati. [Back to text]
14. Yam kho pana bhante kiñci bhūtam sankhatam cetayitam paticcasamuppannam, tad aniccā; yad aniccā tam dukkham; yam dukkham tam n’etam mama n’eso ‘ham asmi na m’eso attāti: evam etam yathābhūtam sammappaññāya sudittham, tassa ca uttarim nissaranam yathābhūtam pajānāmīti.
15. Hoti kho so āvuso samayo yam bāhirā pathavīdhātu pakuppati, antarhitā tasmim samaye bāhirā pathavīdhātu hoti. Tassā hi nāma āvuso bāhirāya pathavīdhātuyā tāva mahallikāya aniccā paññāyissati, khayadhammatā paññāyissati, vayadhammatā paññāyissati, viparināmadhammatā paññāyissati, kim panimassa mattatthakassa kāyassa tanhupādinnassa....
16. Dissatāyam bhikkhave cātumahābhūtikā kāyo ekam pi vassam tittamāno, dve pi vassāni tittamāno..., pannāsam pi vassāni tittamāno, vassasatam pi tittamāno, bhīyyo pi tittamāno.... This Sutta goes on to point out that although the body can last a century or more, yet the unenlightened commoner is able to be disenchanted with, dispassionate towards, and freed from the body. But on the other hand “what is called ‘heart’ (citta), ‘mind’ (mano), ‘consciousness’ (viññāna) day and night arises as one thing and ceases as another,” and yet “the unenlightened commoner is unable to be disenchanted with that, to be dispassionate, to be freed. What is the reason? For a long

time, monks, the unenlightened commoner has subjectivized, identified with, and manipulated this [mind]: ‘This is mine; I am this; this is my self.’ Therefore the unenlightened commoner is unable to be disenchanted with that, to be dispassionate, to be freed.” Evidently, then, it is not by perceiving the brevity of a thing’s endurance that a liberative insight can arise: it seems to be more a matter of perceiving that however long a thing endures it cannot properly be identified as “mine,” as “I,” or as “my self.”

17. *Samaññam nātidhāveyyāti*: I. B. Horner’s rendering is used. Ven. Ñānamoli translates as: “he should not override normal usage.” Elsewhere I use my own translations.

6. A circular argument

What, then, do the texts mean by “impermanence?” We can at once rule out the possibility that impermanence means “no change.” The notion that nothing ever changes could appeal only to the followers of Zeno, Enó, Pakudha Kaccāyana (D. 2: i,56), and others of their ilk. The Suttas dismiss this notion out of hand. If, too, we have eliminated the notion of continuous change, then clearly the only possibility remaining is discontinuous change. By discontinuous change is meant that while everything is subject to change, and could change at any time, and must change sooner or later, yet also things endure. At some times they change and at other times they do not. The problem is that quite some while ago we already acknowledged that though we can perceive discontinuous change, we are not thereby enlightened; and that situation seems not to have changed just yet (which is itself evidence for discontinuous change, if not yet for enlightenment).

What, then, is the difference between discontinuous change (as perceived by us) and discontinuous change (as perceived by an enlightened being)? I would suggest that it is not so much a matter of seeing impermanence as it is of seeing the necessity, the inevitability, of impermanence in all experience. The point may be made clearer by means of a simile (for by means of a simile “some thoughtful people know the meaning of what is said” – S. XII,67: ii,114).

You and I would have no difficulty in accepting the statement “all circles are round.” It is obvious. Indeed, it is virtually a pleonasm. True, we have not inspected every circle that exists and tested each for roundness. True, we may have personally come across but a minute fraction of all circles that presently exist (let alone those that have been or will come to be). And yet this introduces no jot of doubt into our conviction that all circles are in fact round. Our certainty is structural, not statistical.

On the other hand the statement “All swans are white” is statistical. We must always allow for the possibility that a black swan might be found; and black swans were in fact discovered during the explorations of Australia, after which logicians had to change their paradigm to the proposal that “All crows are black.” To date (1988) no white crows have been reported, but the universe is a vast and varied place. Perhaps in some as-yet-unexplored hinterland of Borneo.... But we do not suppose, however vast and varied the universe may appear, that some day a circle will be discovered which is, say, pentagonal. We understand that this cannot be. The statement “All circles are round” describes not a statistical observation but a structural necessity: if it isn’t round it’s not a circle. (We may ignore the irrelevant case of circulars which are in fact rectangular.)

But suppose (unlikely though it may be) that we should meet someone who though otherwise both sane and intelligent does not happen to see the structural necessity for the roundness of circles. He, presented with the proposition that all circles are round, might nevertheless agree with it. After all, in his entire life he has never once seen a single circle that was not round as round could be. Yet his assent would be of a different nature than ours. For him doubt would still be possible. Perhaps in the frozen methane wastes of Io, or in the intense gravity of the sun’s crucible, there might exist a circle that was, say, oblong. He could not be sure, for he has failed to recognize the principle that roundness is the condition for circles. When there is roundness there are circles; with arising of roundness circles arise. When there is not roundness there are not circles; with ceasing of roundness circles cease.

And even if he were to assent to this principle, yet for as long as he failed to see its necessity that assent of his would be statistical in nature, and would thereby miss the point entirely. Reviewing (again) the argument by which he became convinced of this truth about circles he might think, “This time I see the reasonableness of that structural principle; and when I thought about it last it

also seemed correct to me. But will I still agree with it tomorrow?" It can be said of our friend that although he may (in a certain sense) see the structural necessity for the roundness of circles, yet he has failed to see that necessity in a structural way. He has thereby succeeded only in raising his blindness to a higher plane, and has not thereby achieved vision.

Our friend, who is congenial and acquiescent, wishes to be (as are we) beyond doubt in this matter. He would like to understand how it is that the roundness of circles is a matter of necessity rather than a mere matter of fact (for he has heard, as may well be the case, that higher than actuality stands possibility). But how is he to accomplish this? For although it is clear to him that a mere statistical survey of circles will never achieve this certainty (since no such survey could ever hope to be exhaustive), yet any explanation he may devise (or purchase from zealous hawkers of various persuasions) could never be more adequate than the dubious perception upon which it is based.

He may endorse some creation theory or other regarding an original proto-Roundness out of which all circles emanate. He may espouse an eschatological view about an eventual return of all circles to the One Great Circle (so Round that the roundness of known circles is but a shadow of Its roundness). Or he may entangle himself in pseudo-phenomenological theories that circles are nothing more than a vast number of minute particles of roundness, these particles being perceivable (and only with vast effort) to but the few. In this thicket of views all talk of such phenomena as curvature would be regarded as merely conventional speech: ultimate terms could refer only to these minute particulae of roundness, and it would be towards their perception that he would direct his efforts.

You and I know that our friend, though earnest and dedicated, would be chasing phantasmagoria. Such a pursuit can end only in either a frustrated (though honest) defeat or the misery of a fraudulently assumed success. Or else it will end in the grave. But what might we do to help him?

First, of course, we must convince him to abandon all speculation as irrelevant. He must understand that theories are misleading and pernicious obstructions to a right view of things. Rather, he must focus his attention on what he can actually perceive. For truth is to be found not (as he seems to suppose) somewhere beyond his present experience, but by seeing within that present perception a relationship which, though basic, has been overlooked.

What he needs to see is really quite simple. Indeed, a good part of his problem is that he has made things much too complicated, and has thereby masked the truth. It would be of little use, then, to point to the great variety of existing circles. Certainly, circles can be red or blue, large or small, thick or thin. Some are made of stainless steel, others of sealing wax. Some contain artificial preservatives, others are vicious. A few are very valuable. Many are made in Hong Kong. But all of this variety is actually superficial. What needs to be seen is not their diversity but that which is common to every circle.[18] And for this it is sufficient for our friend to sit down with one single circle of any convenient color, size, and composition, and to try to see what is essential to it. What is there dependent upon which the circle is in fact a circle? If he comes to recognize the essence of any one circle he will understand the essence of all circles. And if our friend can avoid being misled by theories, if he can eliminate the extraneous, if he can attend to what is essential, he may succeed in doing just this, and thereby pass beyond all doubt, as are we, as to the fact that "All circles are round."

Now, is universal impermanence a statistical truth or a structural necessity? Although you and I may agree upon its necessity, we must also agree that this truth is evidently not so evident as is the roundness of circles. For (despite our analogous friend) we will actually all agree on roundness, whereas we do not all agree on impermanence. Indeed, not only do we not all understand that universal impermanence is a structural, not a statistical, truth; there are even those who assert that

there exists Something which is neither statistically nor structurally impermanent. Between roundness and impermanence, why this difference?

Our friend's failure to see the inherent roundness of circles is gratuitous. His blindness is a mere negative, like not happening to know that the doorkey is under the mat: were the information available our friend would no doubt be readily able to make use of it. His wrong view is not due to anything he does. He experiences neither an urge to deny the impossibility of a square circle nor any compulsion to seek one out.

On the other hand, a failure to see the structural necessity for change is due to an active intending to not see. It is a negating rather than a negative, a choosing to conceal that which presses for attention, a willing to perpetually perpetrate a misperception. In brief: self-deception.

Self-deception: Sartre speaks of "bad faith" and Heidegger of "inauthenticity;" more straightforwardly, Kierkegaard calls it "twaddle." By whatever name, self-deception is notable in that it involves not only denial of the truth but also denial of the deception. For if we were to deny the truth but to acknowledge the deception ("Yes, it is true that I am denying the truth") then the deception would be transparent stuff indeed. But it is not sufficient merely to deny the deception: we must also deny the denial of the deception. For to acknowledge that we were denying the deception would be no improvement — if that is the right word — over confessing to the deception. But even this is insufficient: if we do not deny the denial of the denial...of the denial of the deception the entire cover-up becomes unraveled, threatening the exposure of.... And, as matters progress backwards, we find that we have already become instantly involved in an endless regression, namely that familiar stairway, the infinite hierarchy.

We saw that experience was hierarchical in its general outlines; we now discover that within experience there exist autonomous hierarchical structures. In the experiential hierarchy "notes — song — concert — evening" the content determined the level within the hierarchy. Notes is more immediate than song and cannot be otherwise. But in the hierarchy of self-deception denial of knowledge is found on every level, and thus describes not a particular level but the hierarchy as a whole. Such hierarchies can be described as replicative, or as recursive.[19]

Recursiveness is important because it offers a stability not present in "ordinary" hierarchies. Remove "an evening on the town" and the entire structure — notes, song, concert — collapses. But remove "denial of knowledge" and we find that...we can't. Recursiveness is not a feature found merely on each level, like the identical floral pattern on each dish in a stack: rather, recursion is the link between adjacent levels. The denial is always on the next most general level to the knowledge. From the perspective of the knowledge, then, the denial is extra-temporal. As long as we fail to achieve a point of view established outside this hierarchy, knowledge can never escape being encompassed by denial, and the structure must remain inviolable. Thus the structure of self-deception has a stability not found in non-recursive aspects of experience — as everyone knows who has ever succeeded in freeing himself from even the narrowest of such deceptions.

But why go to the trouble of so much self-deception? Why should we be so reluctant to acknowledge the necessity, in experience, of impermanence, when we feel no such hesitation in asserting the necessity, in circles, of roundness? The answer will be found reflected in the entire history of humankind. We seek happiness. We seek freedom. We seek security. Or, more fundamentally, we seek. And so we return, as we must, to craving.

Despite the fact that we want things to be this way, the universe displays an uncanny predilection to arrange that things shall be that way. Things become otherwise. Even when things are as we would have them be, they exhibit the disconcerting quality of not remaining so. We deny to ourselves the

necessity of impermanence out of a desire for things to remain as we wish them to be.

But it is not only for this reason that craving is incompatible with perception of impermanence. More fundamentally, craving is teleological, or purposeful, in character: it is always for something. And what it is for is (as we have already seen) its background, or context. And its background is (as we have also seen) of a higher temporal order. From craving's viewpoint, then, its object is always extra-temporal. Craving is bound up with the ongoing (i.e. temporal) effort to discover the Eternal, for in its view only the Eternal can be free of the anxiety due (so it believes) to the world's uncertainty. The extra-temporal does not change: it is certain.

It is not merely an odd quirk on craving's part, then, that it seeks the permanent: it is in its very essence entirely unable to do otherwise. Although it can never achieve its goal (any more than the note can become the song), it always looks towards its goal, and indicates it. Looking towards what it tries to regard as Eternal, it is not well placed to perceive the structural necessity for impermanence. It should be little wonder, then, that there is an organic relationship between craving and non-perception of impermanence (as also between perception of impermanence and relinquishment).

Craving is purposeful: it is always for something. On a gross level we have our specific cravings for this or that; but were they the only sort of craving that existed then we should soon enough be able to put an end to them by the simple expedient of gratification. But no, even after we have "everything we could possibly want" we find that there is still craving. We still want something further. Even when we are most bored with the world's diversions we find (if we bother to look) that there is still a searching, a wanting. Indeed, without wanting there could not be that boredom. Although there is nothing specific within the world that we can identify as what we want, yet still we want. Adrift, desire casts about, like an unmoored ship seeking anchorage. And that casting about is the hunger which characterizes desire. Nothing offers the promise of gratification, and yet we cannot help but seek. And what is the object of our desire? We don't know. What we do know is that we want there to be such an object: we want something to want.

Wanting to want: it is because we crave for craving (as moonstruck teen-agers are sometimes said to be "in love with the idea of being in love") that craving achieves its stability. For observe: craving cannot desire itself. If it could co-incide with itself it could be self-contained, and would no longer possess (or be possessed by) its central characteristic, drive. For there to be drive there must be a seeking outside itself.

What, then, is the meaning of craving for craving? This: what craving is for, its context, is of a higher temporal order than the craving itself. In craving_a for craving_b, craving_b is not the same craving as craving_a: it is structurally more general. Craving therefore appears as a hierarchical complex wherein more immediate craving gives support to craving-in-general and more general craving gives context to the immediate.

For example, within the terms of writing this essay the most general craving is "wanting to write this essay".[20] It is only within the context of the general wish to write the essay that "wanting to write this paragraph" has any meaning: it is (if it is not later deleted) for the essay, and if there was no wish to write the essay it would not occur to me to write these words. But, too, it is only by wanting to write these words that "wanting to write an essay on impermanence" comes to be endowed with substance. Without a specific desire, a wish to do this particular thing, the general desire fails to achieve solidity. Thus, in any experience involving craving, craving will be manifest at every level. Craving, as ongoing (temporal) search, craves the extra-temporality of a more general craving, while the more general craving requires the substantiality of the specific. Together (which is how they always appear) they form a recursive structure wherein "craving for craving"

both describes the hierarchy as a whole (rather than just one level of it) and also links adjacent levels of the hierarchy to form a structure that is both stable and regenerative.

And yet there is also craving for this and that. Being negative in essence, craving cannot appear at any level of generality as pure craving. It requires a positive object to lend it a borrowed positivity: this or that. Only when it is costumed with this guise of substantiality will craving (for this or that) appear to everydayness (i.e. to unreflexiveness). Everydayness lacks the reflexive distance necessary to recognize the relationship between craving and its object. Only in reflexion (i.e. in mindfulness-and-awareness, or self-observation: see footnote 11) is the structure of craving for craving revealed. We do not merely crave this or that, nor do we merely crave for craving: we crave to crave something. Craving for craving, as a construction, seeks anchorage at every level. (My wish “to finish this paragraph” is part of my more general desire “to finish this essay.” Thus craving for craving integrates itself into the ordinary [non-recursive] hierarchy of sentence/paragraph/essay and parasitically feeds on it, while at the same time concealing its hungering negative essence behind the in-being positivity of its host.) (Craving for) craving for this and that, then, arises out of, and conceals, craving for craving (for this and that).

When any specific objective in the world is taken up as extra-temporal that very taking up is no less than an act of enchantment (i.e. a self-deception) wherein the underlying fact of craving for craving is disguised. Sooner or later, however (and more frequently at more immediate levels of experience), the object of enchantment changes and becomes otherwise. Then craving is disenchanted with that object, though not with itself. It is at this time that craving for craving becomes exposed and, needing the security of concealment, seeks to hook onto a new mooring. In this interminable search for an absolute eternity craving craves, ultimately, the entire world (and even with that would remain unsatiated). It attempts in vain to coincide with itself, to be itself fully, and thus to end the anxiety of separation from its true object: craving. Much more could be said about this, but not within the context of an examination of impermanence and of the structure of concealment of the nature of impermanence. For more on the relationship between craving for things and craving for craving see D. 22: ii,308-11.

The principle of recursiveness (which we now see to be involved with both self-deception and the inability of [experience involved with] craving to comprehend impermanence) has been described in less formal terms than ours as a vicious circle (a round one). The vicious circle is the dilemma of indulgence: the more one takes the more one wants; the more one wants the more one takes. It is also the dilemma of self-deception: the more one denies the less one sees; the less one sees the more one denies.[21] But the advantage of describing this principle in terms of hierarchies is that we are then better able to explore its structural features.

Craving (for craving), for example, can be shown to re-occur at each and every level of experience (and is therefore more accurately described as a vicious spiral than as a vicious circle): when craving is present at all it is all-pervasive. It regenerates itself, and is self-perpetuating (as “notes” and “song” are not). Thus it displays exactly the same recursive structure we have already discovered in self-deception. It is easy to see, then, how these structures interact and re-inforce each other. When there is self-deception it is because, in some fundamental sense, we desire to deceive ourselves; and when there is craving we cannot avoid the deception that is inherent in that very craving. No wonder it is so hard to be free from the misery occasioned by these twin nemeses!

Footnotes:

18. “This Teaching is for one who delights and rejoices in uniformity; this Teaching is not for one who delights and rejoices in diversity.” – A. VIII,30: iv,229.

19. The word might be defined, dictionary style, as: “Recursive: adj. see Recursive.” Curiously, recursive hierarchies seem to play an important role in some branches of Western science, including computer programming, wherein it

is essential that such programs do not contain any true recursive hierarchies. For if even one were to be introduced the computer would become involved in an endless cycle and the program would never conclude. In other words, although art may imitate life, a computer program, if it is ever to arrive at a conclusion, had better not do so too closely.

The term “recursive” (as well as several other words) has been adapted with a somewhat altered meaning from Douglas R. Hofstadter’s *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (Penguin Books, 1980). Hofstadter’s book is provocative, witty, imaginative, wide-ranging, entertaining, stimulating, and, alas, quite mistaken in its fundamental approach to understanding the human situation. Neither his deterministic views nor (at the other extreme) the free-will views of Prof. J. R. Lucas can come close to the middle way taught by the Buddha.

20. I could speak, of course, of yet-more-general intentions which give “wanting to write this essay” its context: seeing what my thoughts look like on paper, wanting to share an understanding with others, or perhaps simply seeking my fame (or notoriety) and fortune; but it is not necessary to complicate the example by enlarging it.
21. This is the dilemma of the drunkard in St.-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* who, we will recall, drank to forget. To forget what? That he was ashamed. Ashamed of what? Of drinking.

7. The four noble truths

But (it will be asked) if this is the structure of that deception and craving which underlie the generation of all ill, and if the Buddha's Teaching is (as it claims to be) concerned entirely with ill and the path leading to its ceasing ("Both formerly, monks, and now, it is just suffering that I make known and the cessation of suffering." – M. 22: i,140), then why is there nothing found in the Suttas about recursive hierarchies? To which the simple answer must be: there is, repeatedly and on many levels. And if it is due to recursiveness that deception and craving achieve their stability then a closer look at this peculiar creature may better help us to understand (and, we may hope, to end) the ill which is its consequence. Perhaps, then, there is value in an examination, even at length, of ways in which the Suttas illustrate the principle of recursiveness.

The most fundamental level of the Buddha's Teaching is that of the four noble truths: the truth of dukkha,[22] the truth of the arising of dukkha, the truth of the ceasing of dukkha, and the truth of the path leading to the ceasing of dukkha. The fourth truth is, in its expanded form, that of the noble eightfold path, namely, right view, right attitude, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The first of these factors, right view, is defined (at e.g. D. 22: ii,312) as knowledge of the four noble truths. Such knowledge will of course include knowledge of the fourth of these truths, namely the noble eightfold path; and it will of course include knowledge of the first factor of that path, namely right view. Therefore right view means (among other things) having right view about right view. Further, it means having right view about right view...about right view. Not only does one know, but one knows that one knows. As with properly aligned mirrors, which reflect each other's images endlessly, so too the hierarchy of knowledge is recursively infinite.

But what about the unenlightened, who do not see the four noble truths? They, of course, have wrong view. And if right view means knowledge of knowledge, then clearly wrong view will entail ignorance of ignorance. Such unfortunate individuals not only do not see the four noble truths; they do not know that they don't see them. Indeed, they do not even know that they don't know...that they don't know that they don't see them. And what is this but precisely the same recursive structure already described in our discussion of self-deception?

Footnotes:

22. We have been using a variety of terms — dissatisfaction, suffering, and so on — to serve where, in Pali, the single word dukkha tells all. It will be convenient in the following discussion to use this singular word rather than the variety of English terms, none of which cover as wide a territory as dukkha.

8. The first noble truth

But this is not all. Recursiveness is a feature not merely of the four noble truths taken as a whole: it is a feature of each of them taken individually. (True recursiveness would not have it otherwise.) Thus, the first noble truth, that of dukkha, is described in an expanded form as:

Birth is dukkha; ageing is dukkha; death is dukkha. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are dukkha. Not to get what one wants is dukkha. In short, the five aggregates associated with holding are dukkha. – M. 28: i,185, etc.

These five aggregates — matter, feeling, perception, conditions, and consciousness — associated with holding (pañc’upādānakkhandhā) can be regarded as the constituents or general categories of experience. Without them there would be no experience; in themselves they are sufficient to specify any experience.

In the Suttas each of these five aggregates is described in greater detail. In particular, feeling is frequently described as being threefold: “Monks, these are three feelings: pleasant feeling, dukkha feeling, neutral feeling.” – S. XXXVI,1: iv,204. Each of these three feelings could be described in yet greater detail if we cared to do so. How might we describe the feeling called dukkha?

We have just seen that the Suttas frequently describe it in terms of the five aggregates involved with holding. And among these aggregates is “feeling,” which includes dukkha. And so we arrive at the proposition that dukkha is describable in terms of the five aggregates, which include dukkha, which is describable in terms of the five aggregates, which include dukkha, which.... In other words, no description of dukkha is possible that does not include dukkha in the description itself. (“Pain hurts.”)[23]

This may be regarded by some as ad absurdum, but it could never be called reductio. But in truth is it so absurd? Consider if it were otherwise — if, that is, it were possible to analyze suffering in terms of components that were more fundamental than, and which did not include, dukkha. Then we would be unable to say sabbe sankhārā dukkhā, “All conditions are suffering,” for we would have found a level of experience which was not involved with dukkha. Such a level would be wonderful indeed, if it could be found. But where is it? Certainly the Buddha’s Teaching, which asserts sabbe sankhārā dukkhā as a fundamental principle, does not offer hope that any such experience is possible.

Furthermore, the analysis is necessarily endless; for each time we analyze dukkha into its components we come face to face with dukkha yet again. There is no limit, no essence, no ground we can arrive at wherein we can say “This entity is an ultimate, not further analyzable.” Were it otherwise — i.e. if there was an Ultimate Level in the experiential hierarchy, an absolute, an essence, from which all reality emanated and within which it was concentrated, like a bouillon cube — then we would be unable to say sabbe dhammā anattā, “All things are not-self;” for the notion of selfhood is bound up with the search for an ultimate. Such an ultimate would be wonderful indeed, if it could be found. But where is it? Certainly the Buddha’s Teaching, which asserts sabbe dhammā anattā: “All things (temporal and extra-temporal) are not-self,” as a fundamental principle, does not offer hope that any such ultimate is to be found.

Earlier (in section 3) we discovered that “the extra-temporal exists only with temporality as its condition.” We can now note that an alternative way to say this is sabbe sankhārā aniccā, “All

conditions are impermanent.” To see what is manifestly impermanent as being manifestly impermanent can be done without the guidance of a Buddha: it is a truth which has been discovered by sinners as well as by saints. But conditions (or background: i.e. “for”-ground), as we have seen, already present themselves as being extra-temporal. From there it is no trick at all for conceit to invest these conditions with an absolute extra-temporality, and to conceal the deed with endless swathings of self-deception.

However, its task is endless, for the deception is inevitably undermined by the temporality of all conditions. And as craving flits before the revelatory power of impermanence there is ever the gap between recognition and concealment. Herein craving is exposed and, with right-view guidance, with proper attention, and with eyes sufficiently cleansed, it can be seen. Attachment regards impermanence as an enemy, contests with it, and fails to understand its ongoing defeat. Renunciation regards impermanence as an ally and makes use of its power of discovery. Only thus can it come to understand the true nature of that hopeless contest and to abandon it. But no, we do not abandon it: even, as it might seem, against our will, we find ourselves self-deceived, and come again and again to grief.

Thirst-led folk run here and there,

frantic as the hard-pressed hare.

Attached and held by fetters’ chain,

repeatedly they come to pain. – Dh. 342

What, then, keeps it going? For although these hierarchies of ignorance, of craving, and of dukkha are recursive, they are not independent. Indeed, as we shall see, interdependence is the essence of the second noble truth. Only if we believed in perpetual motion could we accept that these structures might be self-contained, requiring no input of energy to keep them going — sheer indulgence. And belief in perpetual motion approximates to belief in the Eternal — a belief which, due to hunger, is craving’s wrong view. Since craving is necessarily dynamic, it necessarily requires fuel.

The Pali word for fuel is *upādāna*, which also means “taking up,” “attachment,” or “holding.” Holding is the more versatile word, and we shall use it here. (However, the meaning “fuel” is not merely incidental, and should not be forgotten. “Fuel” is akin to “food.” Compare the recurring phrase, “All beings are sustained by food” — A. X,27: v,50, etc. — and also “All beings are sustained by conditions” — D. 33: iii,211.) And what is this holding/fuel? “That, friend Visākha, in the five aggregates involved with holding which is desire-and-lust (*chandarāga*), that therein is the holding.” — M. 44: i,299.

The fundamental holding is holding to a belief in self (*attavād’upādāna*: M. 11: i,67). This is the outcome of conceit (*māna*). Conceit is grounded upon the five aggregates. “By holding matter there is ‘(I) am’ (*asmī ti*), not by not holding; by holding feeling...; by holding perception...; by holding conditions...; by holding consciousness there is ‘(I) am,’ not by not holding.” — S. XXII,83: iii,105. Herein holding (which is the direct consequence of craving) and conceit (which is self-deception in its most fundamental and virulent form) become intertwined in one complex recursive structure. This structure derives its impetus for regeneration from desire-and-lust for the five aggregates (or some part of them) and results in dukkha of every sort. How this result comes about, and the nature of the result, is our next topic.

Footnotes:

23. Descriptions couched in physiological terms sound very learned and meaningful until one examines them more closely. Then it will be seen that although such descriptions certainly discuss the propagation and progress of electrical impulses along certain neural pathways, and theorize about controlling mechanisms and the like, yet in the end they have said nothing whatsoever about pain (and a fortiori about pain's arising, its ceasing, and the non-neural path leading to its cessation).

9. The second noble truth

The second noble truth, the truth of the arising of dukkha, is intricately recursive. No description of “the arising of dukkha” can ignore the key roles played by craving and ignorance. We have already seen how craving and ignorance are recursive. Any structure of which they form an integral part cannot be less so. However it is not our purpose here to illuminate all the recursive interplay and echoing discoverable within the second noble truth. (Nor, by the way, was our discussion of recursiveness in the first noble truth by any means complete: we did no more than to touch upon one aspect of one of the aggregates.) Rather, in light of what the second noble truth reveals about recursion we shall try to better fathom the stability and strength of those structures. For therein perception of (the necessity of) impermanence is concealed, and therefore these structures are fundamentally involved in the arising of dukkha.

Dukkha arises dependent upon there being craving and ignorance. Craving and ignorance are related to dukkha in a describable way which, not being haphazard or casual, can be called structural. The principle which describes this structure is called dependent arising (paticcasamuppāda). It is stated in the Suttas as “when there is this, that is. With arising of this, that arises.” (See M. 79: ii,32, etc.; this phrase also immediately follows the words “the middle way” in the S. XII,15 quotation of section 2.) This principle is exemplified throughout the texts in a variety of formulations, but most commonly in a construction of twelve factors which takes the form “By means of (paccaya) A there is B; by means of B there is C;...” This sequence begins with ignorance (avijjā), proceeds through conditions (sankhārā), consciousness, name-and-matter, six (sense-)bases, contact, feeling, craving, holding, being, and birth, and ends: “By means of birth there come into being ageing-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. Thus is the arising of this whole mass of dukkha.” – M. 38: i,262-3.

Dukkha arises, we are told, dependent upon birth and ageing-and-death. And the Suttas also tell us that “birth is dukkha; ageing is dukkha; death is dukkha.” This suggests that dukkha arises dependent upon dukkha. But whereas earlier we might have dismissed this notion as a mere cyclical argument, now that we have discovered the importance of recursiveness we are more inclined to credit the idea — misery breeds misery — as being worthy of investigation.

Dukkha generates more dukkha. Furthermore, dukkha is the necessary consequence of dukkha. This is due to an essential feature of dependent arising: not only does B exist dependent upon A; it is also the inevitable and necessary consequence of A. Indeed, an exact translation of paticcasamuppāda would be “dependent (paticca) Co- (-sam-) arising (uppāda),” which states this feature exactly.

Thus, for example, it is not only the case that ageing-and-death arise dependent upon there being

birth, and that otherwise they have no basis in existence. It is also the case that if there is birth then there must be ageing-and-death. Birth which does not give rise to ageing-and-death is impossible, however much we may wish it to be so. (Similarly, circles exist dependent upon there being roundness. Without roundness there are no circles. But also, roundness without the circle is unthinkable.) So too, as being gives rise to birth, birth is the inevitable consequence of being, as are being of holding, holding of craving, and so on.

However, not every series exhibits this property. In both experience and in the Suttas we can find sequences of a different type, wherein although B follows from A it is not the case that it necessarily does so. Such series are non-recursive. In the Upanisā Sutta, S. XII,23: ii,29-32, a sequence of this non-recursive type emerges from a variant dependent arising sequence. Using the non-technical term “support” (upanisā) rather than the usual “by means of” (paccaya), the discourse begins with ignorance: “Supported by ignorance, conditions.” It then proceeds through the other factors in sequence as far as “supported by being, birth,” and then goes on:

supported by birth, dukkha; supported by dukkha, faith; supported by faith, joy; ... gladness; ... (inner) harmony; ... happiness; ... concentration; ... knowing and seeing what is; ... disenchantment; ... dispassion; supported by dispassion, freedom; supported by freedom, knowing destruction (of the cankers).

Although dukkha is certainly the inevitable consequence of ignorance, yet faith, joy, gladness, and the rest are, unfortunately, not. Although there cannot be, for example, joy (as it is meant in the texts) without faith, there can be faith without joy: to the extent that faith is poorly placed it could well give rise not to joy but to yet more dukkha. Strictly, then, this latter series is not an exemplification of dependent co-arising since it lacks the recursive feature of being self-generating (as craving breeds more craving, etc.).[24]

It is because it is non-recursive that it is so easy for this sequence to collapse, leaving us mired as always in the recursive structure which originates in ignorance. It is only when the sequence reaches

the state of “knowing and seeing what is” (which is the first stage of enlightenment, when ignorance is undermined and knowledge [of knowledge] has arisen) that this collapse is no longer possible. Another non-recursive structure emerging from dependent arising exemplification is to be found at D. 15: ii,58-9, and related sequences are common: e.g. D. 21: ii,276ff; A. X,61: v,114-5. Unlike these sequences, the usual exemplification, ignorance to dukkha, is illustrative of co-arising.

Dukkha, then, generates more dukkha, and more dukkha is the inevitable consequence of dukkha. This may shed light on why some expositors have chosen to translate *inasmim sati idam hoti* as “when there is this, this is” — rather than, as we have rendered it, “when there is this, that is” — inasmuch as the same thing keeps being regenerated, which is the basic feature of recursion. “It is just dukkha that comes into being, dukkha that stands and disappears.” —S. V,10: i,135.

Even so, we cannot regard birth, ageing-and-death, and the rest as nothing but dukkha. For if that were possible we would be unable to distinguish any term from the others (as the Suttas certainly do: see how each term is described in light of the perception of the noble disciple [*ariyasāvaka*] at M. 9: i,46-55). Rather, dukkha may be seen as an inevitable and central quality of each, as is roundness of circles. Although all circles are certainly round, still we can distinguish one circle from another. (However, circularity has a simple structure which is non-recursive: one circle does not necessarily generate more circles. This is fortunate, for were it otherwise we should be as swamped by circles as we are by dukkha.)

Since we can distinguish the various terms each from the other we can see that amongst these terms is feeling. Included in feeling, of course, is dukkha. This presents us with exactly the same situation as we discovered when examining the first noble truth: there is an interplay between a “whole” and one of its “parts.” However, we can now recognize that when recursiveness is involved we cannot in fact call anything a whole, inasmuch as wholeness, or conclusiveness, is never achieved.

If the concept of wholeness is nevertheless insisted upon we are unable to decide whether it is dukkha (as the first noble truth, or as the outcome of the second noble truth) that is the posited whole and feeling (as one of the aggregates, or as an intermediate factor in the arising of dukkha) that is a part of that whole, or feeling that is the whole and dukkha that is one of its parts. “Wholeness” is an adopted way of conceptually organizing observed phenomena, and we would make a serious mistake to suppose wholeness to be inherent in the phenomena themselves.

The concept of wholeness is isomorphic with certain aspects of experience, which is why we tend to reify it.[25] But we see that it is not so with all aspects, which is why reification is a mistake. And in particular it is not so with those aspects which are fundamental to the problem of dukkha, which is why the mistake is serious.[26]

This relationship between feeling and dukkha is found in both the first and the second noble truths. These truths are similar because they are both examinations of the same thing: dukkha. They differ because they examine dukkha from different perspectives. The first noble truth is an analysis in terms of constituents while the second is in terms of relationships.

In the same way we might examine, say, a bicycle from a variety of perspectives. In terms of constituents we could speak of handlebars, seat, tires, frame, etc. In terms of relationships, of how the thing works, we might say that with movement of the pedals there is movement of the sprocket; the sprocket drives the chain; the chain forces the wheel to revolve, and so on. Or in terms of manifestation we could regard its motion, either as circular (the wheels) or linear (the whole machine, handlebars, seat, and all).

Thus too, the first noble truth is concerned with the constituents of experience (matter, feeling, perception, conditions, consciousness) as they are involved with holding. The second noble truth describes relationships (by means of feeling, craving arises; etc.). And the Teaching as a whole points repeatedly to the manifestation of these related constituents as dukkha (the sorrowfulness of dukkha, the sorrowfulness of conditions, the sorrowfulness of changeability: dukkhadukkhatā, sankhāradukkhatā, viparināmadukkhatā – S. XXXVIII,14: iv,259 = XLV,vii,5: v,56). And it urges an understanding of this manifest dukkha by comprehending the four noble truths: a holistic understanding of the impossibility of wholeness, and of the dukkha which arises in nevertheless seeking it.

Feeling cannot be regarded as a wholeness encompassing all dukkha; yet within the framework of dependent arising feeling is on a more general level than the dukkha which arises dependent upon it. In other words, “By means of feeling there is (via several intermediate steps) dukkha” is a hierarchical statement. This is not to suggest that we can establish a one-to-one relationship between the various items of dependent arising exemplifications and hierarchical levels: dependent arising is not merely a hierarchical formula. It takes but a moment, for instance, to realize that although “birth” structurally precedes “ageing-and-death” it does not do so hierarchically. Ageing-and-death is not a component of a more general thing, birth, nor is it for birth. It does not have birth as its goal, not even though we accept the Buddha’s declaration that for beings fettered by craving there is rebirth.

Indeed, it might seem more reasonable to assert the opposite, that birth is “for” ageing-and-death, and has ageing-and-death as its goal. But although this is certainly true it is not true hierarchically, for still birth and ageing-and-death are on the same level, not on different ones. And so too with being,[27] holding, and craving: they must be differentiated from birth in ways other than hierarchical.

But when we come to feeling we arrive at a higher level, for feeling is more general than the dukkha which arises dependent upon it. Herein we will be reminded of our earlier observation that craving always looks towards a more general level than that which it itself exists on. We now see that this more general level is invariably involved with feeling. This is only to be expected, for fundamentally what craving seeks is pleasure. It is in fact only in the second place that it all-too-readily identifies pleasure with a more general craving than itself (“that yet more eternal me that I crave to be”). And it is only in the third place that (with the appearance of holding) there is a seizing upon (the things of) the world as that which (by providing opaque positivity to the transparent negativity of craving) is endowed with or able to provide pleasure. Thus craving always seeks pleasure, and in seeking always discovers dukkha.

After feeling the next more general level is name-and-matter. Since this is a category unknown to Western thought it seems unavoidable, if we are to say anything at all about it, that we begin with a brief explication. For our purpose we can understand name-and-matter as approximating with “things-as-they-appear(-in-experience):”

And what, monks, is name-and-matter? Feeling, perception, intention, contact, attention: this is called name. The four great elements and the matter taken up by the four great elements: this is called matter. This which is name and this which is matter: this is called name-and-matter. – S. XII,2: ii,3-4, etc.[28]

Matter exists, whether or not it is cognized. (I don’t need to look at my clock in order for it to function.) But experience of matter always involves a context which, though not the matter itself, is part of the experience of it. This context is how matter appears, or is characterized, or identified (as “This thing”), or named. Such an orientation is describable in terms of contact (involvement in experience), perception (visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, conceptual),[29] attention (direction of emphasis), intention (what it is for), and — feeling. “Name-and-matter together with consciousness” (D. 15: ii,64) is a way of specifying experience-in-general. To say more than this would take us away from our central purpose.

We see that just as feeling, which is the condition for dukkha, also includes dukkha, so too name-and-matter, which is the condition for feeling, also includes feeling. And just as feeling, together with the dukkha which is a part of it, represents a more general level than the dukkha which arises

dependent upon the arising of that feeling, so too name-and-matter, together with the feeling that is a part of it, is on a more general level than the feeling which arises dependent upon the arising of that name-and-matter.

This gives us three hierarchical levels of feeling within the stock dependent arising exemplification. In the following discussion we will distinguish between them, when we have need to do so, by designating the feeling which is part of name-and-matter as feeling_a; the feeling which exists dependent upon name-and-matter and which is the seventh factor of the usual exemplification as feeling_b; and the (feeling of) dukkha which is the outcome of this whole formulation as feeling_c. When we need to distinguish between levels of craving we shall refer to craving which exists dependent upon the feeling which is a part of name-and-matter as craving_a; that which is the eighth factor of the dependent origination series as craving_b; and that which exists dependent upon the (feeling of) dukkha which concludes the series as craving_c. Other particularizations, where necessary, will follow the same pattern.

Since “By means of feeling_b...there is dukkha_c,” it follows that whenever there is feeling of any kind there is also feeling that is dukkha. Both pleasurable feeling and neutral feeling are inseparable from dukkha. For pleasurable feeling, when it exists, is taken as being “that which craving conceives [itself to be for],” while neutral feeling arises when craving, although not actually delighting in a particular matter, regards that matter as “potentially delightful.”[30] Therefore when we say “feeling” we say more than “dukkha,” but we never say anything different than dukkha. So too, when we say “name-and-matter” we say more than “feeling” (since “name” also includes perception, intention, contact, and attention), but we never say anything different than feeling. And since, again, when we say “feeling” we never say anything different than “dukkha,” therefore when we say “name-and-matter,” just as when we say “feeling,” we only say “dukkha.” Therefore it is said: “It is just dukkha that comes into being....”

However, there is a movement here towards the arising of more specific and obvious dukkha. This movement is designed to conceal the more pervasive and inescapable (dukkha) feeling that is inseparable from “what craving is for” and which, in its most general manifestation, is part of “experience-in-general” (name-and-matter together with consciousness). In other words, dependent upon any feeling there arises a specific craving which seeks escape from dukkha and synonymity with the pleasure which it conceives of (as its own). And this movement always results in a yet-more-specific sorrow.

To some it may seem that the distinctions we are making here are artificial and hollow. To distinguish between “By means of feeling_a...dukkha_b” and “By means of feeling_b...dukkha_c,” or between “By means of feeling_a...craving” and “By means of feeling_b, craving,” or between other sets of relationships which differ from each other only in regards to their position within the hierarchy — it may seem that such distinctions are but a mere tautologous argument which reveals

nothing at all about the generation and regeneration of dukkha. That this is not the case can best be demonstrated by means of an illustration.

Suppose that Bandha, a common laborer working for day-wages, is trudging down the road, his pick and spade resting on one shoulder. It is the end of a hot and tiring day. Occasional cars cruise by, raising the dust and also raising Bandha's recurrent wish that he could be such a one as to own a car. To be able to drive about when and where he pleased, and not to have to breathe dust and exert his tired body! His perception of the world (fine cars, cloying dust, tired body, etc.) is imbued with a wistful regret for his lot, a pervasive muted dukkha at his utter remoteness from the way he would choose things to be.

Yet since he accepts the virtual impossibility of achieving his wish he does not dwell overmuch upon it. He thinks instead, a bit lazily perhaps, of the dinner he will eat when he gets home. Not so fulfilling a prospect as the world of cars and wealth, to be sure, but pleasurable nevertheless, and much more likely to be realized. His attention, then, is divided roughly into thirds. There is the actual world in which he walks, and which is for him both manifestly and essentially dukkha; and then there are the imaginary worlds, the one of wealth, which promises exquisite pleasures but which is very remote; and the other of dinner, which anticipates more common pleasures but, being close to hand, is the principle object of his intentions.

The imagery he creates as he walks along helps Bandha to avoid facing the dukkha of his actual situation, namely, that he is a common laborer working for day-wages with no prospect of ever being anything else except disabled or dead. Still, thoughts of cars and wealth cannot but increase his awareness of the contrasting details of his actual situation, namely, that he is in fact walking, that his feet hurt, that his tools weigh him down, and so on. And too thoughts of dinner cannot but increase the grumblings of his empty stomach, and his awareness of those grumblings.

Thus, he avoids facing the general dukkha of his situation by means of heightened awareness of particular dukkhas, and these dukkhas become manifest by craving for pleasure. (More formally, craving is born of the dukkha feeling which is an aspect of experience-in-general. While in flight it "discovers" mind-based percepts [i.e. imagery], touches upon them, and conceives them as being pleasurable. This conceived pleasure gives rise to a more immediate level of craving, which elaborates, or gives substance to, that craving-for-pleasure which is its context.)

Were he interested in reflexion Bandha would discover that by confronting this general dukkha the particular dukkhas would pale into unimportance. But, like almost everyone else, he prefers virtually any intensity of particular (and interchangeable) dukkhas to the single persistent gnawing general dukkha of being-for-death. However, Bandha has lived long in this situation and is inured to it. His defences are long-established and habitual, and he need not take on any further specificity of

dukkha to conceal from himself his day-to-day involvement with dukkhaa.

But now suppose that while passing a car-sales showroom Bandha should happen to notice a poster announcing a sales promotion scheme wherein anyone could freely enter his name into a drawing, the grand prize being the very fine car on display in the showroom window. And suppose that on this particularly hot day Bandha's imagination should become inflamed with the notion that he himself might win this draw.

Thereby his dream of owning a car — and all the wealth that goes with it! — would not seem as remote as he had always accepted; it would now appear as a very real possibility. In this intense pleasure which craving has conceived not only are his specific aches and tirednesses totally set aside. Not only is the minor pleasure of anticipated dinner quite forgotten. More importantly, the intention to utterly disguise dukkhaa is temporarily achieved, or at least virtually so: Bandha is now hardly aware of his actual situation, let alone the dukkha inherent in it.

So he resolves to enter the showroom at once to put down his name for the draw. But so ensnared is his attention in the imaginary situation he has conceived for himself that he fails to notice that the establishment has already closed for the day. Only when he finds the door locked does this check to his fantasy force him to pay sufficient attention to his actual world to understand that there is an obstacle in his way. This obstacle is involved with dukkhab, a more immediate order of feeling than the pleasurable feeling which craving is for. But the enchantment has been invested with such potency that the dukkha of the locked door is comparatively minor and is insufficient to break the spell of that fantasy. Never mind the locked door; tomorrow morning first thing he will put down his name.

So he turns from the showroom, his eyes still possessed by the car that will be his. Such flight from the real dukkha of his situation can only yield more specific dukkhas. In this case Bandha, inattentive to his actual world, takes but a few steps before he stumbles over a rubbish barrel he had failed to notice, knocking over the barrel and himself as well.

This is an obstacle sufficient to force his attention back to the real world. So now Bandha is suffused with a sense of himself as having been lost (to fantasy). How could he have been so careless? And worse, he recognizes (with a mental fall more painful than his bodily one) that this is not the first time he has suffered the consequences of daydreaming. How many jobs has he lost? And that time he set the mattress on fire, nearly burning down the whole house! It fills his awareness in an instant, and Bandha sees this fall as being "typical: the sort of thing that I'm always doing." Thus there is the appearance of the very general and pervasive dukkhaa of despair: "I'll never be anything but a failure; I'm a born loser, it's the story of my life."

This despair will of course have its gratifications, for this despair is not cast upon him, as is a net on a fish, but is chosen. There is the advantage of ease, for instance. For “the story of my life” (and however poor a story it may be, it is better than no story at all) doesn’t require of Bandha any unusual initiatives to perpetuate. But it is nevertheless despair, and Bandha recoils, needing escape. If only he was able to take an outside view of his situation he would be able to simply abandon the position from wherein despair is generated, for he would then see the deception. But Bandha does not have the immense advantage of external guidance in right view, and cannot see this way out of his dilemma, however much (or perhaps because) escape is so needed. This need is the cravinga which arises dependent upon his sense of despair.

But it wasn’t his fault! He didn’t knock over that rubbish barrel on purpose, these things are always happening to him, he’s got no luck at all. Thus the despair at perceiving his own shortcomings (“the sort of thing I’m always doing”) is transmuted into grief at the injustice in the world (“these things always happen to me”) by a simple act of denial of responsibility. But not actually transmuted: rather, the despair is simply concealed by interposition of the more immediate dukkhab of grief, for the responsibility remains, however much it is denied.

There is, of course, a gratification in this grief: innocence, non-responsibility. But still, it remains a grief which cannot be overlooked. A return to the fantasy is impossible, at least as yet, for Bandha has not yet even picked himself up from amidst the spilled rubbish. The actual world still demands that he attend to his situation within it. But grief generates its own cravingb for pleasure. How, then, to escape this grief?

Any broken bones? Bleeding? Contusions? At least a mark or two? In fact Bandha wasn’t hurt at all by his spill; but it is always possible to find some bodily pain or other if one looks assiduously enough. And it is equally possible to ascribe it to any cause one wishes, and to dwell upon it and to magnify it, particularly if doing so helps one to avoid dwelling upon something else. So Bandha discovers some painsc, and begins to invent a story which he hopesc will evoke appropriate sympathy from his wife. Here is a fantasy with enough modest pleasure in it to compensate for the dearth of actual bodily injuries — if only there had been a little blood as testimony of his innocence! — which would otherwise have almost adequately concealed the mental ones.

But his wife, Bandha knows, will be unlikely to offer much sympathy. He could be half-dead and she would have for him nothing but complaints, gossip, and underspiced food — to be married to such a woman! And the idiot who left that trash barrel in the middle of the road where innocent passers-by could break their bones — the world is full of fools!

Bandha’s lament is a denial of responsibility for his pains, just as “no luck at all” is a denial of responsibility for an already well-disguised despair. It is therefore dukkhad which, of course,

generates its own cravings for flight from dukkha and search for pleasure. What mode will it take? Perhaps Bandha will cease to curse the fools of the world only to begin feeling sorry for himself: a hard day's work for such poor wages, a long hot walk home with no companionship, an empty belly, and now this! What chance for an unlucky fellow like Bandha to win that car? Poor Bandha, he's the only one with any sympathy for his own tribulations, with any appreciation of his own true worth, nobody else cares at all. And thus this dukkha(e) generates craving for sympathy and appreciation. Oh, to be understood!

And so it goes, each dukkha generating further dukkha for so long as there is flight. And each fresh dukkha more immediate, more obvious than the last — indeed, painfully so. And thus is the arising of this whole mass of dukkha: sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair.

This sequence (which takes much less time to live it than to tell it) is now completed. Bandha has disguised the fundamental nature of his situation enough to enable him to deal with it, in his own way. He begins to pick himself up — nobody to give him a hand, even in this! — and to proceed home. But hardly has he risen to his knees when he notices two street urchins guffawing at his misfortune, and at once he is suffused with the awareness of having been seen.

That defensive structure of sorrow, lamentation, pain, and grief he has devised in order to conceal the despair of his situation was adequate to his eyes alone. Left to himself he could have ignored the fact that the world-in-general, let alone specifics, is radically and fundamentally at odds with the way he would have it be. But now he stands (or, rather, half stoops amidst the spilled rubbish) exposed to the eyes of the world, and that defensive structure is inadequate.

Thrust from a world in which he was the possessor of a fabulous car into one in which he is laughed at even by street urchins, Bandha must now find a way to extricate himself (again!) from such dukkha. And who are they but a pair of stray waifs, probably homeless? How dare they laugh at the misfortune of an honest and hardworking laborer, the strength of the nation! Away with them!

And so Bandha resolves upon prideful anger as his shield. And if it is felt with sufficient intensity anger can indeed conceal a great amount of dukkha. But it will not conceal it with anything other than dukkha, for anger is but dukkha transmogrified. No matter how he twists about Bandha cannot conceal dukkha except by generating further (and more immediate and more obvious) dukkha.

But anger, though far more endurable than naked despair, is also far less durable. It requires a correspondingly more immediate effort to be maintained in being. Yet it can serve as a refuge only for so long as it is maintained, and maintained with sufficient intensity. Therefore it entails the channelling and expenditure of a great deal of energy, or fuel. This is tough work, and it is itself painful. And furthermore (furthermore indeed!) it cannot give rise to anything other than yet more

craving — revenge? quick, a stone! all this rubbish about, but where's a rock? — and more dukkha.

But of course as Bandha picks up a good-sized missile the two urchins flee; and Bandha rises to his feet with a gratifying sense of having been victorious at last in his dealings with the world, never mind all that has gone before. This single victory, celebrated by throwing the stone at the now-empty roadway, when relived and elaborated upon, will augur promise of a rosy future wherein Bandha can exult on his way home to dinner.

Or rather, would have exulted. But unfortunately for him, as he turns to proceed homeward — giving the rubbish barrel a good shove with his foot, just to show the world what a triumphant Bandha is capable of — he realises that he has been observed not only by that pair of children. Four gentlemen in trousers stand beside the open doors of a car — theirs! — which they are obviously about to enter. Equally obvious, they have paused just long enough to observe Bandha's antics — a sarong-clad laborer who tries to enter that toney dealership and then, unable to tear his eyes from the showroom window (some driver Bandha would make!), first upsets both a trash barrel and himself, and then threatens small children with rocks. The whole sequence, they saw it all. And now, with a glance at one another and the briefest possible of smiles all round, they turn from Bandha (who realizes in the full light of their vision of him that he had also forgotten, in his triumph, to pick up his fallen tools) and they enter their car, conversing with casual friendliness in a world which is theirs.

To rouse anger at the street urchins was an easy enough matter. But in full view of four well-dressed gentlemen who live in the world of which he merely dreams, Bandha is stripped of any possible defence. He can only hope to escape their imperious glances by flight, and so he turns, routed and utterly mortified to his very being. He stands exposed and naked to himself; and as he quickly gathers up his tools and hurries away from the scene of his disaster he knows that now he will never enter that showroom to put down his name. It will be long before he will willingly pass this way again. He will say nothing at all to his wife. He must begin again the endless chore of dressing himself in swathing upon swathing of dukkha.[31]

We can see, then, that our description of the hierarchically recursive interconnectedness of feeling and craving is no mere theoretical structure but rather a generalized description of what happens, again and again, in life. Our example is necessarily rudimentary, and is also confined to the psychological level: we have not yet reached the transcendental (*lokuttara*) level which is actually the beginning of the Buddha's essential Teaching,[32] but more sophisticated examples can be discovered in one's own experience.

The experience may be as trivial as a slight grimace or as profound as full-blown paranoid delusion. But every instance veils within itself on every level the basic structure of conceit (“I know...”) and

of craving (“I want...”) and is fueled by desire-and-lust. Insight into this situation is capable of exposing what is hidden therein. The value of paradigmatic description lies not in its being elaborate, clever, or original, but in its capacity to lead us to an understanding of the situation within which we find ourselves endlessly entrapped. It can serve thus as that right-view guidance referred to earlier.

Some may regard such analysis as “mere intellectualizing.” However, if intellectualizing means using one’s intelligence this is not necessarily a bad thing. It cannot be a substitute for insight, but if properly used it can be a prelude. For it is only by understanding the nature of our situation in the world that a movement is possible which, rather than perpetuating that situation, ends it.

Footnotes:

24. Thus, the question:

Do little fleas have lesser fleas that bite ‘em,

And so on and so forth, ad infinitum?

is not so much a question of recursiveness as of infestation.

25. Even more fundamentally, we tend to reify the concept of wholeness because it is vitally implicated in the notion of absolute extra-temporality (“this, my self”). In this sense, though, it is more than a mere tendency: the ordinary person, unable to do otherwise, does not see that such reification is not a mistake but the mistake.

26. Even experience “as a whole,” *pañc’upādānakkhandhā*, does not constitute a wholeness. In experience there is that which is central, or attended to most closely; that which is peripheral, or accorded less attention; and that which increasingly approximates to utter vagueness. But where the “horizon” lies, beyond which there is not the slightest awareness, we can never say. For if we attempt to discover it what we find instead is that the focus of attention has shifted and this “horizon,” if it actually exists, has moved to a new limit. Although experience clearly does have its limits we are unable to discover directly “where” those limits are. We can only (mis-)conceive them. For analytic purposes experience may in certain ways be taken as an entity, a unit, yet strictly we can never regard it as constituting a wholeness, as something complete.

27. Some might think it more reasonable that being should be said to follow upon birth rather than to precede it: without birth how could there be being? But on the ontological precedence of being, cf. Sartre, op. cit. pp. 136-42, of which we can quote only a few lines: “...Actually it seems shocking that consciousness ‘appears’ at a certain moment, that it comes ‘to inhabit’ the embryo, in short that there is a moment when a consciousness without a past is suddenly imprisoned in it. But the shock will cease if it appears that there can be no consciousness without a past.... There is a metaphysical problem concerning birth in that I can be anxious to know how I happen to have been born from that particular embryo.... But...we do not have to ask why there can be a birth of consciousness, for consciousness can appear to itself only...as being already born....”

28. It will be seen that this definition of matter is recursive: matter is defined in terms involving matter. Therefore, regardless how exhaustively we analyze matter, we will never find a level which does not involve matter. Nor will we ever arrive at an ultimate level to matter, as physicists are repeatedly discovering. No matter. The four great elements (earth, water, fire, air) are sometimes elaborated in various ways — most naively by supposing matter to be made from the four elements, compounded in various proportions (a move often found in conjunction with the supposition that name-and-matter can be equated with mind-and-matter; but on this topic, never mind); and perhaps most successfully as aspects or modes of behaviour which matter manifests. The Suttas seem to neither support nor to discourage such efforts. Rather, they regard these elements in more elementary terms: anything solid is an instance of earth-element, etc. This approach reinforces the basic recursive definition of matter: as matter is defined in terms of the elements together with matter taken up, so too the elements are described in terms of matter, which leads back again to the elements. See the M. 28 quote, beginning in section 5 (footnote 15) and concluding in section 12.

29. See A. VI,63: iii,413: “Monks, I say perceptions result in description....”

30. It also arises in the case of one who perceives the necessity of impermanence (i.e. a noble disciple, *ariyasāvaka*)

when, not delighting in a particular matter, he regards it as “not potentially delightful.” But this distinction goes well beyond the level of discussion we have reached so far.

31. It would be entirely possible to illustrate in relation to Bandha’s experience not only the various levels of feeling and craving but also of holding (“This is what I am,”), being (“and this is the way the world is:”), birth (“others are born rich winners; I’m a born loser,”), and ageing-and-death (“the story of my life: my destiny.”), or to strictly describe the regeneration of dukkha using these terms (which are intermediate between craving and dukkha) as was done a few pages back using the six (sense-)bases and contact (which are intermediate between dukkha and dukkha). Such a description would be more complex than that involving the bases and contact, but it would come to the same thing: dukkha regenerates dukkha. Apart from the formal description itself (which could not be brief) some of these terms would require their own explication. This is better left undone, at least here, for we must stop sometime, and considerations of length suggest it be now. But the important point is not to carry out such an analysis but to understand that it could be done.
32. The Buddha’s Teaching is designed to lay bare a level of experience which it is the concern of all other levels to hide, and from which all action originates. To reveal what is common to all behavior what is needed is not specification but universalization. In specification we would take (for example) “By means of feeling, craving” to mean “Because of this particular feeling there is that particular craving,” an approach which can produce an excellent behavioral psychology. But it can also be understood as “Because there is such a thing as feeling there is also such a thing as craving,” an approach which can lead to an understanding not only of things but of the nature of things. This perception is developed when, in reflexive examination of, say, (experience of) a particular feeling those qualities which particularize the feeling are ignored [they are “put in brackets,” so to speak], and attention is centered upon those qualities which are common to all feeling. This particular feeling is seen as “but an example of all possible feeling.” Thus it is seen as a universal.

10. The third noble truth

The third noble truth, the ceasing of suffering, is the converse of the second, the arising of suffering. But it is not merely the opposite, or the same thing said in an opposite way. The structural principle which characterizes it — “When this is not that is not; with ceasing of this that ceases” — when taken together with the characterizing principle of arising, together form a general description of the structure of impermanence. It is insight into this very structure that marks the difference between the ordinary person and one who sees not only things (e.g. impermanence) but also the nature of things. Such an insight is frequently described (at e.g. S. LVI,11: v,423) as seeing that “whatever is of a nature to arise, all that is of a nature to cease.”

Of course, it is not only by the conjunction of these two noble truths that the nature of impermanence is described. Each of them separately says the same thing, both as principle and as exemplification. It is apparent, for example, that “By means of birth there comes into being ageing-and-death” is but a different way of saying the same thing: “Whatever is of a nature to arise, all that is of a nature to cease.” And this truth is implicit in every statement with the form “By means of A there is B” where B is the necessary consequence of A.

The usual exemplification of the third noble truth has such a structure. It involves the same twelve factors, ignorance to ageing-and-death, in a formula with the pattern “With ceasing of A ceasing of B; with ceasing of B ceasing of C...” Clearly this is a description of impermanence, of how things (and in particular dukkha) cease. Therefore all that was said concerning impermanence and recursiveness in section 9 will apply *mutatis mutantis* to the third noble truth. There remains the need to indicate how it is that perception of impermanence is concealed, and how it can be revealed.

It can be seen from what has already been described that dependent arising is most commonly exemplified as a twelve-factored formula not because it takes eleven steps to get “from” ignorance “to” dukkha (for it is only conceptually that ignorance and dukkha can be distanced), but because to say more would only be endlessly repetitive of what has already been said. On the other hand, to say less is certainly possible: many exemplifications are to be found which in various ways omit some or even most of the terms.

Thus, some people can work out the personal significance of dependent arising by considering their experience in light of one or another aspect of the exemplification. Others will use the exemplification as a whole, while still others will do their work based on the guidance of the principle itself. Dependent arising formulae (and the principle as well) are best regarded not as quasi-scientific explanations but as pedagogical paradigms, designed to provide guidance in the work of comprehending the perilous nature of one’s situation. They can, of course, be misapplied. But it does not follow from this that there is only one “correct” way to use them. This essay does not attempt to explore the diversity of possible applications.

That there is such a diversity of exemplifications will of course occasion no surprise. As with any recursive structure, to see any part of the structure is to see the whole of it. This is in contrast to non-recursive structures. One could not construct a bicycle with no greater understanding of it than, say, the relationship of the pedals to the sprocket. Taken together with Sutta statements (at e.g. S. LVI,30: v,436-37) that he who sees any one of the four noble truths sees all of them, this is in itself sufficient proof (if one is still needed) that recursiveness is of the essence in the Buddha's Teaching. Dependent arising, then, keeps saying the same thing over and over: in the structure of any experience the more specific arises and ceases bound up with the more general context within which it exists. Existence apart from a context, as well as a context apart from specification, is utterly impossible.[33]

And whatever is bound up with conditions is contingent. It is at all times liable to become other than the way we would have it be, and is at no time fit to be regarded as "me" or "mine." It is inseparable from dukkha. And this is true of all experience, all the way up to "name-and-matter together with consciousness," which is to say experience-in-general. ("Experience-in-general" is to be understood here as "the most general level of experience," rather than as "experience taken as a whole.")

But what, then, of experience-in-general? This, at least, might seem to constitute if not an ultimate then at least a limit. For within the realm of experience, which is the only realm of which we can know or say anything at all, what could be more general than this?

We can readily understand that name-and-matter arises dependent upon consciousness, for name-and-matter can be known or described only insofar as it is in fact cognized, or present. If it is not cognized its very existence is beyond any reckoning,[34] and therefore name-and-matter is negative as regards existence. It can derive only a borrowed existence (whereby it becomes reckonable) from consciousness, and as regards existence its being is that of a debtor.

What, then, of consciousness? Is it independent? When we considered Bandha's troubles we found that a movement towards the specific did not lead to escape from either dukkha or the conditions that give rise to dukkha. What, then, of a movement towards generality?

The answer is to be found in the well-known variant dependent arising exemplification found at D. 15: ii,56-7, which begins: "By means of name-and-matter, consciousness; by means of consciousness, name-and-matter; by means of name-and-matter, contact; ...feeling ..." etc.[35] It is clear that here there is no "first term." Nothing independent is to be found. Just as name-and-matter depends upon consciousness (without which matter could not be involved in experience as name-and-matter) so too, "this consciousness turns back from name-and-matter; it does not go beyond"

(D. 14: ii,32). This inter-relatedness is compared at S. XII,67: ii,114, to two sheaves of wheat leaning each against the other: if either falls they both fall. They stand together and they fall together.

In other words, a consciousness which does not cognize something, a “pure” consciousness (“pure,” here, in the sense of “without content” rather than “without defilements”) is as impossible as a fire without fuel. Consciousness may be understood as the presence of things — for if a thing is cognized it must in some sense be present, and we cannot know of a thing that “it is [present]” unless it is cognized. There cannot be “presence” without there being something that is present. So too, consciousness can only exist dependent upon there being “the cognized,” and it can be known or described only in terms of that content.

Just as a fire becomes reckonable only dependent on the means whereby it arises — when fire burns by means of logs it becomes reckonable only as log fire; when fire burns by means of faggots... by means of grass... by means of cowdung... by means of chaff... by means of rubbish it becomes reckonable only as rubbish fire — so too, consciousness becomes reckonable only dependent on the means whereby it arises. When consciousness arises by means of eye and forms it becomes reckonable only as eye-consciousness; when consciousness arises by means of ear and sounds... by means of nose and smells... by means of tongue and tastes... by means of body and tangibles... by means of mind and ideas/images it becomes reckonable only as mind-consciousness. – M. 38: i,259.

We can say, then, that of itself consciousness lacks content. But there can be no presence without something being present. And since consciousness (or presence) cannot cognize (or be present to) just itself,[36] it can derive only a borrowed essence (whereby it becomes reckonable) from name-and-matter, and therefore consciousness is as negative regarding essence as is name-and-matter regarding existence, and as regards essence its being is that of a debtor.

D. 15: ii,63-4 leaves no doubt as to the significance of the inter-relatedness of name-and-matter and consciousness:

Thus far, ānanda, may one be born or age or die or fall or arise. Thus far is there a way of designation, thus far is there a way of language, thus far is there a way of description, thus far is there a sphere of understanding. Thus far the round proceeds as manifestation in a situation — so far, that is to say, as there is name-and-matter together with consciousness.

Another way in which the Suttas indicate the relationship between consciousness and its content is in terms of the aggregates. Consciousness taken together with the other four aggregates can be

regarded as “experience-in-general” in the sense of “the totality of experience” or “the aggregate of experience.” Not only is the interrelationship or inseparability of feeling, perception, and consciousness explicitly stated (at e.g. M. 43: i,293); the dependence of consciousness upon the other four aggregates is also described at length. See e.g. S. XXII,53: iii,53-4, which concludes: “Monks, whoever should say thus: ‘Apart from matter, apart from feeling, apart from perception, apart from conditions, I will show the coming or going or disappearance or appearance or growth or increase or fullness of consciousness’ — that situation is not possible.”

Whether in terms of aggregates or of name-and-matter, there can be no doubt that this mutual dependence of essence and existence is essentially (and existentially) the same as the mutual dependence of specificity and context, which we have already discussed. Just as “existence” is the most general possible context, so too “essence” is the most general possible specification. Therefore we can see that the fundamental exemplification of dependent arising can be stated concisely in the form found at D. 15: “By means of name-and-matter, consciousness; by means of consciousness, name-and-matter.” Whatever follows afterwards does so by way of expansion, not by way of innovation.

However, most dependent arising formulas do not in fact begin by explicitly stating the interdependence of consciousness and name-and-matter, nor do they end there. More often we find, “By means of ignorance, conditions; by means of conditions, consciousness; ...name-and-matter; ...six bases; ...” etc. And if indeed “name-and-matter together with consciousness” is the most general possible of existential specifications, then what can be meant by “conditions?” For if they are yet-more-general than “the most general possible” they must be impossible. But if they are not yet-more-general what could they be? And is not “By means of conditions...” a mere tautology, akin to saying “With conditions as condition...” or “By means of means...?” If it is more (or less) than a tautology, then what is it? And, above all, what specifically are these “conditions,” nested so prominently between “ignorance” and “consciousness?” And what have they to do with impermanence?

When we look through the Suttas we find a considerable variety of things identified as “conditions” (sankhārā): in-and-out breaths, thinking, pondering, perception, feeling, merit, demerit, imperturbability, intention, contact, regarding, doubt, wavering, kingly possessions and apnt of the Buddha’s Teaching: non-independence.

Not only are there “conditions;” there are also, unavoidably, “conditioned things” (sankhatā dhammā, sometimes shortened to “things,” dhammā). In the same way, there is not only “dependent arising” (paticca-samuppāda) but also “dependently arisen” (paticca-samuppanna). These pairs are simply two sides of a coin: if any thing is a condition then there is something else which is conditioned by it. If any thing is conditioned there must necessarily be also a condition (or conditions). If there is dependent arising, there are things dependently arisen. If things are

dependently arisen, there is dependent arising.[37]

Now, within the context of dependent arising the term “conditions” is invariably described as consisting of three general categories. “There are three conditions: body condition, speech condition, mind condition” – M. 9: i,54, etc. And it happens that the Suttas never specify “conditions,” either further or otherwise, within the dependent arising context. This has permitted the growth of a diversity of opinions regarding the significance of “conditions” within the dependent arising context. And it is against this diversity that we ask, “What are these ‘conditions,’ nested so prominently between ‘ignorance’ and ‘consciousness?’”

How is “conditions” described in other Sutta contexts? We need not look far to find a discourse (e.g. M. 44: i,301) in which “conditions” is defined in the same terms as in the dependent arising context. “There are, friend Visākha, these three conditions: body condition, speech condition, mind condition.” Examples are offered: “The in-and-out-breaths, friend Visākha, are body condition. Thinking and pondering are speech condition. Perception and feeling are mind condition.” An explanation is provided. “The in-and-out-breaths, friend Visākha, are bodily. These things are bound up with the body. That is why the in-and-out-breaths are body condition. First, friend Visākha, having thought and pondered, afterwards one breaks into speech. That is why thinking and pondering are speech condition. Perception and feeling are mental. These things are bound up with the mind. That is why perception and feeling are mind condition.”

But it is sometimes argued that although these diverse items are (for reasons we need not detail here) the examples of preference within their native context, namely, certain meditative attainments, yet this context is rather remote from considerations of the structure of the second noble truth, “the arising of dukkha.” Might we not find a more relevant example in the context of the first noble truth?

In this context, that of the aggregates, “conditions” is often defined as “six bodies of intention — intention with regard to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, images/ideas — these, monks, are called conditions.” (S. XXII,56: iii,60, etc.) Here, then, the example of choice is choice. And at S. XXII,79: iii,87 (quoted in footnote 37) we are told that it is due to conditions (which, of course, would include intention) that the aggregates are conditioned as matter, feeling, perception, conditions, and consciousness, respectively.[38]

It is said that consciousness is conditioned as consciousness by conditions. This sounds much the same as “By means of conditions, consciousness.” Perhaps, then, “conditions” within the context of the second noble truth is not far removed from that of the first? Would it be legitimate to regard conditions within the context of dependent arising as involving (partly, at least) intention?

We can agree that intentionality is certainly fundamental to experience.[39] After all, it is revealed as such by reflexion. And being fundamental, our texts do not ignore it. Not only is it found in the explication of “conditions” (as the fourth of the five aggregates); it is, as well, one factor of name-and-matter. (See S. XII,2, in chapter 9.) If we are to regard it also as a factor in the “conditions” upon which consciousness depends, would this not be yet another instance of a term appearing first in a specific context and then in a more general one? The problem with supposing so is that this requires us to conclude that “intentions” are not only fundamental to experience (with which we can entirely agree) but that, surpassing even consciousness, they wholly transcend experience (which is but idle speculation).

It appears, then, that we cannot import an understanding of “conditions” into the dependent arising context without encountering difficulties or objections. From various quarters numerous questions have been raised.

Was the term “conditions” ever specified, in a dependent arising context, in some discourse now lost to us? Was it left unspecified either through neglect or a simple inability to address every possible question that future ages could raise? Was the meaning of the term not then regarded (as it is in some circles today) as dependent upon its context? Was it deliberately left as an open category? Or are there still other possibilities yet to be imagined?

The “lost discourse” theory is the least likely alternative. There is no reason to suppose that any discourses, once gathered into the protective framework of the Nikāyas, were ever lost. For scholastic evidence in support of this judgment see my *Beginnings: The Pali Suttas*. What, then, about neglect? It is always risky to ascribe to other eras the values and assessments of our own milieu; but from our present perspective it is difficult to imagine that the subject was not deemed as being as important in the Buddha’s time as it is today.

But other points are not so easily decided. Independence of context? True, words have meaning even when they stand alone, independent of grammatical context; and this is particularly true of technical terms. But at the same time words are not independent of their context, which can alter significance in ways which are at times subtle beyond all description.[40] When “conditions” appears in the dependent arising context then to what extent does it take on fresh tones, or overtones? And how can we tell?

And if that seems to be a fine-edged distinction, then what are we to make of the question of deliberate non-specification? There is a strong argument in its favor. Dependent arising involves the whole of experience. To specify conditions in any way might be taken, wrongly, as suggesting that there are aspects of experience in which conditions play a greater role than elsewhere. Yet, against this view there is the equally strong contention that nowhere is it said that “conditions” is

deliberately left as an open category. In other words, not only is “conditions” not specified; its non-specification is also not specified. This strategy has its aesthetic appeal; but the Suttas usually spell out in detail every point which could possibly be misunderstood. That this is not done in the present case argues against deliberate non-specification.

We could, if we wished, argue the above points more closely than we have. But no matter how refined our argument it would remain but an argument. No matter how subtle our scholasticism we would be no closer to understanding.

We see that we cannot go to other contexts in order to determine the meaning of “conditions” within the dependent arising context. This is a valid strategy for determining the meaning of some Sutta terms. But with a word as critical and as contested as *sankhārā* we find fine distinctions being drawn in support of various positions. (And, in any case, the Suttas ought not to be regarded as a sort of gigantic puzzle, its parts all interlocking. Each discourse originated within its own particular context, even though that context has not always come down to us. While all discourses point, distantly or closely, to the same goal they do not all do so in the same manner. It is not an error to find relationships between Suttas, but some caution must be taken before drawing conclusions from such comparisons.)

We see, too, that we can neither invoke historical hypotheses (lost texts) nor base conclusions on speculations about the unstated motives of the Buddha or of his disciples. Not thereby will we discover meaning and purpose in the texts.

What we must do, it seems, is to examine the dependent arising texts themselves, and refrain from going beyond them, either to other texts or to conclusions they do not themselves support. And we must also remember that those texts come to us within the context of our own experience. We do not rely upon our experience to understand those texts, of course, for the message of the texts is that we mis-conceive that experience. Rather, we remember that the texts are a guide to recognizing that which, within our experience, we have not hitherto recognized. Our understanding of the texts must be an understanding relevant to experience. For we are not trying to decide which side of a chalk line we should stand on. We are seeking to resolve a personal dilemma. And we cannot do so unless our considerations are personal.

Earlier we asked whether “conditions” could possibly be yet-more-general than “the most general possible.” If we require of “conditions” within dependent arising contexts that they be (primarily at least) intentions, then clearly we could not subsequently understand them as being involved with the hierarchy of experience. In such a case we would be forced to seek for some other way in which we could explicate dependent arising in terms that were isomorphic with what is revealed by a reflexive examination of immediate experience.

But — fortunately, perhaps, for hierarchical experience — this move is not called for.[41] For it must be insisted that in fact the Suttas never actually do take the step of identifying conditions in dependent arising contexts as being (or including) intention, any more than they do with the triad beginning with in-and-out breaths, or with any of the many other specific items which throughout the texts are identified in various contexts as being conditions. They never go beyond offering the three open categories of body, speech, and mind. In other words, all aspects of experience, bodily, verbal, and mental, arise with condition, not independently. Since this is a move they consistently avoid, for us to make it in defiance of their lead (however much our own view may invite us to do so) may well be a case of missing the point by overshooting the mark (see chapter 4).

And what, then, might be the point of leaving the term “conditions” unspecified in dependent arising contexts? If we are to understand the term in a way which is relevant to our concerns we shall reject any explanations which lie outside the range of experience. Certainly, when we looked, earlier, through the Suttas at the various things which within their contexts were identified as being conditions we found nothing which lay outside experience.[42] Indeed, to the extent that they are found at all, all conditions clearly depend upon consciousness (without which, of course, there would be no experience for these conditions to be found within). This leads us to two observations:

1) The relationship of conditions to consciousness is reminiscent of the relationship between feeling and dukkha. Neither feeling nor dukkha could be regarded as either “a whole” or as “part of a whole,” and yet we were able to differentiate between them in terms of precedence. Here too, although any particular conditions are certainly dependent upon consciousness (as well as upon contact — M. 109: iii,17) for its involvement within experience, yet consciousness depends upon the fact that there is such a thing as “conditions.” Therefore the category “conditions” takes precedence over the category “consciousness.”

2) The relationship of conditions to consciousness is reminiscent of the relationship between name-and-matter and consciousness. Indeed, the parallel is so close that the mistake is sometimes made of equating name-and-matter with the first four aggregates. However “conditions,” if it includes anything, certainly includes more than just intention, contact, and attention, none of which could be regarded as body or mind condition. It is by itself a broader and more-inclusive category than “name.” Therefore “name” may be regarded as a particularization of “conditions.” As a particularization name-and-matter is indeed as dependent upon consciousness as is consciousness upon name-and-matter. However, the category “conditions” is not at all a particularization. Therefore it is never suggested that “By means of consciousness, conditions.” Conditions as a category takes precedence.

This brings us back to what was said earlier, namely, that in order to reveal what is common to all behavior what is needed is not particularization but universalization. The “specific” when contrasted

with the “universal” has quite different implications than when contrasted with the “general.” Even “name-and-matter together with consciousness” can be described as “the most general possible of specifications” when we refer to specific name-and-matter and specific consciousness. But for investigating the root-source of dukkha we need to attend not to the specific but to the universal. And “name-and-matter together with consciousness” is not “the most general possible of universalizations:” conditions is.

Is, not are, because to say “conditions are” is to pluralize and to specify: this, that, and the other. To say “conditions is” is to singularize, to universalize, to regard any particular condition as being no more (in essence) than “an example of conditionality.” The vital point is not that consciousness arises dependent on this condition or on that condition, but that consciousness has conditions. Therefore “conditions” is not yet-more-general: it is yet-more-universal.

In the same way our friend needed to see any particular circle — regardless of whether it was red or blue, large or small — as being in essence no more than “an example of roundness.” This could not be a mere matter of abstraction. (“Yes, ‘All circles are round’ may be fine in practice, but how does it work in theory?”) To abstract is no more productive than to attend to specifics while ignoring their general nature. (“Yes, this circle is hard; it is red; it is round. But will the next one be soft? Will it be blue? Will it be square?”) We require universalization. (“This circle could serve as a template for roundness, and so could any other circle.”) What is necessary is to see any specific as an instance of the universal. It is for this reason that we need to regard any specific condition as being no more, in essence, than “an example of conditionality.” (“This is an example of a relationship, of non-independence, and so too are all other experienced phenomena.”) Only thus can we see its universal necessity. Therefore the category “conditions” is left unspecified.

As we saw, the other factors of dependent arising exemplifications, consciousness to ageing-and-death, can be regarded in two ways: either as specifics or as universals. As specifics (“By means of this particular A, that particular B”) their use is on the psychological level. As universals (“There are such things as B if and only if there are such things as A”) they look towards the root. Therefore they transcend all psychology. For psychology at its best can only explore the manifestations or symptoms of the root problem.[43] But with “By means of conditions, consciousness,” specification becomes pointless, for all we will achieve is to specify consciousness (eye-consciousness, etc. — see the M. 38 extract in the chapter). This is endless and therefore non-productive. Therefore the category “conditions” is left unspecified.

Other parts of the exemplification are designed to lead from specifics to the general. This part leads from specifics to the universal. It is universal because “By means of conditions...” describes every level of experience and every pair of related items within any dependent arising exemplification. “Craving for craving” is a true recursive statement, but it is limited to the specific case. It describes only the structure of craving. But “by means of conditions...” describes the structure of conditions.

That is, it describes the structure of all things that are dependently arisen. It is therefore the universal view of all recursiveness. And being universal, rather than specific, the category “conditions” must be left unspecified.

“By means of conditions...,” then, is no mere tautology: it is as concise a statement of the essence of the Buddha’s Teaching as one could possibly hope for. Indeed, to say “by means of conditions...” is equivalent to saying “dependent arising.” And, of course, to say “dependent arising” is to say “the Buddha’s Teaching” (M. 28: i,191). This is because dependent arising as a structural principle is self-descriptive. That is to say, it too arises with condition, not independently: it is dependently arisen. And what is the condition by means of which this principle arises? This: the condition of there being specific exemplifications of the principle.

Here we distinguish between the principle itself (“when there is this, that is...”), and its exemplifications (primarily, “by means of ignorance, conditions; by means of conditions...” and so on). The exemplification is not the principle: it is one of the many possible ways in which the principle becomes specified within (or as) experience. The principle states the general case. Just as in a world in which circles could not exist (though actually we cannot conceive of such a world) the principle that “all circles are round” would be meaningless, so too, if dependent arising totally lacked exemplifications then as a principle it would be wholly meaningless. That is, it would be no principle at all.

The principle of dependent arising, then, is not something “out there,” beyond experience, yet casting its influence upon us like some baneful and invisible sun. Such a model harks back to the search for an absolute, an unmoved mover of things, a godhead. But dependent arising is a refutation of just such a model. As such, it cannot fail to be subject to its own principle. Although from the point of view of its exemplifications the principle certainly appears as extra-temporal, yet it is also certainly not absolutely extra-temporal.

Efforts are sometimes made to equate the Buddha’s Teaching with eternalist religions by asserting that the fundamental insight to which this Teaching points is an eternal principle. As such it is said to be, therefore, of the same nature as that hypostasized impersonal god who, having created the cosmos, now merely sits back and observes it, paring his hypostatic fingernails. However, the fundamental point of this Teaching — namely, that an absolute or independent thing is nowhere to be found — is self-descriptive. Therefore any attempt to equate the Teaching with eternalist doctrines can be seen to be utterly misconceived.

But this is not all. (Indeed, with recursiveness it never is all, is it?) There is yet another way in which dependent arising can be regarded as self-descriptive. More significant than being the generalization of specific exemplifications, it can also be regarded as the universalization of specific

exemplifications. Here we rediscover the equivalence between dependent arising and “by means of conditions....” We have already discussed how it is that “by means of conditions...” achieves its significance as a universal. Therefore the same cannot be less true of dependent arising. Whichever term we use, the purpose of this universalization is to create a movement from the psychological level (as illustrated by Bandha’s troubles) to the transcendental level (which, however, is beyond illustration). To understand how this works we must again look at holding.

The experience of the ordinary person, the puthujjana, is invariably involved with holding, the fundamental form of which is holding to a belief in self (see M. 11: i,66-7). However, this self that is believed in has the nature of being inadequate. The ordinary person thinks “I am,” but he is then unable to avoid the puzzlement, “But what am I?” He will seek in one way or another to establish an identity: “I am this; such is my self.” If a belief in self was adequate (as is, for example, a belief in concrete slabs) then this quest(ioning) would be unnecessary. (Nobody needs to repeatedly confirm, “This really is a concrete slab; that really is what belongs to a concrete slab.”) Because the ordinary person does find it necessary to repeatedly reconstruct this self identity we may say that (unlike concrete slabs) this self that is believed in lacks essence. (See Dh. 62, in chapter 2.)

However, though it certainly lacks essence, it is not strictly correct to say that “self” lacks existence, or that “self does not exist.” (To make such an assertion is to go beyond what is found in the Suttas: a dangerous move.) For the ordinary person self does exist; but he fails to recognize that it exists as a belief. But this belief in self is essentially a notion of independence: a self that is in thrall to the world’s vicissitudes is no self at all. Therefore the ordinary person cannot escape the conviction that this self in which he believes is independent of his belief in it. His view is that the appropriated depends on appropriation (i.e. that things are “mine” because “I am”). Therefore he fails to see that it is appropriation which depends on the appropriated (i.e. that “belief in self” persists only for as long as things are regarded as “mine”).

If something permanent could be seized then the appropriation too would be permanent. However, what is appropriated is necessarily impermanent. Therefore appropriation too is impermanent. If the view “my self” could persist independently of a “this” then there would be no means by which it could be undermined. It would be permanent. It is impermanent due to the impermanence of the conditions for that identity. Having accepted the validity of the notion “self,” the ordinary person does not see the invalidity of the question, “What is this thing, my self?” Therefore he cannot avoid his puzzlement. And since he does not comprehend his error he cannot recognize that his continuing search for such a “self” can never succeed. He is enchanted by the notion that independence is to be found, and is thereby caught in a terrible dilemma.[44] For though such a quest is doomed this does not dissuade the ordinary person. It merely keeps him busy. Neither assertion nor denial of selfhood can resolve his dilemma. The Suttas reject all statements which deny “self” no less than those which assert it. The Nidāna Samyutta (ii,1-132) is particularly rich in examples.

The need to identify “self” with “this” or “that” is a display of self’s lack of essence. This need can be abandoned only when it is seen to be predicated upon accepting selfhood on its own terms: as being independent, permanent, and pleasurable. But when one comes to right view then it is understood that other than as (dependent upon) a belief such a self is not to be found (and also, of course, that even as dependent upon belief such an independent self is still not to be found). Only with such an understanding is it possible that the search for a self that is independent (of that belief) could be abandoned, together with the belief. There will then be no ground upon which such a belief could re-establish itself.

However, when there is belief in self then all of experience is apprehended either as “this, my self” or as “that, for my self.” If it isn’t “me” then it must be “mine.” (Even when there is a manifest disclaimer, “not mine,” there is still tacit appropriation: “it could be mine,” i.e. “it is mine as ‘rejected;’ I can do with it as I wish, even to the extent of choosing whether it is to be accepted or refused.”)

This view is continuously undermined by the unreliability of the world. (“It seems, then, that ‘this, my self’ is not so independent after all: the fault, of course, is with ‘this,’ never with ‘my self.’”) But nonetheless that unreliability is in itself insufficient to lead to an abandonment of the view. What is needed is to see the nature or unavoidability of this unreliability. This is what Buddhas teach.[45]

The ordinary person can potentially identify “this, my self” with any part of experience (= the five aggregates involved with holding). But such an identification will naturally tend to gravitate to the most general level of experience (or levitate, if one conceives the hierarchy to be an ascending generalization). The impermanence of “this particular ache in my left elbow” is far more easily exposed than that of “being one who suffers from arthritis.” “Being one who feels a” could be taken up yet more readily by the ordinary person as being “the nature of my self” (cf. D. 15: ii,66). Of course, “being one who suffers from arthritis” could also yield movement towards the identification, “This (my) body, my self.” A. E. Housman has admirably summed up the furthest implications of such an identification:

Good creatures, do you love your lives?

And have you ears for sense?

Here is a knife, like other knives:

It cost but eighteen pence.

I need but plunge it in my heart

And down will come the sky,

And earth’s foundations will depart

And all you folk will die. (More Poems, XXVI)

Identification of the body with “self” is supported by our sense of control over the body (even though we may have arthritis). But it is undermined not only by the body’s manifest changeability and need for sustenance but also by comparison with the longevity of many material things external to the body. “Therefore the unenlightened commoner is able to be disenchanted, to be dispassionate, to be freed herein” (i.e. from body). S. XII,61: ii,94. See footnote 16.

The identification “this, my self” is more tenaciously involved with mental qualities and, in particular, with consciousness. For it is not only “self” that lacks essence: we have seen that consciousness too lacks essence. There is a very great difference. Consciousness lacks essence in the sense that it is simply the presence of any phenomenon (matter, feeling, perception, conditions), and is not more than that. However, “(a belief in) my self” is actively involved in seeking substantiation. A belief in self exists dependent upon craving and, the question “What am I?” having been raised, there is a quest.

Consciousness, though as negative as the notion of self, lacks the drive characteristic of “self.” Yet it is seized upon, and is taken up as “this, my self.” Being a “this” in relation to “my self” endows consciousness with a sort of false positivity: it comes to be conceived of as the essence of selfhood. This identification wins support from name-and-matter, for name-and-matter (as we have seen) does in fact provide that essence which consciousness lacks — an essence which the ordinary person will then ascribe to “self.”

Therefore other parts of experience, when taken up as “this, my self,” tend to be so identified at a remove from holding. Consciousness is interposed. And when that identity, “this, my self,” comes to be altered (as it must) to a new “this” then, due to the buffering action of consciousness, there is not normally the need for a radical re-organization of “my world.” Thus, “things as they are experienced” are taken as being for “this consciousness, my self.” They become known not merely as “the cognized” — i.e. as what is for consciousness — but as “the appropriated” — i.e. as what is for me.[46]

Actually, the situation is considerably more complex than the account offered here, for two reasons.

1) For the ordinary person, that which is primarily identified as “this, my self” is holding (to a belief in self). Consciousness is taken up only in the second place, and the others, if at all, only in the third place. However, holding (a complex structure which is negative in regard to what is held) is not seen as holding: it is seen only in the guise of the five aggregates (and the aggregates, then, are actually concealed by the holding which mimics them) — as if in a mirror one were to search for frown lines, while at the same time wearing a mask which was an exact replica of one’s face, except

that on the mask there was painted a becoming smile! We shall not attempt to expand on this observation.

2) For the ordinary person there is considerable ambiguity between “me” and “mine.” Although “this” and “that” can be differentiated without difficulty[47] the difference between “my self” and “for me” is not so clear-cut as might be supposed. On the one hand there is an ever-widening schism between “this” and “my self” as “this” becomes more explicit. This growing failure of “my self” to coincide with “this” tends increasingly to endow “this” with the character of a “that (for me).” On the other hand merely by virtue of being “for me” each “that” is already granted the potential of becoming “this, my self:” such is my potency.

In the following discussion (as in the previous), rather than become tongue-tied with qualifications, when we refer to “this, my self” we shall understand that it is not the case that thereby “my self” can be localized within experience. Not only can “my self” not be localized; it cannot even be found. Whenever there is holding, then holding is pervasive, universal.

With these qualifications made we can say that whatever is identified as “this, my self” is at that time conceived of as being absolutely extra-temporal. For the notion of selfhood is inherently a notion of independence, permanence, and pleasurable-ness. When there is the view “this, my self” then the conditions upon which that view depends are not seen. Other conditions can be seen, but not those upon which self-view is based. Conditions are seen, but not as a universal. This means that they are seen as things, not as the nature of things, and the nature of things is that they are conditioned.

When “conditions” is not seen as a universal then “by means of conditions...” (= dependent arising) is not seen, at least insofar as it applies to “this, my self.” However, “by means of conditions...” can be seen in other relationships. Dependent arising is seen, but not as a universal. This means it is seen as a thing, not as the nature of things, and the nature of things is that they are dependently arisen.[48]

When dependent arising is not seen as a universal then impermanence is not seen, at least insofar as it applies to “this, my self.” However, impermanence can be seen in other relationships. Impermanence is seen, but not as a universal. This means it is seen as a thing, not as the nature of things, and the nature of things is that they arise and cease.

And when impermanence is not seen as a universal then dukkha is not seen, at least insofar as it applies to “this, my self.”[49] However, dukkha can be seen in other relationships. Dukkha is seen, but not as a universal. This means it is seen as a thing, not as the nature of things, and the nature of things is that to hold them is dukkha.

And when dukkha is not seen as a universal then not-self is not seen, at least insofar as it applies to “this, my self.” However, not-self can be seen in other relationships. Not-self is seen, but not as a universal. This means it is seen as a thing, not as the nature of things, and the nature of things is that they are not-self.

Therefore fundamentally dependent arising is not seen, impermanence is not seen, dukkha is not seen, not-self is not seen. What is seen is “this, my self.” And “this, my self” is necessarily seen to be independent, permanent, and pleasurable. And because in his endorsement of this perception the ordinary person is sadly mistaken, therefore he experiences sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair: thus is the arising of this whole mass of dukkha.

Dukkha arises, then, dependent upon not seeing dependent arising. This is ignorance. “Non-knowledge of suffering, non-knowledge of the arising of suffering, non-knowledge of the ceasing of suffering, non-knowledge of the path leading to the ceasing of suffering — this is called ignorance.” – M. 9: i,54, etc.[50] “By means of ignorance, conditions; by means of conditions...,” then, may also be understood as “by means of ignorance, dependent arising.” And the corollary is, of course, “with ceasing of ignorance, ceasing of conditions; with ceasing of conditions...,” which may also be understood as “with ceasing of ignorance, ceasing of dependent arising.” This indicates to the ordinary person how he can resolve his dilemma.

His dilemma is that he cannot perceive dependent arising, he cannot perceive impermanence, he cannot perceive dukkha, he cannot perceive not-self. And he cannot perceive them in their vital sense because he does not see how to stop perceiving “this, my self.” When, as a Buddhist, he earnestly tries, he finds that by a “heads-on” approach (“This is not-self; that is not-self; nor that nor that nor that...”) he does not succeed. All he succeeds in doing is, at most, to change the identification from “this, my self” to “something else, my self” (and, probably, also discovering an ever-deepening sense of frustration and futility in the effort).

This is the identical dilemma that he faces when he decides to “give up everything:” no matter how sincere his resolve, no matter how intense his effort, he finds that that resolve and effort are insufficient. It is undercut at once, always, and everywhere, by attachment. To resolve such a dilemma evidently requires something more than the simple wish to do so. For such a simple and straightforward effort, whether to perceive impermanence or to give up all attachment, will simply lead him back to the perception that he can’t.

But we know that this is not entirely true. For although it is sometimes very difficult, yet we have all succeeded in ending certain “narrow” deceptions (such as “cigarette smoking is good for you,” or “the way to cure poison ivy infection is by scratching”). And we know, too, that the Buddha’s

Teaching offers itself as that means whereby one can end even the “broadest” or most fundamental of deceptions, that of conceit.

But how, then, is this to be done? If a “heads-on” approach continually fails, then clearly an indirect movement is indicated.[51] The development of any particular perception of dependent arising, or of impermanence, or of dukkha, or of not-self — which is entirely possible for the ordinary person, within the limits described above — can lead to a universal perception.

It must be emphasized that by “a universal perception” I do not mean “seeing the whole of experience.” (This, anyway, is an impossibility, inasmuch as the seeing, which is part of the experience, is itself not seen. Or if it is seen then the means whereby it is seen — namely, a higher order of reflexive attention, which is also part of the experience — is itself not seen. And so on.) Even if we (think we) see dukkha “everywhere” we have not thereby perceived dukkha as a universal. At best we have seen it as no more than a generality.

But dukkha can be seen as a universal in even the most specific things (e.g. “the in-and-out breaths,” or anything else to do with body; or “this aching in my elbow,” or anything else to do with feeling; or “this fear that my house may be on fire,” or anything else to do with mind; and so on). It is seen as a universal if it is seen as an instance of the way all experience is necessarily organized. In other words, to see structure structurally we must see that it is dependent upon exemplification. It is futile, then, to try to see the “bare” principle. What must be seen is the particular living relationship upon which the structure is founded, and to see that it too arises, endures, and ceases dependently. It is towards this direct intuition on the most intimate level of being that the Buddha guides our efforts. When dukkha (or impermanence or the others) is seen as a universal in “this particular perception” then at that time there will not be seen not-dukkha (and the others) elsewhere.

To achieve this universalized perception requires dedication and perseverance, inasmuch as it is a perception which is at odds with all that holding to a belief in self involves. It is achieved through intelligent experimentation with reflexion and its concomitants (i.e. the noble eightfold path), using the Teaching as a guide (see e.g. A. VI,98-104: iii,441-444)[52] lest one confuse concept with percept.

But even then this perception is in itself insufficient; for when the ordinary person achieves it he still has at the same time a belief in self. Though he sees nothing he can take up as independent, permanent, and pleasurable, yet there remains the view that there is a person, a somebody, to be found. In this unstable position it is necessary for the ordinary person, using proper attention, to apply his perception of the universal necessity of dependent arising (and of the others) to this co-existing view.

Reference to our circular analogue may help him to understand this. But should he not succeed in this then his perception of universality can be lost. Indeed, he will probably find it difficult enough to maintain this perception. And, the perception lost, he would find himself to be still in the throes of wrong view and of the dukkha that arises dependent upon wrong view.

Fortunately, however, there is the Teaching. One who has achieved this perception of universality is now in a position to fully utilize the guidance of the Teaching's outside perspective. If he chooses to not opt for pleasure then he can now acquiesce by accepting, even against craving's view of things, that this Teaching points the way to the end of dukkha.

When such a movement is made, then this individual will understand the meaning of "with ceasing of ignorance, ceasing of conditions." He will no longer be puzzled, as he was before, as to how there could be a ceasing of conditions (and of consciousness and the rest) and yet for an individual to remain. For even fully purified beings surely continue to breathe both in and out, and to think, to ponder, to perceive, feel, regard, intend, and so on. And yet all of these things are identified in various contexts as conditions. But now he will understand that "with ceasing of ignorance, ceasing of conditions" means that "those conditions which depend upon ignorance cease when ignorance ceases; and ignorance, or non-seeing, ceases when those conditions are seen to be dependent upon ignorance."

And what are those conditions which depend upon ignorance? They are the conditions dependent upon which there is the identity "this, my self." And, as such, they are not seen as conditions. Not being seen (for what they are), they cannot be further specified. Other conditions — conditions which are seen — are not conditions which depend upon ignorance. Only those conditions which are not recognized as such are implicated in the arising of "this consciousness, my self" or "this name-and-matter, my self" or any other possible identification of "my self."

Whereas previously such a person had been unable to see craving except on craving's own terms, now he has this Teaching to offer him an outside view. This view is not locked into those conditions which arise dependent upon ignorance. He can thereby see, as he could not before, that contrary to craving's view of things, all experience that is involved with "I," "me," and "mine" is wholly dukkha. There is (pace St.-Exupéry) no oasis of pleasure to be found within this desert of dukkha. Understanding this, wrong view is thereby exposed. It is concealment (of dukkha and of flight from dukkha) that, as the characteristics of ignorance and craving, generate and re-generate dukkha. With dukkha now fully exposed as concealment, as flight, that recursive structure which had infected all of experience becomes destabilized and must collapse. It is by such a movement that one ceases to be an ordinary person (puthujjana) and becomes a noble disciple (ariyasāvaka), one who sees the noble eightfold path as the way to the ceasing of dukkha.

Footnotes:

33. This is not to suggest that this is all that dependent arising says: “Ánanda, this dependent arising is deep and is seen to be deep. It is by not wakening to and penetrating this Teaching that mankind is entangled...” – D. 15: ii,55 = S. XII,60: ii,92. And at S. LVI,19: v,430, it is said of each of the four noble truths that they have numberless shades and variations of meaning.
34. This does not contradict our earlier statement that “matter exists whether or not it is cognized.” Although there is no valid reason to doubt that even when it is not cognized matter continues to exist, and there is considerable indirect evidence to support this notion, still, when it is not cognized then at that time matter is outside the bounds of experience. But when it is cognized matter can never be present “bare,” i.e. as uninvolved with feeling, perception, intention, contact, and attention. What is cognized is name-and-matter, and it is name-and-matter, not matter, that exists dependent upon consciousness.
35. This exemplification omits “six (sense-)bases.” Since these bases are implicated in every experience (that involves perception), and since perception is part of “name,” the omission does not in fact “leave out” the bases. (How, after all, does one omit perception from experience?) It merely changes their involvement from being explicitly stated to being implicitly understood. The bases are also immediately implicated in any experience (involving contact), and contact is both part of “name” and “the factor which precedes feeling.” So from this view the bases are implicated on each level of experience, as indeed they must be.
36. Consciousness, like experience, is hierarchical but it is not itself recursive. We cognize various levels of experience: consciousness of feeling_c is more immediate than consciousness of feeling_b. But we cannot say “consciousness of consciousness (of x).” There cannot be presence of presence; there can only be presence of “the present thing.” Unless something is actually present there cannot be presence. “By means of name-and-matter, consciousness.” Our discussion of consciousness will be limited to the most general level of experience (of which consciousness of feeling_a is one aspect), namely, consciousness together with name-and-matter.
37. See S. XXII,79: iii,87, where all five aggregates, including conditions themselves, are described as conditioned things. “And, monks, what do you say are conditions? ‘They condition the conditioned;’ that, monks, is why they are called ‘conditions.’ And what is the conditioned that they condition? Matter as matter is the conditioned that they condition. Feeling as feeling is the conditioned that they condition. Perception as perception is the conditioned that they condition. Conditions as conditions is the conditioned that they condition. Consciousness as consciousness is the conditioned that they condition. ‘They condition the conditioned,’ monks. That is indeed why they are called ‘conditions.’” See also S. XXII,81: iii,94-99.
38. This does not imply idealism: the aggregates are conditioned, not created. But neither does it imply positivism: there is not merely the discovery of an already-existing world, complete with its relationships and implications. There is a middle way whereby this can be understood. Matter is perceived by the bodily senses as sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches, and by the mind as the imaginary counterparts of these. These percepts are then characterized by involvement with intention, feeling, and attention; and it is this characterized matter which I use to construct my world.
- Thus, if I hear a crackling sound (perception of matter by ear) I may characterize (or “name”) it as “fire.” I will then conceive a set of worlds in which “fire” plays a role, either agreeable (“dinner will be ready soon”), neutral (“just some old rubbish”), or disagreeable (“hey, that’s my house!”). However, I have learned that if my concepts do not accord with reality then I am liable to find their burden difficult to bear. Therefore I will consider whether these (or any of my conceived worlds) are isomorphic with what is further revealed of matter’s behaviour. Investigating, I see a length of shiny color waving briskly (perception of matter by eye), which I identify as “some plastic snapping in the wind.” I decide (or intend) that what I see is what I hear, and re-interpret the crackling as “sound of plastic.” With this re-conditioned matter I construct a new world, perhaps a pleasurable one wherein “I can deservedly relax, having dealt efficiently and successfully with an emergency.” Then I smell smoke. And so on.
39. It is worth pointing out that intention does not precede action. If I think about getting up then at that time there exist both “the intention to think about getting up” and “thinking about getting up.” If later I do in fact get up then at that time there exist both “the intention to get up” and “(the act of) getting up.” It is perfectly possible for me to get up without prior consideration (i.e. planning), but it is quite impossible for me to get up without at the same time intending to do so. “Monks, I say intention is action. Intending, one does action by body, by speech, by mind.” – A. VI,63: iii,415. Everydayness confuses intention with planning (which is the intention “to think about intending”), and therefore everyday language does also, even in some non-technical Sutta passages. In reflexion the distinction is clear: each act is accompanied immediately and at once by its intention. But for as long as reflection (= thinking about) is confused with reflexion (= self-observation) planning will be confused with intention. For so long the meaning of “responsibility” will be misunderstood.
40. “‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.’ ‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’”

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master — that is all.’” Clearly neither Alice nor Humpty Dumpty had grasped the notion of interdependence of content and context.

41. However, there is one way in which we might properly regard “conditions” as being intention. We have seen that in experience there is not only a simple hierarchy (e.g. “the clock tower” is more specific than “the Fort,” which is more specific than “Colombo,” which is more specific than “Sri Lanka”) but also a hierarchy of “for”-ness (e.g. the cup is for containing tea; tea is for drinking, which is for quenching thirst, which is for comfort; etc.). What a thing is for can be regarded as its intentions (“potentials” would be more precise, but the imprecision is not fatal). Therefore we might understand “By means of conditions...” to mean “Because there is a hierarchy of intentions (or of potentials)....” “Structure” is a more fundamental category than any category within that structure. In this sense, then, “conditions,” as intention, might properly be regarded as “surpassing even consciousness.” Although herein we will not discuss this approach further, yet to the extent that the idea proves to be isomorphic with experience it could be (for some people) conducive to setting aside mistaken notions and coming to see the uses of right view.
42. The single exception is āyusankhārā, conditions for life (i.e. things upon which life depends). These are said (at M. 43: i,295-96) to be “things that are not experienced.” We are never told what any of these unexperienced conditions might be. Contemporary theory, though, might indicate lymphatic circulation and the firing of neural impulses as examples, inasmuch as the body would probably not survive the total cessation of either. But though we can know about these life conditions indirectly, or conceptually, nobody actually experiences, say, the replication of his own DNA as part of ongoing cellular activity. To what extent such phenomena are merely reified conceptual devices, designed to organize and rationalize what is directly experienced, is a question which fortunately we need not decide here. But that there are things which, though beyond our direct experience, are capable of maintaining (or of terminating) life should not evoke surprise. However, those life conditions which lie beyond the realm of experience can have no direct bearing on the problem of dukkha (which is the problem of craving-based experience). Therefore, following the lead of the Suttas, we shall say no more about them. Such irrelevancies can best be left to the physiologists of the world.
43. The texts are filled with examples of applications of this Teaching at the psychological level, but clearly there can be but one “example” of universalization. If, that is, a singularity can be called an example. But it is an instance which is repeated time and again (with variations) throughout the Suttas. “Whatever is matter, past, future, or present, internal or external, coarse or fine, inferior or superior, far or near, all matter (is to be regarded as): ‘Not, this is mine; not, I am this; not, this is my self.’ Thus there is seeing what is with right understanding.” (The same formula is then repeated for feeling, perception, conditions, and consciousness.) This should not be understood as a call to examine individually each and every bit of matter, past, future, and present, in order to determine its nature and then to conclude, on the basis of this statistical survey, that indeed all matter very probably is not mine, etc. Clearly a different sort of examination is being called for here.
44. Despite the rationalized way in which “belief in self” is presented here, the belief, questioning, questing, and identifying are not overt and planned acts (though they are certainly intentional), at least in their initial arising. It is only subsequently that they become explicit as thought and thought-out. In any experience involved with holding no part of that experience can be found which is not already infected (such is the epidemic nature of conceit). Even in those meditative levels wherein thinking and pondering (speech conditions) have ceased, for one not fully enlightened there is still conceit. The problem, then, is more fundamental even than thought, let alone language.
45. Earlier it was said that dukkha arises due to the uncertainty inherent in the world. Actually this is but half the truth. There are two sources of dukkha in the world, not just one: the uncertainty inherent in the world (inasmuch as I could suffer loss, failure, or death at any time) and the certainty inherent in the world (inasmuch as sooner or later I certainly will suffer loss, failure, and death). Craving tends to stabilize pleasure, but the uncertainty of the world tends to destabilize it. Craving tends to destabilize dukkha, but the certainty of the world tends to stabilize it. Inevitably, the world wins; but craving always demands another chance. If it were not for these two things, certainty and uncertainty, the world would be a wonderful place indeed — if, that is, there could still be such a thing as “the world.”
46. That there is a propensity to identify selfhood with consciousness is apparent, of course, not only from structural considerations or textual exegesis. We have only to look around us. Adherents of many schools of philosophy (e.g. idealism) and psychology (e.g. Jungianism, transpersonalism), as well as of religions in general, regard consciousness as being in some sense fundamental or absolute. So do other thinkers, including many existentialists and even some advocates of current teachings which nevertheless go by the label of “Buddhism.” But I know of no school which seriously ascribes selfhood to the other categories we have been considering. For example, we find in spiritual literature much talk of “pure consciousness.” But there seems to be nothing said of “pure conditions,” “pure perception,” “pure feeling,” or “pure matter” (“pure” in the sense of “nothing but”) in today’s mystical marketplace. (Except that, possibly, “pure matter” might be accepted by the most extreme adherents of logical positivism — but then, that breed are hardly to be found shopping in such a marketplace.) Too,

there is a “Cosmic Consciousness” movement, but at present there seems to be no interest (perhaps unfortunately) in “Cosmic Name-and-Matter,” “Cosmic Ageing-and-Death,” or any of the others (with the arguable exception of an underground “Cosmic Craving”).

47. This (or that) is not to say that the differentiation does not have a degree of arbitrariness. In English we take it for granted that any thing must be either “this” or “that,” “here” or “there.” But in Sinhalese, for example, the division is seen as four-fold: a thing is either “this/here,” or “that/there (but close to hand),” or “that/there (not close but within sight),” or “that/there (too far away to be seen).” But since appropriation is more fundamental than language (a dog, for example, can display greed but cannot verbalize it), these differences do not alter the basic problem.
48. There are various passages in the texts (e.g. D. 14: ii,31-35; S. XII,10 & 65: ii,10-11 & 104-07) wherein the Buddha says that he considered dependent arising in its various aspects before his enlightenment. This raises the question, “If perception of dependent arising marks the difference between the enlightened individual and the ordinary person, then how can these passages be understood?” The usual reply is that this perception took place in “the moment before his enlightenment” (which again raises the ambiguous notion of moments), and was the impelling perception that brought about that comprehension. However, the texts make clear that it was in perceiving “arising” and “ceasing” that there arose “the eye (of truth), knowledge, wisdom, gnosis, light” (the usual formula for the initial perception). But the consideration of dependent arising preceded this perception (by how long an interval is not said) and was therefore the reflexion of one as yet unenlightened. The usual answer, then, explains nothing. It merely leaves us with the plaint, “It happened to him; but I also think about dependent arising. Why doesn’t it happen to me?” But now, distinguishing between things and the nature of things (i.e. that things arise and cease), we can understand how it can be that the ordinary person is fully able to see dependent arising in a certain sense — as every reader of this essay will be able to confirm — but that this does not mean that he necessarily sees it in its vital sense, as a universal.
49. Actually, there is one way in which dukkha can be seen as “this, my self:” when it is dukkha itself (e.g. “this ached in my elbow”) that is taken up as “this, my self” (“good grief!”). In such a case it is seen as dukkhadukkhatā, the sorrow of dukkha (“woe is me”). But it is still not seen as sankhāradukkhatā, the sorrow of conditions; for the conditions upon which belief in self depends are not seen. Nor is it seen as viparināmadukkhatā, the sorrow of changeability; for the impermanence of those conditions is of course also not seen. These two sorts of sorrow can be seen by the ordinary person only in secondary relationships, never in this vital one.
50. This Sutta goes on to say that “with the arising of cankers (āsavā) there is arising of ignorance.” But later we are told: “With the arising of ignorance there is arising of cankers.” And what are these cankers? “There are three cankers: the canker of sensuality, the canker of being, the canker of ignorance.” Here then, the recursive structure of ignorance appears in yet-greater detail. Not only do cankers and ignorance arise by means of one another, but one of the cankers is the canker of ignorance. (Seven ways to abandon cankers are discussed in M. 2: i,6-12. See also S. XXII,101: iii,152-53.) Ignorance, then, is not merely a failure to be adequately informed. (“I didn’t know the gun was loaded.”) It is a deliberate refusal to look at that which is at all times and all places there to be seen. (“I didn’t know that pain hurts.”) It is a refusal supported by a recursive hierarchical structure of successive generations and generalizations of denial and a spectrum of successive specifications of dukkha.
51. “In all fighting, the direct method may be used for joining battle, but indirect methods will be needed to secure victory.” Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*.
52. E. M. Hare’s rendering (in *Gradual Sayings III*) of anulomikāya khantiyā samannāgato as “living in harmony and patience” is quite misleading. The phrase actually means “endowed with compliance in conformity” (with the Teaching).

Compliance, of austerities, is chief.

“Extinction is supreme,” the Buddhas say.

No ascetic causes others grief.

No recluse does oppress in any way. – Dh. 184

11. The fourth noble truth

Recursiveness in the fourth noble truth needs to be discussed in detail. Fortunately for the length of this essay, however, it need not be done here, inasmuch as it has already been done elsewhere with both conciseness and elegance. Here we shall only comment briefly on that discussion.

In the 117th Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya (the Mahā Cattārīsaka Sutta, or The Great Discourse of Forty Parts — M. iii,71-78) the Buddha sets forth a Teaching which elucidates the inter-relatedness of the various factors of the noble eightfold path.

Monks, what is noble right concentration with its support (upanisā — see chapter 9) and equipment? Right view, right attitude, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness: whatever is one-pointedness of mind equipped with these seven factors, monks, this is called noble right concentration with its support and equipment.

The eightfold path, then, is not a mere heterogeneous collection of terms: they function as a whole and are structurally inter-related. The Sutta expounds on that relationship.

The key phrase, recurring seven times, is “Monks, here right view comes first.” This should be no surprise: we have seen that the structure of dukkha is stable due to the recursive structure of ignorance. We have already discussed (in section) the structure of right view (“knowledge of knowledge of...”). That this structure forms the “navigational framework” whereby the path, once discovered, cannot subsequently be lost, should need no expansion.

But to progress on the path requires not only right view. Right effort and right mindfulness are equally fundamental. Right mindfulness is the characteristic of seeing (reflexively) whether there exist defilements as the source of dukkha. It is fundamental because without perceiving faults there is actually no possibility of expunging them, and the eightfold path is essentially a path of purification. (“Monks, this path is the one way for purification of beings, for transcending of sorrow and lamentation, for going to an end of pain and grief, for finding the way, for realization of extinction — that is to say, the four foundations of mindfulness.” – M. 10: i,55-56.)

If, knowing fault from non-fault, one sees no faults, then one can know: “There is in me no fault.” In such a fortunate situation there is nothing further to be done. But if one sees fault then it is necessary — and only then is it possible — to remove that blemish. But this requires not only right view (i.e. knowing fault from non-fault) and right mindfulness (i.e. seeing fault and non-fault) but also right effort (i.e. removing fault, leaving non-fault), for without right effort one is in effect “sitting by the side of the road.”[53]

Thus, after describing both wrong and right view our Sutta continues: “Thus these three things run parallel with and circle around right view — that is to say, right view, right effort, right mindfulness.” Right view, then (as well as right effort and right mindfulness), circles around right view. But unlike the circularity of “ignorance of ignorance,” the circularity of “right view of right view” is not vicious. It is benign, salutary. And so too, we are told, right view, right effort, and right mindfulness run parallel with and circle around right attitude, right speech, right action, and right livelihood. In each case “right view comes first.” In other words, these four factors are established and based upon the recursive structure “right view of right view.” But they are developed and perfected only dependent upon the further involvement of right view with right effort and right mindfulness.

Right view (which, in the noble eightfold path, comes first) is the counterpart of ignorance (which, in dependent arising, comes first). It is the means whereby ignorance is fully eradicated. And so too, right effort and right mindfulness can be seen as counterparts to craving and holding. Both craving and right effort are concerned with drive, with movement. But craving is concerned with acquisition of yet further blemishes (or, if craving objects to that formulation, then it is concerned at least with an acquisition which results in yet further blemishes). Right effort, however, is concerned with expunging of blemishes, and therefore with expunging of craving.

Right mindfulness and holding are both concerned with seeing something. But holding is concerned with seeing an independent permanent pleasurable self, whereas right mindfulness is concerned with seeing the need to discover such a self. Therefore right mindfulness is concerned with seeing holding. Neither right effort nor right mindfulness are recursive (unlike craving and holding). Without right view, mindfulness hasn’t a chance of seeing what needs to be done (and is therefore not right mindfulness), while all effort is mis-spent (and is therefore not right effort). But together with right view these three form an interlocking structure. This framework provides the basis whereby the other factors and the path as a whole achieve stability as the active counterforce to the arising of dukkha. It is this structure which is the support for right concentration, and it is these factors which are its equipment. It is by means of right concentration together with its support and equipment that purification is achieved and right view and the rest are brought to perfection.

When right concentration with its support and equipment is brought to fulfillment then there are also right knowledge and right freedom. With these two additional factors the path reaches completion; for with right knowledge there is knowledge of right freedom; and with right freedom there is knowledge of right freedom. Thus there is established a stable structure which is the counterpart only of nibbāna, extinction (cf. M. 44: i,304), and which is totally beyond the range of ignorance, craving, and holding.

The five aggregates, no longer involved with holding, are also disentangled from being, birth,

ageing-and-death, and from any pleasure or unpleasure which can arise dependent upon these. There remain of course those bodily pleasures and unpleasures which can arise from the body's contingency. But such feelings are no longer regarded as "me" or "mine," any more than the fallen leaves in the forest, and are therefore not to be accounted as "my pleasure, my pain." They are of no consequence. And for so long as the five aggregates endure, this structure, culminating in right knowledge and right freedom, will endure. With the breaking up of the aggregates, at death, even this will finally end and utterly cease. It too is counted (by right knowledge, by right freedom) as of no consequence.

The Mahā Cattārīsaka Sutta (which deserves far greater attention than it generally receives) is not merely an explication of the recursive structure of the fourth noble truth. It warrants a careful study also for its sound advice on how to live one's life in such a way that one becomes ever more capable of seeing the true wealth which is this Teaching, and of seeing how to make proper use of that wealth.

Footnotes:

53. Not only he who halts a cart run wild
I call "a driver;" also who restrains
arisen wrath, who purges what's defiled.
Other people merely hold the reins. – Dh. 222

Or again:

As the smithy purifies
silver bit by bit, the wise
remove their own impurities
at each moment, by degrees. – Dh. 239

12. Two overviews

We have stressed that all things arise with condition (i.e. that they are impermanent), and that they depend upon (among other things) context. This is true, of course, of the views of continuous and discontinuous change that we have been examining. We accept one or the other of these views because it “makes sense.” It fits, more or less, into a general overview which we have developed about “the way things are,” and which is reflected in our attitude towards the world. This is reasonable enough; for to act otherwise would lead to inconsistency, self-contradiction, and confusion. Probably, not all consistent points of view can be isomorphic with the way things are. But certainly, no inconsistent ones are, for the way things are is that, at least, they are: they do not contradict their own existence.

Even one who holds an overview compatible with the idea of continuous change may find that, because of what has been said herein, that notion no longer seems inevitably necessary. Yet he may discover a lingering reluctance to discard it. For even a faulty part that fits the machinery may seem preferable to a replacement which, though itself flawless, is not compatible with this equipment. And no discussion of change, however skillful, can change that feeling, for it is based not so much upon a belief in flux as upon a more general attitude which receives support not only from flux but from other beliefs as well.

Our discussion of impermanence, then, cannot be complete without a consideration of the two overviews which provide the contextual support for each of the views of impermanence we have been considering. Because the groundwork has already been well laid this discussion need not be extensive.

It will be convenient to use the term reductionism for the overview which is compatible with flux, and holism for that which is compatible with discontinuous change, for reasons which will emerge out of our discussion.

Reductionism finds much of its rationale, no doubt, in the common experience that certain complex phenomena, when reduced to sub-systems, can thereby be understood in a meaningful way. There is no shortage of examples of such phenomena, but our bicycle, being not so many pages away, is handy. We can divide the system “bicycle” into sub-systems, which will include the mechanisms of steering, propulsion, and braking, the rider’s support, and so on. And an examination of these will yield an understanding, at least in some sense, of what is meant by “bicycle.”

None of these sub-systems are themselves “bicycle:” the system is to be found only in the whole of the sub-systems (some of which, such as “bell,” may be optional) organized in a particular functional manner. A bicycle, then, is the sum of its parts plus their organization. Although no sub-

system in itself is (or includes) “bicycle,” yet the sub-systems are comprehensive, both as a whole (for there is no mysterious element outside of them which is needed in order to furnish the organized sub-systems with that “breath of life” whereby — presto! — there is suddenly a bicycle); and individually (inasmuch as there is no component which in its nature cannot be categorized as belonging to this or that sub-system). Furthermore, the sub-systems are organized in a way which is non-iterative (that is, no sub-system is inherently inseparable from other sub-systems; every component, regardless of function, can be classified within one and only one sub-system).

Further, if we wish to understand any sub-system more fully we can reduce it in turn to its components. This will lead us eventually to the nuts, bolts, springs, levers, and what-nots that are the “atoms” which combine to form certain structures (“molecules”) which combine to form higher-level structures which eventually make a bicycle.[54]

This sort of analysis, which is reductionist in character, is fully adequate to understand the structure of bicycles. Furthermore, it is the only type of analysis which can lead to the knowledge, “how to assemble a bicycle.” And it is the sort of analysis that is pervasive not only in our dealings with mechanisms (“fit tab A into slot B...”) but with so much of the way we organize our daily lives (“if I catch the 7:15 to Bosnia-Herzegovina, then the 9:10 to...;” “one more qualification, and then we can go on to ask whether...”) that to question its validity as a means of analysis might seem at first to be a lunatic proposition.

And we can certainly agree that within its own sphere reductionism is a form of analysis that is both legitimate and necessary; and then we can go on to ask whether that sphere is universal. Are there, in other words, areas of human experience which in their very nature are not amenable to a reductionist approach? Are there areas wherein to apply such a methodology is a guarantee of misunderstanding? The answer being — to avoid suspense — yes, there are: any structure which contains one or more true recursive elements cannot, in its very nature, be understood by a reductionist approach.

Suppose, as we dismantle our bicycle (carefully cataloging where each piece came from, what it connected to, and how it functions), we were to discover, tucked away nearly out of sight, a curious mechanism we had never noticed before: a small replica of the very bicycle we were examining — a replica complete in every detail. Not a mere model of our bicycle, this replica, we discover, is an integral part of it, connected to the other parts in a functional manner. What ought we to do?

Of course, we might just heave the whole machine onto the nearest trash heap in disgust and frustration (where, no doubt, Bandha will trip and fall over it). But if we wish to understand how our bicycle works we will have to understand this sub-bicycle as well. So we dismantle this unit piece by piece only to discover.... Obviously, if bicycles were constructed in this peculiar fashion

then a reductionist analysis would never result in an understanding of how to assemble a bicycle. A different form of analysis would be necessary.[55]

But, it may be objected, bicycles are in fact not constructed in such a peculiar way. Ignorance, craving, holding, and suffering, it has been said, are so constructed. But it has also been said that these are actually seen (in their essential aspect) only by enlightened beings and not by the likes of us, and that their existence is therefore not actually established (the structures, that is, not the enlightened beings). For, after all, we don't know that we don't know. And aside from these — it may be objected — what is there in the realm of experience that is not amenable to reductionist analysis?

Very well: consider the spaghetti packet which displays a drawing of a joyous youth holding a spaghetti packet which displays a drawing of a joyous youth holding... As a child I used to be fascinated (and, perhaps, a trifle disquieted) by the implications of this crude illustration. I knew at once that there was no use taking a magnifying glass to it, of course. For even if the art work and printing had been done with exquisite exactitude there would still have been a point at which the yet-smaller youths chortling over yet-smaller spaghetti packets would vanish out of sight.

It wasn't the drawing that intrigued me: it was what the drawing implied. Could any of those ever-smaller smiling youths have an inkling that for the next-larger smiling youth he was but a drawing on a spaghetti wrapper? Was I myself but a...? Absurd, of course: the problem of non-recognition is not so easily settled. But it was this, much more than the drawing itself, that was an early glimpse of the unsettling effects of recursiveness.

Again: all of us have seen at one time or another an ant racing headlong around the rim of a glass or cup. And around and around and... (And perhaps many of us are familiar also with the well-known cartoon that depicts two castaways walking along the shores of an uninhabited tropical island, an island which they have obviously circled many times already, for the caption reads: "We must be getting somewhere — the tracks keep getting thicker." [And, beyond this, some of us may know the Rohitassa Sutta -- S. II,26: i,61-63 = A. IV,45: ii,47-49 -- wherein the Buddha says, "It is not by going that an end of the world is to be known or seen or arrived at, I say."])

From our outside perspective we can understand the futility of such a circling, and we laugh at it. But from the viewpoint of the ant (or of the castaways [or of Rohitassa]) it is no laughing matter. And this not because they are deadly serious about their circling (although they may well be) but because they are totally oblivious to the structure within which they are trapped, which is in fact why they are trapped in it.

Only when they understand their situation can they also understand how to disentangle themselves

from it as well as to see both the humor and the pathos of that situation. Here we discover a humor and a pathos which are not to be found in non-recursive situations. Whatever emotions might be evoked in watching the difficulties someone experiences in getting from A to B, they are of an entirely different sort than those aroused in observing the difficulties involved in getting from A to A. But those difficulties can only be observed from outside the structure. This is quite easily done in the case of such narrow structures as spaghetti packets and ant-runs; but the Buddha tells us of other recursive structures that are as broad as experience itself. And the whole point of his Teaching is to indicate how to achieve an outside view of these structures.[56]

One more example of recursive structures within daily life. Consider the fractions $1/8$ and $13/27$. The fraction $1/8$ can be written in decimal form as 0.125. That is the end of it. There is literally (or, rather, numerically) nothing further that can be said about it. In decimal form it has been fully expressed. The fraction $13/27$, on the other hand, can be written in decimal form only as 0.481481481.... And as we carry out the long division sums we find that no matter how far we extend our labors we will never arrive at anything other than more 481s.

However, we need not actually continue the division in the hope that eventually we will arrive at a better number,[57] for as soon as we reach the first repetition (“40 minus 27 equals 13, bring down the zero for 130...”) we can see how the thing must continue. And we are not surprised, for we have met these nonreducible decimals before, and have learned to live with them, if not to love them. Some fractions are reducible; others are not. And among those that are not are recursive fractions. (However, not all irreducible fractions are recursive. Pi, for instance, in decimal form never locks into a recursive structure, even though, as has been shown, it too is endless. That it is endless, of course, has not stopped mathematicians from carrying out their calculations of pi to sixteen million decimal places (still a long way, to be sure, from the enormous figure of 176,470,000,000, but not bad for all that). On the contrary, it seems to have encouraged them. Are there aspects of experience to which pi is isomorphic?)

Normally we would not indicate the decimal as merely 0.481..., for some might think that what was intended was 0.4818181..., or 0.48111..., or even that the fraction was not iterative at all. So we repeat the series, 0.481481..., which certainly exposes the structure. But if we wish to make absolutely certain that our statement will not be misunderstood even by the slow-witted then we might iterate the series a third time, 0.481481481.... Clearly, though, to go beyond this would be pointless. If one still hasn't understood what is going on here then to say more would only make understanding less likely, not more so. There is already enough information to figure things out. Indeed, there is already all the information that is possible. To say more would only mislead the cabbage-headed into the mistaken belief that the series might somehow reach an end, perhaps at some remote and infinitesimal fraction which he may then set about seeking, as if (unlike Belloc's “remote and ineffectual don”) it would explain everything. But in the world of $13/27$, no matter where one seeks one will never find any decimals save those of the 481 variety, on ever more immediate and miniscule levels. That is the way it is made, and it cannot be made otherwise.

In a holistic approach there can be no attempt to discover entities more fundamental than those apparent on any level of experience. It is accepted that the fundamental structure is manifest at every level of generality. Thus it is possible to discover the universe in a grain of sand (although we need not therefore follow Blake beyond his art, into realms of mystical ambiguities).

The purpose of holistic analysis is to expose this structure (which, we remember, operates between levels of generality as well as on them, and makes the structure a hierarchy, and not merely a stack). To go beyond this purpose is to turn the analysis into an endless progression (or regression). To stay within the bounds of this function is to know when to stop.

In this approach we are unable to make use of the reductionist advice given to Alice when she was in Wonderland (“Begin at the beginning, continue until you reach the end, and then stop”). For it is a feature of holistic structures that they are not only endless (unless they are brought to an end from the outside) but that even a beginning to them is not to be found. Therefore an analysis of holistic structures must go far enough to adequately reveal the recurrent structure, and then the analysis, if not the structure, should stop.

We can recognize, from our experience as well as our discussion, that our inclination towards reductionism may have a deeper basis than the recognition that “reductionism is the way much of the world can be understood.” Perhaps there is a deep-set wish that this be the way the whole of the world could be understood. And perhaps so much of the world is compatible with a reductionist approach because we have filled our world with such artifacts in order to avoid seeing the holistic core from which we perpetually try to escape: misery breeds misery.[58]

It is not because they are baffling and incomprehensible that we dislike recursive structures and wish them banished to some remote province. For they are in fact comprehensible, albeit in their own way. Rather, we dislike them because they don’t seem to get us anywhere. In a reductionist view there is always the suggestion that “now (at last!) I’m finally getting somewhere.” But in a holistic view getting elsewhere is impossible because there is no “elsewhere.” No matter where we look we only find more of the same. And, too, we dislike recursive structures because they are reminders of what we wish to conceal. “What common sense wishes to eliminate in avoiding the ‘circle,’ on the supposition that it is measuring up to the loftiest rigor of scientific investigation, is nothing less than the basic structure of care.”[59]

It is the nature of craving to be in search. Dissatisfied with what is, we seek elsewhere. The question being present, there is the search for an answer. Although we can never discover a lasting and satisfactory answer we can always rediscover the question. But the question is never the answer, and we lack the alchemy that would turn our leaden puzzlement into a golden solution. The itch

being present, there is the search for a scratch. Although we can never discover a lasting and satisfactory scratch we can always rediscover the itch. But the itch is never the scratch, and we are unable to effect the magic that would turn the torment of endless itching into the supposed bliss of an endless Perfect Scratch. Difficult as it is for us, in our quest, to get from A to B, it is as nothing compared to the frustrating and impossible task of getting from A to A!

Rather than face that task, we will prefer to seek elsewhere, or to seek for an “elsewhere,” or to suppose an “elsewhere” and then try to will it into existence. Thus, man is always probing his experience in the hope of finding, hidden beneath its surface, something that is different and which will “explain” things (as St.-Exupéry posits the oasis of pleasure hidden in the desert of dukkha). Our world is replete with this sort of explanation, for it is what people want.

For instance, there is the Freudian notion of “the unconscious.” What is this “unconscious?” Are we conscious of it? If so, then on what grounds can it be regarded as unconscious? If not, then how do we know it exists, except as a (conscious) conceptualization? But despite this simple objection the notion of the “unconscious” is widely and uncritically accepted, presumably because it is the sort of explanation that people want to accept. (The Freudian system may be described as a sort of “psychoanalysis in Wonderland.”)

Another example of such “hidden depths” explanations is, of course, flux. And there are many more such unperceivable hypostasized phenomena invented for the purpose of explaining (i.e. being different than) what is experienced. Explanations abound, in terms of both matter (e.g. electrons; hyperspace) and mind (e.g. “innate releasing mechanisms;” Jung’s “collective subconscious” and similar “we-are-all-one” — one what? — dogmatisms).

We will also find today many different answers offered to us in the name of the Buddha. Not only flux is declared to be “the Buddhist explanation of the universe” (to quote a recent title). We are also offered such concepts as “all that we experience is the result of past actions,” “emptying the (mind’s) storehouse of past conditions,” “the one reborn is neither oneself nor another,” “Buddha-nature,” “thoughts of Self transcend self,” and so on. The list seems to grow ever longer, although the Pali Suttas remain the same length. Nietzsche has correctly characterized this sort of explanatory “elsewhere” as “the illusion of hinterworlds.” (“Was I myself but a...?”) But it is not our purpose here to pick them apart one by one: probably an endless task. For by now it will be clear that in any case the Buddha offers not explanations but rather an indication of the question, and the question’s root, as being that which needs examination.

The search for answers has provided us with some wonderfully clever, elaborate, and original views about “how it all works.” But it can never serve as a tool for understanding our situation. For despite its cleverness it still ignores the basic nature of experience. Rather than seeking a conclusion

we need to understand the inconclusive situation which exists. Therefore whatever form they may take, efforts to explain experience are misdirected, and efforts to explain experience in terms of what itself is not experienced (i.e. of “hidden depth”) are a plain self-contradiction.[60] If such explanations are accepted as concepts among other concepts they will be seen for what they are. But if they are reified then they are misunderstood, taken as being what they are not.

Certainly we can deliberately conceal things from ourselves. This is ignorance, self-deception. But all that is concealed is, ultimately, more of the same. It is concealed because we desire it to be other than more of the same. And it is as something other that we seek to make it manifest. This is why it remains concealed. Once it is understood that even if there is something hidden it is not something different, then there will no longer be an irresistible drive to discover such a secret essence, the impossible exception to the rule. If we scratch the itch what we invariably find is more itch. If we scratch the surface what we invariably find is more surface.

As always, it is the failure to see the recursive structure of craving, the ever-abiding quest to find freedom from the ever-abiding quest, which founds a further and costly failure: failure to recognize the holistic approach of the Suttas. Many Suttas are analytical in nature (and many are not: some are analogical, others are exhortative, inspirational, descriptive, or various combinations of all of these). But it does not follow that they are reductionist. Consider, for example, M. 28: i,184-91, excerpts of which are quoted at footnote 15 and elsewhere. This discourse is perhaps as analytical in approach as any in the Canon. But is it therefore reductionist?

The Sutta tells us that just as the elephant’s footprint can contain within it any other footprint, so too all skillful things go for inclusion within the four noble truths. These four truths are defined and the first truth (dukkha) is then considered in detail in terms of the five aggregates. The five aggregates are defined and the first aggregate (matter) is then considered in detail in terms of the four elements. The four elements are defined and the first element (earth) is then considered in detail in terms of internality and externality. The internal aspect is then further analyzed into “head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, stomach, spleen, lungs, bowels, entrails, gorge, dung, or whatever else is internal, personal, solid, solidified, held to.”

And is all of this analysis set forth for the sake of explaining the whole in terms of its parts? Does the Sutta strive for some ultimate or atomic entity? Not at all, for the discourse then goes on to tell us that all these things, head hair, etc., are just that (earth element) and nothing more than just that, and are not to be regarded as mine, as I, as my self.

Now earth element in oneself and external earth element are simply earth element. This should be seen as it actually is with right understanding: “Not, this is mine; not, I am this; not, this is my self.”

These things, however base or minor they may be, are all to be regarded as impermanent, woeful, not self. It is evident, then, that the point of the analysis is neither to explain the whole in terms of its parts nor to discover any ultimate. Precisely to the contrary, it aims to show that no matter how detailed or minute one's analysis or search may be, still there is no escape from things being no more than what they are. And what they are has the nature of being impermanent, woeful, and not-self.

Every arc of a circle, however minute, displays precisely the same quality of curvature as is shown by the circle as a whole. Thus an understanding of the structure of the arc is not different from an understanding of the structure of the circle. So too even the smallest fragment of existence is not free from the characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and not-self. And thus an understanding of the structure of the fragment is not different from an understanding of the structure of existence.

To demonstrate this D. 17: ii,169-99, takes the opposite tack from M. 28. It points out that however magnificent and expansive an appropriation might be made it is still impermanent and not worth holding to: disenchantment and freedom are preferable. The analysis, which at first may have appeared to be a paradigm of reductionist logical data processing, turns out in the end to be every bit as holistic and organic as the rest of the Teaching.

It is because they fail to understand this that so many people also fail to understand what is meant by the expression "practising the Buddha's Teaching." Their concept of such a practice is akin to searching for an invaluable golden needle in a haystack of worthless straw (see footnote 2). They seem to believe that if only they are diligent enough, sufficiently keen-eyed and nimble-fingered, they will somehow or other find this golden needle. And so they set to work, carefully sifting through the haystack, picking up each bit of straw, examining it, deciding "That's not a needle," discarding it, and reaching for the next bit. And so they discard straw after straw: "That's not a needle, that's not a needle, nor that, nor that, nor...." They believe that if they are persistent enough, and perhaps very lucky, then some day they will be able to cry out joyously, "It's a needle! It's a needle!" Whereupon all their troubles will be over.

Such people need to understand that practice of the Buddha's Teaching is not like looking for a needle in a haystack. It is like looking for hay in a haystack. What needs to be seen is something that is very ordinary, mundane, and present-to-hand everywhere. It is not a different sort of experience that needs to be discovered. It is the everyday sort that needs to be seen. But it needs to be seen rather than, as is usually the case, conceived (as being other than what it is). Unfortunately, though, even if they were to accept this assertion as true, human perversity is such that most people would accept it in the wrong way. They would regard it as an extraordinary and different and explanatory truth. And in the end it would make no tittle of difference to most people, for they would simply return to their haystack, pick up the next bit of straw, examine it carefully, and decide "That's not straw." Discarding it, they would reach for the next bit of straw — "No, that isn't straw

either” — and the next bit, and the next: “That isn’t straw, nor that, nor that....”

A holistic approach can only be understood in the mode of holism, just as non-attachment can only be understood in the mode of non-attachment (and just as, too, attachment can only be understood in the mode of non-attachment). Thus, the message of this Teaching is, in effect: “Your experience is that of a questioning; your need is for an Answer. The history of all worldly endeavour is the tale of a search for this Answer. But an Answer is not to be found. Therefore there is all this dissatisfaction and grief. However, there is a way to stop asking the question....”

But of course most people, ignoring or misconceiving this advice, do continue to ask their questions and to cling to their various answers. Yet whether one’s answer is that everything exists, or that nothing exists, or that all is one, or that all is a diversity, or that self/God exists (free will!), or that self/God does not exist (determinism!), or that I am this, I am that, I am the other — whatever the answer, then regardless of how much wisdom may underlie it, the very fact of its being an answer at all consigns it to the realm of the world, the world of answers. For no answer is capable of uncovering and exposing the conditions upon which there is this constant need to raise these questions. And whatever one’s answer is, it is only a concealment of the question, not an ending of it.

Answers do not change a person. They merely confirm for him certain assumed validities. Only if we refuse to accept any answer, only if we insist upon the question, drive it home, and explore its underpinnings, is it possible to transcend the realm of the question, the realm of the world. The world we experience is a world of concern, anxiety, involvement, appropriation. Any “understanding” of one’s situation which does not recognize this, or which acknowledges it only as an afterthought, is fundamentally and irretrievably inadequate. Only an understanding which exposes the recursive structure of the appropriated, the appropriation, and the posited appropriator as an organic entity permeating the entirety of experience is adequate as a fundament upon which to base an investigation into the human situation — our own. Only thus can there be a comprehension of dependent arising, and thus of the futility of appropriation. Any effort which fails to see how the “eternal” appropriator is utterly dependent upon the impermanent appropriated is a futile effort. But an effort which strikes for the heart of the relationship has indeed the potential for perceiving the futility and can, by perceiving, end it.

Footnotes:

54. It is always possible to go below the “atomic” level. A metallurgist, for instance, might be concerned with what is, as regards bicycles, a “sub-atomic” level; for considerations of alloys can never lead to “bicycle.” Which level is taken as atomic depends on purpose and point of view. The “atoms” of this essay are its words. Although a calligraphist might regard individual letters (or even pen strokes) as his “atomic” level, anyone who tried to understand this essay by considering it letter by letter would only exhaust himself while failing abysmally in his effort to comprehend what is said here.

55. In a letter to the Venerable Ñānavīra Thera (1 February 1959, unpublished) the late Venerable Ñānamoli Thera recounted a conversation he had had with a South American visitor who was not fluent in English: “...I said to him,

pointing to the ironwood tree in new leaf... 'Do they have trees like that in Venezuela?' S: 'Naw, but dey ist a menna menna otchads in Venezuela.' I: 'What kind of orchards?' S: 'Whata kind? Dey grow ona da trees!' I: 'So the orchards grow on trees in Venezuela?' S: 'Sure!' I: 'What kind of fruits?' S: 'Fruits? Ah dunno. Dey ist a vat you call a flowers, plantee valuable, in da joongle onna da trees dey grow, plantee valuable!' I: 'Oh.' By this time it had dawned on me that the 'otchads' were in fact not 'orchards' but 'orchids'..." Orchards that grow on trees — which goes well beyond merely missing the forest for the trees — is an exact description of recursiveness. This particular example is laughable, but since it is this very structure which blinds us to perception of impermanence, the principle which it illustrates is of such importance (and the fruit it yields of such bitterness) that we would do well if our laughter was not that of derision but of recognition.

56. Not only is recursive function theory an important part of computer science (see footnote 19); the notion of recursiveness has yet wider applications in both science and technology. Gregory Bateson, for example, in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), p. 109, borrows terminology from communications engineering in his discussion of cultural value systems. He distinguishes between "a 'regenerative' or 'vicious' circle" and "a 'degenerative' or 'self-corrective' circle." And his discussion (pp. 201-278) of the "Double Bind" theory of schizophrenia bears striking similarities to recursive structures. Although the concepts used in these various disciplines are not always quite the same as that used in this essay (which concept we have distinguished, perhaps a bit presumptuously, as "true recursiveness"), yet they are sufficiently similar to demonstrate the existence of the structure in many aspects of human endeavor.
57. "For to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious thinker. It is then the true division begins, of twenty-two by seven for example, and the pages fill with the true ciphers at last." – Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1959), p. 64.
58. It is of no significance that the manufacturer of those endlessly regressive spaghetti packets (as well as the makers of the many other products whose labels display the same sort of replicative artwork) presumably feels no aversion towards his package design. The purpose of such advertising is to achieve as much self-reference as possible. Rather, the significant point is that we should find that such labelling evokes in ourselves a sense of ambiguity which non-replicative artwork cannot replicate.
59. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (tr. M. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 363.
60. "Monks, it is for one who feels (experiences) that I make known: 'This is suffering,' 'This is the arising of suffering,' 'This is the ceasing of suffering,' 'This is the way leading to the ceasing of suffering.'" – A. III,61: i,176. Certain Pali terms are commonly translated in a way that supports the "hidden depths" view of experience. Most notable among these may be *anusaya* and *upadhi*. *Anusaya* is, to a reductionist, "latent tendency." A holistic translation would be "potential." A piece of paper has the potential to burn — i.e. it is flammable — but we do not suppose that it therefore contains hidden within itself, in latent form, a blazing fire. So too, for so long as there exist ignorance and craving a person has the potential to experience greed, envy, hypocrisy, and many other evil unprofitable states. But we need not suppose that therefore these states exist in some latent or unexperienced form until they are somehow "called forth" into manifestation. Certainly the third section of the *Satipatthāna Sutta* (M. 10, D. 22, etc.) suggests that all characteristics of the mind can be known. It does not suggest that there are latent or hidden characteristics. As for *upadhi*, often translated as "rebirth substrate" (or more simply as "substrates"), the word is a synonym of *upādāna*, "holding," and may be translated as "appropriation." This is true in all *Sutta* contexts. See e.g. *Udāna* 30: 33: "Dependent upon appropriation (*upadhi*) this suffering is born. With destruction of all holding (*upādāna*) there is no suffering born." And M. 105: ii,260: "Appropriation is the root of suffering."