

THE DOCTRINE OF ANATTA

DR. G. P. Malalasekera

ONE doctrine in Buddhism which separates it from all other creeds is in its denial of any real Soul or Self. This doctrine of No-Soul or Anatta as it is called, is the bedrock of Buddhism.

Now, what is this Soul the existence of which the Buddha denies? Briefly stated, the "Soul" is the abiding, separate, constantly existing and indestructible entity which is generally believed to be found in man from the moment of his birth up to the time of his death, and to exist after his death in some other place, either heaven or hell, for all eternity. This Soul is regarded as being separate for each individual; it is a bit of the divine, a spark from God, implanted; within each human being and destined, ultimately, to return to its Maker. As long as the "Soul" resides in man, it is the thinker of all his thoughts, the doer of his deeds and the director of the organism generally. It is the Lord not only of the body but also of the mind; it gathers its knowledge through the gateways of the senses. Though it cannot be seen by the eye, nor reached by speech, nor apprehended by the mind, yet its existence is to be accepted on faith. Without immortality hereafter, so runs the argument, this life would not be worth living. The existence of a soul alone can ensure for each individual the fruits of his actions. Without it there can be no reward in heaven or punishment in hell, no recompense for one's deeds.

Such, generally speaking, is the teaching of other religions, with a few minor differences in detail. Buddhism, on the contrary, denies all this and asserts that this belief in a permanent and a divine soul is the most dangerous and pernicious of all errors, the most deceitful of illusions that it will inevitably mislead its victims into the deepest pit of sorrow and suffering. It is, in fact, says the Buddha, the root-cause of all suffering, because the belief in a separate self breeds egotism and selfishness ; selfishness produces craving for life and life's pleasures tanha which plunges beings into the ocean of Samsara continued existence.

This doctrine of the denial of the Soul the Buddha arrives at by analysis; Buddhism is, for this reason chiefly, called the vibhajjavada, the Religion of Analytical Knowledge. Man, says the Buddha, is composed of two chief parts, the physical body and the mind.

Let us analyse these two components and see if we can find anything permanent or divine in them. The body seems to be our own and yet we cannot control it.

It grows old and is subject to disease and finally it dies. What of the mind? It is even less permanent, for, while the body lasts a while, at least in appearance, the mind or what is called the mind-keeps perishing day and night, always changing. A man's mind, his character and aspirations must change and they do, or there would be no possibility of his higher development, progress and improvement. The same can be said of reasoning, the powers of discrimination and judgment, the will and the memory.

It may be argued, however "Yes, We agree that the Soul is not to be found in any of the parts of our body and mind but we say that the whole of our being is the Soul". This seems to be begging the question because the appearance of a whole is merely a delusion; what "Whole" can there be in something in which every particle is constantly, continually changing? We cling to ourselves, hoping to find something immortal in them, like children who would wish to clasp a rainbow. Like the rainbow are all things; there is a process; a conditioning, but nowhere the least trace of anything permanent.

Life is thus merely a phenomenon or rather a succession of phenomena, produced by the law of cause and effect. An individual existence is to be looked upon not as something permanent but as a succession of changes as something that is always passing away. Each of us is merely a combination of material and mental qualities; every person or thing or god is thus a "putting together", a compound. And this compound, this individual, remains separate as long as it persists in Samsara or existence as we know it. It is this separation which is the cause of life and, therefore, of sorrow. Life will continue as long as there is craving. It is Kamma, our actions, our thoughts and words produced by this craving that keeps the process going.

If at death the craving for life has not been completely destroyed then this craving gathers fresh life, body and mind. The result is a new individual, but new only in a sense. There is nothing that passes from one life to another. It is the Kamma produced by us in our previous lives and in this life that brings about the new life. The new body and mind is merely the result of the previous body and mind. Just as this life is the result of the Kamma of past lives, so our next life is the product of that Kamma plus the Kamma of the present life.

What is important to the Buddhist is not death or rebirth, for these processes are always taking place even in our present life, but the fact that the life-quality which succeeds death is entirely in his own power, and that his future environment will depend entirely on him. Though the tendencies of a past birth influence the trend of mind-processes in a subsequent life, yet the mind has the power inherent in it of overcoming, at least very largely, the evil that might be transmitted.

Must this process of life after life always continue? It need not, says the Buddha; it is the purpose of the Buddha's teaching to tell us how it can be completely destroyed. And with the destruction of the process we reach Nibbana, a word better known in its Sanskrit form of Nirvana. It is the cessation of life as we know it; in a sense it is annihilation, but not the annihilation of self, for there is no self to annihilate. The fire has gone out because there is no more fuel to feed it. It is the annihilation of the illusion of self, of separateness. The whole of the clingings, affections for oneself, the desires, the appetites, the thirst, Tanha, which surround or support this illusion are all destroyed together with the evil, the ignorance, the hatred and greed and the lust which accompany it. They die for lack of the nourishment that sustained them, never more to return. Nirvana is not merely a negative condition but a very positive state of bliss ineffable, of unbounded peace and joy, as is testified by the countless utterances of those that have attained it. "Ahosukham, Aho sukham" they exclaim, "ah, What happiness, What bliss;" cooled are life's sorrows, gone all fear and they are joyful with much joy.

When the Arahant, the Perfect One who has attained Nirvana, dies he is not reborn anywhere, for he is no longer subject to any of the laws that govern life and death. What exactly happens to him we cannot say, for all our thoughts, terms and modes of speech are bound up with the illusion of self and are therefore incapable of describing the state which the Arahant attains after death, a state which is the very antithesis of life as known to us. It is an experience, not speculation.

All we can say about it, is that it is beyond and outside all conditionings. A well-known passage in the books describes it as a state "Where there is neither solid nor liquid, neither heat nor air, neither this world nor any other, neither sun nor moon, neither arising nor passing away nor standing still, neither a being born nor a dying, neither substance nor development nor any basis for substance". It is the end of sorrow, to be known by freedom from distress and danger, by confidence, by peace and calm, by bliss and happiness, by purity and freshness. There is no particular spot where it is to be found, nothing to define it by. Such is the goal of the Buddhist, for the attainment of which the Buddha taught to beings the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.

