

WHAT CONSTITUTES MAN?

By R. Sri Pathmanathan

From his very earliest beginnings, man has always pondered his existence and his relationships with the unknowable. Even today, man is confused and uncertain in spite of tremendous technological progress. The following article suggests that man is unable to find the right answers because he is asking the wrong questions.

– Ed.

What is Truth? Queried jesting Pilate and failed to elicit an answer. In asking this question, Pilate was only giving expression to a puzzle that gnaws at the minds of everyone of us.

From the beginning of history, humanity has been like a child always questioning. This curiosity for knowledge, this eagerness to learn may be called an instinct in man as his hunger for food or thirst for water. It is an integral part of his being.

It is this yearning to know that has led man up the peaks of invention and discovery. It is his mental anxiety that has been the mainspring in the clock of human progress.

In the earlier years man was more concerned with the deeper aspects of life. The Rig Veda, the Upanishads, Confucius, Socrates and Plato worried themselves about the fundamentals of existence. Today, modern man betrays the inquisitiveness of our neighbour's cat and wants to probe and pry into other people's affairs rather than his own. Or else he displays the puerility of a child and plays about with other superficial matters.

His questions mainly pertain to mundane matters. Seldom does he endeavour to analyse the roots of human existence, so much so that modern man has continued to remain like a cork tossed hither and thither upon the sea of Samsara and has failed to cross over to the Shore Beyond.

We need a scientifically constructed ship to cross the ocean; we need a skilful and systematised pattern of living to transport us to Deliverance. The construction of a ship is based on the basic laws of physics. The stratagem of life must be fashioned on the fundamental laws of existence.

And what are they? All religions attempt to answer this question. Each religious teacher has begun his teaching by posing a question that pertains to this aspect of life.

Each messiah has attempted to break through the cobwebs and coils that enshroud our vision and get at the innermost recesses of human life – its origin and its end, its foundation and its ideals. In other words: “Who or What is Man?” Of the countless myriads of questions that confront an individual throughout his existence, none is more important than this.

Most religious systems have begun to investigate this problem by postulating the question: “Who is God?” and ended up in a pathless maze of idle speculation or in a blind alley of abject faith, from neither of which it is possible for these systems to escape. Other religious teachings have endeavoured to solve this problem not by asking the question, “What is God?” but by formulating the proposition, “Who is God?”

Once again the problem becomes insoluble owing to the nature of its content – for it assumes the existence of an individuality, the existence of some identity, of some force or principle that is constant and unchanging, of some idea of a soul, an idea which eludes definition or analysis.

He who attempts to answer the question, “Who is Man?” may be compared to the bull who being tethered to a tree endeavours to escape from it by going round and round the tree, but the more he circles the closer he is drawn to the tree until he comes into a position from which he cannot move at all.

Modern science has taught us that progress depends not so much on the answers we receive to our questions but in asking the right type of question. A wrong question will make us hunt a will o’ the wisp. A correct question will reveal the right answer by itself. Where the ends are clear, the means necessarily become so.

If we are to solve the quadratic equation of human life we must neither introduce a God factor into this algebraic sum nor leave behind the indivisible remainder of a human soul. It is the unique distinction of the Buddha that he solved this elusive question of human existence not by suggesting a different answer but by suggesting a different question. Instead of the question, “Who is Man?” he posed the formula “What is Man?” and the problem became soluble and the solution real.

In solving the algebra of life the Buddha, instead of exhausting his energies in chasing after the unknown factor that is “X”, proceeded to solve it by analysing the known factors and discovering that an unknown factor becomes both unnecessary and irrelevant.

To the Buddha, Man is a current, a force, a process whose only momentum is its own action, whose only spur is its own greed. Like the waves of the ocean that spring up with the coming into being of certain atmospheric conditions and ebb away with the vanishing of those conditions so is man a conditioned force dependent upon certain conditions both for its origin and its disappearance.

The gusts of lust and ignorance, the gales of hatred and malice are responsible for bringing into being the current of life. It is these atmospheric undulations that condition the iceberg that is Man in the sea of Samsara.

To the Darwinian, Man is an experiment in evolution, a developed ape although it is difficult to say in what sense he is developed. To others Man is an essay in creation with his roots in heaven and branches on earth. To still others he is the handiwork of an omnipotent God moulded out of clay and projected by him into this Universe. But to the Buddha, Man is a manifestation of Kammic energy and like all other forces in the Universe a flux of movement.

Man is not a motor car wound into action by an alien hand. He is a self-starter. The electric current of life operates on the automatic switch of Kamma.

The Universe has been compared to a game of billiards with electronic masses, called atoms, in a state of constant and continuous movements, pushed hither and thither by the impact of natural forces, producing new energy in time. So Man in this electronic universe is another flowing mass of energy torn this way and that by the conflicting emotions of hate and love, of elation and despair, of ignominy and fame, its reflex energy being another life and the quintessence of it all being sorrow.

And paradoxical though it may seem it is only by realising what is Man that Man ceases to be Man and escapes into the portals of deliverance, it is only a full and final realisation of the essential core of life – its impermanence, its sorrowfulness, its soullessness that liberates Man.

All Buddhists do possess some appreciation of anicca, dukkha and anatta, but such appreciation is both elementary and superficial because the moment one of us loses our fountain pen or purse, the moment a colleague of ours in office gets an undeserved raise above us, the moment our launderer loses our best shirt, the moment a nurse spills our baby's milk, we seem to forget everything about anicca, dukkha and anatta and fly into paroxysms of anger and jealousy, into moods of disappointment and sorrow.

This is because our appreciation of these truths is neither intimate nor profound. At most it is a matter of mere knowledge – a decorative symbol or coat of arms worn on the outside. It is only when these truths like water put on plants sinks into the subsoil of our existence and leavens our whole being that we can be said to possess Enlightenment.

These truths are not only to be known and understood but they are to be realised. They must seep themselves into the very core and marrow of our life and animate and vivify our entire being. As much as in the case of the food we eat, unless these truths are absorbed and assimilated into our system they will fail to furnish us with the mental stamina and stability so peculiarly necessary to a Buddhist.

Man in his ultimate analysis in his finest essence is dukkha and anatta. He is anicca because he is a component of skandhas and all component things are subject to decay. A man's ego consists of the feelings that haunt him, of the passions he broods over, of the desires that burn him and the dreams he makes. There is nothing absolute or permanent.

The beauty of the sunset, the fragrance of the flower, the flavour of the fruit, the melody of the music, the gorgeous glamour of feminine elegance make life pulse with the rhythms of joy, but like dew beneath a sweltering sun these pleasures melt away as soon as they are born.

There is a tender joyous relief to the man who nurses his ulcerous pimple by stoking it with the soft touch of his finger. But such relief is only transient. The moment the finger is removed it leaves behind a more writhing pain than the one he endured before.

Man, therefore, is the crystallisation of dukkha. His birth a sob, his life a moan, his death a sigh. If Man is dukkha the more so are his creations. His Utopias of eternal peace are day dreams that must fizzle out in a haze of smoke at the first touch of reality. No world peace is possible because it is impracticable in a world of men whose centre of reality is conflict.

If unceasing motion constitutes a waterfall, unceasing restlessness and conflict constitute life. Where there is disturbance and mobility there can be neither peace nor happiness for these presuppose a serenity of mind a tranquillity of thought, a repose of emotions and a quietude of the spirit which alone are the harbingers of peace and contentment.

But Man is not anicca and dukkha only. He is also anatta. As a lump of salt has no inside or outside and is nothing but taste, so man has no inside or outside but plain motion. Man is an aggregate of body (rupa) and mind (nama). And nothing brings these together except the normal operation of Nature according to the customary principles of affinity.

Matter attracts itself to mind and mind to matter like sodium to chlorine, or iron filings to a magnet. And both matter and mind, nama and rupa are forever in a state of ceaseless flux, in a state of constant flow which makes it assume an illusory sense of individuality.

The film we see at the cinema is only a succession of scenes that acquire the identity of a single unified whole by reason of the rapidity and close continuity of their succession. A line analysed mathematically is a series of points and nothing more. A river is not a single unit but a perennial flow of water.

Man then is only a succession of thoughts which become invested with a delusory sense of a concrete ego by virtue of the very tempo and momentum in which these thoughts succeed one another.

And it is because of this absence of a permanent entity that the Buddha says that Deliverance is possible. If there were an unchanging soul there would be no escape from this whirligig of torment and terror. It is because there is no unchanging focus or centre of gravity to which we are pivoted that we can become something different from what we are.

The soul of Man round which his life is said to revolve is like the axis of the earth. The salvation of Man lies in his creative mind-force. It is only upon the anvil of human experience and human thought that there can be hammered and forged into being, the golden metal of human Deliverance. For it is only a mind sanctified by SILA and stabilised by SAMADHI that can attain WISDOM and see through the rings of smoke into the nature of things and the naked core of Reality.