

The Philosophy of Change



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THE PHILOSOPHY OF CHANGE

by

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*Uju maggam hi akkhate
gacchatha ma nivattatha*

'Go onward; falter not,
Upon the straight road pointed out.'

-Thera Gatha, 637.

May peace harmonious bless this land;
May it be ever free from maladies and war;
May there be harvests rich, and increased yield of
grain;
May every one delight in righteousness;
May no perverted thought find entry to your
minds;
May all your thoughts e'er pious be and lead to
your success religiously;
Milarepa.—Tibet's Great Yogi.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

It is an honour for the Dharmodaya Sabha to have an opportunity on the occasion of the 4th World Buddhist Conference to put before the world the Immortal Teachings of Lord Buddha who showed to the ailing people the way to the Supreme Deliverance and who 2500 years ago shone like the sun and whose all-pervading light is still penetrating into the depths of ignorance of the sentient beings.

The philosophy of change, the integral part of what Lord Buddha taught shows us the illusory nature of the world and further informs those struggling under delusion that nothing is permanent and changelessness will be possible only when one ceases to have any sort of desire. It is, therefore, high time for all people to think of life with a brotherly outlook rather than with an outlook coloured by the idea of 'I-ness and My-ness.'


This booklet entitled "The Philosophy of Change", we hope, will acquaint the readers with the basic principles of Buddhism.

Thanks are due to Ven. Piyadassi Thera who placed this booklet at the disposal of the Dharmodaya Sabha to publish it for the historic occasion of the Fourth World Buddhist Conference, and the Dharmodaya Sabha hopes that the readers will make the best out of it in understanding the basic concepts of Buddhism.

15. 10. 56.
Kathmandu

Asha Ram Sakya,
General Secretary,
Dharmodaya Sabha.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma-Sam-Buddhassa.



THE PHILOSOPHY OF CHANGE

*Homage to the Blessed One,
The Exalted One, the All-Enlightened One!*

CHANGE or impermanence is the essential characteristic of all phenomenal existence. We cannot say of anything animate or inanimate, 'this is lasting'; for even while we are saying it, it would be undergoing change. All is fleeting: the flower's beauty, the bird's melody and a sunset's glory.

"Suppose yourself gazing on a gorgeous sunset. The whole western heavens are glowing with

roseate hues; but you are aware that within half an hour all these glorious tints will have faded away into a dull ashen grey. You see them even now melting away before your eyes, although your eyes cannot place before you the conclusion which your reason draws. And what conclusion is that? That conclusion is that you never, even for the shortest time that can be named or conceived, see any abiding colour, any colour which truly is. Within the millionth part of a second the whole glory of the painted heavens has undergone an incalculable series of mutations. One shade is supplanted by another with a rapidity which sets all measurements at defiance, but because the process is one to which no measurement applies,.....reason refuses to lay an arrestment on any period of the passing scene, or to declare that it is, because in the very act of being it is not; it has given place to something else. It is a series of fleeting colours, no one of which is, because each of them continually vanishes in another.”¹

History has proved again and again, and will continue to prove, that nothing in this world is

¹ **Ferrier's Lectures and Remains.**

lasting. Nations and civilizations rise, flourish and die away as waves upon the ocean, yielding place to new, and thus the scrolls of time record the passing pageant, the baseless vision, and the fading flow that is human history.

All component things, all things which arise as the effect of a cause, and which as cause, give rise to an effect, can be crystallised in the single word *ANICCA*— Impermanence. All tones, therefore, are just variations struck on the chord which is made up of Impermanence, Sorrow and Soullessness—Anicca, Dukkha and Anatta.

Camouflaged, these three characteristics of life prevail for ever in this world until a Fully Enlightened One, a Samma-Sam-Buddha, reveals their true nature. It is to proclaim these truths, and not to lead men to an eternal heaven, that the Buddhas appear.

“This is the sum, the quintessence of their teaching and in it all there is no word about redemption. But as the sea is compassed by the land and the land by the sea, so in the teaching of the Exalted One, do Sorrow and Salvation mutually encompass one another. And as one who maps out all the outlines of all the lands on

the surface of the earth, with that same operation supplies the boundaries of all the seas, so the Buddha in giving these three laws of transiency, sorrow and non-I, at one and the same time along with them, gives salvation." ²

The Buddha is known as the *Vibhajjavadi*, the Teacher of the Doctrine of Analysis. He, verily, is the supreme analytic philosopher. Here "analytic philosopher" means one who states a thing after resolving it into its various qualities, putting the qualities in proper order, making everything plain. The analytical philosopher has the character of one who states a thing after going into its details; he does not state things unitarily, that is, regarding all things in the lump, but after dividing up things according to their outstanding features, having made all matters distinct, so that false opinions and doubts vanish, and conventional and highest truth (*Sammuti Paramattha Sacca*) can be understood unmixed. An upholder of the analytic method is the Master, because He approaches not the extremes of eternalism and nihilism (*Sassata, Ucheda*), but teaches the the Middle Way of Dependent Origination (*Paticcasamuppada*).

² Paul Dahlke.

As an anatomist resolves a limb into tissues, and tissues into cells, the Buddha analyses all component things into their fundamental elements.

The so-called being, according to the Buddha Dhamma, is composed of mind and matter or the five aggregates, namely: *Rupa*, *Vedana*, *Sanna*, *Sankhara*, and *Vinnana*—body (matter), feeling perception, volitional activities (formations) and consciousness. This is an ever changing, inter-related conflux of mind and body; (*Nama-Rupa-Santati*) these, when separated from each other, lose something of their potency with the result that they are unable to function indefinitely.

On close analysis it becomes clear that *Nama* or mind is nothing but a complex-compound of fleeting mental states. It is dynamic, and never static. *Rupa* or matter, on the other hand, is merely a manifestation of forces and qualities; in other words, a constant vibration of elements. These forces and qualities which, in the language of the Buddha, are known as *Paramatthas* or *Rupa Dhatu*, are termed *Pathavi*, *Apo*, *Tejo*, and *Vayo*. But they are not earth, water, fire and air respectively as conceived by some Greek thinkers of yore. According to Buddhist Philosophy, *Pathavi*, in

brief, is the element of extension or expansion; *Apo* is the element of cohesion; *Tejo* is the element of preservation and heat; and *Vayo* is the element of motion, it is displacement (*Calana Lakkhana*).

Both mind and matter are void of an unchanging, undying soul or ego or personality. There are the six *indriyas*—six sense doors or sense organs—namely: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind; there are the six *arammanas*—six sense objects or sensibilia,—namely: form, sound, odour, taste, contact and ideas; there is a functional interdependence or relationship between the six sense organs and sense objects, and there is no agent, no soul whatsoever.

As Dr. Paul Dahlke says: "The so-called being is like a flash of lightning that is resolved into a succession of sparks that follow upon one another with such rapidity that the human retina cannot perceive them separately nor can the uninstructed conceive of such succession of separate sparks."

So we understand that according to the teachings of the Buddha, all component things, animate or inanimate, human or divine, pass through the inconceivably rapid moments of *Uppada*, *Thiti* and *Bhanga*, or of arising, reaching a

peak, and ceasing, just as a river in flood sweeps to a climax and fades away. The whole universe is constantly changing, not remaining the same for two consecutive moments.

Heracleitus, the Greek Philosopher, who was born just a few years after the passing away of the Buddha, taught the philosophy of change, and, one wonders if that teaching was transmitted to him from India. "There is no static being," says Heracleitus, "no unchanging substratum. Change, movement, is Lord of the Universe. Everything is in a state of becoming, of continual flux (Panta Rhei)". Further says Heracleitus, "You cannot step twice into the same river, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you." A Buddhist who has grasped the essentials of the Buddha Dhamma, goes a step further, and says: 'The same man cannot step twice into the same river'. For the so-called man who is only a conflux of mind and body is also undergoing rapid change.

"Hindu thought," says Radhakrishnan, "is generally associated with the theory that the world is samsara, a perpetual procession of events, an incessant flow of occurrences. Expressions like 'the wheel of time,' 'the cycle of birth and death,'

'the ever-rolling stream,' 'Samsara,' 'pravaha,' 'jagat' are employed to indicate the nonsubstantial or unstable character of the universe. Everything that exists suffers change. Every actuality is a becoming, has in it the principle of unrest. Nothing empirical is eternally conserved. All life is a constant birth or becoming, and all birth entails a constant death, a dissolution of that which becomes in order that it may change into a new becoming. The world is movement (jagat), and it would be dissolved by the cessation of movement. The illusion is not in the movement, but in the stationariness." Further says Radhakrishnan, "Buddhism took over this conception of samsara from Hindu thought and put it at the centre of its scheme." ³

It is a pity that so distinguished a philosopher as Radhakrishnan has failed to see the difference between the Buddhist conception of samsara and the Hindu conception of it. It is true that the teaching of samsara is pre-Buddhistic. Nevertheless, it should be understood that samsara or procession of events, in Buddhist thought, is utterly free from the notion of a

³ *An Idealist View of Life*, London. 1947, p. 225.

Jivatma or a *Paramatma*, microcosmic soul or macrocosmic soul. There lies the main difference between the Buddhist and the Hindu conception of samsara. Behind this procession of events, for the Hindus there always remains an unchanging Atma. It was the recognition that this atma was an illusion, that made the Buddha's Doctrine revolutionary. The Doctrine of Anatta, no soul, is unique in Buddhism, and is distinguishable from every other religion and philosophy. So the professor is not justified in saying that "Buddhism took over this conception of samsara from Hindu thought". He may rightly say that the Buddha disagreed with the Hindu conception of samsara, and gave to the world His won interpretation of it.

To return to our subject of change, we are born as the effect of many a past cause. From the moment of birth we begin to grow: "At first the infant mewling and puking in the nurse's arms", then by stages we reach the full bloom of youth—youth which is so sweet, but as fleeting and evanescent as the roses in summer time. Finally old age creeps in. Being in the stages of decay, our senses fail us at a time when they are needed most. "Last scene of all, that ends this

strange eventful history is second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." And when the inevitable hour strikes its knell, we end this final scene and pass away.

Birth precedes death, and death on the other hand precedes birth. Birth is conditioned by our own actions both wholesome and unwholesome, *kusala* and *akusala*, and action or Kamma is conditioned by *tanha* or craving or thirst for life and craving is the result of *avijja* or ignorance, not understanding the real nature of things. In other words, not understanding the Four Noble Truths and the universal fact of "Dependant Origination"—*Paticca Samuppada*—which teaches, "this being, that becomes".

Life is but a lamp that burns as long as it is sustained by the oil of craving. And, as cattle wander in search of fresh pastures, beings lured by craving, go from birth to birth, constantly searching for fuel with which the life flame may be sustained, and just as long as one does not root out desire, so long is one mentally fettered like a sucking calf to its mother. Yet there is no personal identity, a self or a soul that passes into the next.

“Certain conditions bring about certain effects. This is sure. It is all a passing show of phenomena. There is no real rest in the cosmic, however much the weary may crave for rest. A relative rest is possible, but not an absolute rest. Nothing cosmic is still; it is all in a whirl. The desired is not there when the outstretched hand would grasp it, or, being there, and grasped, it vanishes like a flake of snow. No cosmic ideal escapes this inexorable unceasing change. Happiness there is; but it is passing delusion. The seeing eye sees its passing with its rising.”⁴

The following story illustrates the passing nature of things. The story is based on the eighth and the last stanza of the *Bramarastaka*⁵ by the Indian poet *Sri Samkara* believed to be a contemporary of *Kalidas*, the most renowned poet of India.

⁴ Bhikkhu kassapa

⁵ ‘*Ratringamisyati bhavisyati suprabhatam
Bhasvanudesyati hasisyati padmajalam
Ittham Vicintayati kosagate dvirephe
Ha! hanta! hanta! nalinim gaja ujjahara*’
“ ‘Night will pass, the fair dawn will come,
The sun will rise the lotuses will laugh—’
Thus mused the bee caught in the calyx of a lotus:
Oh! doom! doom! an elephant tore up the lotus plant.”

It was evening. The sun was setting slowly in the West. The birds were hastening to their nests while beasts were prowling for prey. Now a bee,—a little busy bee was buzzing this way and that, seeking a little honey to still its hunger. At last it saw a pond full of glowing lotuses and with great joy did the bee rest on the calyx of a tender little lotus to feast on a trifle of its hidden nectar. The bee did not harm the beauty of the lotus; it only drank the honey. But, alas! with the setting of the sun, the lotus closed its silky petals thus trapping its hungry visitor. Yet, the little bee was not without hope. These were the thoughts that flashed through its heart as the poor creature lay snared in the dainty lotus-prison:

‘The night will pass away yielding place to the fair dawn; the sun will rise, and this lotus will expand and soon shall I quit this prison house to join my companions.’

But, lo! the unexpected happens. The lordly elephant, king of the forest, wends his way along the path that leads to the pond. He drinks his fill and splashes the cool water over his massive flanks. The questing, sensitive trunk scents the luscious lotus,—the very lotus in which our little errant bee lay captive!

Instantly the mighty beast tears up the lotus plant. And, crunch,— leaves, flower and bee disappear into that vast maw! And the little bee quite contrary to its wishful optimism, thus went to its death.

Such is life! one moment here then lost for ever. Who can say with certainty that one will live to see the morrow? All meetings end in partings, while life ends in death. And we, in this mysterious universe, live, love and laugh; and, "it is easy enough to be pleasant when life flows along like a song." Yet, 'when sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions', and then, the whole world appears to be one picture of pain. Still the man who views life with a detached outlook, who sees things in their proper perspective, whose cultural training urges him to be calm and unperturbed under all life's vicissitudes, who could 'smile when everything goes dead wrong',—he, indeed, is man worthwhile.

The world in which we have taken our temporary abode is like unto a large lotus out of which we all, men and women, gather honey with strenuous struggle. We build up wishful hopes and plan for the morrow. But one day, sudden perhaps,

and unexpected, there comes the inevitable hour when Death, the elephant,—*Maccu Mara*—tears up our lives and brings our hopes to naught.

Therefore said the sages of yore:

“The eight great mountains and the seven seas,
The sun, the gods, who sit and rule o’er these;
Thou, I, the Universe, must pass away,
Time conquers all: why dote on Maya’s play?”

Now when a person is able to see the universality of impermanence (*Aniccata*) he ascends to that summit of vision expressed in the *Dhammapada*, verse 28; “The wise one that casts away heedlessness by heedfulness, climbing up the heights of wisdom, sorrowless, surveys the ignorant sorrowing folk, as a mountaineer the groundlings.” This is the standpoint of the *Arahat*, the Perfect One, whose clarity of vision, whose depth of insight penetrates into the deepest recesses of life and cognizes the true nature that underlies all appearance. He indeed is the true philosopher, the true scientist who has grasped the meaning of change in the fullest sense and has transmuted that understanding into the realization of the deepest truth possible to humans—the truth

of overcoming fully the instability of sentient existence through the conquest of the firm ground of the realm of *Nibbana*. No more can he be swept off his feet by the glamour of things ephemeral. No more can he be confused by the terrible and the awful. No more is it possible for him to have a clouded view of phenomena; for he has transcended all capacity for error through the perfect immunity which intuitional knowledge, *Vipassana Nana*, alone can give.

To attain this high state of liberation, the Buddha points out the sublime path of understanding to humanity groaning under the whip of *Kamma*; but people still cling on to the by-paths that lead deeper and deeper into the morass of suffering. That is because of previous habits that have woven themselves into the texture of their being while aimlessly and endlessly wandering through the jungles of *sansaric* life. It is very difficult to turn ourselves away from customary haunts and grooves of life, from the accustomed modes of conduct, thought and action. But if one wants to conquer the burdensome cares of worldly life, to escape the toils of *samsara* and reach perfection, one has to turn away from things, seemingly dear, comfortable and congenial.

The people of the world mark the changing nature of life. Although they see it, they do not keep it in mind and act with dispassionate discernment. Though change again and again speaks to them and makes them unhappy, they continue their mad career of whirling along the wheel of existence and are twisted and torn between the spokes of agony. An illuminating illustration is that of the scientist. The scientist is a man who accepts impermanence as the salient feature of existence. Although he knows it all very clearly he cannot rid himself of the fascination and thrill which change has, for men in general.

After all, a scientist or a common man, if he has not understood the importance of conduct, the urgency for wholesome endeavour, the necessity for the application of knowledge to life, is, so far as the doctrine of the Buddha is concerned, quite an immature person, a raw recruit who has yet to negotiate more hurdles before he wins the race of life and the immortal prize of Nibbana.

To a Buddhist the primary concern of life is not mere speculation, or vain voyages into the imaginary regions of high fantasy, but the gaining

of true happiness and freedom from all ill. To him true knowledge depends on the central question: Is this learning according to actuality? Is it a thing that can be of use to us in the conquest of real and everlasting bliss?

To the scientist, knowledge is something that ties him more and more to this sentient existence, this nave of nothingness which men call life. Therefore, that knowledge is not saving knowledge, it is not knowledge which makes him turn away from, makes him weary of, the world and all it holds. Thus we see that although today change is understood and made a central principle in the understanding of the world, it does not mean that the scientists have grown sick of the world, but it means that this very change represents to them the imaginary and illusionary possibility of changing the world for the better without breaking away from it. They cherish the belief that it is possible to discover a way of happiness in this very change, a centre of security within this circle of impermanence. They imagine, although this world is uncertain, they can make it certain and give it the basis of solidity for all practical purposes, and so the unrelenting

struggle for betterment and progress goes on with undiminished vigour and futile enthusiasm. But really this thing they are trying to make better is, according to the ideas of Buddhism, subject to change at all points on its circumference and radii, that it is not capable of being made sorrow free at all.

Our life is so dark with decay, so smothered with death, so bound with change, and these qualities are so instinctive to it—even as greenishness is to grass and bitterness to quinine—that not all the magic and witchery of science can ever transform it. The immortal splendour of an eternal sunlight awaits only those who can use the light of understanding and the culture of conduct to illuminate and guard their path through life's tunnel of darkness and dismay.

Today there is ceaseless work going on in all directions to improve the world. Scientists are continuing their experiments and scientific methods with determination and undiminished vigour. Modern means of communication, and contact have produced startling results. All these results, improvements are entirely external and material.

The people of the world today are restless and weary and racked with fear and discontent. They are intoxicated with the desire for fame, wealth, power and gratification of the senses which makes the world more and more an armed camp and drives us steadily to the brink of an armageddon.

Addressing the members of the Indian National Congress, recently, Shri Jawaharlal Nehru said:

'Humanity has to choose today between the message of the Buddha and the hydrogen bomb. There is nothing in between to choose from. I have enough faith in me to bow my head down when the Buddha's name is mentioned. The path which the Buddha and Asoka had shown has not been forgotten and has somehow remained in the mind of India. Mahatma Gandhi followed the same path in our life time and by following that path the prestige and the strength of the nation was raised.

If any question has to be considered it has to be considered peacefully and democratically in the way taught by the Buddha.

Of late Dr. S. Radhakrishnan delivering a speech in New Delhi, said:

The Message of the Buddha is not only for His age but for all time. There is no doubt that the Message of the Buddha has a meaning for the world today. The principles that He enunciated, knew no limits of time, space or class. The practice of those virtues are essential for the establishment of justice and Brotherhood on earth.

Science has given us so much by which we can convert this world into a paradise. Technology enables us to use scientific knowledge for the solution of practical problems. But in spite of these we cannot be sure we are better. The answer to the challenge of the world is found in the Buddha Dhamma."

May all beings be well and happy. !

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