

Buddhism and the Tragic Sense of Life

I propose to examine in this paper certain observations on Buddhism, made by Sidney Hook in a talk entitled, "Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life".¹ The primary aim of my analysis is not to challenge the concept of the tragic which he expounds. He is perhaps recommending a certain usage for the word 'tragic'. However, his exposition of Buddhism distorts the Buddhist attitude to death and the Buddhist attitude to suffering in general. One who has made a close study of the teachings of the Buddha will find Hook's interpretation of Buddhism disappointing. First I shall sum up his contentions regarding Buddhism and then present my own objections to his thesis.

I

(i) According to Hook, there were three factors which made the Buddha renounce the world. They are sickness, old age and death. But these are not the realities fundamental to the tragic sense of life. The term tragic refers to "a genuine experience of moral doubt and perplexity", which issues out of a conflict of moral ideals. Thus there are conflicts between the good and the good, the good and the right and between the right and the right.²

(ii) With the development of scientific medicine the most serious forms of sickness will disappear and will not be replaced by others. Even where sickness is present it may be the occasion of tragedy, but by itself is not an illustration of it. In relation to the forces of nature man's plight may appear to be pitiful but not tragic. The harmful effects of ageing is also a matter for scientific medicine. Anyway, there is no tragedy in growing old biologically but only sorrow.³

(iii) "But what of death-Buddha's third appalling discovery-preoccupation with which has become so fashionable today among some European existentialist philosophers that their philosophy seems to be more a medi-

1. Sidney Hook, *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life*, Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association, Vol. 33, 1959-60, pp. 5-26. (Hereinafter abbreviated as T.S.L.)

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

tation upon death than upon life. Is not death the ultimate source of whatever is tragic in life? I cannot bring myself to think so. Nor can I convince myself that its nature and significance in life waited to be discovered by Kierkegaard and Heidegger and their modern disciples". "It is the reflective attitude towards death not the popular attitude or the one displayed by those in its last agonies, which throws light on its nature and place in life. The attitude exhibited by Socrates in facing it seems wiser than that expressed by the contemnors of the rational life...."

Hook also refers to Tolstoy's claim that if a man has learnt to think he must think of his own death, and to a statement of Sartre that "if we must die then life has no meaning".⁴ All this appears to Hook as "little more than a fear of death and a craving for immortality".⁵ Hook also says that death has its uses, for it gives us an assurance that no evil will last for ever. He concludes that "death *as such* is not tragic".⁶

(iv) All this brings him to his own positive solution, to what in his eyes appears tragic. There are three approaches to the tragic conflict of life. They are the approach of history typified by Hegel, the approach of love, and the method of creative intelligence (Pragmatic method). Hook rejects the first as it is unsatisfactory, rejects the second as it is incomplete and ambiguous and supports the third method. In the light of his own method, he finds the Buddhist attitude unsatisfactory. He says that the Buddhist saint who out of compassion refuses to use force or kill when they are the only methods, leaves room for greater evil. Thus he refuses to accept what he calls the "Christian and especially the Buddhist ethics of purity."⁷

II

(1) *The Concept of Dukkha*

There are a number of objections that can be made against Hook's analysis of the Buddhist concept of suffering. Firstly, what is referred to as the truth of suffering is not limited to sickness, old age and death; it is a wider formula with a very broad frame of reference. Secondly, it has to be understood as one of the four noble truths and not in isolation. The four noble truths form the basis of Buddhist doctrine. They are

4. Ibid, p. 12

5. Ibid, p. 12

6. Ibid, p. 13, Emphasis mine.

7. Ibid, p. 18

truth of suffering, the origin of suffering, the extinction of suffering and of the eight-fold path leading to the extinction of suffering. It is only when the four truths are taken as aspects of a unified doctrine that factors like moral perplexity and emotional fears can be explained. One who emphasises the factor of suffering only is in danger of embracing philosophical positions like nihilism and pessimism. As will be explained later, Buddhism does not uphold such extremes.

Thirdly, the concept of suffering has to be understood in its relation to the related doctrines of impermanence (Anicca) and egolessness (Anattā). Hook distorts the meaning of dukkha as he isolates the concept of suffering from the very surroundings that give it meaning. Lastly, his attempt to project the Buddhist concept of suffering (as he sees it) against the background of his own definition of 'tragic' is misleading.

What is the truth of suffering? Birth (jāti), decay (jarā), disease (vyādhī), death (maraṇa), sorrow (soka), lamentation (parideva), pain (dukkha), grief (domanassa), despair (upāyāsa) are referred to as suffering. To be joined with the unpleasant and to be separated from the pleasant and the failure in getting what one wants is suffering. In short, clinging to the five groups of mental and physical qualities that go to make up the individual constitute suffering (dukkha).⁸

In translating the Pāli word 'dukkha', it is not possible to find one simple word that will compress all the aspects of its meaning. The P.T.S. Dictionary reveals the complexity of the word thus: "There is no word in English covering the same ground as dukkha does in Pāli. Our modern words are too specialised, too limited, and usually too strong".⁹ Starting with specific and concrete instances of physical pain and bodily ailments we discern a broadening group of more abstract meanings—mental sorrow, frustration, conflict, tension, insecurity, anxiety, despair and restlessness. When we come to even broader concepts like unsatisfactoriness, disharmony, emptiness and insubstantiality. Horner for instance recommends the word "anguish", but gives a word of warning that the word may be too strong. But where it has been used the stress appears to be wanted more on the mental than on the physical disease; where physical disease is more clearly intended, I have used other words". The word dukkha etymologically suggests the idea of an evil hollow "the empty of that which should rightly

⁸ *Dīgha Nikāya*, Vol. 2, XXII, 18.

⁹ *P.T.S. Pali-English Dictionary*, Ed. T.W. Rhys Davids & W. Stede, Part IV, p. 159.

fill, and which be perhaps taken as nibbāna".¹⁰ The empty hollow ground around which human misery is woven, is the belief in a non-existent ego. Here the doctrine of dukkha has to be understood in relation to the doctrine of anattā. This aspect of the meaning of dukkha has attracted the attention of scholars like Conze, whose observations strengthen my claim that the Buddha did not merely deal with some superficial aspect of suffering. On the other hand, to use modern terminology, the Buddha dealt with "basic or original anxiety". Conze says, "According to the views elaborated by Scheler, Freud, Heidegger and Jaspers, there is in the core of our being a basic anxiety, a little empty hole from which all other forms of anxiety and unease draw their strength".¹¹ These references to anxiety according to Conze, "have quite a Buddhist ring about them".

In general the word dukkha has three broad usages—a general philosophical sense, a narrower psychological sense and a still narrower physical sense.¹² It is in this general philosophical sense that words like unsatisfactoriness and disharmony have been suggested. This meaning becomes prominent when dukkha is considered as a universal characteristic of all saṃsāric existence, along with impermanence and egolessness. Thus it is said—"What is impermanent (aniccaṃ), that is suffering (dukkha). What is suffering, that is void of an ego (anattā)."¹³

Physical pain is easy to recognise, though it is inevitably mixed with the mental. The Pāli scriptures make a distinction between bodily disagreeable feeling and mentally disagreeable feeling. The mentally disturbing can range from mild irritation to the most tragic forms of despair. When Hook remarks that with the development of scientific medicine the most serious forms of sickness will disappear, he fails to give some thought to the fact that increasing numbers fall a prey to mental sickness today. This certainly has been tackled by the psychoanalyst to a point. But as I have shown elsewhere, on the one hand there are remarkable anticipations of modern psychoanalysis in Buddhism, on the other hand the factor of regression and the re-emergence of neurotic features that baffled Freud can be accounted for in the light of Buddhism.¹⁴

10. *Middle Length Sayings I*, Trans. I. B. Horner, 1954, p. xxii.

11. Edward Conze, *Buddhism*, Oxford, 1951. pp. 22—23.

12. O. H. de A. Wijesekera, *The Three Signata*, Wheel Publication, Kandy, Ceylon, 1960.

13. *Samyutta Nikāya*, IV, I.

14. M. W. P. de Silva, *A Study of Motivational Theory in Early Buddhism with Special Reference to the Psychology of Freud*, Ph.D. Thesis, Hawaii, 1967, unpublished.

BUDDHISM AND THE TRAGIC SENSE OF LIFE

In fact, Freud says that all men are at least partially neurotic. The Buddha also says that we suffer from bodily disease from time to time but that mental disease is continual till the holy state of arahat is attained. Even Freud in spite of his excessive biological orientation, at times suggests that the very nature of an instinct is such that no response is wholly adequate to it. The failure of response can be traced, not merely to societal rigidities, but further back to the ambivalent structure of instinct itself.¹⁵ If this interpretation of Freud is correct, we discern a close echo of the Buddhist concept of taṇhā.

Man is basically restless according to the Buddha, as he is continually nourished by three types of craving—the craving for sense gratification (kāma taṇhā), the desire for selfish pursuits (bhava taṇhā) and the craving for annihilation (vibhava taṇhā). It is this craving which is considered as the origin of suffering (dukkha-samudaya). This craving always searching for temporary satisfaction, 'now here, now there', exists ever renewing itself. When boredom breaks in one direction, it turns for variegated and novel forms of satisfaction in some other direction. When obstruction to satisfaction of desires sets in, man becomes angry, aggressive and discontented. When society frowns on him, he retreats to his castles of pleasure in the imagination. Decay sets on both the subject experiencing and the object of pleasure, and that is the root of insecurity. Now all this need not make us pessimists or nihilists. There is a path leading to the extinction of suffering. This as will be discussed later, is what clearly separates philosophies like existentialism from Buddhism.

(2) *Pleasure and Pain*

As important as the concept of dukkha is the allied question of the Buddhist attitude to pleasure. Concepts like pessimism and nihilism have been used to describe the doctrine of dukkha. This is often due to an inability to understand the Buddhist attitude to pleasure. In accepting the reality of suffering Buddhism does not deny the presence of happiness. In the same way that evil and suffering is not reduced to a conjuror's rope trick (as being mere illusion), the Buddha makes a detailed analysis of the various types of pleasures and the pleasure principle in general.

15. M.W. P. de Silva, *An Analysis of Some Psychological Concepts in Early Buddhism and Freud*, Thesis, Hawaii, 1966, Unpublished.

There are three types of feelings—pleasant (*sukhā*), painful (*dukkhā*) and indifferent (*adukha-m-asukhā*). The term *vedanā* suggests some kind of hedonic tone, and it is pleasant if it is agreeable and painful if it is disagreeable. Pleasure is considered as a natural phenomenon and leaving aside the immaterial and the material planes of existence the world of the earth is referred to as a sense sphere. It is also said that the realm of human beings is abundantly pleasant, when compared with the hell or the animal world. In fact, it could be said that in a sense there are more pleasures than pain in the world of men. In the homily to *Sigāla* dealing with the virtues of the householder, enjoyment of desire as such is not condemned, what is condemned is the pleasure that is vicious, excessive and illegitimate (*Visama-lobha*).

However, in the majority of sermons given to the monks, sense pleasures are referred to as a source of danger. This is all the more emphasised for the one bent on the attainment of mind development. However, the Pāli scriptures refer to the bliss of renunciation and pleasures of a qualitatively different sort that can be enjoyed by the monk.¹⁶ But such states do not involve any attachment. The persistence of strong attachment (*upādāna*) is the fact that makes man blind to the little tragedies that come on his way, till an unbearable one puts him off the balance. Thus for the man who considers the life of complete renunciation difficult, the Buddha recommends the life of a righteous householder. It is said of such a one that he seeks wealth by lawful means, and uses wealth without greed and longing. He gets ease and pleasure for himself and others and does meritorious deeds.¹⁷

(3) *Attitude to Death*

The phrase, 'Tragic Sense of Life', is the title of a book by the Spanish philosopher Unamuno.¹⁸ The meaning of death disturbs him immensely and his predicament could be summed up in his own words "This thought that I must die and the enigma of what will come after death is the very palpitation of my consciousness."¹⁹ For him the meaning of death and the riddle of life are aspects of the same problem. He says, "Why do I wish to know whence I come and whither I go, whence comes and whither goes everything that environs me, and what is the meaning of

16. *Anguttara Nikāya* I, 80.

17. *Ibid.* . . . V, 176.

18. Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, Dover, U.S.A., 1954.

19. *Ibid.* p. 40.

BUDDHISM AND THE TRAGIC SENSE OF LIFE

all: For I do not wish to die utterly...."²⁰ His own solution is to assert his hunger for immortality, in the most quixotic manner, by making a plea for passion over rationality. Meditation on the phenomenon of death is a basic theme in the philosophy of Heidegger and many other philosophers who are labelled as existentialists. Hook describes all this as a "fear of death and a craving for immortality", and by implication includes Buddhism also in the same category. Now what is the Buddhist attitude to death and the craving for immortality?

Hook favours the reflective attitude to death (as he calls it), as against the popular attitude or the one displayed by those in its last agonies. As far as I know, the popular attitude to death is that of avoiding talking about it. "To the average man death is by no means a pleasant subject for talk or discussion. It is something dismal and oppressive....it is only the shock of a bereavement under his own roof, the sudden and untimely death of a parent, wife or a child that will rouse him up....and suddenly awaken him to the hard facts of life",²¹ says a Buddhist making a general observation about man's attitude to death. As Heidegger has pointed out we can try to forget these situations by getting immersed in the "idle chatter" of every day existence. But to be roused from this inauthentic and anonymous existence the shock of encountering 'ultimate' situations become necessary.²² Hence Buddhism too is critical of the popular attitude to death.

However, this does not mean that the Buddhist attitude to death is morbid. It is not a morbid expression of death in its last agonies. The Buddhist does not preach any excessive pessimism or melancholia. What we are expected to do is to display an element of realism and face the hard facts of life instead of covering up the realities before us. In fact, in showing the way out of misery and ignorance Buddhism is optimistic.

Buddhism is critical of mourning and melancholia or weeping as reactions to the death of those dear to us. What is necessary is not to grieve and mourn but to understand its meaning as referred to by the Buddha on numerous occasions. The stories of Pañcāra and Kisāgotami depict in a very concrete way the Buddhist attitude to death. These lines from the Uruga Jātaka convey the same moral: "No friend's lament can touch the ashes of the dead: Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to go."

²⁰ Ibid. p. 33.

²¹ V. F. Gunaratne, *Buddhist Reflections on Death*, Wheel Publication, Kandy, Ceylon, 1966, P. I.
²² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Trans. Macquarrie and Robinson, New York, 1962.

I certainly agree that the existentialist often go beyond the Buddhist attitude. They do sometimes display elements of morbidity and nihilism. Not only is the Buddhist attitude different to this, but the Buddha offers a clear diagnosis of the meaning of death. The existentialist often dramatise the phenomenon of death and the nausea of existence but does not go beyond this. A Buddhist is expected to face the fact of death with equanimity and understanding. Liberation is not possible by mere agony and self-torture. Undoubtedly one should face the fact of death, reflect on its meaning and develop an insight regarding its meaning. In fact, recollection on the fact of death (*maranānussati*) is a form of meditation practised by the monk. Its a corrective for people in whom greed and attachment dominate their personality (*rāga carita*). Those in whom anger and hatred dominate (*dōsa carita*) are advised not to practise this initially. They are advised to practise thoughts on loving kindness and compassion. This illustrates the fact that Buddhism is in a sense a therapeutic system based on the psychology of man. This fact is also expressed in its attitude to death. In short, all violent attempts to deal with the problem of human suffering like self-torture, asceticism, suicide and even the quixotic vitalism of Unamuno are misguided. They lack insight and are subject to the delusion of the ego in a subtle form.

Thus the Buddhist attitude regarding anguish (*dukkha*) offers a striking contrast to that of the Jains who practised the way of self mortification. The deliberate attempt to live through painful experiences and the technique of purging and burning up the effects of karma is condemned by the Buddha. While such violent attempts to deal with the problem of human suffering issue forth from the craving for self-annihilation, Unamuno's lament for immortality emerges on the craving for self-preservation. Anguish cannot be mastered by anguish. Anguish has to be mastered by equanimity.²³

(4) *Immortality and Annihilation*

Hook claims that all this preoccupation with the phenomenon of death is really a manifestation of the craving for immortality. In fact, there are certain misguided critics who interpret the Buddhist ideal of *nibbāna* as a craving for immortality. Some others consider it as a doctrine of annihilation. This misunderstanding can be avoided if we pay heed to the concepts of *bhava taṇhā* (craving for self-preservation and immortality), and *vibhava taṇhā* (craving for annihilation), and how these differ from the concept of *nibbāna*.

23. *Majjhima Nikāya III*, Devadaha Sutta.

BUDDHISM AND THE TRAGIC SENSE OF LIFE

Bhava tanhā arises with a false conception of personality, based on the dogma of personal immortality (sassata diṭṭhi). This is the belief in an ego entity existing independently of those physical and mental processes that constitute life. This entity is assumed to exist as a permanent, ever existing thing continuing after death. Vibhava tanhā emerges on the view that the physical and the mental processes which are identified with the ego will be annihilated at death (uccheda diṭṭhi). Though on a superficial examination these two attitudes appear diametrically opposed, against the larger background of the law of dependent origination, they are considered merely as contrasting attitudes of a being bound to craving. If we compare both these concepts with nibbāna, the concept of nibbāna stands in opposition to both bhava tanhā and vibhava tanhā. The Buddha says that people usually lean on this duality of existence and non-existence, and this attitude is projected on to the ideal of nibbāna. Some consider nibbāna as pure being, pure consciousness and pure self, others give it a nihilistic interpretation.

The Buddhist should not fall into the net of immortality doctrines and thus be critical of Unamuno's approach. Those who are subject to the craving for immortality will fail to realise the truths of anicca, anattā and dukkha. The Buddhist should be equally critical of annihilationism. In fact, the charge of being an annihilationist was made against the Buddha.²⁴ The Buddha replied that if he preaches any annihilation, it is the annihilation of kilesas (defilements). Magandiya refers to the Buddha as a destroyer of growth (bhūnahu). But what the Buddha taught was not destruction but the control of the sense organs, the suppression of desire and the development of wisdom. In this context nibbāna is compared to the restoration of health and suffering to the presence of a basic disease in human beings. Thus the nihilistic interpretation of Buddhism is rejected by the Buddha. The philosophy of dukkha is not fed by a fear of death and a craving for immortality. Buddhism is critical of immortality doctrines and calls man to dispel morbid fears of death. What is necessary is to develop an insight into the nature of human suffering.

If people think that death can give them "some assurance that no one will last for ever",²⁵ as Hook suggests, they are under the spell of the dogma of annihilationism. The Buddhist will also remind Unamuno

²⁴ Ibid. . . . I, 140.
²⁵ P.T.S.L., p. 12.

in his own words that it certainly is "a tragic fate without a doubt, to have to base the affirmation of immortality upon the insecure and slippery foundation of the desire for immortality".²⁶

(5) *Existentialism and Buddhism*

Conze, examining the true and false parallels between Buddhism and European philosophy, makes an interesting point regarding existentialism.²⁷ Though it is not possible to agree with all the observations on comparative philosophy made in this article, his comparative examination of Buddhism and existentialism (though short), sheds some light on this much misunderstood problem. In his analysis of false parallels he confines himself to three kinds. (i) Some like Kant, are not parallels but tangential. (ii) Those like Hume are merely deceptive. (iii) Those like Bergson and existentialists are preliminary. Limiting our analysis to what he says on existentialism, what does he mean by saying that the existentialist resemble Buddhism merely at the preliminary level? "In terms of the Four Truths the existentialists have only the first, which teaches that everything is ill. Of the second, which assigns the origin of ill to craving, they have only a very imperfect grasp. As for the third and the fourth, they are quite unheard of."²⁸ Conze observes that the existentialists have not found a way out of their world weariness. On the other hand the Buddhist is "cheered by the hope of ultimate release and lightened by multifarious meditational experiences which ease the burden of life. Denied inspiration from the spiritual world the existentialists are apt to seek it from authoritarian social groups . . ."²⁹

Though the Buddhist concept of dukkha is wider than the existentialist concept of suffering, the existentialist call "back to authentic existence" is certainly rooted in the sense of tragedy that surrounds the day to day existence of man. To cite the view of Heidegger, the only way to achieve authentic existence, "is to treat one's life as a progress towards death, the only event, as Heidegger thinks, in which we are genuinely each of us alone".³⁰ However, the Buddhist analysis goes beyond this in not merely making us aware of the tragedies that surround man, but also making a diagnosis of them and suggesting a remedy. This is why

26. Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, p. 47.

27. Edward Conze, *Spurious Parallels to Buddhist Philosophy*, Philosophy East and West, 1968 p. 112.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

30. Mary Warnock, *Existentialist Ethics*, Macmillan, London, 1967, p. 14.

BUDDHISM AND THE TRAGIC SENSE OF LIFE

Conze's analysis is far more satisfactory than that of Hook. Hook does not make any attempt to see the finer shades of difference among the Buddhists, philosophers with existentialist leanings like Tolstoy and others like Sartre and Heidegger.

Hook says that the agony over death "is one of the unloveliest features of the intellectual life of our philosophic times—and certainly unworthy of any philosophy which conceives itself as a quest for wisdom".³¹ Certainly those who make a quest for wisdom should not be agonised by the thoughts of death. But yet one should come to terms with the factor of death, understand it as a phenomenon, and give an explanation as to why some people are agonised by it. This is what the Buddha has attempted. Today not merely the existentialists, but some analytic philosophers have evinced an interest in the problem—what is the meaning of death and what is the meaning of life?³² Does the inevitability of death make a meaningful life impossible? To some it appears as a paradox; death cannot be relevant, yet it cannot be irrelevant either. It is true that some people ignore it and that some are obsessed by it, but one's attitude to death also reflects one's attitude to life.

The Buddha does not ignore the fact of death nor is he obsessed by it. Yet it cannot be said that he is merely offering a way of adjusting to this factor, though the practical psychology of Buddhism may thus be actually used by people. The Buddha offers an analysis, a diagnosis and a comprehensive vision of the riddle of life and death. Thus his doctrine goes much beyond existentialism. To follow the doctrine of the Buddha is not merely to be attracted by a mood or merely to see the world from a new perspective,³³ it is to see things as they are (*yathabhūtaṃ pajānāti*).

(6) *Moral Perplexity*

There is another aspect to man's unhappiness. This is due to the factors of intellectual puzzlement and moral perplexity. To be subject to this a person must be at least partially sensitive to the presence of suffering in the world and that makes him raise the question—"Whence do I come and whither do I go." Gotama's own experiment with the severe and unbearable asceticism of the times is a fine demonstration of the heartburning and suffering it can cause. According to the Buddha such perplexity and

31. P.T.S.L., p. 12.

32. Ilham Dilman, Professor Hepburn on Meaning in Life, 1965, Vol. 3, No. 2.

33. Mary Warnock, *Existentialist Ethics*, p. 57.

doubt (kankha) can be overcome. It is karmically unwholesome, paralyzes thinking and hinders the inner development of man. Hook takes the factor of moral conflict as the basis of the tragic view. While the Buddha does not limit the basis of human suffering to moral perplexity alone, he has diagnosed the nature of moral perplexity as well as intellectual puzzlement. In fact they come under wrong views (diṭṭhi) regarding the nature and destiny of man and lie within the causal setting that conditions human suffering.

The corrective to this is right view (sammā diṭṭhi). This is described as the understanding of the four noble truths. There are many false theories that have misled people. The most powerful are the two forms of ego-illusion, eternity and annihilation doctrines. In the moral realm there are various theories of determinism and indeterminism criticised by the Buddha. Moral perplexity can be eliminated by understanding the laws that govern the destiny of the individual (bhava), law of moral retribution (kamma) and the law of dependent origination (paṭicca-samuppāda).

Regarding the problem of moral conflicts as presented by Hook, there are number of objections that can be made. Firstly Hook exaggerates the dominance of the dilemmatic situation. He blames the existentialist for mourning over the phenomenon of death but draws his paradigm of the moral problem from Sophoclean tragedy. In this he is embracing another existentialist theme—the emphasis on extreme situations for the examination of moral values. This is not to deny the fact that we do face problematic issues as moral beings, but that hypothetical examples cited in text books are not so common as some think them to be.

Secondly there are other types of moral situations which are equally important. The man who knows what he ought to do but fails in doing the right thing. The man who is suddenly taken unawares and gives in to temptation. The man who pretends that he has done the correct thing when he is merely deceiving himself. Moral weakness, temptation, self-deception and many such factors are equally important.³⁴ The Buddha was not merely interested in the moral dilemmas of exceptional people under extraordinary conditions. He also probed into the moral debility of the common run of humanity. This point has been well described by a recent writer on ethics—"What parades heroically as a conflict

34. E. J. Lemmon, *Moral Dilemmas*, Philosophical Review, Vol. 71, 1962, 139—58.

BUDDHISM AND THE TRAGIC SENSE OF LIFE

is often a clash of interest in which the voice of ethical imperatives is clear but unpleasant, or it is a command imperfectly understood... Their seeming importance is doubtless related to our fascination by tragedy, which features ethical conflicts to a degree unusual in life."³⁵

Thirdly ethics is not the ultimate realm in which the individual moves. Sila (morality), samādhi (meditation) and Paññā (wisdom) together form a wide arena of individual action. Hence the Buddhist ethics should not be divorced from this context.

It is neither necessary nor possible to outline the Buddhist theory of ethics here. But its basis can be shortly summarised. The attainment of the state of the perfected one (arahat) is the summum bonum of Buddhist ethics. This is good in itself, and whatever is used to bring about this end, as a means is a right action. A right action is described as one which promotes ones own welfare as that of others. The Buddhist ethics is firmly rooted on an analysis of the psychology of human motivation and thus is free from the problems that beset purely formalistic theories of ethics. Buddhism accepts the fact that moral responsibility cannot be evaded. Man has free will and only volitional acts (sancetanā) come within the purview of ethical evaluation. These volitional acts have to be analysed against the background of the motivational roots (mūla). Early Buddhist psychology traces the springs of human motivation to six roots—rāga (craving), dosa (hatred), and moha (delusion) are described as immoral roots. Arāga (charity), adosa (love) and amoha (knowledge) are moral roots. While the Buddha has requested man to refrain from doing actions that spring from the immoral roots he also admonishes man to do positively good actions that spring from the moral roots. There are three avenues of action; bodily, vocal and mental. Actions that issue through these avenues are conditioned by dispositions. These dispositions function at various levels. Sometimes we are vaguely conscious of our actions, sometimes our desires spring from certain dormant traits (anusayas) of which we are not aware. Thus a process of vigorous self-analysis is necessary. These take us to other dimensions of action like concentration and meditation (samādhi) and knowledge (paññā).

All this provides the Buddhist with a very comprehensive frame of reference for examining broad problems of morality and also specific dilemmas. The philosophical basis of ethics, the interpretation of the

35. Henry Margengau,—*Ethics and Language* Von Nostrand, U.S.A., p. 267.

ethical code, the facts of the contextual situation and above all a genuine desire to do the correct thing as it sincerely appears to the individual; all these come into play in a given moral situation. The factor of motive or intention (*cetanā*) plays a very significant part.

An attempt to examine moral dilemmas in the light of the Buddhist doctrine has been attempted by Francis Story, in a very preliminary way.³⁶ As he suggests a rational examination of these are possible. But there is no over emphasis of this kind of dilemma in Buddhism. How is it that men commit evil acts (*akusala*) of body, speech and mind? Can self-knowledge and a deeper understanding of man bring about better conditions for the elimination of human suffering? The basis of Buddhist ethics is therapeutic. Why do men get into problematic situations, is a more important question than how can we resolve this particular dilemma. At least the latter question has to be analysed in the light of the former. If Hook uses the term 'melioristic' to describe his version of pragmatism,³⁷ the therapeutic basis of Buddhist ethics should certainly attract his attention.³⁸

(7) *Love and Hatred*

The Buddhist ideal of compassion has been misunderstood by Hook. He says, "The Buddhist saint or any other who out of respect for the right to life of man or beast refuses even to use force, or to kill, even when this is the only method, as it sometimes is, that will save the multitude from suffering and death, makes himself responsible for the greater evil, all the more so because he claims to be acting out of compassion." As was mentioned earlier Hook cites three approaches to life and of these considers the way of love as ambiguous and incomplete. "It is incomplete because if love is more than a feeling of diffused sympathy but is expressed in action no *man* can love every one or identify himself with every interest".⁴⁰ It is ambiguous as "There are various kinds of love and the actions to which they lead may be incompatible."⁴¹

The question arises whether the three approaches to tragic conflicts cited by Hook are exhaustive. But without raising this question, I will limit the discussion to a clarification of the Buddhist concept of

36. Francis Story, *Dialogues of the Dhamma*, Wheel Publication, Kandy, Ceylon, 1965.

37. P.T.S.L., p. 23.

38. M.W.P. de Silva, *A Study of Motivational Theory* . . 1967, ch. iv.

39. P.T.S.L., p. 18.

40. *Ibid*, p. 19.

41. *Ibid*, p. 19.

BUDDHISM AND THE TRAGIC SENSE OF LIFE

compassion. The Buddhist scriptures mention four sublime states of mind (brahma vihāra). They are mettā (compassionate love), karunā (sympathy towards those in distress), muditā (ability to rejoice with those who are justly happy), and upekkhā (impartiality to all). The English word love is used in a very loose sense, but in Pāli it is easier to make finer distinctions with words used in the Buddhist scriptures. The Buddha is careful to differentiate mettā from any kind of sensuous love (kāma, rāga, methuna). It has also to be distinguished from feelings of affection and attachment (pema, sineha).

Compassionate love is not a diffused feeling, unexpressed in action Hook maintains. The very spread of Buddhism was achieved without using any military force, and its finest expression was found in the kingdom of Asoka, who remarked, "All men are my children". The doctrine of the Buddha is pervaded by this message of compassionate love. "Hatred never ceases by hatred, through loving kindness it comes to an end"⁴²—that is the message of Buddhism. The doctrine of compassion is not an incomplete doctrine, neither is it ambiguous. If as Hook says there are "various kinds of love", they have to be psychologically distinguished, linguistically clarified, without blaming the doctrine of compassion for it. In fact the *Ālovāda sutta* is a good instance where some of these basic human relationships are analysed. The relationship between parents and children, teachers and students, husband and wife, friend and friend, master and servant, layman and recluse. To cite the duties of the parents for instance, the parents express their love for the children in five ways; they restrain them from vice, exhort them to virtue, train them to a profession, attract a suitable marriage and hand over the inheritance. In this way all the other relations based on the diverse emotions of love, devotion, respect and regard are analysed.⁴³ This shows that the Buddhist need not be scared of the linguistic bogey that is love.

It is not possible here to analyse in detail the Buddhist attitude to war,⁴⁴ punishment,⁴⁵ killing, etc. They have been analysed in detail by some scholars. A Buddhist is not expected to use force and violence whatever circumstances are. The Buddha's actual intervention during the war between Koliyas and Sakyas shows in a practical way how the doctrine of compassion works. There are many contexts where the Buddha has

Dhamma Pada, 5.

Dīgha Nikāya, Sutta 31.

K. N. Jayatilleke, *Buddhism and Peace*, Wheel Publication, Kandy, Ceylon, 1962.

Bandula Jayawardena, *Crime and Nikāya Literature*, The Buddhist, Vols. XXXVIII, 1967.

demonstrated the futility of war as a method of settling disputes. All this has to be seen against the wider background of the right way of life. For instance one should not take to professions that prosper on the destruction of life, like the sale of arms, human beings, flesh and poisonous drugs. Thus the request not to kill does not remain at a negative level.⁴⁶

The doctrine of compassionate love is a message relevant to our time. Though Hook does not see the value of this doctrine, others like Erich Fromm say that it is the problem of love that should have an answer to the problem of human existence.⁴⁷ He says that this can only be done by overcoming man's narcissism. The Buddhist scriptures make a detailed analysis of the roots of egoism which fortifies the doctrine of compassion. This takes us beyond compassionate love to other ideals like self-knowledge and truth. Knowledge about the truths regarding the nature of man and the universe is necessary, to establish the doctrine of compassion on a solid footing.

(8) *The Tragic*

A detailed analysis of the linguistic issues involved in the usage of the word 'tragic' is not necessary for our purpose, here. But since the weight of Hook's argument rests on his preference for a certain definition of the tragic, it is pertinent to make some brief remarks, about it. The concept of dukkha has an experiential basis and is interpreted in the light of factual data. The concept of the tragic, is primarily a concept interpreted in the light of norms that guide dramatic theory. I am not sure that Hook has blatantly confused two realms of discourse, but rather he should have been more cautious in transferring a word already containing the overtones of dramatic theory to the field of philosophical judgment. There are logicians who draw inspiration from mathematics and there are philosophers who draw their examples from jurisprudence. The relationship between literature and philosophy is more controversial, though altogether antagonistic. But this makes it very necessary that philosophers of religion should be extra careful when they draw their analogies from literature.

Secondly there are many theories of drama about tragedy, but there are no apriori grounds in favour of one theory. Hook's preference for Sophoclean tragedy is not any better than others. The concept

46. *Majjhima Nikaya I*, 129.

47. Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, Unwin Books, London, 1962.

48. See, T.R. Henn. *The Harvest of Tragedy*, U.K., 1956.

BUDDHISM AND THE TRAGIC SENSE OF LIFE

'tragic' in drama is a concept that has a history. The history of some concepts are monotonous enough to be ignored. But the history of the concept of the tragic in drama merely emphasizes the variety of tragic themes. Also the word tragic has many uses in ordinary language, and the matter of definition anyhow remains a problem. Hook himself says that the "primary locus of the tragic situation is not in a play but in life, in law, and in history".⁴⁹ Certainly tragedy in drama loses meaning if it does not bear on life. But the nature of the tragic in life situations is as varied as the variety of dramatic theories about the 'tragic'. Thus it is difficult to limit all tragedy to moral dilemmas. For instance the phrase, "It is tragic to be robbed off in the brilliance of life", refers to the fact that the vigour and vitality of youth suddenly falls a prey to the hand of death. There are many such contexts, where a tragic moral dilemma does not appear, and yet there is a legitimate use of the word 'tragic'.

The concept of human suffering is a more comprehensive, complex and richer concept than the notion of tragedy offered by Hook. The doctrine of the Buddha in this light is certainly a diagnosis and an answer to the perils of human tragedy.

M. W. PADMASIRI DE SILVA

⁴⁹. P.T.S.L., p. 17.