

## THE CRITIQUE OF PLEASURE IN SOREN KIERKEGAARD AND EARLY BUDDHISM

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Soren Kierkegaard's thesis concerning the "three stages of life" is considered by many scholars as his most influential doctrine. Kierkegaard worked out three levels or spheres of existence—aesthetic, ethical and religious. The Kierkegaardian critique of pleasure has to be elaborated by focussing our attention on the disjunction between the ethical and the aesthetic. Also relevant reference to the religious stage has to be made where it sheds light on the critique of pleasure.

The conflict between the aesthetic and the ethical stages is clearly presented in the two-volume work, *Either/Or*. This work has been described as the "summons to decide between alternate philosophies of life."<sup>1</sup> The life view of a young romanticist, presenting the aesthetic stage is found in volume I and that of a mature ethical idealist, depicting the ethical stage is found in volume II. The philosophy of the stages of life is discussed in many of his works: of these, *Stages on Life's Way* is the most important. This work examines the religious stage of life, in addition to the presentation of the aesthetic and the ethical stages.

In the first part of this paper an attempt will be made to present Kierkegaard's doctrine of the stages as basically related to the critique of pleasure. This doctrine will be compared to certain parallel concepts in Early Buddhism in the second part of this paper. The attachment to sensual pleasures (*kāmasukhallikā-nuyoga*) can be compared to the aesthetic life view, the morality (*sīla*) of the householder (*gahapati*) to the ethical stage and the holy life of the monk (*brahmacariya*) to the religious stage. The concept of the holy life in Buddhism however, offers certain distinctive differences in comparison with Kierkegaard's religious stage. In spite of certain broad similarities, such divergencies arise due to the theistic framework of Kierkegaard's philosophy of religion.

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<sup>1</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Volume I, trans. D. F. Swenson, and L. M. Swenson, Anchor Books, (N. York, 1959), (herein after abbreviated as *E/O I*) p. v.

## Aesthetic Stage

"Every man, however lowly his talents are, however subordinate his position in life, naturally feels the need of forming a life view, a conception of life's significance and its purpose. The man who lives aesthetically does that too, and the universal expression which has been heard from age to age and in all stages is this: one must enjoy life."<sup>1</sup> The term 'enjoy', here, really refers to sensuous pleasures, for the primacy of pleasure is the most distinctive feature of the aesthetic stage. Words like "hedonism" and "romanticism" have been used by critics to describe this stage of life summarily.

Robert Bretall remarks that Kierkegaard uses the word aesthetic in its etymological sense of feeling.<sup>2</sup> Thus the aesthetic way of life is the life of feeling and immediacy. The aesthete is one who constantly lives in the moment.<sup>3</sup> Thus, he cannot conceive of a higher plane of existence which goes beyond this close knit world of immediacy. However, he guards this world of pleasure from boredom, by searching for variety. Regarding the aesthete's passion for variety, Kierkegaard's own words are the best: "See him in his season of pleasure: did he not crave for one pleasure after another, variety his watchword? Is variety, then the willing of one thing that abides the same? Nay, rather it is the willing of something that must never be the same. But that is just to will the manifold, and a man with such a will is not double-minded but at all variance with himself, for he wills one thing and immediately after the opposite, because oneness of pleasure is disappointment and illusion, and it is the variety of pleasure that he wills. Change was what he was crying out for when pleasure pandered to him, change, change!"<sup>4</sup>

Though the aesthete may get engrossed in commonplace and ordinary pleasures, it is the enigmatic, the surprising and the secretive kind of pleasure that can keep him fully absorbed. The aesthete has to drown the dullness and boredom that overtakes him in the search for pleasure. This sense of dullness has to be kept away by the category of the "interesting". The aesthete

<sup>1</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Volume II, trans. Walter Lowrie, Anchor Books, (N.York, 1959), (Herein after abbreviated as *E/O II*) p. 184.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Bretall, ed., *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, (London, 1947), p. xxii.

<sup>3</sup> *E/O II*, p. 183.

<sup>4</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Purify Your Hearts*, trans. A. L. Aldworth & W. S. Ferris, (London, 1937) pp. 43-4.

experiments with varying possibilities of the erotic, but yet does not make any commitment. That is why he renounces the bond of marriage. Searching for immediacy, variety, and novelty, he avoids any kind of stability or resting place. A passage from Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* describes the aesthete well — "Your life is wholly given to preliminary runs . . . you have a predilection for the first sensation of falling in love. You know how to submerge yourself in a dreamy and glowing clairvoyance of love. You love the accidental . . ." <sup>1</sup>

"With regard to marriage you have always behaved merely as an observer . . . . But honestly speaking, your psychological interest lacks seriousness and is rather a hypochondriac curiosity." <sup>2</sup>

The life of the senses can take diverse forms of refinement; yet the aesthetic life ultimately ends in despair. Vivid descriptions of the moods of sensuality are found in many of the works of Kierkegaard.

"The Banquet" in *Stages on Life's Way*, (sometimes, compared to Plato's *Symposium*) presents a vivid description of the sensualist. The motto for the occasion is "In Vino Veritas", which implies that no truth can be uttered except under the influence of wine. One of the characters refers to the "festive, seductive strains", that tore him from "the cloistered seclusion of tranquil youth." <sup>3</sup> The ideal banquet designed to incite and awaken the senses should have an exuberant abundance of wine, the fragrance of perfumes (which excites the senses most), a coolness in the atmosphere that voluptuously kindles desire, bright illumination, chamber music, strong and subdued, etc. <sup>4</sup>

Whatever subtle techniques of refinement are used, the aesthete who does not transcend the level of pure sensuality and hedonism ends up in despair. In fact, Kierkegaard's own comment on the five characters in the banquet scene, is that all of them "are consistent to the point of despair." <sup>5</sup> That is the final ground on which all of them flounder. The aesthete, however, fearing that his pleasures will turn dull and wearisome, advocates

<sup>1</sup> *E/O* II p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Stages On Life's Way*, trans. Walter Lowrie, (Princeton, 1947) p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans., D. F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie, (Princeton, 1944) p. 264.

what he calls "the rotation method." The panacea for boredom is to diversify the pleasures that one seeks; whenever pleasures show signs of waning one should change the object of pleasure. "My method does not consist in change of field, but resembles the rotation method in changing the crop and the method of cultivation . . ." <sup>1</sup> Thus the pleasure seeker is advised to do away with permanent agreements and contracts, like binding oneself in marriage. Even permanent friendships and stable jobs are discouraged.

### **Some Typical Moods of the Aesthetic Life**

Kierkegaard explores the aesthetic life with great ingenuity. Perhaps the emotional involvement with Regina Olsen stirred his imagination, and it is not surprising that Kierkegaard depicted the aesthetic life with a great deal of passion. Incidentally Kierkegaard does not write a neat academic treatise in the manner of a true philosopher. Rather he uses a semi-philosophical literary style. <sup>2</sup> "Instead of lecturing about romanticism and ethical idealism . . . he impersonates the different individuals who are passionately committed to these divergent outlooks on life." <sup>3</sup> Thus we get in his works, some remarkable life-like, phenomenological presentations of aesthetic moods. James Collins remarks, ". . . among all the moods cultivated by the Romantics, three seemed to Kierkegaard to voice the major chords of aesthetic sensibility: sensual immediacy, doubt and despair" <sup>4</sup>. These moods Kierkegaard associated with three figures - Don Juan, Faust and Ahasuerus, the wandering Jew. Collins refers to the fact that these figures had fascinated the imagination both of the common people and of the great artists and confirms Kierkegaard's thesis that "the aesthetic approach makes a universal appeal to men of different interests and talents."

The name of Don Juan represents the very personification of sensuality. "The Middle Ages had much to say about a mountain not found on any map, which is called the mountain of Venus. There the sensuous has its own home, there it has its own wild pleasures, for it is a kingdom, a state. In this kingdom language has no place, nor sober-minded thought, nor the toilsome business

<sup>1</sup> *E/O* I, p. 288.

<sup>2</sup> This is connected with Kierkegaard's concept of Indirect Communication which upholds the use of literary media for communicating philosophical ideas.

<sup>3</sup> *E/O* I, p. v.

<sup>4</sup> James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard*, (U.S.A., 1953) p. 50.

of reflection. There sound only the voice of elemental passion, the play of appetites, the wild shouts of intoxication; it exists solely for pleasure in tumult. The first born of this kingdom is Don Juan."<sup>1</sup>

Don Juan is the voice of elemental passion without any element of reflection. Goethe's Faust on the other hand brings in an element of the intellectual and the reflective, into the enjoyment of pleasure. Thus Don Juan and Faust are two aspects of the enjoyment of sensuous pleasure. "Mozart's Don Giovanni is depicted as the classical representative of the sensual or hedonistic view of life, and Goethe's Faust expresses the aesthetical personality of abstract intellectualisms."<sup>2</sup> Both are incapable of commitment and evade responsibility. They lack the ethical pathos of married life. However there is an element of "doubt" (which is of course purely intellectual) that enters into the Faustian type of aesthete. "For an open acknowledgement of despair, without any possibility of relief, Kierkegaard evokes another legendary figure, the wandering Jew."<sup>3</sup> In the words of Collins, "In the Wandering Jew, Kierkegaard saw the truest symbol of his age and the outcome of a closed aesthetic existence. Beneath the tranquillity and exaltation of the erotic and beneath the steady intensity of doubt, he found silent despair as the last word of aesthetic existence."<sup>4</sup> The aesthetic moods of doubt and despair will be referred to again, in the discussion below.

### Critique of the Aesthetic Philosophy of Life.

*Either/Or* volume II presents a sustained critique of the aesthetic view of life. While the supposed writer of volume I is a young romanticist, the writer of the second is a more mature personality referred to as Judge William. The critique of the aesthetic philosophy is made from the standpoint of the ethical stage.

The aesthetic view of life is not the type of life-ideal that one could turn into a consistent philosophy of life. It collapses and ends in boredom, melancholy and despair. The life of pleasure breaks down, not merely because pleasures are followed by pain,

<sup>1</sup> *E/O* I, p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> F. N. Magill, ed., *Masterpieces of World Philosophy*, Allen & Unwin, (London, 1963) p. 613.

<sup>3</sup> James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard*, (U.S.A., 1953) p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

but because of something more deep, more insidious — namely, tedium, emptiness and meaninglessness. “How terrible tedium is — terribly, tedious. . . . I lie stretched out, inactive, the only thing I see is emptiness, the only thing I move about in is emptiness. I do not even suffer pain. . . . Even pain has lost its refreshment for me.”<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard was basically pointing to the “tremendous dissonance” of the aesthetic life and its “total break with reality.”<sup>2</sup> It is this illuminating insight into the nature of aesthetic life, that brings the Kierkegaardian analysis close to the Buddhist philosophy of Dukkha.

The aesthete is ultimately drawn into the frightful state of boredom. By planning means of diversion to avoid boredom, he runs into the impending ruin with greater force. The history of boredom can be traced to the very beginning of the world. “The gods were bored, and so they created man. Adam was bored because he was alone, and so Eve was created. Thus boredom entered the world. . . .”<sup>3</sup> “One tires of living in the country, and moves into the city; one tires of one’s native land, and travels abroad; one is tired of Europe and goes to America and so on. . . . One tires of porcelain dishes and eats on silver; one tires of silver and turns to gold; one burns half of Rome to get an idea of the burning of Rome.”<sup>4</sup> The burning of Rome was what Nero did and that is a self-defeating method.

It could be said that there are two forms of boredom. In one form a person’s mood is directed to a specific object. He can be bored with a talk, a book, a play etc. This is a very superficial kind of boredom. One can also be bored not with any specific object, but with oneself. This is a more significant kind of boredom. It is referred to as a kind of nameless emptiness. More specifically, it is the sort of feeling a person has when he loses any sense of meaning in his life.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *E/O I*, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> R. Thomte, *Kierkegaard’s Philosophy of Religion*, (Princeton, 1948) p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> *E/O I*, p. 282.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.

<sup>5</sup> Erich Fromm cites an interesting category of patients who come with neurotic ailments—A type of patients who come to the psychiatrist not to get any specific symptom cured, but due to a general inability to lead a meaningful life. It seems that the purely philosophical reflections of Kierkegaard may be taken out of its outer garb of obscurity by giving it some such empirical delineation. See, Erich Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, Yale University Press, (New Haven, 1961) p. 72.

A similar nameless emptiness characterises the state of melancholy. There is something inexplicable and enigmatic in the melancholy individual. "If a melancholy man is asked what grounds he has for it, what is that weighs upon him, he will reply, 'I know not I cannot explain'."<sup>1</sup> Herein lies the infinity of melancholy.

Nero sought pleasures to drown his melancholy. He has gone through every conceivable pleasure. His life, depraved as it may be, has matured his soul; at least he experiences melancholy. But a metamorphosis is not possible, as a higher level of existence is necessary for that. However, if that is to come about, "an instant will arrive when the splendour of the throne, his might and power, will pale, and for this he has not the courage."<sup>2</sup> "Then he grasps after pleasure; all the world's cleverness must devise for him new pleasures, for only in the instant of pleasure does he find repose, and when that is past he gasps with faintness."<sup>3</sup> The spirit within him desires a metamorphosis, but he is constantly disappointed. He can only offer the satiety of pleasure. "Then the spirit with him gathers like a dark cloud, its wrath broods over his soul, and it becomes an anguishing dread which ceases not even in the moment of pleasure."<sup>4</sup> People use other expedients, more innocent than those used by Nero, to escape this condition. They induce forgetfulness by getting engrossed in work and entertainment.

The final dissonance of the aesthetic life breaks in through the threat of despair. It appears that every aesthetic life view is despair, and everyone who lives aesthetically is in despair, whether he knows it or not. However, this is the last aesthetic life view, but "This last view is despair itself"<sup>5</sup>. To a certain degree it is conscious of its own nullity; and when one knows that one is in despair a higher level of existence is possible.

If an artist or a painter, for example becomes blind, he will despair over this fact, this particular fact, and if his sight were restored to him, his despair would disappear. But this despair is not over any particular thing. If it is desirable to present this

<sup>1</sup> *E/O* II, p. 193.

<sup>2</sup> *E/O* II, p. 190.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *E/O* II, p. 198.

in a more positive form, it can be described as the despair of "losing one's own self." Kierkegaard says that many people do not make an attempt to be conscious of this predicament. They seek escape routes, consciously or otherwise. "By seeing the multitude of men about it, by getting engaged in all sorts of worldly affairs, by becoming wise about how things go in this world, such a man forgets himself . . ." <sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard says that a man will always notice something like the loss of an arm, a leg or five dollars. Yet, "The greatest danger, that of losing one's own self, may pass off as quietly as if it were nothing." <sup>2</sup>

"Despair is the most intensive expression of the threat of meaninglessness and emptiness; it constitutes the culmination of the aesthetic mode of existence." <sup>3</sup> At the start, however, the aesthete is too intellectual to realise this state, and it becomes a "despair in thought." <sup>4</sup> This purely intellectual mood is really "doubt", and not "despair", as it should be. Doubt (*Tvivl*) is a despair of thought, based on intellectual reflection. Despair (*Fortvivlelse*) on the other hand involves the whole personality.

A person can truly face the state of despair. For this he must turn away from external distractions, turn inwards and become deeply introspective. Thus he discovers the path towards the achievement of an authentic and integrated selfhood. That is how the dissonance and the discontinuity of the aesthetic life can be overcome. The individual should move from the vacillation and discontinuity of the aesthetic stage to the ethical stage, representing—choice, will, commitment, and freedom. The ethicist does not sow wild oats everywhere, but upholds the sanctity of marriage. For him, home is something sacred and family life is built upon a deep and heartfelt sense of community. "He who lives ethically has seen himself, knows himself, penetrates with his consciousness his whole concretion, does not allow indefinite thoughts to potter about within him, nor tempting possibilities to distract him with their jugglery." <sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie, (Princeton, 1951) p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> F. N. Magill, ed. *Masterpieces of World Philosophy*, Allen & Unwin, (London, 1963) p. 616.

<sup>4</sup> *E/O* II, p. 199.

<sup>5</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie, (Princeton, 1944) p. 263.



### The Ethical Stage

In *Either/Or* volume II, it is shown that marriage really combines the best aspects of the romantic with the ethical and the religious. Judge William says that he has a two-fold task—to show the aesthetic significance of marriage and to show how the aesthetic element in it may be held fast in spite of the manifold obstacles of actual life. “Thus marriage is the truest transfiguration of romantic love.”<sup>1</sup> While pure erotic love is based on the enigmatic, the secretive and the surprising, conjugal love stands for candour, openheartedness, revelation and understanding. While pure erotic love is described as restless and unstable, conjugal love is described in different terms. “It is faithful, constant, humble, patient, long-suffering, indulgent, sincere, contented, vigilant, willing, joyful.”<sup>2</sup> Judge William says that the aesthete is afraid of marriage as he is afraid of peace and quietness. He says, “for you, an agitated sea is the image of life, for me it is still deep waters. Often have I sat by a bit of purling water. It is always the same, the same soft melody, the same green plants on its floor, swaying beneath its quiet waves; the same little creatures running about at the bottom, a little fish which glides under the protection of the overhanging flowers spreading out. . . . How monotonous, and yet how rich in change! Such is the home life of marriage: quiet, modest, purling. . . .”<sup>3</sup>

After Judge William closes his examination of the aesthetic validity of marriage he goes on to review the ethical personality. Here it is shown that what was said about marriage and love applies to life in general. The ethical man binds himself to others in the community and takes upon himself his obligations in marriage, friendship and work. The ethicist believes that every man has a calling and has to perform his duties.<sup>4</sup> As far as each man's duty is concerned, what matters is “not a question of the multifariousness of duty but of its intensity. When with all his energy a person has felt the intensity of duty he is then ethically mature and in him duty will emerge of itself.”<sup>5</sup> In general when a man lives ethically his personality is centralized, not dispersed. “When a man lives aesthetically his mood is always eccentric

<sup>1</sup> *E/O* II, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 146–7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

because he has his center in the periphery. Personality has its center within itself, and he who has not his self is eccentric."<sup>1</sup>

### Religious Stage

As it is not necessary to work out the religious stage in detail, a summary of the relevant concepts pertaining to our discussion should suffice. In the words of a leading commentator of existentialism, William Barrett, "The real line of difference between the ethical and the religious Kierkegaard draws in his *Fear And Trembling*, and it has to do with the uniqueness of the individual, the single one, and with the calling of the religious man, who has to break with the ordinary moral code that his fellow citizens approve."<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard cites the case of Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac. This has its parallel in the giving up of Regina. This "teleological suspense of the ethical," marks a violation of the accepted ethical code, but yet a transcendence to the religious stage.

The emergence of a crisis situation challenges the established ethical order. Thus the religious man upholds a higher transcendental reality, which to Kierkegaard was the existence of God. Really the religious transfigures the ethical with a new group of existential categories—suffering, guilt, sin and faith. Kierkegaard also makes an interesting study of the emotions of fear and dread, doubt and despair. *The Concept of the Dread, Fear and Trembling and Sickness Unto Death*, form an interesting trilogy that gives some insight into the psychology of certain emotions related to the growth of a religious personality.

The concepts of sin and repentance and the notion of religious suffering cannot be accommodated within the ethical stage. "As soon as sin makes its appearance ethics comes to grief. . . ."<sup>3</sup> Suffering also plays a decisive role in the religious life, while it plays only an accidental role in the other stages. Kierkegaard sums up the position thus: "While aesthetic existence is essentially enjoyment, and ethical existence, essentially struggle and victory, religious existence is essentially suffering, and not as a transitional moment, but as persisting."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> William Barrett, *Irrational Man*, (London, 1961) p. 148.

<sup>3</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie, (Princeton, 1941) p. 152 note.

<sup>4</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie, (Princeton, 1944) p. 256.

## The Critique of Pleasure in Buddhism and in Kierkegaard

There are two basic attitudes to the enjoyment of pleasure in Early Buddhism. From one standpoint an attempt is made to describe the ills besetting the pursuit of pleasure in general. From another standpoint an attempt is made to make a distinction between pleasures obtained by correct means and wrong means, between pleasures obtained within limits and the excessive craving for it, between harmless pleasures and perverted lust (*visama lobha*)<sup>1</sup>. However, there is one thing common to both standpoints—there is no room for a life view which maintains the search for sensuous pleasure as the only ideal. The kind of ideal depicted vividly in Kierkegaard's "*Diary of the Seducer*", has been rejected by both Kierkegaard and Early Buddhism. This is the kind of view referred to by the Buddha as "*kāmasukhallikānyoga*" (the way of sensuality). This is referred to as a low, pagan practice and is compared with an equally unprofitable extreme, the way of self-mortification. The Buddha recommends the eightfold path as the middle way.

The first standpoint referred to is the sphere of the holy life of the monk (*brahmacariya*) and the second standpoint refers to the lay morality of the householder (*gahapati*). In Kierkegaard's critique of pleasure too, we get a similar duality of standpoints: the ethical and the religious levels of existence. After we review the Buddhist analysis of pleasure, a clarification of the two standpoints (mentioned above) will be made.

Human activity is continuously nourished by three types of craving: the craving for sensuous gratification (*kāma-taṇhā*), the craving for self-preservation (*bhava-taṇhā*) and the craving for self-annihilation (*vibhava-taṇhā*). Of these the natural proneness to seek pleasure and be repelled by pain is one of the most powerful bases of human motivation.<sup>2</sup>

Sensuality has a subjective and an objective aspect. The term *pañca kāmagaṇa* refers to the five types of pleasure objects

<sup>1</sup> *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, ed. R. Morris, London: Pali Text Society, 1885 (abbreviated as *A*), I, 160.

<sup>2</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya*, ed. V. Trenckner, London: Pali Text Society, 1948 reprint, (abbreviated as *M*), I, 341. Freud refers to this basic disposition as the Pleasure Principle. Kierkegaard considers the "agreeable/disagreeable", as the sensuous categories; *Sickness Unto Death*, p. 67.

obtained by way of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and the body; this is the objective aspect. Subjectively, *kāma-rāga* refers to desires and passions of a sensual nature.<sup>1</sup> The objects of pleasure are referred to as, “delightful, dear, passion-fraught and inciting to lust.”<sup>2</sup> When a person’s passions are roused, there emerges a kind of tenacity to hold on to these pleasures. This is the emergence of clinging (*upādāna*). Unless, there is this persistence of clinging, excitation of the sense organs is not sufficient, to rouse the individual to activity. The pursuit of sense pleasures are however, fed by deeper undercurrents. When clinging emerges, some latent tendencies (*anusayas*) have already been excited. Pleasant feelings (*vedanā*) induce an attachment to pleasant objects, as they arouse latent sensuous greed (*rāgānusaya*). Painful feelings on the other hand arouse latent anger and hatred (*paṭighānusaya*). The universality of this pleasure principle has been emphasised both in the works of Kierkegaard and early Buddhism.

Though people develop strong attachment to particular pleasure giving objects, they also seek variety and change. Thus man searches for variety, finding delight, “in this and that, here and there” (*tatra tatra abhinandini*).<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard too gives expression to man’s restless search for diversity, in what he calls the “rotation method.” Pleasures may be manifold and sweet (*kāmā citrā madhurā*),<sup>4</sup> yet they cause unpleasantness (*appassādā*), much suffering (*bahudukkhā*), and much turbulence (*bahūpāyāsā*).<sup>5</sup> The Buddha says that though pleasures bring temporary happiness, in the long run they cause misery and regret.

Why is it that the drive for sensuous pleasure turns out to be ultimately unsatisfactory? Kierkegaard finds “boredom” to be the main enemy of pleasure and “despair” as the final breaking point of the aesthetic life. This Kierkegaardian approach to the aesthetic life offers some remarkable similarities to the philosophy of Dukkha in Buddhism. However, the Buddha offers a more comprehensive examination, and a wide variety of arguments based on empirical situations, while Kierkegaard was somewhat averse to systematic analysis.

<sup>1</sup> A VI, 68.

<sup>2</sup> *Samyutta Nikāya*, ed. L. Feer, London: Pali Text Society, 1884-1904, (abbreviated as *S*) IV, 60.

<sup>3</sup> S V, 421.

<sup>4</sup> *Suttanipāta*, ed. D. Anderson and H. Smith, London: Pali Text Society, 1948, (abbreviated as *Sn*) 50.

<sup>5</sup> M I, 91.

The critique of pleasure in Buddhism is grounded on the philosophy of Dukkha. But the word "Dukkha" is hard to translate by one word; nor is it possible to give a simple definition of this concept. "There is no word in English covering the same ground as Dukkha does in Pali. Our modern words are too specialised, too limited, and usually too strong. . . . We are forced, therefore, in the translation to use half synonyms, no one of which is exact."<sup>1</sup> Thus the *P. T. S. Pali-English Dictionary*, admits the problems besetting the translation of the word Dukkha. There are a number of strands of meaning of this concept, and at least one significant aspect of it offers interesting similarities to the concept of "Anguish" found in contemporary existentialist literature. This resemblance has been discussed elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> and thus it is not necessary to examine this in detail. The word Dukkha has at least three broad usages—pain as a predominately physical sensation, sorrow as something mental, and a general philosophical sense as unsatisfactoriness. In the third sense Dukkha has been translated by many words, some of which are, words like, disharmony, anxiety, and unsatisfactoriness. This meaning becomes prominent when Dukkha is considered as a universal characteristic of all samsaric existence, along with impermanence (*anicca*) and egolessness (*anattā*).<sup>3</sup>

Thus while it is incorrect to equate Dukkha with the "Angst" of the existentialist, there are some aspects of its meaning that offer certain similarities. Also, Kierkegaard, being the first existentialist thinker, did not give a clear meaning of anxiety or dread. His *Concept of Dread* is presented through the framework of the theological problem of original sin. He also brings in a number of ideas under dread, and the reader is left with a bewildering mass of ideas under this single concept, without a unifying theme except the word dread.<sup>4</sup> That is why his *Sickness Unto Death*,

<sup>1</sup> T. W. Rhys Davids and W. Stede, ed., *P. T. S. Pali-English Dictionary*, (London, 1952) p. 159.

<sup>2</sup> M. W. Padmasiri de Silva, "Buddhism and the Tragic Sense of Life", *University of Ceylon Review*, (University of Ceylon) Vol. 25, forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> O. H. de A. Wijesekera, *The Three Signata*, Wheel Publication, (Ceylon, 1960).

<sup>4</sup> Here are some of the meanings associated with the word dread, in Kierkegaard's *Concept of the Dread*: There are possibilities of evil or temptational possibilities in us, that cause the emergence of dread; our eternal salvation or perdition is constantly at stake, and this implies the idea of appearing before God, which causes dread; everything in the province of existence is utterly

turns out to be a better rallying point for the theme of anxiety; despair is the key existential concept here. We have already referred to the theme of boredom, melancholy and despair in the works of Kierkegaard. It is this analysis that offers an interesting parallel to the Buddhist doctrine of Dukkha. The life of the aesthete turns out to be "empty and void of meaning", or "its meanings are incongruous or entirely distorted."<sup>1</sup> Modern commentators of existentialism, too, regard this "threat of meaninglessness" as the basic component of existential anxiety.<sup>2</sup> This theme has been dramatically presented by Kierkegaard in the "Diapsalmata."<sup>3</sup> "My life is absolutely meaningless. When I consider the different periods into which it falls, it seems like the word *Schnur* in the dictionary, which means in the first place a string, in the second, a daughter-in-law. The only thing lacking is that the word *Schnur* should mean in the third place a camel, in the fourth, a dust-brush."<sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard also said that a man in despair may either be conscious of it or not conscious of it. Kierkegaard's contention that a man's despair may be unknown to him, is a very significant insight.<sup>5</sup> In fact the Buddha says that *avijjā* (ignorance, infatuation or delusion) is the primary root of all evil. Kierkegaard however, considers the concept of "original sin" as more basic than human ignorance.

### Attitude to Pleasure

Now, it is possible, to refer back, to the two standpoints, about sense pleasures. From the first standpoint, the philosophy of Dukkha, has to be accepted as a whole, and there is no compromise regarding sense pleasures. This is the attitude that has

ambiguous, this aspect of absolute risk causes dread; there is also an ontological aspect—due to our inability to grasp the nature of Being, we cannot think of it or not think of it. These meanings have been carefully worked out by Jean Wahl; yet it seems that Kierkegaard is attempting to do too many jobs with one word. See, Jean Wahl, *Philosophies of Existence*, (London, 1969) pp. 66-7.

<sup>1</sup> R. Thomte, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion*, (Princeton, 1948), p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> This is sometimes referred to in the obscure language of the existentialist, as the "threat of Non-Being."

<sup>3</sup> *EIO* I, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> ~~A. V., 176.~~ *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> "If despair is bewilderment (Forvildelse,) then the fact that one is unconscious of it is the additional aggravation of being at the same time under a delusion (Vildfarelse)." Soren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, 1951) p. 68.

to be accepted by those who take to the holy life (*brahmacariya*). Those who follow the less arduous path of the householder (*gahapati*) are permitted to enjoy sense pleasures, if they are obtained in the legitimate manner. They should not, however, give in to excessive craving and perverted passions.

Let us take the path of the householder first. The Buddha makes an analysis of the types of people who are enjoyers of sense pleasures (*kāmā-bhogin*). A certain type of person, who seeks the enjoyment of pleasures, seeks wealth, unlawfully and by violence. So doing, he gets no pleasure for himself, does not share his wealth with others and does no meritorious deeds. This type is compared to the type of person who seeks wealth by lawful means. He gets ease, pleasure for himself, shares with others and does meritorious deeds. This one, makes use of his wealth without greed and longing: is guiltless of offence, heedful of danger and alive to his own salvation.<sup>1</sup> Here, an effort is made to distinguish the enjoyment of pleasures obtained on correct principles and wrong principles.

There is also a reference where it is said that the realm of the human beings is abundantly pleasant when compared with hell or with the animal world<sup>2</sup>. In fact pleasure is considered as a natural phenomenon and the world of earth is referred to as the sense sphere (*kāmāvacara*). The homily to Sigāla for instance, shows how man should organise his natural desires within an ethico-religious setting, and enjoy domestic happiness as a householder<sup>3</sup>. This will be referred to again.

Now let us take the path of the "holy life". In the majority of the sermons given to the monks, the emphasis is more on the misery of pleasures. Here sense pleasures are referred to as a source of danger and incompatible with the life of renunciation. This is all the more emphasised in the attainment of the higher stage of mental development. Apart from the call to restraint and the control of the sense organs, the monks have been advised to avoid situations that can excite lustful thoughts. Thus detachment from sense pleasures is the basis on which the monk has to work out his deliverance. In the sermons to the monks, the advantages of the "homeless life" (*pabbajjā*) over the life of the householder are

<sup>1</sup> A V, 176.

<sup>2</sup> M I, 81.

<sup>3</sup> D III, Sutta 31.

discussed. "The household life is confined and dusty, going forth is in the open; it is not easy for one who lives in a house to fare the Brahma-faring wholly fulfilled, wholly pure, polished like a conch shell."<sup>1</sup> This attitude may be compared with Kierkegaard's critique of the aesthete made from the religious stage. In fact Collins remarks that in the final analysis, for Kierkegaard, "the genuine alternatives are still the world and the cloister."<sup>2</sup> In Kierkegaard's own words, the real contrast is between, "perdition and salvation." In Kierkegaard, while an attempt is made to bring the ethical and the religious together (ethico—religious), there is also some tension between the ethical and the religious.

### **The Ethical in Buddhism and Kierkegaard**

Buddhist ethics is certainly more systematic and broad based than the Kierkegaardian concern with the ethical. However, limiting ourselves, to the more basic aspects of Buddhist ethics, it should be said that the five precepts form the basis of lay morality. The eight precepts, on the other hand mark the transition to the religious stage. As Tachibana says in his *Ethics of Buddhism*, "While the five precepts are moral precepts, the eight are religious vows."<sup>3</sup> Regarding the place of sense pleasures, while the ethical emphasises the significance of chastity, the religious emphasises the factor of celibacy. Chastity is an important virtue, and it is one of the five precepts. The unchaste life of the married man is condemned and the sanctity of family life is upheld in Buddhism. Negatively, Buddhist laymen are expected to refrain from unlawful sexual relations. Positively, the homily to Sigāla for instance, lays down the basic duties of people that will ensure domestic happiness. The mutual duties of husband and wife are clearly described in this sermon; this also mentions the mutual duties of parents and children, servants and masters, teachers and pupils, friends and companions, recluses and laymen. This sermon gives a central place to the solidarity of family life and is a very close parallel to Kierkegaard's claim that marriage is the basis of ethical life.<sup>4</sup>

As was mentioned earlier, the basis of Buddhist ethics is broader than Kierkegaard's conception of the ethical. Out of the five precepts, the two dealing with chastity and the use of

<sup>1</sup> *Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. 1, Trans Horner, P. T. S. (London, 1954) p. 224.

<sup>2</sup> James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard*, (Princeton, 1953) p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> S. Tachibana, *The Ethics of Buddhism*, (Ceylon, 1943) p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> *E/O* II.



intoxicants have a direct bearing on the life of sensuality. The other three are to abstain from killing, stealing and lying. These ensure the basis of community living. Even Kierkegaard's ethicist has a place in the social order, but as Collins points out, Kierkegaard's personal problems colour his conception of the ethical. Due to the crisis brought about by breaking off the engagement with Regina, he was probably impelled, to make marriage "the test case and centre of ethical life." This seems to have had an unbalancing effect on Kierkegaard's notion of the ethical. Sometimes his conception of the ethical appears somewhat limited, when it is exclusively focussed on the institution of marriage; sometimes it appears too general when he deals with the factor of choice as the essence of the ethical. Kierkegaard was of course averse to systematisation, whereas the path of morality (*sīla*) in Buddhism is worked out in detail. This appears to be one significant difference in approach. However, in fairness to Kierkegaard it must be said, as Mary Warnock points out, that what we find in Kierkegaard, "is a kind of ethical outlook", rather than a system of ethics.<sup>1</sup>

"These stages in his own development came to seem to Kierkegaard to be general stages in the development of human beings, who have the possibility of living at any of these stages permanently, or moving from the lower to the higher. Each move to a higher stage must be something which the individual decides, for himself, to make."<sup>2</sup> Now this is not accepted as a purely intellectual belief or as one based on satisfactory evidence, but as something a person would be prepared to live by, as something to which he would be passionately committed. In thus emphasising the importance of choice and commitment, Kierkegaard gives a central place to the factor of will.<sup>3</sup> If there is any Existentialist ethics, it is to be extracted from this total view of the world, in which each man makes his own choice of the truth for himself.<sup>4</sup> Thus what Kierkegaard offers is basically an ethical outlook rather than a system of ethics. While early Buddhism offers an ethics which is more systematic, a Buddhist can imbibe the spirit of some of the insights in the Existential outlook.

<sup>1</sup> Mary Warnock, *Existentialist Ethics*, (London: Macmillan, 1967) p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> For a very clear analysis of the theory of choice and the concept of will in Kierkegaard, see, Winfield E. Nagley, "Kierkegaard On Liberation," *Ethics*, Volume 70, 1959-60, p. 47

<sup>4</sup> Mary Warnock, *Existentialist Ethics*, p. 10.

A Buddhist who follows the rules of conduct practised by the majority without finding out for himself what it all means certainly needs a shaking. In the words of Kierkegaard, "There are many people who reach their conclusions about life like schoolboys: they cheat their masters by copying the answer out of a book without having worked the sum out for themselves."<sup>1</sup> A Buddhist could certainly agree with Kierkegaard's call to "interiorise" morals. This point will be taken again with reference to the religious life.

In general, it can be said that while the critique of aesthetic life and the sanctity of family life presented in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* have their corresponding parallels in early Buddhism, the religious stage in Kierkegaard offers both significant similarities and radical points of difference to the concept of *brahmacariya* in early Buddhism.

### **The Religious Life (*Brahmacariya*) in Buddhism and Kierkegaard**

There is a basic existentialist attitude to the religious life in general, which to some extent is also upheld in Buddhism. Firstly, Kierkegaard rejects the purely speculative philosophers, who attempt to grasp religious truth by the intellect alone. The Buddha also lays stress on the dangers of metaphysical speculation and calls upon every one to practise and follow his preachings. A healthy critical attitude is necessary, but by endless speculation people get entangled in a net (*jāla*) of theories. Secondly, practising a religion does not mean following religious rites and rituals as if that is all that matters. In fact, Kierkegaard is supposed to have had two enemies — the Hegelian and the one who goes to church regularly. The Buddha also condemned attachment to mere rules and ritual (*śīlabhata-parāmāsa*). By attachment to external rites we lose the inner core of religion. Kierkegaard attempted to "interiorise" religion and make it "personal." The Buddha too emphasises the importance of self-knowledge and personal realization, choice and personal involvement. Thirdly, Kierkegaard says that it is sincerity and a passionate urge that makes a person a true Christian. It is this "existential pathos" that makes a person's religion authentic. The one following the Buddhist path of deliverance is also expected to be ardent, zealous and strenuous (*ātāpin*).

<sup>1</sup> Robert Bretall, ed. *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, (London, 1947) p. 19.

“I lay no wood, brahmin, for fires on altars.  
Only within burneth the fire I kindle.  
Ever my fire burns; ever tense and ardent,  
I, Arahant, work out the life that’s holy”<sup>1</sup>

However, to these three points of similarity, there are certain qualifications to be made. While the Buddha considers pure intellectual speculation to be unprofitable, the analytical function of reason is accepted by him within certain limits.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, while criticising the practice of mere ritual, the Buddha lays down detailed techniques and methods of meditation and the practice of morality. Where the Existentialist will say that morality will cease to be morality when it is “encapsulated in principles of conduct,”<sup>3</sup> the Buddhist will always have some general code of ethics. Finally while upholding the value of earnestness, sincerity and authenticity in the religious quest, a Buddhist will be critical of the emotional undertones of Existentialism.<sup>4</sup>

According to pre-Buddhistic customs in India there were four orders of life referred to as *āśramas*. They are (1) *Brahmacārin* or Vedic student, (2) *Grihastha* or householder, (3) *Vānaprastha* or hermit, (4) *Sanyāsin* or ascetic. Of these, only 1 and 4 were compulsory. Tachibana points out that, “The Brahman Brahmacārin corresponds to the Buddhist Sāmaṇera, and the Brahman Sanyāsin or Bhikṣu to the Buddhist Bhikku, if a Brahman passed at once from studentship to the ascetic life, without any intervention of the householder’s life . . . .”<sup>5</sup> The difference between the Buddhist and the Brahman celibates, is that for the Brahman, it was compulsory for every one to lead a life of celibacy at the start, but optional in the middle part of life; for the Buddhist it is compulsory only for those who have become monks. The lay Buddhist observes celibacy only when he observes the eight precepts. In Buddhism the term Brahmacariya connotes the ideas of celibacy and a life of perfect holiness.<sup>6</sup> In general, the term Brahmacariya for the Buddhist, “covers the whole of the religious

<sup>1</sup> *Kindred Sayings* vol. 1, (trans.) Mrs. Rhys Davids, P. T. S., (London, 1950) p. 221.

<sup>2</sup> K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, (London, 1963) Chapters 5&8

<sup>3</sup> M. Warnock, *Existentialist Ethics*, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> There is an irrationalist element in Existentialist thought which, for instance, finds full expression in Nietzsche. Nietzsche is of course not an existentialist in the full sense of the word.

<sup>5</sup> S. Tachibana, *The Ethics of Buddhism*, p. 99.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

life, from keeping the precepts to obtaining Arahatsip.”<sup>1</sup>

The Kierkegaardian concept of the religious life is grounded on the belief in God, and this is a radical departure from the Buddhist view. Secondly, the concept of sin is central to Kierkegaard's concept of the religious. As mentioned in his works, “No man can take note of God without becoming a sinner”.<sup>2</sup> Notions of sin, guilt and repentance in the Christian sense, do not fit into the path of deliverance in Buddhism. Also the concept of “religious suffering” in Kierkegaard appears as an unprofitable extreme to a Buddhist. It is necessary to sum up the Buddhist position regarding these aspects of the religious life in Kierkegaard.

“The doctrine of sin, as held in Europe, is a complex of many strands. One or two of those strands may be more or less parallel to statements found in the earliest Buddhist texts or to ideas expressed in Indian pre-Buddhist texts. But the doctrine as a whole, in any one of its various forms, is antagonistic to the Indian, and especially to the Buddhist view of life.”<sup>3</sup> These words of Rhys Davids who examines the Buddhist attitude to sin, sums up the position well. Sometimes words like *pāpa* and *saṅkiliṭṭha* in the Pāli canon are translated as “sin” and a person who continuously does evil acts is referred to as a sinful person. Yet this does not imply that there is a complete doctrine of sin (in the Christian sense) in Buddhism. The doctrine of *karma* upholds ignorance (*avijjā*) rather than sin as the basis of folly.

Methods like repentance, mortification and self-torment are unprofitable; they are not effective techniques to deal with wrongs already committed. People should develop self-knowledge, acquire an insight into their bases of motivation and then develop counter patterns of behaviour which are not unwholesome (*akusala*). The only path open to an immoral man is to develop self-understanding and bring about a transformation in his character. Repentance, penance, religious atonement and ritual do not purify man. Behaviour that emerges from the unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion (*lobha, dosa, moha*) have to be replaced by behaviour emerging from the wholesome roots, greedlessness, hatelessness and undeludedness (*aloba, adosa, amoha*). Burdening one's mind with an

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, p. 465.

<sup>3</sup> Rhys Davids, “Sin (Buddhist)”, *E.R.E.*, Vol. XI.

unhealthy guilt conscience can have a paralysing effect on the person, who is capable of developing a healthy sense of shame of evil (*hiri*) and a healthy sense of dread of evil (*ottappa*).

The Buddhist concept of *hiri-ottappa* (shame and dread of evil), should not be confused with *kukkucca* which refers to the uneasiness of conscience, worry and remorse. In fact *uddhacca - kukkucca* (restlessness and worry) is considered one of the five hindrances (*nivarana*) to the development of tranquillity and insight. This point is of crucial significance to the main subject of our paper, as the Kierkegaardian emphasis on concepts like sin, guilt and dread often take a pathological turn.<sup>1</sup> A Buddhist has to accept the position that while conscious deception is certainly evil, dejection and pathological guilt is damaging, unwholesome and unprofitable. Honest and diligent self-analysis is necessary but morbid introspection charged by feelings of guilt and deprivation is certainly harmful. Freud has worked out the harmful effects of such mechanisms in his concept of the super-ego.<sup>2</sup> This perhaps gives an insight into Kierkegaard's own predicament — "It would seem that, despite the most penetrating flashes of insight, he was unable to achieve a state of inner harmony."<sup>3</sup>

Regarding the relationship between the ethical and the religious, it seems that there is a more meaningful connection between the two spheres in early Buddhism. The path of deliverance in Buddhism falls into the threefold structure of morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). The latter two always have a sound foundation in morality. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, exaggerates the dilemmatic situation in the ethical sphere, based on Abraham's sacrifice of Issac. The Buddhist attitude to moral dilemmas has been discussed elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> While Kierkegaard's "leaps" into the religious springs from the paradoxical and the dilemmatic, there is a more natural transition from the ethical to the religious in Buddhism; the training undergone by one practising the Buddhist path is referred to as a "gradual training" (*anupubbāsikkhā*).

<sup>1</sup> This complex is embedded in Kierkegaard's own life history.

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, (London, 1957).

<sup>3</sup> M. O.'C. Walshe, "From Kierkegaard to Zen", *Buddhism for Today*, Allen & Unwin, (London 1962) p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> M. W. Padmasiri de Silva, *op. cit.*

## Conclusion

Regarding the universality of the pleasure principle and the lure of sensuality, there is agreement between early Buddhism and Kierkegaard. Both uphold the sanctity of marriage and family life as an alternative to the wild appetites of unregenerate sensuality. The link up between the ethical and the religious (though more intergrated in Buddhism), is common to both systems, and the ultimate significance of the religious is also a common goal. The most significant factor that has emerged out of this study, is that the emptiness and the discordance of the aesthete presented in *Either / Or*, and the critique of sensuality, appear almost as a Kierkegaardian version of the philosophy of Dukkha. If so, the message of the Buddha should certainly be relevant to the existentialist.

There are significant differences: the ethical in Buddhism is much wider, and the theistic basis of the religious (especially the theory of sin) in Kierkegaard, cannot be accepted by the Buddhist. The treatment of dread and despair in Kierkegaard may be a good corrective to the sensualist; but it is overdone in Kierkegaard. There is obviously a strain of the masochistic in Kierkegaard. Early Buddhism considers this pathological strain of remorse and guilt, restlessness and worry (*uddhacca - kukkucce*), as a hindrance to the development of inner tranquillity and insight. In fact Buddhism advocates different techniques of therapy for different types of personality. For instance meditation on the misery and emptiness of pleasure is a good corrective to the lustful type (*rāga - carita*), whereas the practice of compassionate love (*mettā*) is a fitting corrective to the melancholy and hateful-natured (*dosa-carita*).<sup>1</sup>

Kierkegaard's work itself is a fine expression of the kind of spiritual anguish that emerges from the heart of a devoted and sincere man; but the path of liberation that he offers is unsatisfactory from the Buddhist standpoint. The Buddha has very clearly shown that in the final analysis, anguish cannot be mastered by anguish; anguish has to be mastered by equanimity.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, M.W. Padmasiri de Silva, 'The Therapeutic Basis of Early Buddhist Psychology', *A Study of Motivational Theory in Early Buddhism With Special Reference to the Psychology of Freud*, Ph. D. Thesis, University of Hawaii, Unpublished.

<sup>2</sup> M II, Sutta 101.