

*George Rupp* The relationship between nirvāna and samsāra:  
An essay on the evolution of Buddhist ethics

I

Western interpreters of the Buddhist tradition have lavished what at times seems a disproportionate measure of attention on the enigmatic conception of *nirvāna*. Most frequently that attention has focused on the question of whether or not the Theravāda view in particular entails the total annihilation of the human personality. There has been no dearth of proponents for each of the various alternatives which this formulation of the issue allows. But in spite of considerable differences in the interpretations themselves, almost without exception the (at least) implicit claim for each one has been that it represents the original or the earliest ascertainable meaning of the term in Buddhist usage. This tendency is most evident in the writings of scholars like Hermann Oldenberg or T. W. Rhys Davids whose work is concerned primarily with the Pāli Canon. But even a man like La Vallée Poussin, who strongly criticizes those who rely only on the Pāli texts, in turn bases his own position on the contention that Buddhism was a popular religious faith before it became systematized into the philosophical form which it has in the Theravāda Canon.<sup>1</sup>

The considerations of etymology and textual chronology which result from the intention of specifying the earliest possible meanings of a conception are, to be sure, significant contributions in their own right. But this preoccupation with origins is also not without implications for the broader understanding of the nature of religious traditions. Insofar as the study has more than exclusively antiquarian interests it assumes that the earliest uses of a religious symbol provide its normative interpretation. In the case of a tradition with a definite historical founder, this preference for formulations as close as possible to the original ones is, of course, not surprising. But precisely this apparently self-evident authority of interpretations which can plausibly be claimed to reflect the founder's own views may serve to support an uncritically static understanding of religious systems.

That religious traditions which trace their origins to a historical figure do in fact tend to regard the teachings of that founder as normative is incontrovertible. Buddhist literature itself provides what is perhaps the most striking confirmation of this tendency; for some of the very Mahāyāna *sūtras* which Theravāda critics reject as utterly divorced from the letter and the spirit of the original teaching devote a considerable proportion of their attention to a defense of their historical derivation from Śākyamuni himself. Probably the most vivid illustrations of this concern are a number of parables in the *Lotus Sūtra*—those of the Burning House, the Prodigal Son, and the Magic City,

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<sup>1</sup> Louis de La Vallée Poussin, *Bouddhisme: Études et matériaux* (London: Luzac & Co., 1898), pp. 34-47.

for example.<sup>2</sup> In each case extended metaphors are employed to dramatize the typical Mahāyāna claim that the narrow (Hīnayāna) tradition of the Śrāvakas and Pratyekabuddhas represents only the inferior teaching intended for those unable to grasp the full instruction of the Buddha.

From the tendency of traditions to attribute a normative status to what is accepted as their original or at least early expression, one can, of course, elaborate a corresponding theory of religious systems which views the original formulation of the teaching as alone adequate to the pristine insight of the religious genius from which it derives. In the Buddhist and Christian cases in particular and in an analogous way in the Islamic one, there can be no doubt that apologetics and even scholarship often presuppose this understanding of religious traditions. Hence the aim of the apologist is construed as that of expounding what he takes to be the earliest teaching and the corresponding task of the scholar is to ascertain what that earliest teaching is. Approaches to religious data which subscribe to this view of a normative and immutable formulation of the tradition's central insights need not deny the fact that religious beliefs and practices undergo change in the course of their history; but the evaluation of such change must be negative. Insofar as alterations diverge from the past ideal they are perversions or betrayals of the very tradition they claim to represent.

Western interpreters of *nirvāṇa* have not, to be sure, been unanimous in espousing such a static understanding of religion. Indeed, stated in this uncompromising form, it would no doubt be generally rejected as perhaps typical of uncritical devotees of a tradition but as unacceptable even to sympathetic observers. Yet because of its constant appeal to the criterion of earliest usage, one effect of Western scholarship on the question of *nirvāṇa* has nonetheless been to reinforce a conception of the task of religious philosophy or apologetics as the restatement of the truth and relevance of immutable teachings. Specifically in reference to the conception of *nirvāṇa* this understanding of the task of religious philosophy has resulted in an almost unanimous resistance, at least on the part of Theravāda Buddhists, to a reinterpretation of this symbol which self-consciously modifies the meanings that it apparently has in what are taken to be the earliest texts.

A consideration of the possibility of such a reinterpretation implies an understanding of religious systems which not only recognizes but also places a positive value on the fact of development in religious traditions. One serviceable approach is to consider religious systems as comprehensive symbolic

<sup>2</sup> *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka*, chaps. III, IV, and VII. Cf. the English translation of H. Kern, *The Lotus of The True Law*, Sacred Books of the East, vol. 21 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884), pp. 60-117, 181-190; and the abridged English rendering from the Chinese by W. E. Soothill, *The Lotus of the Wonderful Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), pp. 81-121, 131-141.

frames of reference through which individuals and communities interpret their experience and shape their living. In this view, modifications in a community's total experience would in time affect the symbols through which it interprets that experience. Conversely, the constantly reappropriated symbols would in turn provide criteria for evaluating and influencing the quality and the direction of changes in existing patterns of life.

To adopt this approach to understanding religious systems and to explore its applicability to the conception of *nirvāṇa* requires a procedure significantly different from that of most scholars in the past. Instead of focusing on the question of what meanings *nirvāṇa* has in a given body of literature, the central concern becomes the significance of the similarities and differences between disparate interpretations of the same symbol. Even to raise this line of questioning of course presupposes the invaluable etymological and literary work which has been done on the uses of the term in the various texts and bodies of texts. But the difference in emphasis nonetheless remains, since the intention of the exploration is systematic and potentially constructive rather than primarily linguistic or historical.

## II

One index of the systematic function which *nirvāṇa* performs in Buddhist thought is the way in which the relationship between it and *saṃsāra* is conceived. Although there has been considerable variation even within the same community, it seems justified to draw at least one generalized contrast between Theravāda and Mahāyāna perspectives. Whereas for the Theravādin the fundamental motif in the interpretation of the relationship between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* has been that of contrast, the Mahāyānist has typically expressed the conviction that they are ultimately identical. The difference between the two perspectives is not as total as this formulation suggests. But the divergence between them is sufficiently profound to invite a consideration of its possible causes and/or consequences.

One function of the symbol "*nirvāṇa*" in the religious system of Theravāda Buddhism is to provide a critical ideal which stands over against the phenomenal world. *Nirvāṇa* is the absolute standard against which the whole of temporal existence is measured and judged as inadequate, as unsatisfactory, indeed, ultimately, as undesirable. Against the norm of *nirvāṇa*, *saṃsāra* is seen in its true character—that is, as *duḥkha*, "suffering." As an ethical ideal and ultimate value, the symbol of *nirvāṇa* furnishes both the final criterion for evaluating temporal existence and the goal toward which all beings should aspire to escape the deficiencies of that existence. The most frequent characterizations of *nirvāṇa* reflect this dual function. On the one hand, it is designated as the antithesis of phenomenal life: it is not subject to birth, without becoming,

undying; it is completely free from attachment and desire—in particular, from the summary evils of greed, hatred, and delusion; it is uninterrupted peace, happiness, truth. On the other hand, *nirvāṇa* is described metaphorically as the goal of those overcoming the world: it is the island amidst the floods, the further shore, the harbor of refuge, the cool cave, liberation, security.

To recognize the role of *nirvāṇa* as a critical ideal over against temporal existence is not, of course, to adjudicate the perennial debates both among Buddhists themselves and even more vehemently among Western scholars as to what the term itself designates. A recognition of the multiple dimensions of this function is, however, sufficient to preclude any interpretation which reduces the meaning of *nirvāṇa* to the exclusive sense of annihilation of phenomenal existence; for the uses of *nirvāṇa* as a critical ideal imply at least two additional complexes of meaning.

The first is evident when forms of the root from which the noun "*nirvāṇa*" derives are used to describe the psychological or ethical state of the Buddhist saint or *arhat*. When the past participle in particular is used to characterize the *arhat*, it appears most frequently to refer to his having "cooled" or overcome attachment and craving; his having "extinguished" the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion. This ethical and psychological line of interpretation has received virtually unanimous support from both Western scholars and Buddhist believers themselves as at least a critical component of the meaning of the term in the usage of the Theravāda community. Moreover, in some cases interpretation of *nirvāṇa* as an ethical and psychological state is advanced as the sole meaning of the term. Perhaps the most influential modern formulation of this position is that by, or at least under the influence of, T. W. Rhys Davids in the Pali Text Society's *Pali-English Dictionary*: "Nibbāna is purely and solely an *ethical* state, to be reached in this birth by ethical practices, contemplation and insight."<sup>3</sup> In this view those renderings of *nirvāṇa* which appear to designate a place or even an objective metaphysical entity are at least in origin simply metaphorical descriptions of the psychological state of the *arhat*. A very thorough and competent elaboration of this position is available in a recent essay by the Swedish scholar Rune Johansson. He restricts his study to the *Sutta Piṭaka* of the Pāli Canon. He recognizes that even within that body of discourses there are occasional references which appear to view *nirvāṇa* as a "metaphysical substance, transcending space, time and causality, a supramundane reality with independent existence." The most striking example is the well-known passage in the *Udāna* which seems to assert that *nirvāṇa* is not only a condition or state of affairs that is not born, not-become, not made, not compounded, but also a sphere utterly divorced from the elements of phenomenal existence. In Johansson's judgment the rare "traces" of this

<sup>3</sup>T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, eds., *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary* (London: Luzac & Co., 1959 [first edition, 1921-25]), p. 362a.

tendency in the Pāli Nikāyas refer to the “*experienced world* projected as a real world” and then hypostatized as an independent entity. Consequently they do not vitiate the claim that “the *nibbāna* of the Nikāyas is . . . a transformed state of personality and consciousness.”<sup>4</sup>

This argument that the tendency to interpret *nirvāṇa* as a metaphysical entity is the result of projection and hypostatization of psychological states or experiences would not meet general acceptance among Theravāda Buddhists. But even if one regards the argument as plausible, the fact remains that such reference to an objective metaphysical entity still constitutes another complex of meanings of *nirvāṇa* which assumes considerable importance in Theravāda literature as a whole. Johansson himself admits its increasing frequency in the Abhidhamma. The Commentaries reveal the same pattern. Whether or not images like “the further shore,” “the beyond,” and “the harbor of refuge” are in their origin metaphorical descriptions of psychological states, there are not infrequent instances in the history of Theravāda literature in which they are unambiguously construed as designations of a place or sphere of existence constituting that goal of the Buddhist life which is realized once the saint succeeds in becoming completely free from entanglement in *saṃsāra*. A recognition of this complex of meanings is particularly important in view of the widespread conviction among contemporary Theravāda Buddhists that the attainment of *nirvāṇa* has become all but impossible in any time before the distant future after innumerable further births. This belief is, to be sure, most typical in so-called popular Buddhism, as the anthropologists Gananath Obeyesekere and Michael Ames have argued in the case of Ceylon.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Buddhist intellectuals frequently insist on the attainability of *nirvāṇa* as an ethical and psychological achievement here and now. But this position must be seen precisely as a contrast to and even a reaction against the prevailing view that *nirvāṇa* is a future state in theory more desirable than, but nonetheless analogous to, the sensuous paradises which often figure more actively in the religious imaginations of less intellectually-oriented Theravāda Buddhists.

### III

The Mahāyāna conviction that *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* are ultimately the same differs from each of the various Theravāda interpretations. But there are also

<sup>4</sup> Rune Johansson, *The Psychology of Nirvana* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), pp. 51-57, 111-112, 131-137. Cf. I. B. Horner's similar line of argument in reference to the term “beyond” in *The Early Buddhist Theory of Man Perfected: A Study of the Arahan* (London: William & Norgate, 1936), pp. 282-312.

<sup>5</sup> Michael McClean Ames, “Religious Syncretism in Buddhist Ceylon” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1962), pp. 1-45, 224-270; Gananath Obeyesekere, “Theodicy, Sin and Salvation in a Sociology of Buddhism,” in *Dialectic in Practical Religion*, ed. M. Fortes, J. R. Boody, and E. R. Leach, Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology, no. 5 (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1968), pp. 7-40.

not insignificant continuities between the two perspectives, continuities which parallel the fuller development in the metaphysics of the Mahāyāna of fundamental Buddhist commitments evident in Theravāda views as well. In the Mahāyāna conception of *śūnyatā* or emptiness the traditional Buddhist insistence that there is no perduring substantial self is affirmed as applicable to the whole of reality. Not only is there no discrete and unchanging human self; there are no objective or independent entities whatsoever. This pattern of universalizing psychological insights illumines the continuities between the respective conceptions of *nirvāṇa*. In the Theravāda case the recognition that the empirical self is no metaphysical ultimate enables man progressively to free himself from attachment to the phenomenal world and hence from the undesirable moral attributes epitomized in the trinity of greed, hatred, and delusion. The final attainment of this freedom from involvement with the finite and the transient constitutes *nirvāṇa*. Similarly, for those Mahāyāna Buddhists under the influence of the Mādhyamika and Yogācārin schools in particular, the liberating recognition that the entities constituting the differentiated empirical world have no independent existence results in a new perception or awareness of the whole of reality; and the achievement of this insight is the attainment of enlightenment.

Despite such parallels between the Mahāyāna and the Theravāda positions, there are, however, considerable differences. Indeed, the differences are already evident in any attempt to formulate analogies between the two communities. A passage in the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* summarizes the contrast succinctly from the Mahāyāna perspective: "The Śrāvakas and Pratyekabuddhas . . . have the discriminating idea and knowledge of Nirvana, which is not that of the truth. . . ."<sup>6</sup>

That the Theravāda conception of *nirvāṇa* is a discriminating one means, of course, that it is also a critical one. There are ethical criteria which must be met. Only those beings who achieve freedom from the five hindrances and the ten fetters, who overcome greed, hatred, and delusion, who cultivate the four sublime states of benevolence, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, who attain detachment from phenomenal goods—only they attain *nirvāṇa*. In contrast, the nondiscriminating Mahāyāna position is in principle uncritical. Not everyone, to be sure, achieves the insight that the whole of being is in its essence ultimate reality. For that accomplishment rigorous discipline over incomprehensibly long periods of time may be necessary. But it is nonetheless the case that the whole of being is in its essence ultimate reality. All of *saṃsāra* is *nirvāṇa*. The critique which the Mahāyāna perspective exercises is directed against the way men understand or interpret their world, not against the human

<sup>6</sup> D. T. Suzuki, trans., *The Lankavatara Sutra* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956), p. 184. Cf. pp. 109, 157-161.

and natural phenomena which constitute that world. Consequently, the ultimate solution which is proffered is not a new world or even a new self but a new point of view.

The writings of D. T. Suzuki and T. R. V. Murti, two prominent interpreters of the Mahāyāna tradition, may serve to epitomize the formulation of this position. Murti offers a detailed exposition of the Mādhyamika system, while Suzuki elaborates his own understanding of Zen as standing in the idealist tradition of which the Yogācārin school is the clearest historical illustration.

In a number of essays Suzuki is specifically concerned to stress the ethical quality of Zen. He insists that the aim of the Mahāyāna tradition is to lead to an "inner perception which causes a spiritual revolution in our whole life."<sup>7</sup> Hence "from the ethical point of view . . . Zen may be considered a discipline aiming at the reconstruction of character."<sup>8</sup> He also repeatedly maintains that not only the intellect but also the will is operative in the process of attaining enlightenment or *satori*. Perhaps the most emphatic instance of this contention is in the essay "Enlightenment and Ignorance"; for an appreciation of the role of the will in the process of attaining enlightenment is a recurrent theme throughout this piece.<sup>9</sup> Suzuki is, of course, aware of the criticism that the Mahāyāna rejection of any discrimination as to value in the phenomenal world undermines moral discipline;<sup>10</sup> and his emphasis on the ethical and volitional character of *satori* is at least in part no doubt intended to meet this criticism. But it is important to note the qualifications which Suzuki himself either explicitly or implicitly introduces.

Two complementary qualifications seem to be operative. One concerns the context to which Suzuki's discussion of the will refers, and the other is the conception of the will which appears to underlie his exposition. First, Suzuki's analysis of the role of the will in the process of enlightenment has reference to the very strict intellectual self-discipline which concentrated meditation requires. It refers to the exercise of will involved in attaining insight or wisdom about the nature of reality, not to the volitional activity of changing it. Thus Suzuki observes of him who has arrived at the goal, "His daily activities are not changed; what is changed is his subjectivity."<sup>11</sup> Second, the very con-

<sup>7</sup> *Studies in the Lankavatara Sutra* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1930), p. 101.

<sup>8</sup> *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, 1st. ser. (London: Rider & Co., 1958), p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, 1st. ser., pp. 123, 126-127, 129, 137, 138, 154, 156. Cf. "On Satori—The Revelation of a New Truth in Zen Buddhism," *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, 1st. ser., pp. 246-247, 251-252.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Studies in the Lankavatara Sutra*, p. 305, where he dismisses this line of criticism as "still under the bondage of wrong judgments and discrimination."

<sup>11</sup> "Lectures in Zen Buddhism," in *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Erich Fromm (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960), p. 74. Cf. *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, (London: Rider & Co., 1957), p. 95; *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, 1st. ser., pp. 229, 262.

ception of the will as Suzuki uses it in his later essays reveals at most a very subdued voluntarism:

The will in its primary sense . . . is more basic than the intellect because it is the principle that lies at the root of all existences and unites them all in the oneness of being. The rocks are what they are — this is their will. The rivers flow — this is their will. The plants grow — this is their will. The birds fly — this is their will. Human beings talk — this is their will. The seasons change, heaven sends down rain or snow, the earth occasionally shakes, the waves roll, the stars shine — each of them follows its own will.<sup>12</sup>

In his essay "Passivity in the Buddhist Life" Suzuki indicates that this conception of the will as affirmative of what is occupies a central position in his apprehension of the nature of religious affirmation:

Whatever we may say about moral ideals of perfection, religion is after all the acceptance of things as they are, things evil together with things good. . . . 'You are all right as you are', or 'to be well with God and the world', or 'don't think of the morrow'—this is the final word of all religion. . . . To strive, which means to 'negate', is, according to Buddhist phraseology, eternally to transmigrate in the ocean of birth and death.<sup>13</sup>

Despite his occasional stress on the ethical quality of Zen in particular, Suzuki's interpretation of the full implications of the Buddhist perspective seems, then, to support the generalization that the aim of the Mahāyāna tradition is to alter man's view of the world rather than the world itself. T. R. V. Murti's interpretation of the Mādhyamika philosophy reveals the same pattern. There is, to be sure, repeated reference to the preliminary role of morality and spiritual discipline. But from the ultimate perspective which the Mādhyamika dialectic reveals, the defilements and evils and dualities against which moral and meditational disciplines are directed prove to be completely unreal. They must be so, since otherwise the absolute character of *nirvāṇa* would be compromised:

The Absolute as *Nirvāṇa* is conceived by some as the cessation of all desires and aversions. This implies that it was not existent before the destruction. . . . This is wrong according to the Mādhyamika. There has been no initial fall, and there is no need for re-transformation. *Nirvāṇa*, says Nāgārjuna, is non-ceasing, unachieved. There is only the dissolution of false views (*kalpanākṣaya*), but no becoming in the real.<sup>14</sup>

Even more unambiguous is Murti's explicit differentiation of the Mādhyamika conception of *nirvāṇa* from those which maintain that "discrete existences (*saṃskṛta dharmas*) are really changed into another state":

The Mādhyamika brings out by his criticism that there is no change in things;

<sup>12</sup> "Lectures in Zen Buddhism," in Fromm, *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, p. 51.

<sup>13</sup> *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, 2d. ser. (London: Rider & Co., 1958), p. 283.

<sup>14</sup> *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960), pp. 229, 233.



if the kleśas were real, they could not be reduced to nothing. There is only change in our outlook, not in reality. Nirvāṇa is “what is not abandoned nor acquired. . . .” The function of prajñā is not to transform the real, but only to create a change in our attitude towards it. The change is epistemic (subjective), not ontological (objective). The real is as it has ever been.<sup>15</sup>

That there are genuine differences between the Mahāyāna and Theravāda interpretations of *nirvāṇa* and its relation to *samsāra* is perhaps most evident in this denial of any need for other than epistemic change. A very telling passage at the end of Edward Conze’s translation of and commentary on the *Heart Sūtra* may serve to epitomize the depth of the contrast. In that passage Conze sets himself the task of demonstrating how the *Heart Sūtra* may be viewed as a Mahāyāna version of the Four Noble Truths. His elaboration of the parallels presupposes only one fundamental difference: in contrast to the Theravāda the Mahāyāna believes that ill or suffering (*duḥkha*) is ultimately unreal and illusory.<sup>16</sup> Insofar as this reinterpretation of the First Noble Truth is accepted, there is no need for real change as a precondition for beings to attain *nirvāṇa* who are caught in the net of *samsāra*. But there is no suggestion in the Theravāda understanding of the Four Noble Truths that *duḥkha* is unreal or illusory. The Theravāda position does, to be sure, agree with that of the Mahāyāna in focusing on subjective change—that is, on ethical and psychological transformation. But there is no relegation of such change to the status of unreality. Instead both the fact of *duḥkha* and the possibility of deliverance from it are ultimate truths about man’s experience.

#### IV

In surveying the ways in which the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna communities have formulated the relationship between *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*, it is difficult to escape the impression that each tradition has definite strengths from which the other could benefit. In the Theravāda case, there is the manifest asset of a full appreciation that the religious task entails a straightforward confrontation with moral limitations and a concerted effort to overcome them—an effort, that is, to change the existing state of affairs. The result is a conception of *nirvāṇa* which emphasizes differences from and consequently the need for changes in the prevailing patterns of phenomenal existence or *samsāra*. The strength of the Mahāyāna lies in a different direction. Its insistence that *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* are ultimately one constitutes an at least potentially positive valuation of the whole of being. Hence the concern of the Mahāyāna Buddhist is with all of reality. All beings participate in the Buddha-nature; all are already ingredient in *nirvāṇa*. That this broader concern is not simply an abstraction is

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 273-274.

<sup>16</sup> *Buddhist Wisdom Books* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958), pp. 100-101.

evident in the ideals and practice which have characterized the Mahāyāna. It is indeed the more comprehensive path. From its inception, laymen as well as monks have been more integral to its program than in the typical Theravāda position. And the *bodhisattva* ideal articulates explicitly an active concern with the destiny of all beings, a concern which often remains only implicit when the ideal of the *arhat* is dominant.

Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhists have not been unaware of the strengths of each other's perspective. On the Mahāyāna side this recognition of the value of the Theravāda concern with moral and meditational discipline is evident in the not infrequently emphatic inclusion of those dimensions in its own conception of spiritual discipline. Similarly, on the Theravāda side, there have been growing numbers of twentieth century devotees who appreciate the Mahāyāna insistence on a connection between *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*. Typically, this tendency is allied with a conviction that the Buddhist way must address social and political issues. Not surprisingly, the vigorous polemical writings of men like Anagarika Dharmapala and D. C. Vijayavardhana thus demand a positive and even this-worldly interpretation of *nirvāṇa*.<sup>17</sup> In spite of some measure of mutual appreciation, the dominant tone of evaluation is, however, critical. The consistent Mahāyāna position that a preoccupation with overcoming defilements or attachments represents only a provisional discipline still captive to the illusion that such obstacles are real illustrates the criticism implicit even in praise for the Theravāda moral vigor. Conversely, the typical Theravāda appraisal of the Mahāyāna—usually oral, since few Theravāda writers have addressed themselves to questions relating to the Mahāyāna—is that it underestimates the seriousness of moral evil or that it makes the attainment of *nirvāṇa* too easy.<sup>18</sup>

One can only hope that a spirit of mutual appreciation and criticism may lead to a more comprehensive interpretation combining the strengths of both positions. The outlines of such a synthesis seem discernible. It employs the resources which the Mahāyāna offers for ascribing a positive status to the phenomenal world: the whole of *samsāra* is potentially *nirvāṇa*. In this way it generates a soteriological concern with all of reality. But in contrast to many formulations of the traditional Mahāyāna position, this synthesis is not committed to the conception of an eternal and unchanging Absolute. Instead it recognizes the necessity for real development and consequently views the whole of being as in process—as temporal. In this way the Theravāda appreciation of

<sup>17</sup> Anagarika Dharmapala, *Return to Righteousness*, ed. Ananda Guruge (Colombo, Ceylon: The Government Press, 1965), pp. 313, 807; D. C. Vijayavardhana, *The Revolt in the Temple* (Colombo, Ceylon: Sinha Publications, 1953), p. 586.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, the short essay of Bhikkhu Ananda, *Theravada and Zen* (Colombo, Ceylon: M. D. Gunasena, 1962), especially pp. 18, 19, 21. See also K. N. Jayatilleke, "Buddhist Relativity and the One-World Concept," in *Religious Pluralism and World Community*, ed. E. J. Jurji (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), pp. 50-51, 59-60.

the fact of ethical and psychological change is fully appropriated and in turn applied to reality in its totality. The whole of being is developing toward its ultimate realization; it is in the process of its transformation from *samsāra* into *nirvāṇa*.

There is some indication especially among Mahāyāna Buddhists that the interpretation of the relation between *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* is developing in some such fashion. Kenneth K. Inada, for example, construes the equation of *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* to mean that "this mundane empirical world has all the makings or ingredients whereby the pure enlightened world can be realized."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Susumu Yamaguchi observes that "the fundamental notion of the Mahāyāna doctrines was that our actual and empirical world is nothing other than the basis for the realization of the negative and absolute world."<sup>20</sup> Interpreting the relationship of *nirvāṇa* to *samsāra* as that of actuality to potentiality rather than as that of reality to illusion does, to be sure, entail a positive valuation of development which is absent from many Mahāyāna metaphysical systems. But such positive valuation of change is nonetheless very congenial to Mahāyāna spiritual ideals. The *bodhisattva* is committed to relentless efforts to bring happiness and deliverance from suffering to all beings. The very purpose of his existence is to foster change in the world of *samsāra*. To interpret the relationship between *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* as one of actuality to potentiality is, then, to construe such change as ultimately significant. It is not an apparent change which is finally illusory because the Absolute is eternally the same; instead it constitutes a change, a transformation, in the real itself.

Insofar as religious systems offer symbolic interpretations of man's experience, such a modification in emphasis is not surprising. For man's experience is in fact changing. In the India of past centuries the vast majority of men had little control or even influence over their future. The monsoon may serve to epitomize their uncertainties: natural events utterly beyond their control determined their lot so decisively that the effect of human enterprise often was negligible. In contrast, twentieth century man is becoming increasingly persuaded that he can in fact influence the course of his history not only in trivial matters but also on profound and ultimately significant issues for which he must assume responsibility. A remarkable growth of social and political self-consciousness and the correlative awareness of the innovative capacities of human technology have become critical dimensions of man's experience. That the Mahāyāna tradition is able to appropriate, illumine, and in turn shape even what is novel in that experience testifies to the vitality and the viability of its central symbols.

<sup>19</sup> "Some Basic Misconceptions of Buddhism," *International Philosophical Quarterly* IX (1969), 119.

<sup>20</sup> "Development of Mahayana Buddhist Beliefs," in *The Path of the Buddha*, ed. K. W. Morgan (New York: Ronald Press, 1956), p. 171.

There seems to be less indication that the Theravāda interpretation of the relationship between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* is evolving in a similar direction. The traditional emphasis on the distinction between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* with its recognition of the need for moral and psychological change in order to attain the “other shore” is of course highly conducive to a dynamic and critical ethic. But there seems to be little inclination to forge a position which systematically ascribes a positive status to phenomenal existence. Although traditional social virtues and lay ethics are extolled, the ultimate aim of the Buddhist life is still conceived as escape from *saṃsāra*—*saṃsāra* conceived in total contrast to *nirvāṇa*. Hence the dominant theoretical judgment of phenomenal existence is one of sweeping rejection.

This pattern is evident in the hierarchy of religious roles characteristic of Theravāda Buddhist communities. The order of value begins with the ordinary layman, proceeds to the lay disciple and the monk with temple duties, and culminates with the monk who has retreated to an isolated hermitage in order to devote himself completely to meditation. The measure of status is inversely proportional to the measure of involvement with worldly tasks.<sup>21</sup> The ideal of meditational and spiritual discipline is, of course, the common heritage of all streams in the Buddhist tradition. But the Theravāda exemplifies it in particularly striking form because it has only a very subdued emphasis on the role of the *arhat* after he attains enlightenment. Indeed, among that very large proportion of Theravāda Buddhists who believe that it is virtually impossible to attain arhatship in the present degenerate age, the question of a saint’s post-enlightenment role is all but irrelevant. As a result, the task of promoting the happiness or alleviating the suffering of beings within the context of phenomenal existence is of decidedly secondary importance; and the question of directing or influencing the course of human history can have only a very limited and indirect religious significance.

Within the Theravāda community of interpretation there are, of course, also indications of change. Increasing numbers of university-educated believers are, for example, rejecting the popular view of the unattainability of *nirvāṇa* and insisting on understanding the goal of the Buddhist life as capable of realization here and now. With the support of university faculty in departments of Buddhist civilization, philosophy, and Pāli, this growing stratum of intellectuals can marshal overwhelming textual support for its position. The question is, however, more serious when it is not one of documenting textual support but rather that of enriching or even modifying traditional interpretations. And this is what a rethinking of the relationship between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* would require. Among those Buddhist thinkers actively engaged in

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Gananath Obeyesekere, “Theodicy, Sin and Salvation in a Sociology of Buddhism,” pp. 31-38.

political life, there seems to be some inclination to move in this direction. They constitute only a very small minority; but they are, in effect, raising the crucial question of whether or not a religious system is viable in the twentieth century if it declines to interpret as religiously significant man's increasing capacity to shape his personal and corporate life within the sphere of phenomenal existence. To that question the Theravāda as well as the Mahāyāna communities will be responding in one way or another during the coming decades.