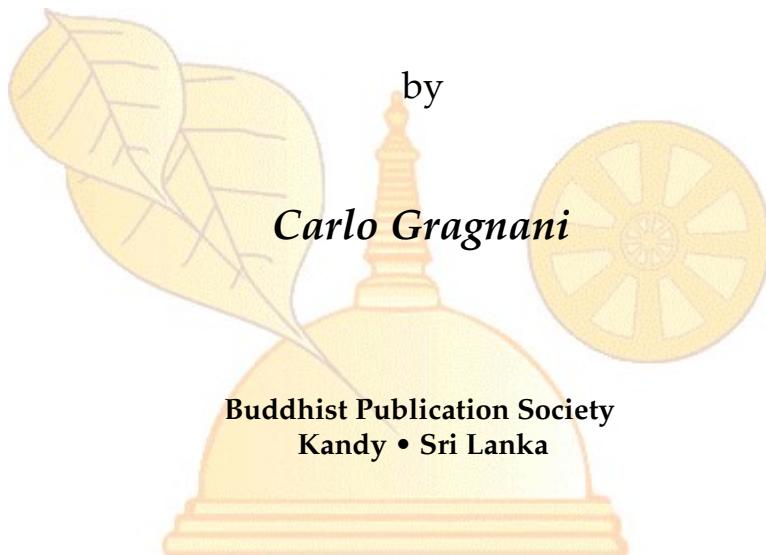


Birth, Life and Death of the Ego



The Wheel Publication No. 215

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First published: 1975

BPS Online Edition © 2006

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Contents

Birth, Life and Death of the Ego.....	3
The Monk Khemaka.....	3
Buddhism and Concepts.....	3
The New Born Baby.....	4
Language Intervenes	5
... It Organises Reality by Creating Things	5
It Grafts Itself on the Pre-Categorical Life	6
... But Has Its Own Limitation	7
... However It Also Opens Up.....	7
Words Are Not Neutral.....	7
Words and Meanings.....	7
The Ego Appears.....	8
Who Am I? Or What Am I?.....	9
The Ego IS Desire.....	10
Needs and Desires.....	10
The Chief Desire of the Ego: To Continue.....	11
A Vicious Circle.....	11
A Young Lady Made out of Salt.....	12
Is Man a Useless Passion?.....	12
A Pirandello Play.....	13
Normal Attention.....	14
Attention.....	15
The Ego Dissolves.....	16
The Door is the Exit, Why Does Nobody Want to Use It? (Confucius).....	16
The Monk Khemaka Again.....	17

Birth, Life and Death of the Ego

The Monk Khemaka

One day the monk Khemaka (so it is said in the Samyutta-Nikāya) was asked by some monks whether he found an “I” or something belonging to it in the Five Aggregates (matter, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness). The answer was negative. Then the monks said that Khemaka had reached the state of Arahantship. But Khemaka denied that he was an Arahant and admitted that a sense of “I am” persisted in him although he could not see an “I” either in the Five Aggregates or elsewhere. Khemaka said that his sense of “I am” was like the smell of a flower which is neither the smell of the petals, nor of the colour, nor of the fibres but just the smell of a flower.

Then Khemaka explains that the sense of “I am” also remains when the first stages of realisation are attained. Later on, with further progress, it vanishes, just as the chemical smell of a freshly washed cloth does after it has been kept for a time in a sweet-smelling box.

We can leave the story at this point and recall how during the four progressive stages of sainthood the ten fetters disappear. The “stream-enterer” (he who has attained the first stage) is free from the first three fetters among which there is “self-illusion” (the other two being “scepticism” and “attachment to mere rites and ritual”). Liberation from self-illusion means that any intellectual concept of being an “I” is dissipated. The “stream-enterer” is however still subject to the remaining seven fetters and therefore not free from other manifestations of the “I.” The “once-returner” (second stage) in addition to eliminating the first three, has weakened the fourth and the fifth fetters (“sensual lust” and “ill will”) which constitute, so to speak, the chief marks of the “I.” In the “non-returner” (third stage), the first five fetters are absent in a total, radical way. Finally, with the access to Arahantship (the last and perfected stage of sainthood) the other five fetters which again constitute different ways through which an “I” makes itself felt, cease (“craving for fine-material existence,” “craving for immaterial existence”, “conceit”, “restlessness”, “ignorance”).

So, it can be said that the “I” presents various aspects coming out separately at different times; they are progressively abandoned along the road to final liberation (Arahantship).

All this perhaps explains the difficulties Khemaka had in conveying his vague sense of being an “I.” The “I” is not “something” which is there in its totality or not; it seems more like a prism which presents now one facet now another, the hidden ones being potentially existent and liable to come into the open at any time.

Buddhism and Concepts

At this point I would suggest that the reader forgets for a while all about the monk Khemaka, the four stages of sainthood and Buddhism altogether, taking a jump forwards of many centuries in order to see how the “I”, the “ego”, is considered in our time by linguistics or by other human sciences.

Why is that? Not to look for confirmation. Buddhism does not need scientific credentials. Its approach is essentially pragmatic. Metaphysical speculations, mental activity expanding by itself (called in Pali: *papañca*, conceptual proliferation), are in opposition to what Buddhism offers as its original and vital contribution, which is also its main purpose: the liberation from suffering; and this high goal is not achieved just by learning theories, but rather by experiencing reality in a new way.

So, generally speaking, it can be said that Buddhism mistrusts thoughts, concepts and logical deductions. It favours instead direct experience, penetrative insight. And in fact, the most important Buddhist attainments cannot be adequately described; they are beyond words.

All this is true, but it is also true that Buddhism, of necessity, does use language and concepts. The Teaching conveys its meaning by words, and in early Buddhism—so it is reported—some people reached enlightenment through listening to the Buddha's talks. Besides, as to the practise, thought-conception (*vitakka*) and discursive thinking (*vicara*) are not only present but unavoidable in Vipassana (insight meditation). They are present also in Samatha (tranquillity meditation), in the first stage of absorption (first *jhāna*), although they are abandoned as absorption becomes more intense.

With regard to the ego, Buddhism—as is widely known—supports the idea that it is only a view, a concept to which no reality corresponds. Although the advice is given to test it and realise it through direct experience, the view that the ego-is-only-an-empty-idea is in itself a concept, an idea, which Buddhism considers valid, true.

So we must be careful when we interpret sentences as for instance: "The ego is only a concept or only a word." We must understand the attitude of Buddhism concerning language. It is not an attitude of rejection or of acceptance, but it is one of taking it for what it is worth.

We have to understand what words are worth. On this point Buddhism is extremely terse; in fact it is not its job to branch out in this field.

But because of that, references to more articulate analysis may be of help. We will see that this help is doubly useful: it allows a more penetrating look into what words are worth and, almost at the same time, into what the ego is, because the ego is closely connected with words, with language, in a way we are going to explore now.

The New Born Baby

We utter the word "I" many times during the day: I eat, I walk, I suffer, I am happy. And even when we do not pronounce that very word (or think of it) our behaviour bears the imprint of the "I" very often. And yet this "I" seems to be ungraspable. Nothing is more familiar and, at the same time, more mysterious than that.

The "I" does not emerge at the moment of the physical birth of the individual; it is a later creation having a slow process of development.

To describe what happens from the physical birth until the formation of a fully fledged "I", implies a measure of arbitrariness. In fact, such a description cannot be an auto-description; it can only be done by watching how an infant behaves (infant, according to the etymology of the word is "he who does not speak"). From such watching we reconstruct the supposed experience of the infant. Only an adult is capable of consciousness of himself, of self-observation. This type of consciousness is considered to give more reliable results than those which can be drawn by the watching of somebody else's behaviour; lately, however, it has been stressed that we are frequently mistaken in judging ourselves; hence the difference between the two ways of access to reality are not so important as they seem to be—and, in fact, they should complement each other.

These remarks are made only to underline the existence of a problem which is worth noticing, although it has only a marginal importance with respect to the subject dealt with in the present article.

The world of a baby, of a sentient being at its first stage of development, before the appearance of the "I" concept, is the world of biological life of primitive needs: a world of

presences closed in themselves to which the being adheres totally, completely; a world of emotions and impulses without object and subject; a world of vague images and reactions to stimuli external and internal.

Soon, this “field of life” organises itself; the infant begins to recognise, although it does not yet verbalise and conceptualise. Events succeed one another with a certain regularity and that gives rise to temporal series (again, only lived, not conceptualised). The appearance of the mother precedes that of the feeding-bottle which precedes the taste of milk which precedes a pleasant feeling. These series have meaning for an infant long before the adoption of the corresponding verbal signs: “mother”, “feeding-bottle”, etc. and are the basis of what, afterwards, will be the temporal succession symbolised by the words: “before”, “after”, “past”, “present”, “future” and so on.

In the same period the infant trains himself to walk, to talk and to perform other activities; but again, it does not yet classify or name them. The infant knows how to hold the feeding-bottle with both its hands, how to turn its head when it wants to look in another direction but all this knowing is implicit; it is a “knowing how to do”, not yet a logical, conceptual knowing.

This life is called pre-categorical because it precedes the categories proper to reasoning. In this type of life there is no separation between the baby and its various activities, the baby being totally absorbed in what it does or feels.

With the access to language, concepts, thinking (that is, to symbolic activity in general) this pre-categorical world continues to exist but is mediated by the linguistic symbol:

That, as we shall see, causes deep transformations.

Language Intervenes ...

The linguistic symbol, the “word” (in contradistinction to signs and signals which exist also in the pre-categorical world; the appearance of the feeding-bottle is a sign for the successive taste of milk) creates a new world. The word is an all-pervading symbol: it fixes, determines, stabilises. What before was a vague appearance not very well outlined and defined an appearance which after a while vanished completely, to come again afterwards (recognised or not), becomes now the mother who may be present or absent but who continues to exist independently from her being here or there. And the mother is not confused with the feeding-bottle, nor the latter with the milk; and all that is separated from the pleasure these things give when they are present and the dissatisfaction which is felt when they are absent.

... It Organises Reality by Creating Things ...

Language, therefore, is not only a means of expression and communication, it is also an organisation of reality (or rather, of our impressions of, and ideas about reality). More precisely: because it organises reality, it makes it possible to express, to communicate it. Language creates things, defines them, makes them stand out; it cuts them out of a flat, amorphous background. So the emotions which existed in a diffused way in the preverbal life, are conveyed, after the access to language, into the categories created by the latter; a variety of specific feelings thereby comes into existence.

Of course, different languages organise reality differently, as is known by intelligent translators whose work aims not so much at finding lexical equivalences but at equivalences of meanings. An example of how reality is differently arranged by different languages is offered by the rainbow which is a continuum, cut, by words, in various points limiting various colours. But it is not cut at the same points by all languages. In Welsh, the word *glas* covers our blue, merging into green and grey. Another example: our verbs have past, present and future tenses,

but in Hebrew, verbs have two temporal tenses according to whether the action expressed by the verb is completed or not. The Eskimos do not have the word snow, but they have four words, each one of them referring to a particular type of snow.

A world where words circumscribe pieces of reality out of a flux, is certainly an organised world, perhaps most suitable for the satisfaction of practical needs and for scientific development. But it should be kept in mind that a world organised by language is also a world dominated by it. The imposition of an order makes it possible for language to dominate the order itself.

It Grafts Itself on the Pre-Categorical Life ...

Let us revert to the pre-linguistic, pre-categorical activity, in order to see more in detail how it links up with language. This activity—we have already noted—is soon organised for practical aims like walking, grasping an object, moving around, talking, etc. All these kinds of behaviour, once they are empirically mastered, are performed automatically. When the linguistic activity sets in (and with it the intellectual faculties), the symbolism—so to say—is grafted on this pre-categorical activity which now is not only performed (it was already) but also thought, expressed in words, in symbols. Symbols symbolise something and in this case, this “something” is just the pre-categorical activities. Our baby now understands the words “walk”, “eat”, “talk”, “cold”, “warm” because they refer to something it has already experienced many times. Without those experiences, those words were symbols of nothing, that is they were not even symbols. Reading a thermometer would not indicate anything about the external temperature if the reader were deprived of the sensation of warmth and cold. (My wife still refuses symbolism in this particular field; instead of using the thermometer she stretches her hand out of the window in order to have a first-hand impression!). Similarly, a soldier must already know how to walk in order to follow the instructions teaching him how to walk in a military fashion.

In a general way, we understand something new only on the basis of something we already know. Even he who asks a question must already know—if only very insufficiently—the answer; otherwise the question cannot even be conceived.

The existence of this indisputable basis which must be there as a starting point for further progress, is shown very clearly in the series of questions linked with one another by the word, “how.” “How to become a civil servant?” “Through winning a competitive examination.” “How to win a competitive exam in action?” “By learning and understanding the subject matters.” “How to understand the subject matters?” At this point there is no more answer because the limit of what must already be known pre-categorically has been reached. In order to understand one must understand, as in order to pay attention one must pay attention, and so on.

Language, therefore, is the final phase of a pre-linguistic process which, in a sense, constitutes its nourishing ground. Only in this final phase the world is organised, conceptualised, temporalized by language. Words extract and abstract from experiences. An experience can be expressed in words, but words cannot express the totality of an experience. As Wittgenstein said: “Worte sind die Haut auf einem tiefen Wasser” (“Words are like a skin over a deep water”).¹

In symbolising something, words impose their law on what is symbolised, which is thereby transformed.

It is necessary to understand this process fully in order to know what words are worth.

¹ L. Wittgenstein: "Note Books 1914-16", Oxford, 1961, p. 53.

We are somehow aware of the pre-verbal world. Let us say that we sense it, we feel its presence, which is often vague and obscure. Now, as soon as we want to know what this presence is, we have to translate it into words (which may be uttered or only thought, it does not matter). Then, what was a vague presence may become "a pain in my right leg" or "a resentment" or "a three-storey house." Before that there was no "pain", no "right", no "leg", no "resentment" and so on; there was certainly something nobody could describe because the moment one does, the world of words is already there.

Therefore—let us repeat it—putting an experience into words is not like taking a photograph or making a duplicate: it is a process of transformation, of translation. Something new is created by words; and yet this newness must be related to what is symbolised, represented.

... But Has Its Own Limitation ...

There is, consequently, a fundamental gulf to overcome in the passage from the pre-verbal world to the symbolised world. And in this passage some limitations must be observed.

Language is, of necessity, linear; it displays itself in time, one word after another. Therefore, it expresses according to this characteristic. Besides, language is static. A mathematical formula (which also is language) can represent movement; but the formula itself does not move. nor does the word "movement": it is static, fixed in what it is.

Language, therefore, obliges what is conveyed by it to come out in ways which respect the limitations of language itself. Hence the problem of making congruent what one wants to say with what is really said (But this is a congruence of a special type, since we do not really know what we want to say until we have found the right words with which to say it).

... However It Also Opens Up.

But if language limits (as we have just seen), it also opens up. If you listen to a good description of a panorama while you are looking at it, it is probable that you will see more in it than you saw before. As La Rochefoucauld wrote: "There are people who would never have been in love, had they not heard talking of love." So words have a creativity of their own. Besides, they are creative also in being multi-significant, knots of significations overflowing in various directions. This is manifested especially in works of art. What is King Lear? An old legend? A family tragedy? A clash of generations? It is all that; a reservoir of meanings.

Words Are Not Neutral

Words are not neutral. Let us suppose that we feel uneasy about the way we behave. The situation may be bearable until it is verbalised. But if the sentence: "You are a coward" is expressed (it does not matter if it is actually heard or if it emerges from within, uttered by an inner voice), the situation may become unbearable immediately. The sentence has precipitated, condensed, fixed, consolidated what, before, was vague and changeable. Now a "coward" is there, stigmatised by a word which has precise connotations.

Words and Meanings

To say that words are symbolic is tantamount to saying that they have meanings. But of course, this is not always the case, as the dividing line between words or sentences (language in general) which have meanings and those which have not, is far from being clear. Of course it is easy to see to which category the words "house" and "bimeco" belong. "House" has a clear referent whereas "bimeco" is bla-bla-bla; strictly speaking, it is not even a word; it is only a meaningless sound.

But there is a multitude of borderline cases concerning sentences which, although formed by meaningful words, are on the verge of not making sense; or cases of single words, the meaning of which is so obscure and doubtful that may be it does not exist at all.

We all experience situations like that whenever we try, unsuccessfully, to convert into words something which makes itself felt in our inner world, or when we find it difficult to make the opposite conversion: from words to their meanings. In the first case we have potential meanings, in search for words; in the second, words in search for possible meanings. And when a search of this kind is unsuccessful we do not know whether it will be successful in the future or never.

To that field belong those perennial philosophical problems which are never adequately solved (free will versus determinism, or many paradoxes like: does movement exist?); it is plausible to think that what makes them "problems" is only their linguistic expression.

I have tried to give an idea of the host of problems which the passage from the not-yet-expressed to its verbal expression implies. A passage which retains something mysterious. Rightly Nietzsche observed ("Die fröhliche Wissenschaft", par. 261) that it needs a genius to see something which, although it is close by, has not yet a name. Naming for the first time means creating a new symbolization, a new individualization, making a new cut into the non-verbal reality, which thereby transforms that reality. This is why it has been said that words, at the same time reveal and hide what they stand for.

The Ego Appears

Though I may appear to have strayed from the subject matter of this article, I have not done so. I have dealt at length with language because the ego belongs to it. It is not possible to understand the ego without understanding language, the soil out of which it is born.

The ego—we have seen—comes into existence (whatever may be the nature of this existence) when the sentient being resorts to words and concepts. As is known, before saying "I" the sentient being refers to himself in the third person. He would say: "the baby wants", "Bob wants", which evidences the fact that he receives his own individuality from others, from the social group and finally from the word. At the very beginning he uses their language when he talks of himself. Afterwards he would say "I"; anyhow, "the baby", "Bob", the "I" become part and parcel of the world of words which, with its meanings and categories, absorbs, sucks, models the sentient being. So the "I" thinks and acts according to the rules of that world; it is caught up in it. And when I say that "it is caught up in it," I mean that it is entrapped—so to speak—not only in words and concepts in their narrow sense, but altogether in the world at large organised, classified, systematised by them.

The ego emerges together with everything which is separated from it (that is the Non-ego). Ego and non-ego are born together. It could not be otherwise, the one being the reverse of the other.

Let us see more closely how this process occurs.

To be hungry, for a baby, is an event (if it is correct to call it that way) not yet conceptualised, without individuality and beyond time. But when the baby can say: "I am hungry" then the categories of individuality, of duration, of subject and object emerge all together. Now there is a name (hunger) which groups various sensations, as there is a name ("I," or Carlo) for the entity to which those sensations refer. There is an ego and its experiences. Both last: The "I" lasts or has the feeling of lasting which derives from remembering its past and anticipating its future. The hunger also lasts; it lasts de facto until it is satisfied; and it lasts also de jure because it has

become a recurrent entity subject to recognition. So there is my hunger of yesterday and my probable hunger of tomorrow ...

Who Am I? Or What Am I?

Now a moment arrives when the ego, which usually takes itself very much for granted, wants to know something about its own nature. So it asks itself: "Who am I?" or "What am I?". And this is the beginning of all sorts of difficulties.

In fact, to this recurrent question no adequate answer seems to exist, if the search is in the direction of a substance or entity. Any possible answer: "I am this, I am that" is doomed to be partial or incomplete. The "this" or "that" (body or feelings or consciousness or what not) shows itself as much too restrictive to connote the "I." Nor an aggregate which would comprise some or all of these elements would do, since it would still be either much too restrictive or much too vague.

But there is more to it than that. In any case the answer to that question leaves out that part of the ego which asks the question. Whatever I may say I am, that is a statement of mine in which the "I" which makes the statement is not included.

One of the most prominent French psychoanalysts, Jacques Lacan, has summarised this situation as follows: "The question is not, to know whether I speak of myself in conformity with what I am, but whether, when I speak of myself, I am the same "I" of which I speak." The ego is inevitably in this plight when it tries to project itself before itself.

As a resume of these inescapable difficulties, I will quote what a French philosopher, Gaston Berger, has written on the subject:

"Am I now able to answer the question which I was asking at the beginning of my inquiry? Can I say who am I? Nothing could be less sure. I have learned to recognise in the personality more or less profound levels. I have taken back properties to their own principles. But levels cover a centre, and properties, have an owner. I have pushed as far as possible my investigation without ever being able to get at something more than my belongings. To recognise them as mine, means to differentiate myself from them. I certainly am not either this body through which sensations come, and which I use for action, nor those tendencies, good or bad ones, that manifest through it. I can even see in the light of experience that I cannot be a body or an aggregate of bodies or a characteristic derived from some particular form of bodies. Those hypotheses which I am refusing were not false propositions, but meaningless affirmations. However, even if I cannot in any way get hold of myself, I nevertheless know that I am, and that I cannot doubt to be...If I wanted to speak more rigorously, I should then say I am I, expressing in this unusual way the fact that the I is always the subject. If I prefer to use a term which belongs both to common use and to the philosopher's language, I will not say, as is sometimes done, that I have a soul (which, to be precise, is contradictory), but that I am a soul."²

Without wanting to comment in detail on this statement, I would say that this inquiry of the ego upon itself is one of the most outstanding borderline cases of a word in search of a meaning. The ego seems to be a word to which no clearly cut boundary made in the pre-verbal reality corresponds.

But if the ego is not to be found in the field of something well defined and circumscribed once for all (more specifically in the field of entities), this does not exclude that it cannot be considered differently. Perhaps it is not an entity, but it may be a fundamental orientation taken by human beings when they are caught up in the linguistic symbolism.

² Quoted from the book by R. Assagioli: "*The Act of Will*", (The Wiking Press, New York), page 261/262.

More than a theoretical problem, the ego may be an existential tendency; not a substantive, but a verb, the verb "to I" or "I-ing" as Alan Watts suggests.

Let us see how satisfactorily we can explore this possibility.

The ego experiences not only the present (or, better, what is present) but also remembers the past and anticipates the future. This remembering and anticipating gives the ego a sense of duration, of its temporal extension in the two directions. But memory has its limits; so, beyond these the ego imagines a further past conceived as a (mythical) primordial age; it does the same with the future, especially the far distant future, seen as a kind of Utopia where peace and harmony, as in that glorious past, would reign. In so doing, the ego creates eternal values of a secular or religious nature. The main reason why the ego indulges in this activity is its strong tendency to escape from the present. The ego seems to be alienated from what happens here and now; it takes refuge in projecting itself into other times already gone or to come. Blaise Pascal had already noticed it: "Man does not know how to live in the present; he is veiled by the shadows of the past or by his planning of the future." What matters to the ego is to refuse the limitations of the present; it revolts against its being just what it is and nothing else, its apparent insignificance. And words are an excellent vehicle to get out of the now. Everybody remembers the old story of the three stone-cutters who, to the same question, "What are you doing?", each one gave a different answer: the first said, "I am cutting stones"; the second, "I am earning a living"; and the third, "I am building a cathedral." The power of words is such that their meanings can considerably exceed the restricted area of the here and now. Through language the ego quits easily the things which happen in the present, in order to go into the abstract; this is why words poorer and poorer of content and richer and richer in fascination are frequently used.

So the ego has a strong tendency not to be there, where in any given moment it actually is.

This tendency is so important that it may be expedient to see more closely what leads to it. In trying to follow this path, I may possibly indulge in some repetitions. But it is not without interest to consider the same thing from different points of view.

The Ego IS Desire

We must take into account that the main characteristic of the ego is to have desires. (It would be more correct to say that the ego IS desire, but for the moment it may be expedient not to go beyond the first, less correct but more generally acceptable statement). Among the desires the ego has, the first, basic, fundamental one is the desire for continuity.

All this needs a bit of explaining.

We have seen how language organises reality by creating "things" which appear to be lasting entities, although intermittently present to consciousness. The ego itself is a product of language and therefore conceives its own being too, as a lasting entity; even more so since the ego appears to itself—explicitly or implicitly—as the ever-present point of reference of all "things." So the feeling of being an ego is much more frequently present—either in itself or as a subjective pole correlative to "things"—than the presence of "things."

Therefore the ego has a strong feeling of continuity. If "things" look like permanent entities, much more so does the ego, the entity which recognises permanence in them.

But in addition to having a strong feeling of continuity, the ego has also a desire for continuity; it wants to have more and more of it.

At this point we have to understand clearly the nature of desire.

Needs and Desires

A desire is not a need although it results from a transformation of the latter. How does this transformation occur? In the pre-verbal world where everything is fluid and formless, the satisfaction of a need is a simple event, provided, of course, that the "something" needed is available. But when this "something", under the influence of language, becomes a lasting thing having a name and being recognisable; when, to take an example, the "something" becomes "the milk", the corresponding need transforms itself into a desire. That is to say: the need overcomes the limits of a biological event, a spontaneous occurrence. The ego remembers past satisfactions enjoyed in drinking milk and wants to repeat them; so it may force the situation and desire what it is not in need of, with the probable result of getting boredom or even nausea instead of pleasure. Desire becomes therefore dissociated from need; eventually the ego forces even an arising of desire through desiring to desire.

All this does not mean that needs are totally supplanted by desires; of course not. But needs do not belong to the ego; they belong to its biological support, so to speak.

Needs are few and clear; desires are numberless and vague because they are closely connected with imagination. Very often one desires something good without having a concrete vision of what this means. Alan Watts, in one of his talks, invited people to be absolutely specific about that. Do you desire a beautiful house? Well, describe it particularly, go down to the last detail and see what happens then!

As soon as a need becomes a desire, its fulfilment becomes problematic.

The Chief Desire of the Ego: To Continue.

Now, the first and foremost desire of the ego is the desire to be, to continue, which means to go on having desires, and the transformation of needs into desires is the texture of the ego, IS the ego.

In order to continue having desires, I must not be threatened in my existence as an ego. Everything, therefore, should be under my control. Mind this word: "my." The desire for continuity is invested with a strong passion expressed by words like "my" and "mine."

So through desire the ego escapes from the present and through desire suffering emerges. (In his own way, Oscar Wilde had this suggested against having desires: there is the danger, he said, that they materialise. And it is very unpleasant to live with the disappointment of our materialised hopes).

To act against these frustrations; the ego resorts to the preservation of its ideals by refusing to have them contaminated by reality. Eternal values serve this purpose through never descending on the earth. Hence, Russian or Chinese regimes are not considered as true Communism, the true Christianity is still to come, and so forth. In this way eternal values stay continuously in an ideal world; their reign always is yet to come.

But neither the support offered by eternal values nor the success reached by man in science and technology (with its tremendous impact on the standard of living) seem to be enough to satisfy man; on the contrary, the more he progresses in these fields the more his sense of uneasiness grows.

This is very evident especially with those people who, having pursued a life-long ideal, cannot escape a sense of disillusionment when they feel that the end of their life is approaching without any particular advancement having taken place in what they had cherished.

A Vicious Circle

A vicious circle seems to exist in this respect.

Uneasiness prompts man to engulf himself in anything which may keep this uneasy feeling away; but, on the contrary, this very action fosters anxiety, giving rise to such disquieting things as the search for "a sense in life" or the doubt whether life has any sense at all.

Desire selects now this, now that object, but since no object succeeds in assuaging the thirst, desire eventually reveals itself as a desire of nothing or, if you like, as an impossible desire.

More explicitly, the plight in which the ego finds itself entangled is the following:

The ego would like to have all its desires fulfilled, which means not having desires any longer; but not having desires any longer would be the death of the ego; so the ego would like to continue having desires!

The appeal of old myths evoking the nostalgia of a primordial Eden, of a Paradise Lost where everything was immersed in everything, distinctions were non-existent and harmony reigned (all desires fulfilled), clashes with the will of the ego to continue, that is to continue to have desires. The ego is the living contradiction consisting in trying to experience "totality" and "individuality" at the same time.

And, as in the Spiritual "Old Man River", the ego is "tired of living, but scared of dying."

The idea of improving itself in order to cope with the situation may appeal to the ego. Doctors, analysts, even magicians may be consulted for that purpose. But even along this road there is little salvation, because the ego puts up resistance when some considerable measure of success is in the offing. The ego is afraid of changing too much since that would go counter Wits basic need of identity.

There is an old story which I will adapt freely to the situation.

A Young Lady Made out of Salt.

Once upon a time there was a young lady made out of salt who felt such a strong attraction towards the sea (from which she was born) as to wanting to be reabsorbed by it.

One day she made the first step into the water, but two toes of the wetted foot dissolved rapidly. The young lady retreated in anger since, of course, she did not want to lose her individuality. So she turned her back on the sea and started fighting in order to affirm herself more and more, as a separate entity, hoping (senselessly) to come thereby closer and closer to the sea. The young lady, in other words, wanted to become the sea again and, at the same time, to continue to be herself.

She tried to reconcile what is reciprocally incompatible.

Is Man a Useless Passion?

If, at that point, we look for a conclusion, we may be tempted to adopt the celebrated one put forth by Sartre: "Man is a useless passion". Were it so, the only way open to man would be to bear with courage his radical, inescapable unhappiness.

But thus to conclude is to interrupt the process of understanding. Before doing that, in any case, let us carry this process a bit further.

Is man a useless passion? I would rather say that the ego is. In trying to define the ego we have found that it resists attempts to describe it statically, that is according to the traditional

Aristotelian logic based on “substance” or “essence” whereas it lends itself to be explained in terms of passionate activity, meant to satisfy an impossible desire.

The ego deceives itself into thinking that its real problem is the satisfaction of this or that desire, being led astray by a world which appears composed of durable and lasting things and therefore productive of lasting happiness. This world is only a creation of language, but the ego ignores that and acts according to its false belief.

However, the human being who, under the impact of language, becomes an ego, has the possibility of awakening which, if developed, would destroy the ego. Usually that possibility is dormant; the ego takes itself, its activity very much for granted. The obviousness of the world of words with all its implications is so deep and generally acknowledged that whenever it is questioned, astonishment and derision arise.

A Pirandello Play

In a famous Pirandello play (“Six Characters in Search of an Author”), there is a dialogue between a character (fully conscious of its condition as “character”) and the producer (who performs the role of a man in flesh and blood) during which the former expresses its doubts about the so called self-identity of the latter.

Here is the relevant part of that dialogue:

“FATHER (the character): ... and once again I ask you in all seriousness; ‘Who are you?’

PRODUCER (turning to the Actors in utter amazement, an amazement not unmixed with irritation):

What a cheek the fellow has! A man who calls himself a character comes here and asks me who I am!

FATHER (with dignity, but in no way haughtily): A character, sir, may always ask a man who he is. Because a character has a life which is truly his, marked with his own special characteristics. And as a result he is always somebody! Whilst a man ... And I’m not speaking of you personally at the moment ... Man in general ... can quite well be nobody.

PRODUCER: That may be as it may? But you’re asking me these questions. Me, do you understand? The Producer! The Boss!

FATHER (softly, with gentle humility): But only in order to know if you, you as you really are now, are seeing yourself as, for instance, after all the time that has gone by, you see yourself as you were at some point in the past... With all the illusions that you had then ... with everything ... all the things you had deep down inside you ... everything that made up your external world ... everything as it appeared to you then ... and as it was, as it was in reality for you then! Well ... thinking back on those illusions which you no longer have ... on all those things that no longer seem to be what they were once upon a time ... don’t you feel that ... I won’t say these boards ... No! ... that the very earth itself is slipping away from under your feet, when you reflect that in the same way this you that you now feel yourself to be ... , all your reality as it is today ... is destined to seem an illusion tomorrow?

PRODUCER (not having understood much of all this, and somewhat taken aback by this specious argument): Well? And where does all this get us, anyway?

FATHER: Nowhere. I only wanted to make you see that if we (again, pointing to himself and to the other Characters) have no reality outside the world of illusion, it would

be as well if you mistrusted your own reality. The reality that you breathe and touch today ... Because like the reality of yesterday, it is fated to reveal itself as a mere illusion tomorrow.

The poor producer does not feel the earth slipping away from under his feet, he is so sure of himself, or perhaps sometimes he does but he is so scared by it that he does not pursue this terrible feeling.

Every now and then, men (producers or not) have a glimpse of their fundamental situation. They may see the world and themselves with new eyes. When that happens everything shows itself as a reverse of what appeared before; everything seems unreal if compared with the usual, customary reality.

Usually these flashes of awareness are without consequences; just one of those fleeting thoughts which have no impact at all on the kind of life one leads. And even if this sort of realisation happens rather frequently, it can be discarded for a variety of reasons; because, for instance, one sees in it a temptation of the Devil against the Divine affirmation: "The world is not an illusion and you have an immortal soul"; or because the *carpe diem* is made to prevail.

So, many seeds are wasted. However there are instances in which they give their fruits. But a fertiliser is necessary for that. That fertiliser has a common name: attention. But it must be an attention of a special kind as we shall see presently.

Normal Attention

Are we attentive in everyday life? Of course we are, and in various ways. We pay attention when we want to learn a new technique for instance, how to drive a car, when we listen to a piece of music we like or when we read a book which interests us. A mechanic is attentive when repairing a piece of machinery. A scientist is attentive when carrying out an experiment. The man in the street is attentive when he walks in heavy rain, and so on.

In each instance the attention fits the case. Sometimes it is relaxed (when listening to music), sometimes it is a kind of free floating attention as when a research scientist does not know in which direction he will possibly discover something, or as when a psychoanalyst tries to catch what his patient "says", without really saying it.

All these types of attention (others might be exemplified) have this in common: the object of the attention is only the goal, the aim to be reached. If I think it is important to close the windows before leaving the house, I keep my mind fixed on that; the movements of my body, the effort made to realise this project pass unnoticed; nor is any notice taken of stray thoughts or anything which may intervene during the process, unless they strike me as important for some reason or other.

As a consequence of that, attention may be associated with some other content of consciousness without this fact being realised. If I try to pass a thread through the very narrow eye of a needle, my attention may be tinged with tenseness or impatience (of which I am unaware).

Being attentive according to the modes described just now is part and parcel of the ego world and does not serve the purpose of seeing the world from a new viewpoint.

The attention which discloses a new world must not be an ego attention. Let us try to elicit some of its traits.

It is an attention which watches reality in the making, moment by moment, in the here and now of every moment. In fact everything happens in the here and now; there is no other lived time than the here and now, but usually we are not conscious of it.

This attention, therefore, is not discriminatory, has no preferences. It is focussed on what happens to be there.

All this represents a radical change with respect to what we usually do. We interpret immediately a group of sensations and we use a name to symbolise them. To take again an example already made, we say: "I am hungry", but—paradoxically as it may seem—we know very little the sensations which are behind those words. We certainly feel hungry but more than that we know we are hungry; we do not spend time in order to experience those sensations; rather we run to eat something.

This new attention is without presuppositions because any possible presuppositions are or should be converted into an object to be attentive to. It is a detached attention as if answering an eternal question: What happens? What happens here and now?

Attention

This attention (which from now on I will write with a capital A, to distinguish it from the other forms of attention) has nothing behind itself, no ego, of course, because the ego—or, better, its components—is in front of the Attention, which, therefore, cannot be mine (or somebody else's for that matter). Introspection is just my attention focussed on myself; this is why it evaluates, judges with satisfaction or dissatisfaction. On the contrary, Attention looks at these evaluations, judgements, satisfactions, dissatisfactions in so far and for as long as they are present. Attention is not associated with anything; it works in isolation, it brings nothing with itself in order to watch everything from nowhere.

Attention has been compared to a host who watches whoever enters his house. The guests are neither invited nor expelled. Some are nice, some are less nice, some are nasty. Their presence may be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral; but Attention does not associate itself with sympathy or with aversion or with indifference for the reason that sympathy, aversion and indifference are also guests to be watched.

Attention ignores one of the obligations of a good host: to entertain his guests. It does not agree or disagree with them; to each one of them it gives the same treatment of watchfulness.

Sometimes a wonderful guest appears by the name of tranquillity. Attention is very much tempted to invite him to sit down and have a cup of tea. But when that happens something important occurs; the guest is no longer as wonderful as before and Attention loses its capital A. The moment it prefers tranquillity to the other guests, it starts quarrelling with some of them.

Attention watches what happens and that is not a simple matter. Mistakes about what happens are frequent. It is possible to believe to be in contact with a physical pain whereas there is only contact with the thought of that pain. It is not easy to feel what one feels (and maybe does not want to feel).

Confusion in this matter is also facilitated by the extreme rapidity with which phenomena succeed one another. Gradually Attention becomes more rapid, noticing clearly each event in succession. In advanced stages, Attention acknowledges every infinitesimal event, physical or mental, adhering to them as the water does to the swimmer's movements.

The exercise of Attention goes counter to long-standing habits which are not easily discarded; this is why Attention falls back into attention very often.

Is Attention on a pre-verbal or on a verbal level? Well, it is possible that at the very moment of contact the object of Attention is just a bare sensation, something noticed of which nothing can be said or thought. But immediately afterwards, language comes into the picture: not in its function of communication but in that of classification of reality, in the sense described before. Indeed, the simple act of mute recognising is already language, it implies language. Besides, since Attention is meant to understand reality, this process of comprehension must of necessity fit into the categories of words and logic. Language, therefore, is far from being excluded from Attention; but Attention makes it possible to see what language hides.

Attention sees, understands the world in a new way; so new that—as has been hinted at before—the world appears as the opposite to the old one. To the latter pertained the characteristics of solidity, durability, self-ness; to the former, that of fluidity, impermanence, self-less-ness.

Under the scrutiny of Attention nothing stays, everything moves, changes, is not identical with itself in two successive moments, although patterns of interconnection, of conditionality, are noticeable. The new reality may also appear unsatisfactory in so far as desire still retains some solidity, some permanence in an ever changing environment. In this situation, desire, not yet reduced in size, so to speak, cannot lean on anything because everything is too evanescent to bear it. Previously, there was a search for a solid ground allowing durable fruitions. The search was doomed to failure, but at least there was some hope while it was going on. Now it is evident that such a ground does not exist. So until desire gives up this impossible fight, the new world is rather distressing. It is only when the final “let it go” happens, that is when desire too, recognised for what it is, is discarded, that a sense of release sets in. (It is evident that this perspective cannot be fully appreciated so long as man cherishes desire so much. Because man—let us repeat once again—not only has desires but is desirous of desires. He may even complain about not having enough of them. I once heard an ego saying: “I would like to eat an ice cream, if I would care for it!” Meister Eckhard had already noticed that “those who are not free are horrified at what makes the joy of free men.”)

The Ego Dissolves

Obviously, under Attention, the ego dissolves. Ego and Attention cannot be contemporaneous. But a warning is quite in order here. If the ego is non-existent during the time Attention prevails, it may re-emerge later to congratulate itself for the splendid performance consisting in disappearing at will! When this happens, it means that Attention is the servant of the ego and not its killer; Attention becomes a new faculty acquired by the ego, about which it can boast.

When this is not the case; when Attention really has the upper hand, the individual is radically transformed, liberated as he is from the ego, from desire, from the category of mine. The individual continues to own things and to say: I, my, mine, but possession has lost its emotive element and the words I, my, mine have only a grammatical connotation or a social meaning. A disinvestment has taken place; energy has abandoned what before was animated by it, i.e. greed, hatred, delusion. Now it is possible to see clearly how the adventures of the ego were the adventures of its own impossibility to be.

The free individual does not necessarily become an ascetic (by the way, asceticism may be accompanied by a host of repressed desires). Nothing impedes one in this free life to enjoy the taste of a cake or the sight of a flower. But when the cake is eaten and the flower withered (or even before that, according to the dynamics of what is present here and now) there is no trying to hold on to anything.

The Door is the Exit, Why Does Nobody Want to Use It? (Confucius)

The plight of Man is that, having attained remarkable, even spectacular success in the world of words, he has not sufficiently realised how he is also the victim of its own creation. The control of things—permitted by language and by what goes with it—has given to man the impression of being the Master. But in reality, on the existential level, man is more and more controlled by what he believes to control. And when the situation in this respect has become clear enough, man has found no other way to cope with it than to inflate his ego, which, of course, gets him more and more involved in its plight. The story of a fly which, having got into a bottle, tries to get out of it by passing through the glass, repeats itself. Like the fly of the story, man usually does not see the little opening and even if he does see it, he does not realise that it is the way out. Instead, he continues spending or rather wasting his energy trying to pass through the glass.

The Monk Khemaka Again

I am afraid I have been guilty of a bit of *papañca*, of heaping words upon words. The monk Khemaka was much more succinct in talking about the ego. "It is just like the lingering smell of a flower." My aim was to analyse, in some detail, how the ego is born, how it lives and how it dies. And now that I have finished my work, a doubt lurks in my mind: sometimes the deeper one tries to go, the more one stays on the surface ...

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The Administrative Secretary
Buddhist Publication Society
P.O. Box 61
54 Sangharaja Mawatha
Kandy, Sri Lanka
E-mail: bps@bps.lk
Web site: <http://www.bps.lk>
Tel: 0094 81 223 7283
Fax: 0094 81 222 3679
