Kenneth K. Inada **Problematics of the Buddhist nature of self**

In dealing with the problematics of the Buddhist nature of self, we are treading on familiar ground. In this article, however, I hope to avoid the all-too-familiar as much as possible and open up fresh areas for a meaningful dialogical discourse.

By the Buddhist nature of self we are specifically focusing on that unparalleled doctrine of *anātman* ("nonself"). Certainly, the doctrine was a rare Copernican turn in philosophic insight in the East, first in India proper then subsequently outside of India, especially in the Asiatic countries in general which developed unique social and cultural forms that continue to exist today. It has, in short, influenced major changes in the outlook and perspective in man and his livelihood; yet, we scarcely know what it means in its fullness and how it has made the impact on him. For instance, ask any Buddhist, practicing or professed, to explain the doctrine or its rudiments and chances are he will not be able to convey to you its full meaning and significance in any satisfactory manner, barring linguistic difficulties naturally. This is as it should be. For any positive or objective accounting of the doctrine would surely be held suspect.

In many respects it is possible to assert that Buddhism is a philosophy of *anātman*. By saying this, I am not at all denigrating other important doctrines in Buddhism; rather, I am trying to say that we can focus on a single major doctrine, such as the *anātman*, and introduce other relevant doctrines of equal or lesser values as well in ways that are consistent and coherent to the whole system of Buddhist thought. For it is an important character of Buddhist thought in general that it includes traits of malleability and flexibility, adaptation and absorption, and interrelationship and interpenetration. In this respect, the later T'ien-t'ai and Hua-yen doctrines, such as, "all in one, one in all," or "all is one, one is all," are not entirely new to Chinese Buddhist thinking. The roots go back to original Buddhist thought. So a Buddhist, nay even a strict academician, cannot afford to experience clashes of ideas, concepts, or doctrines in Buddhism, although clashes are inevitable for many. There is deep concern and uneasiness, to be sure, about the way Buddhists at times set up contrasting doctrines side by side or even on the same level of existence, for example, the relative (*saṃvṛti*) and absolute (*paramārtha*) natures of truth, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, relational origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and so on. These only remind us of the subtleties and profundities of the nature of Buddhist doctrines.[1]

I wish to reexamine the doctrine of *anātman* in such a way that the old problematics will be covered and at the same time new problematics, in the sense of advancing the cause of Buddhist understanding, will emerge. It is not an easy task but well worth the effort. By this attempt, I will return to Buddhist thought what many scholars have tried to deny it, namely, the place and func-

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tion of metaphysics. It would seem to me that such a denial is ungrounded and greatly restricts or limits our understanding of Buddhism. It is so in several ways.

First, the denial is prompted by an overly concern for the Buddhist goal, *nirvāṇa*, and the meditative discipline that leads to it by "transcending" any empirical analysis. Meditation, afterall, it is argued, is the key to slough off the elements of the empirical realm and that within this process metaphysics or metaphysical understanding is unnecessary (shades of logical positivism perhaps) and in fact it becomes a burden on the practitioner. We can understand the zeal to rid man of any obstacles in his meditative practice but that is only one aspect of man's quest for the goal. There is another aspect, equally important and perhaps more basic to his attainments, which is the critical understanding of his own intimate empirical realm of existence. In other words, the metaphysics of his own ordinary experiential world is the most important grounds upon which he launches his meditative practice.

Second, the famous so-called antimetaphysical *sūtra*, *Cūḷa*-M*āluṅkyasutta*, is readily invoked to support the denial. The technical term, *avyākata*, (indeterminate or inexpressible nature), for example, is interpreted to signify the inanity or inefficacy of any metaphysical principles or descriptions. In one instance, the question of whether the *tathāgata* (Enlightened One) survives death is metaphysical and does not elicit an answer, thus suggesting the Buddha's alleged silence. But it can also be argued that the *sūtra* is not really pointing at the bankruptcy of metaphysics or metaphysical thinking as such. The Buddha's constant or repeated entreaty to Māluṅkyaputta that the question "does not fit" (the case) can be interpreted to mean (out of several other interpretations naturally) that his so-called metaphysical imputations, for example, *Tathāgata*, soul, death, finitude, infinitude, and so on, are wrongly constructed or presented and therefore wrongly understood. I will treat the nature of metaphysics shortly.

Finally, by pointing at some of the principal doctrines, such as *śūnyatā*, *nirvāṇa*, *dharma*, *pratītyasamutpāda*, *anitya* and *anātman*, it is pointed out that these do not have substantial contents and therefore they are metaphysically neutral or indifferent. In this instance, I believe the denial is very much premature. That is, it seems that the doctrines or concepts are not really understood in their true natures before they are cast into the same so-called nonsubstantial and thus nonmetaphysical basket. It is a simplistic device but a wrong one. It is wrong for the reason that not one of the doctrines has been given the chance to apply or manifest itself cogently in one's experience. Of course, to demonstrate this is a very difficult task, but it still is important to indicate that to the detractors of metaphysics fall the burden of proof on experiential matters. It seems quite ironic, moreover, that such detractors of metaphysics go merrily along to indulge in the doctrines of Buddhism in ways that not only suggest but strongly indicate the place of metaphysics and the function

of metaphysical thinking. They reserve the right of course to discard the metaphysical ladder after using it, à la Wittgenstein. But can we or do we dispense with the ladder so readily? This is a question that requires further investigation.

To be sure, there is no exact term for metaphysics in Buddhism, nor in Indian philosophy in general for that matter. This may seem to be a shortcoming, but for us I would prefer to interpret it as a real challenge, an invitation to explore deeper into the elements of the Buddhist system. On this, it should be noted at the outset that Buddhism is not a well-defined system of thought with a clearly defined framework into which all the fillers can be readily thrown or framed so that both the framework and the fillers can always be identified in no uncertain terms. Such a framework is a fiction, a bad myth, that simply does not stand. It is an ungrounded myth or ideal to which we must address ourselves and which I hope to clarify in the course of this article.

It further seems to me that the detractors of metaphysics do not distinguish between good and bad metaphysics. They seem to be repulsed from the start and quite abruptly, perhaps, by the term itself, aghast that one could be so bold and presumptuous as to attempt an analysis of man and the world with such categorical verve as seen, for example, in some of the idealistic and materialistic systems. Granted that sheer absolutism or sheer relativism or even sheer materialism has no legitimate place in sound metaphysics, as I am willing to admit that the detractors rightly observe in the imputations of eminent realities in these so-called isms in both the Western and Eastern traditions; still, it would be folly to be ignorant of or to dismiss outright the quest in man for the relative and the absolute nature of things. My point is that the eminent realities referred to within the context of relative and absolute systems are somehow misplaced or misdirected or misguided. They are so because of the truncated or one-directional way in which they are treated within a seemingly coherent system of metaphysics. The proponents are in such a hurry to construct that system that they either miss or gloss over much of the nature of experiential content that constitutes existence. It is so easy to see and count a few realities (or elements of existence) and to indulge in sweeping generalizations about *the reality* of the nature of things. I call this form of metaphysics deviated. It is bad metaphysics. It is a myopic view, a limited or constricted type of metaphysics.

So, granted that bad metaphysics is prevalent among us, even with religious and philosophical thinkers of the first order, there is still a place for good or proper type of metaphysics. In this respect, I cannot help but recall Alfred Whitehead's famous caution:

> Whatever is found in 'practice' must lie within the scope of the metaphysical description. When the description fails to include the 'practice', the metaphysics is inadequate and requires revision. There can be no appeal to practice to supplement metaphysics, so long as we remain contented with our metaphysical

doctrines. Metaphysics is nothing but the description of the generalities which apply to all the details of practice.[3]

In Buddhism there is an incredible amount of concern for the mechanics of 'practice', a deep concern for the ingredients that are necessary for the description of a truly great metaphysical system of experience.[4] In many ways, its metaphysical system is unique in that it probes deeper than most Western systems in accounting for the complex mechanics of man's being including certain elements that are unique to Buddhism. These elements will emerge presently as our discussion develops.

In the main, then, antimetaphysicians have been critical of any and all ontological assumptions. With both idealistic and materialistic strains of metaphysics, there is a tendency, on the one hand, to indulge in a form of "object" or "objects of discourse," such as the Absolute, God, Brahman, One, Unity, Principle, and the like, relative to the macrocosmic realm or, on the other hand, to identify certain atomic components, such as the self, soul, consciousness, elements of existence, and so on relative to the microcosmic realm. Unless one is wary, these implicit or explicit objectifications have the tendency to result in definitive ontological natures that frame one's life and life perspectives. Even in Buddhism, the svabhāvic (self-nature) ontology of the Abhidharma-Sarvāstivāda tradition was immediately criticized by the Sautrāntika as well as by the Mādhyamika (that is, by Nāgārjuna) and the Mahāyāna tradition in general. But we would certainly be remiss were we to dismiss ontologies solely on the basis of their being bad metaphysics. What is important here is to distinguish the kind of ontology referred to that we should be wary of (namely, the svabhāvic type) from the kind that we should be able to explore and accommodate if proved to be worthy as well as relevant to our experiences.

Needless to say, the svabhāvic type belongs to bad metaphysics and thus cannot be perpetrated. But what about the other type? This other type of metaphysics accounts for an ever-widening and deepening nature of human experience. It came about in Western philosophy relatively late, picking up momentum, for example, with the ideas of Hegel, Darwin, Bergson, Morgan, nineteenth-century science, Einstein, Heisenberg, Heidegger and showing up clearly in Whitehead's organic philosophy. In the East, the Buddha had already expounded the rudiments of such a thought twenty-five hundred years earlier. The detailed comparisons between the East and the West on the matter is unnecessary at this point, but suffice it to say that the principle of organic process philosophy was known and lived through by man earlier than usually noted. In the West of course Heraclitus is the shining example of an earlier sage who keyed on the principle of change and process but, alas, few took him seriously. Plato carried the thought further to some extent, but he could not really accommodate it within his great doctrine on the Idea of the Good. Nor did Aristotle, with his sweeping architectonic view of things, really succeed in

accommodating organic philosophy. His thoughts rather fired a concern for the substantial treatment of things. All this is not to fall complacent with a false impression that modern man has understood and accepted process philosophy all along as a way of life. I might add that the situation can also be applied to modern Buddhists, scholars and practitioners alike.

It is my contention that organic process philosophy is marvellously depicted in the Buddhist philosophy of *anātman*. Let us move into its implications.

Anātman is etymologically, *an-ātman*, or the negation of the *ātman* (self); it connotes the exact opposite of *ātman*. Logically, there is no doubt that this is very clear but the question remains whether that is all there is to the concept. Does it convey to us the full meaning? To say that there is no soul or self, or that the soul or self is negated does not really advance the true understanding of the concept of *anātman*, except on the linguistic and logical levels.[5] The antithetic treatment of *ātman-anātman* does not really resolve the question or even come close to clarifying it. As a matter of fact, Buddhist thought never saw the *ātman* view as wholly antithetic to its own *anātman* view. In my understanding, it seems to be a simple case of imposing bad metaphysical elements on the experiential process or confusing bad and good metaphysics.

The problem is much more complicated than we suppose since even on the linguistic and logical levels we go on to accept the *ātman* concept as if we know all about it and premise it for further manipulation. The *ātman* and its spiritual cognate, Brahman, are essentially noncognitive or nonlogical entities, and yet we do not cease to give them circumscribed epistemological meanings. The *ātman* concept still remains in the province of the Hindu who has his own metaphysics as well as the faith and will to pursue it. What the historical Buddha reacted against was the inadequacy of the Hinduistic metaphysics to account for the so-called worldly empirical nature of things. It was not a simple overturn of the *ātman* concept into nullity but a unique overhaul of the understanding of human experience. The famous Middle Doctrine in Buddhism specifically cautions us to avoid the extremes of substantialism (*sassatavāda*) and nonsubstantialism (*ucchedavāda*). I believe the doctrine supports my view that the extremes (*anta*) refer to the ends or elements that are considered obviously bad metaphysics, both of which are ill-grounded in experience.

In many respects, however, the Buddhist introduction of the *anātman* concept was a complete turn around from the prevailing *ātman* concept. Where the latter attempted to see the whole from the metaphysical totality, illusion notwithstanding, the former attempted to see the whole as much as possible from the metaphysically fragmentary nature of things. Where the latter presupposed the *ātman-brahman* identity explicitly or implicitly from the beginning to the end, the former delved into no presuppositions at all and denied any bad metaphysical elements to influence such concepts as *jīva* (soul) *sattva* (sentient being) and *pudgala* (personal identity). Where both

invoked the indeterminate principle (*avyākṛta*), they used it for different purposes, namely, the latter used it to explain away the barriers relative to the *ātman-brahman* identity and all things related to it, but the former used it to exhibit or expose the limitations or shortcomings of relying solely on the entified empirical concepts (*prajñapti*). Where the latter was involved in a kind of emanation theory of being in a relatively "steady-state" affair, the former remained true to a strictly naturalistic and evolutionary basis for man's being, a process that indeed defies one's imagination—and rightly so—but one that purports to have all the ingredients of a consistent system of process thought. I have elsewhere argued that the latter aims at a metaphysical absolute regarding the nature of being, whereas the former aims at an ontological absolute of being.[6]

In Buddhist metaphysics, we are focusing on the concrete nature of experiential reality. And this reality is nothing but the ontological nature of the individual being, his entire experiential content. The reader will be quick to note that I am already using terms that relate to or depict certain realities or ontological objects, something I had previously criticized. This is an inevitable circumstance and a practical necessity. Even the historical Buddha, it will be recalled, was quite mindful and cautious regarding this matter, and yet he had no recourse but to use the prevailing language to convey the intent and purpose of seeking that concrete nature of reality (*yathābhūtam*). In essence, then, we are in search of that reality within the matrix of things, however laden it may be with the elements of the provisional and conventional natures.

Reality is like a maze. If one is caught up with the elements of the maze, one is prevented from seeing the passage-way and contrariwise, if one is not, then the passage-way is there without the usual obstructive elements and thus one is able to move freely and easily. In other words, one understands the maze for what it is or sees it at a glance, so to speak. There are no impediments. It is rather a habit of our ordinary epistemological nature that we try to catch everything in one's experience even by imposing on it unsupportable metaphysical elements. A good example is the Cartesian framework that reduces all epistemological entities to clarity and distinctness. It should be noted that it is one thing to say that epistemological entities must be clear and distinct but it is quite another to say that they relate to reality. And still another to say that reality must be clear and distinct.

So in Buddhism, regardless of the false impositions we make, we are dealing with the metaphysics of being which is in truth a reference to individual ontology. But individual ontology is also process ontology. Therefore, it is not an ontology in the usual sense. The three cardinal characteristics in basic Buddhism, namely, *anicca*, *dukkham*, *anattā* (impermanence, suffering, and nonself) point up to this unique ontology. The first, reminds us clearly that everything is a moving phenomenon or a moving ontology. The "great chain of being" is not merely a static linking phenomenon where the nature of being

persists in linear fashion; rather, it is a novel creative process based on the ever-fresh dynamic nature of the links where nothing persists or endures.

Thus we may now be able to assert that there is a stream of reality (*bhava*) in the general or primal sense, and also a stream of consciousness (*bhavaṅga*, *saṇtāna*) in the finer and more technical sense. The stream cannot be framed, either substantially or in the usual ontological sense, unless we are to speak of it conventionally. Perhaps, I may be permitted to say that the stream of reality has to do with process ontology whereas the stream of consciousness with epistemological process, although the latter process necessarily "rests" upon or functions within the realm of the former.

We might also add that in the strictest sense there is process ontology but no ontological process that refers to static entities in movement. Again, in a different sense it might be asserted that there is ontological understanding of the nature of things but no understanding of ontological (static) elements as such. It is this unique ontological understanding that contributes to good or proper metaphysics. In other words, there seems to be a widening receptacle, a field of being, that aids in the understanding of the nature of things. In this, however, the ontological elements do not constitute that receptacle or field of being, for the focus is always on the dynamic field of existence.

All this is indeed paradoxical and puzzling but process philosophies are of this nature. Yet they are not contrary to or contradictory of the facts of experience. Indeed, they are most adaptive and accommodative of the facts. From the Buddhist standpoint, the seeming contradictions occur from several causes or bases. They may arise, for example, from the inability to distinguish between the provisional or conventional and the ontologically absolute natures of being. Or, it may be due to the inability to follow the middle doctrine which eschews us to stay clear from the extremes as discussed earlier.

It goes without saying that in process ontology we are concerned with the dynamics of the specious present. The present is specious because its locus of reality is never at a standstill or steady and is thus unaccountable in any definitive sense, especially in terms of the manipulable data and aspects of things. Moreover, it can now be stated that the locus of *anātman* is likewise specious and therefore we must concentrate on it.

The problematic of the specious present is somewhat aggravated by the plain fact that we normally assign only a one-dimensional framework to the process of being. That is, we normally understand temporality to be a simple one-directional flow. But it is much more complicated than that. That present, in actuality, is a multi-faceted, multi-directional phenomena which the Buddhists early on sensed and captured in their doctrines. How that multi-dimensional nature manifests in our experiences is the crux of the problem in our understanding of the specious present. The difficulty is basically one in which we are asked to be both spectator and participant of the activities, a difficulty as old as Platonism in the West. This spectator-participant view or approach

is so basic yet so fraught with difficulties of understanding that the average intellect and even great minds find it totally incomprehensible, on the one hand, and beyond reach, on the other.

Naturally, we refrain from resorting to meditative devices of any form for the understanding since we believe that man must still initially seek a naturalistic understanding, bringing into sharp focus all the canons of logic or the intellect together with the utilization of the empirical data in the most exhaustive sense. And in many ways, we have not really taxed our reason and its power to anything like the optimum degree of usage when it comes to intimating ourselves with the nature of reality. The same can be said about our intimacy with the empirical realm. For the most part, we simply get carried away with the mechanics or the elements thereof and these in turn result in subtle dogmatic stands, be they psychological, social, metaphysical, or whatever.

Again, we do not have the time to enter into the reasons for the rise of the dogmatic stands. Rather, it is more important now to focus on one aspect and educe the subtle and unknown ways in which the experiential process is taking place. Moreover, the failure to understand this aspect has resulted in grave misgivings and at times irreparable damage to the person in his pursuit of a proper development of the enlightened way of life.

The aspect in question upon which I wish to focus is the ontological grounds and nature of the process. Failure to understand this, in a rather circuitous or circular way, results in the most damaging phenomenon, namely, the ontological unclarity of existence or one's clouded nature of being (*avidyā*). Of course, I am not implying at all that one cannot go on living in this clouded nature of being, as there are abundant examples personified by our normal saṃsāric (*duḥkha*-ridden) pursuits. Yet, the message of Buddhism is that there must be a constant vigil and search for the opposite, that is, the pursuit for the ontological clarity of existence. This is the search in the right direction of the Buddhist nature of self, the *anātman*. But this search is futile and unproductive should one adhere to old methods and framework. This is not to say that the old methods and framework are to be discarded or abandoned completely; that would be a total destruction or negation which no Buddhist would ever sanction.

What is then called for is the "reorganization," or "reconstitution," if you will, of the ontological framework that I propose. Moreover, certain scholars have conveniently labelled such reorganization or reconstitution as a systematic deontologization. To a large extent, this is true and cogent. However, as I see it, the more important question is, After deontologization, what? True, Nāgārjuna's systematic critique of his opponent's position is an attempt to deontologize his realistic tendencies. But Nāgārjuna's critique does not end there. He will not leave his opponent suspended in so-called deontologized mid-air. He, like all true Buddhists, will try his best to return the deontologized nature back to solid grounds, that is, in constant contact with true reality,

without the traces or vestiges of the mind's imposition on reality as such (*tattva*). In short, deontologization is at best a half-way measure, a conceptual device, that needs to be brought back to the full experiential content in the total process.

Let us proceed to examine further the specious present. As mentioned earlier, the Buddhist will premise two types of continuum; one the continuum of being (*bhava*), the other the continuum of consicousness (*saṇtāna*, *bhavaṅga*). Though different in definition and application they are really indicating certain aspects of the self-same flow of existence. The former refers to the general nature of being and the latter to the subtle links relative to conscious plays. Regardless of the differences then, the specious moment is functional in both. They both exhibit the ways in which the continuum is a fact of existence. The specious moment, as the literal center of being, is always real. But the question to be posed here is, In what way is it sustaining its reality or its real "contents" in the flow of existence? Or, How can we speak of it in its speciousness?

It can be said that the Buddha came to grips with the concept of passage, nay actual passage itself, in a most profound way. Empirically, he perceived rightly that the rise (*utpāda*) of a moment is seen and so is its fall or subsidence (*bhaṅga* or *anityatā*). And he also perceived that there is a duration (*sthita*) in which the moment is full blown, so to speak, or attains fruition (*vipāka*).[7] These three aspects of the moment are incessantly involving themselves in such a unique way that even graphs or diagrams fail to describe the full import of the process. Yet, it is highly important now to utilize these devices in order to delineate, if only in a small way, the peculiarities of the process.

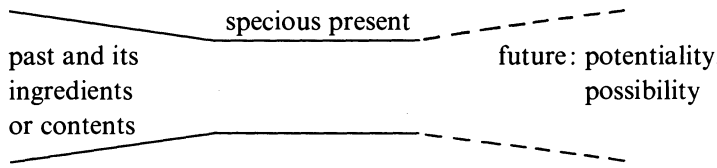
(1) First, the flow of existence in the simplest possible manner is illustrated with an arrow thus: ——→ or it may be expanded into a "bloated" arrow thus: ⟹ to depict the content of the flow. In either illustration, it says or describes relatively little, if any, of the full experiential content. At best, it only shows the directional flow of the process. And so we move on to the next diagram.

(2) The second diagram can be illustrated thus: OOOOOO→ The arrow is quite gratuitous but necessary for conceptual understanding. This diagram is an improvement over the first but it still is inadequate and perhaps is misleading in its simplicity. It gives the false impression that the moments of existence go on in a substantially one-dimensional fashion and in a predictable way. The idea of a causal chain here is too simplistic. Again, it does not really tell us much about the experiential content prior and posterior to the specious moment. Nor does it address itself to the crucial question of the continuity of moments. And finally it suggests a reversion to the normal ontological understanding of process that could only lead to bad metaphysics.

(3) The third diagram does address to the problem of continuity very well. It is depicted as follows: 3a. ⓄⓄⓄⓄⓄ→ Although it illustrates the interlocking

nature of the moments, we can improve on it in the following way: 3b. ⟲→ This diagram shows up the truly interlocking nature of the moments, not only between two moments but a multiple-faceted nature of several moments within the flow. In this respect, it is closer to the reality of the process although confusing in its implicated nature of things.

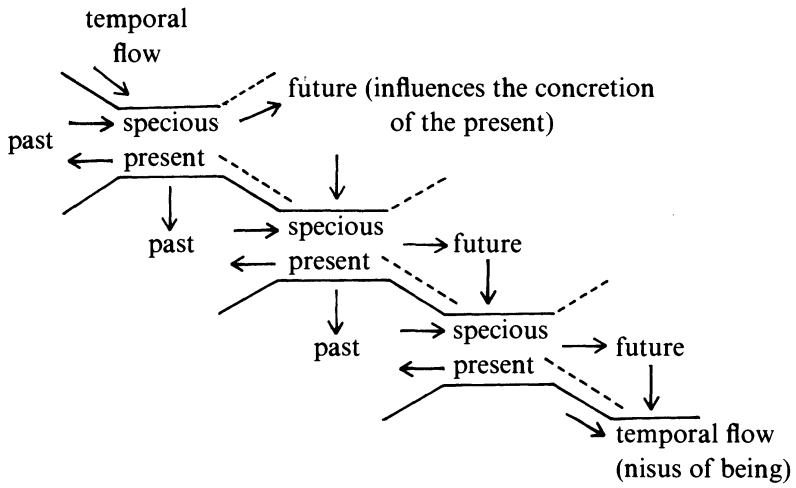
(4) Finally, at this point, we need to have a closer microscopic look at the moment in the making. We might then "blow up" *the present specious moment in the making* thus:



The specious present is equivalent to one of the rings in the above interlocking phenomena, either in 3a or 3b, and the past and the future could very well correspond to the prior and posterior natures, respectively, in the continuum with the proviso that the future is not yet but has all the potential of becoming.

Each specious present is a carving-out phenomenon with respect to the continuum of existence. It has a past from which it has basically but not entirely arisen. In other words, the past is necessary to the present but not sufficient for its own being. It also has a future in terms of latent potential for being. However, what is unique here is the fact that the specious present can "look" two ways, that is, to the components (or realms) of the past and the future for the constitution or creation of its own being. The interlocking phenomena must be viewed in this sense. That is to say, there is every bit of the past, actually as well as potentially, within the specious present. Or, it can be said that there is a sense of the concept of reverse causality functioning here to check the wholly one-directional causal chain of moments. Perhaps the Buddhist accounting here is in correspondence with the Whiteheadian concept of assymmetry, which states that the flow of existence involves a reverse or assymmetric relationship of the specious present to the past and not merely a vice versa phenomenon, in other words, the past symmetrically relates to the present and the present, in turn, to the future. The minutely circular inter-penetrating and interlocking diagram in 3b shows to an extent the symmetric as well as assymmetric dimensions in the continual flow of existence. To illustrate this further and to gain some understanding of the subtle movements, we must proceed to the next diagram.

(5) To illustrate the temporal flow with the more subtle features, I diagram thusly:



A glance at this diagram will show the unique implications of the real temporal characteristics involving the past, present, and future. The locus of reality or the flow of reality resides in the specious present, but it is never left alone for it not only creates in cooperation with the past and becomes a past as well, but it also is intimately related to a potential future in the process. This sounds odd or even absurd on first reading, to be sure, but at least the diagram does sufficiently justify the nature of the profound doctrine of momentary existence in Buddhism (*kṣaṇika-bhaṅga*). For, there is undoubtedly the rise of the moment, not ex nihilo but in full view or cooperation of the components of the temporal dimensions. The specious present gains something but at the same time loses something in its procession to the next triadic contextual matrix of dynamics. In this way, the continuum is fulfilled in terms of content and simultaneously exhibits its open-endedness. The gaining and losing phenomena are dependent largely on the conditions or materials prevailing with respect to the total nature of the relational conditions (*pratyaya*, *paccaya*). And in the search for the understanding of these phenomena, we return finally to a few significant Buddhist doctrines that are relevant to the process thus far delineated and which in turn should make us realize that the *anātman* doctrine is supreme here and that it is infinitely superior to the *ātman* approach to reality.

In diagram 5 I have used the phrase, "nisus of being," for the real temporal flow of existence. It is a nisus in that there is a striving, a motive, to perfect one's own being. Life is a creative process in this sense but not always in the best or propitious sense. The Buddhist calls this relational origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*) which is indeed one of the most difficult concepts to fathom or grasp, much less to feel its functional dimensions in our everyday activities.

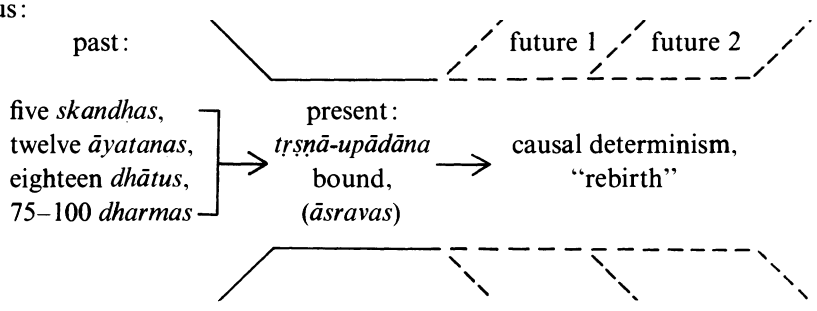
It depicts the becoming process (*bhava*) in its most unique form—uniqueness in the sense that the process is another way of delineating on how the ordinary conception of the self becomes or is at once a nonself phenomenon. The dynamic character of this concept, which is so depictive of the subtle movements in the microscopic realm of existence, issues forth the challenge to understand the *anātman* concept. The two concepts, *pratītyasamutpāda* and *anātman*, may seem so distanced yet are so proximate to our nature of being; indeed, in the strictest sense, they are referring to the self-same reality of existence from two novel but technically isomorphic natures. By asserting this I am not trying to confuse the issue. Rather, I wish to call to attention a desideratum for a closer and critical examination of the ordinary situation in which we continue to exist so that the nature of Buddhist reality could be understood or realized in its own right. Again, all this is cryptic but, only in the hope of showing up the problematics that the becoming process or the nisus of being cannot be reduced to a simple, cut-and-dried type of analysis or manipulation of the elements, be they *dharmas* in the case of Buddhism, in and of themselves as they occur in all facets of our experiences.

In the process, the elements (*dharmas*) have no ontological nature or status, either in an a priori or a posteriori sense. For, their "participation" in the process is the fact of the process itself, just as the process itself properly reflects the various elemental presence. I believe that Diagram 5 is conducive to the Sarvāstivādin's (Vaibhāṣika's) choice of the third explanation for the description of the differences in the temporal flow as stated as a change of condition (*avasthāpariṇāma*). The relevant passage states thus:

> Thus it is that among all proposed explanations the (remaining one alone), the third in number is right, that which maintains a change of condition (or function). According thereto the difference in time *reposes* on the difference in function; at the time when an element does not yet actually perform its function, it is future; when performing it, it becomes present; when, after having performed it, it stops, it becomes past.[8]

We should now have a better picture of the way in which the specious present is flowing as the nisus of being. But I hasten to add here the final diagram to depict the way in which the *ātman* approach vitiates the nisus.

(6) The specious present relative to the *ātman*-process is now represented thus:



It will be seen that the linear symmetrical flow has all the trappings of a causal or deterministic system. The temporal flow is firmly set in the sense that the present came from the past and that it will eventually enter into or become a new phenomenon known as the future. But the problematic involved here is that this type of temporal flow does not, or is unable to, accommodate new or novel contents or elements that are added and at the same time to dispense with the so-called spent contents. This is indeed a disturbing problem, and one which reason by itself fails to answer. A deterministic or even semi-deterministic nature would invariably introduce a form of "transmigration" of the elements of being which is so often erroneously attributed to Buddhism.

The Buddhist approach was not only profound but practical. It did not shirk the problem by presenting a mere theoretical accounting of the facts of experience but went deeply into the components of the experiences themselves in order to present a holistic view that included both the tangible as well as nontangible contents of the said experiences. It started off naturally with the accepted self-view (*ātman* process) but quickly indicated that once such a view is set up or the conditions relative to it are perpetuated, there will be no prevention of the limiting and restrictive phenomena from occurring. For the Buddha came to an understanding that if man were left alone he would continue to assert his basic drives, namely, the desires or thirst for life (*tṛṣṇā*). Close examination, however, will point up the fact that both thirst and the object of thirst are mutually limiting or restrictive in the sense that they isolate themselves from the rest of the run of nature or from the experiential process itself. Yet, nothing in nature or in the experiential process is really independent, isolated, or aloof, except perhaps when we deal with them in abstract or speculative terms.

The Buddha's insight probes deeply here to make a significant contribution toward the subtleties of the thirst for life. The drive is prominently present, as we can easily see, but what makes that drive "counterproductive" is the tendency in it to be "overextending" and thereby "overproductive." In this respect, there is no real appreciation for the drive or thirst itself, for this is warped or unbalanced. In short, the fullness of the drive or thirst is not realized or implemented. What then is this strange new obstructive element? It is nothing but the clinging or attaching phenomenon present in each thrust of the drive or thirst. The technical term for it is *upādāna*, a term which is basic and yet little understood. The thirst or drive is ever-present, as stated earlier, but it overextends itself as soon as the *upādāna* force is present. *Upādāna* usually goes hand in hand with *tṛṣṇā*, but it does not necessarily have to be so. In other words, the passions and desires are vital parts of our experiences but they need not be restrained by the clinging phenomenon, i.e., they can go on in a purely detached manner without the clinging elements of being.

In many respects, there is an element of contradiction in the two terms; at least there is an element of incongruency in treating them together. For, on the

one hand, *tṛṣṇā* (thirst) is a force, an activity that lunges forward in the experiential process and on the other, *upādāna* (attachment) is a holding, steadying pattern that keeps the process from lunging forward in the sense of incorporating new elements. The former is a basic drive, while the latter is a subtle aspect of that drive which becomes narrow and specialized by the latter's presence. The latter is always ancillary to the former and in its expended nature counters the flow of the basic flow. While the former thrives on process, the latter thrives on static objectification. Or, it can be said that while the former is a moving ontology, the latter is a static type of ontology, the type that becomes grist for the conceptual mill and perpetuates bad metaphysics. Yet, despite all, the truth of the whole matter is that both are very much functioning mutually in that the function of one invariably entails the function of the other, and that the function of both only obviates the fact of the subject in its elemental perceiving or grasping activities; this is the assertion of the *ātman* process. Thus the perpetuation of the *ātman*-process theory, although giving way to biological, psychological, and phenomenological phenomena, still is a basic ontological phenomenon. And the failure to understand the ontological implications, both in the ordinary sense of static objectification and in the true sense of nonobjectifiable process flow, has only impeded a real grasp of the reason for man's suffering (*duḥkha*). For, indeed, one of the most basic origins of the suffering state is the inability of man to cope with the flow of existence or the plain fact that life and its elements are momentary or transitory.

It is curious to note that the self (*ātman*) as a subject has really, in turn, become an objective component in the process of perception. It as well as the object of perception have both become ontological objects, and, in consequence, a mild form of rigidity has set in. And thus the ontological nature and the ontological dimensions seen and employed within the framework of the three temporal dimensions begin to rule the order of the process itself.

The same phenomenon can also be said of the five skandhas (constituents of being) which manifestly show up the way in which the *ātman*-process is narrow and obstructive. In the famous *Burden Sutta*,[9] it is repeatedly stated that the *skandhas* are the burden or the carrying of the burden (*bhārahāra*) of life. In the organic skandhic structure, the mere structuring becomes a burden in the sense that they in toto would spell out some form of an objective self. The *sutta* goes on to say that the "burden-taking is the individual," and that "the craving which tends to re-birth, accompanied by delight and passion, taking delight here and there, namely the craving for sensual pleasure, for existence, for non-existence."[10] Edward J. Thomas makes a telling point that the term, *bhārahāra*, can be translated either as "burden-taking" or "burden bearer."[11] He aptly states that in either case, it points up to the concept of an individuality (*pudgala*) or a self (*ātman*).

Now, Why is it a burden? With diagram 6 in view, we can show that the five *skandhas* have the tendency to construct a steadying ontological entity called

a self or a subject that moves through the temporal periods, rather than to be the process itself. That is, the skandhic classification, in terms of each element or any combination, seems to arrest the flow, whereas in reality there is no arresting possible at all. From *rūpa* (corporeality) to *vijñāna* (consciousness), all the *skandhas* seem to statically structure a self or an image thereof. This fact is also supported by the concept of *upādāna* where the *ātman* concept is considered to be one of the four forms of ignorant outflows (*āsravas*), the others being sensual desire (*kāma*), false or dogmatic view (*dṛṣṭi*), and ritualistic following of conduct (*śīla*). These outflows are the seemingly blind irrational forces that seem to dominate the flow by their rigid moorings on life's process. But they, as well as other structural entities (for example, *skandhas*, *āyatanas*, *dhātus*, *dharmas*), are the makings of still another rigid process, perhaps the worst form possible, namely, the rebirth process or the relinking of the staticized (*upādāna*-bound) nature of being.[12]

The rebirth concept is quite problematic in Buddhism. In general, there are two ways to view it. One is that it could be taken to be the phenomenon of an after life in terms of the last so-called clingings or attachment remaining in man. This seems to be the accepted religious or moral view. The other more philosophical view is to take rebirth to mean the clingings relative to the moment-to-moment existence. The latter is preferred since it is the more tangible and plausible of the two views and also for the fact that it can be accommodated very nicely in diagram 6.

The question of *karman* is also quite relevant here. Karmic acts are, in the main, deeds that are determined by one's clinging phenomenon within the process. There is a cessation of that phenomenon should there be a subsidence of the clinging action and which, in turn, immediately exhibits the undefiled nature of being. The early texts speak of different kinds as well as different forms of *karman*.[13] Regardless of the kinds or forms, *karman* is indeed an accounting of the process of being in its exhibitive and sustainable aspects, and thus it only promotes the perpetuation of the concept of the self. This would have to cease in the on-going process if the aim is the enlightened realm of existence.

In many respects, the karmic act is another form of the relational origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) as interpreted in terms of the ordinary conception of the perpetual turning of the wheel of life (*saṃsāra*). There are both the bad deeds as well as the good ones that motivate the saṃsāric life due to its self-directing carving-out process. But self-directing only makes obvious the static nature of being, whereas the inexorable flow of existence must not be hampered by this nature. There is no time to go into the details of the defiling elements (*kleśas*) relative to the flow, but suffice it to say that the Buddhist always solved the problems within the empirical nature of things. In short, the relational origination in its empirical nature is another way to look at the saṃsāric nature, but it can also be turned around or transformed into a nonempirical and

ontologically absolute nature which is another perspective of the flow of existence from the supremely free and unhampered nature of things. Needless to say, the Mahāyāna tradition, in general, pursued such a course with respect to the cogency of the concept of relational origination.[14]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the foregoing, I have attempted to return to man the dynamics of his own process ontology. It is an ontology that should not be confused with ontologies of the usual type. Diagram 6, which depicts the *ātman* process, exhibits all the signs of constructing or continuing a deterministic system based on the usual concept of ontology, that is, the substantiation and attribution of all the elements of existence. It does this because each element defines its own existence or is definable by relating to other entities with the usual ontological base. But nature is far from a mere collection of independent or interdependent entities.

Diagram 5, on the other hand, depicts an open moving ontology where the three temporal dimensions, with respect to the subtle elemental plays, are accommodated without the imposition of restrictive conditions. It addresses itself to the crucial question of delineating the continuity of being. And this continuity of being in turn is also crucial in turn for the fact that it makes it possible to speak of the open-ended ever-widening nature of individual process ontology which must be the basis for the compassionate (*karuṇā*) and enlightened (*prajñā*) natures in man. Without this widening character of process ontology, man's nature will not be afforded the chance to grow and develop. In this way then process ontology makes it possible to identify the metaphysics of man and the world in a continuum or in a coterminous sense. It is essential for man in Buddhism to move out of his restrictive *ātman*-process in order to realize the illimitable nature of the *anātman*-process ontology.

I have thus expressed the desideratum for *a unique ontological turn* in understanding the experiential process. The series of diagrams only served to get a handle on the problematics of the Buddhist nature of self (*anātman*).

NOTES

1. For example, it is said that Louis de la Vallée Poussin struggled throughout his lifetime on the question of how to accommodate a deed (*karman*) with the doctrine of nonself (*anātman*, *nairātmya*) because both concepts do not lend themselves readily. Toward the end of his life, he finally moved from Buddhism as a system of contingency to Buddhism as a system of transcendency. As Maryla Falk put it nicely:

> The new understanding of Buddhism acquired in three decades of earnest personal investigation had brought home to him that the notion of *nirvāṇa* is based, not on the concept, however subtly formulated, of an unconscious and senseless unimaginable condition or of absolute non-existence, but, primarily and throughout the history of Buddhist thought, on the experience of the fulness of salvation. How is this conception possible without the admission of an immortal soul? This was the problem now unhusking itself to its nakedness before the mind of the thinker who had lovingly

devoted his life to the subject of his research and was now preparing to justify it, along with his life, before the Creator. (N. N. Law, ed., editor *Louis De La Vallée Poussin Memorial Volume* (Calcutta: Calcutta Oriental Press, 1940), p. 444).

Until his final days, Poussin could not completely divest himself from his Christian orientation. It should also be noted that Mrs. Rhys Davids drew somewhat similar conclusions concerning the *anātman* concept. Her views on the concept of a More, man's transcendent becoming nature, occupies much of her thinking in later years in such works as *Sakya or Buddhist Origins* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1931) and *Wayfarer's Words* (London: Luzac & Co., Vol. 1, 1940; Vol. 2, 1941). Both Poussin and Davids were formidable Buddhist thinkers in the Mahāyāna and Theravāda traditions, respectively. They both struggled with the problematics of the *anātman* concept, as we all do, but in the final analysis offered no conclusive explanation.

2. *Majjhima Nikāya*, 63 & 64; Pāli Text Society Translation Series, No. 30; *The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. 2 (London: Luzac & Co., 1957), pp. 97–107. In the *suttas*, the Buddha is more interested in the empirical nature of things, that is, the origin of suffering and release from it, rather than pursuing impractical discourse on hypothetical or empirically groundless states of being.

3. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1929), p. 19

4. I have previously drawn some parallels and differences in Buddhist and Whiteheadian metaphysical systems in an essay, "The Metaphysics of Buddhist Experience and the Whiteheadian Encounter," in *Philosophy East and West* 25, no. 4 (1975): 465–488.

5. Richard Taylor in a fairly recent essay, "The *Anattā* Doctrine and Personal Identity" (*Philosophy East and West* 19, no. 4 (1969); 359–366) has argued in an indirect way that the particular person or self is one and the same thing as his body, that there is no personal self as such, and thus everything points to the non-self doctrine. While his analysis has certain linguistic and logical considerations as well as merits, his conclusion on the concept of *anātman* is still unconvincing from the Buddhist standpoint.

6. In a symposium essay, "Munitz' Concept of the World . . . A Buddhist Response" together with a "Rejoinder to Munitz" (*Philosophy East and West* 25, no. 3 (1975): 309–317, 351–352) I have argued that Buddhism is basically stressing on the ontologically absolute nature of things rather than the epistemological entities as such. Or, in another sense, the epistemological structures and entities are grounded in the ontological nature.

7. *Anguttara-Nikāya*, I, 152, article 47; Pāli Text Society Translation Series, No. 22; *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, Vol. 1 (London: Luzac & Co., 1960), p. 135. The gist of the passage states thus: "The arising is apparent, the duration is apparent and the passing away is apparent. These are the three marks relative to the compounded (or conditioned) nature of being." But it also goes on to state, contrariwise and very cryptically, in the very next paragraph: "The arising is not apparent, the duration is not apparent, and the passing away is not apparent. These are the three marks of the uncompounded (or unconditioned) nature of being." The key terms here are of course the compounded (*saṅkhāta*) and the uncompounded (*asaṅkhāta*). Their study is beyond the space of this essay, but at least the way is left open for some understanding as the discussion proceeds in the direction of the ontological absolute nature of things and the problematics thereof.

8. Th. Stcherbatsky, *The Central Conception of Buddhism* (Calcutta: Susil Gupta Ltd., 1956; First Edition printed in London, 1923), pp. 66–67.

9. *Samyutta-Nikāya*, III, 25, article 22; Pāli Text Society Translation Series, No. 18; *The Book of the Kindred Sayings*, Vol. 3 (London: Luzac & Co., 1954), pp. 24–31.

10. *Ibid.* p. 25; I have followed E. J. Thomas' translation (reference follows).

11. Edward J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1953), p. 100.

12. The *Milindapañha*, 32, makes it very clear thus, "If I should have attachment (*upādāna*), sire, I will reconnect (*paṭisandhi*)." Confer *Milinda's Questions* Vol. 1, translated by I. B. Horner (London: Luzac & Co., Ltd., 1963), p. 43; Henry C. Warren, *Buddhism in Translations* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), pp. 232–233.

13. For example, there are fruitful as well as barren types of *karman* (*Aṅguttara-Nikāya*, III. 33) or good and bad *karman* (*Saṁyutta-Nikāya*, III, 2) and that the *Visuddhimagga*, XIX, elaborates

on the fourfold nature of *karman*, that is, that which bears fruit in the present existence, that which bears fruit in rebirth, that which bears fruit at no fixed time, and by-gone *karman*. Confer, Henry C. Warren, *Buddhism in Translations*, pp. 215–221, 226–228, 242–252.

14. The concept of relational origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) takes on a different, much more inclusive and intense, meaning in the Mahāyāna tradition. There is no time to go into its complicated nature here but at least it could be said that it has a profound meaning in the saṃsāric-nirvāṇic identity in virtue of the novel understanding of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) that is germane to the foundational Mahāyāna *sūtras*, including the early Prajñāpāramitā texts, and the followers of that tradition. The understanding of emptiness, I believe, can be accommodated in the ontological scheme as described in Diagram 5. Naturally, this has to be explored further.