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HAPPINESS-FREEDOM
(Who suffers? From *dukkha* to *samadhi*)

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"I teach suffering, the cause of suffering and the extinction of all suffering",
"I am an analyst (*vibhajjavadi*, "following the way of reason") and not a dogmatic (*ditthivadi*,
"following the way of what is said")",
are two of the first sentences reported from the Buddha Siddharta Gautama Sakyamuni in the
99th subha sutta (sutra) of the *Abidhamma (Abidharma)*, third part of the *tripitaka* (the triple
basket of the Pali canon).

Professor Ruut Veenhoven wrote, in one of his papers, "happiness is so primarily a
function of perceived discrepancy between reality and 'wants' " ("Advances in understanding
happiness", in French, *Revue Québécoise de Psychologie*, 1997, vol. 18, pp. 29-74).

Venerable Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, master teacher monk of the Wat Mohkhabalarama
(Khao Buddhong, Chaiya, Thailand) similarly professed to the *upasaka* just admitted:
"*dukkha* mainly results from experienced or feared unsatisfied desires". Although from a
different school, the Lamas Phajo of the Dzong of Punakha (Bhutan), Kunga of the
Tibetology Institute of Gangtok (Sikkim), and of Nama Buddha(Nepal) did not speak
differently.

We should first make the vocabulary clear. *Dukkha* (the Sanskrit term, *dukksha* in
Pali) is classically translated by suffering, pain, unhappiness, ill-being, etc. according to
context, but more often simply by dissatisfaction. In this latter case, Buddhadasa's statement is

practically tautological. Buddhism defines itself as the diminishing of *dukkha*. They add that if someone succeeds in diminishing her *dukkha* deeply and durably, she is a buddhist, even if she has never heard about the Buddha Sakyamuni (thinking, however, that this is very unlikely, that such gifted persons, if they exist, are extremely rare – Milarepa may have been of this kind). *Dukkha* is supposed to have a contrary, *sukkhā* (from which comes "sugar"). However, buddhist philosophy-wisdom-therapy emphasizes *dukkha* and even often considered *sukkhā* as describing a valuable but different dimension ("bittersweet" is possible). Moreover, there is a third concept, *pīti*, conveniently translated as joy, or sentiment of joy, or attitude of joy. Your actions and choices influence your *dukkha* (and your *sukkhā*) but only indirectly and generally after some delay (through your creation of your capitalized *karma*). In contrast, you are supposed to be able to choose directly to be in a state of *pīti*. And this is advised, not as an end in itself but as a means to know and form yourself better, by bringing the depth of you to the conscious observable surface and by making your mind and body more malleable. Thus joy-*pīti* is not sought *per se* but as an indirect mean to diminish suffering-dissatisfaction-*dukkha*. As a result, you sometimes can watch the surprising sight of joyful monks reciting the classical *mantras* and litanies of buddhist pessimism: "all is suffering, the world situation is becoming worse and worse (these times), *anicca, dukkha, anatta* (impermanence – i.e. nothing lasts –, suffering, inexistence – of selves), etc." which is also a strategy towards the same end. At any rate, in a sense, being happy (in spite of all that) is a condition for being able to become happy. This is one of the reasons for which "the end of the way is the way itself", "the aim of the travel is the travel itself".

Ruut Veenhoven also criticizes the view he notes. He also met buddhism in his investigation of what of the three philosophies of China 2000 years ago (Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism) could be of use for the modern world. His conclusion is negative, particularly for buddhism. However, he notes that there are many types of buddhism and that the result may be different for other kinds. This multiplicity is very right and in the very nature of buddhism which says that it should adapt to the specificities of each person, place and culture. However, there is a common basic core. A buddhist is seen as progressing in understanding and self-formation along a way towards a *dukkha*-free end. This end is the same for all schools which differ essentially by the kind of way to it they favour. For instance, Zen buddhism is a limiting case by focussing directly and exclusively on meditative experience rather than intellectual analysis in a large first part of the way – it is only after some ten years of sitting meditation that Deshimaru told his disciples "there are also ideas" –.

In contrast, the *theravada* schools of South-East Asia begin much earlier to teach psychological and philosophical theory and analysis, although varieties of meditative exercises are necessary to understand the meaning of all this by systematic guided introspection (*antarmukhi*, "looking inside", which the *samadhi* experience – see below – finally turns over into the self-projection into the world of *bahirmukhi*, an "extrojection" into *aham-idam*, "I am that") and to benefit from the progress. These latter approaches are bound to suit better modern "rationalists", who, however, may receive the no-self theory (see below) as a shock – a salutary one, though –. Moreover, other traits emphasized by other traditions may also be suitable for a modern or "Western" buddhism which can adopt them, for instance the altruism emphasized by *mahayana's bodhisatvas* inspired by the Buddha's compassionate choice to "come down from the mountain" to teach his discovery of the "middle way" and of enlightenment to his fellow human beings in Sarnath deer park.

These topics are developed in my book *Happiness-Freedom (deep buddhism and modernity)*, published in 1982 (in French) by the Presses Universitaires de France (651 pages)¹. The buddhist translation of the title would transform the westernly positive "happiness" into the protective "non-suffering", and the western obsession of "freedom" into the dynamic, processual and active "liberation" since buddhism also sees itself as the liberation (*moksha, moksa*) from unsatisfiable desires and from the illusion (illusion of social origin, *maya*, from which "magic") of the "self" toward the consciousness of selflessness, "no-self" or no-I (*anatta* pali, *anatman* sanskrit).

Hence, buddhism sees what matters most as suffering and it sees itself as a therapy (the Buddha is also "the great physician"). Suffering and dissatisfaction come from unsatisfied desires (at least one wants not to suffer). Hence the solution is to have no unsatisfiable desires. The best (consistent) way to obtain this is not to fight existing such desires, because this fight and repression is painful, but, rather, to control the birth of one's desires (*lub*, from which "*libido*" and "love"). With respect to satisfiable desires, the various buddhist schools have opposite positions. For the largest ones, these desires should also be prevented or checked, because the satisfaction of one desire leaves the place for other new desires, and the succession of desires and their satisfaction is an agitation which is in itself painful like a

¹ There is a translation in Thai, a partial translation in Japanese, and translation of a part of one chapter in English in *The Multiple Self*, edited by Jon Elster, Cambridge University Press, pp. 233-265 (this includes the economic theory of the effect of meditation on happiness).

burning fire which should better be extinct (extinction is *nirvana*, *nibbana*, that is "no-wind" or no longer wind or agitation). They advise serenity over excitement. Other, minority schools see no problem with satisfying satisfiable desires, and some, especially in tantrism, even advise to focus on this experience to enjoy and learn from it at most, and even propose to skilfully create such satisfiable desires in order to derive pleasure – *kama* (pleasure of the senses) – or happiness and psychological information from their satisfaction. In all cases, controlling the birth of one's desires is the key.

How can one get rid of or prevent a desire? All instances of the sentiment "I want..." have one thing in common: "the "I" which (or who) wants. If there is no such subject "I", there can be no desire. David Hume once remarked that there are some people, across the Channel, on the continent, who believe that since they have thoughts, there exists such an "I" who "thinks". He added that he tried to find such an I "in himself", but failed. He met various things such as perceptions, sensations, conceptions, ideas, sentiments, emotions, consciousness of all that, etc., but nothing which could qualify as such an "I". There is "himself", aggregating all this with physical traits and materials, but this is a "me", an object (and not a subject), a person (*pugdala* for buddhists). Similarly Jean-Paul Sartre, in his biography of Gustave Flaubert, sees the writer as a dust of many small elements (the buddhists' *dharmas*, *dhammas*), but did not find a "self" as intrinsic subject. It is noteworthy that René Descartes never wrote *cogito ergo sum* in his *Meditations* and *Discourses*, but *ego cogito, ergo sum*, with the addition *sive existo* in the latter case: he had to explicitly and emphatically introduce *ego* in the first place in order to be able to (or dare) find it in the conclusion. In my exchanges with knowledgeable buddhists with the implicit reciprocity agreement that they would teach me some of their ideas whereas I would tell them something about the philosophy of the invasive West, when I came to "I think, therefore I am" (understood as "I" is, there is an "I"), I could see a faint smile on their lips, which, for such self-mastered people, is equivalent to loudly bursting out laughing, with gentle but ironic and rather condescending compassion (*karuna*) for such improbable reasoning. If "I think" one can only conclude that there exists a thought which, along with other thoughts and other mental and physical elements in causal influences between themselves and with other elements can constitute a person, but certainly not that there is somewhere some stuff, called "I", engaged in the action or state of thinking. Perhaps Descartes only "discovered" that the person R. D. existed. His "I exist" may not be as gross as " 'I exists" would be. But, then, a punch on the nose would have provided a sufficient proof, and a better one since suffering is

the surest thing whose existence is ascertained – in buddhist view. For buddhists, suffering and the instance "I suffer" exist but there is no "I" who or which suffers. What is basically emphatically denied is the "transcendental I" of some Western philosophers.

However, people may believe that they have such a self subject. This is an illusion of social origin (*maya*) instilled by society starting with education. But reasoning supported by the appropriate mental exercises (*dyanas* pronounced in Chinese *chan* that the Japanese understood as *zen*) in which attention (*manasikara*) is applied with varied successive intensities (*dharanas*), objects, scopes from *ekagrata-ekagrya* ("in only one point") to overall, durations, clarity, neatness or fuzziness, efforts, voluntariness or spontaneity, with more or less consciousness (*satipattha*) or in the unconscious (*vasana*), with or without duality (*dvaita*, from *dva*=2, I and the rest), analytical deconstructions or syntheses, recollections (*patiloman*), repetitions, rhythms, etc.², under the guidance of a knowledgeable teacher, can make one more or less convinced that one's impression of a problematic self is *sunna*, *sunya*, that is, empty, or more precisely hollow or, more exactly, inflated or swollen. Then, desires lose their anchor and can rather easily be waved away. This is the great liberation (*mahamoksa*) from this illusion and from the ties it induces. Selflessness (*anatta*, *anatman*) and emptiness (*sunata*, *sungata*) away from ignorance (*avidiya*, non-sight), hence from greed (*gredha*, thirst) and thus from dissatisfaction.

This central way, however, requires a few qualifications. First, a few desires, pains and pleasures can be used in this process as "skilful means" (*upaya marga*) using obstacles as supports (or "transforming poison into nectar" in Japan) – tantric iconography shows embracing personages trampling the skulls of dead desires underfoot. Second, the pains that serve as warning about bodily (or mental) injuries should be carefully considered and minimally kept. Third, there are other kinds of self-concepts that have existence and meaning³. In particular, what is common to all verbs in the first person singular describing actions or states (I eat, I walk, I rest, I think, etc.) is the "inductive I" (*asmitan* sanskrit, from *asmi*, "I am", conveniently translated as I-am or Im). Its existence by no means implies that of an I-in-itself. The "I-in-itself" is inconceivable, *anirvacaniya* (but not ineffable nor unspeakable). Yet a sentiment of it can exist (*ahamkara* or "enunciation of I"). This I-in-itself is *atta*, *atman*, in the nature of nothingness. There is also the "reflexive self", that is, the set of

² See chapter 13 ("practice") of *Happiness-Freedom*.

³ See chapter 19 of *Happiness-Freedom*.

elements of a person such as ideas-of, conceptions-of, consciousness-of, or sentiments-toward, which refer to this very person. However, reflexive consciousness is accompanied by a more or less intense sentiment of I, the "tied I" (i.e. the sanskrit tantric *butatman*) which tends to misguide the mind. Hence, the person, me, is but a mental formation (p. *sankhara*, s. *samskara*) – as any conceived object is – and the proper I is an illusion. What remains of the self?

Given the particular overwhelming importance of individualism in the *ethos* of modernity, and of the ensuing diseases – the "egalgies" of egoism, envy, loneliness, swollen egos, etc. – in this culture, the philosophical, psychological, practical (practice), ontological and moral lessons of buddhist egology are probably the teachings most needed to foster modern "happiness". But is this medicine possible? Is not the no-self too exotic, too foreign, too far away from modern conceptions to be able to permeate them? However, since modernity probably already ultimately owes to buddhism (and jainism, a sister Indian philosophy) its idea of the primacy of the individual over cultures and politics, by the intermediary of hellenistic philosophies and in particular stoicism and from it Christianity (plus the Renaissance and Enlightenment philosophies), the estrangement gap may not be actually that large and the completion of the lesson may be a possibility⁴. From this India, stoicism kept the individual and self-formation (theory and methods) but forgot the no-self. Then from stoicism Christianity kept the individual (with a personal relation to God) but largely forgot self-formation (which competes with a universal Creator). Could not this travel be retraced? The main difficulty is, rather, sociological in nature: Since this transmission has to be from person to person, from a knowledgeable who adapts the teaching to the specificities of a student who is transformed in the process, with information and practice for awareness and training, and cannot be done through general publication or mass media information, the problem is the too small number of available teachers in societies which do not have this tradition with education from childhood.

What *anatta* (*anatman*) denies is the existence of *atta* (*atman*). This latter term is classically translated as soul. But if there is no soul, what passes, what can pass, from a body to another in transmigration-reincarnation-metempsychosis? This seems to be a basic contradiction at the core of buddhist thought. This has been noticed and considered the

⁴ See *Happiness-Freedom*, chapters 16, 17 and 18.

strongest criticism of buddhism. However, all buddhist thinking or expression is to be understood at two (or more) levels, they have this number of meanings. As a buddhist advances on the way of knowledge, self-formation (and cure of worldly diseases), he has access to new meanings, he passes from the lower to the higher meaning, from *nitartha* to *neyartha*. A few billions hindu and buddhist devotees believe in metempsychosis in the litteral sense. This may help them live, or at least live correctly: if they are sufficiently non-naughty, their good (proper to their present embodiment in hinduism) acts build them a favourable *karma* asset which grants them that, after death, they will be reborn as a person, animal or god (deity) in a less dreadful situation. Hence they are responsible for their fate (by their past deeds) and can only blame themselves if they do not like it. This acts as a belief in Paradise with the charitable second (and further) chance of the possibility of compensating present misbehaviour by virtuous later lives for the *karma* accounting. This also induces them not to mistreat (nor eat) animals or gods (which could be their grand mother). Advanced buddhists evaluate the truth-content of this story as most Westerners do, although they appreciate that hope in better future lives may help people stand the hardships of the present one. But they also know the other, truer meaning of this fable.

This is a psychological metaphor or, rather, theory since there are very precise details, describing the working of the mind, its dynamics, with this samsaric vocabulary (*samsara* = flow, wandering –from life to life). A life stands for a state of the mind. The story describes how the mind passes from one state to another, and so on. Given a state, there comes a focus on one aspect or detail which is characteristic of the next state which builds up around it. This process occurs in 3, 5, 7, 12 or 17 very fast stages which are represented in the iconography of mandalas and described in the "books of the dead" (such as the Tibetan "*Bardo Todol*") and which people who have received sufficient training to slow down their mind process can be aware of and more or less influence. What one is at a point in time, and in particular one's happiness or unhappiness then, depends very much on one's past actions whose effects built up as one's *karma* (from *kri*, to create), and the process also permits self-creation. This is the dynamics of the "wandering mind" (Descartes) and wisdom is the taming of this "crazy monkey of the mind". This applies, in particular, to ideas, to mental representations and images, to moods, to emotions, to desires and to the alternate successions of desires and actions. This birth and re-birth of desires is the pain of life and its ceasing is the extinction (*nirvana*, *nibbana*) of this burning fire. When "actual", biological life ceases, this is a non-problem, a vacuous question to which one can give no better answer than "a noble silence"

("if an arrow hits you, take care of removing the arrow and of the wound rather than worrying about who threw it": questions are worth being answered only if this contributes to attenuate *dukkha*). This death, which is generally a scandal when it is someone else's, is a non-event when it is your own (you will no longer be here to regret or deplore it). The *samsara* tale is first of all a reference guide and a lexicon for the progressant. The mild and mundane hedonic lessons from it are rather of the type that, all considered, anxiety is a priori likely to be a more harmful disease than depression, and excitement tends to be a lesser blessing than elation especially in the selfless non-dual (no self versus the rest of the world) enstatic steady flow experience of any of the 40 types of *samadhi* ("synthesis", *satori* in Japanese, and *bhava* – "the state" – in Tibetan).

Even if one is not fortunate enough to reach this enlightenment experience, or if one does not want to want it because this still would be wanting, just walking along this path is beneficial. It is likely to affect the pilgrim into a buddhist personality (both hard and smooth, as a polished rock or a skull) which is the safest protection to block or deviate attacks of unhappiness. "There exists the travel but not the traveller", "the aim of the way is but the way itself", as they say. Moreover, even some training, formation and information in this direction equips the progressant with the means needed to follow the mundane rules of life advocated by buddhism, such as choosing the middle way (intense right moderation), respect for life, non-anger (none of the 47 types of anger, the worst being that represented by the Tibetan goddess *Tara*), non-violence (*ahimsa*, shared with jainism – which taught Gandhi – but not by other Indian philosophies such as vedism or brahmanism except when the latter learned it from the former two), the 4 altruistic sentiments including *sila* (non-noxiousness to others, good conduct), *metta* (amity), and especially *karuna* (a very rich kind of compassion) – both Pali and Sanskrit have the same term, *mudhita*, to denote the pleasure one derives from the pleasure one gives to others – , all of which make for a less unhappy society.