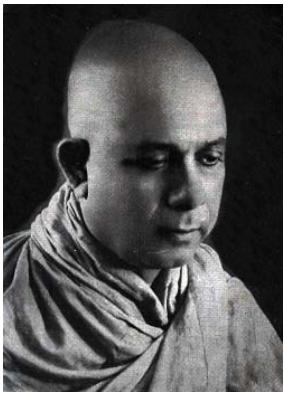
8. Moral Responsibility[1]

by
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Is it one who does the act in this birth and another who reaps its results in the other birth?

To say that he who sows is absolutely the same as he who reaps, is one extreme and to say that the one who sows is totally different from he who reaps, is the other extreme. Overcoming these two extremes the Buddha teaches the middle doctrine in terms of cause and effect.

"Neither the same nor another" *(Na ca so na ca aññ̃o)* states the Venerable Buddhaghosa in the *Visuddhi Magga.*

The evolution of the butterfly may be cited in illustration. Its initial stage was an egg, then it turned into a caterpillar. Later it developed into a chrysalis, and eventually into a butterfly. This process occurs in the course of one life-time. The butterfly is neither the same as, nor totally different from, the caterpillar. Here also there is a flux of life, or a continuity.

Venerable Nāgasena explains this point by citing the illustration of the lamp that burns throughout the night. The flame of the first watch, is not identical with the flame of the last watch, yet in dependence upon the one and the same lamp the light burns throughout the night. In the same way there is a continuity of life – each succeeding state depending upon the preceding one.

If there is no soul, can there be a moral responsibility? Yes, because there is a continuity or identity in process, which is substituted for an identical personality. A child, for instance becomes a man. The latter is neither absolutely the same – since the cells have undergone a complete change, nor totally different - being the identical stream of life. Nevertheless, the individual, as man, is responsible for whatever he has done in his childhood. Whether the flux dies here and is reborn elsewhere, or continues to exist in the same life, the essential factor is this continuity.

Suppose a person is "A" in his last birth, and is "B" in this. With the death of "A", the physical vehicle, the outward manifestation of Kamma energy, is relinquished and, with the birth of "B' a fresh vehicle arises. Despite the apparent material changes, the invincible stream of consciousness *(citta santati)* continues to flow, uninterrupted by death, carrying along with it all the impressions received from the tributary, streams of sense. Conventionally speaking, must not "B" be responsible for the actions of "A" who was his predecessor? Some may object that in this case there is no memory owing to the intervening death.

But, is identity or memory absolutely essential in assessing moral responsibility?

If, for instance, a person was to commit a crime and suddenly losing his memory were to forget the incident, would he not be responsible for the act? His forgetfulness will not exempt him from responsibility for the commission of that crime, for he is not aware that he is being punished for that crime? Is there any justice here?

Of course not, if we are arbitrarily governed by a God who rewards and punishes us. But the Buddha does not talk of punishments.

According to the Buddha the world is not so constituted. Buddhists believe in a just and rational law of Kamma that operates automatically and speak in terms of cause and effect instead of rewards and punishments.

In the words of the late Bhikkhu Sīlācāra[ii]: -

> "If a person does something in his sleep, gets out of bed and walks over the edge of a veranda, he will fall onto the road below and in all likelihood break an arm or leg or something worse. But this will happen not at all as a punishment for sleep-walking, but merely as its result. And the fact that he did not remember going out on the veranda would not make the slightest difference to the result of his fall from it in the shape of broken bones. So, the followers of the Buddha take measures to see that he does not walk over the verandas or other dangerous places asleep or awake, as to avoid hurting himself or anyone who might be below and on whom he might fall."

The fact that a person does not remember his past is no hindrance to the intelligent understanding of the working of the *kammic* law. It is the knowledge of the inevitability of the sequence of *kamma* in the course of one's life in Samsara that helps to mould the character of a Buddhist.



i From BOSAT, Vol. XXIV No. 125, Durutu full-moon, 1961 p. 202

ii One of the earliest Western Theravada Buddhist monks and contemporary of Ven. Nyanatiloka. He was a prolific writer. His writings include A Young People's Life of the Budda, Pancha Sīla, the five Precepts, Lotus Blossoms.

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