

An abstract painting by Henry van Zeyst, featuring a complex composition of overlapping geometric shapes and organic forms. The color palette is rich and varied, including shades of green, blue, brown, yellow, and red. The overall effect is one of dynamic movement and layered depth, with some elements appearing to recede while others come forward. The style is characteristic of early 20th-century abstraction, possibly influenced by Cubism or De Stijl.

**LIFE -  
LIVING AND BEING ALIVE**

**HENRY VAN ZEYST**



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To Helen and Bob Wilders  
whose many suggestions were incorporated.  
With loving remembrance  
of our weekly Saturday afternoons  
during 1978-1979.

# Introduction

We are living. But are we alive? As humans we feel far superior to the lower regions of existence as found in plant life, or even in the animal kingdom. We are aware of living, and we yield to its demands. But we hardly know what life means. We have knowledge of our awareness and we call that consciousness or intellect. But what is consciousness? We have analysed the body and discovered the brain and the nervous system. We have analysed the mind and discovered inhibitions, which are reactions, which work through the senses, which belong to the body. We do not seem to be able to get away from those facts In nature, of which we see the effects without knowing the cause.

In man's search for an ultimate cause of life, he has spelt that word with a capital L, and thus endowed Life with a super-nature, which he has given many names without understanding. A religion which is bent on such a search, which aims at the supernatural, which acts in faith and depends on dogmas—such a religion is based on what is accepted as revelation. But revelation is pure idealism and hence totally divorced from actuality.

But, as life is acting and reacting in relationship, and as there is no relationship between the ideal and the actual, there is no relationship between super-nature and nature. It is therefore no surprise that a deep gulf has separated science from religion. That separation began already from the very first act of man as recorded in the

Christian Bible, when Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge. They had plenty of fruits to eat, but this tree was forbidden. They broke faith because it was forbidden to satisfy their knowledge.

Both science and religion claim that life is their prime concern. The science of life is not a prerogative of biology only, but it concerns psychology as a branch of philosophy as much as it does the eschatology of religion. And, of course, it concerns everyone who reads this, as long as he is alive in body and in mind. Thus, for some the interest in life lies in observing the organic activities in the vegetable and animal kingdoms, botany and zoology; others would restrict life to conscious awareness in a human soul; while a very few would embrace all that exists as emanations of a supreme life-force.

This present study then is an enquiry into the individual claims of biology, of psychology, of theology, with a view to ascertaining the values of a materialistic, idealistic, or spiritualistic approach, in order to arrive at a realistic understanding of matter and mind, living and alive.



# The Physical Facts of Living Matter

It may be said with a fair amount of probability that, if the nature of matter were not a secret any more, every other problem would be solved too. But, as things stand, even the most thorough materialist does not know what matter is. The name 'matter' is given to certain mechanical, chemical, electrical, or organic phenomena, which are all so closely related as to give them a form and a name of substance. Mental and physical phenomena are so much interdependent, that it is impossible to make a real distinction between them. The most we can do is to make a logical distinction for the sake of better understanding their nature. There are some who take both kinds of phenomena to be manifestations of a substratum, which in the case of physical phenomena is called a substance, and in the case of mental phenomena is called a soul. It is this idea of a substratum underlying all phenomena which has led to the animistic concept of matter, and which is thus chiefly responsible for all theories and speculations of soul. And therefore, we may say that the problem of the nature of matter is the basis of all problems.

No philosophy of life is complete, no conception of men's spiritual life is adequate, unless we bring ourselves into a satisfactory and harmonious relation with the life of the universe around us. To ignore that man lives in a magnificent universe, almost as wondrous

as man himself, would be to grasp life only by halves. Physics, geology, cosmology, criminology, the conception of sex are not outside the realm of religion. It is exactly this lack of interpenetration which has resulted in scientific materialism. It is by keeping religion and science in separate airtight compartments, that science has become irreligious and religion unscientific. Just as the human mind can only work through the body and the body without the mind would be corpse-like. So it is science which ought to be the backbone of religion. Where many have tried to follow the path of science, aiming at the greatest happiness for all, and where they sometimes appear to have been very successful in bringing about greater ease, more comfort and longer life, they have brought about at the same time death and destruction. The path of religion also has to show much virtue and holiness, aiming at a life of perfect beatitude hereafter. But that same path is also bestrewed with envy, hate, corruption and religious wars.

To find a way out of this chaos we have to go back to the most elementary principles from which to build up, as from a common platform, a truly scientific religion and a religious science, that is, a religion which is based on verifiable facts and a science which accepts a moral responsibility for the results of its actions.

The problems which have vexed mankind for many ages appear to arise from the different views on the constitution of matter. In all philosophical, scientific and theological speculations on this subject a sharp distinction can be found between matter and mind, the physical and the psychological element in man, which last one is sometimes called spirit and then endowed with supernatural existence and eternity, sometimes, however, totally denied or reduced to a by-product of matter.

This matter, which in itself is said to be devoid of discriminative consciousness (*avinibbhoga*), yet forms the background and the fuel which give rise to sensation and the perception thereof in consciousness. Matter is not the dead material considered in itself, for of such

one cannot have any direct knowledge; yet it is the non-mental, the material element as conceived in the senses. It is the external in so far as it affects the internal. It is the passive side of life in which the mind plays the active part to which it reacts. Such passive aspect of an action is far from being helplessly dead, for it is in actuality the aim of action, and thus it is an active inducement to action, and the cause of reaction. And therefore, matter is not the thing as we feel and see it, but it is a form of energy in which there are different forces at work, which cannot exist individually and separate from each other. In their different components and proportions they constitute matter in its different forms. And so, the different material qualities, as we shall now consider in some detail, are not mere abstract ideas. But, while the mathematician investigates the behaviour of matter under the influence of certain conditions which he can calculate—while the physicist tries to discover the properties of matter—and while the chemist searches for the results by combining or dispersing some material forces—the philosopher considers matter as food for the mind, as an object for the subject, as personality seen from its non-mental side, remembering all the time that the distinction is purely logical and not real.

Each material element has its own intrinsic nature and its own characteristic mark without the implication of a substantial entity. An element (*dhātu*) in the Buddhist sense is therefore not the opposite of a phenomenon, but is a quality in itself, not less real because of its changing, of being a phenomenon. The phenomenal universe is unreal from an absolute viewpoint, because it contains nothing of an abiding nature, such as a soul, substance or entity. But, apart from an absolute viewpoint being a contradiction in itself as in the absolute, there cannot be a viewer apart and distinct from the thing viewed, this unreality is not a negation. For what is unreal in the ultimate sense may be real in the actual or relative sense. Thus, the movement of time has no real existence in itself, but yet it is the measurement of all change. In actuality, then, the phenomena of

matter, dependent on conditions and impermanent in their process, are quite real; just as chemical elements have not become less real for the fact that we know them to be composed of atoms which have been proved to be but electric charges.

Such are the elements of Buddhist conception, not ultimate entities which constitute matter as components, but elementary material qualities which are different forms of energy. These four forms cannot exist individually and separate one from the other. They are not produced by one another, but in their different proportions they qualify and formulate the energy which is then known to us as matter. Their functional qualities are characteristic marks of a basic nature, bearing no more than the old names of earth, water, fire and air, or as they are described in the Samyutta Nikāya (I, p. 28), as the qualities of solidity and cohesion, of combustion and oscillation. They are the elements which “push and pull, and burn and turn.”

Extension or solidity (*paṭhavī*) is the elementary material quality of impenetrability, a property in virtue of which two bodies cannot occupy the same place at the same time. Magnitude is the most obvious characteristic of material things, for thereby can their shape be determined and thereby they become visible. It does not, however, stand for geometrical extensions of length, width and height only, but also for solidity in its different degrees of hard and soft, smooth and rough, heavy and light, rigid and slack, polished and jagged, all relative concepts reflecting the general principle of resistance. It is this power of resistance, due to density, which gives to solid bodies a more or less fixed locality. It is repellent energy, which gives to matter the characteristics of dimension, expansion, weight and pressure. Its main concern, so to speak, seems to be the keeping of the body in equilibrium. Hence, there is a tendency of non-co-operation and isolation, with the inherent tendency of self-preservation which dislikes combining and blending.

Cohesion (*āpo*) is the elementary material quality of internal self-preservation, a property in virtue of which the different particles of a body are not scattered about, but cling, cleave and adhere together. It is on this property that the density of a body depends, its quantity in a unit of bulk. Hereby a body resists any change in the arrangement of its molecules, which is called viscosity. It is a tendency to conservation of matter and energy, but at the same time a tendency to attract and to unite with other kindred matter. This affinity is a magnetic and centripetal energy, with the characteristics of attraction and co-operation. It does not stand, therefore, for liquid only, but for all characteristics which are of fluid condition such as affinity, attachment, adaptability, and subtleness. It promotes change and exchange of locality and shape, as long as the internal composition is not affected.

In the same way as the impenetrability of the element of extension is the energy of self-preservation through resistance to cohesion is the energy of self-preservation through integration. Though opposed in their manner of working, repelling and attracting as magnetic poles, they can yet produce a harmonious process which may lead to the delusion of the stability of matter, though in actuality there is nothing but a process of change.

Caloricity (*tejo*) is the elementary material quality of thermal energy in its different aspects of cold (*sītatejo*) and warmth (*uṇhatejo*). The perception of the different degrees of cold and heat is, of course, entirely subjective, and will differ in different individuals. But, temperature as mere caloricity is an elementary quality inherent in all matter. This is essentially so, because caloricity affects the elementary qualities of extension and cohesion, i.e. of solidity and fluidity. Increase in temperature will melt solids and make fluids evaporate. It is, however, not combustion which involves a chemical change in the object; and thus it is not fire which should be thought of in this connection, neither mechanical heat produced by some external agency in combination with certain substances. It is rather the

physiological source of thermal energy which is found in all bodies whatever may be their temperature. It is then not the intensity of heat or cold, i.e. the quantity of temperature, but the quality of the power through which growth and maturity are effected, as well as decay. Its presence thus is a sign and a characteristic of vitality. Different objects require different quantities of heat to raise their temperatures equally, e.g. iron requiring more than lead, an old man more than a young one, which shows that calorificity is an intrinsic quality of matter which has the characteristics of heat and temperature, but which is in fact and actuality the communication and absorption, the radiation and disintegration of thermal energy.

Vibration (*vājo*) is the elementary material quality of oscillation, which should not be understood as the swinging of a pendulum to and fro between two points, but as an internal motion due to the opposition between the repelling forces of extension (*pathavī*) and the attracting forces of cohesion (*āpo*) in matter. This is the basis for the manifestation of activity. Modern science has accepted this vibrating and pulsating energy in its electronic theory. This elementary material quality with its chief characteristics of oscillation and friction, appearance and disappearance, change in becoming and ceasing, evolution and involution, is the dynamic force in the whole of nature. To this quality are due the phenomena in other qualities, for it is through vibration that extension and solidity are repelling and are felt as pressure; it is through vibration that cohesion becomes concentrated; through vibration is produced the friction which generates calorificity. All contacts with the sense-organs are based on vibration, which thereby becomes the greatest means of communication, be it of sight or sound, of taste, smell or touch.

Thus we see how these four elementary material qualities, unsubstantial as they are, are yet the foundation and the essence of all existence. This material existence does not only provide the means or the instruments for the mind to work with; one might almost say that matter has a mind of its own. Not, of course, the fully devel-

oped mind of consciousness, but a sensitivity of reaction, a tendency to further evolution, a retentiveness of characteristics, which show in their undeveloped stages the individual outlines which are to be found in their existence.

Consciousness is called eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness etc., according to the sense-organ in which it arises. For consciousness is not a spiritual entity, feeding independently on the senses and their objects. It is on sense-contact that sensation arises, giving further birth to perception, ideation and thought. Thus it is in the sense-objects, that is, in the world of events, that can be found already the rudiments of mental reaction. The material elementary qualities of extension and cohesion, which solidify and unify material objects, which reject and attract that which will strengthen and that which will weaken its own process of existence respectively—these material qualities already are the germ of further developed qualities of repulsion in hate and attraction in love, which later in a fully evolved mental state form the basic tendencies which fortify the ‘ego’.

This is not saying that there is hatred in a stone because it is hard, or love in water because it clings to the hand; but the basic tendencies of love and hate being attraction and repulsion in the establishment of ‘self’ are to be found in so-called in-organic matter as extension and cohesion, serving the same, although unconscious, purpose of self-preservation. Likewise the elementary quality of oscillation is but the natural companion of this constant swaying between the opposing forces of solidity and absorption, of repulsion and attraction. It is also the rudimentary vibration, the process of change between becoming and cessation, which sets in motion the desire for what is not; and which becomes the driving impulse of all action, unconscious and latent in inorganic matter, but developed and evolved into conscious and dynamic forces, which form the motives of all volitional activity. It becomes the oscillation of the so-called free will, which is not free at all, but which is swayed

between attraction and repulsion, between the motives which keep the 'self' alive. In this constant energy of motion is engendered naturally and spontaneously a friction with the opposites, produces the material elementary quality of calorificity, the vital heat without which there cannot be either material or mental activity. It is in the heat of this friction that becoming is burnt up in cessation, that matter is grasped by the mind, that desire becomes craving, that life leads to death, that ignorance develops into mental formations and ideations, and that karma leads to rebirth.

Thus one should comprehend the interpenetration of the physical and the mental worlds of events. For, just as the body without the mind would be a corpse, so the human mind can work only through the body. Thus, from the analysis of the most elementary principles can be understood the basic structure of existence. For, although matter is devoid of discriminative consciousness, it forms not only the background and the raw material on which the mind can work, but it is the potential side of action, and so full of action in itself, that it has not been possible to draw a sharp line of division between inorganic matter and organic action, between life and death. A controversy which has sprung to life again with the recent successes in heart-transplant operations, where clinical death is kept at bay by surgical skill.

In Buddhist philosophy life is more than the beating of a heart, for in Buddhist philosophy the faculty of life (*jīvit'indriya*) is an essential factor of existence, not only as a mental quality (*cetasikā*), but also as a material component, by means of which matter evolves, becomes and decays, by means of which matter becomes food for the mind in the one process of becoming, which is existence.



# The Biological Explanations of Conscious Life

The notes of this chapter are chiefly based on my contribution to the Encyclopaedia of Buddhism (Vol. III. pp. 118-123 on Biology), in which I have been assisted and corrected by Dr. B. A. Abeywickrema, Professor of Botany, and Dr. Hilary Cruz, Professor of Zoology, both of the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya, at that time, and to whom my sincere thanks will always remain inadequate.

The initial question of biology is the search into the nature and characteristics of living matter, in order to determine what constitutes life. It is well known that some protein DNA complex holds the basis of life in plants and animals. But that does not give an answer to the question: What is life? The most common answer is change, either as self-determination, or in the nutritive process, or in the process of growth and reproduction. Still, there are many instances where any change of the above description cannot be observed, even under the closest scrutiny, for a long period. Such is the condition of seed, stored in a sealed container, which to all appearances gives

no sign of life, where even the production of carbon dioxide appears to be at a standstill, but which yet proves to be fertile and reproductive when afterwards placed in conditions favourable to growth. Here, the mere absence of decay would indicate the presence of life at least in a dormant manner.

But, does not the expression 'dormant life' involve a contradiction, just as 'static energy'? And can a total suspension of all chemical changes be called life? In so far as there is no decay, there can be no question of death either. It is more probable that the suspension of change was not complete, and that the process which might be an indication of life went on imperceptibly. This would confirm the Buddhist point of view that life is not an entity, but rather a process, a condition, property or qualification; it is the action upon and reaction to environment. Conditions vary; and only when conditions are favourable the process of life starts functioning. Here is no infusion, no agency required, no ultimate beginning of life as a principle, but a constant beginning of life as a process.

Life is a process, evolved and constantly evolving from a group of conditions, which are constantly being regrouped in dependence on other conditions. And what is known of life is only life in manifestation. Thus, when a group of phenomena, constituting for the time being an individual process of growth and decay, comes to an end, this is not a cessation which is annihilation, but only a regrouping of phenomena, in which death gives rise to birth. This process is continuing all the time, even within a so-called living organism, where waste matter is being replaced. This process, referred to as metabolism, is sustained by nutrition, which in Buddhism is of prime importance. "All life is sustained by nutrition"<sup>1</sup>, by food for bodily growth, contact (*phassa*), consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and volition (*cetanā*) for individuality. It is this last kind of nutriment, which is the will-to-live, the will-to-express, the will-to-reproduce. When this will-to-live is psychologically dead, doctor's medicine has

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<sup>1</sup>*Sabbe sattā āhāraṭṭhikā*: D. III, 2. 11.

no chance to cure a patient, and natural food will no longer be absorbed by the body. The cloud circuit of physical and mental co-operation is broken; and with the running down of reserves the destructive process will predominate.

But this is only so from the relative angle of the individual, for, involution (*vivatta*) is only a different aspect of evolution (*samvatta*). Death is not essentially different from life; for both are a process of change, their most important similitude is their continuation of activity.

It is the presumed identity of an individual which has given to life its supreme importance; and hence it follows that the less identity is observed, the less importance is attached to such individuality. Mineral and vegetable life are judged to have less value than conscious life in animals and rational life in humans. And thus it happens that although the faculty of life (*jīvit'indriya*) is a physical constituent of the corporeality group of phenomena, it is only as a mental factor (*cetasikā*) that it finds an honoured place among the seven general psychical constituents which go into the making of any thought (*sabbacittasādhāraṇa-cetasikā*). This is quite rightly so, for only as a mental factor, combined with volition (*cetanā*), does it have the reproductive force of kammic activity (*kamma-vipāka*).

The capability of reproduction is generally accepted as a definite condition of living existence, for without reproduction the organic kingdom would soon pass out of existence. It is the universal law of change according to which involution (that is decay and death) necessitates evolution, which is birth. This capability of reproduction in its simplest form is brought into effect through cell-division. Assimilation through respiration and nutrition brings about growth, which results in cell-division, in which the parent-cell loses its identity in its progeny.

It is the process of differentiation which brings about individualistic characteristics, which are further refined by a process of selection. Nutriment being the most essential condition for existence, it

can be seen that animals have to search for their food which does not come naturally to them, while the inorganic nutriment required by plants are everywhere present in the air that surrounds the leaves, in the rain-water that bathes the roots and in the soil of their natural environment. Thus, animals, apart from their digestive organs, also require the means to carry their body in search of food, and organs to seize it when found. The characteristic of selectivity is still more developed in man and has made him also more specialised. It does not make him dependent on the food as he finds it, but enables him to prepare that food according to his special requirements, which include taste.

Thus, physically the faculty of vitality in its various degrees is characterised by the need of the species to survive; but at the same time psychologically it is the greed of the individual to continue as individual. The need to survive is expressed in absorption and in reproduction. The satisfaction of a need may be a purely passive implementation of a natural and physical reaction, but the satisfaction of greed in the individual is an active projection and self-reproduction with the aim of affirmation, consolidation, continuation, and the securing of permanency. It is this conscious effort (*chanda*) of the will-to-live (*cetanā*) which provides a thought with the volitional component (*kamma*) which makes it reproductive (*vipāka*).

Life, then, seems to be so much more than organic activity, as observed in the vegetable and animal kingdoms. In botany and zoology, even though the purview of life according to Buddhism is more restricted than the sphere of observation in biology as a modern science.

Just as Buddhism deals with matter (*rūpa*) and material forces, and yet is not a science like physics and chemistry—for, Buddhism is interested in matter only in so far as it is conceptualised (*nāma-rūpa*) and in material qualities only as phenomena which constitute this mentalised matter—so Buddhism deals with life and life's forces

only in so far as these are conscious in action and reaction, in the sequence of activities and experiences.

According to Buddhism, life is not the same as the faculty of vitality (*jīvit'indriya*), which is a partly physical, partly mental phenomenon. As a mental phenomenon (*nāma-jīvit'indriya*) it is one of the seven mental factors inseparably associated with all consciousness, viz, sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), mental impression (*phassa*), volition (*cetanā*), vitality (*jīvita*), concentration (*samādhi*) and advertence (*manasīkara*). On the other hand as a physical phenomenon (*rūpa-jīvit'indriya*) it is one of the 24 secondary or derived (*upāda*) phenomena which together with the four essential or elementary qualities constitute the corporeality group (*rūpakkhandha*).

Life, as a vital principle or individual soul, is categorically and repeatedly denied in the teaching of the Buddha, which is referred to as the doctrine of soullessness (*anatta*). Such a principle of life as an independent, permanent entity, as a substance supporting all properties and phenomena, lies outside the pales of natural and exact science, and is of no concern to either biology or Buddhism.

“Life (*jīvita*) is bound up with breathing, it is bound up with the postures and movements of the body, it is bound up with cold and heat, it is bound up with the primary elements and it is bound up with nutrition”<sup>2</sup>. Any serious interruption causes a failure of the life-process, while failure too may occur owing to excess (*ibid.* 28). The faculty of life is then one of maintenance of conscent kinds of matter<sup>3</sup>, and one of the 27 constant and associated factors in various states of consciousness, where, too, its characteristic should be understood as function of maintenance in material composition (*ibid.* 138). It is self-preservation, including assimilation, growth, movement, etc., but it has no moral connotation, as it is essential

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<sup>2</sup>Vism. viii. 27.

<sup>3</sup>*Sahaja-rūpānupālana-lakkhaṇa*: Vism. xiv, 59.

to every kind of thought, whether rooted in greed, hate, delusion, or their opposites<sup>4</sup>.

This life-faculty is considered important enough to give its name to a group of nine, the nine-fold vitality unit (*jīvita-navaka-kalāpa*), which without the life-faculty represent the pure eight-fold unit (*suddhatthaka kalāpa*), the most primitive group of so-called dead matter, viz., extension (*paṭhavī*), cohesion (*āpo*), calorificity (*tejo*), oscillation (*vāyo*), colour (*vaṇṇa*), odour (*gandha*), flavour (*rasa*) and nutriment (*ojā*). In other words, it is this *jīvita* which makes all the difference between life and death, biological death being the cessation of organic activity.

Buddhism deals with life and life's forces only in so far as these are conscious in action and reaction. From any other aspect. "the life of man is like a dew-drop, insignificant, trifling, fraught with much ill and trouble"<sup>5</sup>, "like a bubble on water, like a line drawn with a stick on water" (ibid). But, as an opportunity for moral action it is man's most precious possession, and when a Tathāgata, mindful and self-possessed, casts aside the sum of his life, this earth trembles. It is not a thing to give and take in vain, even though the danger of span of life is hard to know<sup>6</sup>.

Life is a struggle for life, a natural process in which birth leads to death. For the born there is no immortality<sup>7</sup>; there is no man to whom death cometh not; death is by nature inherent in life<sup>8</sup> as old age is in youth, and sickness in health. But, while it is true that birth leads to death, it is also true that death leads to birth. Physically of course, according to the law of preservation of matter and energy, nothing is lost in a process of change, even in the greatest change of all, in death. For, biological death is only the end of a cycle of individual life, which normally passes through

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid. 159, 170, 176.

<sup>5</sup>A. IV, 137.

<sup>6</sup>*Dujjānam jīvitantarāyānam*: Ud. 7, 8.

<sup>7</sup>*N'atthi jātassa amaraṇam*: S. I. 108.

<sup>8</sup>*Maraṇadhammo jīvite*: S. V. 217.

the successive phases of fertilisation, puberty, growth, and death. But, though death marks the end of one cycle, the process moves on, and in death itself is found the genesis of many new cycles. In fact, during the process of one single life there is the continuous process of reproduction of cells, of the fission of single-cell-organisms, within the total process of change in the long series of repetition of origination, growth and cessation.

None of these origins is primordial in the sense of creation, and none of these cessations is final in the sense of annihilation. In other words, both birth and death are various aspects of the process of life, just as much as other phases of that process. And it is indeed in that light that Buddhism views the process of life in the cycle of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), which has no primordial origin of an absolute beginning, no starting point in time of creation, no bringing into existence without a relative cause, but an arising which is dependent on conditions. The scheme, as usually presented, consists of twelve links, each one dependent on the previous one without there being a first, and which for easy understanding is spread out over the three phases of time, past, present and future. Conditions in the past have given rise to effects in the present; these effects can become in the present further causes for future effects. Without being bound into a unitary substance or soul, it is just the fission of the parent-cell becoming its off-spring.

Here the biological field is enlarged to encompass also the psychological, for life is not merely the result of copulation or fission. The factor, which in inorganic matter expresses itself as repulsion and attraction, has become a volitional relationship in organic matter within plant or animal or man. But the basic functions of attraction and repulsion which are the mainstays of individual existence remain the same throughout. The attraction may be only physical, as two drops of water tend to unite; it may be a sense of completion which attracts the opposite pole or slacking quality; it may be a need of security for an unknown withdrawal in isolation, or a satisfaction

of a basic sex-urge; but the subsequent activity of a compound nature (*saṅkhāra*), if based on ignorance (*avijja*), can only lead to an effect which has the full fertility of vitality, resulting in further becoming (*bhava*) in mental and material spheres (*nāma-rūpa*) with its appropriate organs (*saḷāyatana*), contact (*phassa*) and sensation (*vedanā*). These effects become now new conditions for further action, when the sense-organs grasp at (*taṇhā*) and cling to (*upādāna*) their sense-objects. This renewed activity (*kamma-bhava*) leads to subsequent reaction of further birth and death (*jāti, maraṇa*).

Complexity of wilful action is the cause of conflict (*sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*), and this complexity will persist as long as there is a wrong understanding (*avijja*) of duality, i.e. of self and non-self. For, it is on this duality that all likes are grounded. Likes are the nutriment of the self; dislikes are the defensive weapons against the non-self. Thus, the instinct of self-preservation becomes the greatest stimulus for selective activity. Even the natural impulse for propagation of the species is but an extended self-projection into an indefinite future, struggling for survival.

That consciousness ultimately develops out of atoms, molecules, cells. etc., is a far-reaching truth which is already expressed in the Buddhist theory of the five aggregates of clinging (*pañc'upādānakkhandha*), according to which neither the passive reception of sensation (*vedanā*), nor the neutral reactive perception thereof (*saññā*), nor the subliminal formative conception (*saṅkhāra*) is to be considered as a fully developed conscious, morally active and responsible thought (*viññāṇa*), although reception, perception and conception are three forms of capturing (*upādāna*) the mental object.

The passive reception of a stimulus which is called sensation (*vedanā*) may not reach the conscious level at all and will therefore be received and sensed in the material organ without penetrating further. Likewise the neutral reaction to a stimulus at the sense-door (*saññā*) is nothing but an awareness of a disturbance (*dvāraavajjana*).



And even if this is followed by discrimination of formative ideation (*sañkhāra*) it is still but an unconscious reflex of reference to prior experiences for purpose of investigation, comparison and classification (*santīraṇa*), but without acceptance or judgement, which alone could form a volitional act of consciousness (*viññāṇa*).

The passive reception to a physical stimulus is found even in inorganic matter. This passive reaction without the wilful ability to reject it, if harmful, is typical of plant-life. The formation of concepts, of recognition, of memory, the development of association of ideas is not observed in plant-life, but is characteristic of animal life. But, the conscious acceptance with moral responsibility is found only in the fully developed mental states of consciousness. That 'sensation' permeates existence was asserted also by the ancient Greek philosopher Empedocles. Consciousness, and that applies to the conscious reaction to a sensation, requires a central nervous system, which in Buddhism is referred to as the physical sense-organ of touch (*phassa*), which is the sensorial impression from contact with tangibles. That consciousness must be attributed to all existence is then generally denied.

'Consciousness' is but an abstraction, just as 'mind', for the activities of the brain-related organs. It has no existence, but only action. It is action which can react consciously and volitionally, which forms the basis of individual responsibility. A volitional and conscious action is called *karma* (*cetanā 'haṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi*) and as such, karmic action is a psychical activity dependent on physical activity. But there is no necessity to have this physical action performed by a physical 'substance', or to have this psychic activity to be dependent on a psychological 'soul'. In this unique stand, which forms the basis of the Buddha's doctrine, the teaching of non-entity (*anatta*), the Buddha is more of a naturalist and a realist than many so-called materialists who, while rejecting the very possibility of other worlds and of any force beyond their known nature, do not hesitate to introduce concepts of substance,

of ponderable matter and even 'ether' to fill the vacuum of empty space in order to accommodate their theories of contact in activity.

The Buddha has brought those other worlds into his universe by showing their subjection to the same laws of impermanence, conflict and unsubstantiality. Whatever forces there be, they are mere changing phenomena operating under the same laws. And that applies foremost to the mind, which is a process of action and reaction, dependent in its operation on varying conditions, constitutional as well as environmental, physical as well as mental, without anything of the nature of an abiding entity. In an ethico-philosophical doctrine, the question is not whether this plant or that animal has life, but the more fundamental question about the nature of life. Scientists may, if they wish and if they can, draw a line between the living and the dead, or may conclude that there is life in all that is. In the teaching of the Buddha everything is focussed on the concept of conflict (*dukkha*) and its solution. Conflict is caused by and originated in the process of thought which centres around the 'I'-concept. And thus, whatever is capable of culturing this 'I'-concept comes within the purview of volitional responsibility of action and reaction, which is life.

# The Psychological Distortion of Spiritual Life

Buddhist philosophy has always refused to be drawn into vain speculations and even maintains that a distinction should be drawn not only between the possible and the real, but also between the actual and the real. And as existence may be conceivable or possible, ideal, actual or real, it will be necessary to enlarge on this point. An event or a thing is possible if its existence is ideal or conceptual, i.e. if it can be thought of. And as long as there is in its concept nothing incongruous, nothing contradictory, even if its existence is not a fact. it would be a fact and thus it is possible. Thus, a mermaid, or a kinnara which is thought to be a female, half human and half fish or bird, respectively, is quite possible, although nobody has actually come across such a species. When existence is a fact, it is either actual or real, which is a distinction frequently overlooked, and perhaps referred to as subjective and objective.

The existence of a thing may be known to us as a fact, either from personal experience or through the experience of others, whose authority we accept as reliable. Thus, e.g. the existence of the polar-bear, living in the arctic regions, is factual and we accept its existence even though we may never have seen one, except in illus-

trations. But there are lots of other things we come across in daily life, which sometimes turn out to be quite different from what they appeared to be. It is not only the hare in the moon which through a telescope is seen as a series of mountains and valleys, or the snake on the garden-path which turns out to be a rope. But with the progress of analytical science there is hardly anything which is ultimately the same as we thought it to be. Now, an object or an event as we think it to be has an actual existence in the way it acts on us or the way we react to it: the rope we saw may not be an actual snake, but the moment of fear it produced was actual enough. Knowledge at that stage was subjective, and there have been eminent philosophers who maintained that our knowledge can never go beyond this stage, because we cannot go beyond our own thinking, the subject. They do not necessarily deny that there is any other existence which is not subjectively known, and which belongs to the object; they only say that the object-in-itself cannot be known, for as soon as it becomes known, that knowledge is subjective. Thus, actuality is known, and reality is not.

Even simple, every-day experiences, such as the experience that fire burns, is an actual fact, not only proved by striking a match and lighting a cigarette, but even in the analysis of the process of combustion in a chemical combination. Still, all that is actual. In fact, (or should I say, in actuality) all our knowledge is actual, but when we understand the truth of a thing, that is realisation and a glimpse of reality. It is the difference between knowledge and understanding. Where knowledge provides information to the six senses, understanding is insight into the nature of things. We see, we meet, we know other people, we recognise them, have given them names, classified them in families, in races, which is all actual relationship. But, when it is understood that the so-called individual is nothing but a process of actuality, both within himself and in relationship to others, then such understanding is no more the factual knowledge of a particular individual or phenomenon, but a comprehension of

the totality of the process, unrelated and unconditioned. It is insight into the nature of reality, the comprehension of the essence of existence (*yathā-bhūta-nāṇa-dassana*).

To exist is to act; but when action is a reaction, it is an individualised projection. Now it is only the projection which is known, and that projection in actuality is called existence, a beautiful word, expressing exactly what it means: *existo*: ‘I stand outside’. I am an egression or a projection of actuality outside reality.

Although it would be possible (that means it does not contain an inherent contradiction), that there is a reality without actuality, without being projected as experience in an individual, the reverse is impossible. There can be no existence, no actuality, without reality, without the essence of nature, whatever that may be. Thus, the fact of actuality, of existence as a process of becoming, of projection, points to the fact of a non-becoming reality. Unfortunately, the merest glimpse of recognition of non-becoming reality transforms it into an object of desire, and the mind sets to work in a process of grasping, of striving and attainment of a goal with many names: God, Truth, *paramātman*, the Absolute, all spelt with capital letters! It is the psychological distortion of the facts of matter and mind.

Our comprehension of such abstractions does not go beyond an occasional glimpse, which is actual, maybe, but far from complete, and hence not real. What prevents us from meeting this complete understanding and realisation? The answer is in the question itself. It is the ‘self’ who wants to meet the challenge, to solve the conflict, to dissolve the opposition. In this desire it is not seen that this very desire is a projection of a wanting ‘I’ to continue, to become enriched, to become endowed with supreme power and eternal glory; it is the *ātman* who wants to become the *paramātman*; it is the relative who wants to become the absolute; it is the individual who wants to become God; it is the impermanent that wants to become permanent. We have not grasped the essence, paradoxically, just because we tried to grasp it. For, in grasping there is only the ideal, and not

the real; there is separation, which is opposition and isolation, which is essentially incomplete. And it is exactly this kind of incomplete actuality, which we are constantly trying to produce, a psychological distortion, a self-projection without self-understanding.

But it is also in this failure of individual self-expression that the background of existence is sensed. The realisation that life is more than actual living a life one shares with inorganic matter, with the sensuous worlds of plants and animals. Life is not something to grasp at or to cling to possession in order to be living in continuance. Life is to be alive, to be aware, to understand the motives of actions becoming reactions. Without such awareness there can be no understanding, no insight; and such life, without being alive and alert, is not much better than that of a reactionary cabbage!

Thus, in the defeat of becoming and of self-projection there is the beginning of fulfilment of true being. In the realisation that our individual lives are illusory existences without essences, without soul, in that realisation is seen the first glimpse of the reality of the whole, of which individuals are not just parts, but in which, as non-existents, i.e., as not standing out, we live and move and have our being. Existence is a standing aloof from being, and in its actuality it is a manifestation of reality. But, manifestation is always in differentiation and individualisation; hence existence is in individuality where the essence is unmanifested. Being is the undifferentiated (*avyākata*) and the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*) which cannot be comprehended by limited individual reasoning, rightly called ignorance, the absence of understanding (*avijjā*), which in its deluded state personifies even the absolute and calls it God, the supreme distortion of the psyche.

Buddhism does not believe in the reality of either parts or one whole as entities which can be related to one another. Not only in Buddhism, but even to the commonest sense it ought to be clear that as soon as a part is placed in opposition to the whole, the entirety is broken up, the whole ceases to be the whole, and any

further comparison becomes impossible. The fingers are not related to the hand, for without fingers there is no hand. Individuals are not related to the human race, for there is no human race without individuals. Likewise there are no individuals who form part of the race; they are the race. There are no waves apart from the ocean; they are the ocean in action. It is the misunderstanding of seeing passing phenomena as entities, which allows those phenomena to be viewed as existential parts of a totality of being. In reality, those phenomena do not exist, but they are just the essence of the process which in its true nature does not exist either, but only proceeds, becomes, arises and ceases. To try to see otherwise is a distortion of insight, is ignorance leading to confusion and conflict.

One of man's ways of learning is to see things in classes, in categories, in species. That is thought to be necessary in order to be able to refer to an event as belonging to a fixed class. But thereby too much attention is being paid to the things which people and things have in common, because it is by their common factors that we can place them in the same group. But thereby is ignored all that which is peculiar to the individual, that which makes him distinct from everybody and everything else. Thus our approach to events and people is prejudiced by our knowledge of the class; and that prejudice prevents us from noticing what we see. Everything which comes within the field of our observation is at once referred to a class, where memory can store it for further use and future reference. It is through memory that we possess things, that we compare and judge, while our judgements have ultimately only one reference and standard: ourselves. What is pleasant and makes the 'I' grow is called good; the unpleasant which prevents the expansion of 'self' is called bad. Thus, we always think of others as related to us; as far as we are concerned, the only existence is our existence. Existence then is but a relationship in opposition, established for the purpose of usefulness. It prevents us to be what we are, as we live in projecting ourselves, or rather the ideal thereof; and thus we

possess and assimilate that which we are not. In this existence we live outside ourselves and thereby we are not what we are. To the accumulation of experience in memory we add the emptiness of our imagined 'self', which thereby becomes 'mine'.

In this sense, psychologically, existence has no essence, the individual has no soul, phenomena have no substance, the process has no subject, the action has no actor. It is that refusal of understanding which the Buddha labelled conflict (*dukkha*), because it places the 'I' in opposition to the 'other-than-self'. But it is through the understanding of such distorted relationship, that all individual experience and existence will naturally appear meaningless and disappear spontaneously without effort.

The denial of substance or soul, which is the negation of essence in existence, is not a negation of being as becoming; it rather affirms a unity of the process of life, which does not allow of individualism, and which is therefore far different from nothingness and annihilation. Only he lives truly, who lives fully, completely, and not individualistically in that completeness of being, and in that fullness alone, can be found the peace and perfection without conflict, which comes from truth.

What then is a complete life? He leads a complete life who does not approach life in opposition. Every approach, made from some starting-point with reference to 'self', is opposition. But to live without expectation, without purpose, without intentional projection, means, to live entirely in the present only. To live in the present means to live without dependence on psychological values which belong to the past, without the trappings of ancestral or national glory, without the backing of a titled name, of qualifications or property, without the security of a settled future either in this life or in another. For, all these make one live outside oneself, or live in isolation within oneself, but always in opposition, in conflict, due to incompleteness. The understanding of life's entire interdependence, total insecurity and absolute absence of any entity will make oppo-



sition and conflict an impossibility. And that means completeness, perfection and truth.

In that completeness there can be no room for any particular point of view of religion, of faith based on authority, of authority based on fear; no room for any particular shade of political conviction of the right or of the left, based on economic exploitation, based on isolation and opposition in a bid for power; no room for bigoted scientific materialism stressing the needs of the body in order to camouflage the greed of the mind; no room for a conventional society based on tradition, public opinion, herd-instinct and lack of originality and creativeness. For all these are partial approaches to life, which in their partiality create opposition, problems and conflicts, which are distortions of life, preventing an actual experiencing of being alive.

To be alive, one does not have to seek anything. It is a process of living, always new, and hence always fresh.

It does not judge a new contact by comparing it with some past experience, but it fully responds to each challenge immediately, directly, spontaneously, without a projecting purpose of future intention. A complete life does not need authority for guidance, as it has no goal to achieve; it does not need examples to imitate or to worship, for it is creative in its ever new becoming; it does not require values, for it does not want to be fettered; it does not want any security, for it cannot live in stagnancy.

In a misunderstood effort to understand things in themselves we try to objectify them in the abstract by effacing our subjectivity; we try to see them as concrete facts by making an abstraction of our own existence, which exercise makes the whole process of comprehension most unrealistic. We cannot disunite the object from the subject, as the subject exists in the object, just as an element cannot be disunited from its properties: water is wet, fire is burning. The objective world without the subjective perspective is as unreal as the subjective individual without his objective projection. But as

we constantly place one in opposition to the other, we are under the constant delusion of separation without being aware that thereby we try to place ourselves (i.e. that imagined, isolated 'self') outside ourselves which is the actual, subjective-objective world of events which has neither isolation nor opposition.

Thus there is the tendency to treat the physical and biological sciences as distinct from those which deal more directly with the mental aspects of life. Yet, a complete picture of existence cannot be obtained by a one-sided aspect. Material phenomena are known exclusively through registration in the mind; but their tendencies of attraction and repulsion are so reminiscent of love and hate, which form the basic elements of all mental life, that it is practically impossible to draw a sharp line of demarcation between matter and mind. And again, when the mind or mental activity is analysed, there is so much unconscious activity, that it is frequently impossible to distinguish an automatic reflex from a volitional and conscious thought.

Sensation (*vedanā*) is mostly the passive reception in the sense-organs of a physical contact which frequently is not further communicated to the conscious mind. A reflex action to such sensory reception would be no more than a perception (*saññā*) which is hardly different from a physical reaction, such as the winking of an eye, and which cannot be controlled by a conscious thought, even if awareness of the physical contact were perceived in the senses. A still further development in which the physical reaction is accepted as a mental disturbance without its proper nature being known can produce a vague reaction of acceptance or rejection, not very different from the material basic tendencies of cohesion and extension. It is the stage of formation (*sankhāra*) in which a general image is formed or conceived, which produces the mental concept according to the innate and karmic tendencies of the individual process.

Only when the process is completed thus far, can there be a question of a conscious thought with purpose, intention and volition,

without which no mental life can be said to exist. It is not an interpenetration of matter into mind or vice versa, but rather one process of evolution which can be viewed in its different stages. And only when the process is viewed as a whole, nor as an entity, but as a coherent evolving and involving process of becoming and ceasing, which proceeds without entity, substratum, substance or soul, either material or spiritual, can there be the understanding of existence without contradiction, opposition or conflict. Only then existence ceases to be a problem, because it is no longer suffering under the artificial divisions of past and future in time and space, of self and non-self, which are the causes of selfishness, the root of all conflict, of all distortion and ignorance.

This cessation of conflict (*dukkha-nirodha*) is the equivalent of the cessation of becoming in existence (*bhava-nirodha*), which is the true nature and essence of the perfect liberation from all delusion, called Nibbāna.



# Epilogue

Man has been defined sometimes as a lying animal. Not a bad definition; for, if we make allowance for certain domesticated pets, it would appear that in the advance of evolution with its resulting development in cunning among those types, this living together in a more sophisticated environment has smoothed the rough edges of brutal force. Yet, they only made place for the shining and polished appearances of a more refined competition. And that brings us to the point at which every problem becomes a conflict (*sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*), till we have understood the problem as a lie against nature, as an escape from what is, as a refusal to see things as they are.

When all pretence and hypocrisy have been dropped as a mask, then there is the true face of nature as it is now. The face of my life as I have made it, and as I am making it from act to act. It is not a question of liking it; it is a fact. And my trying to hide that fact, or my building up opposition against that fact, cannot solve the problem of my own making. I am that problem; I am the conflict; and I am the goal of my escape.

Sit with it, and live with it, for that is the truth. Life is not only living, but life is being alive. And that is an experiencing from moment to moment, which cannot be explained in text-books of physics and biology, in sacred texts of dogmatism and theology. As long as living is the ego-centric process of reaction in search of continuance and security of that 'self', so long also will there be conflict, which

becomes a problem if a solution is sought in escape therefrom. As long as life has a goal and a purpose, there is living in opposition and conflict. But, when life is being alive in an alertness of understanding, there is neither problem nor conflict, because in that awareness there is no assertion, no striving, no attaining, because there is no 'self'.

In the understanding of that 'no-self' there is insight into what is without aim of wishful projection, without basis of clinging memory, without attachment to what was, without desire for what may be, there is only the direct seeing of what is, seeing the false as false, seeing the past as the basis of clinging, seeing the future as the basis for projection, leaving nothing for the moment of experiencing but the actuality of living and being alive, free and independent, with all the mists of self-deceit rolled away and conflict made impossible.

# About the Author

Henri van Zeyst was born in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in 1905. Educated throughout in Catholic schools and colleges, he spent his final years of studies in philosophy and theology and his first year his priestly ordination in an Italian monastery near Florence. At the age of 31 he was sent to London to be in charge of a new foundation of his Order, where he was also teaching Dogmatic Theology to the scholastics of Christus Rex Priory in North London. An intensive course of comparative religion brought him in contact with Buddhism. Within a year of his coming to Sri Lanka he was ordained a Buddhist monk there in 1938 under the name of Bhikkhu Dhammapala. From 1956 to 1968 he worked at the Encyclopaedia of Buddhism at the University of Ceylon in Peradeniya of which he was in the final years of that period the Senior Assistant Editor and Administrative Officer. During the last stages of his life he was residing in a meditation centre at Nilambe, Kandy, giving instructions to those who came to him for guidance on meditation.

He died on 15 September, 1988.