



INNER  
TRANQUILLITY

*The Buddha's Path to Freedom*

ALAN JAMES

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## Beginnings and Endings

Beginnings and endings are very important to us.

The birth of a baby is a happy event. Marriage is often solemnised in church or temple and celebrated by a lavish feast, with music and dancing to help the food and drink go down. We mark with ceremony and ostentation the opening of a show, an inauguration, the beginning of a new venture—indeed, the beginning of anything that we regard as significant. Each New Year is seen in with much revelry. A beginning seems to symbolise fresh hope, a new start when all will be well.

Endings are equally important. People go to great lengths to attend the funeral of a relative they have not seen for years. Retirement from working life is often celebrated. Farewells—typically on leaving one job or country for another—are occasions for celebration and revelry mixed with tears. The end of the year, the coming of the shortest day at the winter solstice, is widely celebrated. Now called Christmas, once called Saturnalia, it is a time to make merry, to drink to the death of the old year and toast the prospect of lengthening days.

We all feel the importance of beginnings and endings.

Even those of us who see life as a series of cycles still distinguish beginnings and endings. Farm workers are more conscious of the seasons than the years—or were so, before farming became industrial business and financial years came to such prominence. Some, particularly in agrarian communities in parts of Asia, mark time by lunar months, by the cycles of the moon. We can see remnants of this in the ceremonies of traditional Buddhism where *uposattha* days, days of *puja* and increased meditative activity, are marked by the quarters of the moon. In countries like our own, the working week is a familiar cycle—with the end of the week often celebrated, if not the beginning.

We are all familiar with the daily round. Newspapers are published every twenty-four hours, and events reported on that cycle. News that is more than twenty-four hours old is old news indeed.

Longer cycles abound. Sunspots have one cycle of eleven years and another of twenty-two. The Chinese astrological calendar is based on a twelve-year cycle. According to both science and cosmology there are infinitely long cycles during which the entire universe evolves and devolves, aeon after aeon. There is periodic renewal, periodic destruction, on and on, through measureless time.

Some are drawn to look for an ultimate beginning; they want to find out where everything began, the 'first cause'. Was there, at the very beginning, something or someone that started the universe in motion? Was there a 'big bang', a cataclysmic cosmic event, an inconceivable explosion of dense matter that, in expanding and cooling, has produced the universe as we know it today? Even here, some prefer to think in terms of cycles. The big bang and subsequent expansion are only the latest of many; there have been countless expansions and contractions stretching back into the infinite past.

When we look at life within the universe, we are faced with a similar conundrum. Does each life begin at birth, starting from nothing more than the conjoined genetic material of mother and father? Is that the 'first cause' of human existence—or can we look at this too in terms of cycles? Most of the world believes in rebirth or reincarnation—wandering from life to life in an endless round of birth and death. It is this we call *samsāra*.

This process of rebirth is not random but conditioned by the actions we have performed in the past. Choosing to act selfishly, we generally end up worse off next time round; acting wisely, we find ourselves in happier circumstances. In effect, we choose the general tenor of our next lifetime. Indeed, some authorities maintain that we choose not only the circumstances of our rebirth in terms of it being better or worse, but also the time period in which to be reborn. Instead of being reborn in the near future, one could choose the fourteenth century, perhaps, or the twenty-ninth.

To seek an ultimate beginning of life is to flirt with madness. Such a search can lead only to an infinite regress, with every furthest point being found to depend on something before it—back and ever backwards with no conceivable end. We can never know what was

the ultimate beginning of things, where it all began, for whatever we find has to be supported by something else behind it. Anything we find has to have come from something else, for nothing can exist of itself.

Philosophers, well aware of the problem of infinite regress, know that it is not possible to penetrate behind first assumptions, that it is possible to demonstrate logically only that which was assumed in the first place. Logic cannot go beyond itself. A first beginning is forever beyond reach. To test our assumptions, we have to go beyond logic into the realm of direct experience.

The Buddha was fully aware of these issues. He was concerned only with the arising and ending of suffering (*dukkha*). He made no claim to show where life and the world began and explicitly avoided the topic as one of the great unanswerable questions. Instead, he focused on the origin and cessation of suffering due to conditions, dealing with what could be proven here and now—through direct experience—to be the case. He never claimed to show where life and the world would end and expressly classified the topic as irrelevant, as another of the great unanswerable questions. His sole concern was to teach the arising and ending of suffering due to conditions.

He said, 'If this is, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises. If this is not, that does not come to be; from the stopping of this, that is stopped.' He expanded this enigmatic statement in the famous formula of condition dependent origination (*paticca-samuppāda*) which contains twelve links or conditions arranged in an endless circle, each one conditioning the next. I will not go into detail this evening, but here is an outline so you can see how it works.

In the life before this, ignorance was the major condition for the arising of craving. Actions based on that craving gave rise, after death in that lifetime, to the birth of the mind and body in this lifetime. In this life, our reactions to unavoidable resultants from past actions and to new events are based in ignorance and craving, which are the major conditions for birth into the next life. Once born into that future life, there follows subsequent decay, woe, lamentation, despair and death.

So arises all suffering whatsoever, said the Buddha. This is *samsāra*, the round of birth and death.

In all of this, there is no permanent self. There is no being or self that goes on unchanged from life to life. There are only changing conditions, unfolding and interacting.

In reply to the question ‘Who or what is reborn?’ the Buddha replied that it was neither the same nor different. If that seems too cryptic, consider waking up in the morning. Are you the same person who went to sleep the night before? Well, yes, in a way—but there again, no: you have changed overnight, being a few hours older for one thing. There is certainly nothing static in the process.

The Buddha pointed out that all suffering in this world arises from the fact of having been born. You cannot experience the distress of a broken relationship, an illness or a redundancy unless you have first been born. It seems obvious, but the definition of birth bears looking at. Birth is not only the adoption of a material body; it is also the psychological adoption of a self in the moment—the arising of the idea of ‘me, myself, I’ as a separate individual.

Condition dependent origination has far-reaching consequences. To repeat what the Buddha said: ‘If this is, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises. If this is not, that does not come to be; from the stopping of this, that is stopped.’ Putting some flesh on the bones of his statement, he said that if ignorance exists, craving must arise. If craving exists, birth must arise. If birth exists, suffering must arise. If ignorance ceases, craving must cease. If craving ceases, birth cannot arise. If there is no birth there can be no suffering and no death. He said, ‘Thus ceases this whole mass of suffering.’

The Buddha’s superlative teaching is most definitely not theoretical. It is in essence a series of practical instructions on how to bring about the total cessation of suffering. The Buddha taught a practical and effective way to freedom from all ills.

The way to the complete cessation of suffering is called the noble eightfold path. The eight components of the path fall naturally into three divisions: discipline (*sīla*), meditation (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*).

The first section that we meet is *sīla* or discipline, which is a matter of attempting to remove or restrain elements of our behaviour harmful to or inconsiderate of others. The usual template lay people work to is that of the five training precepts, while monks and nuns have many more rules to contend with.

Restraining behaviour in these ways calms the mind so that it can begin to work successfully at the second section of the noble eightfold path: *samādhi*, the setting up of mindfulness and concentration. As mindfulness and concentration increase, it becomes possible to observe body and mind in detail, clearly and without bias.

The increasingly subtle observation of all aspects of mind and body provides the ideal foundation for the meditator to develop the third section of the path: *paññā* or wisdom. Wisdom is a matter of developing comprehension through direct experience. Its purpose, in line with the Buddha's single aim of eradicating suffering, is to overcome ignorance. When ignorance is overcome, craving cannot arise, birth cannot arise, death cannot arise and suffering cannot arise. Just this is the end of suffering.

We remain tied to the wheel of endless birth and death for as long as we believe that things are inherently lasting, satisfactory and separate. We actually (mis)perceive mental and material things in this way and these three misperceptions are called the hallucinations of perception (*vipallāsa*) to underline that fact. Progress towards the eradication of all suffering is made through direct observation of the real state of affairs and it is this observation that overcomes the hallucinations.

We observe—directly, through experience—that all conditioned things are transient, unsatisfactory and non-self—the three marks of all conditioned phenomena. It is not enough to acknowledge intellectually the probable truth of statements about the three marks; it is necessary to see, through direct experience, that they are true. While intellectual understanding is important, it is not enough on its own, for it can never re-order perceptions at this most fundamental level. There has to be direct experience of the three marks for progress to be made.

It is only this direct comprehension, this insight, that overcomes ignorance. Overcoming ignorance, it breaks the fetters that bind us to the round of birth and death, to *samsāra*, to suffering itself.

The first three fetters, out of ten in all, are belief in a self, clinging to rule and ritual, and sceptical doubt. They can exist only if ignorance exists. Their elimination is a most important milestone on the journey to freedom. Overcoming the first three fetters marks the point at which a meditator becomes certain of final enlightenment,

within a maximum of seven more lifetimes (though, with more work, he or she might be able to succeed in this very lifetime). He becomes a streamwinner; he wins to the stream that flows inexorably to enlightenment.

With more practice, a streamwinner develops the wisdom that destroys ignorance. In doing so, he observes the end of beginnings; there is no more arising of self in the moment. He sees the end of becoming and realises that, as there is now no psychological adoption of self, so there can be no more birth. There is nothing to become, nothing to be born, there are no beginnings. This is true freedom. He is free from the past, free from the future, free from the present and free from views.

He also sees the end of endings—he comes to the deathless. Seeing that all things are *anattā*, non-self, he realises that there is no self to die. In fact, all conditioned things are so transient that it is arguable that they do not exist at all. There is nothing to die; it is the end of endings.

\* \* \*

We have journeyed through an entire universe, seen it in its evil aspect, striven for the good, forsaken that and striven for the spiritual, finally to return to our starting point. It is very different, however. Just as the foreign traveller returns home and sees his old haunts with new eyes, so does the spiritual traveller come home to see it in a totally different way. While appearing the same from the outside, he is altogether different, though this is difficult to convey to others. How do you represent the beauty of a rose to a blind man? Or the song of a nightingale to one born deaf?

The successful spiritual traveller completely understands suffering. He knows through experience its conditioned nature, its origins and its cessation. Having won to the deathless, he knows with a knowing that goes beyond words that he is free, that the universe is love, that his journey is ended and that there is no more to do. He is finally at peace.

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Inner tranquillity is a universal goal.

Inner tranquillity, it could be argued, is *the* universal goal, the goal of all existence, however various our attempts to reach it.

The Buddha uncovered a systematic, comprehensive and—most importantly—effective pathway to the attaining of that which all of us seek.

In this collection of lectures, Alan James draws on over thirty years of teaching experience to illuminate this path to the ultimate peace.

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