

## 12. THE SOUL-THEORY IN BUDDHISM.

I should like to be permitted to comment on the essay in the *Journal Asiatique*, Sept.-Oct., 1902, by Professor de la Vallée Poussin on "Dogmatique bouddhiste." The article, which is of extraordinary interest, is the fruit of untiring labour in untrodden fields, and marks a new departure in the exegesis of Buddhist literature. It is an inquiry whether and how far certain tenets, of cardinal importance according to the Pali Pitakas, appear as elaborated, modified, or otherwise evolved in the Sanskrit sources of Buddhism.

The tenets in question are the negation of *ātman* (Pali, *attā*) or soul, and the acquiescence in the current belief in *karma-phala*, or moral retribution in the after-life. To Western minds the nihilism of the one tenet and the persistent individuality implied in the other form an antinomy or parallogism which implies either muddle-headedness, or sophistry, or esotericism, or all three in early Buddhism. The difficulty of reconciliation was not unnoticed even by original adherents.<sup>1</sup> And Professor Poussin's inquiry turns, as might have been expected, on the nature and function assigned, in both Pali and Sanskrit sources, to that constituent of the Buddhist *moi biologique* (I thank the author for that word!) which might replace the more obviously transcendental *ātman* — to wit, *viññāna* (Pali *viññāna*). The inquiry is of necessity lengthy and discursive, but the erudition of the author has brought together a considerable mass of citations in text<sup>2</sup> and footnotes. These, together with the author's lucid presentments of ideas, should make the essay a guidepost which no one can afford to neglect, but which will, on the contrary, be gratefully consulted.

Professor de la Vallée Poussin finds a very positive evolution of *viññāna* - theory in certain Sanskrit - Buddhist

<sup>1</sup> M. III, 19; cf. I, 8, 258; S. III, 103. See the present writer on *Majjhima Nikāya*, J.R.A.S., 1902, p. 480.

<sup>2</sup> On p. 287, for XXVII of *Samyutta*, read XXII.

texts. The term *saṃtāna* is joined to or substituted for it—a term which seems to approximate to our own neo-psychological concept of mind as a ‘continuum’ or flux. And he infers from certain contexts that this *viññāna-saṃtāna* was regarded, not as one permanent, unchanging, transmigrating entity, as the soul was in the *ātman*-theory, but as an “essential series of individual and momentary consciousnesses,” forming a “procession vivace et autonome.” By autonomous he means independent of physical processes. According to this view the upspringing of a new *viññāna* at conception, as the effect of the preceding last *viññāna* of some expiring person, represents no change in kind, but only, to put it so, of degree. The *viññāna* is but a recurring series, not a transferred entity or principle. Hence it is more correct, if less convenient, to speak, not of *viññāna*, but of the *saṃtāna* of *pravṛtti-viññānāni*.

This notion, he holds, gives us a continuous ‘I,’ responsible yet susceptible of interruptions. And hereby the extremes of negation and affirmation in the early tradition are bridged over; and we get a coherent system, vindicating for Buddhism the claim of its founders to teach a Mean Doctrine (*majjhena dhammaṃ*) between the Eternalism of *sabbam atthi* and the Nihilism of *sabbam natthi*.<sup>1</sup> He concludes that since in place of Soul the Buddhists substituted a protagonist who played the part of soul so uncommonly well, we must put into the background all their reiterated rejection of the *Attā*.

Now I venture to think that in breaking up the notion of an abstract *viññāna*-entity into a series of intellectual processes or force-moments, Professor Poussin shows true insight into Buddhist thought. Dimly and crudely, without scientific language or instrument, the early Buddhists were groping, under the crust of words, after that view of phenomena which we are tending to make fundamental in our science of to-day. They were feeling out after a dynamic conception of things—after a world-order of becoming, movement, process, sequence, force.

<sup>1</sup> S. II, 17, 20, 23, 61, 76; III, 135: cf. II, 49, *bhūtaṃ idan ti Sāriputta passasi*?

Heraclitus, with his flux of becoming, had preceded them in a rudimentary fashion. Aristotle, with an inherited tradition of soul as a kind of motion, and with his own theory of soul as informing energy, actualizing the potential, was groping with them. Hume resolved a soul-being, for us, into 'particular' processes. Wundt has done much the same for the "fine old crusted" *Seele* of Germany. Matter itself is melting away as substance.

For the relatively static and material notion of an indivisible soul-monad dwelling in one concrete perishable cage after another, Gotama substituted the idea of a series of wholly transient compounds (*sambhavo*), organisms, personal nexûs, living beings. Living revealed itself as a congeries of manifestations (*pātubhāro*, *uppādo*) of becomings and extinctions. Part of the compound was relatively stable, to wit, the body (*rūpa*, *kāya*); but the rest—and this, *pace* the four other skandhas, virtually amounted to affective reaction or *vedanā*, and intellectual reaction, or *mano*, *citta*, or *viññāṇa*—was in a state of constant flux, "by day one thing as it arises, another as it wanes." To call this by the name of a substance, conceived as permanent and unchanging, were the last absurdity (S. II, 94-5). And with respect to its destiny, the faithful are forbidden to hold any view "about the coming, going, transmigration, rebirth, growth, development of *viññāṇa* apart from what is hereon taught respecting the other skandhas" (S. III, 53 foll.).

In the Abhidhamma, e.g. the Dhamma-Saṅgaṇi, there appears already a tendency to substitute the plural *viññāṇāni* for the term groups of *viññāṇa* (*cha viññāṇakāyā*) of the Sutta Pitaka. But if the early Buddhists did not find fitting terms for the view they were seeking to realize so ready to hand as Aristotle did, it should be remembered that they had not a body of scientific tradition and terminology, however imperfect, to draw upon as he had.

It is true that they did not guard their position as well as they might have done, had they fully realized its great issues. They used now and again the traditional

animistic expressions as to the 'descent'<sup>1</sup> of *viññāna* or *nāmarūpa* into the womb at conception (D. II, 63; S. II, 91, 101); as to laying down this body and taking another (S. IV, 60, 400), and so on. And they incorporated into their canon, with so much other mythical lore, the *Märchen* about Māra seeking the *viññāna* of the suicides Godhika and Vakkali (S. I, 122; III, 119–124)—a fanciful, almost humorous, legend which even M. Poussin, with all his sense for 'ironie subtile,' takes as seriously as other Paliists have done. Again, they use the conventional phraseology of transmigration in making a person speak of *his* past births and *his* future destiny. But the great mass of sober argument and positive exposition in the Pitakas goes to show both that the Buddhists resolved soul-entity into psychological process, and also that a future personal complex or self like unto, and the effect of, yet not identical with the present self, would reap the Karma harvest sown here.

When, however, M. Poussin defines what he thinks is meant by the *saṃtāna* of *pravṛtti-vijñānas*, it seems to me that he draws, from the later sources he quotes, implications very heavy for them to bear. He finds the psychology of the Nikāyas superseded by a metaphysical hypothesis of Sanskrit commentators. He will not admit that this flux of *vijñānas* is "the sequence of states of mind caused by the casual impact of sense and object" (the Nikāya doctrine). No, it is an autonomous continuum of *vijñāna*-moments: "leur série essentielle, leur procession vivace et autonome." These are his own words. But the quotations he supplies hardly bear him out in this metaphysical elaboration of *viññāna*-psychology. He does not claim that this hypothesis exists in the Nikāyas. They indeed affirm of *viññāna* the merely phenomenal nature which he transcends. Far from being autonomous, *viññāna*, for them, *is not*, does not arise (*uppajjati*), unless there is contact by way of sense or

<sup>1</sup> This term is used in Samy. III, 46, to mean simply the 'arising' in consciousness of certain feelings or of ideas about them:—*pañcannaṃ indriyānaṃ avakkanti hoti*.

image (see e.g. M. I, 258-9). And I have not yet traced the *saṃtāna*-hypothesis in the traditions of the southern scholasticism, although *pavatta* for psychological process is a favourite term with Buddhaghosa.

It is easy to call *viññāna* a protagonist of the *ātman* when it has been elaborated into a hypothetical quasi-noumenal continuum of self-induced flashpoints of consciousness. I am not denying that this heterodox elaboration came to pass. On such a dynamic ego further light will be most welcome. But, however strongly its place in Indian thought becomes substantiated, it cannot dwarf the significance, as M. Poussin suggests it can, of Gotama's original position with respect to soul.

The rejection of *attā* was based, it is true, on a logical interpretation of individual experience and consistency of terms. But its import was, in fact, profoundly ethical and social. Gotama was making a stand against priests and gods and sacrificial ritual. And where soul was believed in, there Oversouls and the claims of the soul's 'medicine-man' could not be kept out. That belief he undermined by breaking up the notion of the person as consisting of two distinct homogeneous substances, and by resolving him into a number of impermanent elements and activities—activities that were only potential till called into temporary actuality by natural law-governed antecedent causes. The path he hewed was inevitably rough and ill guarded. It was the work of a great pioneer.

C. A. F. RHYS DAVIDS.