ON THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL ETHICS
OF THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM

The social ideal of lay Buddhism in the political Ashokan tradition was action to create the means for the pursuit of Nirvana, for the overcoming of Attachment and thereby of Suffering (cf. p. 28). But more famous is the ideal of the canonical Buddhism of the monastic order: the pursuit of the Nirvana goal itself, through ethics of non-action – in order to overcome Attachment to existence and Impermanence. Between this “Arhat” ideal and active social endeavor “there is no bridge” – in the opinion of Max Weber.¹ He assumed that actual social ethics were not derivable from Buddhism. This assumption seems to the present writer a misunderstanding. Max Weber apparently reached this mistaken conclusion because he took it for granted that any possible socially binding ethics per definition would have to “operate with the endless value of the individual soul.”² And in Buddhism only that in which all life merges is endless, not individual souls: their reality is denied both as individualities (in the sense of indivisibility) and as souls: the soul and the ego is conceived not as a permanent entity but as a function of all its innumerable components, a perennial process of flaring up and burning, of birth and rebirth in seconds just as in aeons.³ “All created things perish ... all created things are grief and pain ..., all forms are unreal, he who knows and sees this becomes passive in pain; this is the way ...” ⁴ “Woe upon life in this world!”⁵

Not even Buddha can make the phenomena of Impermanence permanent, “he cannot make the beings [satta] subject to the law of

² Ibid.
birth unborn, he cannot make the beings subject to the law of aging not to age, the beings subject to the law of sickness not to be sick, he cannot bring about that the beings subject to the law of death should not die." 1 “When we bethink us of the death of the sons of the Universal Teacher [Buddha] who was gifted with perfect insight, who had attained all there is to attain, ... then may we lay to heart the entire vanity of all that comes into being and vigilantly strive [after deliverance].” 2 Deliverance is sought in Buddhism by breaking the ceaseless chain of becoming and perishing: meditation is to achieve insight into the illusory nature of sensory phenomena. Thereby the desire for transitory things is destroyed and clinging to existence is overcome. This leads to overcoming the cause of endless rebirth, the overcoming of endless change, the overcoming of Suffering. To those who reach that stage death has lost its peril:

Having abandoned both passion and hatred and folly, having rent the ties, not trembling in the loss of life, let one wander alone ... 3 Having thrown behind pleasure and pain, joy and distress, having acquired equanimity, tranquility, purity, let one wander alone ... strenuous for obtaining the supreme good [Nirvana], with a mind free from Attachment, ... let one wander alone like a rhinoceros. 4 Having left son and wife, father and mother, wealth, and corn and relatives, the different objects of desire, let one wander alone ...; “this is the tide, ... this is the fishhook”, so having understood, ... wander alone like a rhinoceros. 5 As the beast unbound in the forest goes feeding at pleasure, so let the wise man, considering [only his] own will, wander alone ... 6

Gautama Buddha taught: “Be ye a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge ... look not for a refuge to anyone besides yourself.” 7

Thus Theravāda Buddhism has not accepted doctrines of vicarious salvation or salvation by Grace. Its quest is concerned with the self-salvation of what is otherwise called the individual. Therefore this Buddhist quest has been again and again described as selfish, 8 ignoring

6 Ibid., I, iii, 5: transl. SBE, X, ii, p. 6.
8 For example, R. Spence Hardy, Eastern Monachism: An account of the order of mendicants founded by Gotama Budha (London, 1850), p. 343.