

# The Unity of All Life: Ananda Metteyya's View of Nature

## PART ONE

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Man can act only on external and visible characters: nature cares nothing for appearances, except in so far as they may be useful to any being. She can act on every internal organ, on every shade of constitutional difference, on the whole machinery of life. . . . [Man] does not rigidly destroy all inferior animals, but protects during each varying season, as far as lies in his power, all his productions. . . . How fleeting are the wishes and efforts of man! how short his time! and consequently how poor will his products be, compared with those accumulated by nature during whole geological periods. Can we wonder, then, that nature's productions should be far 'truer' in character than man's productions; that they should be infinitely better adapted to the most complex conditions of life, and should plainly bear the stamp of far higher workmanship?<sup>1</sup>

These words are among the many contained in Charles Darwin's 1859 seminal book, *On the Origin of Species*. In it he details the seemingly cruel way in which all the parts of nature struggle against themselves for survival. This view of nature permeated the minds and imagination of Victorian England. It gave a non-theistic explanation of creation for those rejecting religion and was considered heresy by those who believed in God's exclusive role in creating the world. While it would be easy to simply describe Darwin's impact on the view of nature as a polemic, those who agreed and those who objected, the reality is that Darwin's theory resulted in views that were much more complex. This complexity requires a more nuanced investigation; one in which certain individuals become candidates for exploration because of their backgrounds and positions in society; these people help illuminate the complexity of outlooks regarding nature maintained by others. One such person is Ananda Metteyya (Charles Henry Allan Bennett); the first Englishman ever to become a Buddhist monastic and return to England. His views of nature not only accept and integrate Darwin's theory of

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<sup>1</sup> Darwin, Charles, *The Origin of Species*. Literature.org. 1859.  
<http://www.literature.org/authors/darwin-charles/the-origin-of-species/>.

evolution, but he also expanded, converted, and sometimes refuted them based on his background in Theravada Buddhism. Exploring Ananda M.'s views on nature allows us to better understand how Darwin's theories were accepted, applied, and how they were represented in Buddhism and the scientific view of Buddhism prevalent from the middle to end of the Victorian era.

Before we can understand Ananda Metteyya's use of Darwin's theory and his view of nature, we have to know who he was. Born Charles Henry Allen Bennett in London in 1872, Ananda M. was educated in the sciences and worked as an analytical chemist. Due to health issues, in 1900 he moved to Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, for a warmer climate. Having had a previous interest in the religions of the East, he began studying yoga and Buddhism. By 1902 he converted to Buddhism and moved to Burma where he became the second Englishman to ever become a Buddhist monk. At his ordination he adopted the name, Ananda Metteyya. He founded the Buddhasasana Samagama, the International Buddhist Society, in 1903 and helped found the Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland in 1907–8, a predecessor organization to the modern Buddhist Society. Upon founding the International Buddhist Society, Ananda M. began to write about Buddhism in numerous English language journals. In these essays, he presented Buddhism as a religious system completely in harmony with science, and in particular, Darwin's theory of evolution. However, overtime he expanded on Darwin's ideas, contested some, and eventually created a unique view of nature based on the integration of evolution and Buddhism.

### **Buddhism, Science and Evolution**

Ananda Metteyya was not the first to align Buddhism with Darwin's theory of evolution. Many compared Buddhist tenets or doctrines to those of Western science, and in particular evolution. For instance, at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, a Sinhalese native named Anagarika Dharmapala stunned the audience when he claimed that the Buddha expounded on the doctrine of evolution two and a half millennia before Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*. Dharmapala said that the 'teachings of the Buddha on evolution are clear and expansive'<sup>2</sup> and that evolution was a corollary to the Buddhist law of cause and effect. His association of science with Buddhism was in a long line of thinkers who saw the essential doctrines of Buddhism compatible with science. Even those who were less than favorable towards Buddhism realized, after analysis, that its similarities were glar-

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in David L. McMahan 'Modernity and the Early Discourse of Scientific Buddhism' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (December 2004), p. 900.

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ingly apparent. In his 1884 book, *Buddhism: Its Historical, Theoretical and Popular Aspects*, Ernest Eitel wrote, 'A Buddhist may adopt all the results of Modern Science, he may become a follower of Newton, a disciple of Darwin, and yet remain a Buddhist.'<sup>3</sup>

Still others rejected religion all together but saw Buddhism as a mere translation of science. Paul Carus was one of them. Carus was a professor of Philosophy but more importantly he was the first managing editor of the Open Court Publishing Company, founded in 1887. A proponent of Scientific-Buddhism during the Victorian era, and member of Ananda Metteyya's International Buddhist Society, Carus saw science as the foundational basis upon which to build a faith. He called it the Religion of Science. From this viewpoint he examined Buddhism and determined that there were similarities between Buddhism and science. He believed Buddhism was completely compatible with science because it was not religious but philosophical. McMahan explains that within Carus' view,

Karma was natural law translated into the ethical realm; rebirth anticipated the Darwinian understanding of species transforming themselves into other species; the detailed analyses of mind in Buddhist texts were in fundamental agreement with modern psychology; the exhortations of the Buddha to be "lamps unto yourselves," not blindly believing but verifying his statements experimentally, contained the quintessence of the scientific spirit.<sup>4</sup>

This all leads to a position in which science takes the predominant role and Buddhism is understood through its filter. Ananda Metteyya took an opposite view. Buddhism was 'the Truth,' and had been for over two thousand years, and science was simply proving what the Buddha already stated. Regardless of the order though, in each case science and Buddhism are seen as complementary.

This does not mean everyone was in agreement. Some saw the doctrines of Buddhism as contrary to science. Yet, most often these critics were aligned with Christianity and involved with Christian-Buddhist polemics. Moreover, these critics frequently aligned Christianity with science. For instance, Rev. Robert Spence Hardy saw Christianity validated by science and that the same refuted the ideas of Buddhism. As noted by Almond, Hardy 'went so far to assert that all of the geography and astronomy of the Buddhists was proved false and unreal by the demonstrations of science.' Yet the battle between science and religion was less polemic during the first half of the Victorian era.<sup>5</sup> Both

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), p. 93.      <sup>4</sup> McMahan, p. 914.

<sup>5</sup> Sheridan Gilley and Ann Loades, 'Thomas Henry Huxley: the War Between Science and Religion', *Journal of Religion*, vol. 61, 1981, pp. 286-7.

Buddhism and Christianity could claim compatibility with natural sciences with credibility. Even Darwin himself was very religious and did not see his ideas as conflicting with Christianity.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, in the case of Ananda Metteyya, he believed that Buddhism and science were completely complementary and that Darwinism and its representations of nature were factual.

### **Ananda Metteyya's Buddhist and Scientific Views of Nature**

In Ananda Metteyya's first essay for his English journal, *Buddhism: An Illustrated Review* which aimed at spreading Buddhism in the West, he states:

The ancient Gods are fallen,—some yet passing, all must inevitably go. For this new Civilisation of a hundred years is the child of Modern Science, and the real rulers of the West are the great workers in the scientific arena. . . . And if these real rulers of the world, the physicist, the engineer, the chemist, the electrician, are agreed on any one thing, that thing is the impossibility of accepting any longer the bases of the old religious beliefs.<sup>7</sup>

Ananda M. then goes on to say that religion is useful for morality and values, but those values have to be based on a truth not incompatible with science; the West needs 'an ethical system not based on revelation,' but instead, 'on the culture of the higher faculties of the mind. In other words, there is need in the west to-day of a Religion which shall contain in the highest degree a philosophy, a system of ontology, founded on Reason rather than belief.'<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly for Ananda M. this religion is Buddhism. This is because Ananda M. sees Buddhism as a religion 'devoid of belief in all that is opposed to reason.'<sup>9</sup> Also apparent from these lines is Ananda M.'s positioning Buddhism in opposition to Christianity just as science was positioned by many. He rejected the religions of revelation because he felt they lead people away from 'the Truth.' He understood that there were times, in the past, where man was weak and needed assurance, but he felt that the West no longer needed reassurance. Ananda M. accepted Darwin's theory of evolution in its totality. In his *Wisdom of the Aryas* he writes that we needed the myth of God in the past, but this is no longer the case,

now that we understand and have grown mature enough to dare to face what nature really is. We have learned, through the eyes of science, to regard all life as one continuing struggle;—a struggle

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 290.

<sup>7</sup> Ananda Metteyya, 'The Faith of the Future', *Buddhism: An Illustrated Review*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1903), p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 13

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

wherein uncounted millions of exquisitely-sensitive creatures are continually subjected to the cruelest and most torturing of deaths. We see Life everywhere arrayed, seemingly in blindness, against itself; and what our forbears would have termed the "God-given instincts" of its creatures directed against other lives with a cruelty so revolting that our hearts sicken at the very thought of it.<sup>10</sup>

Ananda M. continues his discussion of the cruelty of nature describing how killer whales relentlessly hunt, attack, and exhaust their prey; he describes how the killer whales hunt Sperm whales, pursue them while attacking the Sperm whale's jaw, attempting to dislocate it. And once the Sperm whale is exhausted,

Then, pulling with all its might, the killer succeeds in dislocating the sperm-whale's lower jaw; so that it no more can close its mouth. Then the killer reaps the reward of its long combat; entering the huge animal's mouth *it eats out its tongue* – and departs to leave the hapless monster to die in a slow torment of agony and starvation! Nature is full of just such horrors.<sup>11</sup>

Ananda M. clearly saw nature as cruel and the source of great suffering. This view supported the first of the Buddhist Four Noble Truths, Dukkha, or suffering. It is the conditioned state of all sentient beings according to Buddhism; yet it is the source of the motivation to end the suffering of the self and others. Buddhism 'places this very suffering of life in the forefront of its doctrinal structure.'<sup>12</sup> The Buddha states,

What, again, is suffering? Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering, to be united with what is not loved is suffering, to be separated from what is loved is suffering; not to obtain what you desire and strive for, that is also suffering.<sup>13</sup>

Buddhism sees that this suffering, Dukkha, is derived from desire. An insatiable thirst or craving, or *samudaya*, for more, for the need to satisfy unending wants; it is the condition that Buddhism seeks to overcome and from which one obtains liberation. The Buddha states this clearly: 'What is the origin of suffering? It is thirst (*trishnā*) that leads to rebirth, and that is accompanied by desire and pleasure and finds enjoyment in this or in that.'<sup>14</sup> Ananda M. maps the suffering caused by indiscriminate nature onto the first of the four truths. He notes its cause and that it can be ended, and then, turning to the same source, human life, he notes how this suffering can be overcome.

<sup>10</sup> Ananda Metteyya, *The Wisdom of the Aryas* (London: Kegan Paul, 1923), p. xiii.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xiii–xiv. Italics in original. <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Alfred Scheepers, *A Survey of Buddhist Thought* (Amsterdam: Olive Press, 1994), p. 33. <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

Comparative biology shews [sic] that the more highly advanced in evolution is any given being, the more highly specialized are the natures and functions of the various types of individual cells which go to the upbuilding of that being's life; and so the degree of specialisation of the cells composing the human body is higher than that of any creature on earth.

Just as our lives are thus built up of individual cells, so is a great civilisation built up of individual beings. . . . The similarity is such as to transcend mere analogy; and leads us to the thought that the perfect human civilization would be that wherein the functions of the divers types of living cells composing our bodies were most exactly paralleled by the functions of the various types of individuals composing the state.<sup>15</sup>

Ananda M. continues giving examples of how the immune system resembles national defense. He then states that the cells and individuals only benefit and can achieve when they associate and work together. 'It is only as though the individual cells recognize their unity or purpose with all other cell-lives of the same association.' Because of this association and the unity it creates, Ananda M. sees this association as the basis of addressing the problem of suffering. This leads Ananda M. to his final understanding of the alleviation of the natural born suffering of sentient beings:

The more advanced thinkers of our latter days, are coming ever more and more to grasp the supreme value and importance of this understanding of Life as One,—at least so far as humanity itself is concerned. . . . Life's pain is mitigated just to the extent to which it has achieved this power of association, this practical realization of its own inherent Oneness.<sup>17</sup>

Ananda M. sees this oneness of life, founded on the underlying human condition, as the means to end suffering. The individual recognition of self interest, he feels, would motivate the person to cooperate in a 'consciously-guided synthesis' to overcome and eliminate suffering.

These statements present a peculiar situation. Ananda M. clearly acknowledges that Darwin's evolution is true; that nature is cruel; it fights and feeds upon itself, it continually desires and wants and is the basis of much suffering; and also that this view of nature is compatible with Buddhism's view of the world, i.e. suffering or Dukkha. Yet, he claims Buddhism challenges this view, or at least presents a way in which man, by using examples of this same nature, can overcome the

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<sup>15</sup> Ananda M., *The Wisdom of the Aryas*, pp. xvi–xvii. <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xix. <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xx–xxi.

'lower instincts' and through association, ethics, morality, and the path Buddhism presents, overcome our inherent natures and create a better world. 'Thus, even in the merely material, outer, manifested world, we see the action of some Power that constantly *makes for better*; for advance, for improvement of life's creatures; we imply, indeed, the existence of such a Power when we speak of *evolution* at all.'<sup>18</sup> What is this power? Compassion.

Ananda M. states that compassion is the basis of that which 'lifts a man above the brute.'<sup>19</sup> Continuing his discussion of evolution, we find Ananda M. stating, 'Whereas the very bed-rock of the lower life is the *survival of the fittest*, and hence the elimination of the weaker individuals, we find the more advanced and evolved races of men developing more and more of the divine principle of compassion.'<sup>20</sup> For Ananda M., compassion is the means by which association takes place, and man betters himself, other people, and the world around him.

While Ananda M. may be using Darwin's theory of evolution and examples from science, there is nothing extraordinary about Ananda M. position. Compassion is always the basis by which Buddhism asserts for radical self change. Buddhism asserts the need to see others as part of the self and that helping others is also part of helping one's self. In *What the Buddha Taught*, Walpola Rahula writes, 'compassion represents love, charity, kindness, tolerance and such noble qualities.'<sup>21</sup> Thus his assertion of the unity of life, the need for association, while using scientific language, is essentially Buddhist doctrine using the terminology and examples drawn from science. Using this type of rhetoric added to his ability to attract people who were interested in science and open to Buddhist morality. By presenting Buddhism in the light of science, Ananda M. is able to present the more peculiar ideas of Buddhism, as determined by the West, such as rebirth or transmigration, and Karma. Another area that was very difficult for Western audiences to accept was the Buddhist doctrine of *anattā* or no self. For the Western, this doctrine denied the existence of a soul. Moreover, it also stated that a person is only a combination of processes and conditions that arise, and then abide for a time and finally subside. The Buddha classified a person as the five heap or aggregates; these were the basis of all sentient beings, especially humans. Not surprisingly, many objected to this characterization of humans. Nevertheless, Ananda M. accepted this doctrine as fact and based on it and other ideas of science, he devised unique ideas about life, and in particular, human consciousness.

This article is to be concluded in our February issue.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 114.      <sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 70.      <sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>21</sup> Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 46.















## THE MIDDLE WAY

never achieving the 'apparatus' he sought to invent. Yet today, many experiments are conducted by cognitive-neuroscience that seems to resemble Ananda M.'s ideas of a century ago. Scientists now see the brain as a series of electrical charges firing between neuron synapses. As Rodolfo Llinás of the New York University School of Medicine describes it, 'Neurons have an intrinsic rhythm, a bit like a hum. They generate this electrical dance at a given frequency because they have similar rhythms—they hum in unison.'<sup>19</sup> Scientists have been able to record these hums and 'dances.' Yet, they still lack the ability to record thoughts and then transmit them to others. Even so, Ananda M.'s conception of recording thoughts has been the subject of a number of movies.<sup>20</sup> Ananda M.'s conception of nature is not one that is comforting to some. It is impersonal and values the group over the individual. Nevertheless, it is one that has a basis deriving from the views of his time and in studying them, we gain a better understanding of some of the early views that inform our modern views of nature.



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<sup>19</sup> NOVA Online, Secrets of the Mind: The Electric Brain. October 2001.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/mind/electric.html> (accessed 29 January 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Many movies in the last decade, such as the Harry Potter movies, *ExiztenZ* and others, represent the ability to store memories, thoughts or emotions using magic or technology. Being able to directly access the memories or thoughts of another is a favourite theme of Hollywood.