

VOLUME: 3

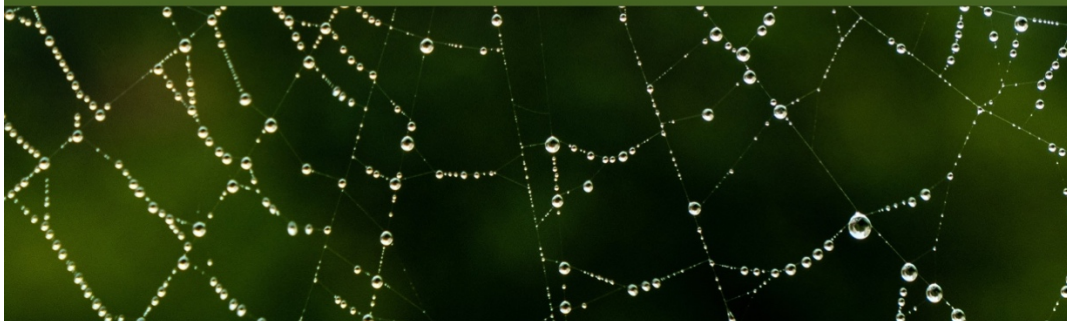
ISSUE: 1

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF FEAR STUDIES

Theme: Navigating Ecofear through Diverse Cultures

Guest Editors: RAYSON K. ALEX, SACHINDEV P. S.

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Ecoanxiety: A Philosophical Investigation from the Early Buddhist Perspective

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Abstract

Ecoanxiety has been described as a fear caused by the climate crisis or environmental degradation. In religious and ethical studies, the emotion of fear is significant because it plays a role as a motivating factor or achieving necessary mental state to get to the ultimate goal in religious life. Fear is often caused by the consequences of an event. However, the dysteleological nature of early Buddhist thoughts does not contribute significantly to environmental problems but construe the fear. This paper is an attempt to explore the Buddhist ethical perspective of ecoanxiety, with special reference to the early Buddhist thinker Buddhaghosa. In this paper, I argue that Buddhist ethical teachings have an immediate beneficial effect on ecoanxiety.

Keywords: Ecoanxiety, Buddhist philosophy, Buddhaghosa, Fear Visuddhimagga

Introduction

The word *ecoanxiety* refers to a mental state related to an ecological system. Panu Pihkala (2018) has argued that the term is referred to as “various difficult emotions and mental states arising from environmental conditions and knowledge about them” (546). However, ecoanxiety cannot be separated from the other types of anxieties. For instance, a person is feeling anxious because of his/her loneliness, but at the same time, he/she is also worried about the future because of ecological disaster (Pihkala 546). It is significant to note that early Buddhist philosophy is dysteleological in nature, which does not give importance to the result of the action. Teleological philosophies such as Sankara’s and Vedic-Upanishad system are more goal-oriented. Harris (1994) has argued that in Buddhist philosophy (similar argument can be read in 1995 as well),

There are difficulties in determining how best to act with regard to the natural world unless that response has been specifically authorised by the Buddha. The problem here is twofold. In the first place, few of the Buddha's injunctions can be used unambiguously to support environmentalist ends, and in the second, the dysteleological character of Buddhist thought militates against anything that could be construed as injecting the concept of an "end" or "purpose" into the world. (Harris 53)

Early Buddhist philosophy is dysteleological in nature and, therefore, does not talk about the natural world. The main concern of Buddhist philosophy is human suffering and its solution.

Here, human suffering does not refer to the social issues. It argues for the subjective world works as the individual is inclined towards something. According to the early Buddhist philosophy, one is in pain because of one's ignorance and this ignorance can be removed with right knowledge. Here right knowledge refers to knowledge which leads to liberation. Buddha has discussed in great detail human suffering, its cause and its final solution. That is why it is difficult to talk about environmental issues from a Buddhist point of view. However, there is an argument on how Buddhist ethical teaching can benefit the ecological disasters (Prakash, 2018, 217-18; 2020, 205). I will not examine the early Buddhist attitudes towards the environmental crisis *per se* in this paper. This paper's focus is more about the sentient beings who are anxious about the natural world, and thus ecoanxiety is reasonably significant for Buddhist studies. For instance, in *majjhima-nikāya*, one of the texts of Buddhist Pāli canon, it is mentioned that the disciple approaches the Buddha and expresses his wish to go alone in the dense forest for meditation practices. The main concern was that how a meditator can live in such awe-inspiring, horrifying abodes such as orchard shrines, woodland shrines, and tree shrines. And while practicing the meditation there, a wild animal can come up to the meditator, or a peacock can knock off a branch, or the wind would rustle the leaves (Nanamoli 4). In *Visuddhimagga*, Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa has also addressed the same concern about how a meditator can protect himself from the different types of fear inducing agencies in the forest [i]. He writes, "*Creeping things* are any long creatures such as snakes and so on that move by crawling. Contact with them is of two kinds: contact by being bitten and contact by being touched. And that does not worry him who sits with a robe on. So he uses it for the purpose of protection from such things" (Nanamoli 1: 87).

In this text, the story encourages the meditator to follow the rules and manage and transform his anxiety. The text offers the significance to meditation practices undertaken in the forest because these practices advantage meditators to obtain unattained concentration, abandon attachment to life, and become free from anxiety (Nanamoli 2: 54). However, this concern of the disciple is addressed by Buddha, which I will be taking on in the last section of this paper. My intention to bring this instance here is to substantiate how ecoanxiety is an important concept in Buddhist studies. In this paper, I will take up the early Buddhist elucidation of fear and anxiety and elucidate the application on ecology. This paper is focused on the early school of Buddhism which consist of Sarvastivada and Sautrantika schools of thought. More precisely, I will be focusing on the early Buddhist text *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purification) written by Buddhaghosa. It is significant to note that *Visuddhimagga* systematically presents the interpretation of Buddhist teaching contained in Pali text.

The Emotion of Anxiety

There is no word for emotion in Buddhist psychology, but Buddhist thinkers have elucidated various emotions. Emotion is considered to be the effect of individual judgment (De Silva 42); this is true with any emotion. For instance, a pleasant feeling (*sukha*), a painful feeling (*dukkha*), greed, hatred, anxiety, and so on. These emotions occur when an individual comes to a judgment. I will take up this issue in detail in the last section of the paper. However, it is significant to note that the difference between fear and anxiety can be drawn to some extent. De Silva has argued that "Fear generally arises as a response to a specific danger, whereas anxiety arises as a reaction to a danger which is not clearly seen" (De Silva 46). De Silva argues that emotion/anxiety is caused by the attachment or connection with one's self (De Silva 44). Vasubandhu argues that

the emotion of fear arises when an individual expects or undesires an event. He writes that the “unpleasant consequences” or undesired events are called Kārikā (*bhaya* or fear) because they engender fear (AKB II: 32b). Fear arises when one person has a strong attachment with a particularly valuable object and does not want to lose it. For instance, if I am concerned about my kids that they will not have a good life after an ecological disaster, my concern for their well-being will turn into an emotion of fear. However, in Buddhist psychology fear and anxiety are the same. The early Buddhist text *Samyutta-nikāya* elucidates how the qualities of anxiety are also seen in the emotion of fear. In a simile, a wise man consoles a sick woman who is anxious about the well-being of her family. The wise man argues that anxiety will not help in anyway, so she should abandon her anxiety (SN 11: 54(4) III).

In this instance, a monk consoles an individual who is anxious over his mother and father. Here it is coherent to argue that the features of fear are in anxiety as well; therefore, it is difficult to argue that fear and anxiety are two different emotions. De Silva argues, “some forms of anxiety or vague apprehension under clear analysis can be seen to be specific fears” (De Silva 49). For instance, the above mentioned metaphor where an individual, who is on death bed, feels anxiety regarding the family. This sense of vague apprehension is based on how their family will survive after his death. But analysis of this vague apprehension can lead us to explicit causes. Therefore, anxiety has the same feature as fear. The Buddhist thinker, Buddhaghosa, does not differentiate between fear and anxiety (Nanamoli 322). In many places in *Visuddhimagga* (is a Buddhist treatise on Buddhist practice and Theravāda Abhidhamma written by Buddhaghosa) he has used these words in one sense.

Buddhaghosa and Ecoanxiety

Anxiety is interwoven with attachment, which can produce pleasure. De Silva argues that the identification of the five aggregates in Buddhism (such as form, sensations, perceptions, formations and consciousness) as a construction of a permanent ‘self’ gives rise to fear and anxiety; ‘self’ according to him is fluid (De Silva 49). Before elucidation of the emotions of anxiety and fear, it is significant to discuss the notion of the five aggregates, as mentioned in early Buddhist philosophy. In early Buddhism, there is an emphasis on the relation of *mind-matter*, as it does not bifurcate the phenomenal into matter and mind, or body and mind, as two separate entities. Mind, as humans have maintained, is not an independent entity. The sensations are inherently located in the sense-faculties. The sense of faculties has been recognized as internal. These are the seats of respective sensations. Again sense faculties are constituted by *Rupa* or matter. Thus, the bottom line is that in early Buddhism, one *cannot* separate mind from the body.

In the Western philosophy, David Hume also claimed that the self is nothing more than a bundle of perceptions. Thus, I would submit that the Buddha and Hume have used the “bundle” theory (proposed by Hume). Here, it is significant to note that Buddhism makes a metaphysical claim though Hume makes only an epistemic claim. Hume writes in his well-known work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, that we do not actually experience anything which can substantiate the belief in the self and/or made by the self. Wherever we try to experience our self, we experience a continuous flow of perceptions that replace one another in rapid succession. “I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the

perception” (Hume 525). For Hume, self or person is not the other that is a “bundle of impressions.” It is fascinating to note that for the early Buddhists as well as for Hume there is phenomenologically no thinker or perceiver but thoughts and perceptions. “When we talk of *self* or *substance*, we must have an idea annexed to these terms. Otherwise, they are altogether unintelligible. Every idea is derived from preceding impressions, and we have no impression of self or substance, as something simple and individual. We have, therefore, no idea of them in that sense” (Hume 631). For Hume, to have an idea, we must have a corresponding impression, but in real life, we do not have an impression of idea of self. Therefore, we have no idea of self. The idea of self is arguably a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity and are in constant flux and motion (Hume 252).

Correspondingly, in early Buddhism, a person is nothing more than five aggregates [ii]. In Buddhism, the word '*Nama*' has been used in the same sense. One should not understand *Nama* or *Mind* as 'formless' like a soul that enters in a body at the time of birth. Buddha refused to accept a notion of a formless and eternal self. Buddha's explanation is the abolition of ambiguity. It is not to shift the soul to the mind. In early Buddhism *Nama* represents all activities of the body [iii]. Therefore, in early Buddhist philosophy, an individual is not more than the five aggregates.

In this section I am discussing the conception of anxiety or fear from a Buddhist point of view. Buddhaghosa has elucidated the notion of fear with a simile. He gives the simile of a woman whose three sons have received a charge of capital punishment. The King has ordered to cut off their head. The woman visits the place of execution where she finds the King had already ordered to cut off the eldest son's head and is about to cut off the middle son's head. After seeing the execution of the first two sons, the women give up hope for the youngest son. She started believing that the youngest son will also face the same fate (Nanamoli XXI: 30.). In another simile, Buddhaghosa explicates a pregnant woman's simile who has already given birth to ten children. She has lost all the children because of her infected womb. Therefore, she assumes that she would also lose the child in the womb (Nanamoli XXI: 31). Buddhaghosa has termed this as the appearance of terror. The woman's fear of the past bitter experiences constantly create a fear in the new context as well. Buddhaghosa, through this simile, shows how the appearance of terror takes place in the mind. He argues that when an individual sees the cessation of formation in the past and the cessation of formation in the present, rather than based on these experiences, the individual believes in the cessation of the future formation. The fear arises in the response of the real dangers (assuming that there are imagined dangers as well) (Nanamoli XXI: 37; De Silva 46).

He states the simile of a man who sees the three charcoal pits at a city gate and, based on his experiences, forms a judgment that whoever falls into the charcoal pits will not suffer from pain (Nanamoli XXI: 32). In another example, he argues that a man is looking on three spikes in a row. The first one is acacia spike, the second one is an iron spike, and the third one is a gold spike. He is not afraid of these spikes because he is aware that falling on a spike will not cause any pain (Nanamoli XXI: 32). Therefore, the terror does not appear in his mind. Buddhaghosa writes that "it is called 'appearance as terror' only because formations in all kinds of becoming, generation, destiny, station, or abode are fearful in being bound for destruction, and so they appear only as a terror" (Nanamoli XXVI: 33). Whenever we judge—accurately or inaccurately—some situation which is dangerous for us, it leads to provoking the actual fear or anxiety (emotion) as experience.

According to Nanamoli:

In order to contrive the means to deliverance. Here is a simile: a man thought to catch a fish, it seems, so he took a fishing net and cast it in the water. He put his hand into the mouth of the net under the water and seized a snake by the neck. He was glad, thinking, "I have caught a fish." In the belief that he had caught a big fish, he lifted it up to see. When he saw three marks, he perceived that it was a snake and he was terrified. He saw the danger, felt dispassion (revulsion) for what he had seized, and desired to be delivered from it. Contriving a means to deliverance, he unwrapped [the coils from] his hand, starting from the tip of its tail. Then he raised his arm, and when he had weakened the snake by swinging it two or three times round his head, he flung it away, crying "Go, foul snake." Then quickly scrambling up on to dry land, he stood looking back whence he had come, thinking, "Goodness, I have been delivered from the jaws of a huge snake!" (XXI: 49)

Through this simile, Buddhaghosa elucidated how a meditator can get rid of the problem of fear. Comprehending the simile, the meditator's knowledge of appearance as terror is like when the man was frightened. Knowledge of contemplation of danger is like the man's seeing the danger. Knowledge of contemplation of dispassion is like the man's dispassion (revulsion) for what he had seized. Knowledge of desire for deliverance is like the man's deliverance from the snake. The attribution of the three characteristics to formations by knowledge of contemplation of reflection is like the man's contriving a means to deliverance. For just as the man weakened the snake by swinging it, keeping it away and rendering it incapable of biting, and was thus quite delivered, so too this meditator weakens formations by swinging them with the attribution of the three characteristics, rendering them incapable of appearing again in the modes of permanence, pleasure, beauty, and self, and is thus quite delivered. That is why it was said above that he discerns them in this way "in order to contrive the means to deliverance" (Nanamoli XXI: 50). However, Buddhaghosa argues that there are three main gateways to achieve liberation or one can do away with anxiety:

(1) *To the seeing of all formations as limited and circumscribed and to the entering of consciousness into the signless element* (Nanamoli XXI: 67): Buddhists theorize in momentariness where they argue that everything appears for just a moment. According to early Buddhist theory, everything in this world is made of a simple element or *dhamma*. This element or *dhamma*, by nature, is temporary, and it can continue to exist for a single moment. But each *dhamma* perishes conditioning the next moment of *dhamma*. In the Buddhist context, a moment is like a row of lamps sending flashes one after the other, thus producing a moving light illusion. Motion consists of a series of immobility. A lamp's light is a common metaphorical designation for the uninterrupted production of a series of flashing flames. When this production changes its place, one says that the light has moved, but in reality, other flames have appeared in other contiguous places. Therefore, early Buddhists argue for the impermanence of everything.

However, based on theory, Buddhists argue as ethical prescription that we should see all the formation or moment as limited and circumscribed. Limited means that all formations are limited by rising and fall because there was no existence of the present form before the rise, and it will also vanish with the fall. Therefore, contemplation of the impermanence of a formation will

help apprehend the formation in a more sensible way (Nanamoli XXI: 68). Buddhaghosa writes, “When he brings [them] to mind as impermanent, formations appear as liable to destruction. When he brings them to mind as painful, formations appear as a terror. When he brings them to mind as not-self, formations appear as void” (Nanamoli XXI: 69). Again signless liberation should comprehend as the noble path that has occurred by making *Nibbana* its object through the signless aspect. Signless refers to a state where mind does not find any sign of permanence and eternal self.

(2) *To the stirring up of the mind with respect to all formations and to the entering of consciousness into the desire-less element* (Nanamoli XXI: 67): Early Buddhist recommends that one should comprehend all the formation as desire-less or one should not attach the desire with any formation of the object. Buddhists argue that desire is the main cause of our bondage and pain and acts as a major hurdle to achieving liberation. Desire or attachment is one of the causes of the cycle of birth and rebirth or endless pain, i.e., living a fear-based life. Therefore, it is significant ethically to refrain from the attachment.

(3) *To the seeing of all things (dhamma) as alien and to the entering of consciousness into the void-ness element.* (Nanamoli XXI: 67): It is recommended that one should comprehend all things as alien or different from us. Here, void-ness means that there is neither self nor any other things which can take the position of a self. The text says, “*nāhaṃ kvaṇaṇi kassaci kiñcanaṭ’ asmim̐ na ca mama kvaṇaṇi kismiñci kiñcanaṭ’ atthi* (I am not anywhere anyone’s owning, nor is there anywhere my owning in anyone) (Nanamoli XXI: 53). It means that the meditator does not see the self anywhere, even not in others. Here it is significant to note that self only refers to an eternal entity that enters the body at the time of birth and leaves at the time of death. Buddha does not accept any permanent entity. Buddhaghosa argues that this way, one can abandon fear and terror.

These three gateways to liberation lead to the removal of suffering from life. This path of fearlessness will help us to achieve a state where fear and anxiety cannot bother one’s mind or the world around that mind. However, In *Majjhima nikaya*, there is a chapter where the whole discourse is about the emotion Fear and Dread (*Bhayabherava Sutta*). This discourse has taken place between the Buddha and Brahmin Jāṇussoṇi where Buddha gives a discourse on fear as emotion. He faced these emotions when he was practicing meditation before his enlightenment.

There are the especially auspicious nights of the fourteenth, the fifteenth, and the eighth of the fortnight. Now, what if, on such nights as these, I were to dwell in such awe-inspiring, horrifying abodes as orchard shrines, woodland shrines, and tree shrines? Perhaps I might encounter that fear and dread. And later, on such especially auspicious nights as the fourteenth, the fifteenth, and the eighth of the fortnight, I dwelt in such awe-inspiring, horrifying abodes as orchard shrines, woodland shrines, and tree shrines. And while I dwelt there, a wild animal would come up to me, or a peacock would knock off a branch, or the wind would rustle the leaves. I thought: ‘What now if this is the fear and dread coming?’ I thought: ‘Why do I dwell always expecting fear and dread? What if I subdue that fear and dread while keeping the same posture that I am in when it comes upon me?’ (Nanamoli 4: 20)

In his discourse, he argues that how a person who is not purified in verbal conduct, unpurified in mental conduct, and unpurified in livelihood, they evoke unwholesome fear and dread (Anālayo 1524; Nanamoli 4: 5-7). Further, he says, recluses who go into the forest for practice and are devoid of wisdom evoke unwholesome fear and dread (Nanamoli 4:19). He elucidated how he faced fear and dread. Whenever he faced fear and dread, he always subdued the fear and dread in the same position. My main intention here is to show how Buddha has signified the notion of wisdom, where he argues for the purification of mind and body, which is the only way to get fear-free, authentic mindfulness. Mindfulness will help one to overcome fear and anxiety. Let's comprehend the significance of purification of mind in detail with the help of a simile. Buddhaghosa has given twelve different similes to elucidate how to bring wisdom to the mind. I will be discussing a few significant similes in this paper.

In Buddhaghosa's first simile of the fruit bat, he gave an example of a fruit bat who ascends on a honey tree with five branches to get good fruits or flowers. The fruit bat investigates all the branches one after another but fails to achieve taking fruits or flowers and realizes that this tree is barren. Thus, she lost interest in the tree and flew away (Nanamoli XXI: 91). By the same token, the meditation should take the five aggregates as the objects of clinging as the five branches of fruit tree [iv]. The meditator should see all aggregates as not worth taking after the comprehension. The meditator becomes dispassionate towards five aggregates because of its impermanence characteristic as fruit bat develops a dispassion towards the fruit tree. However, it is coherent to say that a fruit-bat has different causes to feel dispassionate towards the fruit tree, but here the comparison is made in terms of dispassion, a mindful attitude towards emotions. After developing the disinterest in five aggregates, the meditator uses a path of knowledge for his final liberation, which is the fruition of his knowledge.

In another simile, Buddhaghosa gives an instance of a man and his burning house. A house owner who is taking rest after finishing his dinner found that his home is on fire. Seeing the house on fire, he was frightened. Here the shrewdest act would be to get away from the house and be at a safe place (Nanamoli XXI: 95). Similarly, when the meditator realizes the amount of pain in life, he should go for a safe place through the right knowledge. Going for a safe place refers, analogically, to the achievement of the ultimate reality (In Buddhism, *nirvana* is considered ultimate reality. The notion of ultimate reality is a reality which does not depend on the experiences of persons as it is not subject to change.) This simile substantiates that the right knowledge and practice can help individuals face fear and anxiety. Buddhaghosa argues that an individual must fully, *via* unattachment, comprehend the situation and respond accordingly as the house owner did in this simile.

It is significant to see the application of Buddhaghosa's explanation of the three gateways regarding ecoanxiety. According to Buddhaghosa, one can control one's emotion of fear or anxiety through the three gateway of liberation because virtuous action cannot be performed with this emotion. Buddhaghosa argues that the path of the saint is to work for everyone because all the sentient beings are equal. Buddha, according to the text, advised practicing virtues such as fearlessness, non-attachment, etc. because it leads to non-remorse (Prakash, "The Path of a Saint: Buddhaghosa's Argument" 207). Therefore, Buddhist ethical teaching, though it is dysteleological, has significant impact on potentials for a sustainable development. Early Buddhist philosophy gave importance to all sentient beings and argued that one should act for others' welfare. For instance,

one cannot ethically exploit natural resources if one is aware that other living beings are dependent on them. Principally, it is correct to say that Buddhist philosophy talks about the greater good for human beings with ecology. Swearer termed it as “ecology of human flourishing” (133). Buddhist ethical teaching gives importance to individual pain and suffering and suggests that the path for purification or removal diminishes fear of the pain and fear itself. As I have argued above, following the path of liberation or working for a solution of one’s own pain/fear and body-mind can lead to other sentient beings’ wellbeing.

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to examine the notion of ecoanxiety and its solution from the early Buddhist perspective. Early Buddhist philosophy argues that the right knowledge and practices are significant to conquer the pain and suffering, fear and terror. In this process, forest dwellers’ meditative practices, as an example, are significant to achieve difficult concentrations, relinquish attachment, anxiety, etc. Here eradicating anxiety is a result of mindful practices. A meditator who is about to dwell in the forest faces in all likelihood an initial relationship with some form and some extent of ecoanxiety. The Buddhist text invoked in this essay has argued how the right knowledge and practices can help face and eliminate ecoanxiety. In this paper, I argued that how Buddhist philosophy sees attachment as the main cause of ecoanxiety or any type of anxiety for that matter, thus, offers the right practices that can help individuals re-orient their inner relationship to anxiety—and, likewise, re-orient their exterior relationships to all beings (including the environment itself). Mindfulness and meditation practices in the right course may offer immediate benefits and have a long-term benefit for the mind and body of all sentient beings.

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Notes

i One must be wondering here about the definition of forest. Buddhaghosa discusses the concept of forest in detail with the reference of other Buddhist texts. It says, “Forest,” according to the Vinaya method firstly, is described thus: “Except the village and its precincts, all is forest” (Vin III 46). According to the Abhidhamma method, it is described thus: “Having gone out beyond the boundary post, all that is forest” (Vibh 251; Pāpī 176). But according to the Suttanta method, its characteristic is this: “A forest abode is five hundred bow-lengths distant” (Vin IV 183). That should be defined by measuring it with a strung instructor’s bow from the gate-post of a walled village, or from the range of the first stone’s throw from an unwallled one, up to the monastery wall (VSM 2:49).

ii There are five aggregates (*khandh*): matter (*Rpa*), feeling (*Vedan*), perception (*Sa*), volition (*Saōkhra*), and mind (*Viāa*).

iii The Buddha does not accept the soul as a permanent, substantial entity because he defends his position on the reality of moral consciousness and the efficiency of *kamma*. Keith writes, “The Buddha, we are to believe, was eagerly seeking for a theoretical basis on which to establish morality, and he was willing to accept from the Eternalists the doctrine of a gradual accumulation of spiritual merit through a series of progressing existences, but he was averse to their doctrine of an eternal spiritual principle. He was, it seems, deeply impressed by the contradiction of assuming an eternal principle which must have been, for incomprehensible reasons, polluted by all the filth of mundane existence in order later on to revert to its original purity. He was thus led to the denial of any permanent principle and to regard matter and mind as split in an infinite process of evanescent elements (*dharmas*), the only ultimate realities, besides space and annihilation.” (Keith 1985, 393-394)

iv I have elucidated the notion of five aggregates above. For Buddhism, a human personality is not more than five aggregates.
