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**THE MYTH OF ABSURDITY: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF ALBERT CAMUS'
THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS FROM A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE**

by
Michael Brown

**A Thesis submitted to the Department of Philosophy
of Saint Mary's University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia
April, 1995**

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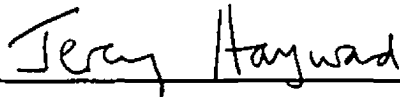
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Abstract

The Myth of Absurdity: A Critical Examination of Albert Camus'

The Myth of Sisyphus From A Buddhist Perspective

by

Michael Brown

April, 1995

This thesis is an evaluation of Albert Camus' essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* from the point of view of Buddhism. Essentially, Camus' existentialism will be compared and contrasted to the Buddha's teaching of Enlightenment. Based upon the Buddha's "Four Noble Truths" the claim will be made that Camus' "three certainties of existence" (one, the human desire for happiness, lucidity, unity and eternal life; two, the universe's inability to fulfil that desire; and three, the "absurdity" and "existential anxiety" that arises from the confrontation between desire and reality) are fundamentally erroneous. According to the Buddha, the universe is one loving nondual consciousness and the "illusion" of division is in fact a creation of an elaborate dichotomizing perceptual process. Through meditation the individual attains a technique that allows him/her to see through the illusion created by dualistic perception and experience the truth of an ultimately loving nondual universe; hence, the enlightened individual no longer identifies with, clings to, or is preoccupied with their private desires, the universe becomes completely fulfilling and "existential anxiety" comes to an end. This thesis makes the claim that Albert Camus'

philosophy is based on a premature conclusion about the nature of reality that is drawn from a limited perceptual strategy. Nevertheless, this thesis will argue that in Camus' early essays, Noces, he seems to have transcended this dualistic tension created by perception and to have rested, at least for a brief moment, in nonduality. However, the argument will be made that because Camus did not have the benefit of meditation, he was unable to abide there.

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INTRODUCTION

As the twentieth century advanced, sweeping changes took place in almost every facet of life. The modern individual gained access to an unprecedented quantity of information in many fields: biology, chemistry, physics, the sub-atomic realm, astronomy, history, other cultures, mechanization, communications, transportation, the human mind and psyche. However, technological advance exacted a price on the twentieth-century individual; extraordinary and rapid intellectual and scientific sophistication was accompanied by a general feeling of helplessness and a debilitating sense of anomie and malaise. Two World Wars, fought with advanced weaponry and efficiently coordinated by intricate communication networks, resulted in mass destruction and death. In the first half of the twentieth century the world was in shock as human beings experienced chemical warfare, the cruelty of the holocaust, and the horror of the atomic bomb. The twentieth century was also a time when bureaucratic, commercial and political superstructures had come to dominate the modern individual's life. The individualism that had defined Western society since the Renaissance was now being stifled in the modern era by a predominantly mass conformist social attitude and a scientific reductionist view of life. Not only had individuals become insignificant entities in modern states, but twentieth-century science threatened the modern human being's self-image at a very fundamental level; human behavior and consciousness were being reduced to bio-chemistry. Consciousness itself came to be considered by many to be an epiphenomenon of matter, a function of electro-chemical circuitry. On a grander level, astronomers, empowered with advanced technical equipment, observed a previously unknown universe of hundreds of billions of galaxies which are members of larger

galactic clusters, themselves parts of even vaster galactic superclusters separated by space only measurable in terms of light years. Discoveries in the realm of physics shook the very foundation of science itself and dismantled long-standing "certainties" concerning the nature of the universe as physical laws were uncovered to be relative, rather than fixed and absolute. Modern life was surrounded by a widespread sense of anxiousness, insecurity and uncertainty as human beings came to see themselves as meaningless specks living in an unpredictable and hostile universe of incredibly immense proportions. The problem of individual minuteness, insignificance, and powerlessness as perceived in the grand universal scheme of things was given immediate expression in the philosophy of existentialism embodied in the writings of Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, among others. The feelings of individual anguish and alienation produced by twentieth century life were explicitly articulated by the existentialists who addressed such pressing fundamental concerns of human existence as suffering and death, loneliness and dread, guilt, conflict, spiritual emptiness, the lack of absolute values, ontological insecurity, the sense of cosmic absurdity, the limitation of human reason, and the ultimately tragic hopelessness of the human condition.¹ Existentialists expressed the bleak and disenchanted spirit of a European continent accustomed to war, where traditional values and beliefs were being dramatically uprooted.

Basically, existentialism can best be characterized as an "intellectual mood"² or atmosphere rather than a coherent creed or body of doctrine. It was a complex

¹ Richard Tarnas, The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that Have Shaped Our World View (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), p. 389.

² Max Charlesworth, The Existentialists and Jean-Paul Sartre (London: George Prior Publishers, 1975), p. 1.

philosophical, psychoanalytical, religious, and anti-religious movement that flourished in war and post-war-torn Europe in the 1940s and 1950s. Although it crystallized in the mid-twentieth century as a movement of thought, its origins reach back to the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1853) and to the German thinker Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche rejected classical conceptions of reality that sought to uncover a fixed universal and eternal Truth, and were particularly critical of the German dialectician Georg W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) concerning his systematic approach to existence.³ Hegel held that the world unfolds necessarily according to the eternal Idea, but for Kierkegaard such an objective and systematic view ignored and neglected the reality of the unpredictable nature of the universe and the personal autonomy of the individual.⁴ For the existentialist, following Kierkegaard's insight here, the proper method of philosophizing is not concerned with explaining abstract and necessary systems of thought, but with evoking, revealing, and describing the particular and unique singular experience of the individual.

Although Nietzsche was in one sense diametrically opposed to Kierkegaard's position, particularly in terms of its expression in Christian theological terms, he nevertheless agreed with the Dane that no single a priori thought system should govern either belief or investigation, and that the individual's lived experience should take priority over fixed ideological deductions. For Nietzsche, reality is not a fixed self-contained "system" but a fluid, creative and amorphous "process." Unlike Kierkegaard,

³ Richard Tarnas, The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), p. 382.

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, Either/Or, trans. Walter Lowrie, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), 2: 223.

however, he vehemently denied the existence of God.⁵ The Nietzschean rejection of God was strongly embraced by existentialists such as Sartre and Camus, who maintained that God must be dead if human beings are to take themselves and their freedom seriously. For them no transcendental absolute guaranteed the fulfillment of human life or history, no cosmic blueprints or providential purpose exist; God is dead and human beings are on their own, condemned to be free.⁶

It was against the backdrop of these complex philosophical, political, social, religious, and scientific attitudes that one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century emerged. Albert Camus was born in Mondovi, Algeria in 1913. Educated at the University of Algiers, in what was then colonial French Africa, Camus developed as an important author of plays, novels, and essays. He moved to Paris in 1940, where he began a career in journalism and became an active member of the resistance movement during the German occupation of France. He became editor of the clandestine newspaper Combat, a position he continued to hold after the liberation of Paris.

Immediately following the post-war period, Camus, like Jean-Paul Sartre, became heavily involved in political activity, and his name became closely identified with the existentialist movement. His literary achievements include novels — The Stranger (1942), The Plague (1947), and The Fall (1956) — and essays — The Myth of Sisyphus (1943) and The Rebel (1951) — works that enjoyed enormous success, especially in North America. According to Germaine Brée, one of the foremost interpreters of modern French

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, trans. W. Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 181.

⁶ Tarnas, Passion of Western Mind, p. 389.

literature, "No French writer before him reached so wide an American public."⁷ Camus' spectacular literary career peaked in 1957 when he was awarded the Nobel Prize, and came to an abrupt and tragic end in 1960, when at the age of forty-six he was killed in an automobile accident.

This thesis is, essentially, an evaluation of Camus' essay The Myth of Sisyphus, with special emphasis on his notions therein of "absurdity," "existential anxiety," and "revolt." Chapter 1 is a summary of The Myth, where Camus addresses the problem of nihilism, which, after World War I, had been the subject of much philosophical discussion. Camus maintains that the individual is confronted with a crisis insofar as he/she constantly struggles for happiness and meaning within the context of an ultimately senseless existence. He posits a human crisis rooted in what he called "the three certainties"⁸ of existence identified as, first, the individual's desire for happiness, lucidity, unity and eternal life; second, the universe's silence or inability to fulfill that desire; and, third, the "absurdity" and "suffering" arising from this confrontation between human beings and the universe, between individual human desire and the absurdity or meaninglessness which is reality.

Accepting the reality of absurdity, Camus concludes that the universe has perpetrated a gross injustice on its human members, and then asks, how can a life that has no ultimate meaning best be lived? Behind this question, of course, is the notion that once the individual realizes the ultimate purposelessness of existence, he/she may be

⁷ Germaine Brée, "Introduction" to Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Germaine Brée (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. iii.

⁸ Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 26.

inclined to commit suicide; and, given this obvious possibility, Camus concludes that the problematic response is "the only truly philosophical problem."⁹ However, Camus rejects the alternative of suicide on the grounds that it confirms rather than resolves the absurd; it amounts to a tacit submission to the cruel reality of absurdity. Instead, Camus implores the individual to give his/her life a degree of dignity and significance by "revolting" against their actual condition. Revolt, to be sure, does not cure the suffering produced by a recognition of absurdity, but it is a prescription designed to lessen and cope with "existential anxiety" by generating a feeling of defiance and superiority to the forces that will eventually crush human beings. An act of suicide, in the final analysis, is an act of cowardice. Even though the world becomes indifferent to him, the "man of the absurd" accepts his inescapable condition without hope, and at the same time retains a passionate and defiant attachment to his existence. The absurd man lives for today, draining as much as he can out of life even while keeping in mind that someday life will end tragically with no prospect of an afterlife. Camus expounds a humanistic ethic that stresses heroic effort without any possibility of ultimate success or happiness.

It is in this context that Camus introduces his metaphor of the mythical character Sisyphus, who, as punishment for stealing the gods' secrets, was sentenced to perform the meaningless and never-ending task of pushing a boulder up a hill. Like Sisyphus, the absurd hero must accept the burden, limitations and futility of his/her condition and rebel against a life that threatens to impede a chance for joy and happiness.

Chapter 2 is devoted to challenging and criticizing Camus' existentialism in terms of the teachings of the Buddha, insofar as they represent a rejection of the Algerian's

⁹ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 11.

"three certainties" as an accurate reflection of ultimate reality. What Camus believed to be certain and undeniable the Buddha considered an illusion, created and perpetuated by fear and ignorance. Essentially, the Buddha taught that what Camus perceived to be an individual's natural desire for private fulfillment can be overcome; personal suffering can be ended in this lifetime and all human beings can directly experience existence in a fulfilling universe characterized by unity, freedom, clarity, basic goodness, peace, and unconditional love.

Relevant elements of Camus' and the Buddha's early lives, social environment, and the development of their thought are compared and contrasted at the beginning of Chapter 2 in order to provide some understanding of why both men initially became discouraged by life, and of how they chose to manage their anxiety-ridden existences. The first three of the Buddha's "Four Noble Truths"¹⁰ will be presented as a position that challenges Camus' three certainties. Like Camus, the Buddha observed that the human condition is plagued by suffering. Thus, the Buddha's "First Noble Truth" describes life as suffering. He then traced his existential pain to its source, with his "Second Noble Truth" finding the cause of suffering to be the "desiring ego" or "self" so that, like the Algerian, the Buddha adjudged human suffering to be produced by desire. At this point, however, the Buddha did not conclude that human life was "absurd"; instead he suspended final judgement about the nature of the universe and sought to ascertain whether or not individual suffering can be overcome. Launching a rigorous and meticulous inquiry into his own mental operations and their relation to reality, the Buddha investigated his personal suffering and desires at a deeply profound and

¹⁰ Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, ed. and trans. The Teaching of Buddha (Tokyo: Kosaido Printing Co., 1966), pp. 74-76.

fundamental level. Arguably, he discovered that the existentialist assertion of a separate "self" coming into contact with a hostile "outside world" that is both alien and strange is a creation of an elaborate dichotomizing perceptual process, and that in reality the universe is one loving "nondual" unity. Nonduality is one of the central themes in Buddhism, referring to the "fact" that the universe is essentially one loving consciousness, and that division or separation is a creation of what the Buddha called a discriminating mind, that is, a mind that perceives and conceives of reality as consisting of separate "things" with independent existences. Simply stated, the perceptual process, according to Buddhism, is a function of mind that creates division, and thereby distorts reality. Seeing through the illusion created by dualistic perception and experiencing the truth of an ultimately loving nondual universe, the enlightened human being no longer identifies with, clings to, or is preoccupied with their private desires; the universe becomes completely fulfilling, and suffering comes to an end. Hence, the Buddha's "Third Noble Truth" makes the momentous claim that all human sufferings can end in this lifetime. Through Enlightenment, the "individual" is freed from suffering and all three "poles" of Camus' "three certainties" will be seen to disappear.

The different methods of inquiry into the nature of reality used by Camus and the Buddha are examined in Chapter 3, where the claim is made that, without a proper method or technique by which an individual can personally verify the truth of either Camus' existential philosophy of absurdity or the Buddha's teaching of Enlightenment, we are reduced to accepting either of their respective doctrines on authority. Basically, Camus begins his approach to reality by basing his philosophy on what he believed to be experientially given: viz., a hopelessly irreducible dualism between human beings and the

world. Accepting the truth of absurdity, he proposed an "absurd line of reasoning"¹¹ by which to analyze this condition and explore the best possible ways of living in it. However, the Buddha claimed that the problem of pursuing the ultimate nature of reality based upon what is experientially given employs a human perceptual process which is fundamentally distorting. Accordingly, by employing the practice of meditation "one" can directly bring the elemental workings of the entire perceptual process into "Awareness" and see how, through this meditative technique, the division between "self" and "world" is created. According to the Buddha, meditative awareness has the capacity to see through the perceptual projections of ego, recognition of which makes it possible for "one" to abide in the ultimate reality of nonduality. Without the proper method of experiencing nonduality, the human being is not able to transcend dualistic perception, so that nonduality will appear to them as an abstract concept. Hence, the practical method of meditation is essential if human beings are to free themselves from suffering and become Enlightened.

While this thesis supports the contention that Albert Camus based his philosophy of "absurdity" on a premature conclusion about the nature of reality drawn from a limited perceptual strategy, it will suggest that the Algerian did in fact enjoy moments of opening into nonduality. Camus' essays Noces exhibit a meditative-like quality where the Algerian recounts moments of extreme intimacy with nature. He seems here to have transcended the dualistic tension created by perception and to rest, at least briefly, in nonduality. However, the argument will be made that because Camus had not been introduced to meditation, he was unable to abide there.

¹¹ Camus, quoted in Thomas Hanna, The Thought and Art of Albert Camus (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1958), pp. 14-15.

CHAPTER ONE: A SUMMARY OF THE MYTH

ABSURDITY

In The Myth of Sisyphus Albert Camus describes the situation in which human beings find themselves. The essay begins with the premise that life has no ultimate meaning. Human beings constantly devote their energy towards attaining a prominent position or high status for themselves. Yet, their efforts make little sense in a world that is completely indifferent to them; that is, a world in which God is dead. Eventually, all of life's achievements will be hopelessly lost. Promising only death, existence is greeted by humans with a feeling of despair. Camus acknowledges that once the individual realizes that the world is in fact meaningless, he/she may be inclined to commit suicide. Accordingly, The Myth of Sisyphus is essentially an analysis of the problem of suicide, which the Algerian existentialist characterizes as the only profound issue facing human beings.

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.¹

According to Camus, humans are purposive and meaning-seeking beings who dwell in a senseless universe. "Absurdity" is the term used by Camus to characterize this unresolvable conflict between the meaningless universe and its failure to satisfy the human demand that it provide a basis for human values, ideals, and our judgements of right and wrong. Since the nature of reality is not value-supportive, absurdity is, for Camus, not a characteristic of the external world itself, but of the insoluble opposition between what "is" and what human beings "desire." In the midst of a random and chaotic

¹ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 11.

universe, Camus claims that he can be certain of only three things: one, his own desire for a meaningful existence; two, a world that cannot satisfy his desire; and three, an absurdity arising from this confrontation of human beings and the world. The discrepancy between desire and reality prompts Camus to claim:

This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together. . . . This is all I can discern clearly in this measureless universe where my adventure takes place.²

Given the reality of absurdity, Camus wants to know "whether one can live with it or whether, on the other hand, logic commands one to die of it? I am not interested in philosophical suicide but rather in plain suicide."³

Camus lists several instances in which individuals are led to question the meaning of their existence. For example, when "the stage-sets collapse"⁴ one is suddenly forced to question the meaning of his/her life that has, up to this point, been governed by routine and habit. He also cites the example of a man who realizes he is growing old and that all his accomplishments, expectations, and hopes for life will be inevitably lost in the face of certain death. The sheer inevitability of death awakens in a person the sense of life's futility. In an earlier essay *L'envers et l'endroit* (1937), Camus describes an old man roaming the street praying that tomorrow everything will change, but who comes to the

² Ibid., p. 26.

³ Ibid., p. 50.

⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

crushing realization that every tomorrow will be the same and suicide presents itself as a reasonable alternative:

And this irremediable discovery crushes him. Such ideas make you die.
If you cannot endure them, you kill yourself.⁵

Death is Camus' nemesis; it is a supreme injustice that warrants the consideration of suicide.

At this stage of Camus' thought it is important to emphasize the picture of extreme alienation between human beings and the universe that the existentialist is painting. Metaphorically speaking, it is as if water (human beings) was accidentally spilled into a bucket of oil (the universe). The water and oil randomly come into contact with one another, but they do not mix. They are related only insofar as they co-occupy the same bucket. Eventually, the water will evaporate and disappear altogether. In other words, atheistic existentialists such as Camus subscribe to the view that what we call "life" is not the product of intelligent design but, rather, an "accident" that sparkles for only a brief moment and then vanishes forever into the vastness of universal nothingness. Life simply exists by chance, not for some "higher" reason.

Camus' notion of absurdity can also be observed within the operations of the human mind. Human beings attempt to understand the universe completely and absolutely; but their efforts are constantly frustrated because the universe is ultimately incomprehensible.

For if, bridging the gulf that separates desire from conquest, we assert with Parmenides the reality of the One (whatever it may be)

⁵ Albert Camus, L'énvers et l'endroit (Algiers: Charlot, 1937), p. 48.

we fall into the ridiculous contradiction of a mind that asserts total unity and proves by its very assertion its own difference and the diversity it claimed to resolve. This other vicious circle is enough to stifle our hopes.⁶

For Camus, truth and knowledge are not absolute; rather, they are relative and fallible. He viewed reality not as a solid and fixed system in which truth is objectively uncovered, but as a fluid, unfolding, and ultimately meaningless "process." Although acknowledging we can have a limited knowledge of "traits" and "appearances," he claimed that we can never have complete or total knowledge with respect to existence. Camus writes:

But with its first move this world cracks and tumbles: an infinite number of shimmering fragments is offered to the understanding. We must despair of ever reconstructing the familiar, calm surface which would give us peace of heart. After so many centuries of inquiries, so many abdications among thinkers, we are well aware that this is true for all our knowledge. With the exception of professional rationalists, today people despair of true knowledge. If the only significant history of human thought were to be written, it would have to be the history of its successive regrets and impotences.⁷

Adele King, author of Albert Camus, writes that the Algerian existentialist's argument is not simply a restatement of common epistemological problems:

To questions of how we know and what facts we can establish, his answers would be similar to that of an empiricist. Within the realm where they are efficacious, he defends the use of reason, common sense and scientific investigation. He never denies the reality of the external world as it is immediately apprehended by the senses. Such sensory experience is the basis for all possible knowledge. Camus'

⁶ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 23.

⁷ Ibid., p. 24.

complaint that the world is ultimately unknowable is a more radical matter.⁸

Ultimately, then, Camus maintains that we can know truths but never "the Truth."⁹

For him, knowledge is only possible in the "closed world" of art where beings and objects are given a permanent and unchanging form. When Camus, the existentialist, revolts against "the approximate nature of all knowledge," King notes that "his revolt is of the same order as his revolt against death. No human action could solve this dilemma; his revolt is bound to be ultimately sterile."¹⁰ The gap between human desires and reality can never be bridged, and this realization gives rise to feelings of dissatisfaction, alienation and suffering. Albert Maguet, author of Albert Camus: The Invincible Summer, lists the elements of Camus' dissatisfaction with life that caused him to formulate his concept of absurdity:

Absurd, the contradiction between our aspiration for the external and our subordination to duration; absurd, the opposition between our desire for unity and the irreducible duality of our nature; absurd, the discord between our passion for understanding, for exercising our reason, and the unintelligibility, the "unreasonable silence" of the world, between our feverish quest for happiness and the vanity of our action.¹¹

⁸ Adele King, Albert Camus (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 22.

⁹ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 24.

¹⁰ King, Albert Camus, p. 22.

¹¹ Albert Maquet, Albert Camus: The Invincible Summer, trans. Herma Brissault (New York: George Braziller, 1957), pp. 42-43.

REVOLT

Reduced to its simplest expression, Camus' thought in The Myth of Sisyphus is an attempt to answer the following question: What value abides in the eyes of the person who refuses any transcendental or supernatural consolation? His response is that in acknowledging absurdity as an inescapable reality, human beings should nevertheless preserve their dignity by maintaining a constant state of "individual revolt." Although this revolt is an ultimately hopeless effort because the individual chooses to rebel against unavoidable death, Camus contends that it is the "best possible" course of action when confronted by a hopeless situation. In a highly simplified form, the sequence of Camus' reasoning runs as follows:

I love life and desire all that it has to offer. I especially do not want it to end, but since it does end in death, the universe has perpetrated an enormous injustice against man. In the face of this cosmic grievance, the only thing I can do to assert my dignity as a man is to maintain a constant state of revolt against universal injustice.¹²

The individual decision to revolt and preserve the confrontation of oneself and the world is of extreme importance. Camus believes that:

. . . revolt gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life. To a man devoid of blinkers, there is no finer sight than that of the intelligence at grips with a reality that transcends it. The sight of human pride is unequalled.¹³

¹² James W. Brown Seeing, Sensing and Saying in Camus' "Noces": A Study in Narrative Voice (unpublished manuscript, 1994), p. 8.

¹³ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 54.

For Albert Camus, meaning can only be given to one's life through action. A sense of a tangible, vital participation in life is deep in his thought.¹⁴ In an indifferent world nothing has any importance or value except the pure act of living. Camus pleaded for the individual to live a life full of passion, challenge, and obstinate refusal of any supernatural consolation. In a disordered universe, "revolt" will provide human beings with a positive and aggressive course of action against the background of an ultimately gloomy fate. The Myth of Sisyphus was intended by Camus to be more of an urgent plea for revolt than a philosophical investigation. Brian Masters states that the Algerian's aim was to restore to individuals, through revolt, a strong sense of dignity and honour which the absurdity of human existence denies them;¹⁵ and Gaeton Picon observes that what Camus really retains from his posture of revolt is the notion that there is one part of man which does not tolerate humiliation, and that man's right to pursue happiness must be respected.¹⁶

It is in this context that Camus introduces the mythical Greek character Sisyphus as a paradigm for the absurd hero. According to the popular myth, Sisyphus was accused by the gods of stealing their secrets and was subsequently sentenced by them to perform a meaningless and never-ending task as his punishment. He was eternally condemned to roll a rock up a mountain anew each day. Camus recounts the Greek myth as follows:

¹⁴ Serge Doubrovsky, "Camus in America," in Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Germaine Brée (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1962), p. 17.

¹⁵ Brian Masters, Camus: A Study (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1974), p. 48.

¹⁶ Gaeton Picon, "Exile and the Kingdom," in Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Germaine Brée, p. 149.

The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labour.¹⁷

Despite this eternal sentence, however, Sisyphus retained his dignity and surmounted his fate by scorn. He found joy and happiness, not in entertaining thoughts about a pot of gold that lay waiting for him at the end of the rainbow, but in the actual succession of sensual appearances and the will to participate actively in the world. What makes Sisyphus so special is that he is aware of his fate, yet has the courage and determination to endure, thereby rising above the treachery of his destiny. By recounting Sisyphus' story Camus intended not to evoke illusions of final victory, but to make the point that meaning, value, and happiness can only be found in Sisyphus' glorious struggle. Camus writes:

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He, too, concludes that all is well. The universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.¹⁸

PHILOSOPHICAL SUICIDE

The three certainties of existence (human desire, an unfulfilling universe, and the absurdity that arises from this confrontation) form what Camus characterizes as an "odd

¹⁷ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 107.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

trinity."¹⁹ He argues that the true and proper approach towards life demands that all three parts of the trinity be maintained. The Algerian is critical of those philosophers who observe the discrepancy between human desire for ultimate meaning and purpose and the reality of universal meaninglessness but fail to conclude that the universe is absurd, citing Leo Chestov who, upon realizing the scandal and paradox of existence, decided to believe in what Camus calls a cruel and irrational God.²⁰ Camus has a great deal of trouble reconciling the Christian belief in an all-loving God with the brutal reality of living in a world where children suffer and die. For him it was incomprehensible that Chestov would deduce the existence of God from the realization that life is absurd.

For when, at the conclusion of his passionate analyses, Chestov discovers the fundamental absurdity of all existence, he does not say: "This is absurd," but rather "This is God: we must rely on him [i.e., God] even if he does not correspond to any of our rational categories." . . . His greatness is his incoherence. His proof is his inhumanity. One must spring into him and by this leap free oneself from rational illusions.²¹

For Camus, evil, suffering and death are primary facts of human existence; goodness and God are not. Camus argues that the Christian erroneously asks us to accept suffering and death and place our faith in God and an eternal afterlife. Henri Peyre writes: "Camus' revolt is against hope, which is a form of resignation, robbing man of energies he uses to enrich a God who hardly needs them."²² The Algerian revolts

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 34.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 29–30.

²¹ Ibid., p. 37.

²² Henri Peyre, "Camus the Pagan," in Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Germaine Brée, p. 68.

against the Christian faith which teaches humans to pin their hopes on a heavenly life and accept the evils of this earthly one. In Camus' opinion, such an attitude undermines the courage men and women need to cope with the all too real ills right here, right now.

Camus also criticizes Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard in asking us to enthusiastically embrace the paradoxical and the absurd. The Dane's religious phase of existence is marked by an absolute transcendence and the introduction of passionate faith, and for Camus his instruction to human beings to take a "blind leap of faith"²³ entails sacrificing one's intelligence.

His childhood having been so frightened by Christianity, he ultimately returns to its harshest aspect. For him, too, antinomy and paradox become criteria of the religious. Thus the very thing that led to despair of the meaning and depth of this life now gives it its truth and its clarity. Christianity is the scandal, and what Kierkegaard calls for quite plainly is the third sacrifice required by Ignatius Loyola, the one in which God most rejoices: "The sacrifice of the intellect." This effect of the "leap" is odd but must not surprise us any longer.²⁴

For the atheist Camus, to have faith in God is to give up intellectual pursuits. In this sense desire for knowledge becomes a sin; human beings are told to accept God without question. Camus implores the individual to choose a way of life in which he/she is entirely oriented toward this earth, passionately resolved to make it produce everything it can for human beings.

Camus argues that the speculative thinker, on the other hand, attempts to understand the whole of reality through the categories of universal logic. Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, for example, attempts to fully comprehend and explain the

²³ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 40.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 39–40.

universe in rational terms. But Camus protests that the universe's exact nature cannot be understood or described. Husserl's phenomenology only succeeds in suppressing the truth that reality is neither totally rational nor totally irrational. All that can be said is that a tension is created between human beings and the world; and Camus realizes that "Any refusal to maintain the tension between man and the world, any denial of part of the paradox, results in 'philosophical suicide.'"²⁵

Similarly, in Camus' eyes, Hegel commits philosophical suicide. Camus rejects the Hegelian notion of reality as an historical unfolding and of human action as a dialectical series of historical tasks knowing no other law than their own realization. Speculative thought only sees the general movement of categories and, as a result, neglects the individual. Camus refuses the idea of automatic action, and insists on choice, real commitments, and the freedom to act in accordance with genuine conviction on the basis of definite situations instead of following a series of historical contingencies.²⁶ He believes that life has its roots in action, not in the impersonal and non-emotional categories of metaphysics and science. Meaning can only be given to life through action which is not an end in itself but a process of becoming. He rejects any system of philosophy in which truths must fall into place and be arranged. Camus has no such system, no general framework; he grasps onto only a few discontinuous truths.²⁷

²⁵ King, Albert Camus, p. 34.

²⁶ Nicola Chiaromonte, "Sartre versus Camus: A Political Quarrel," in Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Germaine Brée, p. 32.

²⁷ Doubrovsky, "The Ethics of Albert Camus," in Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Germaine Brée, p. 72.

Being conscious of the absurdity of life, the individual can choose either to end or to sustain his/her own existence. Camus strongly advises the latter alternative, insisting that life can be joyfully and passionately lived despite the reality of absurdity. He reasons that suicide cannot be an appropriate response to absurdity because it suppresses one of the poles of the "odd trinity" by extinguishing the life of the individual and thereby suppressing the tension between the human being and the world. Instead of resolving the absurd, suicide intensifies and confirms it. Suicide amounts to a hopeless surrender to absurdity. People who commit suicide, Camus continues, confuse two separate issues: they assume, erroneously, that suicide is a logical step when confronted with the meaninglessness of life, whereas the only thing to be deduced from the irrationality of the world is that it is indeed irrational. Camus concludes that while life may be ultimately senseless, it is still worth living. Brian Masters maintains that The Myth is an effort to clarify this difference,²⁸ and Conor Cruise O'Brien writes that Camus' essay shows "how and why life is precious, in spite of the fact that it is pointless, meaningless, and must end in certain death."²⁹

THREE CONSEQUENCES

Three consequences follow from the individual's decision to accept this earthly kingdom. One, human beings must maintain a state of revolt by being aware of the incoherence of the world while at the same time refusing to acquiesce in its sad condition.

²⁸ Masters, Camus: A Study, p. 28.

²⁹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, Camus (London: Fontana/Collins, 1970), p. 29.

One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity. It is an insistence upon an impossible transparency. It challenges the world anew every second. . . That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it.³⁰

Camus' instruction to the individual concerning life is analogous to recommending the behavior of a boxer who refuses to quit in a bout he has no hope of winning. Like the boxer, the individual must also refuse to resign in the face of absurdity, thereby giving one's own life dignity. Only by committing to live passionately, despite an eternal death sentence, can human beings achieve their full stature. Destiny may dictate the ultimate fate of the individual, but it does not restrict the individual's ability to act freely while he/she is living. In other words, "how" the individual acts is not determined by fate. According to Paul Edwards, Camus' "conscious espousal of the metaphysical arbitrariness of human purpose and action transforms nihilism from a passive despair to a way of revolting against and transcending the world's indifference to man."³¹

A second consequence of the individual's choice to live is that the rebel, realizing that death makes a mockery of all his/her plans, discovers a peculiar kind of freedom. Like the condemned man who finds himself in a prison from which there is no escape, the rebel understands that there is no point in setting goals because to do so would be an exercise in futility. The image of the condemned prisoner who refuses to silently accept his inescapable destiny provides a striking contrast to the individual who passively succumbs to defeat by choosing to commit suicide. Brian Masters spells out the

³⁰ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, pp. 53–54.

³¹ Frederick A. Olafson, "Albert Camus," in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Vol. 2 (New York: The MacMillan Company and the Free Press, 1967), p. 16.

difference: "The condemned man raises his voice, at the last moment, in the face of certain death, to protest against the absurd injustice which makes life end in extinction; the suicide meets absurdity with a whimper."³² Again metaphorically, the individual in revolt is comparable to a boxer who is getting severely beaten by a much more skilled opponent but who, instead of admitting defeat and giving up, chooses to heroically retaliate.

Finally, the third consequence is that, because death holds no rewards or salvation, the rebel realizes that what is important in life amounts to accumulating the greatest quantity of experiences. In other words, Camus would argue that, even though a result of chance rather than will, sixty years of life is a greater accomplishment for the rebel than forty years. It is, for example, a greater achievement for a boxer to get battered, yet survive the full fifteen rounds of a fight, than to put in a few quality rounds in the early stages only to get knocked out in the sixth.³³

ABSURD HEROES

Camus considers Don Juan to be an "absurd hero"³⁴ who has "chosen to live in the present without regret for the past nor hope for the future. Don Juan views love not as a long experience tending towards the eternal, but as an immediate sensation that is

³² Masters, Camus: A Study, p. 44.

³³ John Cruickshank notes, however, that in L'homme révolté (The Rebel, 1951), Camus shifts his argument from emphasis on the quantitative life towards an emphasis on an intensely conscious qualitative life. John Cruickshank, Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. xiv.

³⁴ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 74.

both short-lived and exceptional."³⁵ Other absurd heroes for Camus include: the actor, the adventurer, and the artist. The actor constantly drains each present experience to the utmost.

The actor's realm is that of the fleeting. . . . Above all, it directs our concerns towards what is most certain, that is towards the immediate. Of all kinds of fame the least deceptive is the one that is lived.

Hence the actor has chosen multiple fame, the fame that is hallowed and tested. From the fact that everything is to die someday he draws the best conclusion.³⁶

The adventurer, too, is a rebel because not constrained by political ideology, an absurd hero who acknowledges that his/her revolution has a provisional character but who, nevertheless, protests against the fate of one's own existence while realizing that he/she can never achieve final victory. The struggle is magnificent, but the final result is mercilessly the same. Finally, the artist creates for the adventure of creation. The artist's life is consumed with imitating the diverse and wonderful experiences offered by the world of the senses and emotions. For instance, the painter recaptures the pure world of colour in the same way the musician recaptures the pure world of sound. For Camus, artistic creation enables the artist to clarify his revolt and to fully develop those spiritual forces that give dignity to man. As he says:

Conquest or play-acting, multiple loves, absurd revolt are tributes that man pays to his dignity in a campaign in which he is defeated in advance. . . .

³⁵ Ibid., p. 102.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 74.

. . . One must live or die of it. So it is with the absurd: it is a question of breathing with it, of recognizing its lessons and recovering their flesh.³⁷

While praising such characters, Camus nevertheless insists that what is important is not the occupation that one chooses, but being conscious of the "mad character" of the role one is playing. After all, if individuals viewed their roles as meaningful, they would be deceiving themselves into believing that life is rational and ultimately purposeful and, thereby, they would suppress one of the terms of the "odd trinity."

A FRATERNAL ETHIC

For Camus, absurdity means that there are no metaphysically guaranteed directives for conduct. Yet he held that a positive ethics could be generated from absurdity. His heroic nihilism advocated a doctrine that asserted one should accept oneself as the sole guarantor of one's own values. Correspondingly, it should be noted that this doctrine necessarily involves accepting the principle of respect for other human beings. Further, he considered certain responses to absurdity as morally unacceptable. For instance, Nazism was an intolerable reaction to a nihilistic view of the world because it promoted hatred, inequality, and oppression. Any denial of human fraternity was severely condemned by Camus. It seems, then, that even at this relatively early stage in the development of his thought, Camus insisted that authentic revolt against the human condition had to be a "revolt in the name of the solidarity of man with man."³⁸ As Rachel Bespaloff puts it:

³⁷ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 86.

³⁸ Olafson, "Albert Camus," p. 16.

Camus used the themes of life and death during the occupation, starting from both subjectivity and collectivity. . . . Those who went through the ordeal of occupation recognize those situations where, speaking of themselves, they were compelled to say we at a time when each lived the we in an abyss of isolation and exile. The precarious solidarity which had thus linked people as they faced the catastrophe, and which would not outlive the catastrophe, called for a testimony which would rescue it from history and restore it to ethics. This is the task of the poet. Camus answered this call.³⁹

Camus tried to demonstrate in The Myth that a creative humanism of high nobility can be constructed without the help of God. No matter how inescapable mankind's imprisonment, human beings can now rejoice in living a life of revolt which gives the individual a strong sense of dignity and suffices to make him/her great. By protesting against our absurd condition, human beings effectively postulate a human nature that must be respected, a terrestrial brotherhood that must be defended, and moral values grounded in the idea of moderation and respect for others.⁴⁰ For Camus, "revolt" is an effort that gives life meaning in the face of "absurdity"; it is the concept at the very heart of the existentialist's philosophy and the key to understanding his notion of happiness and value as well as his ideas of social action and artistic creation. Camus is not only restating basic principles of liberal humanism but is, in a more profound sense, "exploring and justifying the immense potential man has for becoming himself."⁴¹ The Myth marks Camus' effort to reaffirm the dignity and value of human life against a

³⁹ Rachel Bepaloff, "The World of the Man Condemned to Death," in Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Germaine Brée, pp. 98–99.

⁴⁰ Bernard C. Murchland, "Albert Camus: The Dark Night Before the Coming of Grace," in Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Germaine Brée, p. 63.

⁴¹ Ibid.

backdrop of nihilistic thought that pervaded the philosophy of his generation. Through "revolt" Camus discovers reasons to "justify his instinctive desire for happiness and his love of life."⁴²

⁴² King, Albert Camus, p. 27.

CHAPTER TWO: CAMUS AND THE BUDDHA

THE BUDDHA

Like Albert Camus, the Buddha also observed that life as it is typically lived is unfulfilling and filled with insecurity. In short, life is "suffering." The Buddha observed the "existential anxiety" common to all humanity nearly two and a half thousand years before the Algerian existentialist but, unlike Camus, he did not assume that this condition was irremediable. Instead, he sought to understand the root cause of and conditions for his "suffering." Through a profound and meticulous analysis of mind and its relation to reality the Buddha launched an exhaustive inquiry into the nature of suffering and explored the possibility of removing it from the human condition. According to traditional reports, he discovered that suffering could come to an end in this lifetime for anyone willing to make the effort necessary to achieve this goal. He trudged the dusty paths of India for nearly forty-five years carrying this message. His activities included training monks, public preaching, private counselling, advising the perplexed, encouraging the faithful, and comforting the distressed, until he finally succumbed to death at the age of eighty. Like most ancient teachers the Buddha wrote nothing; yet his life and oral teachings have been extensively documented and recorded. The Teaching of Buddha is an authoritative collection of sacred writings that contains the essence of the Buddha's teachings as preserved and handed down for more than two thousand years.¹ The teaching of "The Four Noble Truths" directly addresses the problem of suffering and essentially constitutes the Buddha's most important fundamental convictions about life. To use medical terminology, "The Four Noble Truths" provide: one, a diagnosis or

¹ Huston Smith, The World's Religions (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), p. 87.

description of the nature of the disease "suffering"; two, an account of its etiology; three, a prognosis for its cure; and four, a prescription for its treatment.²

This thesis contends that although Albert Camus and the Buddha offer relatively similar accounts of the nature and origin of suffering, the former's understanding is limited and incomplete. Because Camus did not fully understand the precise nature and cause of the disease suffering, he was unable to prescribe a proper treatment for it. Not only is the Algerian's prescription of "revolt" an inadequate response to "existential anxiety" but, according to the Buddha, by constant preoccupation with resisting this anxiety through "revolt" humans actually feed their own suffering. Camus' plea for individual revolt in the face of absurdity does not alleviate suffering, then, it is instead a prescription that is actually conducive to furthering it. Although Camus and the Buddha gave similar descriptions of existential anxiety, their attitudes toward it were strikingly different. Whereas Camus saw suffering in the world and quickly formulated an ethic of revolt in order to minimize its negative effects, the Buddha chose to explore and understand the nature of suffering and thereby discover a spiritual cure. What for Camus was a natural, unavoidable, and inescapable human condition was, for the Buddha, a created and escapable one. The following poem by Divani Shamsi Tabriz nicely expresses the Buddha's attitude towards the matter:

From the moment you came into the world of being,
A ladder was placed before you that you might escape.³

² Jeremy Hayward, Shifting Worlds Changing Minds: Where the Sciences and Buddhism Meet (Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc., 1989), p. 48.

³ Divani Shamsi Tabriz, quoted in Ram Dass, Journey of Awakening: A Meditator's Guidebook (New York: Bantam Books, 1978), p. 12.

CAMUS' EARLY LIFE AND INFLUENCES

At this stage it is important to present a brief biographical account of both Camus' and the Buddha's lives in order, first, to explain why they initially became disenchanted with life; and second, to explain how they chose to deal with their anxiety-ridden existences. The keys to understanding the thought of Albert Camus and his notions of "absurdity" and "revolt" lie in his personal experiences as a youth, as well as the intellectual, social and political environment of his time. Camus was born in the French territory of Mondovi, Algeria on November 7, 1913. His experiences as a youth included ambivalent feelings of exaltation and bitterness. On the one hand, as a boy roaming over the Algerian beaches and hills, he was overwhelmed by the magnificence of this beautiful landscape. The sensual North African environment filled the young Algerian with a fierce rage to live. This can be seen in an early work, Noces (1938), which is in essence a "sumptuous hymn"⁴ to the world of physical beauty, and gives a vivid and eloquent account of his youthful experience of sensual delight:

Sea, plain, silence, perfumes of that land! I filled myself with a fragrant life, and I bit into the already sun-gilded fruit of the world, overwhelmed as I felt its strong, sweet juices trickle from my lips.⁵

On the other hand, this basic experience of sensual happiness was tempered with a feeling of despair. The son of a farm labourer who was killed in the first Battle of the Marne in 1914, Camus was soon to comprehend the hard reality of life. Raised by his

⁴ S. Benyon John, "Albert Camus: A British View," in Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Germaine Brée, p. 86.

⁵ Albert Camus, "Noces à Tipasa," in Noces, nouvelle ed. (Paris: Charlot, 1945), p. 29.

widowed and deaf mother, he was forced to contend with poverty, silence, solitude, and death. A lonely child living in a beautiful, yet paradoxical world, Albert Camus learned his first "absurd lessons" as a boy growing up.

Camus entered the University of Algiers in his late teens. During his studies there he came into contact with two important literary influences, Dostoevsky and André Malraux. The nihilism and spirit of revolt prevalent in their writings touched a chord in Camus, particularly because they matched his personal vicissitudes; and Camus' reaction to life was further nourished and confirmed by the nihilism predominant in much French thought and literary sensibility current in the period between the Two Great World Wars.

After completing his licence and post-graduate research in 1930, Camus was forced by a life-threatening illness to spend much time in a sanatorium. This personal bout with tuberculosis made Camus immediately attentive to the fact that someday life would tragically end. And for Camus death is indeed "tragic" because it puts a sudden and complete end to human beings' chances for lasting happiness. He adamantly believed that death does not open upon another life; it "is a door that shuts."⁶ James W. Brown writes that it is this irreconcilable opposition between "man, with all his hopes and aspirations for happiness and clarity, and death, in its categorical and irrevocable finality, that would become the breeding ground for Camus' ideas about absurdity."⁷

As alluded to in the introduction, the social, political, and scientific environment of Camus' time also greatly influenced his views concerning the absurdity of existence. He belonged to a generation which history forced to live in a climate of violent death, in

⁶ Camus, "Le vent à Djemila," in Noces, nouvelle ed. p. 41.

⁷ Brown, Seeing, Sensing and Saying, p. 8.

a world shattered by the cruelties of two world wars, the holocaust, massive destruction, and oppressive totalitarian regimes. Amidst the chaos of mid-twentieth-century Europe, the traditional longstanding belief in an all-loving omnipotent God ruling the universe for the good of all seemed to Camus to have lost any defensible basis.⁸ Moreover, with the advent of new scientific discoveries, particularly in the realm of physics concerning the "relative" nature of reality, human beings' traditional values, beliefs, and assumptions about the nature of the physical universe and the individual's place in it were directly challenged. Human existence was surrounded by uncertainty, contradiction, risk, fear, and death.

It was against this complex and dynamic background of personal, intellectual, social, political and scientific experiences that the existentialism of Albert Camus grew and flourished. His celebrated essay The Myth of Sisyphus precisely captured the mood of this time. The sum total of the antinomies and contradictions in nature, reinforced by the Algerian's personal life experiences and the often horrendous living conditions of war-torn Europe, inspired Camus in The Myth to correlate his obsession with the "absurd" and his appreciation of sensual happiness.

THE BUDDHA'S EARLY LIFE AND INFLUENCES

Nearly three thousand years earlier, India was afire with a man whose message continues to inspire today. The Buddha was born Prince Siddhartha of the Sakyas around 563 B.C. in what is now Nepal. He was the son of a chieftain or petty king called Suddhodana, and lost his mother Queen Mahamaya shortly after he was born. Like

⁸ Tarnas, Passion of the Western Mind, p. 389.

Camus, then, the young prince also had to contend with the painful reality of having lost a parent, though unlike the Algerian, Siddhartha enjoyed a luxurious upbringing and appeared to have everything: nobility, wealth, fine clothes, a handsome appearance, and the fame and power that accrued to his status as heir to his father's kingdom. At the age of nineteen, he married a beautiful wife, Yashodhara. For all of his good fortune, however, he became discontented in his late twenties, the source of his discontentment being based on his bitter perception that the human body could not escape disease, decrepitude, and death.⁹ Siddhartha became disillusioned by what he saw as the hallowness of his father's luxurious kingdom. He felt his life to be superficial and unable to make him happy. He saw bodily pain and death everywhere and as a result pleasures of the flesh quickly lost their appeal. Like Camus, Siddhartha perceived death as a cruel reminder of the vulnerability and limitations of the human condition; and he began to question the meaning of his existence. The distractions of life became such a nuisance to him that, at age twenty-nine, the prince forsook his comfortable domain in an attempt to seek the true meaning of life.

"A man struggling for his existence will naturally look for something of value. There are two ways of looking — a right way and a wrong way. To look in the wrong way means that, while he recognizes that sickness, old-age, and death are unavoidable, he searches among the same class of empty transitory things. To look in the right way means that he recognizes the true nature of sickness, old-age, and death, and searches for meaning in that which transcends all sufferings. In this palace life I seem to be seeking the wrong way."

Thus, the mental struggle went on in the mind of the Prince until his twenty-ninth year when his only child, Rahula, was born.

⁹ Smith, World's Religions, p. 84.

This seemed to bring things to a climax, for he then decided to seek the solution of his mental unrest.¹⁰

Siddhartha began his quest for "the Truth" by seeking out two of the foremost Hindu masters of the day in the hope of becoming enlightened. When this effort fell short he joined a band of ascetic forest dwellers,¹¹ a move which similarly failed to bring him Enlightenment. Finally, after six years of intense spiritual practice, which included a period of extreme self-mortification, the prince turned to and dedicated himself completely to the practice of meditation. As traditional reports have it, Siddhartha claimed to have attained Enlightenment while seated one evening under a peepul tree in Gaya. From that day on he came to be known as "the Buddha." (Etymologically, the sanskrit/Pali word "buddha" means "one who has awakened."¹²) This experiential discovery of an enlightened life free from suffering provided the basis and inspiration for the Buddha's teaching, whose basic doctrine or "dharma" is summed up in the "Four Noble Truths."

COMMON GROUND

Although the Buddha and Albert Camus had different upbringings and social backgrounds, and despite the fact that the latter lived in a much more complex and diverse era, the thought of each revolved around the same fundamental theme: the reality of human despair caused by a recognition of the reality of suffering and death. During

¹⁰ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, pp. 9–10.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 10.

¹² Smith, World's Religions, p. 84.

the early stages of his life, the young prince's general dissatisfaction with what he regarded as an unfulfilling existence closely parallels Albert Camus' frame of mind when, in The Myth of Sisyphus, he writes about the futility of daily life when set against the backdrop of an ultimately hopeless fate; namely, death without any hope for an afterlife. Both men experienced a profound emptiness in their lives; both felt there must be more to life than either carrying out daily routines or surrounding oneself with luxurious comforts.

Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, sleep, four hours of work, meal, and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, according to the same rhythm — this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the "why" arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.¹³

The existentialist asks: Why go through the monotonous and mechanical motions of life when eventually all human endeavour will reach the same hopeless conclusion? Similarly, the prince pondered the meaning of his lavish existence in the face of inevitable death.

"The luxuries of the palace, this healthy body, this rejoicing youth! What do they mean to me?" he thought. "Some day we may be sick, we shall become aged, from death there is no escape."¹⁴

As already stated, Camus saw that many people attempt to distract themselves from thinking about death by trying to attain a prominent status or by acquiring wealth. Continuously people reject, avoid, and ignore the inevitable.

¹³ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 19.

¹⁴ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, p. 8.

I come at last to death and to the attitude we have towards it. On this point everything has been said and it is only proper to avoid pathos. Yet one will never be sufficiently surprised that everyone lives as if no one "knew."¹⁵

Likewise, the prince also recognized the natural human tendency to ignore death. He observed that defence mechanisms of all sorts designed to help human beings forget about their deaths take a variety of forms: the acquisition of luxuries, political and military conquests, the search for certainty in philosophy, the maintaining of religious beliefs, etc.¹⁶ Though the two were separated by nearly two and a half thousand years, and despite differences in culture, background, and language, Albert Camus and the Buddha shared precisely the same insight regarding the human condition. Their respective approaches and reactions to the problem of suffering, however, were very different.

THE BUDDHA'S FIRST NOBLE TRUTH

The Buddha inquired into the possibility of liberating himself from his suffering. He reasoned that if a path towards this goal existed, it could only be discovered once the cause of and conditions for the disease were fully known. Again in medical terminology, a proper treatment can be prescribed to a patient only when an accurate diagnosis and complete etiology are made. The first obstacle the Buddha confronted in his quest was the seemingly inescapable character of the disease. As alluded to earlier, the life he lived in his father's kingdom was by most standards quite good; yet even this seemingly good way of life was full of anxiety. From this observation the Buddha formulated his "First

¹⁵ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 21.

¹⁶ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, p. 84.

Noble Truth": life is permeated by suffering. He then elaborated on his description of the disease "suffering" by pinpointing exactly the six moments when life becomes too painful: the trauma of birth (which involves a discharge of painful feelings); the pathology of sickness; the morbidity of decrepitude; the phobia of death; the seemingly inescapable character of the disease "suffering"; and, finally, the fear of being separated from what one loves. All human sufferings, he contended, can be traced to one of these six sources.

The world is full of suffering. Birth is suffering; old age and death are sufferings. To meet a man whom one hates is suffering, to be separated from a beloved one is suffering, to be vainly struggling to satisfy one's needs is suffering. In fact, life that is not free from desire and passion is always involved with distress. This is called the Truth of Suffering.¹⁷

Camus, too, observed that suffering and life go hand in hand. When considering the possibility of suicide he writes:

Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation and the uselessness of suffering.¹⁸

And later he agreed with Martin Heidegger when the latter claimed that anxiety is at the source of everything.¹⁹ Although Camus' description of the disease is less detailed and

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 74.

¹⁸ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 13.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

encompassing, he and the Buddha nevertheless agreed that "suffering" plagues the human condition.

According to the Buddha, the common element binding the "six moments of suffering" together is the mark of impermanence, a fundamental characteristic of all existence and phenomena. Impermanence is a notion that is very similar to the Heraclitean concept of "constant flux"²⁰ and the modern scientific principle of entropy.²¹ The Buddha observed that everything, without exception, is constantly changing. Everywhere he looked he saw change: people change, objects change, thoughts change, beliefs change, perceptions change, relationships change, ideas change, the weather changes. The Buddha claimed:

It is the everlasting and unchanging rule of this world that everything is created by a series of causes and conditions and everything disappears by the same rule; everything changes, nothing remains without change.²²

The Buddha maintained that anxiety results from a conflict between the human desire for permanence and the reality of continuous change. By nature human beings cling obstinately to life out of fear of death; they cling to youth out of fear of aging; they cling to loved ones out of fear of losing them; they cling to pleasure and happiness out of fear of pain and suffering.²³

²⁰ Tarnas, Passion of the Western Mind, p. 45.

²¹ See "entropy" in Lloyd Motz and Jefferson Hane Weaver, The Story of Physics (New York: Avon Books, 1989), p. 176.

²² Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, p. 82.

²³ Ibid., p. 94.

For people, life is a succession of graspings and attachments, and then, because of this, they must assume the illusions of pain and suffering.²⁴

By continuously resisting, avoiding and rejecting the natural and inevitable change that accompanies life, human beings become prisoners who are trapped between their own desires and reality. Brown writes:

The mind that perceives the nature of impermanence but that wants the world to be otherwise lives in bondage. In Buddhism, bondage is nothing more nor nothing less than clinging to the concepts of birth, death, and suffering.²⁵

THE BUDDHA'S SECOND NOBLE TRUTH

The Buddha employed the term "tanha" to express this specific desire for private fulfillment, tanha being the force that imprisons human beings by persuading us to seek ego fulfillment in a world incapable of supporting such aspirations. Hence, the Buddha's "Second Noble Truth" identifies the desiring "self" or "ego" as the cause of suffering.

The cause of human suffering is undoubtedly found in the thirsts of the physical body and in the illusions of worldly passions. If these thirsts and illusions are traced to their source, they are found to be rooted in the intense desire (tanha) of physical instincts. Thus, desire having a strong will-to-live as its basis, seeks that which it feels desirable, even if it is sometimes death. This is called the Truth of the Cause of Suffering.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., p. 104.

²⁵ Brown, Seeing, Sensing and Saying, p. 22.

²⁶ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, p. 74.

Albert Camus also witnessed the human attempt to cling to what will eventually change. He writes that a man realizing he is thirty years old,

. . . admits that he stands at a certain point on a curve that he acknowledges having to travel to its end. He belongs to time and, by the horror that seizes him, he recognizes his worst enemy. Tomorrow, he was longing for tomorrow, whereas everything in him ought to reject it. The revolt of the flesh is the absurd.²⁷

As an existentialist, Camus did not actually protest against time itself; rather, he protested against what time stands for and what the Buddha more precisely defined as "change." After all, if human beings were not to age, become sick or die during the passing of time, then presumably the Algerian would have no objection. If change did not occur and human beings remained forever healthy and young, then for Camus human beings would not suffer. However, the existentialist writer experienced great anxiety because he was unable to reconcile these desires with the harsh reality of change. He could not simultaneously embrace both his thirst for life and the mathematical certainty of death:

The horror comes in reality from the mathematical aspect of the event. If time frightens us, this is because it works out the problem and the solution comes afterwards.²⁸

The desire for self-fulfillment and freedom from the chains of impermanency is great, but to actualize that desire is an ultimately hopeless effort; this realization brings feelings of alienation, anxiety and dissatisfaction.

²⁷ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 20

²⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

CAMUS AND THE BUDDHA DIVERGE

At this point, Camus' existential philosophy and the Buddha's teaching of Enlightenment radically diverge. When confronted by the seemingly inescapable reality of human suffering, the former, seeing no solution, hastily concludes that life is absurd and swiftly formulates an ethic of revolt in a heroic, yet ultimately hopeless attempt to combat universal injustice. As Brown points out:

Seeing death and suffering all around him and realizing that they were the greatest impediments to his happiness, Camus leaps forward, and applying an incredible lucidity vis-a-vis the hopelessness of the human condition, he formulated his ethic of revolt as if somehow the universe in its benign indifference would be reminded of its injustices.²⁹

Camus' objective was neither to learn, nor to understand, nor to come into direct contact with his existential pain; he chose instead to minimize the effects of suffering: "The important thing is not to be cured, but to live with one's ailments."³⁰ Hence, in The Myth of Sisyphus he begins by accepting the incurable nature of the disease and subsequently prescribing "revolt" not only as a kind of pain killer to help tolerate and dull the bitter sting of anxiety, but as a stimulant, a way to impose meaning on, give dignity and happiness to, an otherwise ultimately indifferent, absurd, and meaningless existence.

On the other hand, the Buddha did not attempt to avoid or resist suffering, nor did he choose to draw any hasty conclusions or prescribe any half-hearted cures. Instead, he decided to approach the problem from the point of view of a beginner wanting to know

²⁹ Brown, Seeing, Sensing and Saying, p. 9.

³⁰ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 38.

what answers concerning the possibility of eliminating human suffering might be ascertained by a mind characterized by innocence and unconditional openness, a mind not filled with fixations, certainties, formulations, hypotheses, or theoretical speculations.³¹

If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few.³²

Whereas Camus' understanding of reality was restricted in the sense that he adamantly held, without question or further investigation, specific beliefs to be certain and undeniable (i.e., the "three certainties": his desire for ultimate certainty, happiness, clarity, and meaning; an unfulfilling world; and an "absurdity" that arises from confrontation between the first two), the Buddha initiated an inquiry that was not bound by such beliefs. Simply put, Camus' philosophical starting point was based on and presupposed the truth of the "three certainties," whereas the Buddha launched an investigation into the meaning of life from ground zero; that is, he suspended all beliefs concerning the nature of reality and presumed no certainties.

Without passing judgement or trying to correct what many centuries later Camus would deem an "unjust" and "absurd" world, the Buddha simply reasoned that if the cause of life's dislocation were a sort of craving for private fulfillment, its cure would lie in its being overcome.

But if one carefully examines all the facts, one must be convinced that at the basis of all suffering lies the principle of craving desire

³¹ Brown, Seeing, Sensing and Saying, p. 11.

³² Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind (New York: Weatherhill, 1970), p. 21.

(tanha). If avarice can be removed, human suffering will come to an end.³³

Had the Algerian been familiar with Buddhist literature, in all likelihood he would have argued that the Buddha's effort to remove "tanha" from the human condition is a futile task. For, as repeatedly stated, Camus insisted that none of the "poles" of the "odd trinity"³⁴ be suppressed: "to destroy one of its terms is to destroy the whole."³⁵ To wipe out the self's desire for private fulfillment would suppress one of the poles and deny one of the certainties, and would therefore be an impossible option. The problem and great source of frustration for Camus was that, while he could not deny these desires, the universe could not fulfill them: "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."³⁶ He saw the great pain these desires cause, but he also saw that humans are bound by them.

ENLIGHTENMENT

On the other hand, taking nothing for granted, the Buddha looked inward to investigate his own most fundamental beliefs about reality, and turned to meditation as a means of gaining insight into the fundamental operations of his mind in an attempt to understand his "existential anxiety" not just at a conscious level, but at a deeply profound and highly sub-conscious state. In its pure and simple sense, meditation involves the

³³ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, p. 84.

³⁴ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 34.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 34.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 31-32.

observation of mind in its elementary functions (the Buddha's meditative technique is explained in greater detail in the discussion of the "Fourth Noble Truth" in Chapter Three). He devoted himself wholly and completely to this practice until, one evening, he experienced "The Great Awakening."³⁷ Relentlessly and meticulously observing the elementary functions of his mind, the Buddha attained a realization about how to end suffering through awakening to the truth of the undivided wholeness of reality. He discovered that the human "ego" or "soul," that is, a permanent "thing" to which the name "I" refers, is an illusion, and that the basic framework of all existence is "nondual."

Whereas Camus' existential philosophy asserts that the human mode of being is characterized by freedom and indeterminacy: "For if I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and to summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers. . . . For ever I shall be a stranger to myself,"³⁸ the Buddha's notion of "egolessness" or "nonduality" is far more than simply a rejection of a permanent and unchanging essence or central headquarters for "self" localized in the heart, soul, ego, or mind.³⁹ Not only, to use existential terminology, is consciousness an amorphous stream; it is an undivided totality that encompasses all of reality. In other words, mind and matter, subject and object, observer and observed, being-for-itself and being-in-itself are all aspects of one underlying totality; One Universal Mind. The Buddha teaches that:

This conception of universal oneness — that things in their essential nature have no distinguishing marks is called "Sunyata."

³⁷ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, p. 30.

³⁸ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 24.

³⁹ Jeremy Hayward, Shifting Worlds Changing Minds: Where the Sciences and Buddhism Meet (Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc., 1987), pp. 50–51.

Sunyata means non-substantiality, the unborn, having no self-nature, no duality. . . .⁴⁰

Meditation enabled the Buddha to realize that not only is the desiring ego the cause of suffering, but that it is itself an illusion created and sustained by an elaborate distorting perceptual process. As alluded to earlier, the Buddha claimed that not only do we ordinarily reject inevitable change at an obvious and conscious level, but that we do not accept the mark of impermanence even at the deeply subconscious level. The Buddha through meditation gained the insight that the most basic function of consciousness is to surround itself with beliefs it holds to be true and unchanging, so that at this fundamental stage there is a clinging to a world of unchanging beliefs, objects and minds. As Jeremy Hayward points out, the issue for the Buddha was not that we have correct or incorrect beliefs, but rather the realization that human beings have an inherent tendency to ceaselessly "seek" belief.⁴¹ The Buddha discovered that perception, the main function of consciousness, is a mechanical process involving several layers, the earliest stage of which is characterized by fear and bewilderment.⁴² As a result, and similar to Jean-Paul Sartre's notion,⁴³ consciousness becomes frightened by the outpouring of activity and consequently posits beliefs which serve to stabilize and make secure an otherwise constantly changing and therefore seemingly frightening world. The belief which gives

⁴⁰ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, p. 118.

⁴¹ Hayward, Shifting Worlds, p. 15.

⁴² Nananada, Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971), p. 3.

⁴³ Jean-Paul Sartre, The Transcendence of the Ego, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957), pp. 132-133.

human beings the most security and comfort is that in a separate "self" as the referential headquarters for consciousness.⁴⁴ In other words, consciousness, according to the Buddhist account, gets frozen at a certain point in this mechanical stage of perception, and subsequently uses that perceptual center (ego) as its point of future reference. Furthermore, all subsequent perceptions will be from the point of view, or seen through the window, of ego as consciousness creates the "self" by "valorizing one link in the perceptual chain at the expense of the others."⁴⁵ Hence, the Buddha claims that "self"—deception is at the very heart of perception:

Consider all substances; can you find among them an enduring "self"? Are they not aggregates that sooner or later will break apart and be scattered . . . ?⁴⁶

. . . Attachment to an ego—personality leads people into delusions.⁴⁷

This "self"—deception produces existential pain at the most fundamental level insofar as by clinging to belief in a permanent and ultimately real "ego," human beings increase their "separateness" and create a resistance to and friction with the natural impermanent and nondual order of the universe. By positing a fixed "ego" the human organism attempts to halt what is naturally in flux.

⁴⁴ For a thorough account of "Skandha Theory" see Hayward, Shifting Worlds, pp. 58–67.

⁴⁵ Brown, Seeing, Sensing and Saying, p. 22.

⁴⁶ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, p. 20.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 152.

The Buddha's contention is that the created "ego" defiles the world and distorts its reality: our perceptions and desires become arranged in a way conducive to maintaining the security of "ego." Consequently, we spend our whole lives trying to secure the welfare of something that never existed until we created it.⁴⁸ Hence, the belief in ego gives rise to impure desires that result in selfish mental defilements which themselves are responsible for much human misery: greed and ambition, hatred and rage, selfishness and jealousy, conceit, egoism, vanity and pride.⁴⁹

Consider your "self"; think of its transiency; how can you fall into delusion about it and cherish pride and selfishness, knowing that they must all end in inevitable suffering?⁵⁰

For the Buddhist, Albert Camus and every other unenlightened human being is a slave to such impure desires because they have not seen through the illusion of ego, and have lived their lives as if the ego is the most real and important "thing." A short poem by Mehrer Baba captures the essence of this Buddhist insight that the confused mind of ego becomes completely immersed in and attached to a world of illusion, conflict, alienation and struggle.

It's characteristic of the ego that it takes all that is unimportant as important and all that is important as unimportant.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Chögyam Trungpa, The Heart of the Buddha (Boston & London: Shambhala Publications Inc., 1989), p. 22.

⁴⁹ Bhikku Bodhi, "The Buddha's Teaching," in Entering the Stream: An Introduction to the Buddha and His Teachings, ed. Samuel Bercholz and Sherab Chodzin Kohn (Boston: Shambhala Publishing Inc., 1993), p. 63.

⁵⁰ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, p. 20.

⁵¹ Mehrer Baba, "Discourses," quoted in Ram Dass, Journey of Awakening, p. 18.

The Buddha went on to maintain that, once the defiling clouds of ego are removed, "one," can clearly see that ego "is" the source of confusion and that by transcending confusion one attains Enlightenment and suffering comes to an end.

The discriminating mind is only a mind for the discrimination of imagined difference that greed and other moods relating to the self have created. The discriminating mind is subject to causes and conditions, it is empty of any self-substance, and it is constantly changing. But since people believe that this is their real mind, the delusion enters into the causes and conditions that produce suffering. . . .⁵²

. . . An unenlightened and bewildered life rises out of a mind that is bewildered by its world of delusion. As we learn that there is no delusion outside of the mind, the bewildered mind becomes clear; and because we cease to create impure surroundings, we attain Enlightenment.⁵³

For the Buddhist, the occurrence of this insight is so powerful, clear and moving that it automatically brings subsequent release from suffering. As Brown explains:

The way of the Buddha brings suffering to an end because, in observing the operations of mind at their source, it sees that ego is the source of suffering and that ego itself is an illusion created and sustained by perception. The enlightened soul perceives this truth with absolute clarity, the insight being of such magnitude and urgency that it kills the ego on the spot. The death of the ego and subsequent rebirth into the first-experience sensation is called "Liberation."⁵⁴

⁵² Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, pp. 132–34.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 100.

⁵⁴ Brown, Seeing, Sensing and Saying, p. 7.

THE BUDDHA'S THIRD NOBLE TRUTH

Because the Buddha's experience of Enlightenment reveals the "self" by which humans suffer as having no real substantiality, anxiety and attachment are thereby eliminated at their very source. Tanha consequently loses its grip on the enlightened "individual" who thus ceases to believe in the ego and the ultimate reality it has been seen to project.⁵⁵ Upon seeing through the illusion of ego, the enlightened "mind" has been directly exposed to the truth of the fundamental interconnectedness of the universe and as a result, it can no longer relate to egocentric desires except in a superficial way. Accordingly, the Buddha's "Third Noble Truth" informs and assures us that the prognosis for the disease is good: suffering can be cured.

If desire (tanha) which lies at the root of all human passion, can be removed, then passion will die out and human suffering will be ended. This is called the Truth of the Cessation of Suffering.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, and this is very important, the liberating experience of nonduality is not, for the Buddha, a kind of indifferent state of absorption into the vast expanse of universal life; nor is it a kind of intellectual elimination of suffering by removing the "desiring self" from Albert Camus' "three certainties" position. Rather, the Buddha claims that the experience is accompanied by a profound spiritual pull and sense of rightness. Upon experiencing nonduality "one" directly observes and feels for themselves the loving way in which the universe operates, and this insight triggers a great sense of joy in being not simply a "part" of this process, but the actual process itself. The enlightened "mind"

⁵⁵ Hayward, Shifting Worlds, p. 52.

⁵⁶ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, p. 76.

clearly sees that human beings are infinitely more than the "ego" by which they had defined themselves, and by directly experiencing this reality they can overcome suffering and open into a joyful existence not based exclusively on self-interest. An existentialist like Camus, it seems, was unable to embrace this blissful unity with the cosmos; and this is why he wrote of human individuals as torn between their essential passion and "urge towards unity and the clear vision of the (absurd) walls enclosing [them]."⁵⁷ Camus was unable to bridge the gap between human beings and the universe and experience what the Buddha claimed to be a nondual universe.⁵⁸ The Algerian's dualistic perception of reality led him to an absurdist interpretation of an unfulfilling universe. For the Buddha, however, this existential interpretation of the universe is erroneous: the universe is far from being absurd and unfulfilling. The Buddha taught that the realm of nonduality is one of total perfection, loving intelligence, compassionate wisdom, splendid brilliance, inherent goodness, openness, clarity, and oneness to which the organism is drawn; and according to this teaching, Camus' "three certainties" result from ignorance and do not ultimately reflect reality. Furthermore, Camus' prescription of "revolt," formulated as a response to what he believed to be the truth of these certainties, perpetuates ignorance and thereby enhances the feeling of suffering. Human beings can free themselves from the dictatorship of "selfish desire" by shedding the fundamental deception "ego" and thereby awaken their greater loving and undivided nature. The Buddha asserts:

Buddha-nature is, indeed, the most excellent characteristic of human nature. Buddha teaches that, although in human nature there

⁵⁷ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 27.

⁵⁸ However, I will make the claim in Chapter Three that Camus did briefly experience such nondual moments, but could not abide there: infra, pp. 69-75.

may be endless varieties such as men and women, there is no discrimination with regard to Buddha-nature.

Pure gold is procured by melting ore and removing all impure substances. If people would melt the ore of their minds and remove all impurities and worldly passion and egoism, they would recover the same pure Buddha-nature.⁵⁹

From a Buddhist perspective it is no wonder that Camus, who never saw through the illusion of "ego," posited his "three certainties." Metaphorically, the error is comparable to a scenario in which the Algerian has been seated his whole life and, because he has never known what it is like to stand up and walk around, in ignorance he mistakes the lap (ego) to be the most real and important "thing" in his life. Consequently, he admires his lap and decorates it with ornaments (egocentric desires). Even though his posterior feels sore (suffering), he clings to his lap, afraid that someday he may fall off his chair and have the lap disappear (fear of self-extinction). However, one day someone comes along and teaches him how to stand (meditation), whereupon the lap suddenly disappears (awakening to the truth of egolessness) and the ornaments fall to the floor (egocentric desires lose their grip); not only does the existentialist realize the lap is not an ultimate reality, but that it was the source of his confinement (Enlightenment). Moreover, the pain in his posterior caused by being constantly seated disappears (the ending of suffering). He goes outside and walks around (Liberation) and realizes the existence of a whole fantastic reality (loving nonduality) which has always been around (nonduality is the basic framework for all existence) although previously inaccessible. He no longer feels the need to cling to, decorate, or protect the lap, but feels rather the need

⁵⁹ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, p. 158.

to explore his new freedom (desires change in accordance with awakening to the truth of nonduality). Nevertheless, any time he chooses to sit, the lap reappears and can be used at his convenience (the ego and egocentric desires have not completely disappeared; what has disappeared is his preoccupation and identification with them). The "seated Camus" in this Buddhist analogy represents confinement, suffering, and ignorance, while the "mobile Camus" represents liberation, the overcoming of suffering, and clarity.

NIRVANA

Buddhism designates the realm of nonduality "nirvana," and contrasts it with the ego-centered realm of confusion and anxiety called "samsara."⁶⁰ An individual in a state of samsara feels alienated from and constantly struggling against the universe. For Buddhists, Albert Camus abides in samsara; he writes constantly in terms of the individual pitted "against" the universe: ". . . how can I deny this force crushing me?"⁶¹ ". . . Victory would be desirable. But there is one victory and it is eternal. That is the one I shall never have."⁶² Camus' dissatisfaction with what he perceives as the reality of absurdity leads him to expose and protest against universal injustice. He feels alienated by the universe and consequently expresses his wish that the universe be other than it is, that he be united with it. He writes: "If man realized that the universe like him can love and suffer, he would be reconciled . . . that nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the

⁶⁰ Hayward, Shifting Worlds, p. 7.

⁶¹ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, pp. 81–82.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

absolute illustrates the essential impulse for the human drama. . . .⁶³ Camus' perception of a universe as hostile and dualistic is radically different from the Buddha's conception of a universe characterized by fundamental peace, love, and unity. The latter teaches that experiencing "nirvana" is awakening to the truth of the basic interdependence of all things and events. The world beyond our "selves" is not what Camus described as an alien "desert,"⁶⁴ but is an extension of our own bodies. Existentialists such as Camus feel alone, and see themselves as temporary visitors on the cosmic stage: he writes that man has landed on an "ephemeral island"⁶⁵ and must attain his dignity through "dogged revolt against his condition."⁶⁶ Buddhists, on the other hand, see that everything in the universe contradicts this existential attitude. As Alan Watts eloquently puts it: "We do not come into this world; we come out of it, as leaves from a tree. As the ocean 'waves' the universe 'peoples.' Every individual is an expression of the whole realm of nature, a unique action of the total universe."⁶⁷ In reality, human beings are not lonely and isolated inhabitants of what Camus called a "magnificent desert";⁶⁸ rather, they should be thought of metaphorically as being waves on the Universal Sea. Just as the wave is not separate from the ocean, so too are we not separate from the universe. The Buddha put it this way:

⁶³ Ibid., p. 23.

⁶⁴ Camus, "Le désert," in Noces, p. 110.

⁶⁵ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 89.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 104.

⁶⁷ Alan Watts, The Book (New York: Random House Inc., 1966), p. 9.

⁶⁸ Camus, "Le désert," in Noces, p. 112.

. . . there can be no fundamental distinctions among things. The apparent distinctions exist because of people's absurd and discriminating thoughts.

In the sky there is no distinction of East and West; people create distinctions out of their own minds, then believe them to be true.⁶⁹

According to the Buddha, it is when we neglect and struggle against our basic nondual nature that suffering results. Thus, Albert Camus' rallying cry of individual "revolt" against those aspects of life that cannot satisfy his desire for "self"-fulfillment only serves to suppress the truth of nonduality, and fuels the fire for greater separation and suffering.

⁶⁹ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, p. 102.

CHAPTER THREE:

THE CONTRASTING METHODOLOGIES OF CAMUS AND THE BUDDHA

ABSURDITY OR ENLIGHTENMENT?

This final chapter examines the different methods of inquiry into the nature of reality used by Albert Camus and the Buddha. First, it is important to briefly summarize their contrasting perceptions of reality. On the one hand, in The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus describes reality as characterized by "absurdity," employing this term "absurdity" to express the cleavage between a human being's aspirations for unity and the insurmountable dualism of mind and nature, the dualism between the human wish to endure and the finite character of existence, and between the human quest for lucidity and absolute knowledge and the ultimately random, chaotic, and meaningless nature of the universe. On the other hand, The Teaching of Buddha portrays the universe as an essentially loving and intelligent unity, while the creation of an individual "self" or "ego" results from a dichotomizing dualistic perceptual process that prevents human beings from experiencing this fundamental blissful unity. As human beings and readers confronted with the same problems that faced both Camus and the Buddha we have nothing but our own opinion, common sense, and reasoning capacity to decide which theory of reality is legitimate. It is as if we were to go back to Christ's era and set ourselves the task of determining whether the Earth is flat or round. We might engage in much speculation and theorizing but with few means of verification. We would need the proper vehicle(s), a rocketship to blast into outerspace and look back at the world, say, or a large ship to circumnavigate the world, in order to discover and confirm the truth of the Earth's shape. Similarly, without the proper vehicle or method for confirmation, Camus' existentialism and the Buddha's teaching of Enlightenment are reduced to being merely

interesting theories with no great experiential impact on the individual.¹ Moreover, if no way existed for personally verifying the truth of either duality or nonduality, absurdity or Enlightenment, we would be forced to rely on having faith in either the Algerian's philosophy or the Buddha's teaching. However, both men firmly resisted any attempt to initiate faith in authority as a legitimate form of acquiring truth(s). Camus writes that the Christian faith has "persisted in blocking the royal road of reason and in recovering the direct paths of truths."² The Buddha, too, preached a way of life devoid of faith and speculation and open to personal concrete testing: "Do not go by what is handed down, nor on the authority of your traditional teachings."³ And on his deathbed he advised one of his servants: "Therefore, O Ananda, be lamps unto yourselves. Hold fast as a refuge to the Truth. Work out your own salvation with diligence."⁴ Clearly both Camus and the Buddha would agree that truth is to be found not by subscribing to an authoritative school of thought, or in blind faith, but in personal experience.

CAMUS' ANALYTICAL METHOD

For Camus the proper method of philosophizing involves description and analysis. As noted in the introduction, Camus argued that the philosopher should not be consumed with explaining or systematizing reality, but with evoking, showing and revealing what

¹ Hayward, Shifting Worlds, p. 42.

² Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 28.

³ Quoted in E. L. Woodward, Some Sayings of the Buddha (London: Gordon Press, 1939), p. 238.

⁴ E. A. Burtt, The Teaching of the Compassionate Buddha (New York: Mentor Books, 1955), pp. 49-50.

he/she perceives. Camus observed the post-war European individual living in a desolate and featureless landscape without any guidance from "above," without any hope for an afterlife, trapped in an existence in which he/she had not chosen.⁵ At this time in history, Camus described life as dominated by nihilism, absurdity, and a sickness of spirit, and he explained that we cannot come to terms with our times unless we have analyzed and understood these phenomena. The Myth precisely captured the mood of this time. Given the apparent pointlessness of existence, Camus asks: Why not commit suicide and relieve ourselves of the burden of existence? He proposes what he calls an "absurd line of reasoning" by which to respond to this question.

Is there a logic all the way to death? I can find out only by following in the unique light of evidence, without unruly passion, the reasoning whose beginning I am indicating here; it is what I call an absurd line of reasoning. Many are those who have started with it. I still do not know if they had held fast to it.⁶

Essentially, Camus' analytical method is an experiment in honesty and logic, the sequence of which runs as follows: If it is true that reality is absurd, then in all honesty we should be bound to follow this truth in all its consequences, and develop a guide for conduct within its framework. The "absurd philosopher" must begin with what he perceives are certainties of his immediate experience, elucidate them, and move forward from there by "logical analysis and imaginative deduction."⁷ Camus holds that the "three certainties" of existence are not a priori or axiomatic, but experiential givens which provide the starting

⁵ Charlesworth, The Existentialist and Jean-Paul Sartre, p. 2.

⁶ Camus, quoted in Thomas Hanna, Thought and Art of Albert Camus, pp. 14-15.

⁷ Hanna, Thought and Art of Albert Camus, p. 35.

point and context for the emergence of an absurd sensibility. Given the reality of absurdity, Camus advises the individual to live a life full of passion and revolt in the here and now: we must root our being in the moving present if we are to grow in happiness. To be consciously aware of each passing moment with its sensuous pleasures and ephemeral moments of happiness is the ideal of the "absurd man." Sisyphus, the lover, the actor, the adventurer, and the artist are exemplary types of "absurd people" who make of this ideal the ferment of their existence. However, Camus does not pretend that a life lived in accordance with passionate revolt will be completely rewarding, he simply states that "only" in this way can humans retain their honesty, lucidity and dignity. Camus' method or "absurd line of reasoning" does not aim, then, at a solution to absurdity, but at the best course of action despite absurdity. For Camus, the only measure of this philosophy's adequacy depends on whether men and women can live happily and proudly in it. He concedes that a philosophy of revolt must be prepared to adjust its thought, admit its errors, and seek to promote a life that best ensures human happiness. The admirable features of Camus' "absurd line of reasoning" are its honesty, modesty, self-correcting nature, and openness.

THE BUDDHA'S MEDITATIVE METHOD (THE FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH)

Having stated this, it seems that in all likelihood the Algerian would have been willing to explore other methods of pursuing truth and experiencing reality. Such an alternative method exists within the Buddhist tradition. The Buddha maintained that through the practice of meditation human beings can transcend dualistic perception and thought and verify for themselves through personal experience the reality of nonduality.

By gaining direct insight into the truth of nonduality, human beings can live a life free from suffering by abiding in nirvana.

These awakened ones,
Dedicated to meditation,
Striving actively and vigorously,
Attain nirvana, the ultimate security.⁸

According to the Buddha's meditative discovery, what Camus accepted as an experientially given unbridgeable and irreducible dualism of human beings and nature is, in fact, a creation of perception. The Buddha teaches that it is possible to see through the illusory perceptual process and discover our true united nature. As Hayward explains, the meditative technique used by the Buddha enables human beings "to see directly the nature of belief in ego, the structure of perceptual projections of ego, and the gap between the ego's fabricated world and what is."⁹ The Buddha's "Fourth Noble Truth" provides a prescription for curing human suffering:

In order to enter into a state where there is no desire and no suffering one must follow a certain path. The Noble Path is Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. This is called the Truth of the Noble Path to the Cessation of the Cause of Suffering.¹⁰

Essentially, the meditative technique taught by the Buddha requires no more than sitting down, maintaining a straight back and neck, and being attentive to the flow of the

⁸ "Words of the Buddha," in Dhammapada: The Path of Truth, trans. Balangoda Ananda Maitreya, Rose Kramer (Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc, 1969), p. 69.

⁹ Hayward, Shifting Worlds, p. 52.

¹⁰ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, p. 76.

breath, a procedure which does not require belief, purpose, imaging, programming, nor does it require any effort beyond being mindful of the breathing process.

The main method taught by the Buddha to help people awaken from their confusion is meditation. Meditating in the Buddhist way is not like praying. It is not trying to believe in anything or make utterances in your mind about your beliefs, longings, or intentions. It is more like relaxing and just letting things be as they are without cranking anything up. We spend a lot of time in our lives trying to crank something up. In meditating, Buddhists take the approach of letting go of all that struggle and resting in the way things really are, which is however they happen to be.¹¹

For Buddhists, meditation is not an exercise in breathing, but an exercise in training attention in order to explore one's inner mental functioning. By concentrating attention on the breath the meditator learns to focus on a single object of awareness. Meditators soon discover the difficulty of this seemingly simple task; attention is constantly jumping from one thought to another, from one object of attention to another. According to the Buddha, the ingrained habit of mind is to constantly wander:

The human mind, in its never-ending changes, is like the moving water of a river, or the burning flame of a candle; like an ape, it is forever jumping about, not ceasing for even a moment.¹²

The meditator observes that mind spends most of the time lost in fantasies, illusions, reliving pleasant or unpleasant experiences, anticipating the future, recapturing the past and so on. Because the mind is often lost in such thoughts it is usually unaware of the subtle mental processes occurring right "now." It is the Buddha's contention that the

¹¹ Bernardo Bertolucci, "Introduction," Entering the Stream, ed. Samuel Bercholz and Sherab Chodzin Kohn (Boston; Shambhala Publishing Inc., 1993), pp. xiv-xv.

¹² Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, p. 94.

"wandering mind" is out of touch with reality. It is as if metaphorically we were reading Camus' Myth of Sisyphus and, because it is so interesting and absorbing, we fail to hear our spouse enter the room. All the processes of hearing have been triggered, yet we do not hear what is going on immediately around us because our attention is focused elsewhere. Only through careful practice can we learn to focus our attention. Meditation aims at focusing attention on the present. Once it is noticed that the mind is wandering away in pursuit of a particular set of thoughts, then the meditator gently, not forcibly, brings attention back to the breath. Although Albert Camus calls for human beings to be consciously aware of each successive moment, unlike the Buddha, he offers no technique by which to accomplish this "seemingly" simple task. For the Buddha, by calmly and patiently practicing awareness of respiration, the meditator learns not to fall into distraction or absent-mindedness as he/she becomes quietly rooted in the "now" moment. The result of this benign effort is an acute alertness to one's present mental state combined with a profound quieting of mind.

Right Concentration means to keep the mind right and tranquil for its concentration.¹³

According to the Buddha, as the mind calms it attains a clarity that allows insight into fundamental mental processes normally hidden from the "wandering" or "cluttered" mind. Basically, through meditation attention becomes trained to become aware of perceptual processes that occur too quickly for untrained attention to detect.¹⁴ At this fundamental and revealing level, dualistic perception is not seen as an ever-present fluid

¹³ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, p. 330.

¹⁴ Hayward, Shifting Worlds, p. 2.

stream; rather it is recognized as a mechanical process in which the meditator perceives in terms of "flashes" or "spurts." Space or what Buddhists call "emptiness"¹⁵ exists between these dualistic flashes, an emptiness which is the "homebase to which the meditative mind constantly returns."¹⁶ To be more accurate, the meditator does not actively pursue "emptiness"; rather, he/she is drawn there. Emptiness in the Buddhist tradition does not correspond to a western nihilistic idea of nothingness, however; instead it is directly experienced as spacious, open and free, as radiating a feeling of peacefulness, brilliance and unconditional love.¹⁷ And within it is what the Buddha calls a "pure mind of Enlightenment"¹⁸ or what Hayward refers to as "primordial nondual awareness,"¹⁹ and it is contrasted with the "self"—conscious dualistic insight at the basis of perception. For simplicity's sake, the former form of intelligence will be referred to as "Big Mind," while the latter will be called "little mind." Nevertheless, the Buddha explains that the two are not exclusive forms of intelligence; rather Big Mind functions as the "whole" of the intelligence process from which little mind arises and is a "part." Another way to put this is that Big Mind is the basic framework for all existence; all things and events, including little mind, flash in and out of Big Mind ceaselessly.

Essentially, little mind is the realm of dualistic perception and rational thought. It is a "self"—conscious state produced when that "part" or "aspect" of Big Mind mistakes

¹⁵ Trungpa, Heart of the Buddha, p. 394.

¹⁶ Brown, Seeing, Sensing and Saying, p. 22.

¹⁷ Hayward, Shifting Worlds, p. 264.

¹⁸ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, p. 132.

¹⁹ Hayward, Shifting Worlds, p. 264.

itself for the whole. Little mind is reflective, analytical, logical and discriminating. At this "stage" of consciousness the meditator observes that little mind forms mental concepts in an attempt to name, differentiate, categorize and make sense of experience. The Buddha contends that the very nature of this function of mind "creates" division by its efforts to articulate meaning; little mind by nature perceives and conceives of the universe as consisting of separate "things" having independent existences when in reality there is no such distinction.

All things are perfectly homogeneous. such discriminations are caused by erroneous judgements by those who seek these phenomena. . . .²⁰

It is the passion for analysis and discussion by which people become confused in judgement.²¹

In this sense, according to Buddhism, the "rational thought" of little mind is not what Camus believed was the means for reflecting or clearly seeing reality; rather it is constantly distorting reality by creating the illusion of division within reality and thereby fueling feelings of self-conscious tension, alienation, struggle and existential anxiety. It is this mind that Camus identified with completely: ". . . there is nothing beyond reason."²² For meditators, however, a pure mind of Enlightenment exists beyond little mind.

From the unknown past, being conditioned by their own deeds and deluded by two fundamental misconceptions, people have wandered about in ignorance.

²⁰ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, p. 62.

²¹ Ibid., p. 160.

²² Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 36.

First, they believed that the discriminating mind, which lies at the root of this life of birth and death, was their real nature; and second they did not know that hidden behind the discriminating mind, they possessed a pure mind of Enlightenment which is their true nature.²³

Another way of putting this is that the Buddha maintains human beings are not little mind "thinking"; they are nondual "Awareness" attending to this dualistic "function" of mind. Essentially Big Mind is our true nature and it is prior to dualistic perception and thought; it is the realm of pure Awareness. It is an "original" or "unconditioned" mind that is prior to such mental functions as rationalizing, analyzing, discriminating, evaluating, imaging, thinking, conceptualizing, reflecting, belief and doubt formation. Big Mind operates in complete and total innocence and freedom. Perhaps it can best be conceived as open or receptive loving intelligence. The purpose of meditation is to free awareness from identifying with and perceiving only from the distorting and anxiety-filled point of view of little mind by bringing it back to its original unconditioned loving state so that its true origin and harmonious relationship with nature may be rediscovered. As Brown puts it:

Such a mind [Big], rare as it may be, has been deconditioned to impulses and knee-jerk reactions to phenomena and it has unlearned the grammar of cartesian thought-patterns, freed itself from ideology and demythologized our human fabrications. It is alone, naked and vulnerable; it is in an ideal position to receive and give love.²⁴

²³ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, pp. 62-64.

²⁴ Brown, Seeing, Sensing and Saying, p. 35.

Buddhists claim that meditation increases peaceful nondual moments in experience and, unlike an "absurd awareness," brings a sense of unity, clarity, and a feeling of being intimately involved with everything and of being free from self-conscious tension. The Buddha teaches:

By the practice of meditation, the Buddha preserves a calm and peaceful spirit, radiant with mercy, compassion, happiness and even equanimity. He deals equitably with all people, cleansing their minds of defilement and bestowing happiness in a perfect singleness of spirit . . . Buddha's state of mind surpasses human thought.²⁵

Camus, it seems, could not surrender him—"self" and completely open to the realm of Big Mind because he did not have the benefit of a technique for transcending dualistic perception and rational thought. As already mentioned in great detail, what Camus accepted to be an experiential given, a pure perception of an alien "outside world," the Buddha claimed to be filled with distortion, defilement, and fundamental deception. Hence, according to the Buddhist meditative tradition, Camus' starting point for his "absurd line of reasoning" is fundamentally erroneous. It seems the case, however, as we shall now argue, that even though Camus' "absurd line of reasoning" was based on a premature conclusion about the nature of reality drawn from a perceptual strategy that is limited and does not reflect ultimate reality, he nevertheless experienced moments of opening to the fundamental unity (Big Mind) described by the Buddha in his "Third Noble Truth."

²⁵ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, pp. 62–64.

CAMUS' EARLY ESSAYS EXHIBIT A MEDITATIVE-LIKE QUALITY

Camus' early essays exhibit a profound connection with nature that seems to parallel the Buddha's meditative experience. In fact, Germaine Brée observes that Camus' essays in Noces amount to meditations: "Each of these four essays is a meditation complete in itself."²⁶ Camus strongly identifies with the Hellenistic concepts of the centrality of bodily experience and an innocent and loving union with the natural world. For Camus, Algeria is the incarnation of love of life, natural beauty, and the splendour of the world. His essays constitute a kind of celebration of human beings united with nature. Serge Doubrovsky writes:

Camus considers the sun to be the unifying force of the universe. It is light felt not as a distant purity, but as a fecundating bath. It is the unifying force of the cosmos. . . . The theme of the "sun," therefore, defines the fundamental category in Camus' ontology: participation. The body is the place where man and nature meet in happy marriage.²⁷

The Algerian shares with pagan Greek culture a sense of the body's passion for living, grounded in an unreflective feeling of innocence and unity. His physical sensibilities are rooted in the primary sensual vitality of a body immersed in the sun, sand, and sea. At this level of unreflective experience, anxiety and separation do not appear to be present in Camus; instead he seems to be in a state of blissful union with his surroundings. As he

²⁶ Germaine Brée, Camus (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), p. 80.

²⁷ Serge Doubrovsky, "Ethics of Albert Camus," in Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Germaine Brée, pp. 73–74.

bites "into the sun-gilded fruit of the world"²⁸ it is clear that his essays have a profoundly "nirvanic" flavour:

No, it was not that I counted nor the world, but only the harmony that made love spring between us.²⁹

And later he writes:

Now spread out to the four corners of the world, forgetful, having forgotten myself, I have become the wind and within the wind, the columns and arch here, the stone slabs smelling of the sun and the pale mountain set around the deserted city.³⁰

The above passage from Noces bears a remarkable resemblance to a passage in The Teaching of Buddha:

Buddha's body in this aspect fills every corner of the universe; it reaches everywhere. . . .³¹

The language of union, innocence, harmony, bliss and love prevalent in Noces to describe man's unreflective encounter with nature could almost double as a Buddhist account of a meditative experience. Camus appears to have transcended the dualism of little mind and to rest, at least for a brief moment, in the realm of Big Mind.

²⁸ Camus, "Noces à Tipasa," Noces, p. 29.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Kyokai, Teaching of Buddha, p. 52.

ABSURDITY SETS IN

However, Camus quickly catches himself: "What a temptation to identify oneself with those stones, to melt into the burning and impassive universe which defies history and its ferments."³² As the feeling of absurdity sets in, Camus' state of mind changes from a basic experience of sensual joy free from anxiety toward an awareness of the discord between human beings and the world. The divorce between Camus and his environment seems to have been triggered by three types of negative experience: one, his witnessing of the overwhelming and destructive power of nature; two, his encounter with solitude, sickness and death; and three, his experience of travel which instilled in him a sense of the strangeness of existence. Although certain parts of Camus' early works display what Brown calls a "kind of Mediterranean purity unfettered by the Cartesian model"³³ of separation and doubt, his later works reflect and emphasize a critical evaluation of life. This analytical approach to reality is clearly stated by Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus:

It is clear that I am defining a method. But it is also evident that the method is one of analysis.³⁴

Destruction, strangeness, and the foreboding presence of death are all elements of existence that cause Camus to stop and think, to evaluate, and to try to make sense of reality. Jean-Paul Sartre observes this analytical spirit in Camus' writing:

³² Albert Camus, "The Stop in Oran," in The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 160.

³³ Brown, Seeing, Sensing and Saying, p. 12.

³⁴ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 22.

The presence of death at the end of our path has made our future go up in smoke; our life has no future; it is a series of present moments. What does this mean if not the absurd man is applying his analytical spirit to time.³⁵

Whereas Descartes moved syllogistically from doubt to certainty, Camus started from a fundamental sensual experience of certainty, then reason and reflection (little mind) mediated and instilled in the Algerian a sense of doubt, contradiction, divorce, and uncertainty.

The mind's first step is to distinguish what is true from what is false. However, as soon as thought reflects itself, what it first discovers is a contradiction. . . . For the one who expresses a true assertion proclaims simultaneously that it is true, and so on "ad infinitum."

This vicious circle is but the first of a series in which the mind that studies itself gets lost in a giddy whirling. The very simplicity of these paradoxes makes them irreducible.³⁶

Because of thought's inability to understand reality in terms of a single unifying principle,³⁷ Camus judges the universe to be absurd and unjust:

Hence the intelligence, too, tells me in its way that this world is absurd. . . . This world in itself is not reasonable. . . .³⁸

Simply put, Camus looked at the world through the eyes of the little mind, saw it to be absurd, and experienced great anxiety, because it could not "live up" to his expectations.

³⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, "An Explication of the Stranger," in Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Germaine Brée, p. 118.

³⁶ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 22.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 23.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 26.

But it is important to note that this "existential angst" resulted "after" the Algerian's initial pagan sensual experience. Thomas Hanna, author of The Thought and Art of Albert Camus, holds that "Albert Camus, at the beginning of his literary production, expresses, not reaction, but love and understanding for the shores of North Africa, an understanding which becomes the setting for all his subsequent thought."³⁹

Subsequently, he attempts to adjust his primal experience of natural and sensual beauty to his secondary experience of sensing the absurdity of existence. This appears to support the Buddha's contention that the "discriminating mind" of rational thought, reflection and analysis is not always present in experience, and conflict and division occur only when it does appear, an assertion Camus would not deny:

If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world. I should be this world to which I am now opposed by my whole consciousness and by my whole insistence upon familiarity. This ridiculous reason ["rational thought"] is what sets me in opposition to all creation.⁴⁰

For Camus, however, the problem was that he saw himself as a being who "must" think, judge and analyze. The existentialist affirms that one must act in terms of thought; in fact one must think in order to live.⁴¹ Camus argues that there is nothing beyond rational thought. In this sense it could be said that Camus completely identified with little mind; that is, he is first and foremost a reflective thinker rather than a non-reflective observer. Hence, Camus divorced himself from Big Mind and became the reflective

³⁹ Hanna, Thought and Art of Albert Camus, p. 11.

⁴⁰ Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p. 51.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 23.

evaluator who judged and critically analyzed from a distance what was an initially innocent, lucid, joyful and nonreflective immediate perception. It is his very "analytical approach" that sustains and perpetuates his existential anxiety.

It is very important that the following two points be made: one, Buddhists would clearly state that Albert Camus' tendency to perceive from the point of view of little mind is not a problem in itself: what is a problem, however, is the extent to which he believes little mind to be an ultimate reality by clinging to it as if it were the "final truth"; and two, dualistic perception would not discontinue for Camus had he become Enlightened: what would discontinue, however, is the suffering resulting from one's total immersion in, preoccupation and identification with "self." According to the Teaching of Buddha, Camus was unable to escape from suffering because he identified totally with little mind, and was unable to separate pure Awareness or Big Mind from the dualistic perceptions and thoughts that are its objects. Because the existentialist identified with little mind he found himself in an "absurd prison" from which escape seemed impossible. According to the Buddha, on the other hand, human beings can unlock themselves from this "self-created absurd prison" by directly approaching their inner being through meditation and thereby rediscovering their true roots or home.

We have what we seek. It is there all the time, and if we give it time it will make itself known to us.⁴²

Buddhism does not claim to answer "all" of life's ills; however, it does seem to offer a powerful meditative technique for clearly seeing the fundamental nature of mind, transcending the limitations of dualistic perception of little mind, and for expanding our

⁴² Bayazid al-Bistami, quoted in Ram Dass, Journey of Awakening, p. 202.

consciousness so that we can uncover a fresh, kind and compassionate way of looking at the world. For Buddhists such a transformation of ourselves is not idealistic abstraction, but a real possibility rooted in an accurate understanding of our true nature.

CONCLUSION

At the height of his literary career, Albert Camus met his much-dreaded death on January 4, 1960 in an automobile accident. Perhaps this ending best suits a man who had a vision of human beings in their most glorious and proudest moments. Camus directly confronted what he believed to be an absurd world by questioning the value of existence. He demanded of human beings their passionate participation in the world and that they directly challenge their actual situation. Camus saw his task as that of an artist who would bring absurdity to the attention of others, carry its burden himself, and live a life immersed in the absurd. Camus' heroic impulse in The Myth was to forge an autonomous, strong and proud individual engaged in a glorious combative struggle to survive, a rebel who strives to assert himself/herself in an attempt to control the environment from which he/she emerged.

Camus' heroic effort to lessen human suffering and bring happiness to the lives of men and women deserves admiration. Like the Buddha, Camus was a humanist of great stature; however, unlike the former he was unable to transcend suffering. The "absurd hero" in Camus, who was forever struggling to conquer nature, competing to survive and maintain his position, could not surrender himself to a larger unity. His need to correct, find significance in, and impose meaning upon the world constrained him as an artist and limited his vision into the nature of reality. Firmly clinging to the truth of the "three certainties," Camus' inquiry into the meaning of life began with a world already defined, a world from which there could be no ultimate evasion. It is not the intention of this thesis to prove that Camus' existentialism was "wrong" and the Buddha's teaching was

"right"; rather, it is to suggest that the Buddha's inquiry into the nature of reality was complete and encompassing while Camus's was not.

It is difficult to speculate about whether Camus could have arrived at the kind of fundamental truths that the Buddha uncovered had his life not been prematurely cut short. What is clear, however, is that Camus' thought was progressing toward a fundamental Buddhist theme: "love." As Brée notes, in Camus' early essays his theme was "innocence"; then came the theme of "absurdity" predominant in The Myth of Sisyphus. This was followed by the theme of "revolt," and later by the theme of "measure"; and finally there was the theme of "love" which was left undeveloped due to his sudden death, but was clearly suggested in some short stories in Exile and Kingdom.¹ The development of his thought represents a search for truth and he was "far from believing that he had arrived either intellectually or as an artist, and he spoke of only a few hard-won certainties."² Rejecting the idea of having a totally coherent intellectual order in the world, Camus focused his energy toward examining how to best live in it. Pierre-Henri Simon maintains that Camus stands alone among modern thinkers in the sense that, even though he believed existence to be absurd, he still feverishly searched for happiness.

Moreover it should not escape us that, by virtue of the awakening, the progress toward wisdom is distinguished in no way from the search for happiness. The question of happiness is constantly posed in the work of Camus. . . . In his most despairing moments Camus never loses sight of the great task of man which is to learn to be happy.³

¹ Brée, "Introduction," Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. ix.

² Ibid., pp. ix-x.

³ Pierre-Henri Simon, "Albert Camus the Man," Witness the Man (Paris: Armand Colin Library, 1951), p. 183.

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