



# The Four Evolutionary Stages of Religion

by Ven Dr. Madawela Punnaji

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# **The Four Evolutionary Stages of Religion**

*by*

*Ven Dr Madawela Punnaji*

In 1987, I had the honour of being invited to deliver a lecture at a university in Sri Lanka, on the evolution of the human being through the practice of religion according to Buddhism. I spoke under the title – Man, Superman and Beyond. The talk included the four stages through which religion evolves.

Superman is not a mere fiction, as it is understood today. Real supermen did walk on earth more than twenty

five centuries ago. Superman is the result of a process of evolution that took place long time ago. Superman as a species is virtually extinct today, though not entirely. Man evolves in the effort to solve the problem of existence, as in the case of plants and animals. In order to understand this process of evolution, and the problem of existence, it is useful to examine the modern biological theory of evolution.

### **The Biological Perspective**

Life, is the characteristic behaviour of a substance which was formed out of inanimate matter when the right conditions and the right constituents happened to coincide at some moment in the history of

this planet. This substance had the special characteristic of being able to reproduce itself.

Although this substance, like any other, had to some day break up and be destroyed, it had the capacity for apparent continuation through continuous replacement. In other words, it attempted to become permanent in an impermanent world, even though this attempt was a failure in reality.

This was the original mistake made by living matter. There was no actual living or being; there was only an attempt to live and to be. There was no existence; there was only a struggle for existence. There was no survival either for the fit or for the unfit; there

was only an apparent survival. What really continued, ultimately, was only a struggle for existence and the actual survival of nothing.

### **Evolution of Civilized Man**

The uncivilized man is closer to the apes in that he, like the ape, is for the most part passively reacting to the environment, unable to control his impulses. His life is full of anxiety. He has to find food or he will die of starvation. In going out to find food, he is in danger of becoming the food of another animal. He has to risk his life in order to find food for survival.

In the midst of this danger, he also begins to seek pleasure, and in doing so, he often risks his life too in



competition with others. Uncivilized man does not have satisfactory shelter or clothing. He does not have proper medicine when sick. He does not have much security and comfort in life. As a result, uncivilized man experiences a relatively greater amount of anxiety than civilized man. Uncivilized man, because he is not in full control of his natural impulses, is self-centred and cannot properly care for others. He is also competitive and alienated and has to satisfy and defend himself, alone, as an individual, even by hurting others. He cannot therefore make much progress in the control of his environment, until he learns to join others and share and care and help one another in society.

When the mind is broadened this way in the process of civilization, man becomes less and less individualistic and more and more co-operative. He becomes more capable of team work. Through cooperative team work, in production and exchange and the discovery of better ways of governing and organizing society, civilized man is thus able to reduce the anxiety of life. It should be noted that this anxiety reduction became the primary goal of man, and it was achieved through socialization and self-discipline in civilized man. Self-discipline is both positive and negative. It is to perform what is socially constructive and to avoid what is socially destructive.

This social attitude is the characteristic of civilized man. It is individuals that make a society not vice versa. Civilized man is socialized man. Civilized society is his product.

### **Evolution of Superman**

Although civilized, man through better organization, work and technology, is able to reduce anxiety and make life more comfortable, he is not able to eliminate anxiety from his life entirely. Civilized man, in the process of becoming socialized and disciplined, learns to suppress his natural self-centred urges and impulses.

These suppressed impulses begin to accumulate tension, which

seeks release in actions. Because this tension is not allowed to be released in actions that are anti-social, they tend to find release in perverted form, or this tension remains in the form of anxiety.

This is why civilized-society is plagued with neurosis, anxiety, problematic stress and other psychological problems and psychosomatic disease. Civilized man, though he is comfortable physically, is still uncomfortable within. Therefore he seeks inner peace and tranquillity. He turns to techniques of stress management, the use of tranquillizer drugs, progressive relaxation, hypnosis, biofeedback and other methods of finding inner peace. He

also turns to modern psychotherapy as well as ancient religious techniques of meditation and mysticism.

The important thing about this new turn that civilized man has taken is the focus on inner peace and tranquillity. This new turn of civilized man is in the direction of the next stage in the evolution of man. It is the evolution of civilized man to the level of superman. The more natural and more systematic method of evolution of civilized man to superman, however, is achieved through the practice of religion.

By religion, I do not mean mere belief and ritualistic practice. That is what organized religion usually is. I am speaking of natural religion,

which is the gradual evolution of consciousness; beginning with the appreciation of what is good and true. This appreciation elevates the human mind above the mere concern with the satisfaction of basic physical needs. In order to understand the evolution of civilized man to the level of superman it is useful to examine the evolution of religion.

The different religions that we find in the world today are different forms of organized religion. Organized religion does not help individuals to fully evolve because the individuals remain bound to dogmas and rituals, and are not free to evolve. Natural religion is a process of individual evolution. There are four main levels

of individual religious evolution. They are:

1. The *Saddha* level (devotion)
2. The *Sila* level (discipline)
3. The *Samadhi* level (tranquillity)
4. The *Panna* level (understanding)

At the *Saddha* level we appreciate what is good and true. This may be expressed in the form of worship of a perfect being who is perfect in goodness and wisdom, whatever be the name one may call Him. Religion is practiced at this level in the form of devotion. It is the devotional level of practice. At this level, man becomes orientated to seek inner perfection. He begins the journey towards civilization.

Religion at the *Sila* level is where one begins to practice the good life, or good principles of behaviour, which are socially beneficial. It is at this level that one begins to practice commandments or precepts. This is the level of self-discipline where one begins to control natural emotional impulses and thereby learn to control selfishness. At this level, therefore, we learn to cultivate an interest in others or all beings. It is at this level that civilized man is born. This *Sila* level of religious practice produces civilized man.

The third, the *Samadhi* level is the level of renunciation and meditation. At this level one gives up all worldly pursuit, sensual pleasures and



possessions and takes to meditation. This may also be called the mystic level. Most mystical states described in various religions, fall under this category of practice. In Buddhism this level is called the *Samadhi* level. All the *Jhana* and *Samadhi* are practiced at this level. At this level one begins to experience inner peace and happiness which is superior to the excitement of sensual pleasures. At this level, one also begins to experience psychic powers by which one's mind has control over matter. Moreover, the senses become more acute, and the brain more efficient at this stage. This is the stage at which man becomes – superman.

The last or the fourth stage of the evolution of religion is what is called the *Panna* level. It is at this level that man becomes fully aware of the problem of existence and its solution. At this level there is direct awareness of experience, instead of existence. It is at this level that man becomes superhuman and even loses his identity. This is a stage higher than the level of superman. It is at this level that man awakens from the dream of existence, and ends the process of evolution, by stopping the struggle for existence. It is the final evolutionary stage, where man becomes immortal, not through eternal life, but through freedom from the delusion of existence. It is the stage of the –

Awakened One the Buddha, the God become.

These four evolutionary levels of religion are levels that every individual has to pass through during the course of human evolution. This evolution is not an unconscious biological evolution but a consciously executed evolution of consciousness itself.

Religion seen in this way is concerned with individuals, rather than organizations, temples or churches. When an individual evolves from one stage to another the views and lifestyles change. Organized religions tend to prevent such change and therefore obstruct the evolutionary process. Religion that I refer to, and which I call natural

religion, is not mere obedience to rules but a conscious process of growth and evolution. It could also be called a growth technique, by means of which an individual consciously evolves from a lower to a higher level of consciousness.

What is special about the superhuman evolutionary stage is the superhuman understanding. This is getting in touch with the ground of being. This ground of being is experience, which can be normal or supernormal. The normal experience is anguish and its cause. The supernormal experience is the absence of anguish and the way to its absence. This superhuman understanding has

been described by the Buddha in the form of the Four Supernormal Truths.

1. The understanding of anguish
2. The understanding of the origin of anguish
3. The understanding of the cessation of anguish
4. The understanding of the way to the cessation of anguish

This fourfold understanding is seen by the Buddha, to be superior to the psychic powers and the states of peace experienced by superman. This is because this understanding results in the solution of the problem of existence, and the ending, of the evolutionary process. It is therefore

the ultimate point in the evolution of man.

This understanding, however, is not the grasping of a concept but a freedom from all concepts, though it is not an absence of concepts either. It is the direct awareness of experience through introspection. It is seeing experience with its constituent parts and seeing how the parts of experience arise and cease from moment to moment, in the words of the Buddha.

When we are able to see these components of experience objectively, without identifying with them or personalizing them, we become free of the notion of self. Then there is nothing to identify as self or call mine or myself. Then there is no self to be

anxious about or try to preserve or satisfy. Then there is no self to grow old or die. Then one is free from aging and death. This is immortality. This is the end of all anguish. The anxiety persisted due to the notion of self that resulted from personalization of experience. When this personalization was stopped, the notion of self, disappeared and the anxiety ceased. The purpose of this essay has been to point out that superman is not a mere dream or fantasy, but a concrete reality.

The evolution of superman from man is not so much a biological process as it is a psychological one. It is the evolution of the human consciousness through introspection.

The consciousness becomes gradually conscious of itself, and thereby loses the delusion of existence. It is experiencing experience instead of existence. This freedom from delusion paves the way to vistas of super-knowledge that equips man to become superman.

Today the growing science called quantum physics is gradually making mankind aware of the potentialities of the human mind. Mankind must solve its problems through evolution. Just as a child solves his problems by growing up, and animals solve their problems by evolving, human beings too have to solve their problems through maturity, growth and evolution. Modern society is plagued with problems like crime,



drug abuse, poverty, mental sickness, psychosomatic disease, insanity, suicide, war and many more. All these problems seem to be the result of emotional immaturity. Therefore, maturity, growth or evolution seems to be the only solution. If evolution is the solution to our problems, then it is worth our while to learn how to evolve.

Man evolves through the practice of religion. Religion is the process of human evolution. *Saddha*, or belief in superman, gives hope to mankind. *Sila*, or self-discipline helps uncivilized man to become socialized and civilized. *Samadhi* or gaining inner calm helps civilized man reach the state of superman. *Panna*, or direct awareness

of experience, helps superman to awaken from the dream of existence, and evolve to the superhuman level. If you have recognized the importance of evolution, and if you have accepted the fact that it is possible for a human being to evolve, and if you have understood the method of conscious evolution, then what is left to be done is nothing but to make the effort to keep evolving.

Once I was traveling by train from Washington DC to New York City. On the way I saw a large poster put up at one station. It contained the picture of a large chimpanzee. Below the picture was, a line that read: Keep Evolving. This should be everyone's motto. This is my message to you too: keep

evolving. If you follow this advice, there would be no doubt about the possibility that you will evolve to the level, not only of superman but also to the superhuman level.

Today, man has begun to recognize his latent potentialities. Modern man has even become a kind of superman through his technological skills. Now he looks forward with confidence to the day he would be in control of the universe, though to be really in control one has to be in control of oneself. Therefore, superman, at least technologically, is not a dream to him anymore; it is to him a possible reality. At least modern man is able to appreciate the importance of

becoming superman and is confident enough to try.

Therefore, let me repeat: keep evolving by practicing religion in the non-dogmatic universal way. Keep evolving to solve your problems. Keep evolving to become supermen, and even reach the superhuman level.

## **THE 124 YEAR OLD BUDDHIST MAHA VIHARA, BRICKFIELDS**

The Buddhist Maha Vihara was founded in 1894 by the Sasana Abhiwurdhi Wardhana Society (SAWS), the oldest registered Buddhist Society in the Klang Valley.

From its very inception, the Vihara has been managed by the Sinhala Buddhist community but always financially supported by the Chinese and Indian communities. The first structure of the Vihara was the Main Shrine room, completed in early 20th Century. The donors for the Shrine Room, as recorded in the Selangor Government Gazette 1896, pg. 408 are clearly Chinese and Indian communities and among the main donors were:

*Kapitan Yeap Quang Seng, Towkay Loke Yew, K. Tambusamy Pillay, R. Doraisamy Pillay, Loke Chow Kit, San Peng and Son, Lim Tua Taw, etc...*

The Vihara was always the focal point to mobilize the Buddhist community. The large gathering to protest and stop the screening of the then controversial film "Light of Asia" in 1927 in Malaysia was also held at the Vihara, and so was the mass gathering and signature campaign in the 1950s to lobby the government to declare Wesak as a national holiday.

During the Emergency period of 1948-1960, monks from the Vihara made a massive impact reaching out to calm and educate the psychologically disoriented Chinese New Villagers who were evicted from their traditional lands and placed in new settlements by the Government which was fighting a communist insurgency.

Since the 1940s, the Vihara commenced a free Dhamma publications program as a Dhammadutta outreach to the masses which by the year 2012 was made available in 28 languages, with millions of copies of books and CDs

produced. The Vihara's Buddhist Institute Sunday Dhamma School (BISDS), founded in 1929, is the oldest Sunday School in the country with an enrolment of more than 1200 students and continues to produce systematic books on Buddhist studies for children.

The Wesak procession organized by the Vihara since the 1890s is the oldest and largest religious procession in the country. The 3-day Wesak celebrations at the Vihara attracts about 100,000 people.

Many students or devotees who have studied and benefited from the BISDS, the Vihara's Free Publications, Dhamma programs, classes, talks, etc have gone on to set up new Buddhist societies and centers which help to spread Buddhism in the country far and wide.

The SAWS is also one of the founding members of the Malaysian Consultative Council for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST) formed in 1983, a Council which constructively engages the Government on matters affecting non-Muslims in the country. The MCCBCHST Administrative office is based at the Vihara.

In 2004, the Vihara was a major focal point in the country to collect relief aid to assist the South Asian Tsunami that killed almost 280,000 people. Several forty foot container equivalents of relief aid were dispatched by the Vihara to Sri Lanka, Indonesia, India, Myanmar and Thailand by air, sea and land.

Buddhists remain the country's largest organ donors, thanks to Cornea and Organ Donation Campaign carried out by the Vihara.

The Vihara continues to operate to deliver its obligation to the Buddhist community till this day and is governed and directed by its Vision, 4 Missions, 6 Strategic Objectives

and 4 Ennoblers in tribute and gratitude to all our past and current Sangha, volunteers, donors, friends, etc. We would be failing in our duty if we fail to mention the name of the foremost amongst them, our late Venerable Chief, ie. Ven Dr Kirinde Sri Dhammananda.

### ***Vision***

To be a leading international center for the Learning, Practice and Dissemination of the Buddha Dhamma

### ***Mission***

To provide a conducive environment to:

- promote scholarship and study of the Buddha Dhamma
- propagate the Buddha Dhamma
- be the focus of Buddhist activities for the larger community
- foster Theravada Buddhist cultural and traditional practices

### ***Six Strategic Objectives***

To be the Buddhist center of choice for:

1. Learning, Practising and the Realization of the Dhamma
2. Spreading the Dhamma
3. Buddhist Civilization
4. Synergy groupings to sustain the Buddha Sasana
5. Compassion in Action
6. Financial Accountability while delivering Cultural Obligations

### ***Four Ennoblers:***

1. Loving Kindness
2. Compassion
3. Altruistic Joy
4. Equanimity

### ***Motto***

Go forth, for the good, happiness and welfare of the many, out of compassion for the world.

## SERVICES AVAILABLE AT BUDDHIST MAHA VIHARA

- Dana for Monks (at Vihara or Home) and Bana (Sermons)
- Blessing Services / Funeral Services by Monks
- Booking of Facilities for religious functions / events
- Marriage Registration
- Full Moon / New Moon Day Puja & Free Vegetarian Lunch
- Sunday Dhamma Classes for Children & Adults
- Buddhist & Pali University Diploma, Degree & Masters Program
- K Sri Dhammananda Library
- Bookshop

### **DAILY ACTIVITIES**

Monday to Sunday	6.30am - 7.30am	Morning Buddha Puja
	11.30pm - 12.00 noon	Noon Buddha Puja
	7.30pm - 8.30pm	Evening Buddha Puja

### **WEEKLY ACTIVITIES**

Mon, Wed, Thurs	8.00pm - 10.00pm	Meditation Class
Tuesday	8.30pm - 10.00pm	BMV Choir Practise
Thursday	7.30pm - 9.00pm	Senior Club Yoga Practise
Friday	1.00pm - 2.00pm	Afternoon Puja & Talk
	8.00pm - 9.30pm	Dhamma Talk
Saturday	7.30pm - 8.30pm	Bojjhanga Puja
	9.30am - 11.30am	Sanskrit Class
Sunday	8.30am - 9.30am	Morning Puja
	9.30am - 11.00am	Abhidhamma Class
	9.30am - 12.00 noon	Sunday School Session
	10.00am - 11.30am	Dhamma Talk
	10.00am - 2.00pm	Traditional Chinese Medicine
		<i>(1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Sun of the month. Please note there will be no clinic if a Public Holiday falls on the allocated Sunday)</i>
	11.00am - 12.30pm	Pali and Sutta Class
	1.30pm - 5.00pm	Sinhala Language Classes
		Sinhala Cultural Dance Classes
	2.00pm - 3.00pm	Dhamma for the Deaf (fortnightly)
	2.00pm - 7.00pm	Diploma & Degree in Buddhism Classes
	5.00pm	Feeding the Homeless

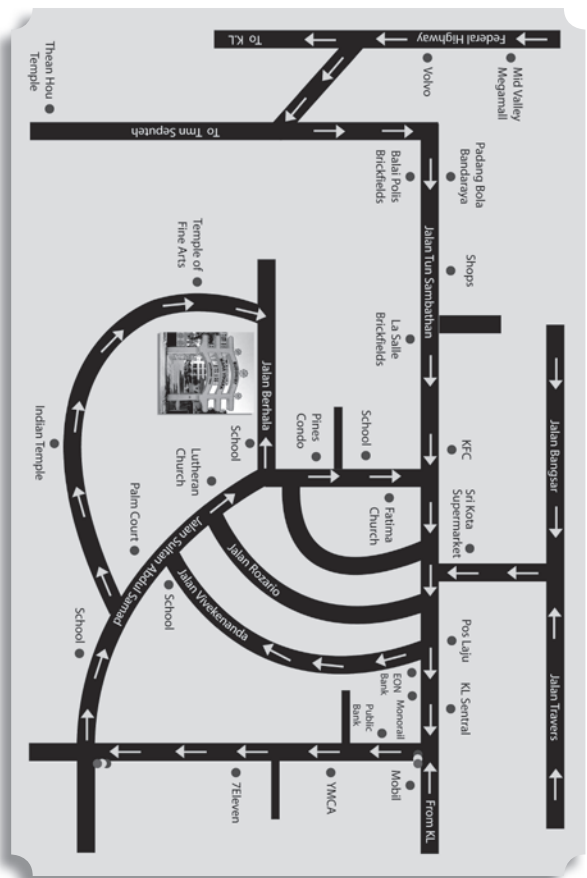
### **DONATION IN CASH OR KIND CAN BE MADE FOR:**

- BISDS Building Fund - Classrooms, Meditation Pavilion, Lifts, Meeting and Counseling rooms
- Free Publications (Malaysia and Overseas) - Annually about 300,000 books in 30 Languages
- Education Fund
- Full Moon and New Moon services sponsorship
- General Maintenance of the Buddhist Maha Vihara
- Utilities (Electricity, water, telephone, administration etc)
- Illumination (lighting) of the Main Shrine Hall
- Illumination (lighting) of the Awkana Buddha & Cakra
- Monks' Dana - Offering Monk Requisites of Food, Medicine, Lodging, Robes, etc
- Welfare Fund
- Special Religious Events - Wesak
  - Annual Blessing Service
  - Annual Merit Offering
  - Kathina Pinkama (ceremony)
  - Monks' Novitiate Programme

**MAY THE BLESSINGS OF THE NOBLE TRIPLE GEM  
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## LOCATION MAP TO BUDDHIST MAHA VIHARA



# DONATION FORM

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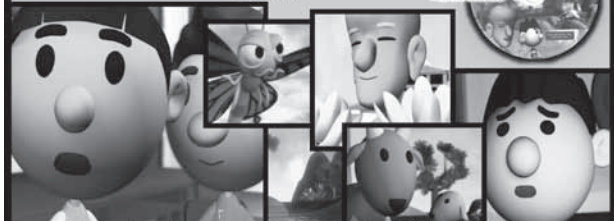
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May he rejoice in this meritorious deed  
and be peaceful and happy.*

*We also wish to share the merits with  
our departed relatives, friends  
and sentient beings.*

*May they all attain the  
Bliss of Nibbana*

*Sadhu! Sadhu! Sadhu!*



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