Chapter I

*Dukkha*: Violence and Suffering

Of the four noble truths of Gautama the Buddha, the first and the foremost is the recognition of the omnipresence of suffering. “Sabbe sankhara dukkha” (all compound things are suffering), said the Buddha (Humphreys, *Buddhism* 81). According to Humphreys, “suffering” is only one translation of the Pali word “dukkha.” He explains:

[Dukkha] covers all that we understand by pain, ill, disease – physical and mental – including such minor forms as disharmony, discomfort, irritation or friction, or, in a philosophical sense, the awareness of incompleteness or insufficiency. It is a dissatisfaction or discomfort, the opposite of all that we mentally embrace in the terms of well-being, perfection, wholeness, bliss. (*Buddhism* 81)

These different forms of suffering can be summed up in a single phrase of Edwin Arnold — “the disease of life” (26). To young Siddhartha, the first three of the four “signs” he met in the streets of Kapilavastu — the aged man bowed down by years, the sick man scorched by fever, and the corpse followed by mourners — represented “this disease of life.” He meditated “what its far source
and when its remedy” (Arnold 26). That was the beginning of Buddhism, a philosophy described by Rhys Davids as “philosophy of suffering” (qtd. in Humphreys, Buddhism 84).

Frost’s philosophy too grows out of his recognition of life as full of suffering. “Tragedy, yes,” Frost once said, “There is always tragedy – That is what life is” (qtd. in Cox 121). Philip L. Gerber points out that “Frost occupies himself in the pit of grief from which philosophy must spring” (“Bound Away” 68). The reality of human suffering is always in the backdrop of Frost’s thoughts and reflections. Charles S. Foster reports that Frost “always carried a thorn in his pocket to remind him that it is from the realities, physical, mental and spiritual, that poetry springs” (80). Like young Siddhartha who, after witnessing the “signs” of suffering in the streets of Kapilavastu, pondered over the universal question of human tragedy, Frost also thought, even from his school days, about the origin and causes of man’s tragic existence. Says Lawrance Thompson:

As [Frost] walked alone toward high school troubled by problems in his own home, he puzzled over the old question concerning whence and why misfortune is. He seriously doubted, now, whether all the griefs, sorrows, pains and evils which had darkened his loved ones since the death of his father, could be made fit positively into any larger design. (The Early Years 121)
There is, however, a marked difference between the Buddha and Frost in their tragic experience: while young Siddhartha came to know about human suffering from the lives of others, Frost learnt it from his own life. C. P. Snow in his short biographical sketch of Frost observes that "He had been through great suffering" (139). Thompson goes so far as to call Frost a "modern Job" (qtd. in Greiner 12). Frost's life-story reads almost like a Sophoclean tragedy. Thompson and Winnick in the third volume of Frost's biography summarise the poet's tragic experiences in his private life. Frustrations and tragedies haunted him from the cradle to the grave. Young Robert had to suffer many humiliations due to financial difficulties at home following his father's death. His mother's income as a school teacher was very meagre. After graduating from high school, his courtship of Elinor White caused him great mental agony. Once he doubted that he lost her out to another suitor. At last, however, he could win her back. After their marriage, the next tragedy that struck Frost was the death of their first child, Eliot. The boy died at three of 'cholera infantum.' The doctor, who called in, held Frost responsible for not calling him sooner. Years after he lived to see death and insanity overtake all but one of his four children, a son and three daughters. Marjorie, the youngest surviving child and Frost's favourite, died of perpetual fever in 1934 after giving birth to her first child. Six years later Frost's only surviving son, Carol, died.
by his own hand, after years of mental disorder. Irma, another daughter, was also the victim of mental disorder, and she had to be placed in a mental institution. Earlier, Frost’s sister, Jeanie had to be hospitalised for the same illness. Only Lesley escaped, and she blamed Frost for all the family’s misfortunes. After Irma’s suicide in 1947, Frost wrote to Louis Untermeyer, “Cast your eye back over my family luck, and perhaps you will wonder if I haven’t had pretty near enough” (qtd. in Thompson and Winnick xix). Further, the poet made clear his preoccupation with suffering in the following lines from “New Hampshire”:

I make a virtue of my suffering
From nearly every thing that goes on round me.
In other words, I know wherever I am,
Being the creature of literature I am,
I shall not lack for pain to keep me awake.
Kit Marlowe taught me how to say my prayers:
“Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.” (166)

The key to the tragic elements in Frost’s poetry was first provided by Lionel Trilling in his famous speech at the poet’s eighty-fifth birthday in March, 1959. Opening with a reference to Frost’s “Sophoclean birthday,” Trilling ended by saying directly to Frost:

I hope you will not think it graceless of me that on your birthday I have made you out to be a poet who terrifies. When I began to speak I called your birthday
Sophoclean... Like you, Sophocles lived to a great age, writing well; and like you, Sophocles was the poet his people loved most. Surely they loved in some part because he praised their common country. But I think that they loved him chiefly because he made plain to them the terrible things of human life; they felt, perhaps, that only a poet who could make plain the terrible things could possibly give comfort. (qtd. in Burnshaw 105)

Later in his essay, “A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode” Trilling elaborates his argument as follows:

I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet. Call him, if it makes things easier, a tragic poet, but it might be useful every now and then to come out from under the shelter of that literary word. The universe that he conceives is a terrifying universe. (156-157)

The tragic experience, which Frost had in plenty in his personal life, forms the pervading theme of many of his poems such as “Acquainted with Night,” “The Lesson for Today,” “The Home Burial,” “The Death of the Hired Man,” “An old Man’s Winter Evening,” “The Design,” “The Draft Horse,” “Once by the Pacific,” “The Witch of Coos,” “A Servant to Servants,” “The Hill Wife,” “The Census-Taker,” “Range Finding,” “The Vanishing Red,” “The Code,” and so on. These poems, which can be termed as “poems of suffering,” are, in the words of Frost himself, an “unforced expression of life I was forced to live” (qtd. in Sergeant 58). The tragic vision that
these poems present is not an imitation or extension of any scholastic concept of tragedy. Frost’s tragic vision is his own. Louis Mertins rightly observed that “Frost could learn from Shakespeare, but his tragedies were his own, not Hamlet’s, Macbeth’s, or Lear’s” (83). Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant also points out that “Actually he spoke from the tragic background of the poet who writes from the heat of the life that he knows and divines” (188). However, Frost’s poems of suffering are not purely personal. Says Elaine Barry: “Intellectually he had even taken the step beyond the romantic awareness of personal despair to contemplate the possibility of cosmic meaninglessness” (Robert Frost 101).

How far Frost was concerned with personal suffering, and how far he transcended his personal despair and contemplated the universal suffering of man is explicit in “Acquainted with Night.” “Much that is basic in Frost,” says John Robert Doyle, “may be found in “Acquainted with Night”” (166). “In one mood of dejection,” reports Thompson, Frost “hinted that his immediate poetic concern was with nothing except darkness” (Years of Triumph xiv). Putting these two observations together, one can easily conclude that “Acquainted with Night” is a representative poem of Frost in which he expresses his serious concern with darkness.
On the superficial level the poem is a record of sordid experiences of a city walker, in the dead silence of the night. He walked out all alone in the night up to the farthest limit of the city, and then came back. It was late in the night and it was also raining. The city streets wore a deserted, sombre look. The scene was as cheerless and lonely as it could be. At that late hour, no body was out except the watchman at his beat. The city walker passed him by with dropped eyes. He was “unwilling to explain” to the watchman the inner urge, the sense of his loneliness and isolation. The watchman would not understand such spiritual matters. So the city walker passed him with downcast eyes. During the night walk, the city walker was startled to hear a cry which comes to him “over houses from another street.” He listened to it with rapt attention. He stood still and tries to decipher its meaning. But the cry was not addressed to him. It was a vague impersonal cry, suggestive of the horror, bloodshed and violence of city life. As the city walker moved further, he saw a clock tower with its “luminary clock against the sky.” To the city walker it seemed to proclaim that “the time was neither wrong nor right.”

It is possible that Frost had a special fascination for night walks. As early as North of Boston (1914), Frost began to have things to say about late walks. In “The Fear” he says that “Every child should have the memory / Of at least of one-long-after bed time
walk" (92). Again, in “A Late Walk” Frost describes his journey through “the mowing field” and “The headless aftermath.” When he comes to “the garden ground” he hears “The whir of sober birds / Up from the tangle of withered weeds” which “Is sadder than any woods” (8). He sees a bare tree beside the wall from which a brown leaf “comes softly rattling down.” He continues his journey to pick “the faded blue / Of the last remaining aster flower / To carry again to you” (9). At the end of North of Boston Frost placed “Good Hours,” which is not only a late walk poem, but a poem which foreshadows precisely the situation of “Acquainted with Night.” The speaker’s was a solitary walk in a winter evening: “I had for my winter evening walk- / No one at all with whom to walk” (102). But the speaker found a sort of company with young men and women in the cottages. He went till “there were no cottages found,” and when he returned he saw “no window that was no black.” Once again, as early as 1942, “Come In” presents a late walker “out for stars.” Walk in the night is thus characteristic of Frost.

This prompts the reader to assume that “night” has a symbolic significance in Frost’s poems. In “Acquainted with Night,” for instance, night is not physical; it represents, in the words of Doyle, “the sadness that life has to offer” (171). The title as well as the last line of the poem supports this surmise. Further, the fourth line in the poem – “I have looked down the saddest city lane” – reinforces
this surmise. The sufferings of men around him keep the poet always awake, and his night walk is a symbolic journey through the hardships of his fellowmen in search of an answer to the universal problem of suffering.

"The saddest city lane" in the "Acquainted with Night," reverberating with the "interrupted" cry of grief and despair in the dreadful night, represents a miniature world of suffering – perhaps the world, described by Frost as "a coarse brutal world, unendingly coarse and brutal" (Thompson, *Years of Triumph* 559). A student of Buddhism now remembers the cry of the aged man, the sick man, and of the mourners which young Siddhartha heard from the streets of Kapilavastu. To Siddhartha those three signs symbolised "the still sad music of humanity." They brought to his mind the sadness, the want, the helplessness and the vices of the world. Beginning with the sufferings of the individuals, Siddhatha pondered over the universal problem of "dukkha," and at last came to formulate his four noble truths for the salvation of man from his never-ending suffering.

"The Buddhists," says S. S. Barlingay, "begin their enquiry with 'dukkha'." The Buddhist scholar explains that it is not 'my' misery but the human misery with which the Buddhists are concerned (162). In "Acquainted with Night" Frost recognises
suffering, but whether it is his personal suffering, or the impersonal suffering of the whole mankind is disputed. Robert Pack maintains that “In his sonnet [“Acquainted with Night”] written in Dantean terza rima, Frost is in his own circle of hell, locked into an obsessive ‘I’ of self-consciousness”(17). It is true that when the speaker in the poem “walked out in rain,” he was burdened with personal melancholy, but when he came “back in rain,” we feel that he was a changed man. His personal melancholy, it seems, melted and merged with the impersonal cry of despair which he heard from the street. To explain it further, the speaker came out to the street, seeking relief from his personal sufferings; but he confronts more intense sufferings of others there, and these impersonal sufferings seem to alleviate, to a certain extent, his personal suffering. According to the Buddhists, this realisation of the omnipresence of suffering, far beyond the personal suffering, is the first imperative; “for in this realisation,” says Humphreys, “lies that seed of compassion whose flowering is the crown of Buddhahood.” Humphreys adds:

He who faces the fact of unhappiness may learn to see the unceasing agony in the eyes of other men, and so be driven, as the Buddha was impelled to find and finally destroy the cause of suffering both for himself and his fellowmen. (The Middle Way 68)
One feels that Frost too had developed such an attitude to suffering, especially towards the end of his life. This is evident from what Daniel Smythe reports:

I had met him at the edge of one of his greatest sorrows. His son was gone. But as he said, “It’s all the way of the world,” and pointing to a newspaper picture of a bombed bus, “They were probably all killed. They are more sadness than mine.” (68)

One has reasons to believe that in “Acquainted with Night” Frost shows a matured wisdom of human suffering, following what Wallace Stevens calls an “experience of annihilation” (qtd. in Lentricchia 77) of his self on listening to the impersonal cry of grief in the street. The speaker in the poem, for instance, does not complain anywhere about his personal sufferings. “Perhaps the most significant aspect of the poem,” says Doyle, “is that the fact of isolation, or, aloneness is never linked with complaint.” He continues:

The very essence of “Acquainted with Night” is the fact that the speaker has known what the night had to offer in the past, and knows that he will have to accept what the night has to offer in the future. No self pity emerges from the lines, no self praise for having accepted life. Self knowledge there is and a simple embracing of a phase of human experience. (171)
The cyclic nature of suffering appears to be one of the themes in "Acquainted with Night." Robert Pack speaks about it:

The poem returns to the end to the line ["I have been one acquainted with the night"] with which it begins, for there seems to be no way out of this circle. The speaker's movement outward in body and inward in thought both lead to the same darkness, the same "night." The "city light," and later the moon, the "luminary clock" paradoxically illuminate only this essential darkness. (17)

Perhaps, the poet suggests that the suffering has no end, and it repeats itself in various forms so long as the world exists. To the Buddhists this idea of ceaseless suffering is not new. The Buddhist scripture "Khanda Samyutta" says: "Come a time when the mighty ocean dries up and vanishes; come a time when the mighty earth be devoured by fire and perishes. But never will come the time when the sufferings of beings will cease (Allen, Buddha's Words 34). So no time or place is free from suffering. Frost also admits it when he says that "the time was neither wrong nor right." He told Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant that "This poem ["Acquainted with Night"] came to me after a visit from A. E. [George Edward Russell], the Irish mystic, who subtly murmured: "The time is not right' " (303). In fact, the poem is a reply to George Edward Russell and
many others who hold the view that the age we live in is particularly bad. On another occasion Frost elaborated this idea:

We have no way of knowing that this age is one of the worst in the world history. Arnold claimed the honor for the age before this. Wordsworth claimed it for the last but one. And so on back through literature. I say they claimed the honor for their ages. They claimed it rather for themselves. It is immodest of a man to think of himself as going down before the worst forces ever mobilised by God. (Thompson and Winnick 121)

Frost concludes the statement that “All ages of the world are bad.” This concluding conviction of the poet that “All ages of the world are bad” seems to the central theme of the poem “The Lesson for Today.” At the very outset of the poem itself, the poet refutes the argument of some modern “sages” that “this uncertain age” is “dark” and out of “joint.” The tragic existence of man is “too large a situation,” but the modern “sages” try to grasp it “with too much social.” Frost is of the view that “We cannot appraise the time in which we act.” However, he is sure that it is an “adverse” time. But in all ages “There’s always something to be sorry for / A sordid peace or an outrageous war” (352). Throughout the ages man has the convention with regard to violence and brutality. Violence and its subsequent suffering are an integral part of the human existence. The poet, therefore, concludes that “The ground of all faith is human
woe" (352). We have no choice but to take this curse either as tragic or comic. Man is always an insignificant speck under the domination of either religion or science. According to the poet, "The lesson for today is how to be unhappy yet polite" (353). He knows that "Earth's a hard place in which to save the soul" (353). This is a universal phenomenon "not confined to any one time, place or human kind." For the soul one age is like the other: "...all ages shine / With equal darkness" (354).

"The groundwork of all faith is human woe"— the whole poem seems to revolve round this line, and it obviously reflects Frost's philosophy of suffering. Frost once categorically stated that "So far shall grief go, so far shall philosophy go" (qtd. in Brower 111). This statement, along with the line quoted above, once again establishes that Frost's philosophy, like Buddhism, grows out of suffering. Rhys Davids speaks about Buddhism thus: "The fact that life as we know it is largely made up of painful and sorrowful experiences is the foundation from which Buddhism as religion, ethics, philosophy takes its start" (92). The Buddha himself is reported to have said to his disciples:

If these things [sufferings or evils] were not in the world, my disciples, the Perfect One, the holy supreme Buddha, would not appear in the world; the law and the doctrine
which the Perfect One propounded would not shine in the world. (Coomaraswamy 83)

For those who study the theme of suffering in Frost’s poems, the poem “Home Burial” is of immense interest and significance. What happens when one cannot accept the reality of death, the culmination of suffering, is graphically portrayed in this poem. Amy, the young wife, in the poem is unable to reconcile with the death of her child. The overwrought woman drifts obsessively to the tall window looking out upon the snow-covered family plot. Every sight of the raw mound reopens her wound. She clings to her grief obstinately. Already her resistance to a consoling touch drives a wedge between herself and her husband. He feels his loss no less painfully than she. But knowing that life is for living, he relegates the past. The wife finds this incomprehensible and annoying. She says: “You could sit there with the stains in your shoes / Of the fresh earth from your own baby’s grave / And talk about your every concerns...”(54). Amy, at last, concludes that “the world is evil,” and refuses to accept it. According to Doyle, the failure of husband and wife to understand each other is “absorbed into the larger question of the failure of both, in fact of all human beings, to understand death.” The poem has thus universal significance. In the words of Doyle, “Out of the stark situation of infant death, the author has brought forth an intensely tragic poem” (39).
"[I]n the sorrow of one woman is the woe of all mankind," observes Humphreys in his analysis of the Buddhist parable of "Kisa Gotami and the Mustard seed" (The Wisdom of Buddhism 81). A student of Buddhism who reads "Home Burial" feels that Amy is a counterpart of Gotami. Gotami approached Lord Buddha with the corpse of her beloved one in her hands, and sought some miraculous medicine to restore the child to life. The Buddha said to her: "You did well, Gotami, in coming hither for medicine. Go enter the city, make the rounds of the entire city, beginning at the beginning, and in whatever house no one has ever died, from that house fetch tiny grains of mustard seed." Gotami searched and searched and searched, but found no such house in all the villages. However, in the process of her searching she found that her grief was a very common one. Then she became realistic in her attitude to death, and accepted her fate. At last she sought refuge in the Buddha, and he recited to her the following lines:

The man who delights in children and cattle
That man whose heart adheres thereto
Death takes that man and goes his way
As sweeps away a mighty flood of sleeping village.

(Burtt 44)

This parable has great philosophical significance. It contains two of Buddha's most important doctrines: that death is universal and that it should be accepted with a tranquil mind. Every thing in
the realm of phenomenal existence is in change, and is transitory. Whatever becomes passes away. Whatever is must die. Every living creature, like other things, is a compound of elements. Sooner or later it must dissolve. Hence a realistic acceptance of life and death is an essential part of true adjustment to reality. As long as one is completely absorbed in his own grief, there is no way of gaining victory over pain. If instead one can identify in feeling with the experience of others who similarly suffers, one will be freed from his own grief. This identification intrinsically brings about enduring peace and joy that are superior to grief.

Amy and Gotami stand poles apart in their attitude towards suffering, caused by their children’s death. Gotami recognises, though with great difficulty, that the agony of death has to be endured; Amy, on the other hand, remains adamant at the face of death. And hence her tragedy. The Buddha narrated the parable of Gotami to illustrate his doctrine of universal suffering, but the parable also conveys another important message that it is man’s reluctance to accept the reality of suffering that produces his tragedy.

Amy and her unnamed spouse represent two different and conflicting attitudes to one specific thing in life – grief. The contrast
between these two characters, which is one of the focal points in the
poem, is vividly drawn by Doyle:

For the husband, though there is great grief, life must go
on; for the wife, because there is great grief, life, normal
life, cannot go on. The husband forces grief beneath and
fills the surface of life with every day affairs; the wife
spreads her grief over all and submerges the affairs of
every day existence. (38)

There is no evidence in the poem to suggest that the
husband is endowed with philosophical insight into the complexities
of life and death, but he recognises that in spite of the bitterness of
the death of his child, “life must go on.” So he endures the reality of
his child’s death with matured wisdom. Further, he does not
approve of the violent outburst of his wife. However, he often
sympathises with her. In his digging the grave, the husband
demonstrates his acceptance of the reality of death. He accepts his
own hard and bitter role and responsibility. But Amy who cannot
accept the death of her child, cannot accept her husband’s
acceptance. She condemns the world as evil. She fails to see the
reality, because she cannot transcend her personal suffering and see
beyond. She fails to see that “the grief which all hearts share grows
less for one” (Arnold 128). So she suffers and also makes others
suffer.
The poem seems to raise the universal question of how to live in a world afflicted with death and suffering. While Amy’s attitude to this problem is negative and destructive, her husband’s is positive and creative: while Amy is preoccupied with the thoughts about the dead, her husband is concerned with the problem of the living. All his efforts appear to be, as Frost puts it in “The Investment,” “Not to sink under being man and wife / But get some color and music out of life?” (264)

Whether “Home Burial” is an autobiographical poem or not is beyond the scope of the present discussion. However, one feels that in the attitude to death and suffering Frost is with Amy’s husband. In one of his letters to Untermeyer Frost says: “And I suppose I am a brute in that my nature refuses to carry sympathy to the point of going crazy because someone else dies” (Letters of Frost 103). As his biography shows, Frost was a witness to a series of deaths in his family. So he wrote in “The Wind and the Rain”: “I sang of death – but had I known / The many deaths one must have died / Before he came to his own”(336). Passing through these various trials of suffering, Frost seems to have gained a self-possession that none would have dreamt possible. Harvey Allen describes him as a powerful engine “wracking itself to pieces from running wild after the loss of its flywheel” (qtd. in Burnshaw 252). The poet also wants others to learn this lesson of acceptance. “Frost has no sympathy for
the man who rails against his lot,” says Philip L. Gerber. Gerber elucidates Frost’s philosophy of acceptance:

Always the great inescapable fact is that man comprises an imperfect being who operates within a large but equally imperfect universe. Freighted with impossible dreams man labours towards impossible goals. No salvation can be had within the two keys to release. First comes the recognition of man’s plight; next acceptance. (145-146)

There is abundant evidence to believe that men and women in Frost’s world know how to endure catastrophe with courage and confidence. In “The Self-Seeker” the broken one, who lost the use of his feet in a mill accident, resigns himself to the kind of crippled life that he must lead. Similarly, the woman in “The Lovely Shall be Choosers” is able to find some consolation to help her endure each of the seven stunning blows that the fates have in store for her. So too the wife in “A Servant to Servants” is reconciled to the hardships which she endures even though they may lead her into madness. Again, the speaker in “Bereft” undergoes a similar period of despair in which all that he cherishes seem to be taken from him.

The poem “Acceptance” is another eloquent expression of Frost’s philosophy of acceptance and endurance. Every living thing in nature accepts darkness without a demur. No creature complains
about darkness, “When the spent sun throws up its rays on cloud / And goes down burning into the gulf below”(249). Birds reconcile to the sunset as a natural “change to darkness in the sky.” Reaching home safely they brood, “Let the night be too dark for me to see / Into the future” (249). They are then fully equipped to encounter the reality of darkness. “Let what will be, be.” The poem makes us think that man alone refuses to accept this truth about suffering, and hence his tragedy. Man fails to understand that through darkness he can see the future better. The image of the setting sun suggests decay and death. It is certain that the same sun will rise the next day with renewed lustre and glory. Frost thus expresses here his hope and optimism in no uncertain terms.

This realistic attitude to death and suffering is characteristic of Buddhism too, as is evident from the parable of the mustard seed. Speaking about death, Dalai Lama points out that it is a part of our lives, and “whether we like it or not it is bound to happen.” So, “Instead of avoiding thinking about it, it is better to understand its meaning.” Dalai Lama adds that “If from the beginning your attitude is ‘yes death is a part of our lives’ then it may be easier to face” (22). He elaborates his idea:

When unfortunate things happen in our lives there are two possible results. One possibility is mental unrest, anxiety, fear, doubt, frustration and eventually
depression, and in the worst case even suicide. That is one way. The other possibility is that because of that tragic experience you become more realistic, you become closer to reality. With the power of investigation, the tragic experience may make you stronger and increase your self-confidence and self-reliance. The unfortunate event can be a source of inner strength. (23)

In “Home Burial” Amy and her husband distinctly represent these two extreme attitudes to the misfortunes in life. Amy’s unrealistic attitude leads to “mental unrest, anxiety, fear, doubt, frustration and eventually depression,” while her husband’s realistic attitude makes him stronger and more self-confident.

“Home Burial” is a poem in which one can easily trace Frost’s affinity with the Stoics. Bertrand Russell describes a Stoic as follows: “Show me one who is sick and yet happy, in peril and yet happy, in exile and happy, in disgrace and happy. Show him me. By the Gods I would fain see a Stoic” (Western Philosophy 264). Amy’s husband accepts and endures the loss of his child, and in the acceptance of his suffering he is more or less like a Stoic. But a comprehensive study of Frost’s philosophy shows that the poet was more than a Stoic. Russell points out that “the Stoic gospel was one of endurance rather than hope” (262). In other words, the stoics do not entertain hope or optimism. Frost, on the other hand, is an optimist who welcomes and embraces darkness so that he can “see
into the future” (“Acceptance” 249). Again, he does not approve of the Christian idea of salvation through suffering, as he makes it clear in “The Masque of Reason.” Unearned suffering is against Frost’s reason, and like Job he seems to insist, “I am reduced / To asking flatly for the reason – out right” (483). One can rightly assume that Frost’s incessant search for a logical reason for the suffering, along with his recognition of the omnipresence of suffering, brings him closer to the Buddhists than either to the Stoics or the Christians.

It is pertinent at this point to look for the reason, if any, for the suffering of Amy and her husband in “Home Burial.” Caught in the whirlpool of sorrow, Amy and her spouse have neither the patience nor the time and energy to probe themselves into the reason for their suffering. But the reader feels that desire and death are linked together in the poem in a highly complex manner. Katherine Kearns elucidates this point:

For Frost, “home burial” becomes the most complex of all terms, a metonym for the perceived simultaneity of desire and death: earth is the gravitational stuff from which one is made and the most intimate home of all. The place where the demon wallows, the female earth becomes in Frost’s poetry the symbolic locus for the penetrative act that signals at once both procreation and burial. (127)
Frank Lentricchia points out that when, casually, the husband describes the small family graveyard as “Not so much larger than a bedroom,” Amy “takes him to be alluding very obliquely and very maliciously to the act of sexual love that brought the child to the world and, by painful extension, to death” (64). Lentricchia then reinforces the impression that in “Home Burial” death and suffering are intrinsically associated with desire — here, the sexual desire. The Buddhist doctrine that suffering is the consequence of desire is justified here.

Man’s isolation and suffering in his old age seem to be one of the serious concerns of Frost. In “home Burial” he says, “No, from the time when one is sick to death, / One is alone, and he dies more alone” (54). “The Death of the Hired Man” and “An Old Man’s Winter Night” explore this theme of old age in detail and depth. “The Death of the Hired Man” is a poem not only about the hired man’s death, but also about old age and sickness. We get a vivid picture of Silas from Mary’s description of him:

He’s worn out. He’s asleep beside the stove
When I came up from Rowe’s I found him there
Huddled against the barn door fast asleep
A miserable sight, and frightening, too – (35)

The wretched sight of Silas calls to our mind the pitiable picture of the old and sick man whom young Siddhartha happened
to meet in the streets of Kapilavastu. Says Edwin Arnold in *The Light of Asia:*

A stricken wretched it was, whose quivering frame
Caught by some deadly plague, lay in the dust
Writhing, with fiery purple blotches specked:
The chill sweat beaded on his bow, his mouth
Was dragged awry with the twitchings of sore pain:
The wild eyes swam with inward agony. (73)

Old age and sickness, like death, is a universal phenomenon. Channa, the charioteer, explained to Siddhartha this truth and reality:

. . . . this comes
In many forms to all men; griefs and wounds
Sickness and tetter, palsies and leprosies
Hot fever, watery wastings, issues, blain
Before all flesh and enter everywhere. (Arnold 75)

In “The Death of the hired Man” we are told that Silas was a hard working farm hand. Warren always admired his worth in the farm. Silas was, in the words of Redcliffe Squires, one of “stubborn human worth” (78). But old age and sickness destroyed both his mind and body. He lost his memory, and he could not even speak. “He jumbled every thing,” says Mary. In short, as Redcliffe Squires points out, “the portrait [of Silas in his old age] does touch the heart” (78). The description of sick and old Silas approximates with
what Channa, the charioteer, speaks about old age in *The Buddhacharitā*.

He says that old age is “the murder of beauty, the ruin of vigour, the birthplace of sorrow, the grave of pleasure, the destroyer of memory, the enemy of the senses” (Asvagosa 37).

Like “The Death of the Hired Man,” “The Old Man’s Winter Night” is also about old age, disease and death. According to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, this poem “mostly symbolises and embodies what Robert Frost drew from his silent Franconia winters and respectively, from his Derry winters.” The critic thinks that the very theme of the poem is “winter, the winter of nature and of man” (177). The poem is remarkable not only for its portrayal of human suffering in old age, but also for the perusal the poet makes of the spiritual crisis of an old man who is lonely and isolated. The old man here has many things in common with the speaker in another poem by Frost, “Bereft.” The speaker in “Bereft” is scared even by the sound of wind. Nature seems to conspire against him:

Something sinister in the tone
Told me my secret must be known:
Word I was in the house alone
Somehow must have known abroad,
Word I was in my life alone,
Word I had no one left but God. (251)
The loneliness of the old man in "An Old Man's Winter Night" is all the more terrifying, because his loneliness is most probably the loneliness of his mind. As Frost says in "Desert Places,"

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars – on stars where no human race is
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places. (296)

The old man in the present poem is completely cut off from the outer world. In his senility he fancies that “all out - of - doors looked darkly in at him” (108). Age took away all his sensory powers, and also his sense of time and space. In short, he is “at a loss.” He is scared of night and all its dreadful sounds. His only companions in his loneliness are a lamp in his hand and the moon. The old man, then, forsaken by his kith and kin, and unable to keep a house or a farm of his own, spends a winter night in a desolated house, waiting for nothing but his own death. He reminds us that “Here is the common destiny of flesh” (Arnold 78).

Even a casual reading reveals that the poem is replete with images of darkness, night, winter and sleep. These images, according to Emerson, are very much associated with Buddhism. In a journal entry for Dec. 1842, he wrote that “this remorseless Buddhism lies all around threatening with death and night.” He adds that “every thought, every enterprise, every sentiment has its ruin in this horrid
infinite which circles us and awaits our dropping into it." And again, in April 1843, he associated Buddhism with "winter, night, sleep," and viewed it as a dark void of "chaos" drawing the individual towards the oblivion of "trances, raptures, abandonment, ecstasy" (qtd. in Rudy 102).

Frost's poem, "The Trial by Existence," wins the special attention of a student of Buddhism for the ideas it expresses about man's choice and acceptance of a life of suffering, and also about the question of death and rebirth. Paradise offers the heroic souls "wide fields of asphodel forever," but they reject the offer and come forward to accept whole-heartedly a rebirth in the world which means "the trial by existence, the obscuration upon earth." It is significant to note that the choice of an earthly existence, ridden with sorrows and sufferings, is made by the heroic souls themselves, and not by any external force: "That life has for us on the wrack / Nothing but what we somehow chose" (21). Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant remarks that this was "Frost's affirmative answer to sorrow, death, and human tragedy as early as his teens" (332). Jean Gould in his biography of Frost describes how this idea of the choice of suffering came to the poet. He says:

Long ago in Lawrance the lines came to him "That life has for us on the wrack / Nothing but what we somehow chose," though we lack the memory of our choosing; he
could recall the exact spot, a few blocks from school, when he was walking to meet a friend, that those lines had come to him by themselves.

Gould also points out that “Many times [Frost] had thought of them since — whatever life had them in store; the good, the bad, the joyous, the sad — all of it was in the realm of human choice, conscious or unconscious” (270). Frost thus attained, in the words of Sergeant, “the mature psychological perception — not always learnt by human beings in a life-time — that we are not merely pawns of fate; in some sense we ‘choose’ our way, even if unconsciously and unaware of it at the time of choice” (332).

This idea of man’s choice of his own life approximates with the Buddhist idea, as expressed by Humphreys, that “every man is the moulder and the sole creator of his life to come, and master of his destiny.” Humphreys adds that “As it is man who suffers, so it is man who generates the cause, and having done so he cannot flee the consequences” (Buddhism 101). Says The Dhammapada: “By oneself evil is done; by oneself one suffers” (Mascaro 59). The Dhammapada also states that “Neither in the sky, nor deep in the ocean, nor in a mountain-cave nor anywhere, can a man be free from the evil he has done” (53). The Buddhists thus replace Nemesis and Providence, Destiny and Fate with the natural law that a man moulds his future hour by hour through his thoughts, words and deeds. In the words
of an old jingle: “Sow a thought, reap an act; / Sow an act, reap a habit; / Sow a habit, reap a character; / Sow a character, reap a destiny” (qtd. in Humphreys, Buddhism 102).

An understanding of the Buddhist law of Karma leads to self-reliance, and it will prevent us from turning with the weakness of a child to a man-made God. Says Humphreys: “Karma is no God, for the Gods themselves are subject to its sway. Only the ignorant personify Karma and attempt to bribe, petition or cajole it; wise men understand it and conform to it” (Buddhism 103). Frost’s views on self-reliance seems to coincide with this aspect of the Buddhist law of Karma. Like the Buddhists, the poet was always opposed to the idea that man’s fate is determined by any outward forces; he was fully convinced of man’s role in moulding and improving his destiny. Thus says Elaine Barry about Frost’s views on Frost’s self-reliance:

At a time when naturalism with its philosophy of pessimistic determinism had a strong foothold in American literature, Frost refused to admit that man’s fate might be determined by such factors as heredity and environment. His concepts of individualism and self-reliance were as strong as Emerson’s, though more existential, more grounded in the idea that man not only improves himself, but actually creates himself, defines himself, through taking on a “trial.” (Robert Frost 109)
The heroic souls in “The Trial by Existence” chose a life of suffering on earth and gladly gave up paradise, because, according to the poet, they “discerned” “some good” in it. But the poet does not make clear what this “some good” is in the world of suffering. Perhaps, the poet is baffled by this paradox in life. Whether or not there is a good design or purpose behind man’s tragic existence is an intriguing question in Buddhism as well. An early Buddhist poet bursts out in anger:

He who has eyes can see the sickening sight;
Why does not Brahma set his creatures right?
If his wide power no limits can restrain,
Why is his hand so rarely spread to bless?
Why are his creatures all condemned to pain?
Why does he not all give happiness?
Why do fraud, lies and ignorance prevail?
Why triumphs falsehood – truth and justice fail?
(Qtd. in Radhakrishnan, *The Dhammapada* 110)

Buddhism, however, reaches the conclusion that suffering is benevolent for man in that it annihilates his ego-centric-desires and makes him “an essential man.” Says Humphreys: “In the fires of suffering, false desires are finally consumed, and from the ashes rises purified, the essential man” (The Middle Way 73). Humphreys adds that adversities destroy pride of man, which is the main barrier between man and his redemption. In his words, “When pride is slain, and the feet of the pilgrim washed in the blood of the heart, the
gates of enlightenment swing open to receive the conqueror" (73). Annie Besant also expresses the same view on the use of suffering. She says: "[T]he same soul takes the pain in hand as a sculptor might take chisel, and within this instrument of pain he strikes out his own personality, for he knows that it were not for this personality which is selfish he would not feel the pain at all" (16). So, what one suffers from is his ego, and the way out of suffering is the annihilation of this ego; further, the more one suffers, the more his ego shatters and the more he grows matured in mind. In The Problem of Pain, C. S. Lewis says:

I have seen great beauty of spirit in some who are great sufferers. I have seen men, for the most part, grow better not worse with the advancing years, and I have seen the last illness produce treasures of fortitude and meekness from most unpromising subjects. (96)

In "The Trial by Existence" Frost also seems to hold the same view that suffering is an effective tool to destroy the ego. The final stanza of the poem says:

That life has for us on the wrack
Nothing what we somehow chose;
Thus are we wholly stripped of pride
In the pain that has but one close,
Bearing it crushed and mystified. (21)
“The Trial by Existence” is all the more interesting to a student of Buddhism for the questing it raises about rebirth. Humphreys points out that the Buddhist law of Karma involves the element of time. According to him, it is unreasonable to hold that all the causes generated in an average life will produce their full effect before the last day of that period (103). So the effect continues in renewed births, and these renewed births of self-hood are the cause of suffering, old age, sickness and death. Erich Fromm explains that in Buddhism birth is not one act; it is a process; it continues till one is “fully born,” which means “to develop one’s awareness, one’s reason, one’s capacity to love, to such a point that one transcends one’s ego-centric involvement and arrives at a new harmony, at a new oneness with the world” (30). A Buddhist reading of “The Trial by Existence” gives one the impression that the heroic souls in the poem are motivated to be born once again in the world of suffering by their inner urge to be “fully born,” in the Buddhist sense of the term.

Frost’s philosophy of suffering includes his terrifying experiences as well. When Lionel Trilling called Frost “a terrifying poet,” he meant, as the critic himself clarified, that Frost is a tragic poet (156-157). As James L. Potter points out, “There are moments and occasions when he depicts them [men] not as unrealistic and self-centred but also as destructive and even cruel.” Potter continues:
A few of his best known poems, though, as well as some of his less familiar ones, are aimed at the resentfulness, the greediness, the anger of men, and at their violence in an apparently godless universe. (117)

These poems include "Design," "Vanishing Red," "The Code," "The Witch of the Coos" and so on, and they can be termed "poems of terror." Among these "poems of terror," perhaps the most remarkable one is "Design," a sonnet which deals with the universal theme of violence and brutality. Here Frost gives a gruesome picture of a dimpled spider on a white heal-all, "holding up a moth like a white piece of rigid satin cloth"(302). The snow-drop spider, the white flower and the white moth with dead wings constitute a pattern of brutality and destruction. They are "like the ingredients of a witch's broth." Both the spider and the moth, the killer and the killed, are, according to the poet, "assorted characters of death and blight." Together they form "a design of darkness to appall." This miniature world of death and destruction baffles the poet, and he wonders whether it is the common design of the universe.

A Buddhist scholar would like to see this poem as an expression, though not conscious, of the Buddhist "dukkha" with all its manifold meaning and significance. Christmas Humphreys explains, as we have already seen, that the Pali word "dukkha" covers all that we understand by pain, ill and disease both physical
and mental, and that the word includes such minor forms of as disharmony, discomfort, irritation and friction (*Buddhism* 81). In the present poem there is the suffering of the moth; there is the violence of the spider, and again there is the discomfort and disharmony which cause violence and suffering. “This is the kind of poem,” Frost said revealingly, “that I am never sure of because (I think it’s) too observing” (qtd. in Cook, *A Living Voice* 263). What Frost meant, according to Reginald Cook, was that “his observation in this instance took him into darker areas than was customary” (263). Most probably, the “dark areas” indicate life’s tragic and bitter experiences.

Thomas Mc Clanahan maintains that design in this poem of Frost is nothing but chaos. He says:

Schematically, one can see that if the “if/then” proposition means anything at all, it is that design (D) and the design of darkness (chaos ©) are one and the same. The argument of the poem — if design governs, then design of darkness(chaos) governs — can be schematised as D>C. Applying the rule of contraposition the conclusion reduces to — C > — D. Therefore, if it is ‘not’ the case that chaos rules, then it is also ‘not’ the case that design rules. (117)

So one of the themes in the poem is chaos in the microcosm which, of course, reflects in the macrocosm too; and in order to convey this theme effectively Frost adopts the strategy to confound
the readers rather than to resolve the complex issues raised in the poem. With this intention, it seems, Frost changed the conventional pattern of sonnet form. Says Dorothy Judd Hall, “Instead of the conventional sonnet formula, propound / resolve, the strategy [in the poem] appears to be: ‘propound / confound’ ”(Robert Frost 70-71).

Reginald Cook draws our attention to some of the questions in the poem which confound the readers. In his words,

Why, in effect, is there this “design of darkness to appall?” Why do we find in the small world intimations of evil? Is He willing to prevent evil, but not able? As Epicurus of deity. Then He is impotent. Is He able but not willing? When then is evil? (A Living Voice 267)

Dorothy Judd Hall adds one more question: “What directive force, if any, ‘steered’ the moth to its doom, at the hands of its kith-or-’kindred’ spider? (By implication, what or who engineered this moribund plot?)” (Robert Frost 70).

A Buddhist scholar recalls that almost similar questions baffled the sensitive mind of young Siddhartha in his formative years. Edwin Arnold writes about it in The Light of Asia:

....[L]ooking deep, he saw
The thorns which grow upon the rose of life:
How the swart peasant sweated for his wage,
Toiling for leave to live; and how he urged
The great eyed oxen through the flaming hours, 
Goading their velvet flanks; then marked he, too 
How lizard fed on ant, and snake on him 
And kite on both; and how the fish-hawk robbed 
The fish-tiger of that which it had seized; 
The shrike chasing the bulbul, which did hunt 
The jewelled butterflies; till every where 
Each slew a slayer and in turn was slain 
Life living upon death. So the fair show 
Veiled one vast, savage, grim conspiracy 
Of mutual murder, from the worm to man, 
Who himself kills his fellow.... (emphasis added) (25)

Frost’s poem “Design” urges the readers to think about the poet’s attitude towards violence. The poet seems to have realised, like young Siddhartha, that violence is an inevitable part of existence. This is made clear in his yet another poem, “The Flood,” where the poet says:

Blood has been harder to dam back than water 
Just when we think we have it impounded safe 
Behind new barrier walls (and let it chafe!) 
It breaks away in some new kind of slaughter. (254)

According to the poet, blood is not let loose by the devil, as most of us would like to say: “But power of blood itself releases blood.” The blood finds release both in “The weapons of war and implements of peace.” It is a “tidal wave” which “leaves summits stained.” The poem concludes with this observation: “Oh, blood will
out. It cannot be contained” (255). The poet then reconciles himself to the reality of violence with an air of resignation. “Once by the Pacific” is another poem which again illustrates Frost’s acquaintance with the violence of our time. Here the storm is an effective symbol of violence and destruction. It threatens to consume the world within no time. The poet says: “It looked as if a night of dark intent /Was coming, and not only a night, an age” (250). Norman H. Holland speaks about the poem as follows: “As I put the poem together for myself, I respond most immediately to its violence, to words like ‘rage,’ ‘din,’ or the menacing phrase, ‘dark intent’ ” (16). “The night of dark intent” and especially the “age” of “dark intent,” according to Doyle, “suggests a concern for human affairs far beyond the effects of one storm” (173). However, the poet is not pessimistic about the survival of man in this age of “dark intent.” He exhorts men to be prepared for rage. Doyle observes that “In its crucial position, ‘prepared’ is one of the most important words of the poem: man must be ‘prepared’ to stand solidly against violent force in some frightening form” (174). Man gets the courage and confidence to face the disaster from the irrefutable fact that “There would be more than ocean-water broken / Before God’s last ‘put out the light’ was spoken” (250). The poet perhaps implies that violence and destruction of the age, however dreadful they are, cannot completely destroy the world. Frost thus declares his faith in the survival of
mankind in this world in spite of the various threats of its extermination by violence and aggression.

One can see that in “Design” Frost does not either approve or disapprove of violence. Both the spider and the moth, the killer and the killed, seem to win the poet’s love and sympathy. The poet, for instance, describes the spider as “dimpled” and “fat,” and these words, as everybody knows, are commonly used to address young children affectionately. Similarly, the poet’s love and regard for the moth is revealed in his comparison of it to “a white piece of rigid satin cloth.” This ambivalent attitude of Frost to violence is clear in another poem, “The Rabbit Hunter.” The poet here does not hate or blame the hunter who causes the death of a hare. The hunter, careless and still, “lurks /With the gun depressed / Facing alone the alder swamps” which are “Ghastly snow-white” (360). His hound works “like one possessed” and brings him on “The shadowy hare / For him to rend / And deal a death.” The death is mystery to the victor as well as to the victim, and also to the poet. He says: “That [death] he nor it / (Nor I) have wit / To comprehend” (360).

Like young Siddhartha who saw beneath the “fair show” of life, the “vast, savage, grim conspiracy of mutual murder” (Arnold 25), Frost also seems to recognise the universal violence and destruction in the diabolic drama called life. The spider in “Design” and the
hunter in “The Rabbit Hunter” are, of course, the present victors, and
the moth and the hare the present victims; but tomorrow their roles
may be reversed. In this unintelligible world of violence and
brutality, the weak and the strong alike deserve pity and
compassion, because “Every where each slew a slayer and in turn
was slain, life living upon death” (Arnold 25).

Frost’s attitude to violence often baffled the readers. There were
many occasions when Frost was reported to have spoken in defence
of violence. For instance, James L. Potter points out:

Frost was no stranger to the notion of violence in
general. He was not intrinsically opposed to war; he felt
that United States should remain strong militarily even
long after world war II was over, and despite the loss of
friends as Edward Thomas in world war I, he
acknowledged that he found a certain amount of
enjoyment in the excitement of that war. (119)

This does not, however, mean that Frost was callous and
indifferent to the sufferings of the victims of violence. In fact, his
heart overflowed with pity and compassion for the weak and the
suffering like that of the Buddha who said, “I, Buddha, who wept
with all my brother’s tears, / Whose heart was broken by a whole
world’s woe” (Arnold 210). Frost’s two poems, “To A Moth Seen in
Winter” and “A Considerable Speck” prove it. The moth in the first
poem seeks shelter in the “gloveless hand” of the speaker in winter time. The speaker knows the agony of the moth, and expresses his pity, but at the same time he is aware of the fact that he can not save its life. He tells the moth,

But go, you are right. My pity cannot help. 
Go till you wet your pinions and are quenched. 
You must be made more simply wise than I 
To know the hand I stretch impulsively 
Across the gulf of well-nigh everything 
May reach to you, but cannot touch your fate. 
I cannot touch your life, much less can save 
Who am asked to save my own a little awhile. (355-356)

Even in the microscopic creatures Frost sees a display of mind, and his heart goes out for them. This forms the central theme of his poem, “A Considerable Speck.” Once a speck creeps into the speaker’s manuscript while he was writing. “It ran with terror and with cunning crept.” The speaker permits the speck to lie there till it slept. Then he says,

I have a mind myself and recognise 
Mind when I meet with it in any guise. 
No one can know how glad I am to find 
On any sheet the least display of mind. (358)

However, Frost makes it clear that his love is distinct from the “collectivist regimenting love” of the modern world. In his words,
"I have none of the tenderer-than-thou / Collectivist regimenting love / With which the modern world is being swept" (357).

It is obvious that Frost's love and compassion for the suffering is not based on socialistic ideology of universal brotherhood, but on his own realisation that every living creature is a projection of his own mind. In short, Frost's love for even the meanest creatures grows out of his identification with them. This identification teaches him that life is precious for creatures, however small they are. The speck in the poem is a microscopic creature; still it expresses its desire to live. The poet says: "It seemed too tiny to have room for feet / Yet must have had a set of them complete / To express how much it did not want to die" (357). Therefore, the big creatures should look upon the small creatures with pity which alone can make peaceful co-existence a reality in the world. In this context a Buddhist scholar recalls the following lines from The Light of Asia:

.... [the Buddha] spake
Of life, which all can take but none can give
Life which all creatures love and strive to keep
Wonderful, dear, and pleasant unto each
Even to the meanest; yea, a boon to all,
Where pity is, for pity makes the world
Soft to the weak and noble for the strong. (Arnold 131)

Frost's love and compassion was not confined to the animal kingdom alone; it extended to the plant kingdom too. His short
poem, “Lodged” can be cited as the best example to this point. Here is the poem:

The rain to the wind said,
“you push and I will pelt
They so smote the garden bed
That the flowers actually knelt
And lay lodged – though not dead
I know how the flowers felt. (250)

The last line clearly indicates how much the poet shared the sufferings of the victims of cruelty around him. He could even feel the pain and agony of the flowers when they knelt and lay lodged on the ground. The most important thing is that he felt as they felt.

One can argue that this kind of identification with things and persons becomes possible for the poet as he can cut across the barriers of his self and see into the life of others. Stephen Bachelor, a Buddhist ecologist, observes:

When we dissolve the rigid boundaries of the self we inevitably reveal our connection with, and mutual dependence upon, other things. And when this insight breaks through in our hearts, it expresses itself as compassion and love. (31-39)

The Buddhists hold that all things in nature are intimately connected with each other. The Chinese Buddhists called this the
doctrine of the "mutual interpenetration and interfusion of all phenomena" (Martine Bachelor 12). Stephen Bachelor states that according to this doctrine every thing in the universe is literally dependent upon every thing else, that nothing stands alone, and that every thing is linked together through time and space (36). Uisang, a Buddhist monk from Korea, put it in these lines of verse:

In one is all, in many is one
One is identical to all, many is identical to one
In one particle of dust are contained the ten directions
And it is with all particles of dust.
(qtd. in Martine Bachelor 11)

Stephen Bachelor states that the eighteenth century Indian Buddhist poet Shantideva evoked this sense of universal sympathy with his image of life as a single organism, like a cosmic body. For just as the hand reaches out to a foot that is in pain, so does the enlightened person reach out in sympathy to those who are suffering. Insight into the interpenetration of all things transforms our immediate relationship with those around us, making it simply impossible to stand by with indifference and watch the world go up in flames. In a sense, the realisation of interdependence of life is a painful one. No longer can we remain comfortably insulated by the illusion of our separate selfhood. At this point compassion stops being the deliberate doing of good, it becomes an instinctive urge. “Although one acts in this way for others,” remarks Shantideva,
“there is no sense of conceit or amazement.” He adds that “It is just like feeding oneself; one hopes for nothing in return”(37).

The poems of Issa, given below, expresses the idea very clearly that even the smallest of the small things are an integral part of our life and existence:

Buddha law
Shining
In leaf dew.

Fireflies
Entering my house
Don’t despise it.

Clouds of mosquitoes –
It would be bare
Without them. (Stryk and Ikemoto 100)

So Buddhism recognises that in this vast universe all creatures, big and small, have a role to play, and that they complement each other. Therefore, it is essential for these creatures to live in peaceful co-existence for their survival and mutual welfare. “Karuna” or compassion is the most sublime virtue that is needed to bring about peace and harmony.

A student of Buddhism feels that Frost’s pity, love and compassion for the moth, the speck and the fallen flower in the
poems cited above bears resemblance to the Buddhist love and compassion which, as we have already seen, is based on the doctrine of “mutual interpenetration and interfusion of all phenomena.” It is, therefore, difficult to believe that the poet spoke in support of violence. Perhaps, he just recognised the reality that practical life is impossible without violence. Even Mahatma Gandhi, the great votary of “Ahimsa,” admits that worldly existence demands violence. He says:

We are helpless mortals in the conflagration of “himsa.” The saying that life lives on life has a deep meaning in it. Man cannot for a moment live without consciously or unconsciously committing outward ‘himsa’. . . [H]e can never overcome entirely free form outward ‘himsa’. . . [S]o long as he continues to be a social being, he cannot but participate in the ‘himsa’ that every existence of society involves. (264)

It seems that the Buddha also took for granted the reality that violence cannot be completely done away with from social life. B.R.Ambedkar points out that the Buddha nowhere gave any definition of Ahimsa. One has, therefore, to spell out his intention from circumstantial evidence. “The first circumstantial evidence on the point,” says Ambedkar, “is that the Buddha had no objection to eating meat if it was offered to him as part of his alms” (346). According to Ambedkar, the Buddha resisted the opposition of
Devadatta who insisted that the monks should be prohibited from eating meat given to them by way of alms (346). It is also said that the Buddha died of indigestion caused by eating boar’s flesh, a special meal, served to him by a blacksmith named Chundaka. E.J. Thomas speaks about this event thus: “What the food was that Buddha ate at his last meal is disputed, but the oldest commentators definitely take it to have been soft boar’s flesh” (84). Thomas quotes “The Mahaparinibbana,” which describes the Buddha’s last meal, to prove his point:

So Chunda the smith the next day caused to be prepared in his house excellent food hard and soft and much soft boar’s flesh, ... On arrival [the Buddha] sat on the appointed seat, and said to Chunda the smith, “Serve me, Chunda, with the soft boar’s flesh that has been prepared, and serve the retinue of monks with the other hard and soft food prepared”.... Then the lord addressed Chunda, the smith, “The boar’s flesh that remains bury in the pit. I see no one in the world of Gods and men, with Mara, Brahma, with ascetics and brahmins, Gods and men, by whom it could be eaten and properly digested, except by the Tathagata. (86)

Being a pragmatic reformer, the Buddha could not but approve of the material requirements of the people of his time. A man whose philosophy of life was rooted in the hard facts of life could not have acted otherwise. It was indeed his awareness of the people’s material
requirements that prompted the Buddha to preach the doctrine of "Ahimsa." As Ram Sharan Sharma points out, the indiscriminate killing of cattle affected adversely the agricultural economy in the Buddha's time, and for the survival of the society it had to be restrained. Says Sharma:

The use of iron tools made possible clearance, agriculture and large settlements. The agriculture economy based on the iron ploughshare required the use of bullocks and it could not flourish without animal husbandry. But the Vedic practice of killing cattle indiscriminately in sacrifices stood in the way of the progress of new agriculture. The cattle wealth slowly decimated because the cows and the bullocks were killed in numerous Vedic sacrifices. The tribal people living on the southern and eastern fringes of Magadha also killed cattle for food. But if the new agrarian economy had to be stable, this killing had to be stopped. (73)

Thus one realises that the Buddha’s doctrine of “Ahimsa” was the need of the hour – a pragmatic way of saving the economy of the time. Further, one feels that the Buddha’s doctrine of “Ahimsa” is more psychological than moral or ethical. That is, while propounding the doctrine of “Ahimsa,” it seems that the Buddha was more concerned with the inward “himsa” than with the physical one. Following this psychological attitude to “himsa,” the Buddhists in
general hold that it is the mind which generates violence. Says Humphreys:

The will to violence which causes war, the desire to dominate the thoughts and acts of others, is in the mind of others who generate it, partly conscious and largely unconscious; in the last case all the more potent for being unrecognised. *(The Buddhist Way* 63)

J. Krishnamurthy ² endorses this view when he says that “The source of violence is the ‘me,’ the ego, the self which expresses it in so many ways – in divisions, in trying to become or be somebody (74).

In “Design” Frost also seems to be more concerned with the psychological violence, or in the words of Reginald Cook, with the “psychological darkness in the moral condition of man” (268). What thus “appalls” the poet as well as the readers in the poem is not the physical violence, but the psychological one. It is easy to work out an intellectual or rational explanation for the outward violence; still it will continue to exist until its original cause, namely man’s ego-centric desires, is rooted out from his mind. So a solution to the problem of violence lies in the moral and psychological approach to it, and not in any rational or intellectual deliberations. This is what Frost seems to highlight in “Design”; and a Buddhist applauds it.
In “The Draft Horse” also Frost seems to deal with what Reginald Cook calls “the psychological darkness in the moral condition of man.” The poet, for instance, is silent about the physical identity of the killer of the horse. The speaker just assumes that the killer is a man. As Robert Pack maintains, “It might as well be an angel or a devil or the speaker’s own guilty fantasy” (19). Similarly, the motive of the killing is also enigmatic. All this and more indicate that the poet is least bothered about the physical violence in the poem, and in this matter he deliberately keeps the readers in the dark. The reader is also caught by the enshrouding darkness in the poem which, according to Dorothy Judd Hall, “is an acquiescence to the symbolic darkness enshrouding man.” The journey of the couple is, in the critic’s view, “an excursion in the dead of night” (346). Their’s is an unspecified journey; we do not know whether the couple are leaving home, or returning home. Their journey can be taken as a journey into their own minds. We are told that their journey takes them “Through a pitch-dark limitless grove.” A student of Buddhism knows that grove is often used in Buddhism as symbol of desires. For example, The Dhammapada says: “Cut Down the (whole) forest, not tree (only); danger comes out of the forest. Having cut down both the forest and desire, O mendicants, do you attain freedom (Radhakrishnan 148-149).
The journey takes the couple not only through the grove of desires, but also through the night air filled with hate:

The most unquestioning pair
That ever accepted fate
And the least disposed to ascribe
Any more than we had to hate, (444)

A Buddhist scholar can argue that the desires of the couple combined with their hatred brings about the violence in the poem. One feels that the couple are actively involved in the murder, because they do not complain to any one about the killing of their horse. Sohn and Tyre say: “[The couple] do not trouble themselves over why such a disaster should befall them, but accept it as if they had expected something like this to happen” (61). Precisely, violence is in their minds.

Coming back to “Design,” one feels that it is not without significance that Frost made a spider the protagonist in the poem which deals with the universal problem of violence. The picture of the evil white spider, according to Elizabeth Shepley sergeant, can be compared with the imagery of wheel of thread in the foreground of a battlefield, described in “Range-Finding” (189). She adds:

I have come to feel that the web of strings is one of Frost’s most characteristic poetic and metaphoric figures. Death was present in both these poems.
Perhaps the web as Frost uses it is symbolically the web of life itself. All the poems in which it is found seems to have something deeply fateful about them. (189)

A Buddhist scholar recalls the following passage in *The Dhammapada* in which men of sensual pleasures are compared to a spider. Her is the passage:

Those who are slaves to passions follow the stream (of craving) as a spider the web which he has made himself. Wise people when they have cut this (craving), leave the world, free from cares, leaving all sorrow behind. (Radhakrishnan 167)

Radhakrishnan offers his comment on this passage:

As a spider, after having made its thread-web, sits in the middle, and after killing with a violent rush a butterfly or a fly which has fallen in its circle, drinks its juice, returns and sits again in the same place, in the same manner, creatures who are given to passions, depraved by hatred and maddened by wrath, run along the stream of thirst which they have made themselves and cannot cross it. (167)

The spider is then the aggressor; and the web, which comes out of itself, represents his own cravings – a product of his mind which causes the destruction of others. The imagery of the spider and his web clearly illustrates the Buddhist view that sensuous
craving is the primary cause of violence and suffering. Says Humphreys:

Impelled verily by sensuous craving, attracted by sensuous craving, moved by sensuous craving, only out of vain craving, kings war with kings, princes with princes, priests with priests; citizens with citizens; the mother quarrels with the son, the son with the mother; the father with the son, the son with the father; brother quarrels with brother, brother with sister, sister with brother, friend with friend. Thus given to dissensions, quarrelling and fighting, they fall upon one another with stones, sticks and swords. And so they hasten toward death or deathly hurt. (The Wisdom of Buddhism 62-63)

By making a spider — a Buddhist symbol of both violence and sensual cravings — the protagonist in the poem “Design,” Frost, like the Buddhists, seems to recognise, either consciously or unconsciously, that ego-centric desires are the real causes of violence and suffering in the world.

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1 North, South, East, West; North-east, South-east, South-west, North-west; Zenith, Nadir [up and down].

2 J. Krishnamurthy’s penchant for Buddhist ideas is widely recognised. For instance, Fritjof Capra comments that the teachings of J. Krishnamurthy “were quite close to those of Buddhism,” though he never used any terms from Buddhism (26).