Chapter II

Anicca: The Theme of Change

The Buddha’s doctrine of “dukkha” is, in fact, based on his yet another important doctrine, namely, the doctrine of “anicca” (change). The doctrine of “anicca” provides a theoretical explanation for man’s suffering: it explains that everything in this world is impermanent and is subjected to change and decay; and therefore, those who adhere to the transient charms and allurements of life, are bound to suffer. The Buddha’s last farewell address to Ananda, his disciple, sums up the doctrine of “anicca,” and it is worth quoting in full:

Enough Ananda! Do not let yourself be troubled; do not weep! Have I not already on former occasions, told you that it is in the very nature of all things most near and dear unto us that we must divide ourselves from them? How, then, Ananda, can this be possible — whereas anything, whatever born brought into being, and organised, contain within itself, the inherent necessity of dissolution — how, then, can this be possible, that such a being should not be dissolved. No such conditions exist. (Coomaraswamy 142)

The doctrine of “anicca” suggests that life is “essentially and inevitably a process of rise and fall, waxing and waning, growth and
decay (Davids 187). According to Radhakrishnan, “anicca” is a “philosophy of dynamism.” He adds that Buddha formulated a philosophy of change, “impressed by the transitoriness of objects, the ceaseless mutation and transmutation of things” (Indian Philosophy 367). Radhakrishnan explains it further. For the Buddha, life is nothing but a series of manifestations of becoming and extinctions ("Patubhavo-uppado"). It is a stream of becoming. It is a recurring rotation of birth and death. Whatever be the duration of any state of being, whether it is as brief as a flash of lightening or as long as a millennium, yet all is becoming. All things change. The becoming of all that is, is the central fact of Buddhism. Absolute reality is not the property of anything on earth. “It is impossible that what is born should not die” ("Abhidharma kosavyakhya"). Whatever is subject to origination is subject also to destruction. Necessary and inexorable is the dying of all that is born. The difference is only in the degree of duration. Change is the stuff of reality. The world is only the transmitting of force. Uninterrupted change is the feature of conscious life. The living universe is a reflection of our mind. Each simple phenomenon is but a link in the chain, a transitory phase of evolution, and the several chains constitute the one whole, ‘dharma dhati’ or the spiritual universe (368).
An eloquent expression of this doctrine of change can be found in the words uttered by Sakka, the king of Gods, to the Buddha’s disciples who were in grief immediately after the Master’s death:

They’re transient all, each being’s parts and powers,
Growth is their very nature, and decay,
They are produced, they are dissolved again:
To bring them all into subjection – that is bliss.
(qtd. in Coomaraswamy 143)

Interestingly, change is a recurring theme in Frost’s poems, and it is already noticed by a number of critics. Philip L. Gerber observes that “Frost’s pages are soaked in mutability” (Robert Frost 139). According to Donald J. Greiner, Frost’s “‘age-long’ theme is mutability” (236). “The ebb and flow of Heraclitus,” says Elizabeth Isaccs, “seems to recur over and over as the man-poet Frost speaks” (43).

One can find that just as Buddha’s philosophy of “dukkha” takes its origin from his other doctrine of “anicca,” Frost’s tragic vision appears to emerge from his strong conviction that life is transient and transitory. Louis Mertin’s observation that “Death and tragedy became the alembic of change for Frost” reinforces this impression (226). Some of the biographical details of Frost, provided by Lawrance Thompson, once again endorse this view. Says Thompson:
The hungry zest for life accentuated the shadow of death which became reality for him in the early death of his father. Like so many before him, he found a new sadness in the painful recognition of transience wherever he looked. (*Fire and Ice* 179)

Manorama Trikha also speaks about the same incident in Frost’s life:

It was with the death of his father that Frost vaguely felt for the first time a sense of “obscuration upon earth” and the temporality of man’s existence. The loss with its unyielding memories and raw pain called up out of its depths of mind the most complicated of all the question — the question of existence; what does it mean to be? (*Poetry of Clarifications* 99)

So the seeds of Frost’s philosophy has to be sought in his recognition of the hard fact that life is essentially brief and evanescent. Dorothy Judd Hall is right when she maintains that Frost’s “concern with salvation arises from an intense awareness of material waste.” She adds: “I do not think that his interest in salvation was initially theological; it sprang, rather from his recurring wonder about the meaning of loss and about man’s struggle to stave it off” (*Robert Frost* 101).
Frost's preoccupation with the theme change is evident in his first published poem, "My Butterfly," which appeared in The Independent in 1894. The poem, which is an elegy on the death of a butterfly, introduces the theme of change in the opening lines themselves: "Thine emulous fond flowers are dead, too, / And the daft sun-assaualter, he / That frightened thee so oft, is fled or dead" (28). The poet remembers the glorious days of the butterfly:

Since first I saw thee glance,
With all thy dazzling other ones,
In airy dalliance,
Precipitate in love,
Tossed, tangled, whirled and whirled above,
Like a limp rose-wreath in a fairy dance. (28)

In those days the poet was glad both for the butterfly and for himself. But then neither the poet nor the butterfly knew "That fate had made thee for the pleasure of the wind" (29). It seemed to the poet that

.... God let thee flutter from his gentle clasp,
Then fearful He had let thee win
Too far beyond Him to be gathered in
Snatched thee, o'reager, with ungentle grasp. (29)

The butterfly is thus dead:

I found that wing broken today!
For thou art dead, I said,
And the strange birds say.
I found it with the withered leaves
Under the eves. (29)

The images here — like the dead flowers, withered leaves and broken wings — obviously focus on the transience of life, its joys and its beauty. In this elegy Frost seems to lament not only on the death of a butterfly, but also on the decay and change in nature and in man.

In “Pond of the Milkweed,” the poem which appears in Frost’s final volume, we get the descendants of the butterfly in his first poem. The butterflies which came to suck the honey of the milkweed, and also of the flowers of the plant, disappear all of a sudden, leaving behind a melancholic scene of decay and ruin, and the poet mourns: “Where have those flowers and butterflies all gone / That science may have staked the future on” (412). The poet learns with regret that “…waste was of the essence of the scheme” (412). The milkweed thus brings up to the poet’s very door “the theme of wanton waste in peace and war / As it has never been to me before” (411). In short, like Frost’s first poem, “Butterfly,” this poem in his last volume too depicts the transitoriness of life’s joy and beauty.

Another poem, “November,” is also remarkable for the catalogue it presents of the images of change and decay:

We saw leaves go to glory,
Then almost migratory
Go part way down the lane,
And then to end the story
Get beaten down and pasted
In one wild day of rain. (359)

The air itself reverberates with the voice of decay and death. "We heard 'Tis over’ roaring." "A year of leaves was wasted." Without being aware of this reality of change, "We make a boast of storing, of saving and of keeping".

But only by ignoring
The waste of moments sleeping
The waste of pleasure weeping,
But denying and ignoring
The waste of nations warring. (359-360)

According to Dorothy Judd Hall, “Coming out of a year of world conflict, 1938, 'November' builds to a climax in which war is a mournful extension of all that is profligate in nature" (Robert Frost 102).

Even a casual reader can find that change is one of the main themes in Frost's nature poems. Nina Baym remarks that to Frost the New England landscape reveals only nature's physical laws, especially "the grim laws of change and decay" (143). The critic points out that Frost's nature poems describe autumn and winter. These
poems, according to Nina Baym, convey mutability not only by their seasonal settings but also by their details which emphasise “the inevitable and ceaseless movement toward death — night fall, leaf fall, snow fall” (144). Philip L. Gerber also maintains that “spring and autumn scenes crowd [Frost’s] poems.” Gerber adds that the different seasons suggest birth, growth, death and regeneration; they remind man of life in death and death in life (Robert Frost 139). The poem, “Blueberries,” for instance, calls to mind the mystery of birth in death:

There may not have been the ghost of sign  
Of them anywhere under the shade of the pine,  
We get the pine out of the way, you may burn  
The pasture all over until not a fern  
Or grass-blade is left, not to mention a stick,  
And presto, they’re up all around you as thick,  
And hard to explain as a conjurer’s trick. (59)

Frost’s recognition of the cyclic change in nature, which makes man aware of his own state of flux, finds an elegant expression in the following lines from “In Hardwood Groves”:

Before the leaves can mount again  
To fill the trees with another shade,  
They must go down past things coming up  
They must go down into the dark decayed.

They must be pierced by flowers and put
Beneath the feet of the dancing flowers.
However it is in some other world
I know that this is the way in ours. (26)

"The Woodpile" and "Spring Pools" are two other nature poems of Frost which deal with the theme of change and decay. Donald J. Greiner points out that "In 'The Wood Pile' Frost links all humanity to 'the slow smokeless burning of decay' "(233). The poem provides a scene of destruction with its cord of maple abandoned to the process of decay of nature. But the decayed wood is not altogether worthless, surely, because it goes to build soil for the new. In short, the wood pile serves as compost for another cycle. And the process cannot be avoided. Frost seems to believe that decay or death in nature is just an illusion, because it ultimately ensures birth or regeneration.

"Spring pools" is, in the words of Frank Lentricchia, "a lament for the transience of precarious things" (91). The tiny forest pools and the flowers of spring growing beside them, both magnetising the poet's loving attention, enjoy only a precarious existence. The poem enlightens that decay is inevitable for progress and growth. Doyle speaks about the poem as follows:

The author is trying to dramatise the claim that summer comes into existence by destroying spring. On the next level, progress to maturity is made at the expense of youth, one part at the expense of another part, and one thing at the expense of another thing. (61)
A Buddhist scholar can easily find that Frost’s recognition of the cyclic change both in nature and in man evidently coincides with the Buddhist doctrine of “anicca” which upholds, more than anything else, the cyclic change in life. Says Christmas Humphreys:

Like all other natural process “anicca” also is cyclic. It is an ever — rolling wheel with four spokes — Birth, Growth, Decay and Death. Every form that comes into being goes through each stage in turn, and nought can stay the hand of time. (*Buddhism* 80-81)

The Buddhist idea of the cyclic change in life, expressed in *The Light of Asia*, is also worthy of our notice in this context:

Only, while turns this wheel invisible;
No pause, no peace, no staying place can be;
Who mounts may fall, who falls will mount; the spokes
Go round unceasingly. (*Arnold* 210)

For one who makes an attempt to read Frost’s poems in the light of the Buddhist doctrine of “anicca,” “The Lesson for Today” has a special significance. Here the poet professes that of late his chief concern is the transience of life. So he frequently visits the graves and tombstones to learn “how long a man may think to live.” He realises that the length of human life is unpredictable; it ranges “from hours to months and years and many many years.” Every thing is transitory — the individual life, life of the nation, life of
mankind and even the life of earth. In short, all worldly things are subject to decay and death.

We are all doomed to broken-off carriers
And so is the nation, so is the total race
The earth itself is liable to the fate
Of meaninglessly being broken off. (355)

The poet thus becomes conscious of the disintegration of things and persons; he recognises decay and destruction as an integral part of existence. "That Frost accepts human condition as imperfect and diminished seems clear enough," says Alfred R. Ferguson (429). The recognition and acceptance of the transitoriness of life is obviously an important aspect of Frost's tragic vision. Frost and the Buddha seems to meet here. Buddhism combines three important characteristics — suffering, impermanence, and non-egoity ("dukkha," "anicca," and "anatta"). The doctrine of "anicca" states that there is no finality or rest within the universe: there is only a ceaseless becoming and never-ending change. Life is like an ever rolling wheel with four spokes - Birth, Growth, Decay and Death. Humphreys explains the doctrine:

The law of change applies to all compound things, including man made objects, ideas and institutions. From a granite cathedral to a chinese vase, from a code of laws to an empire, all things rise to their zenith, and
then however slowly, decay towards the inevitable end.

(Buddhism 80)

The lines, "We are all doomed to broken-off careers....Of meaninglessly being broken off," definitely echo the Buddhist doctrine of change. According to Randall Jarrell, Frost's tragic vision is based on his understanding that life "wears away into death" ("Tenderness and Passiveness" 113). In reality we live not in an unchanging paradise, but in a world of change and decay. The acceptance of this reality is a sign of maturity, and Frost shows this kind of maturity by embracing the opposites like life and death, and growth and decay in the same spirit. Says Alfred R. Ferguson:

Though Frost is not transcendental as was Whitman, urging us to see the possibilities of 'lovely and smoothing death,' he does link death and life as part of the process of the whole. (429)

The realisation that life is tragic and it is also transitory does not, however, make Frost sentimental or pessimistic. His inclination is to scoff at tears. He ridicules the Elegy-writers with contempt. Instead of indulging in sentimentalism, Frost accepts his 'incompleteness' as a reality of life. This brings to our mind a remark Frost once made: "I am prepared for any sadness in the structure of the universe" (qtd. in Thompson and Winnick 41). On his death bed Frost wrote to his daughter, Lesley: "Life has been a long trial yet I mean to see more of
it" (qtd. in Thompson, Letters of Robert Frost 596). Frost thus kept his cool in the face of suffering, and refused to drown in the pit of grief. Says Elizabeth Jenning:

What is most noticeable in all Frost's reflective poems is an almost total absence of despair or pessimism; it is not that he shuns darkness or difficulties - quite the reverse - but rather that something in his own mind and imagination makes him eager to accept, to examine, and sometimes to reconcile opposites. (93)

Frost's readiness to accept and reconcile the opposites is reflected in his statement in the poem "The Lesson for Today" that "I had a lover's quarrel with the world" (355). The poet is fully aware of the fact that life is tragic and transient; he believes in the doctrine of "Memento Mori." He visits the graves to learn about man's transitory existence which has become his concern of late. Nevertheless, the poet is not daunted by life's transitoriness; whereas, he loves it with all its complexities and contradictions. Frost prescribes the line "I have a lover's quarrel with the world" as the epitaph for his tombstone, and therefore we can assume that this line sums up his philosophy of life and that the poem as a whole is a manifesto of his faith.

A Buddhist student has reasons to feel that in the positive acceptance of life with all its miseries and sufferings Frost comes
close to the Buddha. Though Buddhism is essentially a philosophy of suffering it does not encourage pessimism. Says the Buddha: “Such is the way of the world: decay and death. Because the world know this, they do not let themselves be cast down with grief (Allen, *Buddha’s Words* 12). Radhakrishnan elaborates this point as follows:

Buddha does not preach the worthlessness of life or resignation to an inevitable doom. His is not a doctrine of despair. He asks us to revolt against evil and attain a life of finer quality, an arhata. (*Indian Philosophy* 365)

So the Buddhists love life for its “finer quality,” while they fight against its evils. One can find that this love and hate relationship to life is characteristic of Frost’s philosophy too which invokes us “how to be unhappy yet polite.”

No other single poem of Frost expresses the mutability and transience of life so poignantly and precisely as “Nothing Gold Can Stay.” The title itself conveys the central theme: all things change, and all are impermanent. It is not that gold “does” not stay; it is that it “cannot” stay. In addition to implying that nothing can endure, “stay” implies that nothing can remain as it was. Stasis and perfection have no place in our human, mortal world. Process is
inevitable, not only to the world as a whole, but to every individual being.

The most dominant image in the poem is gold. Gold, precious and permanent as a metal, is considered here as a colour. And it is an illusion. The opening line of the poem, "Nature's first green is gold," clearly suggests it. The golden colour cannot hold for long. It is evanescent as wealth itself. It will soon change to green. The idea of mutability is further emphasised in the second couplet. Here it is in terms of leaf and flower instead of green and gold. The earliest leaf unfolds its beauty like a flower. But in spite of its appearance, it is leaf instead of flower. Here leaf is reality and flower an illusion. The leaf exists in disguise only for a moment. Then it moves on to its true state as leaf.

The two striking images in the first four lines of the poem — gold and flower — truly represent the dazzling, but evanescent beauty of life. Their outward charm is deceptive. It leads the worldly men ultimately to disillusionment and despair. The apparent gold in the poem shifts to green; apparent flower subsides to leaf. The hue of gold with all its richness and splendour cannot be preserved. Nor can flower, delicate and evanescent in its beauty, last long. Hence we are touched by melancholy when gold changes to green and flower changes to leaf.
One recalls Yashodhara’s dream before Siddhartha’s renunciation which reassures her about the evanescence of worldly wealth and beauty, represented by gold and flowers. She narrates the dream to Siddhartha as follows:

And sleeping still I rose, and sleeping saw
Thy belt of pearls, tied here below my breasts,
Change to a stinging snake; my ankle rings
Fall off, my golden bangles part and fall;
The jasmines in my hair wither to dust;
While this our bridal couch sank to the ground,
And something rent the crimson purdah down:
(emphasis added) (Arnold 91)

Yashodhara’s “golden bangles part and fall,” and “the jasmines in [her] hair wither to dust.” It is a moment of realisation for her of the impermanence of wealth and beauty. She says: “Then far away I heard the white bull low, / And far away the embroidered banner flap, / And once again that cry, ‘The time is come!’” (91). It is high time that the thinking men realised the mutability of worldly wealth and beauty. “The time is come.” Those who do not heed this call are sure to suffer.

Those who study the poem, “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” cannot ignore the changes that Frost introduced in its first draft. Among these changes the most important one seems to be in the sixth and seventh lines. These lines in the first draft which read as “In autumn
she achieves / A still more golden blaze” were later substituted by “So Eden sank to grief / So dawn goes down to day” (Mertins 218). The change serves to focus on the central theme of the poem — the transitoriness of life. Eden being the symbol of all the happiness and pleasures of life, its loss signifies the loss of all the material and other comforts of man. According to Judith Oster, “‘Eden Sank to Grief’ reminds us that among other ‘griefs’ caused by loss of Eden is the major grief of death and loss which no one can escape” (224-225). So the poet obviously implies that man’s happiness depending on material comforts, cannot last; and death, the ultimate reality, causes the greatest of all miseries. A Buddhist remembers that this greatest wisdom was taught by Siddhartha to Yashodhara, and through her to the whole mankind, 2500 years ago:

Nay, though we locked up love and life with lips
So close that night and day our breaths grew one,
Time would thrust in between to filch away
My passion and thy grace, as black night steals
The rose - gleams from yon peak, which fade to grey
And are not seen to fade. (Arnold 64-65)

The process of change is reinforced in the next altered line of the poem: “So dawn goes down to day.” Here the pattern of the poem is assured: the transformation is no transformation to be mourned. Our human experience makes us aware that dawn is tentative, lovely
but incomplete and evanescent. We know that dawn does not “go down” to day, but comes up into the satisfying warmth of sunlight and full life. The reader then accepts the Edenic sinking into grief as a rise into a larger life.

The idea that change does not mean destruction is not new to the Buddhists. They believe that there is no such thing as destruction in the manifested universe. Death and birth are the two sides of the same coin. The change that seems to destroy gives new form and shape to life. Edwin Arnold expresses this Buddhist idea of cyclic transformation of destruction and regeneration in the following lines:

Lo! As hid seed shoots after rainless years,  
So good and evil, pains and pleasures, hates  
And lovers, and all dead leaves, come forth again  
Bearing bright leaves or dark, sweet fruit or sour

Frost will perhaps certify this Buddhist idea of cyclic nature of transformation. As Alfred R. Ferguson points out,

To Frost the bud is no more significant than the ripe fruit; indeed stasis usually seems far less valuable than process. Obstacles, guilt, choice, death and decay are proper segments of earthly experience. For Frost as for Edgar in ‘King Lear’, wisdom is knowing that ripeness is all. (441)
“In Nothing Gold Can Stay” Frost expresses not only the melancholy of transitory beauty, but an affirmation of the reality that change is an essential part of existence. In the words of Alfred R. Ferguson again, “The substance, the sinking, the going down is, by the logic of the poem, a blessed increase if we are to follow the cycle of flower, leaf, bud, fruit, into the full life that includes loss, grief and change” (440).

In his analysis of the poem, “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” Doyle observes that Frost’s acceptance of the transitoriness of life is “one reason for the lyric strength of his poems.” He continues that Frost’s attitude allows him to love many aspects of external nature and of human nature because he is not taken up with lamenting what he cannot change (176). What is significant for Frost appears to be the willingness to accept the richness of the moment before it passes. It is the way to master the flux of life.

This attitude of Frost comes very close to the attitude of Zen Buddhists to life’s transience and impermanence. According to Suzuki, “Zen attempts to take hold of life in its act of living; to stop the flow of life and to look into it is not the business of Zen” (111). Suzuki narrates an interesting episode in the earlier part of his book which illustrates his point. Once a distinguished Zen teacher was asked how he did his exercises himself. He answered, “When I am
hungry I eat; when tired I sleep.” He explained that when others eat they do not eat, but are thinking of various other things, thereby allowing themselves to be disturbed; when they sleep they do not sleep, but dream of thousand other things (86).

In “Nothing Gold Can Stay”, in short, Frost does not lament over the transience of life; instead, he seems to implore the readers to develop a ripeness of mind to face this reality of life. A scholar of Buddhism will happily endorse this outlook of Frost. The Buddhists think that it is not the transitoriness, but the want of a proper attitude to it that is the cause of suffering. Says Lama Anagarika Govinda: “It is not the ‘world’ or its transitoriness which is the cause of suffering but our attitude towards it, our clinging to it, our thirst, our ignorance” (qtd. in Rudy 108). This dispassionate attitude to the transience of life is especially characteristic of Zen Buddhism. Nancy Wilson Ross says: “Now this is the part of the secret of Zen; that life reveals itself most plainly when you do not clutch at it either with your feelings or with your questing intellect. Touch and go! That is the whole art” (125). The greatest of all haiku poets; Basho, put it as follows: “When the lightning flashes, / How admirable he who thinks not -- / ‘Life is fleeting’” (qtd. in Ross 125).

That “Life is fleeting” seems to be the central idea emphasised in Frost’s yet another poem “Out, Out—”. This poem is based on a
news paper report that “Right down the road from the Lynches, a young boy had lost his hand in the teeth of a ‘snarling’ buzz-saw, and died from shock and loss of blood before the doctor could save him” (Gould 93). The poem which Frost himself termed as too “cruel” to read in public (93), depicts poignantly the transience and impermanence of life, and one can find here an echo the Buddhist doctrine of “anicca.” The accidental death of the young boy reminds a Buddhist student of what “Salla Sutta” says: “As every jar made by a potter must some day be shattered, so must man’s life” (Allen: Buddha’s Words 69).

The title of the poem itself is expository of the theme of life’s transitoriness. The title is obviously taken from Macbeth’s famous soliloquy, “To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow.” “Out, out, brief candle!” the soliloquy continues, and concludes with an emphatic statement that life “is a tale/Told by an idiot full of sound and fury /Signifying nothing” (5.5.19-28). More than anything else, the soliloquy focuses on life’s impermanence. By adopting a title from this soliloquy Frost clearly indicates that the central idea of the poem is mortality of man.

This theme is skilfully woven into the fabric of the poem. The boy in the poem worked on a saw machine which “made dust and dropped stove - length sticks of wood” (136). One feels that just as
the saw machine drops dust and pieces of wood, life disintegrates and ends in dust. The reader recollects Buddha’s parting words to Ananda that “Everything whatever born, brought into being, and organised, contains within itself the inherent necessity of dissolution” (Coomaraswamy 142). The poem continues: those “who lifted their eyes” from the saw mill could see “five mountain ranges one behind the other / Under the sunset far into Vermont” (136). It is significant to note that even before the boy appears, Frost introduces “those that lifted eyes.” According to Gloriana Locklear, these men, who are not necessarily the boy’s family nor the speaker of the poem, exist by being absent (168). And they are the men who could see into the life of things: they could see the mountain ranges under the sunset. This vision seems to be highly symbolic. The sunset is obviously an image of ruin and death, and one might remember a Buddhist poem by Christmas Humphreys: “The twilight falls. Inevitable hands / Draw the soft curtains of the fading day / All changes, grows, grows old” (The Buddhist Way 89). The mountain ranges, on the other hand, stand for permanence and stability. The juxtaposition of these contrasted images gives the impression that the seemingly permanent structures of the world like the mountain ranges are “under the sunset.” According to the Buddhist doctrine of change, “From a granite cathedral to china vase, from a code of laws to an empire, all things rise to their zenith.
and then however slowly, decay towards the inevitable end” (Humphreys, *Buddhism* 81).

The buzz saw is a striking image in the poem, and it establishes itself as a presence in the very first line, snarling and rattling away. The harsh sounds are repeated twice in line seven, and we are not surprised when the buzz saw seems to act on its own. It leaps (or seems to leap) for the boys hand and takes it in one bite, “As if to prove saws knew what supper meant.” The saw acts here as an agent of destruction. Says Glorian Locklear:

The presence of the saw is inimical, brutal but a presence of power, embodying the forces that may well do us harm, with reason or not, though volition or not. The saw suggests nature at its most brutal and percipience at its most minimal, reactive rather than deliberately causative, but still dangerous. (167)

The poor boy becomes a victim of the saw, and the poet perhaps reminds us that nature is present everywhere with its means of destruction — here it is the saw — and that nobody can escape from its eternal laws of change and decay. The harsh sound of the saw is reminiscent of what Shakespeare says about life as “full of sound and fury signifying nothing.” In this unintelligible life, nothing is certain and stable. “And nothing happened: day was all but gone,” says the poet (136). The end of the day once again signifies decay.
and death, and underscores the primary theme of the poem, namely, the transience of life.

We now reach the climax of the poem. When the boy’s sister came and announced “supper,” the saw which too was hungry, leaped out and “ate” his hand. In agony, the boy appealed to his sister and others to keep “the life from spilling.” But they could not. As “Salla Sutta” warns, “When death beckons, no father can hold back his son, no kith detain his skin” (Allen, *Buddha’s Words* 82). In this context the word “spilling” is especially arresting; it obviously indicates decay and disintegration of life.

The boy’s wild cry for help was in vain. His hand was gone already. In the mean time, the boy seems to have realised the futility of life, and accepted that reality. As the poem has it,

Then the boy saw all –
Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man’s work, though a child at heart—
He saw all spoiled. (137)

The transitoriness of life is something very hard to recognise; it requires great maturity of mind to comprehend it. The boy “doing a man’s work” was precocious. His present pain combined with his past sufferings had, perhaps, made him “old enough to know” that
all was “spoiled.” Through suffering one grows. Thus maintains a Buddhist poet:

To suffer is to suffer well, to accept
The untoward circumstance, to bear with skill
The weighted balance which the fool, inept
In equilibrium, would strive to kill
With flight or malediction

To suffer is to grow, to understand.
(Humphreys, Buddhist Poems 20)

On his recognition that all was “spoiled,” the boy seems to experience a tranquil bliss even at the most agonising moment of his death. At this point the poem seems to attain a slow pace. The small sentences and broken thoughts clearly suggest the slow dwindling of the boy’s life into a void. Here are the lines from the poem:

He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath
And then – the watcher at his pulse took fright
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little - less - nothing!–and that ended it. (137)

The boy’s death is not at all terrifying. After a heavy storm of pain and suffering, death comes to the boy like a cool breeze. The wisdom of life’s mutability might have dawned upon him, and so it becomes possible for him to welcome the tender arms of death without demur. John F. Lynen speaks about the boy’s acceptance of death
thus: "The boy seems to accept death with the same resignation as that expressed in Macbeth’s lines, and in some ways the poem reflects the meaninglessness Macbeth describes" (33-34). However, Lynen draws a contrast between Macbeth and the boy: "For the boy, unlike Macbeth, ‘sees all’ and he therefore does not struggle to live" (34). Commenting on this observation of Lynen, T. R. S. Sharma points out one more contrast between these two characters. He says: “When he makes this comparison, Lynen seems to forget that it took Shakespeare five acts of the play before Macbeth could experience utter despair” (70). Lynen further glorifies the death of the boy in the following words: “The boy’s death symbolises not only a superior wisdom [superior to Macbeth’s] but a superior kind of existence” (35). One can assume that the superior wisdom that the boy attained at the moment of death was about the impermanence of life and the futility of bemoaning it.

The attitude of the boy’s colleagues and his family to his death always intrigued the readers. Sohn and Tyre say:

[Instead of pouring out their grief, the boy’s family simply take up their work again. Does Frost wish to condemn the living or respect them for turning to their affairs in the face of tragedy? Is it courage or indifference that makes the living return to their affairs? (71)
Gloriana Locklear has an answer to these questions. The critic says:

The family may seem unsympathetic, unwilling to give the boy the half hour, quick to return to their affairs after his death “Since they /Were not the dead,” but they go on as they must if they are not to lie down and die themselves. Their awareness and grief are not slight, but their free time and capacity for public emotions are. They are pragmatists firmly fixed in their own time and place and are depicted rather than judged by the narrator.

(168)

The reader, who exists beyond those five mountains and who is most able to see better, need not settle for these answers. He can argue that the indifferent attitude of the poor workers and of the family members of the boy is not callous or inhuman; their attitude rather indicates the human predicament. Despite his frequent encounters with life’s transience and impermanence, man finds it hard to disentangle ‘himself’ from the illusion of life’s permanence and stability; he is so deluded to believe that he is rooted on this earth, and forgets the truth that he is only dust. And hence the repetition of human tragedy. The Buddha was absolutely right when he exclaimed: “O Worldly men! How fatal is your delusion! Inevitably your body will crumble to dust, yet carelessly, unheedingly ye live on (Carus 17).
That men, caught in the cobweb of delusion, live carelessly and unheedingly in a world of decay and impermanence, seems to be the core and essence of Frost's poem, "Provide, Provide." According to Randall Jarrell, the poem is "an immortal masterpiece" of Frost which "is full of the deepest, and most touching, moral wisdom." He continues that "The Wisdom of this World and the wisdom that comes we know not whence exist together in the poem, not side by side but one inside the other" ("To the Laodiceans" 88). Jarrell makes it clear that by the term "The Wisdom of this World" he implies expediency; but he does not elaborate what he means by "the wisdom that comes we know not whence." It would most probably be the wisdom about the futility and absurdity of man's attempt to earn wealth and reputation in a world of change and decay. Darrel Abel endorses this argument by quoting profusely from the Bible (25). A Buddhist is sure to like the poem for the theme of life's impermanence it deals with so precisely and powerfully.

Abishag, the protagonist here, was once a famous actress, "the picture pride of Hollywood"; but now both her fortunes and beauty declined, and she grew old and ugly. She is now regarded as a "witch," an old "withered hag." She earns her living by washing, and sweeping the floors of the rich. The fall of Abishag from the peak of glory to the vale of tears exemplifies life's transience and impermanence: her fate is the common fate of mankind. The poem is
silent about how far Abishag is responsible for her own tragedy. But the reader can assume that it was her pride of beauty, wealth and reputation, which would have dazzled her in the youth, and which made her believe that all the youthful glories were permanent, that brought about her tragedy. Abishag thus becomes a victim of the illusion of permanence.

Frost's naming of the "witch" as Abishag appears to be very significant. Abishag was the young virgin brought to King David when he was old and stricken in years, to be in his bosom so that he might get heat. After David's death, Adonijah, who unsuccessfully tried to usurp the succession promised to Solomon, asked to have Abishag to wife. Then Solomon had him put to death, although Adonijah was Solomon's half-brother and older than he was. Darrel Abel points out that "Abishag is an unmistakable sex symbol, and represents in the poem the treacherous lubricity of carnal beauty and lust" (26). "Abishag" rhymes with "rag" and "hag," and thus the name becomes a synonym for evanescent beauty as well.

Frost's modern parable of Abishag calls to our mind the Buddhist parable of Vasavadatha. Vasavadatha, a courtesan in Mathura, happens to see Upagupta, a prominent disciple of the Buddha, a tall and handsome youth. She fell desperately in love with him. She sent invitation to the young monk repeatedly, but
Upagupta ignored it. Meanwhile, her inordinate vanity and desire for wealth prompted Vasavadatha to murder one of her lovers, the chief of the artisans. Her crime was later detected, and she was condemned to have her ears and nose, her hands and feet cut off, and flung into a graveyard. Now Upagupta came to her, and soothed her with the wisdom of Tathagatha. Vasavadatha at last took refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, and died a peaceful death.

Abishag and Vasavadatha have many things in common: both of them were proud of their beauty and wealth in their youth; their cravings for wealth and position were inordinate; they were slaves to their evil passions; and they ultimately suffered for their sins. There is poetic justice in the sufferings of these two voluptuous women. Here is a message for mankind: life’s charm is transient, and do not fall a victim to it. Upagupta’s parting words to Vasavadatha are meaningful: “The charms of a lovely form are treacherous and quickly lead into temptations, which have proved too strong for thee” (Carus 182).

The tragic fall of both Abishag and Vasavadatha, the two most alluring women of their respective times, teaches us what a Buddhist scripture says: “Such is the beauty of a maid - / Like autumn leaves
they fall and fade” (Coomaraswamy 136). Frost seems to second this idea when he says in “Our Doom to Gloom”:

The bud must bloom till blowsy blown
Its petals loosen and are strewn;
And that’s fate it can’t evade
Unless it would rather wilt than fade. (450)

The poem, “Provide, Provide,” raises the question as to how man can redeem himself from the ravages of decay and death. The poet invokes us ironically, “Die early and avoid the fate.” Suicide, however, is not a solution to the devastation of life. Wealth too cannot solve the problem of old age and its related misfortunes. In a world governed by Mammon man hopes so; but it is a false hope, because wealth itself is evanescent like beauty. In pursuit of an answer to the universal problem, the poet says that, “Some have relied on what they knew, / Others on being simply true,” and that “What worked for them might work for you.” Frost seems to approve of this rational approach of depending upon one’s own reason and knowledge; in other words, he exhorts, though not directly, to look within for the remedy of the problem of change and decay. A Buddhist welcomes this approach because he believes that “Within yourself deliverance must be sought” (Arnold 208). Thus looking within, one realises that sweet memories of the past cannot alleviate the pangs of the old age; in fact, those memories aggravate the
sufferings. One also realises that worldly life ends in pain and suffering whether it is the life of a “star” or that of a person who is not so lucky. This human suffering is intensified by desires of the past as well as of the present. A Buddhist recollects in this context the following passage from *The Buddhacharītha*:

For the passions sake the ignorant man behaves wretchedly and incurs the suffering of death, bonds and the like. For the passions sake the living world, made wretched by expectation and tormented, goes to toil and death. (Asvagosa 157)

The problem of life’s transitoriness always bewilders the thinking men of all ages. Old age, disease and death appear to be something insurmountable. Man in his anxiety entertains the vain hope that “boughten friendship” will enable him to tide over the sea of troubles. The modern man is so much enraptured by the material prosperity around him that he supposes that he can purchase with money the most serene and sublime human values like love and friendship. The unbridled growth of materialism degraded human virtues into commercial products. Entrapped in this vicious circle of materialism, man forgets what an anarchist poet wrote years ago:

Not by accumulating riches but
by giving away that which you have
Shall you become beautiful;
You must undo the wrappings, not
case yourself in fresh ones;
Not by multiplying clothes shall you make
Your body sound and healthy, but
rather by discarding them.
(qtd. in William James 313)

The message is clear: life becomes more beautiful and more enjoyable not by amassing wealth, but by renouncing it. Material wealth cannot generate and promote love and friendship, because it is primarily based on man’s selfish desires.

“Provide, Provide” can be treated as a satire on western materialism and its evils. Abishag, who worshipped beauty and wealth in her youth more than anything else, truly represents the western man’s craze for material prosperity, and through the tragic story of her fall, Frost seems to make a prophecy of the doom of western materialistic civilisation. Interestingly, Frost’s view on western civilisation, as reflected in the poem, runs parallel to that of the Buddhists. Viscount Torio, who was a Buddhist scholar as well as a high official in the Japanese army, has this to say on western civilisation:

Though at first sight occidental civilisation presents an attractive appearance adapted as it is to the gratification of selfish desires, yet, since its basis is the hypothesis that men’s wishes constitute natural laws, it must end
in disappointment and demoralisation. (qtd. in Coomaraswamy 127)

Western civilisation is therefore deceptive; it breeds only man’s selfish desires and makes him suffer. It is the arch enemy of man and his much cherished values like love and friendship. The Buddhists assert that it is not material wealth, but human compassion born out of suffering, that strengthens human relations. Says Christmas Humphreys: “Only he who is willing to suffer can understand, in the deepest sense, the suffering of others, and this understanding is the awakening of that flower of pure compassion whose final bloom is Enlightenment” (The Middle Way 71). In adversity alone the true man is revealed. “In the fires of suffering,” says Humphreys, “false desires are consumed, and from the ashes rises, purified, the essential man” (73).

This is the Buddhist way to genuine love and friendship. Upagupta’s compassion for Vasavadatha in her distress is a fine illustration of it. It was born not out of his carnal desire for her beauty or wealth, but out of his emotional identification with her suffering. “Sister,” said the young man to Vasavadatha, “it is not for my pleasure that I approach thee. It is to restore to thee a nobler beauty than the charms which thou hast lost” (Carus 182). Vasavadatha also could understand the depth of Upagupta’s
compassion only in her death-bed. It is then suffering that nourishes human relations; material prosperity just makes a mockery of it. Through the sarcastic phrase “boughten friendship,” Frost drives home the absurdity of human relations in a materialistic society. Besieged in a world of material progress, modern man is transformed into a ‘desire machine’ to whom all the human virtues are sheer products in the market. *Worst of all, he is deaf to the words of wisdom which can make him an “essential man.”* Like Vasavadatha in her youthful years of voluptuousness, the modern man in the western society — here represented by Abishag — refuses to listen to “the words of righteousness while surrounded with temptation, while under the spell of passion and yearning for worldly pleasure” (Carus 182). And hence his tragedy.

How should man face the natural law of change and transience of life, or in the words of Frost, “What to make of a diminished thing?” is the question that the poem “Oven Bird” raises, and tries to answer. Discussing this poem, Robert Pack observes that, “Belief for Frost is always grounded in the question out of which belief emerges” (12). So the question, “What to make of a diminished thing?” Here is an instance of Frost’s belief that life is a “diminished thing,” and that it is some thing to be encountered.
That life is a “diminished thing” is a dominant theme in the poem, and it is suggested through various images. Summer is a diminishing from spring, as the oven bird says, “as one to ten.” Fall is a diminishing from summer. The fall recalls to mind the fall from the garden of Eden which is also a mythical diminishing. Death, the highway “dust,” is the diminishment of life. In this context what Sohn and Tyre says about the word “fall” in the poem is worth quoting in full. He says: “The two ‘falls’ in 1. 9 (which already play on the ‘petal-fall’ of line 6) can be read to imply not only the season, but also the fall of all leaves and blossoms; the Biblical fall of Man; declining powers in general; and death itself” (47). According to Robert Pack, “The poem is a diminishing of the oven bird’s loud call and its ‘possible’ meanings.” He continues that “Ageing on the highway, Frost, too, is a diminishing thing” (12).

The recognition and acceptance of “the diminished thing” called life is what is elaborated in the poem. The oven bird contemplates the ruin that is summer. Now the other birds ceased to sing. Most of the flowers disappeared. Pear and cherry blossoms fell to earth. There is not much left that is attractive. The oven bird knows it. However, he can take whatever life gives him. He is a realist. He sees exactly what is happening and can make the proper adjustment; in short, he knows “What to make of a diminished thing.” As Roberts W. French points out, “The oven bird knows how
to adapt to circumstances; he is a survivor. He knows a lesser world when he sees one, and he shows us what to do" (159).

In this poem Frost seems to imply that in spite of man's much acclaimed intelligence and rationality, he alone failed to tune his life in accordance with the law of change and decay, and therein lies the secret of his unhappiness. As Annie Besant observes,

[By disease and misery, by poverty and grief, we learn that every thing that surrounds us — not only in the physical world, but also in the region of desire, and in the region of mind itself that all things are changing, and that in the changing he who is changeless may never find his rest. (10-11)

The birds and animals are perhaps less a victim of the illusion of permanence. The oven bird in the poem, for instance, is not downcast with sorrow or despondency at the changes taking place around him; not only that he takes them for granted with confidence and composure. The oven bird teaches us, as Frost reminds us in “Hyla Brook” to accept what is, to “love the things we love for what they are”(119). The Buddhists find no difficulty in accepting this philosophy of life, because they too believe that “Such is the way of the world: decay and death. Because the wise know this, they do not let themselves be cast down with grief” (Allen, Buddha’s Words 12).
“What to make of a diminished thing?” seems to be once again the main problem that Frost deals with in “The Need of Being Versed in Country things.” “Poetry,” says Frost, “demonstrates the need of being versed in country things if we are to face fear, loneliness, even death.” He continues: “Poetry requires an imagination open to birth and death, to a pattern of growth, fruitfulness, decay and rebirth” (Bieganowsky 44). The poem, “The Need of Being Versed in Country Things” is a brilliant exposition of this view of Frost on poetry. This remarkable lyric highlights not only the natural law of change and impermanence, but also suggests a path of liberation from its vicious circle. These two themes, as everybody knows, are of immense interest to the Buddhists, and therefore, this poem fascinates them.

The poem is about a house that is burned down. Only the chimney and barn escaped burning. They too are now deserted. They look like the victim of decay. It seems that birds took for granted this reality of destruction. They fly in and out of the broken windows of the barn. They produce a sound of murmur like a human sigh. “Yet for them there is really nothing sad,” because they know that everything that is now destroyed will regenerate. The poet concludes that one has to be versed in country things to learn this eternal law of change. He says: “One had to be versed in country things / Not to believe the phoebes wept” (242).
The whole poem is centred round one dominant image — a house destroyed by fire. For a Buddhist student “fire” has a special importance. He recalls the Buddha’s famous Fire Sermon where the Lord proclaims that everything in nature is on fire. Says the Buddha:

The eye, --- , is on fire; forms are on fire; eye consciousness is on fire; impressions received by the eye are on fire; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the eye, that is also on fire. (Burtt 97)

The Buddha speaks of fire as an analogy of both change and passion. In the sermon “Lamp and Flame” to King Milinda, the Lord points out that the lamp is a succession of flames each of which lasts only an instant. Then he adds:

Precisely so, great king, there is an uninterrupted succession of mental and physical states. One state ceases to exist and another comes to exist. The succession is such that there is, as it were, none that precedes, none that follows…. (Burlingame 205)

In the poem “The Need of Being Versed in Country things” too fire stands for change. The fire burnt the house almost completely. It can be rightly surmised that the house was once fresh and glorious
like a dream, but now it is destroyed to ashes. True, all compound things disintegrate.

As mentioned earlier, “fire” is also a Buddhist image of passion. In the “Fire Sermon” the Buddha says: “With the fire of passion, say I, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of infatuation; with birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief and despair are they on fire” (Burtt 97).

The source of the fire that destroyed the house in the poem is a mystery. However, one can rightly imagine that it was some aggressive passion like hatred or hostility that brought about this calamity. Every home is a burning volcano of mutual suspicion and hatred as we have found in “Home Burial.” In his short lyric “Fire and Ice” Frost once again puts forward the idea that it is the fire of desire that destroys the world. (The poem is analysed in detail in the next chapter).

“How does one turn away from the bodily and mental functions that are on fire?” asks E. A. Burtt, the Buddhist scholar, and he himself gives the answer:

By refusing to identify one’s self with them; by identifying instead with the unchanging reality that is discovered by renouncing them. Thus one achieves true
health of mind, whatever happens to the body because of sickness, old age, or any other physical change. (96)

In “Fire Sermon” the Buddha states:

[T]he learned and noble disciple conceives an aversion for the eye, conceives an aversion for forms, conceives an aversion for eye-consciousness, conceives an aversion for the impressions received by the eye; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, originates in dependence on impressions received by the eye, for that also he conceives an aversion. (97)

It requires tremendous effort to escape from the bon-fire of passions, but one who succeeds in it can attain “Nirvana,” a mental state of passionlessness and tranquillity. The Buddha is reported to have told King Milinda:

Great King, just as a man burning in a blazing, crackling fire heaped up with many faggots, escaping therefrom with effort, entering a place free from fire, will there experience supreme bliss, precisely so, great king, whoever orders his walk aright, will, by diligent mental effort, realise Nibbana, Supreme Bliss, from which the torment of Three-fold fire is absent. (Burlingame 225)

“The Need of Being Versed in Country Things” does not directly deal with the question of salvation from the burning passions, but the birds’ reaction to the fire is worthy of our notice: they escape
from the burnt house, though with a sigh. Whether the birds are wise enough to realise the danger of fierce passions is a question beyond the scope of the present discussion, but their attitude reflects a totally different perspective of tragedy. In this context it is interesting to note Robert W. French's observation about the poem. He says: “When in ‘The Need of Being Versed in Country things,’ [Frost] describes the human tragedy of a house destroyed by fire, he does not lament, for tragedy depends on how you see a thing, and Frost realises that the human perspective is not the only one possible” (160-161). Like the oven bird, the birds in the poem appear to be wiser than men in their approach to tragedy. Ironically, what makes them better than human beings is not their intelligence, but indeed their want of intelligence, which helps them not to waste their time and energy for seeking the mysterious source of the fire that burnt the house. Says Frost in “The Passing Glimpse”: “Heaven gives its glimpses only to those / Not in a position to look too close.” The birds seem to know what the Buddha said years ago: “It is not the time to discuss about fire, for those who are actually in burning fire, but it is the time to escape from it” (Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy 382). The Buddha makes this idea clear through the parable of a man wounded by arrow. He insists that he will not have this arrow taken out until he learnt whether the man who wounded him belonged to the warrior caste, or to the Brahmin caste,
or to the agricultural caste or to the menial caste. That man, according to Buddha, would die without ever having learnt this (Burtt 34-35).

This parable illustrates that the Buddha was interested more in finding a way out of suffering than in investigating about God or soul. For the Buddha, metaphysics or similar experiences were intellectual luxuries not to be indulged in, when the main enemies, namely, suffering and desire were yet to be fought and conquered.

R. R. Diwakar observes about the Buddha:

He did not encourage metaphysical or philosophical theories. He was against wasting time in intellectual acrobatics. He saw that such things led no where. He emphasised on ethics based on noble instincts and emotions such as compassion, friendliness and non-injury. (144)

This does not, however, mean that the Buddha was unaware of the metaphysical problems. It is said in “Samyutta Nikaya” that once the Lord took up a few Simsapa leaves and asked his disciples which they thought were more — he leaves in his hand or those overhead in the Simsapa wood. When the disciples replied that the leaves in his hand were few in number, the Lord said:

In the same way, monks, many more are those things which through my super-knowledge I do not make
known to you, few are those things which I make known. And why do I not make these things known? Monks, they are not connected with the goal, they are not fundamental to the Brahma-faring they do not conduce to disregard, to passionlessness, to stopping, to tranquillity, to super-knowledge, to awakening, to nirvana. (Coomaraswamy and Horner 242)

Even a casual reader of Frost can find that as a poet-philosopher he is intrigued more by the question “How to live?” than by “What life is?” Frost’s attempt is never to probe deep into the metaphysical questions on life and death, but to give the readers some sweetness and light with regard to practical life. Elizabeth Jennings observes that “Frost refuses either to be loftily mysterious or to give complex psychological motives for making of his poems” (2). One can say with a measure of certainty that while Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman were drawn towards the oriental transcendentalism of the Vedas and Upanishads, Frost had his leanings towards Buddhism which was opposed to complex philosophical discussions, and which concentrated more on the ethical uplift of man. “Frost, like Emerson, believed in the resources of man,” says Reginald Cook, “but while Emerson’s wellspring was transcendental oversoul, Frost’s resource was illuminated empiricism” (“A Reviewal” 205). In short, Frost was with Buddha.
“The Need of Being Versed in Country Things” is highly fascinating to the Buddhist readers for one more important reason that along with the themes of change, decay and destruction, the poem contains some ideas about rebirth. The Buddhists do not believe that death puts an end to life; to them, destruction and regeneration form a cyclic process — they complement each other. Every thing that is born will die, and by the same logic every thing that dies will be reborn. Thus, as Christmas Humphreys points out, “like the revolutions of a wheel, there is a regular succession of death and birth” (Buddhism 99). It is interesting to note that Frost also did not believe that life ended with the grave, but went on in a life after death. Thompson confirms it by quoting from Frost’s private conversations with his intimate friends (Later Years 439). Frost’s belief in life after death does not, however, show that he subscribed to the Buddhist idea of rebirth. The Buddhist idea has various interpretations: some sects of Buddhists, for instance, the Tibetan Buddhists, believe in the reincarnation of soul; and some others in the rebirth of character, and so on. But all of them seem to agree that rebirth or reincarnation indicates that one’s life span is too short to bear the fruits of one’s action, and therefore life must continue beyond death. To Buddhists time is endless, and so rebirth is a possibility. Frost will definitely agree with this Buddhist idea of continuity of life even after death. Once, he was driving with Rabbi
Victor Reichert and Hyde Cox on a moonlit night near Ripton, when Reichert asked him whether he ever felt that he did not have time, and then Frost replied: “The surest sign of immortality I have is that I’ve always known somehow that I had time to burn ....time to burn” (439). However, as Laurence Perrine observes, Frost’s position concerning life after death is agnostic; he accepted the inability of man to answer the ultimate question (Robert Frost 85). Frost admits that “There may be little or much beyond the grave, / But the strong are saying nothing until they see” (300). In “A Soldier,” occasioned by the death in the battle of his most cherished friend, Edward Thomas, Frost abandoned any uncertainty about future existence. His friend, he says, is that “fallen lance” that has intersected the curve of death and “lies unlifted now.” “But this we know, the obstacle that checked / And tripped the body, shot the spirit on / Further than target ever showed or shone” (261-262). With the words “this we know,” Frost sounds a note of certainty about the future life.

In “The Need of Being Versed in Country Things” the ideas of rebirth are brought about through certain images of regeneration. Frank Lentricchia points out one such image in the poem. He says: “[Frost’s] comparison of the chimney with the pistil of a flower ‘after the petals go’ raises the image of rebirth ....; the house will come back even as the flowers shall bloom again” (84). The images of
regeneration are also abundant in the fifth stanza of the poem. Here it is:

Yet for them [the birds] the lilac renewed its leaf,
And the aged elm, though touched with fire;
And the dry pump flung up an awkward arm;
And the fence post carried a strand of fire. (242)

The birds in the poem are not really sad when they leave the burnt house, because, they know that everything that is now destroyed will regenerate. Belief in regeneration makes them optimistic. One has to be versed in country things to learn this eternal law of decay and regeneration.

The image of deserted and desolate house, which according to George F. Bagby “is an archetypal memento mori in Frost’s world” (103), occurs in three other major poems of Frost — “The Black Cottage,” “The Census-Taker” and “The Directive.” The central figure in “The Black Cottage,” a minister, becomes melancholic by his contemplation of a deserted cottage which always appeared to him forsaken, even when it was lived in. And now that “The warping boards pull out their own old nails / With none to tread and put them in their place” (56) the deserted house comes to represent to him the inevitable decay and destruction of all things made — the fleetingness and impermanence of the human life itself. Lewis H.
Miller Jr. discusses this poem in the light of William James’ pragmatism, and remarks that the poem dramatises and epitomises “the philosophic temperament of one of America’s most original thinkers.” Miller Jr. describes the attitude of a pragmatist: “Turning away from abstractions, fixed principles, or closed systems, the pragmatist welcomes ‘open air and possibilities of nature’; he seeks his momentary stay inside the flux” (369). Staying inside the flux, the pragmatist in Frost realises that even man’s beliefs and convictions cannot be termed as either new or old because they are cyclic like the cyclic changes in nature. He says:

Cling to it [a belief] long enough, and not a doubt
It will turn true again, for so it goes.
Most of the change, we think we see in life
Is due to truths being in and out of favor. (58)

The natural object of meditation in “The Census-Taker,” like in “The Black Cottage,” is a deserted house. The poem is set in the midst of an almost lunar barrenness and described in extraordinarily spare language. The census-taker comes one windy autumn evening

To a slab-built, black paper covered house
Of one room and one window and one door,
The only dwelling in a waste cut over
A hundred square miles round it in the mountains: (174)
Everywhere the census-taker witnesses the scene of decay and destruction. The trees around this rudimentary house are either cut down or rotting and leafless. Inside the cabin too all is disuse and decay: “No lamp was lit. Nothing was on the table./The stove was cold ...” (175). It was a totally desolated place; there were not even any ghosts or skeletons in this desolate house: “I saw no man there and no bones of men there.” The emptiness and lifelessness of all he sees are underlined by the irony of the errand on which the speaker came to this “dwelling”: “I came as census-taker to the waste / To count the people in it and found none./None in the hundred miles, none in the house” (174). The poem, in short, can be termed as “a confrontation with nothingness.” Says Frank Lentricchia:

“The Census – Taker,” which outdoes Eliot as it exposes the wasteland and the self trapped in it with no hope for redemption in the far off sound of thunder, is as explicit a confrontation with nothingness as anything in modern American poetry. (80)

The “confrontation with nothingness,” however, does not dishearten the census-taker; he seems to accept the reality of decay and destruction with composure and confidence. He says:

The melancholy of having to count souls
Where they grow fewer and fewer every year
Is extreme where they shrink to none at all.
It must be I want life to go on living. (176)
“Directive,” which Manorama B. Trikha describes as “the most philosophical of Frost’s poems” (213), also begins with the discovery of “…a house that is no more a house / Upon a farm that is no more a farm / And in a town that is no more a town” (377). The poem is in the form of a journey from the present into the past in search of the future. Here the past is “a time made simple by a loss / Of detail, burned dissolved, and broken off” (377). In his metaphysical journey what the traveller experiences first is the tragic truth that all the human patterns — house, farm and township — are broken down. The image of the crumbling graveyard underscores the theme of decay and death. According to Dorothy Judd Hall, “‘Directive’ encompasses the ‘wreckage’ of loss.” The poem echoes the “broken drinking glass” at the spring in “The Times Table.” In metaphoric reach it comprehends the delicate “broken” wing of the butterfly in Frost’s early elegy and the violently “broken shaft” in “The Draft Horse.” It includes the “broken sleep” of the woman in “The Night Light,” “the broken moon” that is an extension of broken sleep in “An Old Man’s Winter Night,” Silas’ “broken” spirit in “The Death of the Hired Man,” and, from “The Lesson for Today,” all our “broken-off careers” (Robert Frost 108).

Hall again points out that the journey in “Directive” is the culmination of many lonely wanderings among landscapes eroded, burnt out, dissolved, vanished: the abandoned “cellar hole” of “The

The attainment of “spiritual reintegration” is perhaps the ultimate goal of all religions in the world, and in Buddhism it comes very close to “Nirvana.” “The word [Nirvana],” says Christmas Humphreys, “literally means ‘going out,’ as a fire dies out for want of fuelling.” He adds “’Nirvana’ is the extinction of the Not-self in the completion of the self” (Buddhism 128). According to Radhakrishnan, it is “the goal of perfection.” He continues:

Through the destruction of all that is individual in us, we enter into communion with the whole universe, and become an integral part of the great purpose. Perfection is then the sense of oneness with all that is, has ever
been and can ever be. The horizon of being is extended to the limits of reality. (Indian Philosophy 448)

The annihilation of self, according to Buddhism, means the destruction of ego-centric desires, and that is a prerequisite for self-realisation and the realisation of the universe.

“Behind 'Directive,' and behind Frost’s extensive imagery of loss elsewhere,” says Judd Hall, “is a pervasive awareness of the vanity of human desire” (Robert Frost 108). The traveller of “Directive” seems to have realised his self through the destruction of his ego-centric desire. Says Manorama Trikha: “Luckily, the traveller of ‘Directive’... ‘lost enough to find’ himself”. She adds that “So ‘getting lost’ becomes a desirable condition ‘to find oneself’” (Poetry of Clarifications 218). She continues her observation:

Incidentally, so far as Frost saved himself from being lost in the woods, as most of his poems reveal, he failed to discover the meaning of essence of existence. And with the courage to be lost he found himself. (emphasis added) (218)

In short, the traveller in the poem passes through varied experiences of life, and ultimately discovers the essence of existence in his own self. The poem thus becomes a directive to self, the perennial source of life, which is the ultimate destination of every seeker of truth.
In the final part of the poem three images strike the readers: the children’s playhouse, the brook and the broken goblet-like Grail — the things that the traveller meet with during the end of his journey. The children’s playhouse can be taken as a symbol of simplicity and innocence towards which the poet directs the readers. Of the significance of the brook Frost himself speaks:

The waters and the watering place are the source. It is there that you would have to turn in time of confusion to be made whole again: whole again as perhaps you haven’t been since leaving childhood behind. Ageing, you have become involved in the cobwebs and considerations of the world. (qtd. in Hall, Robert Frost 110)

The goblet, stolen “from the children’s playhouse,” according to Judd Hall, is a metaphor of rediscovered innocence. The critic adds:

It is also the cup of woe from which we must drink to be saved — an emblem of wholeness regained through endurance of loss; an emblem of the “Heaven” we are given ‘if we own up broken’. (113)

To a Buddhist, the three images are of immense interest, as they are very much associated with the Master’s life and enlightenment. It is said that after leading a strict ascetic life, even without taking food and water for days together, the Buddha realised the futility of such
an extreme form of living. He became so weak and hungry that he could not walk properly. However, in his emaciation he reached the bank of the Nairanjara, now called Phalgu, which flows by the city of Gaya, and took a bath in the river. Now Sujata, the innocent daughter of a cowherd, appeared there and offered the master a bowl of curds and milk. Speaking no word, the master accepted the offering and consumed it. Edwin Arnold speaks about the meal and its effect on the Master as follows:

But of the meal
So wondrous was the virtue that our Lord
Felt strength and life return as though the nights
Of watching and the days of fast had passed
In dream, as though the spirit with the flesh
Shared that fine meat and plumed its wings anew,
Like some delighted bird at sudden streams
Weary with flight o'er endless wastes of sand,
Which laves the desert dust from neck and crest. (147)

The bowl of curd and milk then becomes a source of physical and spiritual awakening to the Master. The bath of the Master in the river, Nairanjara, though it is an insignificant event in his life, appears to be symbolic of his transformation from the initial extreme ascetic life to a new life of spiritual realisation. The river, which is an archetypal symbol of change, here becomes a means of spiritual change: it is after the bath in the river that the Master sits under the
Bodhi tree and later attains the Enlightenment. Sujata, the daughter of a cowherd, embodies the innocence of childhood, and her bowl can be regarded as a Buddhist equivalent of the Christian Holy Grail. In short, one feels that there is a resemblance between the objects—the children’s playhouse, the brook and the drinking goblet—that the traveller in “Directive” meets towards the end of his journey in pursuit of truth, and the things and persons—the river, Nairanjara, Sujata, the innocent girl and her bowl of milk and curd—that the Buddha comes across at the end of his search for the secret of suffering.

The poem ends with the traveller recovering the grail-like vessel and drinking the waters of the spring which makes him “whole again beyond confusion.” To “be whole again beyond confusion” seems to be the ultimate goal of the Buddhists too. Rhys Davids points out that “the object and end of the [Buddhist] training is such mental emancipation, or liberty as enables the subject to know things as they really or truly are.” The Buddhist scholar quotes Matthew Arnold’s famous line in his poem “Dover Beach” about Sophocles—“Who saw life steadily and saw it whole”—and observes: “Much, for that matter, in Arnold’s thoughts is soundly Buddhist, and in pathetic contrast to his ignorance of Buddhism” (224-225). If it is so, Frost, who wrote “Drink and be whole again beyond confusion,” and whom Lionel Trilling compared to Sophocles, can also be called a
Buddhist. This concluding line of the poem reads almost as an echo of a Buddhist verse ("Anguttara-Nikaya II, 24) on the Master:

He hath discerned all this life o’ the world,
In all the world the how and thus of things,
From all detached and leaning, upon naught;
Who all hath mastered, from all bonds is loosed:
Touched is for him high peace and the blest calm,
Where no fear cometh more. (Davids, 225)

No other image is as effective as the image of river to express the theme of continuity of life through birth, growth and death. Lucretius, for instance, viewed life as a river or stream or flux of everything that runs away to spend itself in death and nothingness (Thompson, Robert Frost 26). Frost used this image of river/stream in two of his poems—"Too Anxious for Rivers" and "The West Running Brook"—to put forward his philosophy of change and continuity of life. In "Too Anxious for Rivers" Frost presents a landscape vista where a stream flowing through the foreground would seem to be blocked off by a mountain in the background. Thompson speaks about the poem thus:

Taken symbolically or (in this extremely puritanical poem) taken allegorically, the river is life, the mountain is death, the sea is the life-beyond-death, and the rebuked questioner implicitly may be any descendent of
Adam who has a tendency to ask too many questions about life and death. (*Robert Frost* 25)

The image of river is most effectively used in “The West Running Brook.” A Buddhist who reads this poem remembers what Hung Tzu - Ch’eng of the Ming Dynasty said years ago: “Walking along a running brook in a clouded mountain, one can observe the mysteries of the Tao (the cosmic process or the Way) in every moment” (18). The reader also remembers a Zen Buddhist story which is as follows: A monk once went to Gensha, a Zen master, and wanted to learn where the entrance to the path of truth was. Gensha asked him, “Do you hear the murmuring of the brook?” “Yes, I hear it,” answered the monk. “There is the entrance,” the master instructed him (Suzuki 10). The Zen poet Gochiku put it quite properly in a haiku: “The long night / The sound of the water / Says what I think” (qtd. in Ross 128). Frost’s poem appeals to the Buddhists mainly on two grounds: firstly, it deals with the theme of growth and decay, progress and regress, along with the inherent contradictions which the transitoriness of life presents; and secondly, the poem suggests a middle way for the reconciliation of these opposites.

In this dramatic monologue which is in the form of a conversation between a farmer and his wife who are represented as
admiring the contrary direction of a small New England stream, the most dominant image is the stream. The stream is obviously a traditional symbol of change and transience of life. As Donald J. Greiner points out, “The West Running Brook” along with “The Wood Pile” combines traditional nature imagery with ideas based on the second law of thermodynamics in order to illustrate what Frost terms “the slow, smokeless burning of decay” (237). The stream in the poem is “The stream of everything that runs away.” It is existence itself.

Some say existence like a Pirouet
And Pirouette, forever in one place,
Stands still and dances, but it runs away;
It seriously, sadly, runs away
To fill the abyss’s void with emptiness. (259)

The wife, who is the speaker here, continues that “It [existence] flows beside us in this water brook.” Again, “It flows between us, over us, and with us.” The stream is, in short, “time, strength, tone, light, life, and love,” and furthermore, “The universal cataract of death that spends to nothingness.”

In Buddhism, existence is not static and permanent, but a continuous and ever changing process. Christmas Humphreys puts it precisely:
Samsara is the unbroken chain of the groups of the Five Aspects of Existence or Khandhas which, constantly changing from moment to moment, follow continuously one upon the other through inconceivable periods of time. (The Wisdom of Buddhism 60)

Such an ever changing life cannot be better represented than as a flowing river. Heraclitus makes use of this image of river to suggest the continuous change in life as follows: “You cannot step twice into the same rivers, but fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you” (qtd. in Davids 77). Rhys Davids observes that in Buddhism too, which portrays life as “a stream of becoming,” the image of flowing water is used to denote the “continuity of an ever-changing identity” (74).

Quoting a Burmese Buddhist, Davids states that life appears to be static “like a river which still maintains one constant form, .... , though not a single drop remains today of all the volume that composed that river yesterday” (77).

The transitoriness of life, according to the Buddhist, has its contradictions. Rhys Davids puts it thus:

Life was judged, by the Buddhist, to be so essentially and inevitably a process of rise and fall, waxing and waning, growth and decay, that to pronounce it, .... , was self contradiction. (187)
“The West Running Brook” seems to prove this doctrine of the Buddhists. The brook here represents not only the change and impermanence of life, but also the “contraries” of life. As the husband and wife talk, they notice how the black water, catching on a sunken rock, flings a white wave backward, against the current. The husband says: “Speaking of contraries, see how the brook / In that white wave runs counter to itself.” “Within the poem,” says Lawrance Thompson, “various ‘contraries’ are interlocked to illuminate one of the poet’s major and recurrent themes” (Robert Frost 3). Cast as a dialogue between husband and wife, the poem presents an argument and counter argument — a typical example of the contraries of life. When all the other country brooks flow east to reach the ocean, the brook in the poem runs east. The “contraries” that the brook represents is also the way of the men. “It must be the brook/can trust itself to go by contraries/The way I can with you — and you with me” (258). The “contraries” is further stressed in the following line:

The black stream, catching on a sunken rock,
Flung backward on itself in one white wave,
And the white water rode the black forever,
Not gaining but not losing. (258)

“Robert Frost,” says Dorothy Judd Hall, “confronted life on its own often illogical terms, seeing, thinking, speaking, writing by

The “contraries” of life does not either scare or dishearten the poet; instead he seems to derive a sort of strength out of this struggle.

Says Thompson:

Out of the struggle, the conflict, comes all that ‘raises a little’. And all the sacrifice, all the spending, all the transience suddenly changes from tragic meaninglessness to sacred purpose. It related itself to an integrated scheme of the universe. ‘And there is something sending up the sun’. (Fire and Ice 187)

Thompson also speaks about “Frost’s conviction that we live wisely and dangerously at the confluence of opposing forces .... And that the dangers are converted through struggle into strength”(198). Judd Hall also notices the harmony of the opposites in the poem. Speaking about the husband and wife, the speakers in the poem, the critic observes that “While their modes of looking at things are initially opposite, they arrive ultimately at a position which goes beyond reconciliation.” She adds, “They come by different routes to a place where contradiction itself is a source of enrichment.”

According to Dorothy Judd Hall, even at the outset of the poem itself a correlation is established between cross-currents in nature and cross-natures in people. She is of the view that though the behaviour
of the brook suggests disagreement, it is "complementary rather than antagonistic" (Robert Frost 87). Manorama Trikha is likely to approve of this argument when she says that

Here [in the lines 69-72] the "opposites" attain a renewed meaning. They cease to be opposites and become complementary, as out of the "universal cataract of death," "that spends to nothingness," emerges a counter current or force of resistance that renews life. The poet has finally found an answer to the riddle of contraries. (Poetry of Clarifications 193)

Trikha concludes that in this poem Frost arrives at "the principle of the reconciliation of contraries as the secret of life." She believes that "This philosophical motive holds the centre of the poem" (193). The couple discovers the harmony of the opposites through the brook: "It is the backward motion toward the source,/Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in" (260). Trikha sums up her observation: "The poem that begins casually by talking over the contraries attains an acme by discovering the central truth and ends by pointing out toward the ‘source’ beyond the conflict" (193).

Thompson examines this "source" to which the current of everything that runs away and everything that resists pays tribute. "Perhaps unconsciously," says Thompson, "Frost gradually projected that sacredness he found in his own love, in his own life, outward to
the sacredness of the source” (*Fire and Ice* 187). A Buddhist now recalls the sacred truth that Siddhartha, the hero of Hermann Hesse’s novel of the same title, discovered after years of his search. In this novel, as it is known, the river is a prominent character which represents both the flux of life and the truth that lies beyond life’s opposites. Earlier Siddhartha listened to the numerous voices of the river, but it was only now when he reached the end of his search that he learnt to listen properly to these numerous voices and understand the harmony in the variety. The novel says:

[Siddhartha] had often heard all this before, all these numerous voices in the river, but today they sounded different. He could no longer distinguish the different voices—the merry voice from the weeping voice, the childish voice from the manly voice. They all belonged to each other: the lament of those who yearn, the laugher of the wise, the cry of indignation and groan of the dying. They were all interwoven and interlocked, entwined in a thousand ways. And all the voices, all the goals, all the yearnings, all the sorrows, all the pleasures, all the good and evil, all of them together was the world. All of them together was the stream of events, the music of life. (Hesse 107)

Siddhartha learnt through his varied experiences that “in every truth the opposite is equally true” (112) and that “everything that exists is good — death as well as life, sin as well as holiness, wisdom as well
as folly” (113). In the cycle of change every thing — for instance, even a seemingly worthless stone — is significant, because in the long process it can also become man and spirit (113). So Siddhartha loves the stone and the river as he loves a human being. To him, love is the most important thing in the world. He says,

I think it is only important to love the world, not to despise it, not to despise it, not for us to hate each other, but to be able to regard the world and ourselves and all beings with love, admiration and respect. (115)

Siddhartha learnt this wisdom of universal love from the river; Frost also seems to have understood the sacredness of love, that harmonises every diversity of life, from the “source” of the stream. Judith Oster is right when she observes that “In Frost’s poetry we see man seeking but seldom finding harmony between himself and nature, and it is usually by means of love” (221).

According to Thompson, Frost’s idea of the conflict of opposites comes closer to that of Aristotle, who said that “the knowledge of opposites is one.” Thompson adds that we are back to the two halves of human life; to the position in the Golden Mean from which these two halves may be contemplated and utilised. He maintains that “There is room enough and danger enough in living between such opposites without worrying about change and growth” (Fire and Ice
Thompson's observation gives much food for thought for the Buddhists. They would like to substitute "the Golden Mean" with Buddha's doctrine of the Middle Path which calls upon man to avoid the extremes in life and choose a way in between. Of course, the Buddha meant by "the extremes" voluptuousness and asceticism, but his Middle Path can also be taken as a reconciliation of all the contraries in life. The middle position enables one to look at the opposites in life from equal distance and evaluate them impartially which would most probably bring about a synthesis of them. Frost would have meant it when he said that "We dance round in a ring and suppose / But the Secret sits in the middle and knows" ("The Secret Sits" 362). The poet seems to have a predilection for the middle. In the poem "In the Home Stretch," for instance, he says, "Ends and beginnings — there are no such things / There are only middles" (116).

The Buddhist scripture "Anguttara-Nikaya" points out that there are four kinds of persons existing in the world. The scripture describes them as follows:

There is the person who goes with the stream, there is the person who goes against the stream, there is the person who is poised of self, and there is the brahman who, crossed over, gone beyond, stands on dry land. (Coomaraswamy and Horner 224)
A student of Buddhism who reads “The West Running Brook” feels that though Frost does not attain the stature of “the brahman who crossed over, gone beyond, stands on dry land,” he belongs to the third category of the men who are poised of self. With their poised mind these men can see and understand the true meaning of change, an eternal phenomena of life, in a perspective better than others. “Suttanipata” says:

Whatever streams flow in the world,
Ajita, (said the master then),
The dam for them is mindfulness;
It is their flood - gate too, I say;
By wisdom may the streams be closed.
(Coomaraswamy and Horner  227)

So the way to stop the flow of the stream, according to the Buddhists, is “mindfulness.” A Buddhist can argue that by recognising the harmony in the conflict between the opposites, Frost shows this “mindfulness” which is the mark of highest wisdom in Buddhism.

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1 One remembers in this context the Buddhist practice of “Sati-patthana” — the meditations on a corpse or in a graveyard, designed to bring home the truth of “anicca” (Humphreys, The Buddhist Way 104).