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The Dhamma

And Some Current Misconceptions

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The Dhamma And Some Current Misconceptions



he objection is sometimes raised by Westerners that the Dhamma belongs to another cultural pattern altogether, and is therefore unsuited to the Western outlook.

Buddhism arose among the Indo-European people of northern India some 2,500 years ago, while the predominant religion of the West came from the Semitic tradition of the Near East, which has also produced Judaism and Islam. Consequently, it is hard to understand in what respect Semitic culture is nearer to that West than Indo-European culture itself. Nor should one forget that Christianity expanded from the Near East by way of the Roman empire to Western Europe and America, while Islam is established in such dissimilar cultural areas as West Africa, Malaya and Indonesia. If it be objected that there have been changes to suit local conditions, what happens to our original criticism? It is true that the majority of individuals in a culture have to face the same problems and this suggests the conclusion that these

problems have been created by the specific life conditions existing in that culture. That they do not represent problems common to human nature seems to be warranted by the fact that the motivating forces and conflicts in other cultures are different from ours. [1] But this does not imply that the basis of the human condition found in, for example, birth, death, the search for the pleasant and the avoidance of pain, is not the context in which all the cultures are bound to function.

In present Western conditions it may be hard to appreciate the Dhamma, and no doubt people are put off when they come in contact with the “cocktail-party Buddhism,” which is a by-product of the insistence of looking at life as an intellectual exercise. For similar reasons Jung found occasion to animadvert against those Westerners who practise Eastern yoga.

It is quite true that much, probably most, of the so-called yoga practice indulged in by Westerners is foolish and misguided. That is, however, not because it is “eastern” in origin, but because it is not pursued for the right reason.” [2] In both these cases superficiality or crankiness are the root of the trouble.

A distinction should be made between the location in time and place of the Dhamma and the question of its validity. References in the Pali Canon to externals

are historical and should be distinguished from the essentials, such as the Four Noble Truths, each person being left to put them to the test for himself. The present international situation should also provide food for thought on mettā, or loving kindness, surely as necessary now as at the time of the Buddha. However, it is formulated the Dhamma remains true to its description as “ehipassika,” something to come and see for oneself. This should suggest that Buddhism is more than a bundle of notions. The person who is used to intellectual and speculative edifices is not usually in the habit of testing them by the criterion of personal experience. Contrast this with the words of the Buddha: “I teach you a teaching for the rejection of, the getting rid of, any self, a way by which impure conditions can be put away and pure conditions brought to increase. By which one, even in this very life, may attain unto the fulfilment and growth of perfect wisdom, realising it by one’s own direct knowledge, and therein to abide. Now it may well be that this thought will occur to you: ‘Yes, this may be done but yet one remains sorrowful.’ But that is not the way to look at it, for when this is done, there will be as a result joy, zest, calm, mindfulness, self-possession and the happy life. And if others should ask us this question: ‘But what is that getting of a physical-body self, a mind-made self, a formless self

about which you say all this?’ Then we should thus reply: “It is the same self of which we speak, for at the moment when any one of these three modes of self is going on it is not reckoned as one of the other two: it is only reckoned by the name of the particular personality which prevails. For all these are merely names, terms, ways of speaking, definitions of everyday use. These we use when we speak, but we are not deceived by them.” [3] This cuts across Western lines of thought. Many scholars, however sympathetic they may have been on the intellectual level, missed the point because they tried to deduce where the Dhamma leads instead of combining intellect with experience. How many of those who indulged in the hair-raising speculations about Nibbāna for instance ever did any meditation?

Another extreme is represented by those who sought to smuggle in esoteric teachings. Since the Buddha explained that he was not holding back anything, that was conducive to the welfare and progress of anyone who was interested, in the “closed first of the teacher,” there can be little justification for this. He stated that he knew more than he was prepared to divulge as he was only interested in that which was of practical application. Speculation may be entertaining but it is incompatible with concentrating on the task which can bring beneficent

results in the immediate future. The Dhamma is for the individual and not vice versa and this is one reason why it is based on the First Noble Truth, which states that life involves suffering. Everyone has experienced it to some extent in his own life.

So, far from being alien to the Western person, Buddhism can appeal to him on his own ground. Since the Renaissance the best of the European tradition has aimed at a humanistic training, in which the individual is urged to think for himself. Comparable to this is the advice given by the Buddha to the Kālāmas, who complained about the difficulty of assessing the various teachings in circulation: “Do not be led by the authority of religious texts, nor by mere logic or inference, nor by considering appearances, nor by delight in speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities, nor by the idea ‘this is our teacher.’ But when you know for yourselves that certain things are unwholesome then give them up. And when you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome then accept them and follow them.” [4] This resolves the problem of “faith,” which has caused so much discussion in the West, particularly when it has been opposed to modern science. Galileo suffered for his views, and it was long time before it was admitted in some quarters that this world was not the centre of the universe but merely part of a galaxy. It was only in

1950 that the Pope lifted the ban on Darwin's theory of evolution.

Man cannot change the world overnight, but the Dhamma shows the practical possibility of the individual bringing about a healthy change in his attitude and therefore in his attitude and therefore in his actions; which is bound to affect the environment. Whether he does so is his own business, and unless he appreciates the reasons for doing so it is literally meaningless to try and force him to understand. As the Dhammapada says:

“By oneself, indeed, is evil done; by oneself is one injured. By oneself is evil left undone; by oneself is one purified. Purity and impurity belong to oneself. No one purifies another.” [5] Purity is to be understood in the sense of the purity of a chemical substance and not merely according to moral or ritual convention. The Dhammapada explains that just as a water-pot is filled gradually by small drops of water, so a person may be gradually filled by healthy aims, or else by those which lead to painful results. Only those who are not stuck in the mud themselves can pull another out.

A contemporary psychoanalyst remarks: “The East was not burdened with the concept of a transcendent father-saviour in which the monotheistic religions expressed their longings. Taoism and Buddhism had a

rationality and realism superior to that of Western religions ... Paradoxically, Eastern religious thought turns out to be more congenial to Western religious thought than does Western religious thought itself." [6] He further [7] comments on the cheerful mood of humanistic doctrines, contrasted to the feelings of guilt which arise in theistic religion, in which the devotee is likely to deprive himself of all good qualities by projecting them on to a supernatural agency. In this case it is not surprising that he ends up with the feeling of being a worthless sinner. Nor should the implications of religious masochism be overlooked, in which an apparently acute self-criticism masks arrogance and delusion. Theodor Reik dealt with some of these problems in his "Masochism in Modern Man." Such mechanisms delude the person into thinking he is getting the best of both worlds, whereas it is hindering him from taking the steps which may be reasonably expected to be conducive to better results.

As far as the West is concerned, the present age is one of science and analysis. How does this affect the Dhamma? Psychologists [8] can tell us how this "self" is gradually built up in the originally "selfless" infant, how it expands and becomes more complex with experience, how strains in the imperfectly integrated experience may sometimes distort and split it into two

or more separate “personalities,” and how these may be welded into one again by harmonising the conflicting stresses. Truly do they teach, as the Buddha taught long before, that in all this there is nothing immortal, nothing permanent, no hard changeless centre in the ever-changing flux of experience which could in truth be called a self (conventionally speaking, B. K.). This self that we prize so dearly and to which we subordinate all is a mere emptiness, the empty heart of a whirlpool, a mathematical point which changes its position, not only from year to year, but even from hour to hour, as a man shifts from his “business integration to that which is manifested at his home or club.” This lack of an abiding substance or ego-entity in the ultimate sense (anattā), impermanence (anicca) and dukkha are the three characteristics of life and are so closely related that it is hard to appreciate them as separate concepts. Whether it is the cells of the body, arrangements of atoms or just external events the element of transitoriness is noticeable in life, and from this it is easier to see the lack of an abiding ego entity and hence the incomplete and sometimes unsatisfactory or painful side of it. Anyone may observe the flux of his thoughts and emotions, but if it is to be of real help to him these three characteristics of life must be understood or realised more deeply than

as purely intellectual concepts. “Dukkha” has no single equivalent in English adequate to the range of all it implies. To call it simply “suffering” is misleading. It is obvious that this is not the whole of life, and it would be an error to assume that the Dhamma is either pessimistic or optimistic: Its aim is to see life as it really is, which does not depend on feelings one way or the other.

This may be compared to the aim of a scientist, and it follows that so far from fearing scientific inquiry the Dhamma welcomes it. But neither science nor logic can “prove” nor disprove the validity of the Dhamma, since it must be personally experienced. The present theory of matter [9] as energy or motion seems near to the Buddhist view of *anicca* or impermanence, but then it is clear that the atomic theory of the last century would not have been so sympathetic. What will science say tomorrow? Physics may be applied to the environment, but for the individual it may be more fruitful to look within, not in the sense of brooding or mulling over the projections of the mind. Until recent years the West has largely neglected this in favour of “conquering nature” but in depth psychology in particular there is a move towards dealing with levels of the mind which are normally unconscious. This does not mean they are inoperative, even if many people ignore them. The works of Fromm already

referred to are an interesting bridge between certain aspects of oriental doctrine and depth psychology, but it is especially in meditation that the Dhamma has something of great value to offer to the West.

The struggle between dogmatism and science in Europe has had far-reaching results. For many it has posed the false antithesis of either accepting theistic religion, with its demands of faith, or rejecting all religion for some form of materialism or nihilism. To judge by the increase in neuroses and the number of patients in mental hospitals, and perhaps those who should be there as well, the present trend in Western culture would not appear to be a healthy one. Previously patients complained of specific disorders and suffered from definite symptoms [10] but now the majority complain of "*mal de siècle*": the sickness [11] of the age, which despite material affluence [12] seems to get into distress. The free-for-all of the present does not provide the pleasure, let alone happiness, that on paper it might lead one to expect.

False antithesis has indeed become part or an ingrained habit of dualistic thinking in the West. Without the comforting labels of good and bad, hot and cold, pleasant and unpleasant, people get lost, but do not consider whether such labels mean anything; in most cases they are highly subjective and the results of past conditioning. "People are so fond of

discriminating labels that they even go to the length of putting them on human qualities and emotions common to all. So they talk of different 'brands' of charity, as for example of Buddhist charity or Christian charity, and look down on other "brands" of charity. But charity cannot be sectarian; it is neither Christian, Buddhist, Hindu nor Moslem." [13] Many of these mistakes could be avoided if the three characteristics of life, especially anattā, were borne in mind, but Western thought as a whole is based on the tacit assumption of the ego, which even in its milder forms distorts perception. It may be objected that the Pali Canon abounds in discriminative labelling and that Buddhist analysis is exhaustive in its lists of categories. This is true, but it should be remembered that the texts are the basis of practice, and not a substitute for it. Buddha stated that eventually one has to go beyond suppositions or concepts, and in a well-known sutta of the Majjhima-Nikāya it is stressed that the Dhamma is the means to the end. The image used is that of a raft, which one uses for crossing a river and does not, if one is wise, carry on one's back afterwards. A raft on dry land is a burden.

The way out of the discriminative impasses is the Middle Path. It is characteristic of the Dhamma in its avoidance of extremes. It recognises conventional truth (*vohāra-sacca*) and ultimate truth, (*paramattha-*

sacca). The former is for everyday use, and life as we are bound to live it would be impossible without it. A “person” for instance is not an ultimate truth according, to the Buddhist view, but obviously must be treated as humanity and common sense suggests. The two sorts of truth do not therefore exclude one another, and the Dhamma aims at a healthy balance between them. Each individual is so conditioned that he can see only a little objectively, in the ordinary sense, while in the ultimate sense his mind is so unconcentrated and undisciplined that he mistakes the impermanent for the permanent, the unpleasant for the pleasant, and is so attached to the idea of the ego that he is rooted in ignorance (*avijjā*). Thus his relation to his own existence and the world is based on a fundamental error, and it is hardly surprising if he runs into difficulties. The Middle Path aims to correct these errors and their results. Man is not the exclusively intellectual creature some writers would have us believe, and the Path is designed to cater for the whole being. It has often been described, [14] but unless it is trodden it can scarcely be expected to produce results. As an analogy one might think of the difference between a thirsty traveller having a drink of water, and the same traveller just discussing the nature of drinking water as an academic proposition.

To classify the Dhamma, which is based on

Buddha's experience, is superfluous. The goal is Nibbāna and it represents, among other things, a solution to the problem of discriminative thinking: "Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so neither visible forms, nor sounds, nor odours, nor tastes, nor bodily impressions, neither the desired nor the undesired, can cause such a one to waver. Steadfast is his mind, gained is his deliverance." [15] This does not sound like the nihilism that some critics have reproached Buddhism with, and if anything has been annihilated it is only the bogus ego-feeling. In the Cala-Māluṅkya-sutta [16] the Buddha explains that following the Path does not depend on speculative views as to whether the world is infinite or not, and in this foreshadows the modern approach, which prefers empirical experience and the tangible. This is of relevance to the present situation in the West, where there is a disparity between intellectual achievement and ordinary happiness. Quite rightly the Westerner is not willing to take a leap in the dark, and the Dhamma may be put to a practical test. Eventually even right views have to be put aside, as they are but the means. The Dhamma is not authoritarian, demanding that a person condemn other views, but shows how views arise. Nor is it suggested that liberation can be attained by formal methods: "Better than reciting a hundred verses

composed of meaningless words is one text on hearing which one becomes peaceful.” [17] Buddha described attachment to rites and rituals as a hindrance. Such attachments are subjective, so that they hinder a clear view of reality and represent craving. Rites and rituals are likely to delude a person and deflect his attention from the effective parts of the Path, such as meditation or mind training.

Misconceptions about meditation abound in the West. Some think it is an artificial induction of esoteric states, and others think it is day-dreaming and a waste of time because the meditator does not appear to be “doing” anything. An English classic remarks: “The tendency of Indian mysticism to regard the Unitive life wholly in its passive aspects, as a total self-annihilation, a disappearance into the substance of the Godhead results, I believe, from a distortion of truth (due to temperament). The Oriental mystic presses on to lose his life upon the heights, but he does not come back and bring to his fellow-men the life-giving news that he has transcended mortality in the interests of the race.” [18]

Leaving aside the use of theistic terminology, it would be a grave error to suppose that Buddha became enlightened by purely passive means. His trials in the forest were faced with determination. In the Majjhima Nikāya he frequently advises the monks

not to be slothful, but to meditate, in order to avoid regrets later. Finally, it is difficult to ignore his exposition of the Dhamma during the last forty-five years of his life. After this it was transmitted orally, and later written down. [19]

Meditation requires a basis of calm, which results from a certain ethical standard, and it requires effort. One of the factors of enlightenment given in the texts is energy (*virīya*). Those who doubt whether this applies to meditation should not take it on trust, but try it for themselves ... the benefits that may be experienced are considerable.

“Ehi-passika” ...

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Notes

1. K. Homey, *The Neurotic Personality of our Time*, W. W. Norton, New York, p. 34. [\[Back\]](#)
2. S. K. Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, I: M. Watkins, London, p. xv. [\[Back\]](#)
3. Digha-Nikāya, no. 9, Poṭṭāpāda Sutta. [\[Back\]](#)
4. Anguttara Nikāya, Pali Text Society, London, vol. I p. 188. Translated by Soma Thera in The Wheel No. 8, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy. [\[Back\]](#)
5. Dhammapada, transl. S. Radhakrishnan, Oxford University Press, Verse 145. [\[Back\]](#)
6. E. Fromm, *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, Harper, New York, p. 80. [\[Back\]](#)
7. E. Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, Yale University Press, P. 50. [\[Back\]](#)
8. Prem, op. cit. p. 39. [\[Back\]](#)
9. Vide W. Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, Allen and Unwin, London. [\[Back\]](#)
10. Vide Breuer and Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, Hogart Press, London. [\[Back\]](#)

1. Fromm, *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, p. 85. [\[Back\]](#)
2. Horney, op. cit. [\[Back\]](#)
3. W. Rāhula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Gordon Fraser, Bedford, p. 5. [\[Back\]](#)
4. Rāhula, op. cit. p. 45. [\[Back\]](#)
5. A III 378. [\[Back\]](#)
6. MN 63. [\[Back\]](#)
7. Dhammapada, Verse 102. [\[Back\]](#)
8. E. Underhill, *Mysticism*, Methuen, London, p. 434. [\[Back\]](#)
9. It is still common in countries such as Burma to find people who have committed a whole book, or more, to memory [\[Back\]](#)

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