



# Buddhist Publication Society

## Newsletter

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### Dhamma Without Rebirth?

In line with the present-day stress on the need for religious teachings to be personally relevant and directly verifiable, in certain Dhamma circles the time-honoured Buddhist doctrine of rebirth has come up for severe re-examination. Although only a few contemporary Buddhist thinkers still go so far as to suggest that this doctrine be scrapped as “unscientific,” another opinion has been gaining ground to the effect that whether or not rebirth itself be a fact, the doctrine of rebirth has no essential bearings on the practice of Dhamma and thence no claim to an assured place in the Buddhist teachings. The Dhamma, it is said, is concerned solely with the here and now, with helping us to resolve our personal hang-ups through increased self-awareness and inner honesty. All the rest of Buddhism we can now let go as the religious trappings of an ancient culture utterly inappropriate for the Dhamma of our technological age.

If we suspend our own predilections for the moment and instead go directly to our sources, we come upon the indisputable fact that the Buddha himself taught rebirth and taught it as a basic tenet of his teaching. Viewed in their totality, the Buddha’s discourses show us that far from being a mere concession to the outlook prevalent in his time or an Asiatic cultural contrivance, the doctrine of rebirth has tremendous implications for the entire course of Dhamma practice, affecting both the aim with which the practice is taken up and the motivation with which it is followed through to completion. The aim of the Buddhist path is liberation from suffering, and the Buddha makes it abundantly clear that the suffering from which liberation is needed is the suffering of bondage to *samsāra*, the round of repeated birth and death. To be sure, the Dhamma does have an aspect which is directly visible and personally verifiable. By direct inspection of our own experience we can see that sorrow, tension, fear and grief always arise from our greed, aversion and ignorance, and thus can be eliminated with the removal of those defilements. The importance of this directly visible side of Dhamma practice cannot be underestimated, as it serves to confirm our confidence in the liberating efficacy of the Buddhist path. However, to downplay the doctrine of rebirth and explain the entire import of the Dhamma as the amelioration of mental suffering through enhanced self-awareness is to deprive the Dhamma of those wider perspectives from which it derives its full breadth and profundity. By doing so one seriously risks reducing it in the end to little more than a sophisticated ancient system of humanistic psychotherapy.

The Buddha himself has clearly indicated that the root problem of human existence is not simply the fact that we are vulnerable to sorrow, grief and fear, but that we tie ourselves through our egoistic clinging to a constantly self-regenerating pattern of birth, ageing, sickness and death within which we undergo the more specific forms of mental affliction. He has also shown that the primary danger in the defilements is their causal role in sustaining the round of rebirths. As long as they remain unabandoned in the deep strata of the mind, they drag us through the round of becoming in which we shed a flood of tears “greater than the waters of the ocean.” When these points are carefully considered, we then see that the practice of Dhamma does not aim at providing us with a comfortable reconciliation with our present personalities and our situation in the world, but at initiating a far-reaching inner transformation which will issue in our deliverance from the cycle of worldly existence in its entirety.

Admittedly, for most of us the primary motivation for entering upon the path of Dhamma has been a gnawing sense of dissatisfaction with the routine course of our unenlightened lives rather than a keen perception of the dangers in the round of rebirths. However, if we are going to follow the Dhamma through to its end and tap its full potential for conferring peace and higher wisdom, it is necessary for the motivation of our practice to mature beyond that which originally induced us to enter the path. Our underlying motivation must grow towards those essential truths disclosed to us by the Buddha and, encompassing those truths, must use them to nourish its own capacity to lead us towards the realisation of the goal.

Our motivation acquires the requisite maturity by the cultivation of right view, the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, which as explained by the Buddha includes an understanding of the principles of kamma and rebirth as fundamental to the structure of our existence. Though contemplating the moment is the key to the development of insight meditation, it would be an erroneous extreme to hold that the practice of Dhamma consists wholly in maintaining mindfulness of the present. The Buddhist path stresses the role of wisdom as the instrument of deliverance, and wisdom must comprise not only a penetration of the moment in its vertical depths, but a comprehension of the past and future horizons within which our present existence unfolds. To take full cognisance of the principle of rebirth will give us that panoramic perspective from which we can survey our lives in their broader context and total network of relationships. This will spur us on in our own pursuit of the path and will reveal the profound significance of the goal towards which our practice points, the end of the cycle of rebirths as mind's final liberation from suffering.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

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## Exploring the Wheels

For over twenty-five centuries men and women, inspired by the Dhamma, have chosen to leave the home life to live as Buddhist monks and nuns. But does becoming a monk or nun today fulfil the same needs which people felt so many years ago? Just what is the daily life of a monk like? And haven't there been a great many changes? BPS issues several WHEEL publications which deal with these questions. *Going Forth: A Call to Buddhist Monkhood* (WHEEL 27 / 28) by Sumana Samanera contains a long essay and personal letters which explain why this young German left his homeland in 1906 to enter the Sangha in distant Ceylon. The essay is a moving account of the author's response to the message of the Dhamma and of his need to be in robes. By citing important passages from the Buddha's discourses, interwoven with his own comments, the author explains why he chose to leave the sensually attractive world to lead a life of renunciation: "The more frequently a man thus dwells, all the more perceptibly does the alienation increase, does the world die away from him, for ever more clearly does the true nature of the world reveal itself to the mind through the persistent contemplation of this truth founded in experience." His understanding of the First Noble Truth leads him to state: "To such a comprehension, to such a longing, the meaning of asceticism becomes evident as that manner of living which really makes possible single-minded devotion to that most difficult of all tasks—the task of becoming perfectly good or pure or holy, and thereby free from suffering and rebirth!" He rejoices in his life as a monk: "Only he who has left home knows the relief of relinquishing accustomed bonds; only he who has left home knows the happiness of being free: an inward experience—indisputable!" This work is a modern version of the Theragatha, echoing the thoughts of those bhikkhus of long ago who travelled "that hard but incomparably rewarding road towards unshakeable deliverance of mind."

Just as the needs of man have not changed, so too, the rites of the Sangha exhibit a continuity. *Ordination in Theravada Buddhism* (WHEEL 56) is an account of the novice-ordination ceremony as witnessed by J. F. Dickson at the Malwatta Monastery in Kandy in 1872. "Nothing could be more impressive than the order and solemnity of the proceedings. It was impossible not to feel that the ceremony was being conducted precisely as it was more than two thousand years ago." Today the same ceremony is still held as people respond to the Buddha's words: "Come, monk, well proclaimed is the Dhamma. Live the holy life for the complete ending of suffering."

Bhikkhu Khantipalo has published two works with us which describe bhikkhu life in the present day. *With Robes and Bowl* (WHEEL 83/84) is an account of the life of a *dhutaṅga* monk, one who has devoted himself to a life of austerity, meditative development and homeless wandering with the barest belongings. He follows the routine of such a monk on a typical day: his schedule of early rising, morning chanting, sitting in meditation, going on almsround, etc. Other sections explore the bhikkhu's encounter with death, compare the life of a wandering monk with that of a monk living in a fixed abode, and describe the two joys of the monk's life: noble companionship and solitude. The second work, *The Blessings of Pindapata* (WHEEL 73), deals with the monastic practice of walking on almsround. Commonly misunderstood as "begging," in reality going for alms is an important aspect of monastic training which unites the Sangha and laity in the practice of Dhamma. For the lay people the almsround provides the opportunity to practise generosity, to acquire merit and to express their gratitude to the monks who embody the Buddhist ideal; for the bhikkhus the almsround is an opportunity to observe good conduct, patience, kindness and compassion. The practice is one which is fruitful for laity and Sangha alike.

—Ayya Nyanasiri

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## Book Notes

*Early Buddhist Philosophy in the Light of the Four Noble Truths*. Alfonso Verdu. Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi. 240 pp. Indian Rs. 120.

The present book uses the Four Noble Truths as a schema for developing a systematic exposition of the main tenets of "Hinayana" Buddhist philosophical thought as expounded in the Sarvastivada system of Acharya Vasubandhu's monumental *Abhidharma Kosha*, the major compendium of this system. Under the first noble truth the author discusses the Kosha's analysis of the five *skandhas*; under the second, its theory of causality with its implications for the doctrine of karma; under the third, its conception of the three unconditioned elements; and under the fourth truth, its presentation of the path. To a reader already acquainted with the Abhidhamma system of the Theravada, this overview of the rival Abhidharma philosophy of the Kosha will provide a useful basis for interesting comparisons and contrasts, though whether the author's account of the Kosha is accurate in all respects will have to be judged by one more familiar with the primary sources than the present reviewer. Since much of the book is philosophically technical, it can only be recommended to readers with the requisite background and interests, but for those it should be a stimulating study.

*The Buddha's System of Meditation.* Ayodha Prasad Pradhan. Sterling Publishers, Delhi. 4 volumes, 1750 pp. Indian Rs. 1250. (Available in Sri Lanka from Lakehouse Bookshop, P. O. Box 244, Colombo 2).

This four-volume study by a Nepalese Buddhist scholar is, as its sheer length suggests, the product of many years of painstaking research and reflection, and for the work that went into it the author can only be admired. Having said this, one must also express with regret the wish that Mr. Pradhan would have worked hand in hand with a capable editor who could have helped him organise his material into a more streamlined format and present it in a more direct and lucid style.

As it stands the book often seems to meander from digression to digression so haphazardly that a consistent thread of argument or exposition becomes difficult to discern. A sense of balance would also have been an asset: two of the volumes are devoted almost wholly to the supernormal powers, a phase of Buddhist meditation which does not receive a corresponding amount of attention in the Canon and commentaries, while a digression on yoga in the final volume goes on to consume some 300 pages with scarcely a reference to Buddhism. A much more compressed treatment presented in a more fluent style would have enabled the author to share the fruits of his labours far more effectively.

*The Eternal Legacy: An Introduction to the Canonical Literature of Buddhism.* Mahasthavira Sangharakshita. Tharpa Publications, London. 317 pp. U. K. £7.50.

Winner of the Buddhist Society's Christmas Humphreys Book Award for 1986, this book offers a clear and comprehensive survey of the entire body of Buddhist canonical literature. Early chapters cover the Oral Tradition, the Vinaya and Sutta Pitakas, and the Fundamental Abhidharma, while the following chapters survey the Mahayana canonical literature with close attention to each of the major Mahayana sutras. The opening chapter on "Buddhism and Language" contains several strictures against the Theravada which may strike even an impartial reader as too severe, while the final chapter on "Continuing Revelation" will provoke some puzzled questions and critical reservations from a Theravadin. On the whole, however, the author has done a brilliant job in organising a vast and highly variegated mass of material into such a compact and informative work. Not only will this book provide the general student of Buddhism with a concise survey of the Buddhist scriptures, but its chapters on the Mahayana sutras will enable the Theravadin reader to acquire a capsule knowledge of the sacred texts followed by his Mahayana compeers, all the more necessary today as the two major traditions make more and more frequent contacts.

*Vandana: Buddhist Devotions.* Vihara Book Service, 5017-16th Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20011, U.S.A.

This Theravada Buddhist devotional manual has been prepared especially to meet the needs of people wanting to develop a daily devotional routine. The core of the book is a collection of the most important Theravada Buddhist devotional texts in both Pali and English, with an introductory essay on devotion in Theravada Buddhism, and a supplementary guide to the practice of Buddhist devotions. Available also are four cassette tapes, complete with case, which contain chants of the devotional manual and of the entire Dhammapada by a resident monk of the Washington Buddhist Vihara. For ordering information please write to the Vihara Book Service at the above address.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

## From the Office

A few years ago a nephew of mine came to me to say good-bye before leaving for the U.S.A. for higher studies. I gave him a copy of Francis Story's *The Buddhist Outlook* and told him to read it if he could find the time. I wonder if he ever did find the time. Anyway, a year later a young man came to the BPS asking to see me. "I am a friend of your nephew," he said, "and I have come to thank you." "Why thank me?" I asked. "I am a Sri Lankan, from a non-Buddhist background," he replied. "I am studying in the U.S.A. and I know your nephew there. I read the copy of Francis Story's book which you gave to him, and only then did I realise what a treasure we have here in Sri Lanka, just for the picking! Since then I have studied Buddhism, and now I follow the Buddha's path."

There are many such people "with little dust in their eyes" who only need to meet the Dhamma in order to embrace it. Those of us who have been introduced to Buddhism and appreciate its value owe such people a duty to show them the correct path.

Give them the gift of the Dhamma, the gift that surpasses all other gifts. Perhaps you know of a book on Buddhism that impressed you deeply: give a copy to a friend you think might be receptive to such knowledge. Or ask us for our List of Publications and select a good book for him. Or enrol him as an associate member of our Society. Or you can give us his name and address and we will send him a selection of our introductory literature entirely at our own expense. Then "those who have little dust in their eyes will see."

—Albert Witanachchi

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## The Vision of Dhamma

The BPS bookshop is now carrying copies of the newly-issued book, *The Vision of Dhamma: Buddhist Writings of Nyanaponika Thera* (Rider, London, 6 pp.). This book, attractively produced, includes almost all the original works of Ven. Nyanaponika published by the BPS in its WHEEL and BODHI LEAVES series. Edited and introduced by Bhikkhu Bodhi, the book contains as a foreword an essay by the late Erich Fromm on "The Significance of Nyanaponika Thera for the West." It may be ordered from the BPS at:

In Sri Lanka Rs. 350/- plus Regd. postage Rs.10/-.

Abroad: U.S.\$ 12.00, plus Regd. Sea Mail postage \$ 2.00 or Regd. Air Mail postage \$ 6.25; U.K. £ 8.00, plus Regd. Sea Mail postage £ 1.25 or Regd. Air Mail postage £3/-.

## Newswatch

The Zen Buddhist Temple of Ann Arbor, Michigan, will host a Conference on World Buddhism in North America from July 10–17 of this year. The conference, the first of its kind, will draw on the collective experience both of North Americans who have become Buddhist teachers and of several prominent Asian Buddhist leaders who have made North America their home. Appealing to the expertise of a number of North America's best respected scholars of Buddhism, this conference will explore a wide range of religious and social issues that have come to be prominent in North American Buddhism. For further details contact: Zen Buddhist Temple, 1214 Packard Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48104, USA (Tel: (313) 761-6520 or 995-0435).

We would like to call the attention of our readers to two journals that recently crossed our desk, both coming from the practitioners of vipassanā meditation in North America. One is

*Inquiring Mind*, which describes itself as an independent publication produced for and supported by the vipassanā community. The journal is published twice a year by the Dharma Foundation. For fuller information: Inquiring Mind, P.O. Box 9999, North Berkeley Station, Berkeley CA 94709, USA. The other journal is *Karuna: A Journal of Buddhist Meditation*, which aims to provide articles related to the practice of Buddhist meditation as well as other aspects of life in the world, with a special concern for women's involvement in Buddhist practice. For fuller information write to: Vipassana Meditation Society, P.O. Box 24468, Station C, Vancouver, B.C. V5T 4M5, Canada.

The Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF) was formed in order to bear public witness to the Buddha's Way as a path of peace and protection for all beings. The objectives of BPF include: raising peace and ecological concerns among Buddhists and promoting projects through which Buddhists can express these concerns; encouraging the delineation of the Buddhist way of non-violence to build a foundation for present action; serving as liaison to, and enlisting support for, existing national and international Buddhist peace and ecology programmes; and providing a focus for concern over the persecution of Buddhists as an aspect of protecting all beings.

BPF is a general membership organisation managed by a Board of Directors drawn from the major Buddhist traditions. For fuller information contact:

Buddhist Peace Fellowship  
P. O. Box 4650  
Berkeley, CA 94704, USA

Buddhist Peace Fellowship  
C/o The Old George  
Broadwindsor  
Dorset DT 83QD  
England

—(Courtesy Johnson Thomas)

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# The Buddhist Publication Society

The BPS is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for all people.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is—a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

For more information about the BPS and our publications, please visit our website, or contact:

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