



Buddhist Publication Society

Newsletter

No. 11
Winter 1989

The Vital Link

At the same time that Buddhism has begun to gain a firm foothold in the West, its fate in its traditional Asian homelands has been moving, sadly, in the opposite direction, towards atrophy and decline. Already in several Asian Buddhist countries Buddhism has been forcibly suppressed, while even in those countries which have preserved their political integrity the Dhamma no longer occupies the same sovereign place in people's hearts that it held in an earlier era. Although devotional piety and a sense of Buddhist personal identity still remain strong, throughout the breadth of Buddhist Asia cultural and ideological forces of great power have been unleashed which daily challenge the hegemony of the Dhamma as the key to meaning and value for those who profess it as their refuge.

Among the changes taking place in current patterns of thinking, perhaps the most detrimental to the Dhamma has been the rise to prominence of a materialistic world view which focuses upon the present life as the only field for all human endeavour. This world view need not be assented to intellectually, with full awareness of its implications, for it to become a major determinant of our attitudes and conduct. Often a curious ambivalence prevails in our minds, where with one part of the mind we profess our confidence in the lofty principles of the Dhamma, while with the other we think and act as if the present life were the sole occasion for human happiness and the achievement of worldly success were the true mark of the accomplished individual.

The rapid spread of the materialistic world view has in turn brought about a far-ranging secularisation of values that invades every nook and cranny of our lives. This transformation of values gives precedence to goals and attitudes diametrically opposed to those advocated by the Dhamma, and under its impact the scales have tipped far away even from a reasonable balance between material and spiritual goods. Now we see acquisitiveness replacing contentment as the reigning ideal, competition taking the place of co-operation, fast efficiency the place of compassionate concern, and selfish indulgence the place of abstinence and self-control.

The attempt to live simultaneously by two conflicting sets of principles - those being ushered in by secular materialism and those grounded in the Dhamma - generates a tension that contains within it a seed of very destructive potential. Often the tension is only dimly felt by those in the older generation, who accept the new outlook and values without clearly perceiving the challenge they pose to traditional Buddhist ideals.

It is when the contradiction is pushed down to the next generation, to the Buddhist youth of today, that the inherent incompatibility of the two perspectives comes into the open as a clear-cut choice between two alternative philosophies of life, one proposing a hierarchy of values which culminates in the spiritual and sanctions restraint and renunciation, the other holding up the indulgence and gratification of personal desire as the highest conceivable goal. Since the latter appeals to strong and deep-seated human drives, it is hardly puzzling that so many young people today have turned away from the guidance of the Dhamma to pursue the new paths to instant pleasure opened up by the consumer society or, in their frustration at missed opportunities, to take to the path of violence.

Since it is the younger generation that forms the vital link in the continuity of Buddhism, connecting its past with its future, it is of paramount importance that the Buddhist youth of today should retain their fidelity to the Dhamma. The Dhamma should be for them not merely a symbol of cultural and ethnic identity, not merely a focus point of sentimental piety, but above all a path to be taken to heart, personally applied, and adhered to in those critical choices between present expediency and long-range spiritual gain. The problem, however, is precisely how to inspire the young to look to the Dhamma as their guide and infallible refuge.

It must be stressed that our present dilemma goes far deeper than a breakdown of moral standards, and thus that it cannot be easily rectified by pious preaching and moral exhortation. If conduct deviating from the Dhamma has become widespread among today's youth, this is because the Buddhist vision has ceased to be meaningful to them, and it has ceased to be meaningful not because it has lost its relevance but because it is not being presented in ways which highlight its timeless and ever-immediate relevance. The most urgent task facing those concerned with the preservation of Buddhism must be the attempt to communicate to the young the central vision at the heart of the Dhamma, the vision from which all the specific doctrines and practices of Buddhism issue forth. This does not require a mastery of the technical details of the Dhamma, but it does require that we ourselves understand the Dhamma's essence and are actively striving to make that understanding the foundation of our lives. Both by precept and example we must show that true freedom is to be found not in uncontrolled licence, but in the control and mastery of desire; that true happiness lies not in a proliferation of goods, but in peace and contentment; that our relations with others are most rewarding when they are governed not by conflict and competition, but by kindness and compassion; and that true security is to be achieved not by the acquisition of wealth and power, but by the conquest of self with all its ambitions and conceits.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Exploring the Wheels

Death. You are going to die. How often have you had the fleeting thought that you will die and quickly buried that thought rather than face it? Every time it arises, if you are like everyone else. For while all of us do know that we will die, at some level the ego refuses to accept that fact.

Yet as Buddhists we have to lift our ostrich-heads out of the sand and see things as they really are. And that includes our own death, and the death of everyone we love. Paradoxically, as we look at death, and meditate on death, we learn that death as a meditation subject can lead to the end of death - to enlightenment, to Nibbāna the Deathless.

The starting point in this necessary investigation should be the philosophical and psychological attitudes towards death from the Buddhist perspective. In *Buddhism and Death* (Wheel No.261) M.O'C. Walshe clearly contrasts the still prevalent eternalist/Christian and annihilationist/secular beliefs with the Buddha's knowledge of the falsity of both of these views. He then examines the modern psychological understanding of the mechanism of repression due to fear of death and *thanatos*, the longing for death, and presents the Buddha's insightful recognition of both of these mind-deceptions. Just what the Buddhist attitude towards death is, is presented through short essays: What is Death?, What is Rebirth?, and Death and the Arahāt.

The next step might well be reading the classical meditation on death found in the *Visuddhimagga* (Ch. VIII, pp.247-59). There the reader will find the immediate benefits of contemplation on death:

A bhikkhu devoted to mindfulness of death is constantly diligent. He acquires perception of disenchantment with all kinds of becoming (existence). He conquers attachment to life. He condemns evil. He avoids much storing. He has no stain of avarice about requisites. Perception of impermanence grows in him, following upon which there appear the perceptions of pain and not-self. But while beings who have not developed [mindfulness of] death fall victims to fear, horror and confusion at the time of death ... he dies undeluded and fearless without falling into any such state. And if he does not attain the deathless here and now, he is at least headed for a happy destiny on the break up of the body.

Buddhist Reflections on Death by V.F. Gunaratna (Wheel No. 102/103) weaves an understanding of death through the understanding of the basic teachings of the Dhamma to create excellent insight-meditation subjects, the next step in understanding death. Thus through reflecting on the process of kamma arises the answer to the question, "What is the cause of death?": kamma is one root cause of death. An analysis of the aggregates leads to the realisation "that there is no one who suffers dying, but that there is only a dying-process just as much as living is also a process." Such insights into death are traced through change, dependent origination, and becoming. The writer states: "If we can visualise the immensity of the past and the immensity of the future, the present loses its seemingly compelling importance. If we could but visualise the vistas of innumerable births and deaths through which we have passed, and the vistas of innumerable births and deaths through which we will pass in the future, we should not, we could not fear just this one death out of the endless series of births and deaths, rises and falls, appearances and disappearances which constitute the ceaseless process of saṃsāric life." Then, to effect the co-ordination of the cycles of birth and death, Gunaratna traces the states of consciousness from the death-moment to the re-arising of consciousness in rebirth-linking.

One of the great strengths in Buddhism is that it enables us to take a stumbling block - here, the fear of death - and to use this as the motivating force which leads us on to comprehension, then to meditative insight, and finally to transcendent realisation. Whatever one's motivation - if not fear, then perhaps clinging to life - death needs to be examined.

—Ayya Nyanasiri

Book Reviews

Buddhist Ethics: The Path to Nirvana. Hammalawa Saddhatissa. Wisdom Publications, 23 Dering St. London W1. 213 pp. £6.95 / U.S. \$12.95.

This is a reprint of a book which first appeared in 1970 and had long been out of print before being reissued by Wisdom Publications, who have produced it in line with their usual high standards of bookmaking. The author, Ven. Dr. Hammalawa Saddhatissa, hardly needs introduction to Buddhist readers. Not only is he a renowned scholar and author in the field of Theravada Buddhism, but as head of the London Buddhist Vihara for several decades he is also one of the longest standing Theravada monks resident in the West.

Buddhist Ethics, one of his major works, reveals both strengths and weaknesses. The weaknesses consist, in brief, in its loose construction, in the absence of sustained philosophical inquiry, and in a flock of minor doctrinal and textual inaccuracies. The first-mentioned defect appears most distinctly in the book's desultory treatment of its stated subject. Ven. Saddhatissa begins appropriately with a general characterisation of ethics, which he uses as the scaffolding for his essay. Immediately, however, after introducing his topic, he launches into a sketch of the historical background which digresses into irrelevant details of Indian cosmology and metaphysics. The next two chapters present a summary of the life and teaching of the Buddha

and a disquisition on the Three Refuges which would have gained from being greatly reduced in length and confined to material bearing on Buddhist ethics.

The discussion of Buddhist ethics proper begins with Chapter 4, an analysis of the Five Precepts, and continues through the next three chapters on The Underlying Ideals of the Moralities, The Layman's Duties to His Associates, and The Layman's Relation to the State. It is here that the second fault mentioned above becomes obtrusive, namely, the lack of any attempt to grapple analytically with Buddhist ethical teachings and thereby elicit their deeper significance. In each chapter Ven. Saddhatissa offers abundant quotations from the Pali sources covering a wide range of ethically pertinent topics. The material, however, is laid out in an almost schematic manner without being subsumed under a comprehensive vision which clearly sets forth the ultimate aim of Buddhist teachings and demonstrates how Buddhist ethics contributes towards the actualisation of that aim. At times the book indicates stirrings in this direction, but unfortunately Ven. Saddhatissa does not weld these together into a consistent and well-directed argument, preferring to pass from one textual citation to another in a way which dissipates whatever momentum his remarks tend to gather. Even the last chapter, The Ultimate Goal, offers merely a survey of canonical views_ on the nature of Nibbāna but does not explore with sufficient explicitness its connections to Buddhist ethics. One also regrets the absence of any attempt to highlight the present-day implications of Buddhist ethical principles, even though the author begins his preface by deploring the decline in modern moral standards.

Having pointed out the book's weaknesses, I do not wish to underestimate its value for the student of early Buddhism. Within its brief compass the book brings together a vast amount of material from the early Pali scriptures on the diverse aspects of Buddhist ethics and is particularly rich in its treatment of lay ethics. In this respect Buddhist Ethics can serve as an important counterfoil to the common Western misrepresentation of Theravada Buddhism as an ascetic creed of monastic virtuosos offering the layperson little more than the opportunity to gain merit by providing alms to the monkish professionals. With prolific citations from the Pali Canon, Ven. Saddhatissa makes known the wide array of ethical principles the Buddha laid down for the guidance of his lay followers, principles always distinguished by their soundness, practicality and sobriety. These teachings, which extend from the most intimate aspects of private life to the broad sphere of public polity, offer Buddhist lay followers enlightened guidance in their mundane affairs as well as in their strivings towards the transcendent. Although one would have wished to see the important subject of Buddhist ethics treated with the philosophical acumen and practical exemplification needed to make Buddhist moral teachings convincing to the contemporary reader, we must still commend Ven. Saddhatissa for making available in one compact volume this vast amount of material from the Pali Canon.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Publications

The Discourse on the Fruits of Reclusheship: The Sāmaññaphala Sutta and Its Commentaries.
Translated from the Pali by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Softback, 190 pages. S.L. Rs. 120.00 / U.S. \$ 10.00

The Sāmaññaphala Sutta, The Discourse on the Fruits of Reclusheship, is the second sutta in the entire Sutta Pitaka and one of the most elevating of the Buddha's discourses, sketching the progress of the disciple from the first steps on the path to the attainment of Nibbāna The work is not only a great spiritual classic but also a literary gem distinguished by its simple elegant diction and its beauty of poetic imagery. This book contains a complete translation of the

Sāmaññaphala Sutta together with its authoritative commentary and selections from two subcommentaries. Studied together, the sutta and its commentaries will prove to be of immense help in understanding and practising the Buddha's teachings.

Living Buddhist Masters. Jack Kornfield. Softback, 320 pages. S.L. Rs. 150.00 / U.S. \$ 15.00

Living Buddhist Masters is one of the most valuable books on Theravada Buddhist practice ever published, bringing to the reader the precise instructions of twelve of the greatest meditation masters of twentieth-century Buddhism. In their own words such teachers as Mahasi Sayadaw, Achan Chah, Sunlun Sayadaw, U Ba Khin and others explain the way of practice that has led them and their students to the realisation of the truths of the Dhamma. These masters invite the reader to understand and work directly with their ways of practice. Excellent introductory chapters by the compiler lucidly set out the basic framework of Buddhist practice and describe the settings of contemporary monasteries and masters in Thailand and Burma. Pictures of each of the masters are included.

The Buddha and His Teachings. Mahathera Nārada. Softback, 412 pages. S.L. Rs. 150 / U.S. \$ 15.00 Reprint.

Since its first appearance in 1964 this book has come to be regarded as one of the clearest and most detailed introductions to the fundamental teachings of Buddhism in English. In simple and lucid language Ven. Nārada relates the life of the Buddha and explains the doctrines and concepts that form the common bedrock of all Buddhism. The final chapters show the continuing relevance of Buddhism to the problems of modern life.

Buddhist Dictionary. Mahathera Nyanatiloka. Softback, 275 pages. S.L. Rs. 225.00 / U.S. \$ 20.00 Reprint

This reprint again makes available a work of unquestionable accuracy and authoritativeness in the understanding of early Buddhism. Despite the title, *Buddhist Dictionary* is not a mere word dictionary but a valuable aid to the terminology of Theravada Buddhism, as helpful to the serious lay student as to the professional scholar. The explanations are supplemented by numerous quotations from the sources, thus enabling the reader to extract from the book a minute and precise picture of the essential teachings of Theravada Buddhism.

Future Lineup

In 1989 the Wheel series will begin with a great classic of ancient Buddhist India, *Hymn to the Buddha* by the poet Matrçeta. This devotional poem of astounding beauty is one of the crowning achievements of Sanskrit Buddhist literature, and its rendering into clear sonorous English by Ven. S. Dhammika on the basis of existing scholarly translations should win for it the admiration of present-day Buddhists as well. The Wheel series will continue its Lives of the Disciples with the life of the Buddha's cousin, *Anuruddha: Master of the Divine Eye*, and will include two new dialogues on the Dhamma by Leonard Price (Bhikkhu Nyanasobhano), whose *Bhikkhu Tissa Dispels Some Doubts* has proved to be one of our most popular Bodhi Leaves in recent years. The year will conclude with *Mettā: The Philosophy and Practice of Universal Love* by senior Indian Buddhist monk Ven. Acharya Buddharakkhita.

Several full-size books are also on lineup for publication in 1989. First on our schedule is a translation, *The Udāna: Inspired Utterances of the Buddha*, by John D. Ireland. The Udāna, one of the loveliest and most uplifting minor texts in the Pali Canon, is a compilation of short suttas, each opening with a notable incident that comes to the Buddha's attention and elicits from him an exuberant utterance expressing his insight into the event's profound significance. Like the Dhammapada, the Udāna should prove to be a constant friend and adviser for frequent reading and reflection. It is planned for release in May 1989.

Guidelines To Sutta Study

In the last instalment of this series we saw that the Buddha opened his first discourse by announcing his discovery of the Middle Way, the Noble Eightfold Path. Immediately after enumerating the factors of the path the Buddha then revealed to his disciples the truths to which he had awakened on the night of his enlightenment. These truths, into which the Buddha compressed the vast depths and wide ramifications of his realisation, were called by him the Four Noble Truths:

1. The noble truth of suffering, which declares that the whole of sentient existence is unsatisfactory and fraught with suffering.
2. The noble truth of the origin of suffering, which traces all suffering to craving, the blind egoistic thirst for pleasure and self-affirmation.
3. The noble truth of the cessation of suffering, which asserts that with the eradication of craving, suffering will cease without remainder.
4. The noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering, the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path.

It is this formulation of the Four Noble Truths that has come down to us as the central Buddhist teaching of which all the other doctrines and practices taught by the Buddha are just so many variations. Thence the venerable Sāriputta declares that just as the footprints of all other animals can be contained within the footprint of the elephant, so all good teachings can be contained within the Four Noble Truths.

For this reason the four truths provide a useful guideline for correctly understanding all those suttas taught by the Buddha that offer instruction tending directly to liberation. When we come across any such sutta passage we should investigate: Does it pertain to the first noble truth? To the second, third or fourth truths? To some combination of these? Briefly, any teaching that discusses our existential predicament, revealing the insecure and painful aspects of human existence, will belong to the first noble truth. Any passage that discusses the defilements, our attachments and deluded notions, can be subsumed under the second truth. Any passage which shows how, by controlling and removing the defilements, liberation can be won, will belong to the third truth. And any passage that expounds the path of practice can be understood to pertain to the fourth noble truth.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

(to be continued)

Office News

It is with deep regret that we record the death of Mr. A.S. Karunaratna, one of the three founder-members of the BPS and the person who first conceived the idea of starting a society to publish books on Buddhism in English for world-wide distribution. Born in April 1900, Mr. Karunaratna was one of the leading lawyers in Sri Lanka and took an active part in the social, religious and civic affairs of Kandy. He was an elected member of the Municipal Council and had served as the town's mayor. He was the honorary treasurer of our Society from 1958 until 1985 and a member of the Board for 31 years. We owe him a deep debt of gratitude. May his journey in saṃsāra be happy and short.

We are also sorry to report the death of Ven. Samanera Bodhesako from complications following an emergency operation during a trip to Nepal. Ven. Bodhesako, a gifted writer and a keen student of the Dhamma, was the author of several recent BPS publications and had been especially helpful to us in introducing us to computer-aided typesetting. We will surely miss him and wish him too a pleasant and brief sojourn in saṃsāra.

On a happier note we wish to record an extraordinarily generous gift of a computer, printer and peripherals by Wolfgang Moller, a young computer programmer from West Germany. Mr. Moller not only donated this equipment but made a special trip to Sri Lanka in August to bring it and install it. The fine quality of our accompanying publications is the result of this gift.

—Albert Witanachchi

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 web site, or contact:

The Administrative Secretary
Buddhist Publication Society
P.O. Box 61
54 Sangharaja Mawatha
Kandy, Sri Lanka
E-mail: bps@bps.lk
Web site: <http://www.bps.lk>
Tel: 0094 81 223 7283
Fax: 0094 81 222 3679