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A Remedy for Despair

by Bhikkhu Bodhi

Most of us live in the cramped cold cages of our private projects, frantically struggling to stake out our own little comfortable place in the sun. Driven in circles by anxious yearnings and beckoning desires, we rarely ever glance aside to see how our neighbour is faring, and when we do, it is usually only to assure ourselves that he is not trying to encroach upon our own domain or to find some means by which we might extend our dominion over his.

Occasionally, however, it somehow happens that we manage to detach ourselves from our obsessive pursuits long enough to arrive at a wider clearing. Here our focus of concern undergoes a remarkable shift. Lifted above our habitual fixation on myopic goals, we are brought to realise that we share our journey from birth to death with countless other beings who, like ourselves, are each intent on a quest for the good. This realisation, which often topples our egocentric notions of the good, broadens and deepens our capacity for empathy. By breaking down the walls of self-concern it allows us to experience, with a particularly inward intimacy, the desire all beings cherish to be free from harm and to find an inviolable happiness and security. Nevertheless, to the extent that this flowering of empathy is not a mere emotional effusion but is accompanied by a facility for accurate observation, it can easily turn into a chute plunging us down from our new-found freedom into a chasm of anguish and despair.

For when, with eyes unhindered by emotively-tinged blinkers, we turn to contemplate the wide expanse of the world, we find ourselves gazing into a mass of suffering that is vertiginous in its volume and ghastly in its intensity. The guarantor of our complacency is the dumb thoughtless glee with which we acquiesce in our daily ration of sensual excitation and ego-enhancing kudos. Let us raise our heads a little higher and cast our eyes about, and we behold a world steeped in pain where the ills inherent in the normal life-cycle are compounded still more by the harshness of nature, the grim irony of accident, and the cruelty of human beings. As we grope about for a handle to prevent ourselves from plummeting down into the pits of despondency, we may find the support we need in a theme taught for frequent recollection by the Buddha: "Beings are the owners of their kamma, the heirs of their kamma; they are moulded, formed and upheld by their kamma, and they inherit the results of their own good and bad deeds." Often enough this reflection has been proposed as a means to help us adjust to the vicissitudes in our personal fortunes: to accept gain and loss, success and failure, pleasure and pain, with a mind that remains unperturbed. This same theme, however, can also serve a wider purpose, offering us succour when we contemplate the immeasurably greater suffering in which the multitudes of our fellow beings are embroiled.

Confronted with a world that is ridden with conflict, violence, exploitation and destruction, we feel compelled to find some way to make sense out of their evil consequences, to be able to see in calamity and devastation something more than regrettable but senseless quirks of fate. The Buddha's teaching on kamma and its fruit gives us the key to decipher the otherwise unintelligible stream of events. It instructs us to recognise in the diverse fortunes of living beings, not caprice or accident, but the operation of a principle of moral equilibrium which

ensures that ultimately a perfect balance obtains between the happiness and suffering beings undergo and the ethical quality of their intentional actions.

Contemplation on the operation of kamma is not a cold and calculated expedient for justifying a stoical resignation to the status quo. The pathways of kamma are labyrinthine in their complexity, and acceptance of this causal order does not preclude a battle against human avarice, brutality and stupidity, or stifle beneficent action intended to prevent unwholesome deeds from finding the opportunity to ripen. Deep reflection on kammic retribution does, however, brace us against the shocks of calamity and disappointment by opening up to our vision the stubborn unwieldiness of a world ruled by greed, hate and delusion, and the deep hidden lawfulness connecting its turbulent undercurrents with the back-and-forth swing of surface events. While on the one hand this contemplation awakens a sense of urgency, a drive to escape the repetitive round of deed and result, on the other it issues in equanimity, an unruffled inner poise founded upon a realistic grasp of our existential plight. Genuine equanimity, which is far from callous indifference, sustains us in our journey through the rapids of saṃsāra. Bestowing upon us courage and endurance, it enables us to meet the fluctuations of fortune without being shaken by them, and to look into the face of the world's sufferings without being shattered by them.

Exploring the Wheels

Since the late 19th century Arthur Schopenhauer has been one of the most widely read European philosophers, with an influence extending beyond academic boundaries to literary, artistic and intellectual circles. The correspondence between Schopenhauer's thought and Buddhism has often been noted, but usually only to be dismissed by superficial critics with the facile "reproach of pessimism." To counter this charge Bhikkhu Ñāṇajīvako has compiled a selection from the German thinker's writings in *Schopenhauer and Buddhism* (Wheel No. 144/146), now in its second printing. With documentary evidence the author demonstrates that Schopenhauer had a thorough acquaintance with Buddhist teachings, which he avidly studied through the translations and accounts already appearing in the West in the early 19th century. Indeed, he even kept a small gilded statue of the Buddha on a shelf in his apartment.

The core of Ven. Ñāṇajīvako's work is Chapter 3, on the Four Noble Truths, which reveals that Schopenhauer (contrary to his critics) had insights into all four of the Buddhist truths. The reader without an interest in the historical background to Schopenhauer's Buddhist influences may proceed straight to this chapter, where he will find an impressive selection of passages expressing in fresh and illuminating ways the philosopher's Buddhist intuitions.

Thus under the topic "Suffering" is found the following:

We then see these (beings) involved in constant suffering and without any lasting happiness. For all striving springs from want or deficiency, from dissatisfaction with one's own state or condition, and is therefore suffering so long as it is not satisfied. No satisfaction, however, is lasting; it is always merely the starting point of a fresh striving. We see striving everywhere impeded in many ways, everywhere struggling and fighting, and hence always suffering.

An optimist tells me to open my eyes and to look at the world and see how beautiful it is in the sunshine with its mountains, valleys, rivers, plants, animals, etc. But is the world, then, a peep-show? These things are certainly beautiful to behold, but to be them is something quite different. (p.44)

Schopenhauer has seen not only the omnipresence of suffering in life, but also that this suffering springs from “the will,” what the Buddha calls in the second noble truth “thirst” (“craving”):

Much intense willing always entails much intense suffering. For all suffering is simply nothing but unfulfilled and thwarted willing ... The world is only the mirror of this willing; and all finiteness, all suffering, all miseries that it contains, belong to the expression of what the will wills, are as they are because the will so wills ... So long as our consciousness is filled by our will, so long as we are given up to the throng of desires with its constant hopes and fears, so long as we are the subject of willing, we never obtain lasting happiness or peace. (pp.51-53)

Consequently, Schopenhauer sees that release from suffering comes about through the abolition of willing by knowledge of the inner nature of the world:

He knows the whole, comprehends its inner nature, and finds it involved in a constant passing away, a vain striving, an inward conflict, and a continual suffering ... That knowledge of the whole ... becomes a quieter of all and every willing. The will now turns away from life; it shudders at the pleasures in which it recognised the affirmation of life. Man attains to the state of voluntary renunciation, resignation, true composure and complete will-lessness. (p.58)

The fourth noble truth is here exemplified by a passage from the section entitled “The Road to Salvation,” a phrase Schopenhauer himself used as the title of a chapter in his major work. The passage concerns his use of the word “eudaemonology,” the art of wise living:

What a man is by himself, what accompanies him into solitude, and what no one can give him or take away from him, is obviously more essential to him than everything he possesses, or even what he may be in the eyes of others.

For any earnest student of the Dhamma, this book will offer many pithy comments on life, many rich thoughts for contemplation.

—Ayya Nyanasiri

Book Reviews

A Still Forest Pool: The Insight Meditation of Achān Chah. Compiled and edited by Jack Kornfield and Paul Breiter. Theosophical Publishing House; 306 West Geneva Road; Wheaton, IL 60187; USA. 192 pp. US \$8.50.

Achān Chah is one of the best known and most influential contemporary Theravada Buddhist meditation masters, and the one who has been most successful in making the forest monastic tradition of Buddhist Asia accessible to seekers of Dhamma from the West. This book, compiled by two former American students of his, offers an excellent cross-section of the Achān’s vibrant and multi-faceted teaching. The presentation takes the form of excerpts from Achān Chah’s discourses interlaced with anecdotes about his daily routine and his encounters with pupils and inquirers. The selections are all short and self-contained, most being only slightly longer than a page, and are arranged into seven parts, including a long one consisting of questions and answers. Each part is preceded by a brief introduction by the compilers, and the general introduction gracefully introduces the reader to the forest monastic tradition via a travelogue of a trip to Achān Chah’s root temple, Wat Ba Pong. Beautifully produced, the book is illustrated with line drawings depicting everyday scenes in the life of a Thai forest monastery.

The wide variety of teachings given in the selections aptly reveal the wisdom and wit of this venerable Buddhist master. Unlike those meditation teachers who stress technique and quick results in short-term courses, Achān Chah offers no easy substitute for the thorough overhauling of one's views, attitudes and conduct required to successfully accomplish the Buddha's way. His discourses repeatedly stress the need for virtue, right understanding and wholesome aims as the foundation for practice, and inculcate patience and endurance as the keys to progress. It is this particular emphasis that has enabled Achān Chah to offer Western Theravada a most precious legacy—a well-trained Sangha committed to carry on the transmission of the teaching.

While I wish I could endorse this book without reservation, there are two quibbles I have to raise. One is over the use of Sanskrit terms such as Dharma and Nirvana to convey Theravada teachings; surely the Pali terms should have been used and the Sanskrit equivalents relegated to the glossary. The second, more serious caveat concerns several statements attributed to Achān Chah in the last section of the book entitled "Realisation." Here we stumble upon a string of expressions strikingly inconsistent with the Pali canonical teaching that underlies Achān Chah's approach to the Dhamma—namely, the Dharma as our true self, the Buddha as the ground of being, becoming one with the universe—and these anomalies raise the question whether the translators have not rendered those passages too freely, perhaps reading into them ideas garnered from elsewhere. These reservations apart, *A Still Forest Pool* can be heartily recommended as an inspiring overview of the teachings and charismatic personality of one of our age's great Buddhist teachers.

Being Nobody, Going Nowhere: Meditations on the Buddhist Path. Ayya Khema. Wisdom Publications; 23 Dering Street; London W1 R 9A. 186 pp. £6.95 / US \$12.95.

This book, winner of The Buddhist Society's prestigious Christmas Humphreys Memorial Award, consists of a collection of talks given during a ten-day meditation course by the German-born Buddhist nun, Ayya Khema. In her preface the author writes that "this is a simple book for ordinary people," yet the simplicity of Ayya Khema's approach in no way detracts from the power or cogency of her message. To the contrary her straightforward unvarnished style of delivery communicates with startling directness the urgency of the meditative endeavour.

Although Ayya Khema is in no way a scholar, her discourses reveal a firm grasp of fundamentals as well as a down-to-earth awareness of the deceptions and pitfalls that confront the trader of the path. Many of her formulations, punctuated by homely similes and examples, drive home the perennial truths taught by the Buddha with memorable vivacity and vigour. For beginners this book will be a wellspring of guidance and inspiration, while even for veterans its fresh formulations should breathe new life into ideas long grown stale and too familiar.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Office News

Our regular readers would have noticed that, since 1987, our Wheels and Bodhi Leaves have been of a much improved print quality. Earlier we did receive occasional complaints about the quality of our letterpress prints, which seemed incongruous in this age of sophisticated printing technology. What held us back from venturing into more costly methods of production was our reluctance to increase the prices of our books, which, it seems, would have been inevitable. As a

result of some kindly advice and a very generous gift from a West German friend, we are now able to typeset our periodicals and smaller book publications very attractively right at our office, using an Atari ST computer and a versatile document processor named Signum, well-suited to our needs. The camera-ready copy turned out by this system is then given to a printer for offset reproduction.

Though our system has spared us the drastic increase in production costs that we feared, our costs have risen, and this has forced us to make some changes in our pricing. Our back issues of letterpress-produced *Wheels* and *Bodhi Leaves* will remain at current prices, but issues produced by offset have undergone a slight increase, and this has altered our subscription policy as well.

From Wheel No. 339/341 onwards, the Wheel will cost US \$0.80 (or SL Rs.10) per number; for those issues produced by offset. *Bodhi Leaves* beginning from No. B 110 will cost US \$0.25 (or SL Rs.3) per copy. In our next catalogue, offset prints will be indicated by an asterisk

Since Associate Membership subscription fees are relative to the prices of our periodicals, the options we had were either to increase the annual membership fee or to reduce the number of mailings per year from four to three. We have opted for the latter. However, we hope that the improved quality of our productions as well as the newsletter—a recent feature—will at least partly make up for this reduction by one mailing.

—Albert Witanachchi

Note: The Zen Lotus Society wishes us to inform our readers that their journal previously called *Spring Wind* — Buddhist Cultural Forum will henceforth be named *Buddhist Review*. The Society issues a video cassette called *World Buddhism in North America* (2 hrs, US \$65) on the Conference on World Buddhism in North America held in July 1987, and a “Statement of Consensus” resulting from the Conference (\$3.50). These may be ordered from: Zen Buddhist Temple, 1214 Packard Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48104, USA; or from: Zen Buddhist Temple, 86 Vaughan Road, Toronto, Ont. M6C 2M1, Canada. The same addresses should be used for inquiries regarding *Buddhist Review*.

Guidelines to Sutta Study

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

After expounding the Four Noble Truths to the five ascetics in the Deer Park at Benares, the Buddha proceeds to make three weighty statements about each of the truths. Although most accounts of the Buddha’s first discourse break off after explaining the meaning of the four truths, an examination of these auxiliary statements is as crucial to an understanding of the Buddha’s message as is an analysis of the content of the truths themselves. The Buddha himself will underscore the importance of this passage a little further on in the discourse, when he declares that it was only after he had purified his knowledge and vision of the four truths in their three phases and twelve aspects that he claimed in the world that he had awakened to the supreme perfect enlightenment. The additional passage of the first sermon which we are about to examine discloses these three phases and twelve aspects.

In this passage (pp. 8-9 of Wheel No. 17) the Buddha indicates, in the succinct but pithy style of the suttas, what precisely is to be done about the Four Noble Truths. For the Buddha brings to

us the teaching of the truths not merely as a revelation about the human condition but as a task or challenge put to us by our existential situation—or, more exactly, as an interlocking set of four tasks each of which, like the truths from which they arise, simultaneously implies all the others.

In his exposition the Buddha makes twelve statements, three about each truth. Each statement in the sequence concerning any one truth is parallel in formulation to those made about the other truths, the specific element of content alone being variable. These three types of statement enunciate three types of knowledge:

- (1) knowledge about the truth itself (*sacca-ñāna*);
- (2) knowledge about the task imposed by the truth (*kicca-ñāna*); and
- (3) knowledge that the task has been accomplished (*kata-ñāna*).

In regard to the first noble truth, the first knowledge is the recognition “This is the noble truth of suffering.” Here the word “this” refers to the entire explanation of the first truth set forth earlier in the discourse, particularly to the five aggregates of clinging as the essential referent of the term “suffering.” This knowledge of the first noble truth, which initially must be intellectual and conceptual, is an integral part of the preliminary right view at the head of the Noble Eightfold Path.

The second knowledge grasps that the noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood, that full understanding (*pariññā*) is the task imposed by the truth of suffering. Thus this knowledge also reveals to us that the practice of the Buddhist path is, from one angle, an unfolding course of understanding. To fulfil the practice of the Buddhist path we must be prepared to direct our attention away from the captivating objects of the senses and inward upon the constituents of our own individual being, comprised by the five aggregates of material form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. Through sustained mindfulness and systematic investigation, the apparent monolith of experience must be dissected analytically into its minute components, and these must be contemplated first by way of their distinct individual qualities, and then in terms of their universal marks—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self. When this contemplative insight into the five aggregates reaches consummation with the supramundane path of stream-entry, the blinders of false ascription that make us cling to the aggregates as “I” and “mine” fall away and the immediate certainty becomes established that the five aggregates are indeed the noble truth of suffering.

This penetrative understanding of the truth of suffering comes to completion with the attainment of the fourth and final path, that of arahantship. For the arahant the last vestiges of ignorance that concealed the true nature of the five aggregates have been dissipated by the light of wisdom, and thence for him the task imposed by the first noble truth has been accomplished. Whereas those still striving on the path must recognise the challenge that confronts them—that the noble truth of suffering should be fully understood—the arahant can declare of himself: “This noble truth of suffering has been fully understood.” This is the last of the three knowledges concerning the first truth, the knowledge that the task has been accomplished. Possessed of this knowledge, the arahant rests in the assurance that he has fully understood everything necessary to effect his deliverance from suffering. The challenge of unveiling the truth about our being has been completed in every degree and beyond this nothing more remains to be fully understood.

(to be continued)

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.

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