



Laying Down the Rod

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

The textbooks of history come into our hands bound in decorative covers and set in crisp clear types. To the discerning reader, however, their glossy pages are stained with blood and wet with streams of tears. The story of man's sojourn on this planet has generally not been a very pretty one. For sure, deeds of virtue and flashes of the sublime light up the tale like meteorites shooting across the night time sky. But the pageant of events that the records spell out for us unfolds according to a repeated pattern in which the dominant motifs are greed and ambition, deceit and distrust, aggression, destruction and revenge.

Each age, when the dust of its own battles clears, tends to see itself as standing at the threshold of a new era in which peace and harmony will at last prevail. This appears to be particularly true of our own time, with its high ideals and great expectations aroused by dramatic shifts in international relations. It would be ingenuous, however, to think that a package solution to the tensions inherent in human coexistence can be devised as easily as a solution to a problem in data management. To cherish the dream that we have arrived at the brink of a new world order in which all conflict, in obedience to our good intentions, will be relegated to the past is to lose sight of the grim obstinacy of those deep dark drives that stir in the human heart: the defilements of greed, hatred and delusion. It is these drives that have brought us into this world of strife and suffering, and it is these same drives that keep the wheel of history turning, erupting periodically in orgies of senseless violence.

Like any other stream, the stream of mundane existence inevitably flows in the direction of least resistance: downwards. The task the Buddha sets before us is not the impossible one of reversing the direction of the flow, but the feasible one of crossing the stream, of arriving safely at the far shore where we will be free from the dangers that beset us as we are swept along by the stream. To cross the stream requires a struggle, not against the current itself, but against the forces that carry us down the current, a struggle against the defilements lodged in the depths of our own minds.

Though violence, either overt or subtle, may hold sway over the world in which we are afloat, the Buddha's path to freedom requires of us that we make a total break with prevailing norms. Thus one of the essential steps in our endeavour to reach the abode of safety is to "lay down the rod," to put away violence, aggression and harmfulness towards all living beings. In the Buddha's teaching the "laying down of the rod" is not merely an ethical principle, a prescription for right action. It is a comprehensive strategy of self-training that spans all stages of the Buddhist path, enabling us to subdue our inclinations towards ill will, animosity and cruelty.

The key to developing a mind of harmlessness is found in the ancient maxim stated in the Dhammapada: "Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not slay or incite others to slay." The reason we should avoid harming others is because all living beings, in their innermost nature, share the same essential concern for their own wellbeing and happiness. When we look into our own minds, we can immediately see with intuitive certainty that the fundamental desire at the root of our being is the desire to be well and happy, to be free from all harm, danger and distress. We see at once that we wish to live, not to die; that we wish to be

happy, not to suffer; that we wish to pursue our goals freely, without hindrance and obstruction by others. When we see that this wish for wellbeing and happiness is the most basic desire at the root of our own being, by a simple imaginative projection we can then recognise, again with intuitive certainty, that the same fundamental desire animates the minds of all other living beings as well. Just as we wish to be well, so every other being wishes to be well; just as we wish to be happy, so every other being wishes to be happy; just as we wish to pursue our goals freely, so all other beings wish to pursue their goals freely, without hindrance and obstruction. This fundamental identity of aim that we share with all other beings has implications for each stage of the threefold Buddhist training in morality, mental purification and wisdom. Since all other beings, like ourselves, are intent on their welfare and happiness, by putting ourselves in their place we can recognise the need to regulate our conduct by principles of restraint that hold in check all harmful bodily and verbal deeds. Because afflictive deeds originate from the mind, from thoughts of animosity and cruelty, it becomes necessary for us to purify our minds of these taints through the practice of concentration, developing as their specific antidotes the “divine abodes” of loving kindness and compassion. And because all defiled thoughts tending towards harm for others arise from roots lodged deep in the recesses of the mind, we need to undertake the development of wisdom which alone can extricate the hidden roots of evil.

Since the state of the world is a manifestation and reflection of the minds of its inhabitants, the achievement of a permanent universal peace would require nothing short of a radical and widespread transformation in the minds of these inhabitants—a beautiful but unrealistic fantasy. What lies within the scope of real possibility is the attainment of a lasting individual peace within ourselves, a peace that comes with the fulfilment of the Buddha’s threefold training. This internal peace, however, will not remain locked up in our hearts. Overflowing its source, it will radiate outwards, exercising a gentle and uplifting influence upon the lives of those who come within its range. As the old Indian adage says, one can never make the earth safe for one’s feet by sweeping away all thorns and gravel, but if one wears a pair of shoes one’s feet will be comfortable everywhere. One can never be free from enmity by eliminating all one’s foes, but if one strikes down one thing—the thought of hate—one will see no enemies anywhere.

Exploring the Wheels

Rebirth Explained. V.F. Gunaratna (Wheel No. 167/169). 95 pp. SL Rs. 18, U.S. \$1.80.

In this book the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth is explained through a careful examination of the basic principles of Buddhism, followed by an analysis of the way in which these principles apply equally to the operation of thought-processes during life, at the time of death, and at the moment of rebirth. The doctrine of rebirth is thus shown to be firmly rooted in the philosophical bedrock of Buddhism.

Gunaratna begins with a lucid review of the principle of change: nothing in this world is permanent, but all is constantly in a state of change. This principle is then expanded with two corollaries: “though all is subject to change, nothing is lost or destroyed,” and “there is no distinct and separate line of demarcation between one condition and the succeeding condition or state.” After carefully developing these lines of thought, Gunaratna adds: “everything is in the process of becoming something else,” and examines the seeming continuity of these processes, including the concept of time itself. Since these principles involve action, there must be reaction, and so kamma and its fruit fall within their scope. Kamma is examined from two points of view: “results do not arise always in the order in which their causative actions have taken place,” and “a single cause cannot produce a result, much less many results, nor can many causes produce just one result.” The last principle presented is the law of attraction. Just as “an

atom of particular strength and quality of vibration will attract to itself another whose vibrations harmonise with its own," so it follows that "man not only attracts to himself others of similar leaning and tendencies, but is often able to attract to himself the very things he strongly likes or the very condition and situations he strongly desires."

An understanding of how these principles operate paves the way for the understanding of how the mind, too, operates under these same principles. The mind, Gunaratna stresses, is regarded by Buddhism as "nothing but a constant stream or flow of thoughts," a rapidly changing process "whereby continually one thought merges into another." This leads into a discussion of "the conscious mind and the unconscious mind," a study of the Buddhist distinction between process consciousness and the *bhavaṅga*, which the author compares with the Western concepts of the conscious and unconscious minds. Gunaratna explains the successive stages of a single thought as presented in the Abhidhamma. He uses this method to explicate the thought process at the moment of death, and then at the moment of rebirth.

The second half of *Rebirth Explained* looks at rebirth from different points of view, contrasting the scientific biological perspective on birth with the Buddhist perspective. This is followed by case studies of former lives recalled both through hypnosis and spontaneously.

Lucidly written and based on a firm grasp of the philosophical insights of Buddhism, *Rebirth Explained* will be a useful volume for those who have been attracted to the precise and rigorous character of Buddhist teachings but have hesitated over its central doctrine of rebirth.

—Ayya Nyattasiri

Book Review

Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology, Edited by Allan Hunt Badiner. Parallax Press, Berkeley, California, 1990. 265 pp. U.S \$15.00 (PB).

The conservationist or environmentalist movement born in the 19th century has always had a spiritual or religious tone, a general belief that reverence for and protection of the natural world are essential to humanity's highest welfare. This book, a collection of essays and poems, treats environmentalism largely, but by no means exclusively, from a Buddhist perspective. Several of the writers advance the idea that the physical earth itself ("Gaia") is a living organism, poetically identifiable with a female deity or principle, and therefore deserving reverence and service. Whatever one thinks of this colourful hypothesis, one would be hard put to say exactly what connection it has to Buddhism.

The best essays here don't bother to try: Chatsumam Kabilsingh lucidly explains traditional Buddhist teachings about kindness, non-violence, and helpfulness toward living beings, and the need for respectful treatment of the resources and beauties of the world. Padmasiri De Silva and Sulak Sivaraksa contribute level-headed analyses of Buddhist economic development. Other pieces, however, while extolling reverence for the earth, exhibit an objectionable tendency to treat Buddhism flippantly or primarily as a backdrop for social change. Certainly Buddhism has much to teach us about skilful and responsible conduct of our public lives and projects, but its essential message is the escape from the woeful round of suffering in *samsāra*. Buddhist compassion springs from a realisation of this common predicament of living beings.

A number of pieces here are vague, credulous, or uninformed. There is much uncritical admiration of "tribal societies" and unconvincing effort to reconcile the cool, renunciative character of Buddhism with the ecstasies of shamanism or with a number of other contemporary enthusiasms. Stephen Batchelor, in his thoughtful essay, argues against this sort of irresponsibility and urges a clear understanding of Buddhism as a "well-tested system of

spiritual training.” Indeed, if environmentalists are to draw inspiration from Buddhism, such an understanding is necessary.

—Bhikkhu Nyanasobhano

Notes & News

We are happy to report that BPS publications are receiving an increasingly wider circulation in other languages and in other formats. Surprisingly, an eager reception for our publications is now being found in the Italian language. Nyanaponika Thera’s collection of essays, *The Vision of Dhamma*, appeared in 1988 in Italian translation under the title *La Visione del Dhamma*, published by Ubaldini Editore of Rome. In 1989 the same Italian publisher issued two of our titles by Mahasi Sayadaw, *Practical Insight Meditation* and *The Progress of Insight*, in a single volume entitled *La Pratica del Insight*. Most recently we have been in communication with an Italian publisher specialising in works on Eastern religion, Promolibri of Turin, who intends to publish Italian translations of several BPS titles. They will issue Bhikkhu Bodhi’s *Noble Eightfold Path* in 1991 and the anthology of BPS writings, *The Road to Inner Freedom*, in 1992.

Two new Spanish translations of BPS titles now augment the increasing number of Buddhist books in that language. One is *La Ciudad del Mente*, a rendering of Nyanaponika Thera’s *The City of the Mind*, published by Ediciones Cedel (Apartado 5326, Barcelona). The other is *Los Cuatro Estados Sublimes y la Esencia del Meditación*, a combination of Nyanaponika, Thera’s *Four Sublime States* and Bhikkhu Khantipalo’s *Practical Advice for Meditators*. This work is published by Editoria Alas (Valencia 234, Apartado 36274, 08007 Barcelona). Both books have been published on the initiative of the tireless Spanish Buddhist worker, Ramiro Calle, who has devoted so much energy to the spread of the Dhamma in the Spanish language. Bhikkhu Bodhi’s cover essays for this newsletter continue to circulate widely in other journals. His essays have appeared in *Seeds of Peace* (Thailand), *Journal of the Throssel Hole Priory* (England), *Buddhistiche Monatsblätter* (Germany), and *Unisains Buddhist* (Malaysia). Several journals have also requested permission to reprint our newsletter series “Guidelines to Sutta Study.”

Bhikkhu Nyanasobhano’s *Two Dialogues on Dhamma* recently appeared in Thai translation. The same author’s insightful essay, “A Buddhist View of Abortion,” has enjoyed a number of reprints elsewhere. The essay appeared in *ISKRA*, a journal published by the Doukhobors, a Russian pacifist Christian sect centred in Canada. An editorial note states that though the essay is written from a Buddhist perspective, “it is nearly identical to what would be ‘a Doukhobor perspective’ on this particular issue.” The same essay has been selected for a reprint in *Harmony: Voices for a Just Future*, a magazine dedicated to “consistent reverence for life.”

Publications

Through the years it has been BPS policy to classify our Wheel publications into a graded system based on their number of pages—a single number, a double number, a triple number, or a quadruple number. The price of a particular Wheel was then assigned on the basis of the number group to which it belonged. For years this method proved simple and effective. However, at present costs of book production in Sri Lanka have been subject to sudden and sharp shifts, and thus our long-standing grading system has turned out to be inadequate as a basis for pricing. Thus, from now on, it will be necessary for us to base our pricing of new Wheel issues, and of reprints of old Wheels, directly on the cost of production instead of tying it

to a fixed system of graded prices. While Bodhi Leaves have always been issued as single numbers, their prices too will be based directly on the cost of production.

The following titles, issued since the release of our current catalogue, have now been priced according to this new system as follows:

Mettā: The Philosophy and Practice of Universal Love (Wh 365/366), by Acharya Buddharakkhita. 1990, 56 pp. U.S. \$1.95 / SL Rs. 30.

Dana: The Practice of Giving (Wh 367/369), ed. by Bhikkhu Bodhi. 1990, 80 pp. U.S. \$2.50 / SL Rs. 40.

Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā: Insight through Mindfulness (Wh 370/ 371), by Ven. Mahasi Sayadaw. 1990, 64 pp. U.S. \$1.95 / SL Rs. 30.

The Scale of Good Deeds (Wh 372), by Susan Elbaum Jootla. 1991, 40 pp. U.S. \$1.50 / SL Rs. 30.

The following titles, out of print for some time, are now back in stock at the prices indicated, all in attractive well-printed editions:

Kamma and Its Fruit (Wh 221/224), ed. by Nyanaponika Thera. 1991, 128 pp. U.S. \$4.50 / SL Rs. 90.

Āṅguttara Nikāya Anthology, Pt. 3 (Wh 238/240), trans. by Nyanaponika Thera. 1991, 96 pp. U.S. \$3.95 / SL Rs. 75.

The Worn-Out Skin (Wh 242/242), by Nyanaponika Thera 1990, 72 pp. U.S. \$2.50 /SL Rs. 50.

The Therapeutic Action of Vipassanā (Wh 329/330), by Dr. Paul Fleischman. 1990, 56 pp. U.S. \$1.95 / SL Rs. 40.

Nourishing the Roots (Wh 259/260), by Bhikkhu Bodhi. 1991, 56 pp. U.S. \$2.50 / SL Rs. 50.

These prices supersede all earlier prices that may have been listed for the above publications. The rupee price has been kept low in comparison with the dollar price in order to make our books more affordable by readers in Sri Lanka.

The typesetting of the reprint edition of *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)* has at last been completed and it has now gone to press. For the new edition of the *Manual of Abhidhamma* we were fortunate to obtain over thirty Abhidhamma charts by the Burmese Abhidhamma teacher Ven. U Silananda. The task of composing these charts will further delay publication but will result in a greatly enhanced edition, already provided with a detailed guide to the Abhidhamma by Ven. U Rewata Dhamma and Bhikkhu Bodhi.

Guidelines to Sutta Study

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

In the previous instalment of this series, we said that the Buddha, in expounding the Discourse on the Characteristic of Non-self, develops two separate lines of argument designed to expose the error in our attempts to find a self among the five aggregates. The first, proceeding from the thesis that if anything were truly our self it would be subject to our exercise of mastery over it, attempts to demonstrate that none of the five aggregates allows for such mastery and thus that they all fail to measure up to the criterion of genuine selfhood.

The crux for the Buddha's claim that we lack complete control over the five aggregates lies in the fact that each aggregate leads, in its own distinct way, to our own affliction. At the point

where we last broke off we considered the argument as it applies to the first aggregate, that of material form or the body. The same principle, as the Buddha shows, applies with equal validity to the other four aggregates.

A significant part of our life is dominated by feeling, by the concern to maximise pleasure and to avoid pain. Therefore we are prone to identify feeling as self, to cling to it as our inalienable essence. However, if feeling were truly our self, it would not lead to affliction. As we all want to experience pleasure and ease, if feeling were our self we should be able to exercise such total control over it that we would perpetually enjoy only the most exquisite bliss, never the least discomfort. Yet feeling arises and passes away independently of our will, and thus the affective aspect of our lives is permeated by pain: by sorrow, grief, suffering, displeasure and despair. Since feeling does not obey our internal decrees, but occurs through its own conditions, it cannot be regarded as self.

Perception is the mental factor responsible for noticing objects and qualities, the factor which organises the welter of sense impressions into an intelligible world. Just as feelings divide into the pleasant and painful, so perceptions divide into the agreeable and disagreeable, which are, respectively, perceptions that occasion pleasure and perceptions that occasion pain. If perception were self, then we would never be susceptible to disagreeable perceptions. We would have such total control over our perceptions that we would perceive only what is agreeable, never what is disagreeable. However, such complete mastery over perception is obviously not one of the prerogatives of human life. To the contrary, we are subject to a constant barrage of disagreeable perceptions, perceptions tending to affliction, and thus perception cannot be identified as self.

The aggregate of mental formations comprises a multitude of miscellaneous mental factors, of which the most important is volition. Volition is the source of action: the arousal of the will determines the nature of the deeds that are performed by body and speech and the thoughts that take shape in the mind. Since volition plays a major role in controlling action, it is easy to assume that volition is part of our self, that what we are at bottom is the capacity to act and achieve. However, although volition exercises a controlling influence over action, it is not itself fully amenable to our control. Our decisions, plans, choices and deliberations are often governed by other conditioning factors, sometimes by internal factors which, though massive in their influence, operate without our conscious recognition of them. Thus, while we may wish to be always generous, patient, kind and restrained, we find ourselves tending to be selfish, angry, spiteful and impetuous. Despite our best intentions, our volitions lead to our harm and suffering. Therefore the aggregate of mental formations, the faculty of volition, is not to be identified as self.

Because we consciously observe bodily events, feelings, perceptions and volitions arise and pass away, we readily assume that consciousness—the fifth aggregate—remains stable, the persisting knower of everything that can be known. Yet the Buddha teaches that consciousness too is not a persisting entity. Consciousness is nothing apart from the act of cognising, and thus it is subject to arising and passing away. It arises dependent on the sense faculty and object; it subsists interwoven with its associated mental factors. Since consciousness is governed by its conditions, it is not subject to our absolute control. We may wish to be conscious only of pleasant and agreeable forms, we may want to think only lofty and beautiful thoughts; yet through the force of conditions we are compelled to experience unpleasant and disagreeable forms, we think low and unwholesome thoughts, thoughts that tend to harm and affliction. Thus, because we lack perfect mastery over consciousness, consciousness too cannot be identified as self.

(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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