



Walking Even Amidst the Uneven

The Buddha often speaks of life in the world as an uneven path that constantly challenges us to walk evenly. Each day countless obstacles threaten to obstruct us, to divert us, to knock us off balance, and steady mindfulness and firm determination are needed to avoid losing our way in the dark side-tracks of greed and anger. To stumble may be inevitable until we reach the great highway of the noble ones, but with a clear vision of the goal and diligent effort we can avoid tumbling into the ditches that line the road.

If the task of practising the Dhamma while living in the world has always been difficult, our modern commercial culture has stretched that difficulty by leaps and bounds. No longer is it the case that the desires to be tamed by Dhamma practice are the simple, relatively innocent urges implanted in us by nature or stimulated by a basic subsistence economy. Like unsuspecting fish caught in a net, we move within the coils of a global social and economic order predicated on the premise that the essential human activity is the production and consumption of commodities. From the standpoint of this system, the final good of human life is to purchase and enjoy goods, and the combined ingenuity of laboratory researchers and business magnates ensures that the goods to be enjoyed pour forth in inexhaustible variety.

The law that governs the global economic order is a simple one: never allow desire to abate. The media of communication, our modern miracle workers, employ every strategy at their disposal to ensure that this calamity will not befall us. Through an uninterrupted series of messages they contrive to inflame our fantasies and titillate our appetites with an intensity that would banish the word "enough" from our vocabulary. But despite its mammoth dimensions and global reach, the entire corporate culture rests upon a pervasive illusion that has become so widespread that it seems almost a self-evident truth. This is the idea that happiness is proportional to the quantity and monetary value of our possessions. We are led to believe that by extending our financial assets, by acquiring ownership over more and more goods, we thereby come closer to the good, to becoming happier, more contented, more deeply fulfilled human beings. Yet this belief, this assumption so rarely questioned, is precisely the magical trick, the sleight-of-hand deception, that creates the prison cage of our misery. For so long as we seek happiness by trying to quench desire, the more we strengthen our bondage to the implacable demands of desire. The Suttas compare this process to the attempt to slake thirst by drinking sea water: far from eliminating thirst, the sea water will only increase it.

At the heart of the consumerist culture we find this puzzling paradox, that when we pursue wealth as an end in itself, instead of arriving at true happiness, we only seem further removed from it. This conclusion is easily confirmed if we examine the lives of those who come closest to fulfilling the consumerist dream. Those who enjoy the most abundant wealth, who exercise the greatest power, who revel in luxuriant pleasures, are rarely models of contentment. To the contrary, they often live on the edge of despair and can avoid slipping over the edge only by kindling again and again the quest for more wealth, more power, and more pleasure in a viciously degrading cycle.

When we reflect on this situation in the light of the Buddha's teaching, the reason for the perpetual failure of consumerism stands forth in clear relief. The reason, as the Buddha tells us

so succinctly, is that craving is the cause of suffering. By its own nature craving is insatiable, and thus the more our personal lives are governed by the assumption that the gratification of craving is the way to happiness, the more we are bound to reap disappointment. When an entire society is founded upon the principles of consumerism, upon the drive to produce and sell without concern for genuine human needs, the outcome may well be catastrophic.

According to the Buddha's teaching the way to genuine happiness does not lie in the indulgence of desire but in uncovering and eliminating the cause of suffering, which in practical terms means the control and removal of craving. To adopt such an approach is not a matter of forcing oneself into the mould of a cold puritanical asceticism. The Dhamma is a gradual teaching which instructs us how to order our lives in ways that are immediately rewarding and gratifying. It does not promote personal development by demands for repression and self-affliction, but by gently offering us practical guidelines applicable to our present circumstances, guidelines that help us grow towards genuine happiness and peace.

For those involved in civilian life, seeking to raise a family and to forge their fortune within the world, the Buddha does not enjoin ascetic withdrawal from social and civilian obligations. He recommends, rather, a life regulated by moral values aimed at the cultivation of wholesome qualities of mind. To his lay disciples he does not even decry the accumulation of wealth or extol poverty as a preferred alternative. He recommends only that wealth be acquired by right livelihood and be utilised in meaningful ways to promote the happiness of oneself and others.

In his advice to the village headman Rāsiya (SN 42:12) the Buddha describes three praiseworthy qualities in a householder who enjoys sense pleasures: he acquires wealth righteously; he makes himself happy and comfortable with the wealth thus earned; and he shares his wealth and does meritorious deeds. The practice of meritorious deeds introduces a spiritual dimension to the proper employment of wealth, a dimension based on the recognition that greater happiness comes from giving than from gaining. To give is not only a way to reduce our greed and attachment, not only a way to acquire merit productive of future benefits, but a directly visible source of joy which provides immediate confirmation of the central pillar on which the entire Dhamma rests: that the path to happiness is one of relinquishment rather than one of accumulation.

But while the Buddha praises the virtuous householder who possesses the above three qualities, he does not stop there. He introduces a fourth quality which distinguishes the virtuous lay followers into two groups: on one side, those who enjoy sense pleasures while remaining tied to them, blind to the danger and unaware of an escape; on the other, those who enjoy sense pleasures without being tied to them, seeing the danger and aware of an escape. It is the second of these that the Buddha declares superior. This pronouncement offers us an insight into the Buddha's final solution to the challenge posed by consumerism. The final solution is not a limp compromise between indulgence and virtue, but a bold, decisive step in the direction of detachment, an inner renunciation that enables one to rise above the whole round of production and consumption even while living within its boundaries. The incentive for this movement comes from seeing the danger: from recognising that there is no stable happiness to be gained by the pursuit of sense pleasures, from seeing that sense pleasures "give little satisfaction and are productive of much suffering." Its completion comes from recognising an escape: that the removal of desire and lust brings an unshakeable peace and freedom that is not contingent upon external circumstances.

Although it may be difficult to master desire for material things within the confines of household life, the Buddha, in his wisdom, created a model for the greater Buddhist community to emulate, indeed a model for the world as a whole. This is the Sangha, the order of monks and nuns, pledged to a mode of living in which needs are reduced to the most basic and their

satisfaction provided in the simplest ways. While only a few may have the opportunity and capacity to leave behind the household life in order to devote their energies unhindered to the task of self-purification, the ideal Buddhist social order forms a pyramid in which those at the apex, dedicated to the ultimate goal of deliverance, serve as the models and teachers for those still enmeshed in the demands of economic subsistence.

By their purity, peacefulness, and wisdom the monastics demonstrate to the lay community, and to all those who have eyes to see, where true happiness is to be found. They show that happiness is to be found, not in acquisition and self-indulgence, but in freedom from desire, in renunciation and detachment. Whether as lay disciple or as monk, to enter the course of training that culminates in such freedom is to walk evenly within the uneven terrain of the world. It is to recover, even with one's initial steps, a balance of living so sorely needed amidst the loud demands and hollow promises of our rapacious consumerist culture.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Publications

Recent Releases

- *An Unentangled Knowing: Lessons in Training the Mind*. Upāsikā Kee Nanayon (Acharn Kor Khao-suan-luang). This book offers an inspiring collection of discourses by one of the foremost woman Dhamma teachers of modern Thailand. Known for the simplicity and austerity of her way of life, Acharn Kor had a direct, uncompromising style of teaching that matches the great masters of the Thai forest tradition. The teachings in this book, which combines into one volume the author's earlier Wheel tracts, deal with a wide range of issues in the training of the mind, always emphasising the earnest determination and penetrating honesty needed to win true knowledge and inner freedom.

Softback: 176 pages. 6" x 9"

U.S. \$10.00; SL Rs.300. Order No. BP 515S

- *The Buddha's Ancient Path*. Piyadassi Thera. An authentic and comprehensive book on Basic Buddhism, 30 years in print. (Reprint)

Softback: 240 pages 5.5" x 8.5"

U.S. \$5.00; Rs.200. Order No. BP 103S

Ready for the Press

- *Great Disciples of the Buddha*. Ven. Nyanaponika Thera & Hellmuth Hecker. This volume combines all past issues of our Wheel titles in the "Lives of the Disciples" series.
- *Abhidhamma Studies: Researches in Buddhist Psychology*. Nyanaponika Thera. Bold and brilliant essays on the foundations of the Abhidhamma philosophy, highlighting its significance for the spiritual life.

Note: While preparatory work on the above two titles is complete, we have entered into co-publication arrangements with Wisdom Publications (Boston) to ensure that they receive a wider international distribution; we are expecting publication to take place in the course of 1997.

In Preparation

- *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*. Translated by Acharya Buddhārakkhita; introduction by Bhikkhu Bodhi. This revised reprint of our classic Dhammapada will include as well the Pali text on facing pages.
- *The Seven Contemplations of Insight*. Ven. Mātara Sri Nānārāma Mahāthera. A profound examination of the “seven contemplations” of classical Buddhism and of the actual way they are experienced in the course of meditation, by one of Sri Lanka’s foremost meditation masters of recent times.

[Editor’s Note: As there have been many inquiries about this book and puzzlement over the inordinate delay, we must offer an explanation: In August 1995 we sent the printout of the translation to the editor of the Sinhala version for him to check against the original Sinhala text and return. His share of the work has been delayed by several trips abroad, but he has now assured us that he will finish the work promptly. (BB)]

- *A Treasury of Buddhist Stories*. This volume will combine into a single full-size book the four BPS Wheel issues entitled Buddhist Stories from the Dhammapada Commentary, an anthology compiled from Burlingame’s classic Buddhist Legends. Available by December 1996.

Notes and News

Art Exhibition. From February 10–23 the BPS held its first-ever art exhibition in the upstairs lecture hall at the BPS headquarters. The exhibition, entitled “The Vision of Dhamma” featured 108 watercolours by Bhikkhu Sumedha, one of Europe’s most gifted contemporary painters, who has lived in Sri Lanka as a monk since 1975. The exhibition was greatly appreciated by the local population, who rarely have the opportunity to enjoy high-quality art, and we hope in the future to hold art exhibitions on a regular basis. An exhibition of photographs of Sri Lankan temple paintings, by the well-known photographer Gamini Jayasinghe, is planned for early 1997.

Honours for Majjhima Nikāya. Last year *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, the new translation of the Majjhima Nikāya by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, published jointly by Wisdom Publications and the BPS, received two special honours. The U.S. Buddhist journal *Tricycle* selected the book as the recipient of its annual Prize for Excellence in Buddhist Publishing (in the category “Dharma Discourse”), recognising it as a work of translation “remarkable both in its scope and in its contemporary rendering of the Buddha’s words.” The academic journal *Choice*, published to guide university libraries in the selection of books, selected *The Middle Length Discourses* as one of the “Outstanding Academic Books of 1995,” describing it as “an indispensable addition to any collection of Buddhist studies.”

Translations. We wish to call the attention of our readers to translations of BPS titles and other books of interest. Boeddhayana Uitgeverij in The Netherlands (The Hague) has been especially prolific, issuing Dutch translations of the following: Nārada Mahāthera, *Buddhism in a Nutshell*; Mahāsi Sayadaw, *The Progress of Insight*; Piyadassi Thera, *The Buddha’s Ancient Path* and *The Psychological Aspect of Buddhism*; Nyanaponika Thera, *The Four Sublime States*; and Francis Story, *Rebirth As Doctrine and Experience* (in part). In Germany Jhāna Verlag (Uttenbuhl) has issued a compact softback edition of Nyanatiloka Mahāthera’s translation of the Dhammapada, and also a handsome hardback edition of his translation of the *Abhidhammattha-Saṅgaha*, never before published, entitled *Handbuch der Buddhistischen Philosophie*. For readers of Spanish, Carmen

Dragonetti's long-standing translation, *Dhammapada: La esencia de la sabiduria budista*, with introduction and detailed notes, has been reissued by Editorial Sudamericana in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Sinhala Series. Recognising the need for fine-quality Sinhala books on the Dhamma, the BPS has decided to launch a new line of full-size titles in the Sinhala medium, to be jointly edited by Ven. Piyadassi Nāyaka Thera and Professor P.D. Premasiri of the University of Peradeniya. The first works in this line, now being prepared for the press, will be a Sinhala translation of the Suttanipāta by Prof. Premasiri and a Sinhala version of Ven. Piyadassi's classic *The Buddha's Ancient Path*.

From the BPS Management

Remittances by bank drafts. We often notice that bank charges are not paid by members and dealers to the bank of origin when they remit payment to us by cheque and bank drafts. The payment of these charges then falls to the BPS, and as a consequence we do not receive the correct amount due to us. We would be thankful if our customers would kindly pay the bank charges at their end when making remittances. Otherwise we may be compelled to levy a bank charge in order to receive the full amount due to us.

Acknowledgement of books. Often we do not receive prompt acknowledgement of books received from our overseas book dealers, members, Buddhist organisations, etc. We would appreciate such acknowledgement, which will help us to ascertain whether the books reach you and the speed of transport, and also to take remedial action if necessary.

Book Review

Nirvana and Ineffability: A Study of the Buddhist Theory of Reality and Language. Asanga Tilakaratne. University of Kelaniya: Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, 1993. 182 pp.

Despite their differences, most expositors of Buddhist thought would probably agree that nibbāna is a transcendental, ineffable reality, a state that cannot be expressed in words. *Nirvana and Ineffability* by Asanga Tilakaratne is a tightly argued philosophical study that aims at disposing of both these widespread beliefs. The author, head of the Department of Buddhist Philosophy at the Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, contends that neither transcendence nor ineffability pertain to nibbāna as understood in early Buddhism. On the one hand, he says, the anti-substantialist, empirical stance of the original teaching precludes the recognition of nibbāna as a transcendent reality; on the other, the Buddha's pragmatic, affirmative attitude towards language precludes the idea that it might be ineffable.

Tilakaratne bases his main argument on the Buddha's formula of the "gradual training," contending that this formula shows the entire Buddhist path to be a personal discipline of moral and mental purification that does not require reference to any reality beyond the empirical order. This description of the path, he claims, establishes that "nirvana is not a separate and distinct object" of knowledge, but a mode of knowing and experiencing, "the quality of the life led by the emancipated person" (p.69). To validate his position, Tilakaratne offers to freshly re-examine the texts most often cited in support of the transcendental interpretation, the famous Nibbāna Suttas of the Udāna (VIII,1-4). He admits that these suttas could be used to support the

view of nibbāna he is opposing, but he concludes that to be understood correctly they must be interpreted in a manner consistent with the naturalist picture of nibbāna, “the broader picture well supported by the texts” (p.76).

It is, however, just the nature of the “broader picture” that is in question here, and I must say that Tilakaratne does not offer any convincing arguments in favour of his view. It seems that such suttas clearly point to a transcendent conception of nibbāna, and that to square them with a naturalistic conception requires considerable bending and stretching of their manifest meaning. Tilakaratne is on firmer ground when he criticises the attempt to use the famous tetralemma on the arahat after death to justify a transcendental interpretation, but again I would hesitate over his conclusion that the Buddha’s rejection of the four alternatives establishes that “non-transcendence is a central characteristic of nirvana” (p.81). The famous simile of the extinguished flame is counterbalanced by the simile of the great ocean, “unfathomable and immeasurable,” and a proper understanding of the arahat’s post-mortem condition must give equal weight to the implications of both similes.

Tilakaratne proposes that in contrast to both monism and theism, which locate the solution to the problem of worldly suffering in a reality beyond the empirical order, Buddhism offers as a solution “nirvana, which is neither a disappearance of the distinction between subject and object nor a ‘physical’ transcendence of the world” (p.149). According to the author, the transcendence relevant to the Buddhist concept of nibbāna is a moral one, “the moral quality of the state of mind that has realised nirvana.” This transcendence means the purification of the mind, which allows the individual to dwell in the midst of the world untainted by the mire of phenomenal existence.

Now while it can hardly be denied that the attainment of nibbāna requires moral and mental purification, it would seem an oversimplification to identify this purification with nibbāna itself. In its own nature nibbāna is bhavanirodha, the cessation of becoming, and its full realisation brings the entire process of becoming to an end, inclusive of the subject-object relationship and the very presence of a world. It is true, as Tilakaratne states, that the arahat is “living in the world (while) transcending it simultaneously,” but what makes him an arahat is the fact that he has ensured that he will never return to existence.

In early Buddhism we do not find any laments over the shortcomings of language or an insistence on the utter ineffability of the ultimate good, as we do in the writings of the mystics. The Pali Nikāyas in particular appear to treat language as a perfectly viable instrument for communicating the truths enshrined at the heart of the Dhamma. But from this it would be premature to conclude, as Tilakaratne does, that nibbāna is not a transcendent reality but a quality of life that can be adequately understood simply as the end point of the process of mental purification effected by the path. Though texts dealing with the “metaphysical” aspect of nibbāna are certainly few in number, in the opinion of this reviewer such texts are straightforward enough to leave little doubt that nibbāna is a transcendent reality which serves as a distinct object of meditative knowledge.

The guiding purpose behind Nirvana and Ineffability emerges on the very last page. It is the wish to dispel what the author calls “the myth of the universal identity of religion” (p.150). This contention must be taken seriously, for along with the points of convergence between the great religious traditions there are also important differences which resist facile attempts at harmonisation. However, it is questionable that the distinctiveness of Buddhism can be successfully preserved by arguing against a transcendental dimension at its core and seeking to assimilate its teachings to Anglo-American empiricism and positivism. While such a rationalised version of the Dhamma may seem impressive, it may leave us in the end with

something that amounts to little more than a system of ethical culture and mental training based on an especially insightful psychology.

Throughout the book Tilakaratne contends that transcendent models of religion must be either monistic or theistic, and thus because Buddhism is neither it cannot be a religion of transcendence. This logic excludes a priori the possibility that there could be a version of religious transcendence which is neither monistic nor theistic. In this reviewer's opinion it is precisely there that we should assign early Buddhism, which encompasses, within the framework of a non-substantialist philosophical vision, nibbāna as a transcendent reality which is at once the pre-condition for deliverance and the final term of the liberative process.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Guidelines to Sutta Study

Reminder: After the disciple has mastered the four jhānas, on the basis of the fourth jhāna he attains the three higher knowledges.

The three higher knowledges (*tevijjā*) are always found in the Suttas in the same sequence: first, the knowledge of the recollection of past abodes; second, the knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of beings; third, the knowledge of the destruction of the taints. Although the first two knowledges are extraordinary, they are still technically classified as mundane (*lokiya*) and are not strictly necessary for the attainment of liberation. Nevertheless, the Buddha has included them within the framework of the gradual training, and the ancient monks and nuns often celebrated them in the verses by which they testified to their awakening. When properly harnessed, these knowledges can give a powerful boost to the forward movement of the path. By opening our vision to the vast panorama of saṃsāric suffering, with its ever-shifting scenes of rebirth and frightful dangers, they inspire the keen sense of revulsion and urge for deliverance needed to complete the development of the path.

The entire gradual training culminates in the third higher knowledge, called the knowledge of the destruction of the taints (*āsavaṅkhaya-ñāṇa*). In the Kandaraka Sutta, and in most other concise discourses on the gradual training, this knowledge is described by the same stock formula:

When his concentrated mind is thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, he directs it to knowledge of the destruction of the taints. He understands as it actually is: 'This is suffering' ... 'This is the origin of suffering' ... 'This is the cessation of suffering' ... 'This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.' He understands as it actually is: 'These are the taints' ... 'This is the origin of the taints' ... 'This is the cessation of the taints' ... 'This is the way leading to the cessation of the taints.'

Taken at face value, this passage gives the impression that the meditator who has mastered the fourth jhāna need only incline his concentrated mind to the Four Noble Truths and the whole process of enlightenment will flash by in an instant. To make proper sense of this statement we must recognise that here, for economy of exposition, the Buddha (or the original redactors of the Pali Canon) have compressed into the limits of a single compact formula the entire training in the development of wisdom, which in most cases unfolds in a long process advancing by gradual stages.

When the meditator has stabilised his mind in the jhānas and made the mind malleable and wieldy, he must emerge from absorption and direct his attention to the mental and material

phenomena that constitute the fabric of experience. These phenomena, the five aggregates of clinging (*pañc'upādānakkhandhā*), make up the first noble truth. Thus the work of understanding the first noble truth “as it really is” begins with the analysis and investigation of the five aggregates, which are called accordingly “the sphere of wisdom” (*paññāvacara*, DN ii,63). The meditator must learn how to dissect the compact, solid mass of experience into these five groups of transient, insubstantial phenomena: form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. He must discern them as they appear on each occasion of experience, recognise their causes and conditions, and perceive their origination and perishing.

As he dwells thus, contemplating rise and fall in the five aggregates, the aggregates gradually reveal their three universal characteristics. They show that, because they invariably pass away, they are impermanent; that because they are impermanent they are suffering, incapable of offering true security; that because they are without any inner essence they are non-self. The meditator must uncover these three characteristics over and over—*anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*—thereby bringing the first noble truth into increasingly sharper focus.

As the meditator’s insight into the three characteristics penetrates more and more deeply, he experiences a sense of revulsion or disenchantment (*nibbidā*) towards the five aggregates that comprise his very being in the world. He realises that he has been bound to these five aggregates because of ignorance and craving, the second noble truth, and his mind yearns for that state of deliverance where craving has been extirpated and suffering brought to an end. This is *Nibbāna*, the third noble truth, which he knows can only be realised by cultivating the eight factors of the path he has entered—the fourth noble truth.

Thus in the stage of deep insight the meditator has acquired a clear understanding of the Four Noble Truths, but at this point he has not yet seen the truths, not yet penetrated them with direct knowledge (*abhiññā*). When, however, all the qualities conducive to enlightenment (*bodhipakkhiyā dhammā*) have reached the requisite degree of maturity, a transformation takes place at the very root of the mind. As insight pierces clear through the three marks of the conditioned, at a certain point the mind turns away from all conditioned phenomena, from the conditioned formations (*saṅkhārā*) that make up “the noble truth of suffering,” and launches upon the unconditioned state—the “deathless element,” *Nibbāna*—which constitutes “the noble truth of the cessation of suffering.” When the unconditioned is penetrated, the “supramundane knowledge of the path” (*lokuttara-maggañāṇa*) arises by which the meditator understands the Four Noble Truths directly and infallibly. This knowledge is not sequential: a single act of consciousness penetrates and comprehends all four truths simultaneously. By realising the noble truth of cessation directly as its object, it also directly knows the truths of suffering, of its origin, and of the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

(to be continued)

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