



A Time for Parting

“Have I not told you already, Ānanda, that there must be parting and separation from all who are dear and agreeable to oneself?” These words, spoken by the Buddha to his attendant Ānanda on the eve of his parinibbāna, took on an especially poignant meaning for me this past rainy season, when in quick succession my beloved ordination teacher, Ven. Balangoda Ānanda Maitreya Mahānāyaka Thera, and my long-time spiritual friend, Ven. Piyadassi Nāyaka Thera, succumbed to the implacable law of impermanence. Ven. Ānanda Maitreya expired on 18th July, just one month short of his 102nd birthday. Ven. Piyadassi followed exactly a month later, on 18th August, a little more than a month past his 84th birthday.

Both monks had lived full and fruitful lives in the Sangha throughout the twentieth century, leaving behind such deep tracks in the contemporary history of Sri Lankan Buddhism that it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that their death spells the end of an epoch. Yet, though the two were firmly rooted in Sri Lanka and its ancient Theravada tradition, neither was a narrow nationalist who restricted his field of activity to his native land. To the contrary, they both had a breadth of heart and range of vision that enabled them to feel at home anywhere. Their rich inner springs of compassion extended to people throughout the world, and even in their ripe old age they both travelled the globe to teach the Dhamma to all who would lend an ear. Both monks also transcended the limits of hidebound traditionalism, achieving for themselves a rare synthesis of tradition and modernity. They had studied English in their youth; had read widely in world literature, other religions, and modern modes of thought; and had developed approaches to the Dhamma that highlighted its timeless rationality and timely contemporary relevance.

My own relationship with these two elders was close and deeply personal, unfolding under such unlikely circumstances that it seems a karmic nexus had reached out across the oceans and linked us half a world away. The story of this relationship began in 1971, when I was living at a Vietnamese Buddhist centre in Los Angeles and teaching world religions at a college in the sprawling conurbation of southern California. One day at our centre we received notice that a Buddhist monk from Sri Lanka would be coming to LA, and we invited him to stay with us and give a series of lectures on Theravada Buddhism. That Buddhist monk was none other than Ven. Piyadassi, who was then on his second world Dhamma tour. His lectures were excellent, conveying with crystal clarity and gentle humour the heart of the Buddha’s teachings which he knew so well. At the end of the week, when we parted at the LA airport, Ven. Piyadassi suggested to me that some day I should come to Sri Lanka and spend time in a Buddhist monastery.

This suggestion resonated with an idea that was already taking shape in my mind, and thus the following year, when I decided to come to Asia to enter the Sangha, I wrote to Ven. Piyadassi to remind him of his invitation. In reply he gave me the name and address of a “senior prelate,” Ven. Balangoda Ānanda Maitreya. At first I hesitated to contact this elder, for he was already 76 years old and I feared that at such an age he might not be fit enough to teach me. Little did I realise I was being introduced to a monk of such amazing strength and vitality that he would still be striding the globe well into his 100th year. In any case, I took the chance and

wrote to him, and his welcoming reply set me on a “journey to the East” that culminated in my ordination as a bhikkhu and a three-year tutelage under him at his small village temple near Balangoda.

The future Mahānāyaka Thera had been born just across the paddy field from this temple in 1896 and was ordained there as a novice in 1911. His teacher, Ven. Denihena Silananda, reputed to be the most learned monk in the Balangoda area, subjected his young pupil to a nine-year course of training so rigorous it left him only a few hours of sleep per night. But Ānanda Maitreya emerged with a masterly knowledge of the Tipitaka and its commentaries and of the languages Pali and Sanskrit. At this point his far-sighted guru, aware of the need of the hour, sent him to Ānanda College in Colombo to study English, a move which equipped him for his important work later in life.

Through the middle decades of this century Ven. Ānanda Maitreya played a pivotal role in almost all the major episodes in the modern history of Sri Lankan Buddhism. As a teacher at Ānanda College he helped to educate many of the future leaders of the nation. He founded a prestigious monastic college in Balangoda, which he served as principle for 23 years. He served on the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry which sought to rectify the injustices imposed on Buddhism during the period of colonial rule. He was a member of the Buddha Jayanthi Tripitaka Editorial Board. He compiled the first modern biography of the Buddha in Sinhala and wrote school textbooks for the study of Pali, Sanskrit, and English. He joined the faculty of the new Vidyodaya University as professor of Mahayana Buddhist studies (later vice-chancellor, a position he soon relinquished because of his distaste for administrative duties). He was elected the first Mahānāyaka Thera (chief prelate) of the United Amarapura Nikāya. On the wider Buddhist scene he participated in the Sixth Buddhist Council in Burma (1954–56), where he was appointed the Sri Lankan representative on the Final Editing Committee and later became chairman of the entire Council.

In 1973, at the age of 77, a new leaf opened up in Ven. Ānanda Maitreya’s life: that of a Buddhist missionary to the West. Between then and 1994 he must have made seven or eight extended Dhamma missions which brought him to Britain, France, the U.S.A., and Canada. He also appeared in the well-known BBC television series, *The Long Search*, where, as the informant on Theravāda Buddhism, he deeply impressed viewers around the world. During one stay in the U.S., at the age of 94, he learned to use the computer and returned home with his own little desktop unit: living proof that one is never too old to learn!

On a trip to Colombo in June I had the fortune to meet Ven. Ānanda Maitreya in his temple near Colombo. He had just returned from a trip to Taiwan, Thailand, and Singapore, and appeared to be in sound health, except for complaints about “a little phlegm trouble.” He then seemed so fit, so clear-minded and energetic, that we never suspected the “little phlegm trouble” would turn into the illness that only a month later would take him from our midst. It is testimony to the high regard in which he was held in this country that 100,000 people attended his cremation, and the whole road the cortege took from Avissawela to Balangoda (50 miles) was lined with yellow flags.

Ven. Piyadassi needs hardly any introduction to our BPS readers, who will know him through his classic *The Buddha’s Ancient Path*, *The Spectrum of Buddhism*, and his many contributions to the *Wheel*, *Bodhi Leaves*, and *Damsak* series. It was in fact a sermon he gave in late 1957 that led to the birth of the BPS on New Year’s day 1958; an edited version of that sermon appeared as *Wheel No. 1, The Seven Factors of Enlightenment*. From 1960 onwards he was the editor of the *Damsak* series, the Sinhala counterpart of the *Wheel*, a role he fulfilled amidst a host of other duties so numerous and demanding that they would normally require the talents of three or four monks. He was the director of the Vajirarama Monastery in Colombo,

chief incumbent of the Sambodhi Vihara, and patron of a large number of Buddhist organisations, chiefly those devoted to helping the poor and handicapped. He was also one of the country's most popular preachers, constantly in demand because of his ability to convey the deep truths of the Dhamma in clear, simple language.

The salient characteristic of Ven. Piyadassi's life is summed up in the title of his biography (by Kirthie Abeyasekera), *Piyadassi: The Wandering Monk*. This, however, was not a leisurely wandering on foot with bowl and shoulder bag, but a global, airborne wandering that took him on fourteen international Dhamma tours to over fifty countries. Within Sri Lanka Ven. Piyadassi was, in his own words, "a shuttle on the loom," moving back and forth between Colombo and the provinces with hardly a pause. On his frequent trips to Kandy, once or twice a month, he would stay next door to me in the Udawattakele Forest Reserve, and through this close connection and our shared work for the BPS our friendship became deep, steadfast, and solid. His loss will be irreparable and his place irreplaceable, throughout Sri Lanka and particularly at the BPS.

May these two great elders, who for so long held aloft the torch of the Dhamma, attain the supreme bliss of Nibbāna.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Book Review

Who Is My Self? A Guide to Buddhist Meditation. Ayya Khema.

Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1997; ISBN 0-86171-127-0; pp.184; U.S. \$14.95.

The present volume contains the taped talks given by the late Ayya Khema during a three-week course in California in 1994. She here follows the age-old technique of taking the students step-by-step through one of the Buddha's major discourses, The Poṭṭhapāda Sutta. In this discourse the Buddha is responding to the questions of the wanderer Poṭṭhapāda and other wandering ascetics who have asked him to explain the exact nature of "the higher extinction of consciousness" (*abhisaññānirodha*), which they take to be the peak of spiritual experience.

Instead of telling them directly that their assumption is wrong, the Buddha outlines a comprehensive course of training which proceeds from moral conduct, through concentration, to wisdom. What he does in effect is to expound the series of jhānas or meditation absorptions of tranquillity meditation (*samatha*), which his teaching shares with pre-Buddhist practice, and their use as supports for the development of liberating insight (*vipassanā*) specific to his own teaching.

Ayya Khema's commentary is articulated in close adherence to the text. Starting with the essential foundations of the "gradual training," the reader is taken through the full sequence of the meditative absorptions and the cultivation of the corresponding states of consciousness for the development of insight. This leads on to a discussion of the fundamental truths thus experienced by the meditator, resulting in the realisation of the illusory nature of what we call "self." In a final chapter, "Path and Fruition: The Goal of the Practice," the author gives her own excellent and clear account of the stages of progress on the way to enlightenment, up to "the total disappearance of the feeling of 'self' [which] is the culmination of the path" (p.168). There follows an appendix with instructions for four varieties of loving-kindness meditation.

Ayya Khema has a true teacher's gift of communication. She can put complex ideas simply without sacrificing depth of meaning. Her style flows easily in a conversational tone and her

words are imbued with good, honest common sense. Above all, she clearly writes from deeply lived personal experience, which lends conviction and authority to her words.

So this is a valuable book. But yet its usefulness as the “Guide to Buddhist Meditation” it sets out to be is likely to be diminished, in my view, by the author’s uncompromising belief, which permeates the whole book, that proficiency in the jhānas is essential to the development of insight. Now it is true enough that the combination of the practice of the jhānas with the development of insight—samatha and vipassanā—has been used for centuries as the standard meditative procedure by Buddhist monks and nuns, the reason being that a mind rendered “malleable, wieldy, and steady” by jhāna attainment is better able to exercise the penetrating, equanimous observation necessary to achieve insight. There has, however, also always been a tradition of practitioners who take as their vehicle “bare insight” based on a degree of mental concentration adequate for the arising of insight but not necessarily of jhānic intensity. This is a way that is particularly relevant to lay meditators who cannot work in a supportive monastic environment.

Now these are the kind of people that Ayya Khema is addressing, so a categorical insistence on the need to attain the jhānas before any insight can be achieved is more likely to prove discouraging than helpful. Ayya Khema herself evidently had a special gift for developing high levels of concentration, but it is simply not realistic to assume that everyone else can do so too if they will only try. When she says, “We all have consciousness, and therefore we are also capable of accessing those states of awareness known as the meditative absorptions” (p.83), this is like saying that, as we all have legs, we can all become Olympic runners.

That insight can be developed on the basis of a lower level of concentration than jhāna is an established principle in the mainstream Theravada tradition, and seems to be justified on the basis of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Ānāpānasati Sutta, and other texts. The reason the Buddha includes the jhānas in the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta and similar discourses is surely rather a matter of his exercising skilfulness in means. Here, he is addressing ascetics who are likely to be familiar with deep concentration practices, so he starts from what they know to lead them on to the insight development that they do not know. But this need not mean that the practice of mindfulness and clear comprehension of bodily and mental processes is in itself inadequate. Rather, for the reasons just stated, it is particularly relevant to lay followers still involved in household life. In this connection it is worth recalling that the Buddha had a host of lay disciples who had reached various levels of awakening, and it seems unlikely that many of them were attainers of the absorptions.

This volume is, as we are accustomed to expect from Wisdom Publications, well printed and attractively produced. Apart from the reservation expressed above, it is a worthy addition to the literature on Buddhist meditation and an eloquent testimony to the teaching skills of the late Ayya Khema.

—Amadeo Solé-Leris

Guidelines to Sutta Study

The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving
Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya No. 38

The Pali Canon generally portrays the Buddha as a gentle and amiable teacher who invites questioning, investigation, and discussion. He encourages us to think for ourselves, to weigh his teachings carefully, and to develop our own personal insight into the truth. He does not expect us to rely slavishly upon his guidance but to be “islands unto yourselves.” There are, however, occasions when the Buddha displays a different countenance, when he can show a face that is stern, even severe. This is when he finds that his Dhamma is being misrepresented, and particularly when those responsible for the misrepresentation dwell in the ranks of his own ordained monks and nuns. When an ordained disciple grasps the Teaching wrongly, distorts its meaning in a way governed by personal predilection, and then insists that this mutilated version of the Dhamma conveys the real meaning, a grave danger appears on the horizon; for if the fundamental principles of the Dhamma are subverted from within, by an “inside job,” the Teaching itself will be eviscerated. Deprived of its truly liberative power, it may then serve only to prolong bondage rather than to yield the freedom of Nibbāna.

The Buddha knew fully well that his Teaching runs counter to the way of the world, which means above all that it goes against the grain of a mind prey to a million desires and fantasies. To accept the Dhamma fully demands a profound change in our deeply rooted attitudes and ideas, yet for just that reason it is only too easy for those who are attracted to the Dhamma, but who cannot accept it on its own terms, to bend it and stretch it until it becomes acceptable on theirs. When the Buddha learns that his Teaching is being manipulated in this way, especially by those who wear the saffron robe, he does not keep quiet or brush off the danger with a pleasant smile. Rather, he calls the miscreant into his presence, points out his mistakes, and delivers a severe rebuke.

The Majjhima Nikāya records two instances in which such a confrontation takes place between the Master and a misguided monk, each serving as the occasion for a sutta of great depth and power. The first is the Simile of the Water-snake (Alagaddūpama Sutta, MN 22), which begins when a monk named Ariṭṭha declares that “although certain things have been called obstructions by the Blessed One, they are not really obstructive for one who pursues them.” The sequel makes it plain that what Ariṭṭha was really aiming at was to abrogate the rule requiring monks to observe celibacy. He thought the highest stage of enlightenment could be achieved by those still indulging in sense pleasures, and in advancing this thesis, however subtly, he ran smack up against the Buddha’s dictum that the highest goal could only be won by the highest life (*brahmacariya*), which requires the control and abandonment of sensual desire. Ariṭṭha’s thesis, taken to its limits, could culminate in the idea that sensual indulgence can itself be a means to enlightenment—an idea which, indeed, did gain a foothold during the later history of Buddhism in India.

In the Great Discourse on the Destruction of Craving the Buddha is confronted with another bold challenge to the Teaching: the attempt to smuggle in the idea of a permanent self. When the sutta opens a monk named Sāti has been going about telling the monks that “as I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness that runs and wanders through the round of rebirths, not another.” The other monks try to persuade Sāti to relinquish this view, explaining that the Buddha has always taught that consciousness arises through conditions. But Sāti is an obstinate, self-willed man who refuses to change his views, and thus the monks are left with no choice but to report the issue to the Master.

When Sāti comes into the Buddha's presence, the Master does not upbraid him at once. He first asks Sāti whether the report he has heard is true, and when Sāti admits this he then asks him, "What do you mean by consciousness?" This is an important question, which the monks had failed to ask, for if Sāti had answered correctly there would have been no reason to admonish him. But Sāti does not answer correctly but in a way that implicitly identifies consciousness as a self: "It is that which speaks and feels and experiences here and there the results of good and bad actions." This reply shows that Sāti takes consciousness to be the agent behind all action, the persisting subject behind the changing experiences. Further, since this consciousness "runs and wanders through the round of rebirths," this suggests that Sāti takes consciousness to be a permanent and everlasting self, identical with the ātman of the brahmanic systems of thought.

That a view of self lies concealed behind Sāti's assertion is made clear by another text which states that one of the wrong views that arises in a worldling through careless attention is: "This self of mine that speaks and feels and experiences here and there the result of good and bad actions—this self of mine is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and it will endure as long as eternity" (MN 2/M I 8). When the two texts are put side by side, it becomes evident that Sāti wants to ascribe all these qualities to consciousness: changelessness, permanence, eternal existence.

Once the Buddha has gotten Sāti to explain what he means by consciousness, he corrects him with the same words the monks used earlier, pointing out that consciousness is dependently arisen. To understand this passage, it is important to see exactly what the Buddha is rejecting in Sāti's view of consciousness. Other suttas (and to some extent the sequel to the present one) show that according to early Buddhism consciousness is the channel or vehicle of rebirth, and thus it is perfectly acceptable to say that consciousness re-arises or undergoes rebirth. Thus if Sāti had simply said that consciousness passes on from life to life, his assertion would not have been wrong. But Sāti is saying more than this. What he claims is that it is the very same consciousness (*tad eva idaṃ viññānaṃ*) that passes on, which means that consciousness is a simple, substantial entity that preserves its self-identity throughout the transitory experiences and the sequence of births.

For the Buddha, however, consciousness is not a simple entity, a lasting self, but a process. It is a sequence of discrete occasions of consciousness, each of which is dependent on a wide lattice of conditions. Each occasion of consciousness arises in succession to the preceding occasion, performs its momentary function of cognition, and then immediately perishes, giving rise to the next. Thus there is no identity of consciousness from one moment to the next. However, though there is no identity, there is no absolute difference either, whether between the occasion of consciousness in one life or between the streams of consciousness in different lives. Consciousness occurs as a continuum of consciousness possessing the continuity of a process, and it is this continuity that accounts for the consistency and coherence of personal experience.

(to be continued)

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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