



Two Paths to Knowledge

Many of the formidable social and cultural problems we face today are rooted in the sharp schism that has divided Western civilisation between science and religion, where science claims invincible knowledge based on the empirical investigation of the natural world, while religion can do little more than call for faith in supernatural creeds and obedience to codes of ethics that require restraint, self-discipline, and self-sacrifice. Since religion, as traditionally understood, often rests on little more than blithe promises and pompous threats, its appeals to our allegiance seldom win assent, while the ethical ideals it advocates stand hardly a fighting chance against the constant injunction—thrust upon us by TV, radio, and signboard—to enjoy life to the hilt while we can. As a result, a vast portion of humankind today has become alienated from religion as a meaningful guide to life, left with no alternative but to plunge headlong into the secular religion of consumerism and hedonism. Too often those in the religious camp, sensing the threat secularism poses to their own security, feel driven towards an aggressive fundamentalism in a desperate bid to salvage traditional loyalties.

The quest to establish a sound basis for conduct in today's world has been made particularly difficult because one consequence of the dominance of the scientific world view has been the banishment of values from the domain of the real. While many scientists, in their personal lives, are staunch advocates of such ideals as world peace, political justice, and greater economic equality, the world view promulgated by modern science grants to values no objective grounding in the grand scheme of things. From this perspective their root and basis is purely subjective, and thus they bring along all the qualities the notion of subjectivity suggests: being personal, private, relative, even arbitrary. The overall effect of this scission, despite the best intentions of many responsible scientists, has been to give a green light to lifestyles founded on the quest for personal gratification and a power drive aimed at the exploitation of others.

In contrast to the classical Western antithesis of religion and science, Buddhism shares with science a common commitment to uncover the truth about the world. Both Buddhism and science draw a sharp distinction between the way things appear and the way they really are, and both offer to open our minds to insights into the real nature of things, normally hidden from us by false ideas based on sense perception and "common sense." Nevertheless, despite this affinity, it is also necessary to recognise the great differences in aim and orientation that separate Buddhism and science. While both may share certain conceptions about the nature of reality, science is essentially a project designed to provide us with objective, factual knowledge, with information pertaining to the public domain, while Buddhism is a spiritual path intended to promote inner transformation and the realisation of the highest good, called enlightenment, liberation, or Nibbāna. In Buddhism, the quest for knowledge is important not as an end in itself, but because the main cause of our bondage and suffering is ignorance, not understanding things as they really are, and thus the antidote needed to heal ourselves is knowledge or insight.

Again, the knowledge to be acquired by the practice of the Dhamma differs significantly from that sought by science in several major respects. Most importantly, the knowledge sought is not simply the acquisition of objective information about the constitution and operations of the physical world, but a deep personal insight into the real nature of one's personal existence. The aim is not to understand reality from the outside but from the inside, from the perspective of one's own living experience. One seeks not factual knowledge but insight or wisdom, a personal knowledge,

inescapably subjective, whose whole value lies in its transformative impact on one's life. Concern with the outer world, as an object of knowledge, arises only in so far as the outer world is inextricably implicated in experience. As the Buddha says: "It is in this body with its perception and thought that I declare is the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way to the cessation of the world."

Because Buddhism takes personal experience as its starting point, without aiming to use experience as a springboard to an impersonal, objective type of knowledge, it includes within its domain the entire spectrum of qualities disclosed by personal experience. This means that Buddhism gives prime consideration to values. But even more, values for Buddhism are not merely projections of subjective judgements which we fashion according to our personal whims, social needs, or cultural conditioning; to the contrary, they are written into the texture of reality just as firmly as the laws of motion and thermodynamics. Hence values can be evaluated: rated in terms of truth and falsity, ranked as valid or invalid, and part of our task in giving meaning to our life is to unearth the true scheme of values. To determine the true gradation of values we must turn our attention inwards and use subjective criteria of investigation; but what we find, far from being private or arbitrary, is an integral part of the objective order, permeated by the same lawfulness as that which governs the movements of the planets and the stars.

Affirmation of the objective reality of value implies another major distinction between Buddhism and science. In order for the liberating knowledge of enlightenment to arise, the investigator must undergo a profound personal transformation guided by inner perception of the genuine values. While natural science can be undertaken as a purely intellectual discipline, the Buddhist quest in its entirety is an existential discipline which can only be implemented by regulating one's conduct, purifying one's mind, and refining one's capacity for attention to one's own bodily and mental processes. This training requires compliance with ethics all the way through, and thus ethical guidelines support and pervade the entire training from its starting point in right action to its culmination in the highest liberation of the mind.

What is especially noteworthy is that the ethical thrust of the Buddhist training and its cognitive thrust converge on the same point, the realisation of the truth of selflessness (*anatta*). It is just here that contemporary science approaches Buddhism in its discovery of the process nature of actuality, implying the lack of an ultimate substance concealed behind the sequence of events. But this correspondence again points to a fundamental difference. In Buddhism the impermanent and substanceless nature of reality is not simply a factual truth apprehended by objective knowledge. It is above all an existential truth, a transformative principle offering the key to right understanding and right liberation. To use this key to open the door to spiritual freedom, its sole purpose, we must govern our conduct on the premise that the idea of a substantial self is a delusion. It is insufficient merely to give intellectual assent to the idea of selflessness and turn it into a plaything of thought. The principle must be penetrated by training ourselves to discover the absence of selfhood in its subtlest hiding place, the deep recesses of our own minds.

It is to be hoped that Buddhist thinkers and open-minded scientists, by sharing their insights and reflections, can show us an effective way to heal the rift between objective knowledge and spiritual wisdom and thus bring about a reconciliation between science and spirituality. In this way spiritual practice will become an integral part of the discipline aimed at knowledge, and spiritual practice and knowledge in combination will become the tools for achieving the highest good, enlightenment and spiritual freedom. This has always been the position of Buddhism, as evidenced by the most ancient texts themselves. We must remember that the Buddha, the Enlightened One, is not only, like the scientist, a *lokavidū*, "a knower of the world" but also, above all, a *vijjācaraṇasampanno*, "one complete in both knowledge and conduct."

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Book Review

Landscapes of Wonder: Discovering the Buddha's Dhamma in the World Around Us. Bhikkhu Nyanasobhano. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1998.?? pages, U.S. \$??.

It is often said that, since times are different and people have changed, the Buddha's teaching, so suitable for ancient India, is hardly relevant to us at the dawning of the twenty-first century. Even some Theravadins claim that Buddhism must be adopted, streamlined, and reinterpreted for our modern age. Others regard Buddhism as part of a spiritual smorgasbord, indulging their tastes for the sweet or the unusual but rejecting the Buddha's more demanding teachings.

In his book of brilliant, beautifully written essays, American Buddhist monk and author Bhikkhu Nyanasobhano strikes a very different note. For him, 'the long-honoured, ever-fresh Dhamma needs no revision to move the heart and guide the conduct of a man or woman today, because it is the abiding essence of goodness and peace, which the Buddha kindly taught for the welfare of living beings.' The essays in the book deal with a wide variety of topics, including lessons on suffering, compassion, morality, insight meditation, and liberation. All are written in a rich and flowing language that carries the reader effortlessly along.

Besides these expository essays, the book offers a second type of essay, perhaps unique to our author. This is the contemplative excursion. With a short, opening invitation, Ven. Nyanasobhano draws us away from our busy-ness and self-absorption to some solitary place, where he probes a particular aspect of the natural landscape for its deep and vital truths. He reminds us that in our daily lives we are surrounded by messengers which teach us, if we are aware and alert enough to learn, the invariable facts of existence repeated so often by the Buddha. A swollen stream, a rotting log, the glimpse of a glorious white crane—these can teach us the truths of impermanence, suffering, and essencelessness just as eloquently as the Buddhist texts. Our task, he reminds us, is to learn how to see and to persevere in our contemplations. Ordinary events speak the Dhamma clearly, if we know how to listen. We do not need the spectacular or the marvellous. Even our own fear, irritation, and grief, as they arise and pass away, can be precious objects of contemplation.

These essays remind us that the constant changes we readily observe in our bodies and minds prove that, apart from Nibbāna, there is no respite from impermanence, old age, sickness, and death. Ven. Nyanasobhano makes it clear that the Buddha's message is not an offer of a cushier bed in saṃsāra, but the glorious promise of complete liberation to be sought with the greatest urgency. There is no false comfort in tiptoeing around the unpleasantness of death, but Buddhism teaches us how to prepare ourselves to weather the onslaught of life's harsh lessons and thereby to develop wisdom. The challenge we are offered is to stop craving, to strengthen ourselves with detachment, to view things calmly and wisely, without becoming entangled by them; for it is entanglement that brings suffering.

In 'The Life of Honour,' Ven. Nyanasobhano uses his poetic skills to rouse, inspire, and encourage us to lead an ethically upright life. He demonstrates how, by relying on the Five Precepts, the Noble Eightfold Path, and a clear understanding of cause and effect, we can achieve a consistent integrity in our conduct. Right and wrong, he argues, are not matters of public opinion. Rather than blindly following popular sentiment on such difficult issues as euthanasia, abortion, or capital punishment, we should investigate intentions and results, the law of kamma, which is influenced neither by majority opinion nor by personal views.

The Buddha taught us to live harmlessly, to show compassion to all living beings who, like ourselves, are caught in the wheel of birth and death. In his essay 'Fellow Travellers,' Ven. Nyanasobhano shows how careful attention to the animal realm can be very instructive since the world of animals presents an intensified picture of our own condition. Elsewhere in the book he extols the advantages of monastic life, which offers its members not only a blameless means of livelihood but also structure, discipline, tradition, and communal support. But he also points out that lay Buddhists can and should seek spiritual accomplishments as well. In return for the support

they offer the Sangha, lay Buddhists receive inspiration, instruction, and the precious opportunity to make merit by acts of faith, respect, and generosity.

Landscapes of Wonder is rich with observations informed by the Dhamma and deepened by the freedom and discipline unique to life in the Sangha. There is a special pleasure in finding the Dhamma explained in the context of the North American terrain, with its stark winter landscapes and the raw beginnings of spring. Ven. Nyanasobhano presents the Buddha's ageless teaching so freshly and lucidly, and in such poetic English, that the writer of the book's foreword hardly exaggerates when he says, 'American Buddhism has at last found its Thoreau.'

There is good reason to rejoice that Theravada Buddhism still flourishes in the world, all the more so that it continues consistent with the original teachings. Just as I have never detected a single point of disagreement between my American teacher and my Burmese sayadaw—though they were born forty years apart, ordained in different lineages, and practise in different worlds—so I take comfort and satisfaction in noting that everything Ven. Nyanasobhano writes is in complete accord.

—Visakha Kawasaki

Guidelines to Sutta Studies

The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving (cont.)
Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya No. 38

In the last instalment of this series we saw that the Buddha counters his misguided disciple Sāti's conception of consciousness as a persisting, self-identical entity by explaining that consciousness is dependently arisen. Consciousness is not a single, simple, uniform entity maintaining its identity behind its changing modes; it is, rather, a generic designation for the factor of awareness present in six types of evanescent cognitive events—eye-consciousness through mind-consciousness—each of which occurs as the bare act of cognising an object. Each type of consciousness arises in dependence on two main conditions: an internal condition, the sense faculty, and an external condition, the object. Thus eye-consciousness arises in dependence on the eye and forms and has the function of cognising forms through the eye; mind-consciousness arises through the mind door (which the commentary identifies with the *bhavaṅga* or 'life continuum') and can take any type of object, including the objects of the physical senses, but is particularly equipped to apprehend non-sensuous objects such as concepts and ideas.

The Buddha illustrates this differentiation in the types of consciousness with the simile of fire. Just as fire, though seemingly one, is actually distinguishable into different types of fire by reference to the particular kind of fuel which it burns—as a log fire, a faggot fire, a grass fire, a chaff fire, etc.—so consciousness is reckoned by way of the conditions in dependence on which it arises. While Sāti insists it is the same consciousness that transmigrates from life to life, for the Buddha consciousness does not preserve its identity even on two successive occasions. Each act of consciousness is discrete and perishes almost immediately after it arises, without passing over from one sense faculty to another. It comes into being with the support of its conditions (which are themselves subject to incessant impermanence), performs its momentary function, and then perishes, giving rise to the next occasion of consciousness so quickly that, without sustained attention to the immediate flow of experience, one cannot detect the transition from one occasion to the next.

Nevertheless, the fact that any particular occasion of consciousness is impermanent and dissolves almost immediately after it has arisen does not mean that the process of consciousness comes to an end with death or that there is no survival beyond the body. Just as much as he teaches the insubstantiality of consciousness, the Buddha also teaches that rebirth is real, that deeds have consequences, that we inherit the fruits of our good and bad kamma; and what makes rebirth a

reality is precisely that consciousness continues on, that it survives the demise of the body. Although consciousness is not a persisting entity that can be identified as ‘my self,’ this process of cognition is driven and sustained by a dynamic configuration of conditions, and as long as these conditions remain operative at the time of death, the stream of consciousness will continue beyond death, arising on the basis of a fresh set of supporting conditions. Thus, while it is wrong to say (as Sāti did) that ‘this same consciousness runs and wanders on through the round of rebirths,’ it is not wrong to say that consciousness—understood as a procession of events constantly arising and perishing—continues on from one life to the next. It continues on, however, not as a lasting self, but as a sequence of momentary ‘frames’ of cognitive activity each of which expires as soon as it has acquired full actuality. In this way consciousness can serve as the ‘channel’ for the rebirth process, the reservoir of past experience, dispositions, and karmic formations that underlies continued personal identity through the sequence of lifetimes.

In the next section of the sutta (§§9–14) the Buddha turns the examination of the conditionality of consciousness into a wider demonstration that the five aggregates in their entirety are dependently arisen. He draws out this point by asking the monks a series of questions. He first asks them if they see ‘This has come to be (*bhūtam idaṃ*).’ In the original Pali, as much as in translation, the phrasing of the question is compact and cryptic, but the commentary clarifies the meaning by telling us that ‘this’ refers to the five aggregates as a whole. The commentary says that, having shown the conditionality of consciousness, the Buddha undertakes this inquiry to establish the conditioned nature of all five aggregates. Underlying the passage, but unexpressed, is the presupposition that the notion of an *ātman*, of a substantial self, and the idea of conditionality are mutually contradictory and exclusive. If within the person there is a self, it would have to be something uncreated and unconditioned, something which exists by its own inherent power of being; and if this were the case, it would exist independently of causes and conditions. But when the monks affirm that ‘this’—the assemblage of the five aggregates making up our personal being—‘has come to be,’ at one stroke this proclaims the utter conditionality of the individual. Whatever we refer to as ‘I’ and ‘mine’ is comprised within the five aggregates, and since these five aggregates have all ‘come to be,’ this means that they can neither be identified as an enduring self nor seen to contain any such a self within their fold.

The next two questions reinforce this point. Taken together, the Buddha’s questions and the replies of the monks establish that the five aggregates have arisen from their own specific conditions—spoken of here as ‘nutriment’ (*āhāra*)—and pass away with the cessation of those conditions. Thus we find in this passage an application of the general principle of dependent origination to the five aggregates, with the conditions pointed to by the word ‘nutriment.’ The general principle of dependent origination (which we will meet later in the sutta) states, ‘When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.’ In this formula, the place of ‘this exists’ is taken by the nutriment, and the place of ‘that (which) comes to be’ by the five aggregates. Similarly, in the part dealing with cessation, the ‘this’ that ceases first is the nutriment, and the ‘that’ that consequently ceases is the five aggregates. We will explore this theme more fully in the next instalment of this series.

(to be continued)

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