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Buddhism in Daily Life

And Other Essays

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By

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Buddhism in Daily Life

We often hear people talk about Buddhism in Daily Life," and sometimes they give lectures or even run classes under this title. That is fine, but one may be excused for wondering, occasionally what they mean by it. Obviously, if one's "Buddhism" means anything at all, it must sometimes show in daily life: in the Christian phrase, "By their fruits ye shall know them." I suggest that the true practice of Buddhism in daily life is simply the conscientious attempt to tread the Eightfold Path. If we care to brighten this up by means of a few "Zen" gimmicks, this may be all right provided there is some solid understanding present. But too often such things arise merely from a combination of ignorance, conceit and self-indulgence, perhaps under the quasi-hypnotic influence of a self-appointed "guru" whose real qualifications are in inverse proportion to his pretensions.

The eight steps of the Path fall into the three divisions of wisdom, morality (or ethics) and meditation (or mind-training). The "lower" wisdom is a prerequisite for the development of that true higherwisdom which is Enlightenment, and which can

only come to be when the practice of morality and mind-training is complete.

It might be useful to look at this for a moment in connection with the so-called five faculties: faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom. In a sense, these factors epitomise the Path: energy; mindfulness and concentration correspond to the three "meditative" steps of right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration, and the last factor, wisdom, coming after these factors have been developed. We could take ""faith" to represent here the lower or preliminary wisdom of the first two steps; the ethical steps being here either omitted or perhaps subsumed under "energy." I am, of course, aware that there is another and more "orthodox" way of regarding these five factors, but this way too may be legitimate, The problem of "faith" in Buddhism is one that causes many people difficulty. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which we have to take some things on trust until such time as we can see them clearly for ourselves, and in that sense "faith" is surely an element of the preliminary stage of wisdom (a stage which few of us have actually passed, if we have 'indeed even fully reached and established it).

All the steps of the Path are, of course, interlinked. Let us just look at some of them separately to see their application in daily life. The terms used are different

in translated books. In most cases the translation of the word *sammā* which precedes the name of each step is given as "right," thus "right understanding" and so on. It is sometimes contended that the proper translation is "perfect," and this meaning is of course found in phrases like *Sammā-Sambuddha*. But it also means "in the right direction," and for us beginners that is what it does mean, at best. If I want to go from London to Edinburgh and head due south, my direction is not "right"' or *sammā*. At its simplest, then, the first step implies facing in roughly the right direction. Then, and only then, can we start walking on with any hope of reaching the goal.

Right understanding, the first step, is more literally, and perhaps better, called right seeing. It may involve an element of faith in the sense of trust, and of what may without pretentiousness be called "intuition" (a dangerous word, but not entirely meaningless). At any rate it does mean that we see, for instance, some connection between craving and suffering. The trendy assumption that unbridled sex–indulgence and more acquisitiveness will bring us happiness is based on a lack of "right understanding." There are many other factors involved, but this will do by way of example. The second step, right thought or right motive, implies the establishment of a state of mind favourable to the application of one's "seeing"; for instance, seeing the

peril of acquisitiveness (at least to some degree), one cultivates some measure of non-attachment, and so on. We could then say that the development of the preliminary wisdom involves seeing the right thing to do and getting into the right frame of mind for doing it. We shall soon enough discover that the spirit may be willing but the flesh is weak—nevertheless the great thing is to see and to try. This leads straight on to the stage of morality.

In one book, I have read something to the effect that "for reasons unconnected with enlightenment, Zen stresses strict morality." I do not profess to know what the first part of this sentence means (if anything), but for those bitten with the Zen bug the latter part of the statement is important, and perhaps necessary. We can subsume morality either under the three steps of the Path, right speech, action and livelihood, or under the five precepts (or, better, rules of training). These precepts were not handed down by God or the Buddha on any equivalent of Mount Sinai. In other words, no being, divine or otherwise, has ordered us to keep them. We recite a formula which says: "I undertake the rule of training to refrain from taking life," etc. A point I would make here is that some trendy philosophers have urged that we have no 'objective criteria for any rules of morality, once we have abandoned the traditional God-idea: Buddhism

shows that this is nonsense. A detailed explanation of this would involve the law of kamma. But if we can't see this at all, then to put it shortly, we are lacking in right understanding. We may have many weaknesses. We may fail, perhaps all too frequently, to live up to the ideal. But if we are trying to tread the Path, our daily life should show it.

About the third, or mind-training section of the Path, I shall say little here. Of course, some form of meditation should be part of our "daily life," and for most readers of this essay that will mean vipassanā, in other words the practice of right mindfulness, the seventh step. But we should not neglect the four great efforts" of step 6 (to overcome and maintain wholesome states). This supports and is supported by step 2, right thought, and leads on to mindfulness. The interrelations of the steps are very close here. Finally, the eighth step, right concentration or *samādhi*, is important and far ranging. It includes not only practices for the concentrating and calming of the mind, but also the practice of loving-kindness, compassion, and so on. For those practising vipassanā, the attainment of the jhānic absorptions is not necessary, and most people would anyway be better advised not to aim at such things, especially without a qualified teacher. But those who are agitated and restless may need to do a good deal of concentration

practice to calm the mind.

To be a "Buddhist" without making any attempt to put the principles into practice is nonsensical. Buddhism is essentially something to do rather than something to believe. The attainment of the higher wisdom will, for most people at least, be a long task which may not be fully achieved in this lifetime. But those who are sincerely treading the path will stand out. They will have something about them which subtly marks them out. They will be mindful, compassionate, considerate to others. While they will not rush round offering good advice to all and sundry unasked, they may well be the kind of people whom those in need of advice and help will instinctively turn to. They will be good citizens of the world, for the very reason that they are not too much caught up in its meretricious attractions.

—(*Sangha*, No.3, 1973)

Self—Deliverance

When I was younger, I used to be addicted to the

reading of thrillers and tales of the "Saint" type. In these stories the hero regularly found himself at some point in some frightful predicament at the hands of his ruthless enemies, and it seemed that he was inevitably doomed to perish through their machinations. But he always had some unexpected trick up his sleeve, which enabled him to make good escape at the last minute. We are all, whether we know it or not, in a frightful predicament, trapped in the snares of saṃsāra. True, like the hero of those stories, we have ourselves walked into the trap. But if we have practised the Dhamma sufficiently, we have at our disposal some secret device which will enable us to make good our escape and turn the tables on the minions of Māra. Mindfulness can get us out of any predicament.

In one of the stories I read—in fact in several, I think, with different variations—the hero found himself bound hand and foot in some noxious cellar or dungeon which was slowly filling with water. Unless he could unloose his bonds he was certain to perish. It seemed that nothing could save him. He was tied down by both hands and both feet. But always, somehow or other, he managed to escape. In such a situation, the essential thing, of course, was to get one hand free. Perhaps with his teeth, or with the aid of some cunning implement which had eluded those

who searched him, he managed in the nick of time to do this. Having got one hand free, our hero's situation was, of course, transformed. He could then with comparative ease untie the other hand. With both hands free, he had even less difficulty in untying his feet. And after that he could always get out because his enemies had not bothered to lock the door.

Maybe we can escape from the toils of saṃsāra in a similar way. We are told that there are four stages on the path to Enlightenment. Once the first stage has been reached, eventual liberation, though it may still be quite a way off, is said to be assured. The decisive thing, then, is the so-called first path moment, or "entering the stream." This is when we get one hand free.

The way to get "one hand free" is by mindfulness. The essential task of mindfulness is to enable us to come to an ever deeper realisation of the spurious nature of what we think of as "self" Eventually, this fact of "non-self" (*anattā*) is clearly perceived. This, of course, is not just an intellectual seeing but a direct perception of truth. But it effectually puts an end to even the cleverest intellectual speculations about "self" and "selves." It also means that there is no further lurking doubt about the truth of the Dhamma. And similarly, any lurking belief in the necessity of any form of rites and rituals necessarily vanishes.

Thus at the first path moment three of the ten fetters disappear: (1) personality-belief, (2) doubt, and (3) attachment to rites and rituals. For a person who has gained this stage, Enlightenment is certain, and the end of rebirth is in prospect, though it is said that he may still be reborn up to seven times more. The reason for rebirth, according to the Second Noble Truth, is attachment (*taṇhā*). The roots of desire and aversion lie so deep that even this profound experience does not immediately sever them. But it guarantees that they will be severed. He who has one hand free is already on the Ariyan Path. It is only a matter of time before he gets his second hand free.

The second path moment, whenever it comes, makes the Stream-Enterer into a Once-Returner. His attachment to this world is so reduced that he will be reborn in it at most once more. By this experience the roots of desire and aversion in this world are almost, but not quite, severed. This stage, then, marks not the total destruction, but the decisive weakening of fetters 4 and 5: sensuality and ill-will. Henceforth they will be purely in the mind and have no more than a certain nuisance-value.

With both hands free, our hero was able to release first one foot, then the other. The third path moment destroys sensuality and aversion completely. One who has attained this stage has no further desire or

aversion for things of this world. He will therefore no longer be reborn in human form. He is a Non-Returner. But he is still not fully enlightened. The five lower fetters have gone, but five higher fetters still remain to be destroyed. These are: (6) desire for the world of form, (7) desire for the formless world, (8) conceit, (9) restlessness, (10) ignorance. Fetters 6 and 7 refer to the *jhāna* states which some people can enjoy in meditation (not insight meditation but concentration). They are more subtle, and more delightful than the joys of the world most people alone know. But they too must be transcended. That conceit should still persist at this advanced stage might surprise some, but even here there is doubtless some trace of that pride in "one's own" achievement which so easily vitiates progress at lower levels. The "restlessness" at this stage is doubtless very subtle, and probably takes the form of a measure of impatience to "finish the job." And since one is not fully enlightened, there are also necessarily some degrees of ignorance still present. Consciousness, though powerfully illumined, still has some faint shadows.

Final liberation comes at the fourth path moment. The Arahant, who has gained this, has nothing further to learn or do. The Deathless has been realised. There is no more to be said. These are the stages on the Path

as stated in the scriptures. What they really mean can only be found out one way—by getting there. The first stage is considered to be not exactly easy, but quite possible for many to attain. Its attainment can be objectively tested. Various other lesser "experiences" of a psychic or a psychological nature can be come to by many people. They may be quite good in their way, provided conceit does not arise to destroy their benefits, but they are not the aim. Only mindfulness and clear awareness can lead to the true Path experience. It is worth striving for.

—(*Sangha,* Oct. 1970)

How to Meditate without Meditating

Meditation, we are told, should be easy. And so it is, for some people—in fact for most people, once they have really got into the habit. But let's face it, quite a lot of people don't find it easy in the beginning. I know I didn't and sometimes I still don't. In fact, if I

may be considered an expert on any aspect of Buddhism, it is on the elementary hindrances. I've met them all: sensuality, ill will, sloth and torpor, worry and flurry, and doubt. There's not much I couldn't tell you about the arising of all of these!

The fourth and fifth often go together, and arise because one or other of the first three has come up and won't go away. I get worried because I feel sensual or angry or sleepy, and then I doubt, if not the Dhamma itself, at least my ability to progress.

This is a common syndrome. So, what can we do about it? One answer is not to worry about worrying. If you're worried, note the fact that you're worried—or rather, that a state of worry is present. Look into it with at least a little bit of detachment. Then the situation is this, that with a part of your mind you are watching the rest of your mind worrying! You can break situation down still further into more impersonal terms at a slightly later stage, but that will do for a start. If you can do this at all, then in fact you are meditating! Apply this principle generally, to whatever arises in the mind. You can do it while 'officially' meditating, and you can do it equally well at many other times during the day.

This brings us to the question of "what is mindfulness?" The simplest answer is—just noticing.

Notice as much as possible, and as often as possible, what this funny collection of psycho-physical bits-and-pieces called you is actually up to right now! Just get the habit of doing that, and it will carry you very far. You'll be surprised how far. Mostly we just dream along, and react with pretty automatic emotional responses to whatever happens. It's not necessarily easy to stop doing this, but it's not too difficult to start noticing that that is what "you' are doing.

It is often—and rightly said: "Don't look for results." You probably will though, and if you do, just notice that you are now looking for results! But one of the various reasons for this advice is that in fact you may be the last person to be aware of the results when they do come. Many years ago I started trying to meditate, following the instructions in a little book. I did this conscientiously for several weeks, and then I began to get fed up Nothing seemed to have happened;" I didn't seem to be getting anywhere. I was on the point of giving the whole thing up, when two people who might be presumed to know me fairly well—one was my mother and the other was my wife —both said, apparently independently, that I seemed to be a bit easier to get on with: I didn't fly off the handle quite so much. So something must have happened, but I was quite unaware of it.

So just practise noticing. Some people—especially

those Jung calls the extravert sensorial type—are very good at noticing things outside of themselves. They observe closely other people's actions, behaviour, dress and so on, and generally comment at length on the subject, given half a chance. Their comments are usually somewhat critical. If they observe something unfavourable, they usually say so in no uncertain terms; if what they see is favourable, they probably make remarks indicative of envy or jealousy. If you must observe others like this, try to be objective about it ("OK, he bites his fingernails, so what!"). If you find it hard to observe them without dislike, observe the arising of dislike in your own mind.

If you observe other people in this way, always at least observe your own reactions as well. Maybe that person really is rather dislikeable—but that's not the point. The point is your reaction. Don't try too hard to love every unwashed hippy you meet—it might be too much of a strain. Conversely, let's face it, we are often attracted to people. Don't be too holy and pretend (at least to yourself) that you are never sexually attracted by some person you meet, even though you may not have the slightest intention of doing anything about it. But if such thoughts and feelings do arise, notice them. These days, there is often plenty to notice out here. So just notice the fact that you are noticing with interest—positive or negative; it doesn't matter.

We often hear people speaking about "Buddhism in Daily Life." This is the most essential part of it. Whatever you see, hear, smell, taste, touch or think, notice what arises in your mind (and body) as a result. Don't be discouraged—just notice. And if you still feel discouraged, just notice that feeling too!

This really is an easy practice. Let's go a bit further. A good rule is: don't make excuses to yourself. O.K., so I don't want to meditate (or do the washing-up, or get up in the morning, or what-have-you). Notice the "I don't want to" or, better, the "not-wanting-to." Maybe you still won't do the thing but you've noticed the fact. Maybe you still make excuses to yourself—notice that fact! And it is a fact that if you do this for a while, certain personality-changes, for the better, will occur in you. You may, however, not realise this, though others probably will, whether they tell you or not. And if you find yourself hoping that somebody will tell you how much nicer you have become lately, well—just notice that thought arising too. Really, it becomes quite an amusing game in the end!

There are lots of games you can play. Some people, when offered a drink or something, say, "I don't mind if I do." Why not try the "I don't mind if I don't" game? Suppose you are offered a drink. Being aware of the fifth precept, you feel that to be a "good Buddhist" you should refuse. So, what do you in fact

do? I am assuming that you are the sort of person who, at any rate before "becoming a Buddhist," was not totally averse to a little alcoholic refreshment occasionally. There are many such people, after all. Well, of course, you can be heroic and refuse anyway, even though you would have rather liked it. That, of course, is fine. Or you could let your Buddhism go hang for a bit (gone for a Burton, in fact!), and take it. I'm not recommending this course; I'm just saying it might happen. You might even utter the ritual words, "I don't mind if I do," which is one of those "typically British" examples of understatement we take a national pride in. You could, however, swiftly interrogate yourself mentally and say to yourself: "Do I mind if I don't?" It is quite possible that you will find you can, after all, bear the thought of not having that drink, and so you refuse. If you find you do want it rather badly, well of course it's up to you. But human nature being what it is, the odds are that in that case you will accept. If so, be aware of what is happening. This, of course, may spoil the pleasure a bit, and next time you may really not feel quite so keen on that drink. But anyway you will have learned something. And if you can, even occasionally, say to some preferred pleasure, "I don't mind if I don't," and mean it, then you are getting on a bit. We all have plenty of craving (*taṇhā*)—otherwise we wouldn't even be here.

So it is quite a good game to see just what pleasures we do find easily resistible. After all, it ought not to be difficult to say no to something you don't want very much. So use this method to cultivate a little sales resistance. In this commercialised world it's very necessary.

Probably you can think up 'a few other similar games for yourself. They all help to make the basic practice of noticing more fun. You might as well enjoy your practice while you're about it— always providing, of course, that you notice that you're enjoying it.

—(*Sangha*, June 1970)

Axolotls

The axolotl is a peculiar kind of Mexican salamander, which has come to terms with an unfavourable environment in a unique way. Axolotl have learnt to breed in the tadpole stage, and accordingly most of them never develop to maturity at all, though our wonderful modern science has found a way of

producing mature axolotl: by injecting them with hormones. The parallel with the human race is not, perhaps, very hard to find. We breed fairly freely, and yet most of us never actually grow up into really mature human beings. Tadpoles beget tadpoles which beget more tadpoles, and so it goes on. Unfortunately, however, the human tadpole is not always such a peace-loving creature as the axolotl appears to be. It may be nice and friendly and have many admirable qualities, but at other times it is inclined to display many of the less enchanting traits of the hyena combined with the appetites and table-manners of the shark.

From the social point of view this, then, is the human problem in a nutshell: the human animal rarely reaches maturity, but breeds freely in the immature state. This fact could well be taken as the starting-point for a Buddhist science of sociology, and from it, basically, all the troubles of human society stem.

Plato saw the problem and dreamed of philosopher kings. If the "philosophers" were really fully-enlightened beings, and if they were able to establish and maintain themselves as kings, no doubt that would be fine. But so far in recorded history this has never happened, though plenty of dictators, of whom Hitler and Stalin are merely two recent and horrifying

examples, have tried to set themselves up as something equivalent to such "enlightened beings"—with results we know only too well. There have, occasionally, also been some genuinely benevolent despots who have some-times succeeded, at least locally and temporarily, in doing much good. It has been tried too with religious leaders: Popes, High Priests and so on. Jesus of Nazareth refused to play this game though pressed to do so, and we are told that he who became the Buddha could instead have become a "Wheel-turning Monarch," but as we know he chose a different path.

Social problems are not irrelevant to the Buddhist and certainly Buddhism can contribute much to their solution; nevertheless Buddhism always starts with, and comes back to, the individual. For we can only become enlightened individually, not collectively. Each individual human axolotl has to mature by training and developing his own mind. The only fully mature human being is an enlightened one, and Buddhism is simply a method of producing enlightened beings (Arahants). The Arahant is one who, having broken the ten fetters which bind a man to the things of the world, has overcome all craving and ignorance and will therefore not again be subject to birth. The task may seem daunting, but it is not an impossible one and herein lies Buddhism's message of

hope. Man is so constituted that he can gain Enlightenment, just as the axolotl can mature. But for man no course of injection of hormones—or drugs of any kind whatsoever—will do the trick. Instead, a course of training has been laid down by the Buddha for the attainment of Enlightenment: the Noble Eightfold Path. This Path is called Noble because it produces ariyas—aristocrats, not of birth and race, but of the spirit.

The human axolotl, the ordinary immature human being, like most of us, is called in Pali *puthujjana*—"worldling". By treading the Path he becomes ariya, "a noble one." That is to say, that by developing insight he has broken the first fetter of belief in and attachment to the figment of "self" and realised the inward meaning of *anatta*—the impersonality of all things including his own nature. This is not, by the way, a realisation of some kind of "higher self" but the perception of the falsity of any kind of self-concept. It is not attained by intellectual speculation, however brilliant and however subtle. A purely theoretical "realisation" of anatta is not enough, though some intellectual types (they call themselves "intuitive") are hard to convince of this fact. Nor is it attained by means of the many wonderful and often, but by no means always, delightful experiences that can be had, even when they are not drug-induced. A wholly

different insight-experience is necessary to achieve this, and it can only be gained by hard work, self-discipline and awareness. The vital factor here is the development of right mindfulness, but this too cannot be gained independently of the other steps of the Path.

When the experience of *anattā* has been properly and truly gained and the fiction of "self" has been seen for what it is, two other fetters are simultaneously broken: sceptical doubt and reliance on rites and rituals. This is not the end of the Path but its true beginning. Further profound moments of insight are needed, first to weaken, then to overcome, the remaining "lower fetters" of craving and aversion for things of this world.

Even then the task is far from done. But such a being is now a "Non-Returner": i.e. one who will not again be born in human form, or in any of the "states of woe." The final breaking of the subtle "higher fetters" is the ultimate maturing, the coming-to-be of the Arahant or Man Perfected—his mind perfectly pure and free from desire and aversion—who has realised Nibbāna in this very life.

It is sometimes said that the Arahant ideal is a selfish one. This argument is specious, for where the very idea of "self" is absent, selfishness is impossible. The Arahant is by definition totally free of any

temptation to act in the supposed interests of a fictitious "'self" which he knows to be non-existent, and which has no further interest for him. The path to Arahantship is open to all—men and women, monks and layfolk. The monk is—or should be—simply a whole-time specialist who is getting on with the job as quickly and thoroughly as possible. He is therefore in a position to guide and help lay people who have other preoccupations and who therefore must almost inevitably proceed at a slower rate. He is not really like a Christian priest. He administers no sacraments, but if he is a meditation-master he may act as "midwife" helping layfolk to bring their nascent insight to birth.

The Path is straight but steep. The temptation to rest instead of pressing on is great, and there are all sorts of entrancing side-tracks to tempt us Without help from experienced guides it is fatally easy to get lost. That is why we need a Sangha. The Arahant Mahinda told the King of Ceylon that the Dhamma would never be truly established in any country until a native-born Sangha existed there. The establishment of such a Sangha is not easy. But that is the task we have set ourselves. For it we must all rally round. Axolotls of the world-fetters unite—you have nothing to lose but your fetters.

—(*The Buddhist Path*, Aug. 1967)

About the Author

Maurice O'Connell Walshe (1911–1998) was born in London and studied German at the universities of London, Berlin, Vienna, and Freiburg, eventually becoming Deputy Director at the Institute of Germanic Studies, London. An active Buddhist since 1951, he was Vice-President of the English Sangha Trust, as well as author of numerous articles on Buddhism. His published works include a three volume set of essays of the 13th century mystic, Meister Eckhart and, in 1987, *Thus Have I Heard,* a new translation of the Dīgha Nikāya. A few months before he died, he completed a Buddhist Pali dictionary. (Source: ATI)

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