



# Buddhist Publication Society

## Newsletter

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### An Auspicious Month

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

During the month of July two of the BPS's guiding lights since its inception passed important milestones in their lives. One of these is Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera—our co-founder, long-term president and editor, and current patron—who on 21 July reached his ninetieth birthday. Fortunately, despite weak legs and impaired vision, Ven. Nyanaponika has enjoyed general good health, and thus was able to welcome the many visitors who called on him that day to pay their respects and to express to him their gratitude for his lucid exposition of the Dhamma and selfless service to the spread of the teachings over an illustrious career of so many years.

To commemorate the occasion the management and staff of the Buddhist Publication Society held an alms offering and felicitation meeting at the Mahathera's residence, the Forest Hermitage in the Udawattakele Forest Reserve near Kandy. After the meal offering, speaking on behalf of the BPS Board of Management, Mr. Harilal Wickremeratne announced to the Mahathera that as a token of our appreciation for him, the BPS has established a scholarship fund at the University of Peradeniya to be called "The Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera Scholarship Fund for Postgraduate Research into Theravada Buddhism." The scholarship, to be generated by the interest earned from a fixed deposit set up in a commercial bank in Kandy, is to be awarded to a scholar selected by the University for postgraduate studies in the philosophy, ethics, or literature of Theravada Buddhism.

Felicitations for Ven. Nyanaponika were especially prominent in his native Germany, the land he left so long ago in order to embrace the monk's life here in Sri Lanka. The University of Konstanz, in its Buddhist Modernism series, has issued a volume of writings, talks, texts, photos, and other documents to mark the Mahathera's completion of his ninth decade. The book, compiled by Professor Detlef Kantowsky, is entitled *Nicht derselbe und nicht ein anderer* ("Neither the same nor another"), the famous line from the Milindapañha which Ven. Nyanaponika quoted to the editor when reviewing photographs of himself as a boy and as a young man. (For ordering information inquire from: Prof. Detlef Kantowsky, Universitat Konstanz, Postfach 5560, D-7750 Konstanz 1, Germany.)

In Sri Lanka, his adopted home, Ven. Nyanaponika was recently accorded special honour when the Prime Minister's office selected him as one of a hundred "outstanding Sri Lankans" whose image is to be preserved in bronze in a planned national Hall of Fame. Accordingly, in late June Mr. Harold Peiris of the Ministry of Finance, who is in charge of the project, came to Kandy with the talented sculptor, Mr. Sarath Chandrajiva, to fashion a bust of the Mahathera. The clay model the sculptor moulded in less than two hours was strikingly faithful to Ven. Nyanaponika's features, and was used to create on the spot a plaster-of-paris mould from which the finished bust is to be cast out of bronze. The bust will be exhibited temporarily in the national art gallery in Colombo, along with those of the other nominees, until a permanent exhibition hall is built for them.

The other guiding light of the BPS to achieve distinction this past July is Ven. Piyadassi Mahathera, the editor of our Sinhala Damsak Series and author of numerous BPS titles both in English and Sinhala. By unanimous acclamation, in appreciation of his indefatigable services to

the Buddha-Sasana, the Mahanayaka Theras of the Sangha Council of the Amarapura Nikaya selected Ven. Piyadassi to be appointed as a Sangha Nayaka Thera—a leading elder of the Order—with the honorary designation Vishvakirti Sri Sasanasobhana, “universally famous glorious ornament of the Teaching.” On 15 July at a ceremony held at his alma mater, Nalanda College in Colombo, the new Nayaka Thera received his formal notice of appointment from Prime Minister D.B. Wijetunga before a large gathering led by the Mahanayaka Theras and President Ranasingha Premadasa. Although such honours rest lightly on the shoulders of a monk like Ven. Piyadassi, it is gratifying to us at the BPS to see this “glorious ornament” of our own Society receive the recognition he so rightly deserves. pleasant

At the age of 90, Ven. Nyanaponika is now in his 55th year in the Sangha; at the age of 77, Ven. Piyadassi is now in his 58th year. An inveterate traveller and preacher, Ven. Piyadassi has circled the globe twelve times and at home can be scheduled to give three or four sermons a day—sometimes on one side of the island in the morning and on the other side in the evening. Ven. Nyanaponika, in contrast, has remained almost consistently in Sri Lanka since his arrival here in 1936; yet from the quietude of his hermitage, through the agency of his publications, he has sent his words of wisdom and consolation to the far corners of the earth, translated into more than half a dozen languages.

May these two great elders, who have both in their different ways toiled selflessly for the welfare of the many, enjoy abundant good health and happiness. And may they be with us, as noble friends and advisors, for a long time yet to come!

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

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## Publications

*The Path of Purification*, Hardback: 950 pages 152 mm x 227 mm  
U.S. \$50.00; SL Rs. 950. Order No. BF 207H

*The Path of Purification*—Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli’s masterly translation of the *Visuddhimagga*—is again available in a handsome clothbound reprint edition newly composed in clear sharp types. The *Visuddhimagga* is the “great treatise” of the Theravada tradition, an encyclopaedic manual of Buddhist doctrine and meditation written in the fifth century by the great commentator Achariya Buddhaghosa. Ven. Ñāṇamoli’s translation itself ranks as an outstanding cultural achievement.

## Recent New Titles

*Buddha, My Refuge: Contemplation of the Buddha based on the Pali Suttas*. Bhikkhu Khantipalo. Softback: 134 pages 140 mm x 214 mm. U.S. \$7.50; SL Rs. 150. Order No. BP 409S

In this book the author uses the classic formula of the Buddha’s nine main epithets as the key for collecting a rich variety of texts from the Pali Canon. The result is a beautiful and inspiring anthology of suttas on the personality of the Blessed One, introduced and explained in such a way as to highlight their practical relevance.

*The Itivuttaka: The Buddha’s Sayings*. Trans. by John D. Ireland. Softback: 134 pages 140 mm x 214 mm. U.S. \$7.50; SL Rs. 150. Order No. BP 215S

The *Itivuttaka* is a collection of 112 short suttas preserved by the servant-woman Khujjutara, declared by the Buddha his most learned woman lay disciple. The suttas—in

mixed prose and versa—are elevated and profound, and reach a pitch of lofty spiritual exaltation.

### ***Back in Print***

*Kamma and its Fruit*. Ed. by Nyanaponika Thera. Softback: 128 pages 124 mm x 182 mm. U.S. \$4.50; SL Rs. 90. Order No. WH 221R24

In this book five practising Buddhists offer their reflections on the significance of the Buddha's teaching on kamma and on its relations to ethics, spiritual practice, and philosophical understanding.

*Aṅguttara Nikāya Anthology, Part 3*. Trans. by Nyanaponika Thera. Softback: 96 pages 124 mm x 182 mm. U.S. \$3.95; SL Rs. 75. Order No. WH 238/240

The *Aṅguttara Nikāya* is the collection of the Buddha's "numerical discourses," many of which deal with meditation and the application of Buddhist principles to daily life. With helpful explanatory notes.

*Nourishing the Roots*. Bhikkhu Bodhi. Softback: 64 pages 124 mm x 182 mm. U.S. \$2.50; SL Rs.50. Order No. WH 259J260

These sensitive and perceptive essays are intended to probe into the spiritual dimension of Buddhist ethics, which they treat as an integral part of the quest for purification and liberation of the mind.

### ***A Note of Thanks***

To help bring the Buddha's teachings to those in Sri Lanka who are afflicted with blindness, the BPS is sponsoring the publication (through the Ratmalana School for the Deaf and Blind) of a Braille edition of Ven. Piyadassi's Damsak booklet *Budurajanvahanse saha Bududahama*. We would like to acknowledge the generous donation of 25 reams of quality Braille paper presented by Helen Keller International of New York City specifically for the production of this book.

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## **Book Reviews**

*When the Iron Bird Flies: Buddhism for the West*. Ayya Khema Arkana, London, 1991. 220 pp. U.K. £6.99; U.S. \$9.95 (PB).

This book records a series of talks given by the well-known Buddhist nun Ayya Khema at a meditation retreat conducted at a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Canada. The enigmatic title comes from a prophecy ascribed to the Indian Buddhist sage Padmasambhava: "When the iron eagle flies and horses turn on wheels, the Dhamma will go to the West."

Ayya Khema begins her discourses with a chapter on "the why and how" of meditation, in which she emphasises that meditation is not an end in itself but "a means to change the mind's capacity in such a way that we can see entirely different realities from the ones we are used to." She briefly discusses the relation between the two facets of classical Buddhist meditation, calm and insight, and calls attention to their mutually reinforcing role. Following this introductory statement she offers basic directions for the practice of several meditation subjects: mindfulness of breathing, walking meditation, and loving kindness.

The framework of the following chapters is provided by the important but little known Upanisa Sutta of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, which sketches a formula of stages along the path that has been called “transcendental dependent arising.” The formula shows how suffering gives rise to faith, faith to joy, joy to concentration, and so on to correct knowledge and vision, disenchantment, dispassion and liberation. Ayya Khema devotes her talks to each of these stages, punctuating her expositions of the doctrine with additional practical instructions on meditation, especially loving kindness and mindfulness of sensations as taught in the Burmese tradition stemming from U Ba Khin.

Ayya Khema is not a scholar and her talks are not presented as textual analysis. In simple and primarily practical terms she discusses the successive steps of Buddhist practice, their experiential results, and their bearings on the conduct of daily life. Her discussion is interwoven with homely examples and striking analogies, some taken from the texts, others original.

While I found this book to start off promising to be an excellent primer on the Buddhist path, as I read on I came across numerous passages about which I had to hold reservations. Though these are minor blemishes, they marred my appreciation of the work as a whole. First I question her recommendation of visualisation as a tool for practising mindfulness of breathing and walking meditation; this feature, which is not included in the traditional directions, may lead to imaginative excursions of the mind as much as to true mindfulness and concentration. Then I found some of the explanations of the jhānic experiences hard to square with the canonical account. To mention but one of several instances, Ayya Khema calls *pīti* or rapture a “pleasant physical feeling,” whereas the texts classify it as a mental formation rather than a feeling.

I was astonished at her claim that the first three jhānas are easy to attain, and are mainly a matter of learning to let go. I found too that she describes the jhānic attainments in language more appropriate to insight experiences, though cloudily phrased. I also disagreed with her bald statement that the jhānas are necessary to attain Nibbāna; the statement needs qualification, and she herself later admits that insight may be attained without the jhānas, though with greater difficulty. Most disconcerting to this reviewer was the description of the fruition experience as “a return to the ground of being, to the matrix of existence which is the unconditioned primordial source.” Such terminology, suggestive of a mystical monism, is foreign to classical Theravada Buddhism, and it is puzzling that Ayya Khema, whose understanding of the Dhamma is usually so orthodox, should resort to it.

Although such deviations are widely spaced, it is hard to benignly disregard them. It is to be hoped that future works from the pen of this popular and capable teacher will be more carefully composed.

*The Hungry Tigress: Buddhist Legends and Jātaka Tales.* Rafe Martin. Parallax Press, Berkeley, 1990. 270 pp. U.S. \$15.00 (PB).

Alongside the discourses of the Buddha, classical Buddhist literature contains a vast corpus of myths and stories collected under the name of Jātakas. These tales purport to be accounts of the Buddha’s former lives during which he perfected the qualities that came to fulfilment with his Enlightenment. The most outstanding stories in this collection are narrative expressions of the distinctive spiritual ideals of Buddhism, giving these ideals form and substance in memorable characters and events.

The Pali Text Society publishes a complete translation of the Pali Jātaka collection, but a newcomer to this literature needs a selection of the most characteristically Buddhist stories of this genre, not the complete six-volume set. Rafe Martin, an American Buddhist who is also a prize-winning storyteller, has helped to fill this gap with his book *The Hungry Tigress*, a tasteful

selection of Jātakas and other Buddhist legends related in a fluent and lively style. Martin's compilation is not a translation but a free narration of selected Buddhist stories that seeks to convey their essential message: the exaltation of the spiritual values of patience, kindness, compassion and altruistic self-sacrifice.

The author draws from the life of the Buddha, the Jātakas in both their Pali and Sanskrit recensions, and later Buddhist legends to compose a book that can be both entertaining and edifying. Uniting the author's skills as a professional storyteller with some twenty years' experience as a practising Buddhist, *The Hungry Tigress* can be warmly recommended for children twelve and over as well as for adult readers who seek a glimpse into the rich narrative heritage of Buddhism retold in a modern idiom.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

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### **From the Mailbag**

It is with pleasure that I always read these most useful booklets, realising how important they are for those who are interested in such excellent, thought-provoking aspects of Buddhism. They truly are a great help to our dhammaduta work in the United Kingdom. Thank you very much.

Ven. M. Vajiragnana Mahathera  
Head, London Buddhist Vihara

It is wonderful to know that the BPS is continuing to publish such interesting works, particularly in the face of such difficult conditions as you are having at the moment in your little island. But that is the way Buddhism has always worked, isn't it? It has always carried on even when the world came crashing down around its ears.

Louis van Loon  
Chairman, Buddhist Institute of South Africa

I have been receiving the BPS publications for many years, and every time is a pleasure to receive them. I thank you heartily for your kindness and for supporting me on the Way.

Dr. Hatasi Sandor  
Szombatheley, Hungary

I am grateful to the BPS for its high standard of publications, correct translations, and the noble desire to work for the spread of the true Dhamma. People in Burma feel great inspiration and help by studying the BPS books. They are indeed scholarly, simple and profound. May you progress in all fields.

U Han Htay  
Yangon, Myanmar (Burma)

Every time when I find a new consignment containing the highly esteemed Wheels and Bodhi Leaves in my mailbox, I become very happy and I start reading the booklets with much enthusiasm. Thank you so much for these gemstones, which I have now been reading for about ten years. It was a Wheel publication that first opened my eyes, my heart and my mind to the

unique teaching of the Buddha, and I consider myself privileged to have come into contact with the Dhamma. Often, when I receive one of your publications, its contents meets exactly my spiritual needs and treats just the problem or subject with which I am engaged.

Frauke Wohnert  
Hamburg, Germany

The arrival of your mailing served as a very real and saddening evidence of the disruptive turmoil in Sri Lanka. I feel concern for your safety and join you in hoping for a rapid and complete return to civil peace. Reading the Dhamma brings to me a sense of peace and tranquillity that is much needed throughout the world today. I wish to add my humble but sincere encouragement to your noble staff to keep up the good works in spite of real and pressing reasons for despair.

M.M. Estes  
North Carolina, U.S.A.

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## Guidelines to Sutta Study

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

The first line of argument for the thesis of non-self advanced by the Buddha in the Discourse on the Characteristic of Non-self, sketched in the previous two instalments of this series, attempts to demonstrate that none of the five aggregates that make up our personality allows for the exercise of mastery essential to the notion of genuine selfhood. The second line of argument, which the Buddha develops next, unfolds as a questionnaire based on the “three characteristics of existence.” It proceeds by trying to show that the first characteristic implies the second, and the first two taken conjointly imply the third. That is, by questioning the monks, the Buddha establishes that whatever is impermanent is unpleasurable or suffering, and that whatever is impermanent and suffering cannot be validly regarded as self. The string of questions and replies is applied in turn to each of the five aggregates, and thus the conclusion is drawn that all the aggregates—form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness—being impermanent and suffering, are not self or self’s property.

The three characteristics are the dominant motif of the Buddha’s teaching. They are repeated so often in the suttas and commentaries that the casual student is apt to take them for granted and thereby to lose sight of their inter-connections and deep existential significance. To avoid such complacency it is necessary to examine the three characteristics in depth, to reflect on them often, and to transform them into personal experience through the practice of contemplation. For it is only by a penetrating insight into these real marks of all phenomena that we can withstand the fluctuations of worldly contingencies and develop the wisdom that brings full emancipation from suffering.

The characteristic of impermanence is defined as “the cessation of what has come into being.” It is also said to have the meaning of destruction. This characteristic extends to everything conditioned, from a molecule to a galaxy, from a thought to an empire. The point the Buddha emphasises in his proclamation of impermanence—“Whatever has the nature of arising has the nature of cessation”—is that decay, destruction, and cessation are inherent in whatever comes into being. Although things manifestly perish through external causes, the underlying reason for their impermanence lies in the nature of conditioned things themselves. It is the very

conditioned character of their being, their arrival in dependence on conditions that are themselves unstable, that accounts for their inevitable passing. We grow old and die—not due to this cause or that—but because we have been born.

Unacknowledged by our undeveloped minds, screened behind delusion and desire, impermanence holds sway over all the elements that make up our own individuality. The body, feelings, perceptions, volitions, even cognition itself: continuously these arise, stand momentarily, and then dissolve, leaving behind only an impulse of energy which engenders a fresh arising. Thus by investigation we discover that our very being, the ground on which we stand, is nothing but this causally interconnected succession of events, this process of arising and passing away.

For this reason the characteristic of impermanence implies the characteristic of suffering. Suffering—*dukkha*—here does not mean experiential pain, misery and anguish. It means, rather, the inherent inadequacy and unsatisfactoriness of what cannot yield a stable happiness and invulnerable security. As such, the mark of suffering is stamped on the entire range of our mundane experience, whether pleasant, painful, or indifferent. The reason this is so is because all the elements of experience are unstable: they arise and pass away on their own, beyond reach of our volitional control. Although we may want to stop the agreeable moments of our lives and make them last, we cannot do so; and although we may seek security in things that arise through conditions, we cannot find it. Therefore, because conditioned things are incapable of providing us with a sustained and impregnable happiness, they all turn out on inspection to be *dukkha* or suffering.

If we are to grasp anything as self, the thing we grasp must be permanent and it must also be a seat of control, of mastery over its claimed possessions. The notion of an impermanent and powerless self—a self that arises and passes away and that cannot control the events that affect it—is a notion that is both philosophically untenable and emotionally undesirable. However, the five aggregates that make up what we are fail to measure up to the criterion of selfhood. They are all, as the monks have confirmed, invariably impermanent, and they cannot be controlled in such a way that they always fulfil our desires.

When this is seen, the notion of selfhood stands revealed as a deluded and deluding phantom. Self is not the solid substantial reality we instinctively take it to be but a mirage that we project upon body and mind due to our own ignorance. It is a mirage as well that dissipates with the dawn of insight. Thus the Buddha draws the conclusion: “Whatever is impermanent, painful, and subject to change is not fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, I am this, this is my self.’”

*(to be continued)*

# The Buddhist Publication Society

The BPS is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for all people.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is—a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

For more information about the BPS and our publications, please visit our website, or contact:

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