



Buddhist Publication Society

Newsletter

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The Case for Study

The recent upsurge of interest in Buddhism, both East and West, has been marked by a vigorous practical orientation and a drive to discover the peace and freedom to which the practice of Dhamma leads. This zeal for practice, however, has often been accompanied by another trait which may not be so fruitful, namely, a tendency to neglect or even belittle the methodical study of the Buddha's teachings. The arguments offered in defence of this attitude have already become familiar currency among us. It is said, for example, that study is concerned with words and concepts, not with realities; that it leads only to learning, not to wisdom; that it can change only our ideas but fails to touch us at the deeper levels of our lives. To clinch the case the testimony of the Buddha himself is enlisted, with his famous remarks that to learn much without practising is like counting the cows of others or like carrying a raft on one's head instead of using it to cross the stream.

This contention, to be sure, has its aspect of truth, but it also suffers from a one-sided emphasis which may actually thwart rather than aid our progress on the Buddhist path. It is certainly true that learning without practice is fruitless, but the other side of the issue also should be considered. Should a person gather cows if he knows nothing about how to take care of them? Should he try to cross a rough and dangerous river without knowing how to operate a raft? The Buddha himself insisted that his followers learn and transmit the Dhamma both in the letter and the spirit, but rather than appealing to traditional formulations, let us inquire ourselves into the value and function of Dhamma study.

The point at issue, it must be stressed, is not study as an academic discipline or the accumulation of a wealth of learning, but the acquisition of a sound and solid working knowledge of the basic Buddhist doctrines. Now to see why this is so essential, we must recall that the entire practice of the proper Buddhist path develops out of the act through which we enter the path—the going for refuge to the Triple Gem. If we have taken this step honestly, with correct motivation, it implies that we have acknowledged our need for spiritual guidance and have entrusted ourselves to the Buddha as our guide and to his teaching as our vehicle of guidance. By taking refuge in the Dhamma we accept not merely a technique of meditation that we can use at liberty for our own self-appointed purposes, but a profound and comprehensive teaching on the true nature of the human condition, a teaching designed to awaken in us a perception of this truth as the means for reaching the full and final end of suffering. The liberation offered by the Dhamma comes, not from simply practising meditation in the context of our own preconceptions and desires, but from practising upon the groundwork of the right understanding and right intentions communicated to us by the Buddha.

This cognitive character of the Buddhist path elevates doctrinal study and intellectual inquiry to a position of great importance. Though the knowledge that frees the mind from bondage emerges only from intuitive insight and not from a mass of doctrinal facts, genuine insight always develops on the basis of a preliminary conceptual grasp of the basic principles essential to right understanding, in the absence of which its growth will inevitably be obstructed. The study and systematic reflection through which we arrive at this preparatory right view necessarily involve concepts and ideas. But before we hasten to dismiss Dhamma study as being

therefore only a worthless tangle of verbiage, let us consider that concepts and ideas are our indispensable tools of understanding and communication. Concepts, however, can be valid and invalid tools of understanding; ideas can be fruitful or useless, capable of bringing immense benefit or of entailing enormous harm. The object of studying the Dhamma as part of our spiritual quest is to learn to comprehend our experience correctly: to be able to distinguish the valid from the invalid, the true from the false, the wholesome from the unwholesome.

It is only by making a thorough and careful investigation that we will be in a position to reject what is detrimental to our growth and to apply ourselves with confidence to cultivating what is truly beneficial. Without having reached this preliminary conceptual clarification, without having succeeded in “straightening out our views,” there can indeed be the earnest practice of Buddhist meditation techniques, but there will not be the practice of the meditation pertaining to the integral Noble Eightfold Path. And while such free-based meditation may bring its practitioners the mundane benefits of greater calm, awareness and equanimity, lacking the guidance of right view and the driving power of right motivation, it is questionable whether it can lead to the penetrative realisation of the Dhamma, or to its final goal, the complete cessation of suffering.

It is almost impossible to give a single word of counsel on the subject of study applicable to all followers of the Dhamma. Needs and interests vary so greatly from one person to another that each will have to strike the balance between study and practice that suits his or her own disposition. But without hesitation it can be said that all who earnestly endeavour to live by the Buddha’s teaching will find their practice strengthened by the methodical study of his Dhamma. Such an undertaking, of course, will not be easy, but it is just through facing and surmounting the challenges we meet that our understanding will ripen and mature in the higher wisdom.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Exploring the Wheels

For 2500 years the followers of the Buddha have outwardly professed their belief in his teaching as they voice their trust in the Threefold Refuge with the moving words: “I go to the Buddha for refuge! I go to the Dhamma for refuge! I go to the Sangha for refuge!”

Because the Going for Refuge is so important a step, involving reflection and investigation as well as devotion, two WHEEL issues have been published which analyse the subject so that all may experience the temporary refuge of the Triple Gem until the final Refuge is attained. Nyanaponika Thera’s *The Threefold Refuge* (WHEEL 76) begins with a translation of Buddhaghosa’s commentarial exposition of the subject, followed by his own essay in which he examines the commentarial text and expands upon it with his own penetrative insight into Going for Refuge. Ven. Nyanaponika shows that Going for Refuge comprises three aspects: a conscious act of volition; a conscious act of understanding which reflects upon the questions: “Is this world of ours really such a place of danger and misery that there is a need for Taking Refuge? Does such a refuge actually exist? And what is its nature?”; and a conscious act of wise faith.

He succinctly describes the actual Going for Refuge as: “a conscious act of will directed towards liberation, based upon knowledge and inspired by faith; or briefly: a conscious act of determination, understanding and devotion.” These three aspects are further examined as their emotional counterparts, confidence, devotion, and love, arise. This is an inspiring book, one which will awaken the mind, giving every Buddhist much to consider and every meditator much to contemplate.

In "Going for Refuge," *Taking the Precepts*, by Bhikkhu Bodhi (WHEEL 282/284), the commitment to accept the Triple Gem as the guiding ideal of one's life is shown as the entrance to the Dhamma, an act "which imparts direction and forward momentum to the entire practice of the Buddhist path." In order that "the act be properly understood both in its own nature and its implications for future development along the path," Bhikkhu Bodhi clearly and precisely examines eight aspects of Going for Refuge.

Under the first section, "The Reasons for Taking Refuge" are set out as the dangers pertaining to the present life, to future lives and to the general course of existence, which are all analysed by way of their objective and subjective aspects. The second section, "The Existence of a Refuge," raises the question: "Does there exist a refuge able to give protection from anxiety, frustration, sorrow and distress in the present life; from the risk of an unhappy destination after death; and from the continued transmigration in samsara?" In the third section, on "Identification of the Objects of Refuge," the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha are carefully identified both in their mundane and supramundane significance. The remaining sections are lucidly developed with precise attention to details, noting and commenting on the ramifications of each central thought.

"The Act of Going for Refuge" examines the act by way of the factors of intelligence, will and emotion; "The Function of Going for Refuge" explains how this act lays the foundation for spiritual progress in future lives ; "The Methods of Going for Refuge" covers both the supramundane and the mundane going for refuge; the next section explains the "Corruptions and Breach of the Refuge." And the final section gives a selection of similes for the Refuges, all of striking beauty and profound suggestiveness.

The second essay in the booklet is an introduction to Buddhist ethics, with a detailed explanation of the five and eight lay precepts. Although this booklet was intended for those who are new to Buddhism, it is so comprehensive that it is indispensable to all Buddhists.

—Ayya Nyanasiri

Book Notes

Tranquillity and Insight: An Introduction to the Oldest Form of Buddhist Meditation. Amadeo Sole-Leris. Rider, London. 176 pp. UK £6.95.

Amadeo Sole-Leris, a translator of Pali texts and an experienced meditator, has given us a survey of Theravada Buddhist meditation which remarkably combines the two virtues of compactness and comprehensiveness. His account, backed by sound scholarship, is lucid and reads easily throughout, while his personal explanations are stimulating and astute. Following a brief summary of the Buddha's teaching, Sole-Leris moves into an investigation of the two main branches of Buddhist meditation, samatha (tranquillity) and vipassana (insight), highlighting both their common features and their differences. The practice of samatha is examined in the next two chapters, which respectively survey the forty classical subjects of samatha and the eight absorptions (jhanas) to be reached through this mode of practice. The following chapter examines the practice of vipassana meditation, using as a basis the well-known Satipatthana Sutta. The author's treatment of this text is thorough and illuminating, though at times a bit sketchy owing to the need to cover a great amount of material. The next chapter looks at the ultimate goal of Buddhist meditation, Nibbana, and in just a few pages Sole-Leris goes far in dispelling the confusion surrounding this subject. In his final chapter the author presents an overview of contemporary forms of vipassana practice, emphasising the revival of lay practice and focusing on the methods of meditation deriving from Ven. Mahasi Sayadaw and the lay

teacher U Ba Khin. Though the book is intended principally as an introduction for beginners, more experienced meditators and students of Buddhism will also find it useful as a compact manual. A Spanish version of the book is published under the title *La meditación budhista* (Ediciones Martínez Roca, Gan Via, 774, 7th 08013 Barcelona).

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

News from the Office

Among Sri Lankan Buddhists it is not customary to celebrate birthdays, but these are taken as occasions to offer alms to Buddhist monks. It was as an extension of this custom that the entire office staff of the BPS offered an alms meal to our dear president, Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera, when in July he celebrated his 85th birthday. The previous June also marked the 50th anniversary of his ordination as a monk, which took place on the Poson Poya day of 1936.

For those associated with BPS Ven. Nyanaponika needs no introduction. For the others it should suffice to say that whatever the BPS has achieved since its inception has been due mainly to his labours and guidance. Besides his own writings, which count among the most outstanding expositions of Theravada Buddhism in our time, he has contributed the judgement, concern, and direction that have brought the Society to its present position. We wonder whether he and the other founders would have envisaged such progress 28 years ago, when they started the BPS in the Mahathera's Forest Hermitage!

At the end of August we had another almsgiving to remember our co-workers and close associates who have passed away. August was chosen for this occasion, which will now become an annual event, because it was in this month that we lost our founder-secretary, Mr. Richard Abeysekera, in 1982, and again his successor, Mr. T.B. Naranpanawe, last year. We also used the occasion to remember our many other supporters and authors who are no longer with us. At the almsgiving we remember them with metta and extend to them the opportunity to rejoice at the meritorious deeds we perform in their name. May you too rejoice in these good actions and share in the good kamma we acquire by our service to the Dhamma. We have been overwhelmed but delighted by your responses to the essays by Bhikkhu Bodhi, which have been appearing on page one of each BPS Newsletter. We have received requests to reprint these essays in several Buddhist journals and newsletters, and to translate them into other languages for the benefit of those who cannot read English. If these essays would prove useful to your group or publication, and you would like to reprint them; please write to us. We will be glad to give our permission, but we would like to know which essays are thought timely by our readers and into what languages the essays will be translated. Albert Witanachchi

The Vision of Dhamma

We are happy to announce that a collection of Ven. Nyanaponika's writings has been published in the West under the title *The Vision of Dhamma: Buddhist Writings of Nyanaponika Thera* (Rider, London. 267 pp. UK £7.95). The book, edited and introduced by Bhikkhu Bodhi, includes almost all the original works of Ven. Nyanaponika published by the BPS in its WHEEL and BODHI LEAVES series. As a foreword the book contains an essay by the late Erich Fromm on "The Significance of Nyanaponika Thera for the West." An American edition published by Samuel Weiser is expected in early 1987. The book will be on sale at the BPS bookshop.

From the Mailbag

Visiting one of Warsaw's Zen Centres, I had the chance of looking through some English books about Buddhism. One of them, *The Miracle of Being Awake* by Thich Nhat Hanh, I found very interesting I understood it was written for me. I would like to read the whole book, translate it into Polish and, make copies to present to 'friends. I cannot buy it from you for sending dollars out of my country is not allowed. If you can send me this book free - I could translate it and send you back a Polish version.

Tomasz Kwiatkowaki
Bydgoszcz, Poland

Editor: The book is on Its way, and we look forward to having a copy of *The Miracle of Being Awake* in Polish for our library.

One of our subscribers always orders extra copies of BODHI LEAVES which he gives as gifts. He writes: We give first priority to Theravada monasteries that are actively spreading Lord Buddha's message to the local people here, then to smaller meditation groups, and lastly to prisons. You may be pleased to know that Mahathera Narada's Buddha and His Teachings has been distributed to three of the most notorious prisons in California.

Patrick Lee
San Francisco, California USA

Editor: If you would like to give a gift of the Dhamma in your community, some additional areas which would find Dhamma books welcome are: schools libraries hospitals old age homes youth groups poor countries

We would like to hear from those of you who embark on this noble project. BPS willingly gives a generous discount on all of our publications which are purchased for free distribution.

"Five blessings accrue to the giver of alms: the affection of many, noble association, good reputation, self-confidence, and heavenly rebirth."

Anguttara Nikaya V. 34

Meditation Centres in Sri Lanka: Parappuduwa Nuns Island

In the south of Sri Lanka, on Ratgama Lake near Dodanduwa, is the idyllically situated Parappuduwa Nuns Island, a Buddhist nunnery and meditation retreat established for women of all nationalities. The founder and director of the centre, Sister (Ayya) Khema, is a German-born Buddhist nun who was ordained in Sri Lanka in 1979 and annually teaches meditation courses in different parts of the world. She established the Nuns Island in 1984 as a training centre for Buddhist nuns and other Buddhist women leading a contemplative life. Throughout the day the emphasis is placed on meditation. There are regular interviews with the teacher, a two-hour study period, and nightly Dhamma talks. Previous knowledge of Buddhist teachings facilitates easy understanding of the study-periods and of the life-style in a nunnery. Community living is a prime facet of residence here and a willingness to cooperate with others is essential. One month a year is designated as a retreat period with intensive meditation practised in noble silence. It is necessary to make prior reservations before coming to Nuns Island. Priority in admission is given to those who wish to ordain as nuns and are ready to

undergo a one-year training period before ordination. For additional information, brochure and newsletter, write to:

Sister Ayya Khema
Parappuduwa Nuns Island
Dodanduwa
Sri Lanka

Looking to the Future

WHEEL issues on line for future publication include the following:

The Tragic The Comic and the Personal: Selected Letters of Ñāṇavīra Thera. In 1949 two young Englishmen arrived in Sri Lanka intent on entering the Order of Buddhist monks. One became known after ordination as Ven. Ñāṇamoli, the skilful translator of so many important Pali Buddhist texts. His friend, who became known as Ven. Ñāṇavira, was more solitary and less prolific, but his keen intelligence and earnestness enabled him to gain a deep understanding of the Dhamma, which he shared with others in an extensive correspondence. This selection from his letters deals with such topics as Buddhism and existentialism, the problem of death, humour and fear, and the need to take the Dhamma personally and inwardly. A stimulating issue that will deserve re-reading and reflection. *Gemstones of the Good Dhamma: An Anthology of Verses from the Pali Scriptures.* Compiled and translated by Ven. Dhammika. The Buddha and his great disciples taught not only through discourses and sermons, but also through the medium of verse, in which they gave expression to the principles of the Dhamma in words of pithy wisdom and great beauty. Ven. Dhammika of Australia has collected over 200 of such verses scattered throughout the Pali texts. Arranged according to subject after the model of the Dhammapada, they are presented here in both Pali and English to enrich the faith and deepen the understanding of those who study them.

We would appreciate very much hearing your comments on our present publications, and your suggestions for future publications.

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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