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Subrahmā's Problem

Today, in both East and West, a general breakdown of law and order has planted in us an implacable sense of unease that assails us on the streets, in our workplace, and even in our homes. The rising number of drug addicts, the increase in petty thuggery, the decline of respect for others—all these have jointly led to an intensified atmosphere of suspicion that infects our most ordinary human encounters. Many people only feel at ease behind double-locked doors, with windows secured by metal bars and gates guarded by high-alert sensors. Yet, it is often only when we have armoured ourselves with the most impregnable defence systems, that we discover a still more intrusive source of insecurity. This sense of fear and dread, which can eat away at our most precious moments of enjoyment, does not stem from outside threats but swells up inexplicably from within. Though it may wrap itself around our everyday affairs, sparking off thoughts of worry and concern, its true cause is not so much external dangers as an unlocalised anxiety floating dizzily along the edges of the mind.

A little known sutta tucked away in the Devaputta-saṃyutta gives us an insight into the nature of this hidden anguish far more poignant and realistic than our most astute existentialist philosophers. In this short sutta, only eight lines of print in the Pali, a young god named Subrahmā appears before the Awakened One and explains the problem weighing on his heart:

“Always frightened is this mind,
The mind is always agitated,
About unarisen problems,
And about arisen ones.
If there exists release from fear,
Being asked, please explain it to me.”

It is perhaps ironic that it takes a deva to express so succinctly, with such elegant simplicity, the dilemma at the crux of the human condition. Subrahmā's confession also makes it clear that neither the deva world nor any other set of outer conditions offers a final refuge from anguish. Luxurious mansions, lucrative jobs, unchallenged authority, high-alert security systems: none of these can guarantee inner stillness and peace. For the source of all problems is the mind itself, which follows us wherever we may go.

To understand Subrahmā's distress we need only sit down quietly, draw our attention inward, and watch our thoughts as they tumble by. If we do not fix on any one thought but simply observe each thought as it passes by, we will almost surely find waves of anxiety, care, and worry running through and beneath this ceaseless procession. Our fears and concerns need not assume vast proportions, booming forth bold metaphysical decrees: still beneath the melody of constantly changing thoughts, punctuating them like the thumping of the bass in a jazz quintet, is the persistent throb of worry and care, the second rhythm of the heart.

Subrahmā underscores the predicament he faced—the predicament faced by all “unenlightened worldlings”—by repeating the words “always” (*niccam*) in the first two lines. This repetition is significant. It does not mean that every thought we think is plagued by worry and dread, nor does it rule out the joy of successful achievement, the pleasure of requited love,

or courage in the face of life's daunting challenges. But it does underscore the stubborn persistence of anxious dread, which trails behind us like a gruffy mongrel—growling when we cast a backward glance, ready to snap at our heels when we're off guard.

Fear and anxiety haunt the corridors of the mind because the mind is a function of time, a rolling glimmer of awareness that flows inexorably from a past that can never be undone into a future that teases us with a perpetual, indecipherable "not yet." It is just because the mind attempts to clamp down on the passage of time, wrapping its tentacles around a thousand projects and concerns, that the passage of time appears so formidable. For time means change, and change brings dissolution, the breaking of the bonds that we have forged with so much toil. Time also means the uncertainty of the future, plummeting us into unexpected challenges and inevitable old age and death.

When Subrahmā came to the Buddha with his urgent plea for help, he was not seeking a prescription of Prozac that would tide him through his next round of business deals and his dalliance with celestial nymphs. He wanted nothing less than total release from fear, and thus the Buddha did not have to pull any punches with his answer. In four piquant lines he told Subrahmā the only effective remedy that could heal his inner wound, heal it with no danger of relapse:

"Not apart from awakening and austerity,
Not apart from sense restraint,
Not apart from relinquishing all,
Do I see any safety for living beings."

The ultimate release from anxiety, the Buddha makes clear, is summed up in four simple measures. The most decisive are "awakening" (*bodhi*) and "relinquishment" (*nissagga*), wisdom and release. These, however, do not arise in a vacuum but only as a consequence of training in virtue and meditation, expressed here as restraint of the sense faculties and "austerity" (*tapa*), the energy of contemplative endeavour. The entire programme is directed to digging up the hidden root of anguish, which the existentialists, with all their philosophical acumen, could not discern. That root is clinging. Asleep in the deep night of ignorance, we cling to our possessions, our loved ones, our position and status; and most tenaciously of all, we cling to these "five aggregates" of form, feeling, perception, volitional activity, and consciousness, taking them to be permanent, pleasurable, and a truly existent self.

To cling to anything is to aim at preserving it, at sealing it off from the ravenous appetite of time. Yet to make such an attempt is to run smack up against the fixed decree written into the texture of being: that whatever comes to be must pass away. It is not only the object of clinging that must yield to the law of impermanence. The subject too, the one who clings, and the very act of clinging, are also bound to dissolve, perish, and pass away. To sit back trying to shape a world that will conform to our heart's desires is to fight against the inflexible law of change. But try as we may there is no escape: the sonorous truth swells up from the depths of being, and we can either heed its message or continue to stuff our ears.

The cutting irony in the solution the Buddha holds out to Subrahmā lies in the fact that the prescription requires a voluntary assent to the act we instinctively try to avoid. The final escape from anxiety and care is not a warm assurance that the universe will give us a cheerful hug. It is, rather, a call for us to take the step that we habitually resist. What we fear above all else, what causes the tremors of anxiety to ripple through our heart, is the giving up of what we cherish. Yet the Buddha tells us that the only way to reach true safety is by giving up all: "Not apart from relinquishing all do I see any safety for living beings." In the end we have no choice: we must give up all, for when death comes to claim us everything we identify with will be taken away. But to go beyond anxiety we must let go now—not, of course, by a premature act of

renunciation, which in many cases might even be harmful or self-destructive—but by wearing away the clinging, attachment, and acquisitiveness that lie within as the buried root of fear.

This relinquishment of clinging cannot come about through the forcible rejection of what we love and cherish. It arises from wisdom, from insight, from awakening, from breaking through the deep dark sleep of ignorance. The sovereign remedy is to see that right now, at this very moment, there is nothing we can truly claim as ours, for in reality “All this is empty of self and of what belongs to self.” Form, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness: all are to be given up by seeing them as they really are, as “not mine, not I, not my self.” To see the truth that all conditioned things are impermanent, disintegrating, and bound to perish, is to turn away from clinging, to relinquish all. And to relinquish all is to find ourselves, not barren and empty-handed, but rich with the wealth of the noble ones. For one without clinging, there is no fear, no tremor of agitation, no dark winds of anxiety. The one without clinging is *akutobhaya*, one who faces no danger from any quarter. Though dwelling in the midst of ageing, sickness, and death, he has reached what lies beyond ageing, sickness, and death. Though the leaves fall and world systems shimmer, he sees security everywhere.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Notes and News

BPS Sinhala Line. After an inordinate delay we are finally ready to launch our line of full-size Sinhala Dhamma books, to provide a badly needed counterpart to our fine collection of English-language publications. The move from planning to implementation has been made possible by the appointment of Ven. Wattegama Dhammavasa Thera as managing editor of our Sinhala line. The capable and dynamic abbot of Subodharama Buddhist Centre in Peradeniya, Ven. Dhammavasa has already proved his talents in this field with the independent publication of Sinhala translations of several works by the Thai meditation master, Ajahn Chah. With the assistance of his team of dedicated and intelligent young monks at Subodharama, he promises to offer a breath of new life to our Sinhala publishing line and an uplifting vision for the future. His help will be a great relief to Ven. Piyadassi Nayaka Thera, our veteran executive editor of the Sinhala line, who still continues strong at eighty-three despite a persistent heart condition.

In Memoriam. Over the past few months two of the most esteemed members of the Sri Lankan Sangha, widely known both locally and abroad, have succumbed to the law of impermanence. One was the Ven. Rerukane Chandavimala Mahāthera, who expired on 4 July 1997, just two weeks short of his 100th birthday. Ven. Chandavimala had been the most popular and widely read Buddhist writer in Dhamma. When he felt his end approaching he called his disciples to his room, told them he was about to leave on his final journey, and began to chant the Dhammacakka Sutta. When he reached the passage on the Noble Eightfold Path he fell silent—and was gone! His cremation, performed on his own instructions, was a model of simplicity: no decorations, no publicity, no orations, not even a coffin. He was cremated on a wooden plank in a corner of the temple, and the entire cost of the cremation was the Rs.100 spent on the firewood for the pyre.

The other monk who recently expired was the Ven. Dr. Walpola Rāhula Mahāthera, who died on 18 September 1997 at the age of 90. Ven. Rāhula is best known for his popular book, *What the Buddha Taught*, which has been in print for almost forty years and has introduced so many to the Dhamma. He was also the original inspiration behind the concept of the bhikkhu as political and social activist, an ideal he articulated in his controversial work, *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*.

Ven. Rahula's cremation was also performed in an extremely simple manner, with no media publicity, and at his request his ashes were dispersed in the Kelaniya River.

The Majjhima Makes American TV. One of our correspondents, John Bullitt, who had served as production manager for the Wisdom-BPS edition of the Majjhima Nikāya, recently wrote to us: "You might be pleased to know that the Middle Length Discourses recently made a brief appearance on prime-time American television. It appeared in *Seventh Heaven*, a situation comedy about an adolescent girl who faced some sort of existential crisis, and so had borrowed a small pile of religious books from the library: a Bible, a Torah, and a copy of the Middle Length Discourses! So there was our heroine, sitting on the living room sofa, holding a copy of the Middle Length Discourses for millions of TV-watching Americans to see."

Book Review

The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya of the Pali Canon. Ven. Pategama Gnanarama. Sarana Buddhist Association, 1997. 248 pages. Rs.325; U.S. \$8.00. (Available from BPS)

The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (MPS) is one of the most popular and best known suttas in the Pali Canon, the story of the Buddha's last journey to his final resting place at Kusinārā. As the most poignant exemplification in Buddhist literature of the Buddha's own message of impermanence, the text is replete with human drama, emotional inspiration, and memorable counsel. From the time it first became known in the West the sutta has attracted the attention of Western scholars, who have applied the refined techniques of critical analysis to the task of determining the text's historical development. Two full studies have been devoted to this subject, one a comparison of the different versions of the MPS by Ernst Waldschmidt (in German), the other a study of the text's composition and evolution by André Bareau (in French).

The present book, a welcome addition to the scholarly literature on the MPS, is all the more remarkable in that it comes from the pen of a Sri Lankan Theravada bhikkhu who shows, by his penetrative commentary, that a detached, critical approach to Buddhist sacred literature can comfortably coexist with faith and personal commitment. In his examination of the sutta, Ven. Gnanarama has not confined himself merely to the Pali version, but has also consulted, via the secondary literature, the Chinese and Tibetan translations from Indian originals. While he often refers to the more accessible scholarly literature on early Buddhism, however, his Bibliography does not mention the important studies by Waldschmidt and Bareau. No doubt this is due to the linguistic barriers that stand between their works and the scholar without knowledge of German and French.

Ven. Gnanarama takes as his working hypothesis the consensus reached by Western scholars, that the MPS is a compilation that evolved over several centuries. He contends that the sutta available to us today, in its various recensions, expresses ideas, attitudes, and modes of religious practice [is] characteristic of distinct historical periods. Thus, just as a geologist might use chemical analysis to stratify a buckled mountain into its individual layers, he proposes to dissect the document into its successive strata, taking his cues both from the text itself and from the testimony of history. To proceed in this way holds out at least two attractive promises: first, that of uncovering the original archaic core of the sutta, the "first draught" as it read before the processes of embellishment and interpolation imposed themselves; and second, that of arriving at a picture of the Buddha dating from a very early period, before that picture was redrawn in accordance with later conceptions of Buddhahood.

Ven. Gnanarama's methodology testifies to the dual influence of modern Western scholarship and the humanistic strain dominant in present-day Theravada circles. At the outset he lays

down a clear-cut guideline which he follows with painstaking thoroughness in his analysis: those portions of the sutta that depict the human side of the Buddha's personality and mission are to be regarded as the most authentic, those that cast the Buddha in a superhuman light to be treated as interpolations. If one were to begin with different assumptions, rooted more firmly in traditional spirituality than in modern humanism, one's investigations might lead to different conclusions more congenial to the "supernatural" elements in the sutta.

Ven. Gnanarama does not take us on a direct linear tour through the MPS, episode by episode, assigning each to its temporal stratum. Instead, he has organised his study thematically, using a number of key topics as standpoints from which to survey the material and judge its relative antiquity. This method naturally leaves several noticeable gaps in his analysis, but the omissions are compensated for by his stimulating, thoughtful, and at times provocative observations. The author is clearly not a docile apologist pledged to uphold "Theravada orthodoxy." He displays, rather, a striking capacity for independent judgement and does not hesitate to question deeply entrenched tradition, even to probe into the canonical texts themselves for evidence of distortions governed by hidden agendas.

In a limited review such as this we can only briefly note some of the topics that Ven. Gnanarama touches on and his more prominent conclusions and hypotheses. One of his most provocative chapters is "The Dispensation and the Position of Women" (Ch.7). Here, beginning with the Buddha's reported final advice on how monks should behave towards women, the author reviews the whole story of the founding of the Bhikkhuni Sangha and points out, quite convincingly, several implausible features in the Cullavagga account. His conclusions in this chapter are bound to raise eyebrows in traditional monastic circles but will surely draw cheers from reformists.

The most mysterious and tantalising section of the MPS is the Buddha's dialogue with Ānanda at the Cāpāla Shrine near Vesālī, where he hints at his ability to live on for the rest of the kappa, a hint the disciple fails to catch. Ven. Gnanarama insists—and I agree—that kappa here must mean a cosmic aeon and not "a full human lifespan," the gloss given to the word in the commentaries. But for Ven. Gnanarama this interpretation is evidence, not of the Buddha's superhuman power, but of the weakness of his later followers, who could not admit that their Master died a normal death and thus turned him into a superman. He assigns this episode to a fairly late period in the composition of the MPS, when attitudes of devotional awe were beginning to bend the original naturalistic image of the Buddha in the direction of a supernatural docetism (Ch.8).

Other chapters deal with the question of the lesser and minor rules (on which the author adopts a surprisingly conservative stance, not even querying the implications of the Buddha's allowance to the Sangha to abolish these rules); the four great references (*a later interpolation designed to prevent dissent*); the Buddhist concept of gods (*largely, if not entirely, a concession to popular beliefs not incompatible with the Dhamma*); and the philosophical concepts and path of training in the MPS. In his final chapter (Ch.14) he sketches the portrait of the Buddha that he sees emerging when the accretions have been stripped away and the authentic core laid bare. This is the picture of a great human teacher whose supremacy flowed, not from divine cosmic stature or mystic powers, but from his magnanimous character, perfect wisdom, and boundless compassion. It is perhaps the most compelling testimony to the Buddha's greatness that even this lean, naturalistic conception of the Master, though divested of the awe-inspiring features of the established version of our text, is sufficient to arouse wonder and veneration.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Also received:

An Approach to Buddhist Social Philosophy. Ven. Pategama Gnanarama. Sarana Buddhist Association, 1996. 184 pages. Rs. 275; U.S. \$7.00. (Available from BPS)

Guidelines to Sutta Study

Vatthūpama Sutta (Simile of the Cloth, continued)

Reminder: The Buddha has enumerated sixteen "defilements of the mind."

After enumerating the sixteen defilements of the mind, the Buddha says, with respect to each one: "Having known (such and such) to be a defilement of the mind, the monk abandons it." This statement appears simple and straightforward enough, but, as is so often the case in the Suttas, the surface simplicity rides upon an implicit meaning of great depth and complexity. To understand what lies behind these words, we need to focus on the verb "abandons," which leads us to the noun "abandonment" (*pahāna*). Abandonment is one of the major aims in the practice of the Dhamma; in fact, the entire path of practice can be regarded as simultaneously a process of development and abandonment. What have to be developed are the wholesome qualities, particularly the thirty-seven aids to enlightenment (*bodhipakkhiyā dhammā*). To develop these is simultaneously to abandon the unwholesome qualities of mind, such as the sixteen defilements mentioned in our sutta. The texts speak of abandonment often, and the Buddha already introduced the term in his First Sermon at Benares. When explaining the 'three turns' of the Four Noble Truths, he there says that abandonment is the specific task imposed by the second noble truth: craving, the origin of suffering, is to be abandoned.

The word "abandonment" is not used in the texts with an unequivocal meaning. Like other technical terms, it has several levels of meaning, and which one is relevant in a particular passage is dependent on the context. The Pali commentators distinguish three principal types of abandonment, and to understand the purport of a particular passage it is necessary to determine from the context precisely what type is being referred to.

The first is temporary abandonment through an act of mental resolve. This type of abandonment, called *tadaṅga-pahāna*, "abandoning in a particular respect" or "factor-specific abandonment," is especially prominent in the practice of moral discipline. When one has undertaken a precept, one abandons the immoral action that the precept is intended to regulate. Thus it is said of a virtuous disciple, "Having abandoned the destruction of life, he abstains from the destruction of life. Having abandoned the taking of what is not given, he abstains from taking what is not given...." Factor-specific abandonment is also employed in the training of the mind. As we sit in meditation, when we notice a defiled thought arise—a thought of lust, or of anger, or of violence—we do not yield to it, but note it mindfully and make an effort "to abandon it, dispel it, eliminate it, and abolish it." This is another type of factor-specific abandonment, which can become a self-contained system of meditation in itself. Under the name "the perception of abandonment" (*pahāna-saññā*), this method is taught by the Buddha in the famous Girimānanda Sutta (AN 10:60). The commentaries also mention, as still another form of factor-specific abandonment, the replacement of the various distorted perceptions by the insights arisen in the course of insight meditation.

When we cultivate a meditation subject to a deep level of concentration, the defilements are abandoned in still a different mode. This mode is called "abandonment by suppression" (*vikkhambhana-pahāna*). Suppression is not the same as repression. The term "repression," as used in contemporary psychoanalytic theory, denotes the act by which we unconsciously

prevent certain distressing ideas or memories from entering full awareness; it is a process, occurring beneath the threshold of consciousness, by which we consign ourselves to ignorance about ourselves in order to preserve a sense of psychological security. Suppression, however, is a deliberate process, voluntarily undertaken, with full awareness of what we are about. It is not intended to shield us from the threat of self-knowledge, but to prevent the mind from being driven by psychological forces that are explicitly recognised as unwholesome.

The means of suppressive abandonment is the practice of *samatha-bhāvanā*, the development of calm. By fixing the mind on a single meditation subject and excluding other thoughts, we develop one-pointedness, the ability to fix the mind on its object without vacillation or disturbance. In such a state of concentration the defilements cannot infiltrate the thought process. They have not yet been eliminated, but they no longer erupt at random and sully the luminosity of the mind. As concentration deepens to the level of full *jhāna*, the mind becomes radiantly serene and pure. This type of abandonment is spoken of in the stock passage on the abandoning of the five hindrances: “Like debtlessness, like good health, like release from prison, like freedom from slavery, like arriving at a place of safety—just so a monk sees that these five hindrances have been abandoned in himself” (DN 2.74).

However, while suppressive abandonment offers relief from the defilements, it does not dissolve them at the root, and thus the relief it offers is not the same as release. In other words, suppression is not “the final solution” to the problem of human bondage, not the last step along the way to the end of suffering. Release, or full liberation from the defilements, can only be attained through the third type of abandonment, abandonment by eradication (*samuccheda-pahāna*). This is the decisive mental act by which one cuts off the defilements at their deepest hideout within the mind, extirpating them so that they don't leave behind any residue. This type of abandonment can be achieved only by the wisdom faculty of the supramundane path—the wisdom that penetrates the Four Noble Truths. This wisdom arises from the development of insight (*vipassana-bhāvanā*), the direct seeing of the three characteristics of all phenomena: impermanence, suffering, and non-self. As insight deepens it gradually peels away layer after layer of the manifest defilements, until, when it reaches its culmination, it gives rise to the supramundane path, which in four graded stages eradicates the defilements totally, leaving them “cut off at the root.”

Thus when the Buddha says, “Having known (such and such) to be a defilement of the mind, the monk abandons it,” his statement implies this entire threefold process of abandonment. We can assume that at the beginning of his training, the monk (or any meditator, for that matter) practises the “factorial abandonment” by undertaking moral precepts, which prevent the defilements from acting as causes of misbehaviour. Then, by training in concentration, he abandons the defilements at a deeper level, by suppressing them through one-pointedness of mind. And finally, by developing insight into the three characteristics, he arrives at the supramundane path. He thereby abandons the defilements by eradication, ensuring that they will never trouble him again.

(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.

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