



## Dhamma & Non-Duality — I

One of the most challenging issues facing Theravada Buddhism in recent years has been the encounter between classical Theravada vipassanā meditation and the “non-dualistic” contemplative traditions best represented by Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism. Responses to this encounter have spanned the extremes, ranging from vehement confrontation all the way to attempts at synthesis and hybridisation. While the present essay cannot pretend to illuminate all the intricate and subtle problems involved in this sometimes volatile dialogue, I hope it may contribute a few sparks of light from a canonically oriented Theravada perspective.

My first preliminary remark would be to insist that a system of meditative practice does not constitute a self-contained discipline. Any authentic system of spiritual practice is always found embedded within a conceptual matrix that defines the problems the practice is intended to solve and the goal towards which it is directed. Hence the merging of techniques grounded in incompatible conceptual frameworks is fraught with risk. Although such mergers may appease a predilection for experimentation or eclecticism, it seems likely that their long-term effect will be to create a certain “cognitive dissonance” that will reverberate through the deeper levels of the psyche and stir up even greater confusion.

My second remark would be to point out simply that non-dualistic spiritual traditions are far from consistent with each other, but comprise, rather, a wide variety of views profoundly different and inevitably coloured by the broader conceptual contours of the philosophies which encompass them.

For the Vedanta, non-duality (*advaita*) means the absence of an ultimate distinction between the Atman, the innermost self, and Brahman, the divine reality, the underlying ground of the world. From the standpoint of the highest realisation, only one ultimate reality exists—which is simultaneously Atman and Brahman—and the aim of the spiritual quest is to know that one’s own true self, the Atman, is the timeless reality which is Being, Awareness, Bliss. Since all schools of Buddhism reject the idea of the Atman, none can accept the non-dualism of Vedanta. From the perspective of the Theravada tradition, any quest for the discovery of selfhood, whether as a permanent individual self or as an absolute universal self, would have to be dismissed as a delusion, a metaphysical blunder born from a failure to properly comprehend the nature of concrete experience. According to the Pali Suttas, the individual being is merely a complex unity of the five aggregates, which are all stamped with the three marks of impermanence, suffering, and selflessness. Any postulation of selfhood in regard to this compound of transient, conditioned phenomena is an instance of “personality view” (*sakkayaditthi*), the most basic fetter that binds beings to the round of rebirths. The attainment of liberation, for Buddhism, does not come to pass by the realisation of a true self or absolute “I,” but through the dissolution of even the subtlest sense of selfhood in relation to the five aggregates, “the abolition of all I-making, mine-making, and underlying tendencies to conceit.”

The Mahayana schools, despite their great differences, concur in upholding a thesis that, from the Theravada point of view, borders on the outrageous. This is the claim that there is no ultimate difference between samsara and Nirvana, defilement and purity, ignorance and enlightenment. For the Mahayana, the enlightenment which the Buddhist path is designed to

awaken consists precisely in the realisation of this non-dualistic perspective. The validity of conventional dualities is denied because the ultimate nature of all phenomena is emptiness, the lack of any substantial or intrinsic reality, and hence in their emptiness all the diverse, apparently opposed phenomena posited by mainstream Buddhist doctrine finally coincide: “All dharmas have one nature, which is no-nature.”

The teaching of the Buddha as found in the Pali Canon does not endorse a philosophy of non-dualism of any variety, nor, I would add, can a non-dualistic perspective be found lying implicit within the Buddha’s discourses. At the same time, however, I would not maintain that the Pali Suttas propose dualism, the positing of duality as a metaphysical hypothesis aimed at intellectual assent. I would characterise the Buddha’s intent in the Canon as primarily pragmatic rather than speculative, though I would also qualify this by saying that this pragmatism does not operate in a philosophical void but finds its grounding in the nature of actuality as the Buddha penetrated it in his enlightenment. In contrast to the non-dualistic systems, the Buddha’s approach does not aim at the discovery of a unifying principle behind or beneath our experience of the world. Instead it takes the concrete fact of living experience, with all its buzzing confusion of contrasts and tensions, as its starting point and framework, within which it attempts to diagnose the central problem at the core of human existence and to offer a way to its solution. Hence the polestar of the Buddhist path is not a final unity but the extinction of suffering, which brings the resolution of the existential dilemma at its most fundamental level.

When we investigate our experience exactly as it presents itself, we find that it is permeated by a number of critically important dualities with profound implications for the spiritual quest. The Buddha’s teaching, as recorded in the Pali Suttas, fixes our attention unflinchingly upon these dualities and treats their acknowledgement as the indispensable basis for any honest search for liberating wisdom. It is precisely these antitheses—of good and evil, suffering and happiness, wisdom and ignorance—that make the quest for enlightenment and deliverance such a vitally crucial concern.

At the peak of the pairs of opposites stands the duality of the conditioned and the Unconditioned: samsara as the round of repeated birth and death wherein all is impermanent, subject to change, and liable to suffering, and Nibbāna as the state of final deliverance, the unborn, ageless, and deathless. Although Nibbāna, even in the early texts, is definitely cast as an ultimate reality and not merely as an ethical or psychological state, there is not the least insinuation that this reality is metaphysically indistinguishable at some profound level from its manifest opposite, samsara. To the contrary, the Buddha’s repeated lesson is that samsara is the realm of suffering governed by greed, hatred, and delusion, wherein we have shed tears greater than the waters of the ocean, while Nibbāna is irreversible release from samsara, to be attained by demolishing greed, hatred, and delusion, and by relinquishing all conditioned existence.

Thus the Theravada makes the antithesis of samsara and Nibbāna the starting point of the entire quest for deliverance. Even more, it treats this antithesis as determinative of the final goal, which is precisely the transcendence of samsara and the attainment of liberation in Nibbāna. Where Theravada differs significantly from the Mahayana schools, which also start with the duality of samsara and Nirvana, is in its refusal to regard this polarity as a mere preparatory lesson tailored for those with blunt faculties, to be eventually superseded by some higher realisation of non-duality. From the standpoint of the Pali Suttas, even for the Buddha and the arahants, suffering and its cessation, samsara and Nibbāna, remain distinct. Spiritual seekers still exploring the different contemplative traditions commonly assume that the highest spiritual teaching must be one which posits a metaphysical unity as the philosophical foundation and final goal of the quest for enlightenment. Taking this assumption to be axiomatic, they may then conclude that the Pali Buddhist teaching, with its insistence on the sober assessment of dualities,

is deficient or provisional, requiring fulfilment by a non-dualistic realisation. For those of such a bent, the dissolution of dualities in a final unity will always appear more profound and complete.

However, it is just this assumption that I would challenge. I would assert, by reference to the Buddha's own original teaching, that profundity and completeness need not be bought at the price of distinctions, that they can be achieved at the highest level while preserving intact the dualities and diversity so strikingly evident to mature reflection on the world. I would add, moreover, that the teaching which insists on recognising real dualities as they are is finally more satisfactory. The reason it is more satisfactory, despite its denial of the mind's yearning for a comprehensive unity, is because it takes account of another factor which overrides in importance the quest for unity. This "something else" is the need to remain grounded in actuality.

Where I think the teaching of the Buddha, as preserved in the Theravada tradition, surpasses all other attempts to resolve the spiritual dilemmas of humanity is in its persistent refusal to sacrifice actuality for unity. The Buddha's Dhamma does not point us towards an all-embracing absolute in which the tensions of daily existence dissolve in metaphysical oneness or inscrutable emptiness. It points us, rather, towards actuality as the final sphere of comprehension, towards things as they really are (*yathābhūta*). Above all, it points us towards the Four Noble Truths of suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the way to its cessation as the liberating proclamation of things as they really are. These four truths, the Buddha declares, are noble truths, and what makes them noble truths is precisely that they are actual, undeviating, invariable (*tathā, avitatha, anaññāta*). It is the failure to face the actuality of these truths that has caused us to wander for so long through the long course of samsara. It is by penetrating these truths exactly as they are that one can reach the true consummation of the spiritual quest: making an end to suffering.

(Part II of this essay will appear in the next BPS Newsletter.)

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

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- *The Vision of Dhamma*. Nyanaponika Thera. The BPS is happy to announce the publication of this outstanding one-volume collection of our esteemed Co-founder and Patron's writings from the Wheel and Bodhi Leaves series. The book—a treasury of wise counsel—offers one of the most mature and authoritative contemporary expressions of Theravada Buddhism. Contains: *The Worn-Out Skin*; *The Power of Mindfulness*; *The Roots of Good & Evil*; *Anatta & Nibbāna*; and more. "The writings of Nyanaponika Thera are a 'Guide for the Perplexed' in the last quarter of this century" (Erich Fromm). Not for sale in U.S.A.

Softback: 368 pages 140 mm x 214 mm

U.S. \$16.00; SL Rs. 350. Order No. BP 414S

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Softback: 176 pages 124 mm x 182 mm  
U.S. \$8.00; SL Rs. 250. Order No. BP 608S

- *King Asoka and Buddhism*. Edited by Anuradha Seneviratna. This book comprises scholarly essays which seek to define, from both historical and literary angles, Asoka's relationship to Buddhism. Contributors: Richard Gombrich, Ananda Guruge, Romila Thapar, N.A. Jayawickrama, John Strong, Anuradha Seneviratna.

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- *Being Nobody, Going Nowhere*. Ayya Khema. A popular book of talks on meditation practice by the well-known German nun, given on a ten-day meditation retreat in Sri Lanka. For sale in Asia only.

Softback: 190 pages 136 mm x 214 mm  
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### ***In Preparation***

- *The Pali Literature of Ceylon*. G.P. Malalasekera. A reprint of an old classic, which admirably surveys Sri Lanka's rich heritage of Pali Buddhist literature, from the earliest period down to the present century. Available late October 1994.

Softback: 350 pages 140 mm x 214 mm  
U.S. \$15.00; SL Rs. 350. Order No. BP 610S

- *Living As A Buddhist*. Bhikkhu Nyanasobhano. Planned for late 1994 or early 1995.
- *The Seven Contemplations of Insight*. Ven. Matara Sri Nāṇarama Mahathera. Planned for late 1995.
- *The Progress of Insight*. Ven. Mahasi Sayadaw (reprint). Available by late September.
- *The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path*. Bhikkhu Bodhi (reprint).
- *The Great Discourse on Causation*. Bhikkhu Bodhi (reprint).

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## Book Review

*Forty-Three Years Ago*. Sangharakshita. Glasgow: Windhorse Publications, 1993. 59 pp. £ 3.50; \$6.50.

This recent booklet by Sangharakshita is packaged as “Reflections on my Bhikkhu Ordination,” but it is in fact little more than a misinformed and malicious attack on the Bhikkhu Sangha and the millions of laypeople who follow Theravada Buddhism. Sangharakshita begins his reflections by recounting how, six years after his own bhikkhu ordination in India in 1950, he discovered a technical irregularity in the proceedings which, he concluded, had rendered the ceremony null and void, invalidating his status as a bhikkhu. He then launches into the main theme of his essay: a sustained attack on the very notion of valid bhikkhu ordination, intended to establish that “technically valid (bhikkhu) ordination is virtually impossible of attainment and ... if one did, miraculously, obtain it one could not know that one had done so” (p.23). Such hostile accusations pervading the booklet clearly reveal its intent.

Not that Theravada Buddhism does not welcome accurate and constructive criticism. However, the disappointment with Sangharakshita’s booklet is that it is neither accurate nor constructive. Indeed, his entire argument rests upon a premise about the legality of bhikkhu ordination that is factually mistaken: “The bhikkhus constituting the ordaining chapter ... have moreover to be *parisuddha* or ‘completely pure’ in the sense of being guiltless of any major breach of the *sikkhapadas* or rules of training, such as would render them liable to expulsion or suspension from the Order” (pp.8–9). This simply is not correct, as anyone who has carefully studied the Vinaya would know. A bhikkhu who has committed a *pārājika*, an offence entailing immediate and automatic return to lay status, but who has not admitted this transgression, is technically a layman in the guise of a monk, a “sham bhikkhu.” Contrary to Sangharakshita’s thesis, the presence of a sham bhikkhu in an ordination ceremony—even in the position of preceptor—does not invalidate the ordination. As long as there are at least five “real bhikkhus” present (ten in Northeast India) the ordination holds. Moreover, the “real bhikkhus” completing the quorum do not have to be “completely pure” as Sangharakshita states. According to the Vinaya an ordination only fails for lack of a quorum when there are less than five real bhikkhus (ten in Northeast India) among the assembly that approves the ordination.

Building upon this basic error, Sangharakshita proceeds to argue that all bhikkhu ordinations are invalid, or at best open to such serious doubt that the very notion of valid ordination is undermined. This is as preposterous as it is mischievous. Even if Sangharakshita’s ordination was itself invalid—and this is now uncertain—it is quite illogical for him to infer the same about all bhikkhu ordinations. In the countries following Theravada Buddhism, ordination ceremonies are always performed with the utmost care and sufficient bhikkhus are invited to ensure that even if a few unrecognised sham monks participate, the required quorum will be met.

Sangharakshita next turns upon the lifestyles of bhikkhus and laypersons. He claims that in Theravada “not being a bhikkhu, i.e. not being ordained, a layman strictly speaking has no spiritual life” (p.26) and “Theravadin laypeople ... are in fact second class Buddhists” (p.32). These are the misunderstandings of an outsider, one with little experience of the rich and beneficial lifestyles of both the bhikkhu and the layperson in the traditional Theravada countries and now amongst Westerners following Theravada, who experience an immensely powerful training in virtue, meditation, compassion and wisdom.

But Sangharakshita should know his Buddhism better than to make such claims as: “Going for Refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha is the central and definitive Act of the Buddhist life.” This recurrent slogan is Sangharakshita’s own idea; the Buddha explained the path to liberation differently. Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha (the Bhikkhu

Sangha, according to the most ancient suttas) is the first stage of a Buddhist's spiritual journey, usually occurring when a layperson first gains confidence in the Dhamma. The next decisive stage along the direct path to deliverance, as the Buddha described it, is the Going Forth, whereby the Buddhist layperson in a position to take this step leaves the lay life and becomes a bhikkhu. This he does having realised that the way of life most conducive to the realisation of Nibbāna is—in the Buddha's view though obviously not in Sangharakshita's—the monastic training exactly as described in the Theravada texts. The meaning of this step, formalised in the bhikkhu ordination ceremony, is a voluntary undertaking of the lifestyle followed by the Buddha himself and prescribed by him for those fully intent on reaching the end of suffering. The Buddha was a bhikkhu, and I would add here that the rules, dress, and code of conduct laid down for a bhikkhu are certainly not "cultural baggage" (as Sangharakshita implies, p.41), but were prescribed at the very beginning by the All-Enlightened One. The following stages, which can only be perfected when virtue is well purified, are the achievements in jhāna and insight culminating in arahantship, which the entire lifestyle of the bhikkhu is designed to foster in the finest details.

Finally, seeing how Sangharakshita extols the Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, I might point out that the author of the Theravada monastic lifestyle is the Buddha himself; that the Dhamma includes the Vinaya procedures such as bhikkhu ordination; and that the Bhikkhu Sangha has always contained within it the vast majority of the Ariyan Sangha, i.e. those attained to the four stages of enlightenment. It is to be hoped that the author of this booklet will realise these aspects of the Triple Gem and be more respectful of them in the future.

—Bhikkhu Brahmavamsa

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## Guidelines to Sutta Study

In the previous instalment of this series we saw that the Buddha, in his account of the gradual training (Kandaraka Sutta, MN 51), begins with two events which are not so much actual phases of the gradual training itself as its prerequisites. The first is the arising in the world of a Tathāgata, a Fully Enlightened Buddha; the second, his teaching of the true Dhamma, the doctrine which reveals the path to deliverance. The appropriate response on the part of a qualified listener is to place faith (*saddhā*) in the Master and his Message. In the sutta the disciple who is prepared to tread the holy life to its final goal takes another major step that marks a complete break with his accustomed routines. In order to live the holy life in its purity and perfection, unencumbered by distracting obligations and the allure of sensual pleasures, he renounces the home life and goes forth into homelessness.

Thus the first step of the gradual training in its proper dimension, aimed at liberation from the beginningless cycle of existence, is the going forth: the taking up of the way of life of a bhikkhu, a homeless monk. This step throws open to the disciple the magnificent edifice of the gradual training, making it accessible without the concessions, compromises, and infringements that seem virtually inseparable from life in the world. On the basis of his enlightenment, the Buddha has arranged the gradual training into an extraordinarily methodical structure which facilitates the entire process of purification. Step by step the training proceeds from the subduing of the coarsest, most external levels of unwholesome activity through increasingly subtler inward levels, to its culmination in the mind's deliverance from even the most deeply rooted bonds and fetters.

When embarking upon the gradual training, the first layer of defilements that must be controlled and eliminated is the coarsest, that pertaining to conduct. It is only when the infringements of moral principles by bodily action and speech are held in check, that significant progress can be made in the direct training of the mind by the practices designed to foster concentration and wisdom. However, though the training in conduct may be described as coarse in relation to the more refined training in concentration and insight that follows, the influence of unwholesome tendencies upon our bodily and verbal behaviour is usually much subtler and more extensive than we realise. And since one aspect of the spiritual ideal that the Buddhist training seeks to embody is impeccable conduct, conduct that bears testimony to inward purity and restraint, the Buddha has promulgated a comprehensive body of training rules designed to impress these ideal modes of behaviour upon the disciple from the start. This body of training rules comprises what is known as the Vinaya, the Discipline.

The type of training inculcated by the observance of these training rules is called *silasaṃvara*, restraint by morality. In the suttas the Buddha has laid down, as the minimum moral discipline expected of the lay disciple, the Five Precepts: abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicants. But in the exposition of the gradual training he intends to describe a disciple who aims for nothing less than the final goal, the realisation of arahantship in this very life, and thus in setting forth the moral training he makes known the training of the bhikkhu, who has taken upon himself the whole body of moral regulations prescribed by the Buddha. In alternative accounts of the gradual training found in other suttas, the Buddha concisely describes the moral training of the bhikkhu in terms of "the restraint of the Patimokkha (the Code of Monastic Rules)" (see MN 107, 125, etc.). But in the Kandaraka Sutta sequence on the gradual training, he compresses the bhikkhu's moral training into a schematism that conforms more closely to the universal ethical principles enunciated in his teaching.

This stock passage contains two sub-sections. The first describes seven principles of conduct that are also comprised, with one important variation, within the Noble Eightfold Path under

the headings of Right Action and Right Speech. As the Buddha expounds them in the suttas, each of these moral maxims has two aspects, distinguished as *vāritta*, avoidance, and *cāritta*, performance. The seven main principles of the bhikkhu's conduct, viewed from the angles both of avoidance and performance, are thus: (1) to abstain from killing and live compassionately; (2) to abstain from stealing and live honestly; (3) to abstain from incelibacy and observe celibacy; (4) to abstain from false speech and speak the truth; (5) to abstain from divisive speech and speak only what promotes concord; (6) to abstain from harsh speech and speak gently; and (7) to abstain from idle chatter and speak what is meaningful. The one rule among these that is specific to the monastic discipline, and that is not also incumbent upon the lay Buddhist, is the observance of celibacy, which replaces the lay disciple's obligation to abstain from sexual misconduct.

The second part of the passage on restraint by morality describes aspects of the bhikkhu's discipline which are not strictly moral in the narrower sense of the term. In this passage, a shift in emphasis takes place, the ethically oriented training rules shading off into guidelines to conduct that are predominantly ascetic in character. While some of the abstinences described here remain moral—such as abstaining from cheating, deceiving, wounding, plunder, and violence—others prohibit actions that are not the least bit blameworthy when engaged in by a person living a righteous lay life. Among these are the training rules (6)–(10) undertaken by novices in the Order: abstaining from food after midday; from dancing, singing, music, and improper shows; from using cosmetics; from using high and luxurious seats; and from accepting gold and silver. These actions have been proscribed by the Buddha, not because they are inherently immoral, but because they fall short of the ideal standards of renunciation, restraint, detachment, and simplicity that the gradual training is designed to actualise.

(to be continued)

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