



From Views to Vision

The Buddha's teaching repeatedly cautions us about the dangers in clinging—in clinging to possessions, clinging to pleasures, clinging to people, clings to views. The Buddha sounds such words of warning because he discerns in clinging a potent cause of suffering, and he thus advises us that the price we must pay to arrive at the "far shore" of liberation is the relinquishment of every type of clinging. In a move that at first glance may even seem self-destructive on the part of a religious founder, the Buddha says that we should not cling even to his teachings, that even the wholesome principles of the Dhamma have to be treated like the makeshift raft used to carry us across the stream.

Such astringent words of advice can easily be misconstrued, and if misconstrued the consequences may be even more bitter than if we simply disregard them. One particular misinterpretation into which newcomers to the Dhamma (and some veterans too!) are especially prone to fall is to hold that the Buddha's counsel to transcend all views means that even the doctrines of Buddhism are ultimately of no vital importance. For these doctrines too, it is said, are merely views, intellectual constructs, filaments of thought, which may have been meaningful in the context of ancient Indian cosmology but have no binding claims on us today. After all, aren't the words and phrases of the Buddhist texts simply that—words and phrases—and aren't we admonished to get beyond words and phrases in order to arrive at direct experience, the only thing that really counts? And doesn't the Buddha enjoin us in the Kalama Sutta to judge things for ourselves and to let our own experience be the criterion for deciding what we will accept?

Such an approach to the Dhamma may be sweet to chew upon and easy to digest, but we also need to beware of its effect upon our total spiritual organism. Too often this kind of slippery reasoning provides simply a convenient excuse for adhering, at a subtle level of the mind, to ideas which are fundamentally antithetical to the Dhamma. We hang on to such ideas, not because they are truly edifying, but in order to protect ourselves from the radical challenge with which the Buddha's message confronts us. In effect, such claims, though apparently aimed at safeguarding living experience from the encroachment of stodgy intellectualism, may be in reality a clever intellectual ploy for refusing to examine cherished assumptions—assumptions we cherish primarily because they shield deep-rooted desires we do not want to expose to the tonic influence of the Dhamma.

When we approach the Buddha's teachings, we should bear in mind that its vast array of doctrines have not been devised as elaborate exercises in philosophical sleight of hand. They are propounded because they constitute right view, and right view stands at the head of the Noble Eightfold Path, the chisel to be used to cut away the dross of wrong views and confused thoughts that impede the light of wisdom from illumining our minds. In the present-day world, far more than in the ancient Ganges Valley, wrong views have gained widespread currency and assumed more baneful forms than earlier epochs ever could have imagined. Today they are no longer the province of a few eccentric philosophers and their cliques. They have become, rather, a major determinant of cultural and social attitudes, a moulder of the moral spirit of the age, a driving force behind economic empires and international relations. Under such circumstances,

right view is our candle against the dark, our compass in the desert, our isle above the flood. Without a clear understanding of the truths enunciated by right view, and without a keen awareness of the areas where these truths collide with popular opinion, it is only too easy to stumble in the dark, to get stranded among the sand dunes, to be swept away from one's position above the deluge. Both right view and wrong view, though cognitive in character, do not remain locked up in a purely cognitive space of their own. Our views exercise an enormously potent influence upon all areas of our lives, and the Buddha, in his genius, recognized this when he placed right view and wrong view respectively at the beginning of the good and evil pathways of life. Views flow out and interlock with the practical dimension of our lives at many levels: they determine our values, they give birth to our goals and aspirations, they guide our choices in morally difficult dilemmas. Wrong view promotes wrong intentions, wrong modes of conduct, leads us in pursuit of a deceptive type of freedom. It draws us towards the freedom of license, by which we feel justified in casting off moral restraint for the sake of satisfying transient but harmful impulses. Though we may then pride ourselves on our spontaneity and creativity, may convince ourselves that we have discovered our true individuality, one with clear sight will see that this freedom is only a more subtle bondage to the chains of craving and delusion.

Right view, even in its elementary form, as a recognition of the moral law of kamma, the capacity of our deeds to bring results, becomes our gentle guide towards true freedom. And when it matures into an accurate grasp of the three signs of existence, of dependent arising, of the Four Noble Truths, it then becomes our navigator up the mountain slope of final deliverance. It will lead us to right intentions, to virtuous conduct, to mental purification, and to the cloudless peak of unobstructed vision. Although we must eventually learn to let go of this guide in order to stand confidently on our own feet, without its astute eye and willing hand we would only meander in the foothills oblivious to the peak.

The attainment of right view is not simply a matter of assenting to a particular roster of doctrinal formulas or of skill in juggling an impressive array of cryptic Pali terms. The attainment of right view is at its core essentially a matter of understanding-of understanding in a deeply personal way the vital truths of existence upon which our lives devolve. Right view aims at the big picture. It seeks to comprehend our place in the total scheme of things and to discern the laws that govern the unfolding of our lives for better or for worse. The ground of right view is the Perfect Enlightenment of the Buddha, and by striving to rectify our view we seek nothing less than to align our own understanding of the nature of existence with that of the Buddha's Enlightenment. Right view may begin with concepts and propositional knowledge but it does not end with them. Through study, deep reflection and meditative development it gradually becomes transmuted into wisdom, the wisdom of insight that can cut asunder the beginningless fetters of the mind.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

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In Preparation

Being Nobody, Going Nowhere. Ayya Khema. A popular book of talks on meditation practice by the well-known German nun, taken from a ten-day meditation retreat in Sri Lanka. Asia Only edition; ready early 1994.

A Pali-English Glossary of Buddhist Technical Terms. Bhikkhu Nanamoli. Finally rescued and restored, this book is due for the press in late 1993 and should be available in early 1994.

The Vision of Dhanuna. Nyanaponika Thera. A comprehensive volume containing the writings of our esteemed Patron from the Wheel and Bodhi Leaves series. One of the most mature and authoritative contemporary expositions of Theravada Buddhism. Planned for mid-1994.

The Pali Buddhist Literature of Sri Lanka. G.P. Malalasekera. An old classic, long out of print, to be reissued by the BPS. Planned for mid-1994.

Prices and order numbers will be announced in this column when these books become available.

Notes and News

Dhamma Dana Project. At a recent meeting, the BPS Board of Management decided to launch a Dhamma Dana Project in order to give our valuable books and booklets a wider distribution. In the future the BPS will distribute, free of charge, approximately 150 copies of each major new full-size book publication to selected Buddhist centres and temples both within Sri Lanka and around the world. We will also be sending a substantial portion of our Wheels, both new and reprints, to various centres for free distribution among their members. To ease the financial strain of this project, we cordially invite our friends and well-wishers to participate in this meritorious undertaking. If you would like to contribute towards this free distribution of Buddhist books, please send whatever amount you wish to the BPS, ear-marked "Dhamma Dana Project."

Ven. Nyanaponika Honoured. On 30 August 1993 the Amarapura Nikaya, one of the three branches of the Maha Sangha in Sri Lanka, conferred the honorary title of Amarapura Maha Mahopadhyaya Sasana Sobhana (= Great Mentor of the Amarapura Nikaya, Ornament of the Teaching) upon four of its distinguished elder monks, all above the age of 90. Among them was Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera, 92, co-founder of the BPS and its present Patron, who was ordained into this Nikaya 57 years ago. The scroll and title were presented at a convocation in Colombo with Sri Lanka's President, D.B. Wijetunga, as the guest of honour. Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi received the award on behalf of the Mahathera.

Pali Text Society. The Pali Text Society will be producing a new List of Issues for 1994, which will include a revised price list and all titles, including Journals, published since 1991. The increased discount of 20% for PTS members will continue in 1994. For a copy write to the Pali Text Society, 73 Lime Walk, Headington, Oxford OX3 7AD, England.

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Book Review

The Nature of Buddhist Ethics. Damien Keown.
Hampshire: Macmillan, 1992. 280 pages, hardback. £42.50.

While scholarly studies of Buddhist doctrine and meditation have multiplied rapidly in recent years, relatively little attention has been given to the critically important subject of Buddhist ethics. Damien Keown's *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* is an intelligent and insightful attempt to redress this regrettable imbalance. Utilizing the resources of both major Buddhist traditions, Theravāda and Mahāyāna, the author proposes to define the formal characteristics of Buddhist ethics. His aim is not only descriptive but predominantly philosophical: to uncover the function of ethics within the Buddhist discipline and to determine the grounds on which Buddhism seeks to validate its ethical codes and values.

The first part of the book focuses upon the ethics of early Buddhism. Chapter 2 deals primarily with the precept formulas of the Suttas (unfortunately hardly touching on the abundance of canonical material on lay ethics); Chapter 3 investigates the psychological foundation of Buddhist ethics, with particular emphasis on the Abhidhamma; Chapters 4 and 5 explore ethics in relation to early Buddhist soteriology. The main contention running through this part of the book is that much modern scholarship has drastically misrepresented the role of ethics in Buddhist spirituality. The particular interpretation the author challenges he calls the transcendency thesis, which holds that ethics plays merely a provisional role in the Buddhist path and must ultimately be transcended by the Arahant, who has "gone beyond good and evil." Keown argues, in contrast, that a careful reading of the Buddhist texts shows that for Buddhism morality does not serve solely as an instrument for the attainment of insight but is itself an intrinsic good, integral to the final goal. He sees the final end of Buddhism as comprising both moral and intellectual excellence, and he contends that ethics does not simply serve as an expedient for gaining enlightenment, but foreshadows and engenders the moral purity essential to the liberated one.

While I substantially agree with Keown on this point, I could not find in his analysis a sufficiently precise explanation of the specific role that morality plays in the soteriological strategy of the path, and I felt this to be a major omission in a comprehensive book on Buddhist ethics. Certainly, Keown is right to stress that morality does not drop away when the higher

stages of concentration and wisdom emerge, but it is also important to pinpoint the exact contribution morality makes to the dynamics of the path. Briefly put, this is to restrain immoral conduct and to create a predisposition towards concentration, which in turn supports the arising of wisdom, while it is wisdom (which I would argue is still the best rendering for *pañña*) that uproots all defilements both emotive and intellectual. While morality definitely pertains to the Arahant's perfection of conduct, it is wisdom that guarantees such perfection, by destroying the defilements that are at the bottom of all unethical behaviour and emotional obsession.

Keown attempts to rectify misunderstandings that have clustered around several central concepts of Buddhist ethics. He offers a cogent argument that the term *kusala* should not be translated as "skilful," a rendering which reinforces the instrumentalist view, but as "good" or "virtuous" (I myself prefer "wholesome"). However, when Keown explains *kusala* as "those qualities or states which are intrinsically related to nibbāna," or as "qualities (that) partake of nibbāna," he claims too much; for the capacity to lead to Nibbāna is not intrinsic to the *kusala* states, but only emerges when they are linked together in the framework of the Noble Eightfold Path. The essential characteristic of *kusala* states is being morally blameless and productive of pleasant results. It is only the supramundane (*lokuttara*) wholesome states that intrinsically lead to Nibbāna.

I also differ from Keown in the interpretation of the term *puñña*, "merit." Keown takes *puñña* to mean the pleasant consequences of good action or the happiness that accompanies good activity, which is too broad. Strictly, *puñña* signifies the potency of virtuous action to produce pleasant fruits within *samsāra*. The Arahant has "gone beyond merit" because, with the extinction of ignorance, his deeds have lost all potential for ripening within the round.

In Chapter 6 Keown surveys the ethics of the Mahāyāna, offering us a trove of information otherwise nearly inaccessible to a nonspecialist. He shows that the Mahāyāna wavered between two poles of ethical thought, a conservative pole and a progressive pole which endorsed a more flexible, and sometimes audacious, attitude-towards conventional morality. Keown deals with the problematic issue of "skilful means" (*upāya*), concluding that the ethically flagrant form this doctrine occasionally assumed was basically a hyperbolic way of stressing the primacy of compassion. It was not intended literally for consumption by the ordinary Mahāyānist, though it becomes permissible for the advanced bodhisattva. This seems to be the source of the idea-unacceptable to the Theravādin—that a "crazy wisdom" master remains morally unimpeachable even when he defies all conventional canons of morality.

In the last two chapters Keown's explores the relationship between Buddhist ethics and two streams of Western ethical thought, Utilitarianism and Aristotelianism. He sees Utilitarianism as a misleading model for understanding Buddhist ethics, since it makes consideration of consequences the sole determinant of ethical judgements, while Buddhism seeks ethical value in the intentional nature of deeds themselves and not solely by reference to their consequences. He proposes instead that a more fruitful model for comparison with Buddhism is the ethics of Aristotle, and adduces several interesting points of convergence between the two systems.

Although I would raise a number of objections to the author's understanding of technical points of Buddhist doctrine, particularly in the field of early Buddhism, on the whole I found this a stimulating study which helps call our attention to the need for reassessing the role ethics plays in the broader contours of the Buddhist path.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Guidelines to Sutta Study

In the next series of articles in “Guidelines to Sutta Study,” rather than analysing a particular sutta in its entirety, we will instead explore one of the fundamental structures that underlies the Buddha’s exposition of the Dhamma. This structure runs through a great number of suttas, serving to integrate a wide range of practices into a successively evolving path that leads from the ordinary condition of unenlightened living to the peerless accomplishment of an Arahant, freedom from all bonds and fetters. When this structure is comprehended, it will provide us with a convenient tool for correctly interpreting a great number of suttas and for grasping the unity of the teaching, how the instructions conveyed in diverse suttas link together into a coherent course of practice.

It has often been pointed out that the Buddha was an extraordinarily systematic teacher. He did not proclaim his teaching merely on the spur of the moment, in bursts of passion or in compliance with streaks of sudden intuition. It is clear from the texts, even after we allow for the intrusive hands of scrupulous editors, that the Buddha devoted an enormous amount of care to the way he formulated the principles of his doctrine. The result of this painstaking attention to the formulation of the Dhamma is the clarity and consistency that we encounter everywhere in the texts, qualities which seem to call out, “Behold, here is the teaching of one who is indeed perfectly enlightened.” These formulations the Buddha fitted into carefully delineated structures that repeatedly appear in a wide variety of suttas, sometimes identically, sometimes with interesting differences. Like variations on a musical theme, familiar passages may show up in new, unexpected guises, sometimes with subtle but significant divergences of wording, sometimes embedded in a new arrangement of ideas or illuminated by an arresting and memorable image. The structure with which we will be concerned in this series of articles is called the sequence of the gradual training (*anupubbasikkhā*), a sequence that plays a prominent role in the first part of the Dīgha Nikāya (the Long Discourses) and throughout the Majjhima Nikāya (the Middle-length Discourses). The sequence of the gradual training serves as a blueprint that encompasses many different aspects of the Buddha’s practical teaching, bringing them together not as a random collection of separable items but as tissues functionally fused in the total organic unity of the training. The sequence forms a series of stages rising from the simplest and most rudimentary steps and culminating in the attainment of the Buddhist goal, the destruction of defilements right in this very life. But a word of caution is necessary. Although the image of a path is employed to suggest the sequential nature of the Buddhist training, its arrangement in a graded structure, it would be a misunderstanding of this metaphor to construe the distinct stages as discrete and mutually exclusive steps. This conception of the path must be studiously avoided, for the Buddhist training is not mechanical but organic. It involves not so much a series of separate steps as an inward process of self-transformation in which each stage, while giving rise to its successor, persists in the successor at a still greater level of efficacy than before. Thus, to use the traditional terms, *sīla* is not replaced by *samādhi*, but becomes more thoroughly purified when the latter arises, and *samādhi* in turn becomes deepened and fortified by the arising of *paññā*, while all three reach fulfilment with the attainment of their end, *vimutti* or liberation.

While the structure of the gradual training figures in many suttas, neatly adapted to the context, we will take for consideration the “middle-length” variant, which appears in its quintessential form in MN 27, The Shorter Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint Simile, and in MN 51, The Kandaraka Sutta. Since the presentation in the former is embedded in an extended simile—the comparison of the quest to confirm the Buddha’s enlightenment with the search for an elephant in the forest we will use the more stripped down version of MN 51. Here the gradual training is introduced in the context of an inquiry into the best type of individual. The Buddha has concisely described four types of individuals found in the world: the one who

torments himself, the one who torments others, the one who torments both himself and others, and the one who torments neither himself nor others, who is “here and now hungerless, extinguished and cooled, and who abides experiencing bliss having himself become holy.” Having first defined the first type of person as the extreme ascetic, the second as one who follows a bloody occupation such as a butcher, executioner, murderer, etc., and the third as the one who simultaneously practises asceticism and bloody sacrifice, he finally sets about to define the ideal person, the one who torments neither himself nor others. This person, the Buddha will show, is the Arahant, but rather than asserting this blankly, he gradually builds up to the figure of the Arahant by showing the course of practice by which one secures one’s own highest welfare while bringing no harm to others.

(to be continued)

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