



Towards a Threshold of Understanding - II

In *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul asserts that “the ‘enlightenment’ experienced by the Buddha comes down to the conviction that the world is bad, that it is the source of evil and suffering for man” (p.85). No doubt the fact that the book consistently encloses the word ‘enlightenment’ in quotation marks already suggests that the Pope’s attitude to Buddhism is not an appreciative one. This suggestion is confirmed by his manner of characterising the content of the enlightenment, which reduces the Buddha’s great awakening beneath the Bodhi tree to a caricature.

By way of rejoinder it should first be said that Buddhism does not regard the world in itself as either good or bad, and the Buddha never described the world as ‘the source of evil’ for man. The Buddhist texts scrupulously use terms with moral connotations, such as ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ solely to evaluate intentional actions and the persons and states of mind from which such actions spring. They do not ascribe moral qualities to entities that are incapable of moral initiative. Thus actions are bad (*pāpa*, *akusala*) when they intend harm and suffering for oneself and others, good (*kalyāṇa*, *kusala*) when they aim at promoting happiness and well-being. The Buddha’s analysis of the roots of good and evil also proceeds entirely within the sphere of psychological ethics without overstepping the bounds of that domain. According to the Buddha the roots of evil are the unwholesome springs of action: greed, hatred, and delusion; the roots of good are non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion, i.e. detachment, loving kindness, and understanding. The process of spiritual development in Buddhism can be described, from one angle, as the attenuation and eradication of the unwholesome roots by the cultivation of their wholesome opposites. The entire process centres upon the mind as the sole source of both good and evil, with the world set well in the background of this striving for internal purification.

In his formula of the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha does declare that worldly existence is dukkha, but dukkha does not mean evil. It means, rather, unsatisfactory, inadequate, subject to suffering. To understand why the Buddha states that all worldly existence is dukkha one must view this statement in its wider context. According to the Buddha’s teaching, our individual lives unfold within a beginningless cycle of rebirths, *saṃsāra*, wherein all living beings except the enlightened ones wander on driven by the thirst for continued becoming. Each individual life beginning with birth and ending with death is thus but a ‘link’ in an infinite chain of lives, a single turn of the wheel of existence. As we move within *saṃsāra*, again and again we undergo birth, ageing, illness, and death, again and again we experience pain and sorrow. It is for this reason that the Buddha declares that life within the confines of *saṃsāra* is dukkha.

Buddhism locates the cause of our suffering, not in the world considered as an objective reality, but in our own minds. The root of suffering is ignorance coupled with craving; because we fail to understand the true nature of things, our lives are propelled by blind desires for pleasure, power, and renewed becoming. The Buddha’s teaching is concerned, not with the obliteration of the world, but with the obliteration of ignorance and craving. When greed, hatred, and delusion are quenched, one then experiences the perfect peace of Nibbāna throughout the duration of one’s life in the world, and with the end of life one is permanently released from the round of rebirths into the Unconditioned.

The Pontiff describes Nibbāna as ‘a state of perfect indifference with regard to the world,’ adding that in Buddhism salvation means ‘above all, to free oneself from evil by becoming indifferent to the world, which is the source of evil’ (p.86). By such statements he represents Buddhism to his readers as a quietistic doctrine of withdrawal which can address the momentous problems that face humanity today only by politely turning its back on them. This is hardly a satisfactory depiction of Early Buddhism, in which transcendence of the world is stressed, let alone of Mahayana Buddhism, in which the bodhisattva’s compassionate activity on behalf of the world becomes the guiding ideal.

The Pali word that the Pope interprets as ‘indifference’ is presumably *upekkhā*. The real meaning of this word is equanimity, not indifference in the sense of unconcern for others. As a spiritual virtue, *upekkhā* means equanimity in the face of the fluctuations of worldly fortune. It is evenness of mind, unshakeable freedom of mind, a state of inner equipoise that cannot be upset by gain and loss, honour and dishonour, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. *Upekkhā* is freedom from all points of self-reference; it is indifference only to the demands of the ego-self with its craving for pleasure and position, not to the well-being of one’s fellow human beings. True equanimity is the pinnacle of the four social attitudes that the Buddhist texts call the ‘divine abodes’: boundless loving kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity. The last does not override and negate the preceding three, but perfects and consummates them.

If Buddhism in practice has not always lived up to the high ideals posited by the original Teaching, this is to be understood as a result of the downward gravitational pull of human nature, not as a consequence of any emphasis on apathy and indifference in the pristine Dhamma. The Buddhist texts provide ample evidence that the attainment of Nibbāna does not issue in a stolid indifference to the world. The Buddha himself, the ideal model for his followers, led an active life of forty-five years after his enlightenment dedicated to the uplift of humanity. Throughout Buddhist history, the great spiritual masters of the Dhamma have emulated the Awakened One’s example, heeding his injunction to wander forth ‘for the welfare and happiness of many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of devas and humans.’

It is not only enlightened monks and nuns who have displayed this sense of spiritual mission. As a corporate whole, Buddhism has inspired and animated all the Asian cultures in which it has taken root. It spread without violence and bloodshed, without forcible conversions, winning adherents entirely by its lofty teachings and the exemplary lives of its followers. Wherever the Dhamma took root, it has provided hope and encouragement, pointing to lofty ethical and spiritual ideals, spelling out concrete codes of moral guidance for the whole society. It needs only a little reflection to decide whether such a result is possible in a doctrine that advocates total apathy or callous self-absorption as the highest good.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Publications

Recent Releases

- *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Original translation by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli; revised and edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi. A complete translation of the Majjhima Nikāya, produced as a high-quality hardback, 3 volumes in one, with notes, glossary, indexes.

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- *The Seven Contemplations of Insight*. Ven. Matara Sri Ñāṇārāma Mahāthera. A profound examination of the 'seven contemplations' of classical Buddhism and of the actual way they are experienced in the course of meditation, by one of Sri Lanka's foremost meditation masters of recent times.
- *Great Disciples of the Buddha*. Ven. Nyanaponika Thera & Hellmuth Hecker. This volume combines all past issues of our Wheel titles in the 'Lives of the Disciples' series.

Note: While preparatory work on the above two titles is complete, we are seeking a Western co-publisher; thus actual release will be delayed until these arrangements are finalised.

From Other Publishers

- *Asoka—A Definitive Biography*. Ananda W.P. Guruge. 675 pp., hardback, 1993. U.S. \$30.00; SL Rs. 1,250.
- *Buddhism—The Religion and Its Culture*. Ananda W.P. Guruge. 252 pp., hardback, 1984. U.S. \$5.00; SL Rs. 150.
- *Buddhist Philosophy of Education*. Ven. Havanpola Ratanasāra. 138 pp., softback, 1995. U.S. \$5.00; SL Rs. 200.
- *A Handbook of Pali Literature*. Somapala Jayawardhana. 276 pp., softback, 1994. U.S. \$10.50; SL Rs. 450. A guide to the major landmarks of Pali literature from the beginnings to the recent past. Covers the literature of Sri Lanka, India, Burma, and Thailand, classified under the names of authors and of literary works in a single alphabetical sequence.
- *History of the Buddhist Sangha in India and Sri Lanka*. Gunaratne Panabokke. 277 pp., hardback, 1993. U.S. \$15.00; SL Rs. 675.
- *Logic and Epistemology in Theravada Buddhism*. Ven. Hegoda Khemānanda. 138 pp., softback, 1993. U.S. \$6.00; SL Rs. 250.
- *Nirvana and Ineffability*. Asanga Tillekeratne. 181 pp., hardback, 1993. U.S. \$10.50; SL Rs. 475. Argues that the concept of nirvana in early Buddhism is neither transcendent nor ineffable.
- *Sexuality in Ancient India: A Study based on the Vinayapitaka*. L.P.N. Perera. 298 pp., hardback, 1993. U.S. \$15.00; SL Rs. 690. Of interest not only to the Indologist, but to students of social psychology, medicine, and law.

- *A Textual and Historical Analysis of the Khuddaka Nikāya*. Oliver Abeynayake. 236 pp., softback, 1984. U.S. \$5.00; SL Rs. 125.
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Notes and News

Dhamma Dana Project. Under the Nyanaponika Dhamma Dana Project, we have so far distributed 120 copies of *The Vision of Dhamma*; 100 copies of *The Noble Eightfold Path*; close to 50 copies each of *The Pali Literature of Ceylon*, *The Path of Freedom (Vimuttimaggā)*, and *The Great Discourse on Causation*; and 25 copies of the *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (Majjhima Nikāya)*. In addition, we now regularly send out 250–350 copies of each new Wheel title to various Dhamma centres and Buddhist societies around the world, for free distribution among their members. Financial support for this important undertaking is urgently needed. Remember that the gift of Dhamma excels all gifts, and your contributions to this Project are magnanimous ways of sharing in such a precious gift.

A Crunch on Paper. Since world paper demand has been outstripping supply, the market price of paper has increased at distressingly high rates. Last year prices escalated about 30%, and in the sphere of economics the law does not hold that whatever goes up must come down. Despite this crunch, affecting publishers around the world, we will do our best to keep our publications available at affordable prices; but however painful they may be to us (and to you), price increases will be unavoidable.

German Books on Buddhism. For the benefit of our German readers, we wish to mention here three important titles on Buddhism recently released in the German language: (i) *Deutsche Buddhisten, Geschichte und Gemeinschaften*, 2nd ed., by Martin Baumann (Marburg, Diagonal): a detailed history of Buddhism in Germany down to the present day. (ii) *Der Erste Deutsche Bhikkhu: Das bewegte Leben des Ehrw. Nyanatiloka und Seine Schuler*, by Hellmuth Hecker (Universität Konstanz, Buddhistische Modernismus Forschungsprojekt): a biography of Ven. Nyanatiloka with life sketches of his pupils. (iii) *Grundlagen des Buddhismus*, by Ehrw. Nyanatiloka Mahāthera (Uttenbuhl, Jhāna Verlag): German translation of BPS Wheel No. 394/396.

New Catalogue. Our new catalogue for 1995/96 is now available. If you would like a copy, you need only write to us, enclosing \$1.50 or the equivalent in international reply coupons to defray air-mail postage.

Book Review

Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree: The Buddha's Teaching on Voidness. Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu.

The late Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu was one of the most influential Dhamma teachers in recent Thai Buddhist history. An independent thinker and prolific author, he set himself the goal of rediscovering and propagating 'the correct and essential principles of pristine Buddhism,' an undertaking that sometimes caused friction with the Thai Buddhist establishment. As with so many other attempts to fulfil the lofty aim of returning to essentials, the results in Ven. Buddhādāsa's case are uneven. On the positive side, he has done much to stimulate a keener awareness of the original Buddhist teaching, to inspire socially and ecologically viable applications of the Dhamma, and to challenge the dead weight of superstition that infects Buddhism throughout

Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree is Ven. Buddhādāsa's study of the Buddha's teaching on *suññatā*, emptiness or voidness (he himself prefers the latter rendering). In this work, fortunately, the erratic tendencies in Buddhādāsa's thought are not prominent, and he thus emerges here as an eloquent interpreter of an aspect of the Dhamma often neglected by traditional Theravadin scholarship. The teaching on *suññatā*, as is well known, is the central pillar of the Mahayana 'Perfection of Wisdom' literature, but the notion of voidness also plays a pivotal role in the oldest formulation of the Dhamma found in the Pali Canon. As Ven. Buddhādāsa shows, the teaching on *suññatā* is in essence an alternative slant on the teaching of egolessness (*anatta*), and thus can justly be called 'the innermost heart of Buddhism' (p.25).

True to the Buddha's own pragmatic intent, Ven. Buddhādāsa does not treat the teaching on *suññatā* as an escapade in speculative metaphysics (a tendency to which the Mahayana philosophies are prone), but situates it squarely within the liberative framework of the Dhamma aimed at the extinction of suffering. He organises his exposition around the familiar analogy of a medical diagnosis. Humanity suffers from the spiritual disease of egoism and selfishness; the germs are the feelings of 'I' and 'mine'; the Buddha, the great physician, prescribes *suññatā* as the remedy for this illness. *suññatā* is nothing but voidness of 'I' and 'mine': objectively, it is the absence of selfhood in all phenomena; subjectively, it is freedom from the grip of 'I' and 'mine,' the mind's release from attachment and clinging.

Ven. Buddhādāsa finds the Buddha's medicine of *suññatā* prescribed in a short maxim taken from the suttas: 'Nothing whatsoever should be clung to as 'I' or 'mine'.' This statement, he claims, comprises all the principles and practices of the Teaching, from the Triple Refuge to the attainment of Nibbāna (pp.29–34). One of the high points of the book is an extended passage in which he tests the cogency of this statement by asking, 'Is there anything worth having, anything worth being?' By reviewing virtually every possession and mode of being imaginable, he leads us to the disarming conclusion that there is truly nothing at all worth having and nothing worth being (pp.94–100).

Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree is divided into three parts with fourteen chapters, within which the author covers: the essential meaning of *suññatā*, the breadth of the principle, elements of *suññatā*, levels of *suññatā*, techniques for practising *suññatā*, and different occasions for contemplating *suññatā*. Ven. Buddhādāsa's language is simple and direct, his style of delivery robust, peppered with pungent similes and examples from daily life. Particularly impressive is his instruction on how to practise *suññatā* at the time of death, a process which can transform life's final defeat into a final victory, as the mind, by complete relinquishment, achieves 'final quenching without residue' (pp.104–10).

Along with its strengths, Ven. Buddhādāsa's exposition does reveal flaws, though these are not as obtrusive here as in some of his other works. I find troubling his favourite theme that 'the whole question of rebirth is quite foolish and has nothing to do with Buddhism at all' (p.4). Surely this assertion is hard to square with the countless suttas which show how vitally important the idea of rebirth is to the whole structure of the Dhamma. This flippant dismissal of rebirth may account for his quaint, rationalised explanations of birth, and of kamma and its fruit (pp.86–88), and also his wrong account of the distinction between the two elements of Nibbāna (p.55).

Another problematic idea that recurs is the claim that "at any moment that our minds are void of 'I' and 'mine,' that is nibbāna" (pp.49, 111). Ajahn Buddhādāsa admits that this is 'not absolute nibbāna,' yet he insists 'it is nibbāna just the same.' In the Pali suttas the Buddha describes Nibbāna as the destruction of greed, hatred, and delusion, the cessation of becoming, etc., and never allows any temporary absence of egoistic thoughts to qualify as the Deathless. This idea seems to be related to Ven. Buddhādāsa's view that our 'original mind,' which is always imbued with wisdom, is essentially identical with *suññatā*, and thereby with Nibbāna

(pp.28, 33). Such bold juxtapositions of terms are typical of the Zen masters, by whose writings Ajahn Buddhādāsa has clearly been influenced, but this style of discourse does not easily harmonise with the early Buddhist teaching based on the Pali Canon. The intersection of discordant frames of reference may be disconcerting to a reader acquainted with the distinct perspectives of the different traditions, and confusing to one unaware of such differences.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Also received

Asoka the Great. D.C. Ahir. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corp., 1995. 228 pp. with plates, hardback. Ind. Rs. 250.

A comprehensive study, with critical assessment of Asoka's greatness and glory as a man, as a king, and as a patron of Buddhism. The author analyses the Asokan Edicts and brings out in bold relief the rich legacy of Asoka in the life and culture of modern India.

Guidelines to Sutta Study

In the suttas the Buddha often describes the attainment of the jhānas by means of a stock formula that appears countless times in the texts. This formula, which is sometimes embellished by similes of striking beauty, indicates as concisely as possible how the meditator progresses through the series of the four jhānas. The formula describing each jhāna highlights two complementary aspects to the attainment: (i) the mental factors that must be eliminated in order to reach this particular jhāna; and (ii) the mental factors that determine the distinctive character of that jhāna. Let us now examine this formula in detail, with attention to the factors that are respectively to be eliminated and acquired.

(i) "Having thus abandoned these five hindrances, imperfections of the mind that weaken wisdom, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, the bhikkhu enters upon and dwells in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by thought and examination, with rapture and happiness born of seclusion."

From this passage we see that the prerequisite for attaining the first jhāna is the abandonment of the five hindrances (see BPS Newsletter No. 29). The overcoming of the hindrances is referred to directly in the first clause, and then a second time indirectly by the words 'quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states.' Here 'sensual pleasures' signifies the objects of sensual enjoyment, while 'unwholesome states' refers to the subjective defilements that prevent entry upon the jhāna, the most prominent of which are the hindrances. The formula also specifies four of the five jhāna factors (*jhānaṅga*) of the first jhāna: thought (*vitakka*), examination (*vicāra*), rapture (*pīti*), and happiness (*sukha*). The fifth jhāna factor, one-pointedness (*ekaggatā*), is not mentioned in the text, but its presence is presupposed by the very process of fixing the mind steadily upon a single object.

Both in the preparation for the jhāna, and within the absorption itself, each factor makes its own unique contribution. Thought and examination are the main 'work team' for the attainment: the former applies the mind to the object, the latter anchors it there. As these two factors gain in strength, they arouse rapture, elation over the enhanced purity of the mind and power of concentration, and happiness, the blissful feeling that accompanies mental unification.

(ii) "With the stilling of thought and examination, he enters upon and dwells in the second jhāna, which has internal confidence and unification of mind without thought and examination, with rapture and happiness born of concentration."

To advance from a lower jhāna to a higher one, there is no further need to eliminate unwholesome states, for these have already been overcome in the first jhāna. Progress depends, rather, on the overcoming of the grosser factors within the lower jhāna itself. Thus the passage from the first jhāna to the second involves the elimination of thought and examination. These grosser factors cannot, however, be abandoned by a mere act of will. What is required to eliminate them is recognition of their flaws and a strong desire to reach a superior absorption in which they are absent. Based on this preparation, the meditator continues contemplation of the root meditation subject until the grosser factors subside and the mind becomes absorbed in the second jhāna, which contains three factors (rapture, happiness, and one-pointedness). The formula mentions as well two other qualities: internal confidence (*ajjhataṃ sampasādana*), an enhanced degree of tranquillity that arises with the subsiding of thought and examination; and unification of mind (*cetaso ekodibhāva*), a term which emphasises the superiority of the concentration in the second jhāna over that in the first.

(iii) “With the fading away as well of rapture, he abides in equanimity, mindful and fully aware, and experiences happiness with the body; he enters and dwells in the third jhāna, on account of which noble ones announce: ‘He is equanimous, mindful, dwelling happily.’”

The third jhāna arises through the ‘fading away’ of rapture, the gross factor of the second jhāna. In the third jhāna the experience of pleasant feeling is subtler and more pervasive, so that the meditator is said to ‘experience happiness with the body.’ In this jhāna three other mental factors play prominent roles: mindfulness (*sati*), full awareness (*sampajañña*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). Although these three were also present in the lower jhānas, their contributions were subordinate, but now they emerge as distinctive elements in their own right.

(iv) “With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, he enters upon and dwells in the fourth jhāna, which has neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling as well as purity of mindfulness due to equanimity.”

In the third jhāna pleasant feeling still predominates, and though it has reached a high degree of refinement, its very presence obstructs the full efflorescence of equanimity. But with the ascent to the fourth jhāna, the happiness or pleasant feeling (*sukha*) is replaced by neutral feeling, feeling that is neither painful nor pleasant, and this substitution allows equanimity to shine in its natural element. The equanimity of the third jhāna is compared to the crescent moon during the day, which can barely be seen against the bright daytime sky. But equanimity in the fourth jhāna, being reinforced by neutral feeling, is like the crescent moon at night, which shines brightly against the dark background. When equanimity comes into association with neutral feeling, not only does it blossom in its own purity, but it also purifies mindfulness and all the other associated states within the jhāna.

(to be continued)

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