



A Disease in our Entrails

Several months ago I went for a two-week retreat to a hermitage in the low country highly respected for the austere, meditative life of its monks. Each day a different group of *dāyakas* (donors) comes to the monastery bringing almsfood, often from remote towns and villages. They arrive the previous evening, prepare an early breakfast which is sent up to the refectory, and then, in the forenoon, the monks come down on alms round, walking slowly in single file. After they have collected their food and gone back up, one monk stays behind to give the Refugees and Precepts, preach a short sermon, and conduct the dedication of merit.

One day during my retreat I noticed some of the male *dāyakas* behaving rather oddly near the abbot's quarters. I asked my friend, a German monk, about their strange behaviour, and the explanation he gave me sent a mild shock wave through my mind. "They were drunk," he told me. But that wasn't all. He went on to explain that the only thing unusual about the incident I had witnessed was that the men had become inebriated rather early in the day. More typically, he said, they will put on their best behaviour until the formalities are finished, and only then head off to the local tavern to celebrate their piety.

This stark revelation aroused in me both indignation and sorrow. Indignation, at the idea that lay Buddhists who come to offer alms should flaunt the most basic precepts even in the sacred precincts of a monastery — indeed one of the few in Sri Lanka where the flame of arduous striving still burns. Sorrow, because this was only the latest evidence I had seen of how deeply the disease of alcoholism has eaten into the entrails of this nation, whose Buddhist heritage goes back over two thousand years. But Sri Lanka is not the only Buddhist country to be engulfed by the spreading wave of alcohol consumption. The wave has already swept over far too much of the shrinking Buddhist world, with Thailand and Japan ranking especially high on the fatality list.

This ominous trend should spur earnest followers of the Dhamma to reflect still more deeply on the foundations of Buddhist morality. For his lay followers the Buddha has laid down five precepts as the minimal moral observance: abstinence from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and the use of intoxicants. The Buddha did not lay down these precepts arbitrarily or out of compliance with ancient customs. He laid them down because he understood, with his unimpeded omniscient knowledge, which lines of conduct lead to our welfare and happiness and which lead to harm and suffering.

It should be stressed that the fifth precept is not a pledge merely to abstain from intoxication or from excessive consumption of liquor. It requires nothing short of total abstinence. By this rule the Buddha shows that he has understood well the subtle, pernicious nature of addiction. Alcoholism rarely claims its victims in a sudden swoop. Usually it sets in gradually, beginning perhaps with the social icebreaker, the drink among friends, or the cocktail after a hard day's work. But it does not stop there: slowly it sinks its talons into its victims' hearts until they are reduced to its helpless prey. For this reason those who are keen to follow the Buddha's path should stick to the rules as he defined them and should not set about reinterpreting them to justify their own weakness.

To dispel any doubt about his reasons for prescribing this precept, the Buddha includes the explanation in the rule itself: one is to refrain from the use of intoxicating drinks and drugs because they are the cause of heedlessness (*pamāda*). Heedlessness means carelessness, recklessness, disregard for the boundaries separating right from wrong. It is the opposite of heedfulness (*appamāda*), moral scrupulousness and earnestness based on a keen perception of the dangers in unwholesome states. Heedfulness is the keynote of the Buddhist path, “the way to the Deathless,” running through all three of its stages: morality, concentration, and wisdom. To indulge in intoxicating drinks is to risk falling away from each stage of the path. The use of alcohol blunts the sense of shame and moral dread and thus leads almost inevitably to a breach of the other precepts. One addicted to liquor will have little hesitation to lie or steal and will easily be prone to sexual transgression, even to murder; hard statistics clearly confirm the close correlation between the use of alcohol and violent crime, not to speak of traffic accidents and occupational hazards. Alcoholism is also a major contributing factor to family disharmony—to quarrels, physical violence, and sexual abuse within the family—and a most costly burden on the whole society.

When the use of intoxicants undermines even the most basic laws of morality, little need be said about its corrosive influence on the two higher stages of the path. A mind besotted by drink will lack the alert attentiveness required for meditative training, and certainly will not be able to make the fine discriminations between wholesome and unwholesome mental qualities needed in the development of wisdom. The Buddhist path in its entirety is a discipline of sobriety. It demands the courage and honesty to take a long, hard, utterly sober look at the sobering truths about existence. Such courage and honesty will hardly be possible in a mind that must escape from truth into the glittering but fragile fantasyland opened up by intoxicants.

It may well be that a mature, reasonably well-adjusted person can enjoy a few drinks with friends without turning into a drunkard or a murderous fiend. But there is another factor to consider: namely, that this life is not the only life we lead. Our stream of consciousness does not terminate with death but continues on in other forms, and the form it takes is determined by our habits, propensities, and actions in this present life. The possibilities of rebirth are boundless, yet the road to the lower realms is wide and sweet, the road upwards to a higher rebirth and final deliverance steep and narrow. If we were ordered to walk along a narrow ledge overlooking a sharp precipice, we certainly would not want to put ourselves at risk by enjoying a few drinks. We would be too keenly aware that nothing less than our lives is at stake. If we only had eyes to see, we would realise that this is a perfect metaphor for the human condition, as the Buddha himself, the One with Vision, confirms (see SN 56:42). As human beings we walk along a narrow ledge, and if our moral sense is dulled and the voice of conscience gagged, we can easily commit an action that will topple us over the edge, down to the plane of misery, from which it is extremely difficult to re-emerge.

But it is not for our own sakes alone, nor even for the wider benefit of our family and friends, that we should heed the Buddha’s injunction to abstain from intoxicants. To do so is also part of our personal responsibility for preserving the Buddha’s Sasana. The Teaching can survive only as long as its followers uphold it, and in the present day one of the most insidious corruptions eating away at Buddhism’s entrails is the extensive spread of the drinking habit among its adherents. If we truly want the Dhamma to endure long, if we wish to keep the path to deliverance open for all the world, then we must remain heedful. If the current trend continues and more and more Buddhists succumb to the lure of intoxicating drinks, we can be sure that the Teaching will perish in all but name. At this very moment of history when its message has become most urgent, the sacred Dhamma of the Buddha will be irreparably lost, drowned out by the tinkle of glasses and the rounds of merry songs.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Notes and News

Beyond the Net. On Vesak of this year “Beyond the Net,” a comprehensive website on Theravada Buddhism was launched in Colombo. The website, the brainchild of Mrs. Yuki Sirimane, is hosted by Lanka Online Ltd, a subsidiary of Capital Suisse Asia (Pte) Ltd, and sponsored by B.P. De Silva Holdings (Pte) Ltd of Singapore for the purpose of promoting Theravada Buddhism through the use of modern communications technology. The BPS is a major contributor to “Beyond the Net,” which will be functioning as our effective website. Among the features: the fundamental concepts of the Dhamma are explained by Bhikkhu Bodhi, with short sections on the Four Noble Truths, the three characteristics of existence, dependent origination, kamma and rebirth, and the Noble Eightfold Path. Bhikkhu K. Ñāṇananda contributes a collection of creative short essays, “From Topsy-turvydom to Wisdom,” written in his remote hermitage at Devalagama. Mitra Wettimuny presents meditation as a practical guide to serenity and insight, and also conducts a chat session and answers questions by E-mail. The website includes the entire BPS catalogue, voluminous selections from our publications, and announcements of newly released BPS titles. Most of the content can be downloaded in Word for Windows format. “Beyond the Net” can be accessed on <http://lanka.com./dhamma>.

Nyanaponika Dhamma Dana Project. This project, launched in 1994 and named in memory of our founding president, Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera, was established for the purpose of distributing copies of BPS publications free of charge to Buddhist centres and libraries around the world. Under the project we send a copy of all new BPS book publications to each of the 100 centres on our master list, and we also send 300–350 copies of all new Wheel titles (and reprints) for free distribution. This project can continue, however, only so long as donations are received sufficient to meet our expenditures. We therefore invite the general public, particularly our associate members, to assist us in this meritorious undertaking. We especially welcome grants to the BPS under the Last Will, which will give you the assurance that your precious legacy is being used for the noblest purpose of all, the spread of the Dhamma. Please send donations to the Executive Director, earmarked “Nyanaponika Dhamma Dana Project.”

Book Review

How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings. Richard F. Gombrich. London & Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Athlone, 1996.

This book is a slightly revised version of the Jordon Lectures in Comparative Religion, which the author, president of the Pali Text Society, delivered in 1994. Despite the title, the book does not offer a sequential account of the origins of Buddhism. Its focus, rather, is on the formation of early Buddhist doctrine as found in the Pali Canon. The unifying thesis of his work, developed in Chapter 1, is his claim that the ideas, terminology, and didactic techniques of early Buddhism must be understood in relation to its historical context. Gombrich emphasises two kinds of influences to which Buddhism responded in the formulation of its teachings. One was the philosophical and religious milieu within which Buddhism arose and against which it had to define itself. The other was the competing currents of thought that were circulating in the Sangha, which left their impact on the records.

Chapter 2, “How, not What: Kamma as a Reaction to Brahminism,” explores in finer detail the contrast between the Buddha’s Teaching and its older rival. Gombrich regards the specific

doctrinal differences that separate the two traditions as expressive of a more fundamental difference in orientation: brahminism was principally interested in the essences of things, in what things are, while the Buddha favoured a pragmatic functionalism which sought to understand how things work. Thus, he points out, when both parties inquired into the nature of the person and the world, they came to opposite conclusions. The brahmins saw both person and world as derived from a single ultimate reality, the One; the Buddha saw the two as devoid of any substantial core, hence as ultimately Zero (pp.32–33).

Gombrich locates the Buddha's most radical departure from brahminism in his decision to make action or kamma, rather than being, the key to understanding existential reality. He stresses the revolutionary nature of the Buddha's teaching on kamma, which he says "turned the brahmin ideology upside down and ethicised the universe," thus marking "a turning point in the history of civilisation" (p.51). Nevertheless, Gombrich carries his comparison between the two systems to an untenable conclusion when he maintains, through a study of the Tevijja Sutta (DN 13), that the Buddha taught the divine abodes (*brahmavihāra*) to be a sufficient means to final liberation (p.62). Such an inference is undermined by many texts in which the Buddha declares the divine abodes to be insufficient for attaining Nibbāna, and would also mean that *paññā*, insight or wisdom, is not a prerequisite for the final goal.

Chapter 3 spans a wide range of miscellaneous material to show how the Buddha drew upon various non-literal teaching devices to communicate his doctrine. Here Gombrich discusses the use of imagery, metaphor, extended simile, allegory, and satire, which he brings into relation with such subjects as the defilements, Nibbāna, the *nāgas*, *Māra*, cosmology, and ideas on time.

Chapter 4, "Retracing An Ancient Debate," is the meatiest in the book, but also the most controversial. Gombrich envisions a contest being waged in the early Sangha between monks who advocated meditation as the most effective means to attain Nibbāna and those who favoured insight. He also supposes that the proponents of insight prevailed, so that texts were admitted into the canon which allowed "that Enlightenment can be attained without meditation, by a process of intellectual analysis (technically known as *paññā*) alone" (p.96). He appeals for support to the *Susīma Sutta* (SN 12:70), which he reads as implying that enlightenment can be attained without meditation (pp.125–26). But if we turn to the sutta itself, we would see that all it says is that there exists a class of arahats who do not possess the supernormal powers (*abhiññā*) or the formless meditative attainments (*āruppa*). This position is hardly unique to the *Susīma Sutta* but is met with throughout the Pali Canon. True, the commentary describes these arahats as "dry insight practitioners, without *jhāna*." But even this does not mean that they reach the goal by mere "intellectual analysis," without meditation. It means, rather, that they have followed the path of bare insight meditation (*suddhavi-passanā*), a strenuous system of meditation that involves direct contemplation of mental and material phenomena with only a minimal base of concentration.

In Chapter 5, "Who Was Angulimāla?", Gombrich takes a fresh look at the popular Buddhist story of the serial killer whom the Buddha converted to a life of holiness. The story of Angulimāla has always raised the question why he engaged in such a gory enterprise. The commentators answer with a fanciful background narrative, so improbable that any reflective reader must conclude the original reason for Angulimāla's life of crime has been irretrievably lost. Not so, says Gombrich, who thinks he has discovered the reason concealed behind the garbled text of one of Angulimāla's verses. Gombrich proposes a few emendations to the verse (MN II 100, Thag 868), which leads him to the conclusion that Angulimāla was a devotee of Mahesa, a title of the Indian god Shiva, and that he engaged in his murderous scheme to fulfil a religious vow. While the changes Gombrich proposes in the verse would have to be evaluated by one more proficient in Pali prosody than myself, I found his solution to the problem ingenious, and taken on its own merits it seems quite plausible.

How Buddhism Began is a humble and unpretentious work, written with the openness of a true scholar. Though I cannot agree with all Gombrich's conclusions, I feel that in this book, as in his earlier work, he has opened up important avenues for future scholarly research into early Buddhism. Nevertheless, I must remain sceptical about the scholarly enterprise of stratifying the suttas and discovering doctrinal tensions in their contents. To my mind, the texts of the four Nikāyas form a strikingly consistent and harmonious edifice, and I am confident that the apparent inconsistencies are not indicative of internal fissuring but of subtle variations of method that would be clear to those with sufficient insight.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Guidelines to Sutta Study

Vatthūpama Sutta (Simile of the Cloth, continued)

The Buddha opens the Vatthūpama Sutta with the simile of the cloth, from which he draws out the theme that binds together the discourse: a mind stained by defilements cannot easily absorb the pure qualities of the Dhamma and is heading for a lower rebirth; a mind secluded from the defilements absorbs the qualities of the Dhamma and is heading for a higher rebirth and total release.

In the next expository section the Buddha enumerates sixteen defilements of mind (*cittass'upakkilesa*). This list appears often in the Suttas, and functions as a kind of mirror which we can use to examine our state of mind. In the Aṅguttara Nikāya a slightly modified version of the list has been incorporated into the codas at the end of each chapter, from The Threes to The Elevens. There it is stated that all the numerical groups of training factors taught by the Buddha were taught “for the direct knowledge, full understanding, destruction, abandonment, utter destruction, vanishing, fading away, cessation, giving up, and relinquishment” of these defilements. This statement places our list at the very heart of the Buddhist training and underscores its importance.

To catch a thief one must know who he is; to expel a defilement one must know its identity. Thus it is worthwhile for us to briefly examine these sixteen defilements. Although the sutta itself does not define them, the Majjhima Commentary (MA) offers short explanations, and several of the items are also defined in the Vibhaṅga (Vibh) of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka.

(1) Covetousness and unrighteous greed (*abhijjhā-visamalobha*). MA: “Covetousness is desire and lust for one's own belongings; unrighteous greed, for others' belongings. Or the former is desire and lust for things obtained legally, the latter for things obtained illegally. But on another interpretation, there is no need to distinguish the two; both are simply greed, which is always unrighteous. They are one in meaning, differing merely in the letter.”

(2) Ill will (*byāpāda*), (3) anger (*kodha*), and (4) malice (*upanāha*). These three belong together, being different nuances of hatred (*dosa*). Ill will is strong hatred directed towards persons. Anger is a less persistent flare up of annoyance, irritation, and rage directed towards either persons or inanimate objects. Malice is chronic aversion, a deep hostility which seeks the opportunity to inflict harm, “the continuity, successive binding together, strengthening of anger” (Vibh).

(5) Denigration (*makkha*) is contempt for a person who has helped one in time of difficulty. Instead of recalling one's benefactor's help with gratitude, one speaks derogatively of that person and of the favours he bestowed.

(6) Disputatiousness (or disparaging, *paḷāsa*): “that which is disparaging, being disparaging, the state of being disparaging, causing dispute, competing, not giving in” (Vibh).

(7) Envy (*issā*) and (8) avarice (*macchariya*) form a pair. Envy is resentment or jealousy of the gain, honour, and respect won by others; avarice is stinginess, meanness, reluctance to share one’s wealth, privileges, and benefits with others.

(9) Deceit (*māyā*) and (10) hypocrisy (*sāṭṭheyya*) also go together. Deceit is the disposition to conceal one’s own faults and shortcomings to prevent others from knowing about them; hypocrisy is pretending that one possesses virtues that one really lacks.

(11) Obstinacy (*thambha*) is “what makes a person stiff like a bellows full of air, stuck up, devoid of humble ways” (MA).

(12) Competitiveness (*sārambha*) is the urge to outdo others in order to establish one’s own superiority. While this need to excel can be wholesome, it becomes a defilement when tainted by the sense of rivalry.

(13) Conceit (*māna*) is self-inflation arisen on account of one’s birth, social class, beauty, wealth, learning, etc. Conceit is distinguished as of three kinds, the conceit “I am better,” the conceit “I am equal,” and the conceit “I am inferior.”

(14) Arrogance (*atimāna*) is excessive conceit, self-inflation that makes one despise others.

(15) Vanity (*mada*) is infatuation with one’s youth, health, and vitality, or with wealth, beauty, learning, and other assets.

(16) Heedlessness (*pamāda*) is “wrong bodily, verbal and mental action or the succumbing of consciousness to the five cords of sensual pleasure, or not working carefully and constantly, being stagnant, relinquishing the taste, non-development, non-cultivation, non-practising, heedlessness in the development of good qualities” (Vibh).

All these qualities corrupt the mind and prevent it from shining brightly. Thus they are called “defilements of the mind.”

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

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