



Better than a Hundred Years

One day not too long ago I picked up on my short-wave radio an interview with an American futurist whose name I didn't catch. A futurist, as the word implies, is one whose job it is to predict the future. By collating a vast amount of information about developments presently taking place in various fields, he discovers the most prominent trends at work beneath the surface of events, and by projecting from these trends he constructs a picture of the future over increasingly longer time frames – over the coming decade, century, and millennium. Naturally, as temporal distance from the present increases, the picture he paints becomes proportionally more liable to error; but though an element of conjecture is unavoidable in all long-range forecasts, what the futurist holds is that his projections are based squarely on the trajectory along which we are travelling today.

The questions the interviewer posed drew out from the futurist an astonishing picture of things to come. In his cheery view, the great perennial springs of human suffering are about to yield to the insistent pressure of our ingenuity and determination to create a better world. The next century will usher in an era of unprecedented progress, prosperity, and justice, with radical changes taking place even on the most primordial frontiers of biology. Couples who want children will no longer be dependent on natural processes vulnerable to chance and tragedy: they will be able to specify the precise features they would like their children to have and they'll get exactly what they want. Medical science will find cures for cancer, AIDS, and other dreaded illnesses, while virtually every vital organ will be replaceable by a synthetic counterpart. Biologists will discover how to halt the process of ageing, enabling us to preserve our youthfulness and vitality well into our twilight years. By the end of the next century our life span itself will be extended to 140 years. And before the next millennium draws to a close, science will have found the key to immortality: "That's a hundred percent certain," he assured us.

While I listened to this intelligent, articulate man ramble on with such optimistic verve, I felt a sense of uneasiness gnawing away in my gut. "What's wrong with this picture?" I kept on asking myself. "What's missing? What's so troubling?" Here he was, depicting a world in which humanity would triumph over every ancient nemesis, perhaps even over death itself; and yet I felt that I just couldn't buy it, that I would prefer this wretched, fragile, vulnerable existence nature has conferred on us by birth. Why?

For one thing, it seemed to me that his glowing picture of the future depended on some pretty big assumptions — assumptions which could only work by conveniently turning a blind eye to other present trends which are very far from comforting. He was presupposing that advances in technology will bring only benefits without entailing new problems just as formidable as those that taunt us today; that by sheer cleverness we will be able to rectify old blunders without having to curb the greed that caused those blunders in the first place; that people will spontaneously place the common good above the promptings of naked avarice; that the spread of material affluence will suffice to eliminate the suspicion, hatred, and cruelty that have bred so much misery throughout history.

But, as I continued to reflect, I realised that this was not all that was troubling me about the futurist's picture; I felt there was something still deeper scratching at the back of my mind. At its root, I came to see, my disquietude revolved around the issue of orientation. The picture he presented showed a future in which human beings are completely immersed in temporal concerns, absorbed in the battle against natural limitations, oriented entirely to the conditioned world. What was conspicuously absent from his picture was what might be called "the dimension of transcendence." There was no hint that human existence is not a self-enclosed circle, that it unfolds in a wider spiritual context from which it gains its meaning, that the quest for true fulfilment requires reference to a domain beyond everything finite and temporal.

By deleting all mention of a "dimension of transcendence" the futurist could portray a humanity pledged to the idea that the ultimate good is to be realised by gaining mastery over the external world rather than mastery over ourselves. Given that life involves suffering, and that suffering arises from the clash between our desires and the nature of the world, we can deal with suffering either by changing the world so that it conforms to our desires or by changing ourselves so that our desires harmonise with the world. The picture drawn by the futurist showed a future in which the first alternative prevailed; but the Buddha, and all humanity's other great spiritual teachers as well, unanimously recommend the second route. For them our task is not so much to manipulate the outer conditions responsible for our discontent as it is to overcome the subjective roots of discontent, to vanquish our own selfishness, craving, and ignorance.

In preferring the more ancient approach I don't mean to suggest that we must passively submit to all the frailties to which human life is prone. Stoic resignation is certainly not the answer. We must strive to eliminate debilitating diseases, to promote economic and social justice, to fashion a world in which the basic amenities of health and happiness are as widely distributed as possible. But when the driving engine of civilisation becomes sheer innovation in techniques we risk venturing into dangerous areas. To struggle with Promethean audacity to bend nature to our will so that all the objective causes of our suffering will be obliterated seems an exercise in hubris – in arrogance and presumption – and, as we know from Greek tragedy, hubris inevitably provokes the wrath of the gods. Even if our reckless tinkering with the natural order does not unleash a cosmic cataclysm, we still risk a gradual descent into the trivialisation and mechanisation of human life. For by making technological ingenuity the criterion of progress we lose sight of the moral depth and elevation of character which have always been the classical hallmarks of human greatness. We flatten out the vertical dimensions of our being, reducing ourselves to a purely horizontal plane in which all that matters is technical expertise and organisational efficiency. Thereby we veer closer to the situation described by T.S. Eliot, "The world ends not with a bang but a whimper."

While I reflected on the futurist's predictions, there came to my mind a series of verses from the Dhammapada which offer a strikingly different picture of the challenge facing us in our lives. The verses occur in the "Chapter of the Thousands," vv.110–15. The first four stanzas tell us that it is not how long we live that really counts, but how we live, the qualities we embody in our being: "Better than to live a hundred years immoral and unconcentrated is it to live a single day virtuous and meditative. Better than to live a hundred years foolish and unconcentrated is it to live a single day wise and meditative. Better than to live a hundred years lazy and dissipated is it to live a single day with energy firmly aroused. Better than to live a hundred years without seeing the rise and fall of things is it to live a single day seeing the rise and fall of things."

In these verses the Buddha tells us that our primary task, the task to which all others should be subordinate, is to master ourselves. The challenge he throws at us is not to remove all the thorns strewn over the earth, but to put on sandals, to vanquish the desires responsible for our

suffering in the very place where they arise: in our own minds. As long as our lives are ruled by desire, there will never be an end to discontent, for the elimination of one obstacle will only give rise to a new one in a self-replicating cycle. What is essential is not to prolong life by readjusting biological processes so that they fulfil our wildest dreams, but to ennoble life by sober mental training within the humble limits of our natural condition. And this is achieved, as the Buddha repeatedly stresses, by the triple discipline of moral restraint, meditation, and deep insight into the impermanence of all conditioned things.

The last two verses in this series introduce the end towards which this training points, which is also the goal towards which our lives should be steered: “Better than to live a hundred years without seeing the Deathless is it to live a single day seeing the Deathless. Better than to live a hundred years without seeing the Supreme Truth is it to live a single day seeing the Supreme Truth.” If human progress is not to be reduced to a mere pageant of technological stunts pushing back our natural limits, we require some polestar towards which to steer our lives, something which enables us to transcend the limits of both life and death. For Buddhism that is Nibbāna, the Deathless, the Supreme Truth, the state beyond all limiting conditions. Without this transcendent element we might explore the distant galaxies and play cards with the genetic code, but our lives will remain vain and hollow. Fullness of meaning can come only from the source of meaning, from that which is transcendent and unconditioned. To strive for this goal is to find a depth of value and a peak of excellence that can never be equalled by brazen technological audacity. To realise this goal is to reach the end of suffering: to find deathlessness here and now, even in the midst of this imperfect world still subject, as always, to old age, illness, and death.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Book Review

A Return to Innocence: Philosophical Guidance in an Age of Cynicism. Jeffrey M. Schwartz, M.D., with Annie Gottlieb and Patrick Buckley. New York: HarperCollins, 1998. 320 pp. U.S. \$22.00.

In traditional societies the transmission of ethical values across the generations has usually been a special prerogative of the family, which takes upon itself the task of providing for the moral instruction and character formation of the young. In the modern West, however, this responsibility is being subtly undermined by the new ideology of secular materialism, with its exaltation of the individual and its denial of any objective basis for ethics. The consequences of this trend, visible on many fronts, include high divorce rates, broken homes, and the spread of the one-parent family. Today many young people grow up with little exposure to the virtues of respect, honour, love, and self-sacrifice nurtured by a stable home environment. Thrust prematurely into adulthood by peer pressure, pop music, and the clamour of TV, these youngsters drift aimlessly towards the future in a deep moral limbo. Under such conditions it is hardly surprising that in America, where this process has gone furthest, the teen population is beset by daunting rates of suicide, mental illness, drug abuse, and crime.

Return to Innocence is a courageous, clear-minded, and compassionate attempt to tackle this problem at the very root and to offer a programme of recovery drawn largely from the teachings of the Buddha. The author, Jeffrey Schwartz, is an American psychiatrist and neuroscientist at the UCLA School of Medicine, highly respected for his work on obsessive-compulsive disorders. Religiously, he describes himself as “a Jew who practices Buddhist mindfulness meditation and studies Buddhist and Christian philosophy from their original sources” (p.13). But though he

occasionally refers to Moses and Jesus in the pages of his book, throughout it is the wisdom of the Buddha that shapes his thinking and inspires his words.

The book takes the form of a series of letters that Schwartz wrote to a 16-year-old student named Patrick Buckley, the son of a single mother who was anxious for her son to receive guidance from a successful adult male. In his correspondence, Schwartz assumed the role of Patrick's "philosophical guardian," intent on steering him clear of the pitfalls of cynicism and moral recklessness that claim so many unwary young people today. The goal towards which he points his young friend is what he calls "Innocence." While in past epochs innocence was always considered an inviolable asset of youth, for many young people today the very idea of innocence is spurned in favour of a slick facade of "cool" sophistication. Schwartz sees this as a serious symptom of our own moral failings. He points out that the word "innocence" literally means not harming, so that a search for innocence is the quest for a way of life which protects one from harming oneself and others. In the author's view, true innocence, far from being a synonym for naiveté, is actually "the highest of human accomplishments ... the defining mark of those who have achieved genuine victory in facing life's innumerable challenges" (p.81).

Schwartz's letters are consistently lively and articulate, set out in a text illustrated by some fifty magnificent drawings mostly by Gustav Dor, and William Blake. The letters cover a period of about eight months (dates are not given) and offer a wide-ranging course of instruction in how to recover innocence, which Schwartz sees as both the source of ethical intuition and the goal of the spiritual journey. The theme that ties the different aspects of Schwartz's proposals together is the thesis that ideas have consequences: that wrong ideas about human nature and the means to happiness bring personal and social disaster, while right ideas open the door to inner freedom, personal fulfilment, and communal harmony. The place to seek right ideas regarding the conduct of life, Schwartz holds, is in the teachings of humanity's great spiritual teachers, which have proved so durable because they are "the operating instructions for human nature" rooted in a profound understanding whose validity still stands.

The wrong idea that Schwartz sees as particularly culpable in causing so much damage in peoples' lives, especially in relation to the family, is the view that we are not really responsible for our behaviour, that we can blithely follow our impulses wherever they lead us and then pin the blame on our biology and past conditioning. Schwartz counters this by appealing to the Buddha's teaching on karma and its fruit, which holds that in each present moment we have the freedom to choose our actions and thus must be willing to face their consequences. Mental force, he insists, is a power in its own right which can even change the circuitry of the brain. To prove this he gives us a brief introduction to brain physiology and to the discoveries he and his colleagues have made in their treatment of obsessive-compulsive patients.

Each group of letters takes off from the problems Patrick faces in his daily life, and in addressing them Schwartz deals admirably with such topics as the need for mental discipline, the power of right speech, the importance of shame and moral dread (*hiri* and *ottappa*), the law of karma, the value of sobriety, the wholesome and unwholesome roots, the ten armies of Māra, and much else. When Patrick begins to take driving lessons, Schwartz introduces him to the techniques of Buddhist meditation – the way to drive his personal vehicle – emphasising mindfulness and wise attention as tools not only for self-understanding but for gaining self-control amidst the temptations and challenges of student life. When Patrick's wobbly high-school romance falls apart, Schwartz explains the difference between infatuation and real love, concluding with words of wise advice: "true love waits for a true friend" – and true friendship calls for trust, openness, honesty, and respect (pp.257–59). The book ends with an outline of the Mahāmaṅgala Sutta, "the road map and traveller's blessing I want to leave you with" (pp.275–80).

My admiration for this book is not unqualified. For one thing, when discussing meditation in relation to neuroscience, the author habitually lapses into language suggestive of materialist assumptions: e.g., “wise attention can tame an unruly brain ... an unruly brain necessarily leaves behind it a trail of destruction” (p.145). At times, too, when explaining the practice of mindfulness he seems to adopt a mind-matter dualism in which mind is construed as a substantial self (a touch of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi?*), and mental acts are subjected to materialist reduction: e.g., in speaking of the “Impartial Spectator” as the part of the mind that can recognise “the difference between ‘me’ (the watcher/observer) and ‘my brain’ (the thought or feeling)” (p.122). He also depicts the struggle for self-mastery as a battle between the spirit and the animal brain, as if moral evil were to be traced entirely to our biological heritage.

These, however, are minor lapses and hardly detract from the rare moral vigour and compelling power of this book, which bursts with deep insights and ripples with hope and humour. Schwartz says here many things that have needed to be said for a long time, and he says them very well indeed; the Buddhist community in particular should lend him a close ear. I should stress that while this book would make a superb guide for any sensitive and intelligent youngster, it is not intended principally for adolescents. Its real audience is the reflective adult dismayed by the moral turpitude so widespread in modern life. Through the medium of letters to a young friend, and by drawing freely on the teachings of the Buddha, the author offers us a lucid diagnosis of our plight and a candid prescription of the medicine we need to regain our spiritual health.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Guidelines to Sutta Study

The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving (cont.)
Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya No. 38

After the Buddha has reprimanded Sāti for misrepresenting the Dhamma by his insistence that consciousness is a persistent transmigrating entity, he next sets about to corroborate his own statement that consciousness is dependently arisen (*paṭicca-samuppannaṃ*). To describe consciousness thus is to say that consciousness arises in dependence on conditions, that “apart from conditions there can be no origination of consciousness (*aññatra paccayā natthi viññāṇassa sambhavo*).” The Buddha first demonstrates this with reference to the concurrent conditions for conditions, that is, those conditions which exist along with the act of consciousness. He first introduces a classification intended to dispel our assumption that when we speak of consciousness we are referring to a unitary entity. While we ordinarily think of consciousness as a single uniform whole, for the Buddha consciousness is merely a general term comprising six types. These six types are distinguished by the sense base through which they arise: thus we have eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, and mind-consciousness. Consciousness itself—taken in abstraction from its particular mode of occurrence—is knowing, cognising, experiencing, or awareness. All these terms, however, refer only to a general property (or better, function) which is never found in the abstract but only as embedded in concrete occasions of consciousness. In its concreteness, any occasion of consciousness is always a specific type of awareness, either eye-consciousness or ear-consciousness, or one of the other types.

Each type of consciousness necessarily arises in dependence on at least two primary conditions, which are elsewhere called the internal sense base (*ajjhātika-āyatana*) and the external sense base (*bāhira-āyatana*). In the Abhidhamma they are called the door (*dvāra*) and

object (*ārammaṇa*), respectively. An act of consciousness will occur in dependence on many other conditions as well—for example, on the group of coexistent mental factors, or more broadly on the entire complex of “name-and-form” (*nāma-rūpa*)—but the two conditions mentioned, the internal base or door and the external base or object, are the conditions which demonstrate most clearly the dependent nature of consciousness. The other conditions may be common to various types of consciousness, but these serve to differentiate consciousness into distinct types.

Each type of consciousness takes its own specific internal and external base. Thus eye-consciousness arises in dependence on the eye as its internal base; never in dependence on the ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind-base. Again, eye-consciousness arises in dependence on forms as its external base; never in dependence on sounds, odours, tastes, tactile objects, or mental phenomena. The function of eye-consciousness is to see, and in order to see it needs a sense faculty, namely the eye (*cakkhu*, which might be understood to comprise not only the physical eye, but the entire physiological basis for visual cognition including the optic nerve and the visual cortex of the brain); and it also needs an object, a visible form (*rūpa*). If the eye were severely damaged there would be no faculty through which eye-consciousness could see; and if no visible object was present there would be nothing for eye-consciousness to see. Though light is sometimes said to be an additional condition for eye-consciousness, in a completely dark room, while one could discern no features of objects, one would still be seeing darkness, and thus eye-consciousness can arise even in the absence of light.

Each of the other four types of sense consciousness has its own internal and external bases: respectively, ear and sounds for ear-consciousness, nose and odours for nose-consciousness, tongue and tastes for tongue-consciousness, and body and tactile objects for body-consciousness. In the case of mind-consciousness the situation is more complicated, since this type of consciousness can arise through the five physical sense doors and can take the five external sense objects as its own objects. Thus, when one compares paints of two different shades of blue to determine which would serve better for painting the bedroom, it is eye-consciousness which cognises the two shades of blue, but mind-consciousness which compares their respective merits and selects one rather than the other. When one listens to somebody speak, it is ear-consciousness which hears the sounds, but it is mind-consciousness which turns them into meaningful words. Yet mind-consciousness has additionally a class of objects unique to itself; these are called simply *dhammā*, which we might freely translate “mental phenomena.” These mental phenomena include all types of objects of a non-sensuous nature: concepts, ideas, images, judgements, relations, etc.

Mind-consciousness is also said to arise in dependence on its own internal base, called *mano* or mind. The Suttas themselves do not clearly explain the difference between mind (as a door) and mind-consciousness (*mano-viññāṇa*), and thus the different Buddhist schools have handled this problem in their own ways. In the Theravada, the Abhidhamma commentaries identify the “mind door” (*manodvāra*) with the bhavaṅga, the subliminal life-continuum, or sometimes conjointly with the bhavaṅga and the adverting consciousness, the latter being the mental act of adverting to the object at the moment before mind-consciousness supervenes. Thus mind-consciousness arises by the interruption of the subliminal flow of the life-continuum consciousness, and this interruption is effected by a mental act of “adverting” to the non-sensuous object coming into range of awareness.

(to be continued)

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