



The Nobility of the Truths

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

The most common and widely known formulation of the Buddha's teaching is that which the Buddha himself announced in the First Sermon at Benares, the formula of the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha declares that these truths convey in a nutshell all the essential information that we need to set out on the path to liberation. He says that just as the elephant's footprint, by reason of its great size, contains the footprints of all other animals, so the Four Noble Truths, by reason of their comprehensiveness, contain within themselves all wholesome and beneficial teachings. However, while many expositors of Buddhism have devoted attention to explaining the actual content of the four truths, only rarely is any consideration given to the reason why they are designated *noble* truths. Yet it is just this descriptive word "noble" that reveals to us why the Buddha chose to cast his teaching into this specific format, and it is this same term that allows us to experience, even from afar, the unique flavour that pervades the entire doctrine and discipline of the Enlightened One.

The word "noble," or *ariya*, is used by the Buddha to designate a particular type of person, the type of person which it is the aim of his teaching to create. In the discourses the Buddha classifies human beings into two broad categories. On one side there are the *puthujjanas*, the worldlings, those belonging to the multitude, whose eyes are still covered with the dust of defilements and delusion. On the other side there are the ariyans, the noble ones, the spiritual elite, who obtain this status not from birth, social station or ecclesiastical authority but from their inward nobility of character.

These two general types are not separated from each other by an impassable chasm, each confined to a tightly sealed compartment. A series of gradations can be discerned rising up from the darkest level of the blind worldling trapped in the dungeon of egotism and self-assertion, through the stage of the virtuous worldling in whom the seeds of wisdom are beginning to sprout, and further through the intermediate stages of noble disciples to the perfected individual at the apex of the entire scale of human development. This is the arahant, the liberated one, who has absorbed the purifying vision of truth so deeply that all his defilements have been extinguished, and with them, all liability to suffering.

While the path from bondage to deliverance, from worldliness to spiritual nobility, is a graded path involving gradual practice and gradual progress, it is not a uniform continuum. Progress occurs in discrete steps, and at a certain point—the point separating the status of a worldling from that of a noble one—a break is reached which must be crossed, not by simply taking another step forward, but by making a leap, by jumping across from the near side to the further shore. This decisive event in the inner development of the practitioner, this radical leap that propels the disciple from the domain and lineage of the worldling to the domain and lineage of the noble ones, occurs precisely through the penetration of the Four Noble Truths. This discloses to us the critical reason why the four truths revealed by the Buddha are called noble truths. They are noble truths because when we have penetrated them through to the core, when we have grasped their real import and implications, we cast off the status of the worldling

and acquire the status of a noble one, drawn out from the faceless crowd into the community of the Blessed One's disciples united by a unique and unshakeable vision.

Prior to the penetration of the truths, however well-endowed we may be with spiritual virtues, we are not yet on secure ground. We are not immune from regression, not yet assured of deliverance, not invincible in our striving on the path. The virtues of a worldling are tenuous virtues. They may wax or they may wane, they may flourish or decline, and in correspondence with their degree of strength we may rise or fall in our movement through the cycle of becoming: When our virtues are replete we may rise upwards and dwell in bliss among the gods; when our virtues decline or our merit is exhausted we may sink again to miserable depths.

But with the penetration of the truths we leap across the gulf that separates us from the ranks of the noble ones. The eye of Dhamma has been opened, the vision of truth stands revealed, and though the decisive victory has not yet been won, the path to the final goal lies at our feet and the supreme security from bondage hovers on the horizon. One who has comprehended the truths has changed lineage, crossed over from the domain of the worldlings to the domain of the noble ones. Such a disciple is incapable of regression to the ranks of the worldling, incapable of losing the vision of truth that has flashed before his inner eye. Progress towards the final goal, the complete eradication of ignorance and craving, may be slow or rapid; it may occur easily or result from an uphill battle. But however long it may take, with whatever degree of facility one may advance, one thing is certain: such a disciple who has seen with immaculate clarity the Four Noble Truths can never slide backwards, can never lose the status of a noble one, and is bound to reach the final fruit of arahantship in a maximum of seven lives. The reason why the penetration of the Four Noble Truths can confer this immutable nobility of spirit is implied by the four tasks the noble truths impose on us. By taking these tasks as our challenge in life—our challenge as followers of the Enlightened One—from whatever station of development we find ourselves beginning at, we can gradually advance towards the infallible penetration of the noble ones.

The first noble truth, the truth of suffering, is to be fully understood: the task it assigns us is that of full understanding. A hallmark of the noble ones is that they do not flow along thoughtlessly in the stream of life, but endeavour to comprehend existence from within as honestly and thoroughly as possible. For us, too, it is necessary to reflect upon the nature of our life. We must attempt to fathom the deep significance of an existence bounded on one side by birth and on the other by death, and subject in between to all the types of suffering detailed by the Buddha in his discourses.

The second noble truth, of the origin or cause of suffering, implies the task of abandonment. A noble one is such because he has initiated the process of eliminating the defilements at the root of suffering, and we too, if we aspire to reach the plane of the noble ones, must be prepared to withstand the seductive lure of the defilements. While the eradication of craving can come only with the supramundane realisations, even in the mundane course of our daily life we can learn to restrain the coarser manifestation of defilements, and by keen self-observation can gradually loosen their grip upon our hearts.

The third noble truth, the cessation of suffering, implies the task of realisation. Although Nibbāna, the extinction of suffering, can only be personally realised by the noble ones, the confidence we place in the Dhamma as our guideline to life shows us what we should select as our final aspiration, as our ultimate ground of value. Once we have grasped the fact that all conditioned things in the world, being impermanent and insubstantial, can never give us total satisfaction, we can then lift our aim to the unconditioned element, Nibbāna the Deathless, and make that aspiration the pole around which we order our everyday choices and concerns.

Finally, the fourth noble truth, the Noble Eightfold Path, assigns us the task of development. The noble ones have reached their status by developing the eightfold path, and while only the noble ones are assured of never deviating from the path, the Buddha's teaching gives us the meticulous instructions that we need to tread the path culminating in the plane of the noble ones. This is the path that gives birth to vision, that gives birth to knowledge, that leads to higher comprehension, enlightenment and Nibbāna, the crowning attainment of nobility.

Publications

Recent Releases

The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga). Translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli. Hardback: 950 pages 152 mm x 227 mm. U.S. \$50; U.K. £30; SL Rs. 950. Order No. BP 207H

This book is again available in a handsome clothbound reprint edition newly composed in clear sharp types. The *Visuddhimagga* is the "great treatise" of the Theravada tradition, an encyclopaedic manual of Buddhist doctrine and meditation written in the fifth century by Achariya Buddhaghosa. Ven. Ñāṇamoli's masterly translation itself ranks as an outstanding cultural achievement.

The Spectrum of Buddhism. Piyadassi Mahathera. Softback: 450 pages 140 mm x 214 mm. U.S. \$15; U.K. £10; SL Rs. 300. Order No. OP 165

In his newest book Ven. Piyadassi offers—with his usual vividness of style and clarity of expression—a work that spans the many aspects of this fascinating system of Asian spirituality. His book explores the philosophy of Buddhism, its psychology and ethics, its culture and history. He also deals with such vital themes as the position of women, meditation and the mind, and the spread of Buddhism to the West.

In Preparation

A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma. Edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi.

This upcoming title is an all-new, greatly expanded edition of the classic *Manual of Abhidhamma*, the fundamental Theravada introduction to the Buddhist philosophy of mind and mental processes. The book contains the Pali text of the *Abhidhammāṭṭha Saṅgaha*, an exact English translation, and a detailed exposition by the Burmese Abhidhamma authority Ven. U Rewata Dhamma and Bhikkhu Bodhi. The book will also feature over 40 charts, most by the Burmese Abhidhamma scholar, Ven. U Silananda. Those who wish to contribute towards the publication of this important work may send their cheques or money orders to the BPS, specifying the purpose of the donation. Those contributing U.S. \$25 or more, U.K. £15 or more, or SL Rs. 500 or more, will automatically receive a gift copy of the book when it becomes available, most likely in mid-1992.

Middle Land, Middle Way: A Guide to the Buddha's India. Bhikkhu Dhammika.

This book will offer an informative guide to the major sites of Buddhist pilgrimage in India directly associated with the Buddha and his great disciples. Each chapter provides a detailed

account of the background history of the place and the interesting sights it contains. The work should prove an indispensable companion to any traveller to the sacred shrines of Buddhist India. To be announced when available.

The *Wheel Series*.

The Wheels for 1992 will include the second part of *The Essential Practice: Dhamma Discourses of Ven. Webu Sayadaw*; a work on *The Future Buddha, Ariya Metteyya* by Saya U Chit Tin; and *The Buddha and Jesus Christ as Religious Teachers* by Dr. Lily de Silva.

Under Reprint

The Life of the Buddha according to the Pali Canon. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli.

The Path of Freedom (Vimuttimaggā). Translated from the Chinese by Ehara, Soma, and Kheminda.

The All-Embracing Net of Views: The Brahmajāla Sutta and its Commentaries. Translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi.

The Discourse on the Root of Existence: The Mulapariyāya Sutta and its Commentaries. Translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi.

The Seven Stages of Purification and the Insight Knowledges. Matara Sri Ñāṇarama Mahathera.

The Road to Inner Freedom. Edited by Nyanaponika Mahathera.

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A Tragic Note.

We regret to report that a tragedy has befallen our projected *Pali-English Glossary of Buddhist Technical Terms* by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli. In the last stages of preparing this work by computer, the two floppy disk versions of the book became corrupted, and at almost the same time the hard-disk version became inaccessible. In a last-ditch move to save this precious glossary, we are arranging to send the floppy disks to the software manufacturer in Europe (Signum), with the hope that they can recover the lost files. If not, close to two years of hard work will have been lost, and our only chance of producing the book will be to seek a volunteer to re-enter the vanished text on disk.

New Membership Rates

Associate membership rates for 1992 are as follows:

Local: SL Rs. 150

Foreign: U.S. \$15; U.K. £10 (Sea mail); U.S. \$25; U.K. £15 (Air mail)

We would appreciate it if any members who have already sent in their membership fees under the old rates would kindly remit the balance due under the new rates.

We are also happy to introduce lifetime associate membership for foreign subscribers as well as local ones. The rates for lifetime associate membership are:

Local: SL Rs. 1500

Foreign: U.S. \$300; U.K. £200 (Air mail only)

Notes and News

Nyanaponika Scholarship Fund. As a mark of appreciation to our founder and present patron, Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera, on the occasion of his 90th birthday the BPS initiated plans to establish a "Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera Scholarship Fund for Postgraduate Research into Theravada Buddhism" at the University of Peradeniya. The source of the Fund will be a fixed deposit set up in a commercial bank in Kandy, which will generate interest from which the award will be granted. The BPS has set up a core deposit, but as several members have already expressed interest in contributing to the Fund, we are ready to welcome donations from both members and well-wishers of the BPS. Depending on the total amount accumulated, we will establish either one or more scholarships or fellowships, to be awarded to students selected by the University for postgraduate studies in the philosophy, ethics or literature of Theravada Buddhism. Those who contribute should please specify the purpose of their contribution

A Note of Thanks

In addition to those who have supported us so generously with financial donations, we would like to extend special thanks to those who have offered us help in other ways during 1991: to Ravi Peiris, general manager of Wijeya Graphics (Colombo), for developing a scheme of Pali accents for the fonts in our new Apple Macintosh desktop publishing system; to Douglas Bullis, for the donation of MS Word 3.02; to Upasena and Badra de Silva, for the gift of a new Atari hard disk; to R.J. van der Kamp, for technical assistance with computer problems; to our team of volunteer proof-readers, for generously offering their time to correct proofs.

Book Reviews

Buddhist Monastic Life, according to the texts of the Theravada Tradition. Mohan Wijayaratna. Translated from the French by Claude Grangier and Steven Collins. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990. 214 pp. (PB).

This is a timely book on the Vinaya, the rules of the Buddhist monastic discipline. It comes just as Buddhist communities are forming in the West and the rules of the Vinaya are becoming live

issues. The author's purpose is to show the inner logic of the Vinaya—how the rules fit together coherently with one another and with the teachings in the Suttas to delineate a communal life conducive to the practice of the Dhamma—and in so doing he dislodges two serious misconceptions about the Vinaya that have become commonplace in the West.

First is the theory—originally advanced by S. Dutt in his *Early Buddhist Monachism*—that soon after the Buddha's passing away his monastic followers switched to a pattern of settled communal living, away from the Buddha's original plan of free unsocial wandering, and so lost the original Buddhist vision. This theory has acquired the status of a received truth among modern scholars, and yet as the author shows, it is based on a partial and unbalanced reading of the texts—reading too much between the lines and not enough of what the lines of the texts actually have to say. Taken as a whole, the Vinaya as we have it outlines a consistent pattern in which settled communal living is balanced with solitary wandering so that the monks and nuns could benefit from the opportunities afforded by both.

The second misconception that the author helps to clear up is the belief that the rules of the Vinaya simply reflect cultural norms in ancient India which have no intrinsic connection to the practice of the Dhamma. The corollary to this belief is the view that now that Buddhism has come to the West, it is time to reform the Vinaya to fit in with modern Western attitudes. The author shows the fallacy of this view by pointing out that in a number of areas—notably the question of whether renunciates should be celibate and whether they should work for a living—there was no consensus in ancient India. The Vinaya rules touching on these issues thus cannot be dismissed simply as cultural relics from an ancient and hidebound past. Rather—and the author draws ample documentation from the Suttas for this point—they are a natural extension of the principles of the Dhamma itself.

Similarly, he shows that the rules dealing with food, money, dwellings, clothing and relationships within the community derive naturally from what it means to leave the lay life and take up the life of a renunciate in a way which avoids the extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification. All in all, the author has done a fine job of outlining—in a way which is balanced, clear and free from polemic—the inner workings of what might be called the ecology of the Vinaya: an ecology in the sense that it forms an interconnected system which could easily be thrown off balance if any of its elements are tampered with.

Of course, the book does have its minor flaws—including more than twenty errors concerning details of some of the rules—and one major flaw: the author falls into the mistake, common among current scholars, of overstating the revolutionary nature of the Buddha's decision to allow women to ordain. Actually, the Jains and other sects had women renunciates well before the Buddha's time, so there was nothing really new at all about the Buddha's decision. The Buddhist accomplishment in this area—and here the monks and nuns who carried on the tradition deserve credit along with the founder—lay in establishing a pattern for female ordination which ultimately spread to many countries and lasted for many centuries.

These points aside, this book is a solid and responsible piece of Vinaya scholarship. If it is widely read in Buddhist circles—and it should be—it will do a great deal to resolve many of the controversies currently surrounding the Vinaya and to move the discussions of the topic to a more mature, informed and productive level.

—Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Guidelines to Sutta Study

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

In the Discourse on the Characteristic of Non-self the Buddha presents two lines of argument for establishing the characteristic of non-self as inherent in the five aggregates that constitute personal existence. These arguments—explained at length in the previous two instalments of this series—serve to show: (1) that because the five aggregates all lead to affliction they cannot be taken as self; and (2) that because the five aggregates are impermanent they are also marked by suffering, and what is impermanent and suffering cannot be regarded as “mine,” “I,” or “my self.” Now, having established his thesis by reasoning, the Buddha next undertakes to show how the same principle of non-self is to be applied as an exercise in contemplation.

Addressing the five monks, the Buddha says: “Therefore, monks, any kind of material form whatever, whether past, future or present, whether gross or subtle, whether internal or external, whether inferior or superior, whether far or near, must be seen with proper wisdom as it really is thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’ Any kind of feeling whatever ... Any kind of perception whatever ... Any kind of mental formations whatever ... Any kind of consciousness whatever, whether past, future or present ... far or near, must be seen with proper wisdom as it really is thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’”

With these words the Buddha draws together into a comprehensive formula all varieties of the five aggregates. Each aggregate can be viewed from eleven angles. By way of temporal period it can be considered as past, future or present. By way of quality it can be gross or subtle, these being relative terms. By way of location it can be internal, i.e. pertaining to one’s own person, or external, i.e. pertaining to other persons or the outer environment: By way of plane of existence, or quality again, it may be inferior or superior. And by way of position, it may be far or near.

Regardless of which among these eleven attributes qualify any of the five aggregates, each aggregate taken for contemplation is to be seen “with proper wisdom”—that is, with the wisdom aroused by insight contemplation—as it really is: not mine, not what I am, not my self. The Buddha’s statement is an all-inclusive statement designed to bring the five aggregates in their totality within the scope of the characteristic of non-self.

The commentaries explain that each of these three contemplations—as not mine, as not what I am, as not my self—is intended to counter a different distortional tendency of the mind. Left to its own devices, without the guidelines of the Buddha’s teaching, the mind subjects all its data of cognition to three forces of distortion or conceptual proliferation (*papañca*)—craving, conceit and speculative views. On account of craving things are erroneously taken to be “mine,” to be personal possessions or things worth appropriating. On account of conceit things are taken to be “I”: we identify with the aggregates and on this basis we rate ourselves as superior, equal or inferior in relation to others. And through the speculative tendency we treat things as the raw material for fashioning views and theories about our self or soul and its relation to the world.

By subjecting the five aggregates to this threefold contemplation, the three distortional tendencies are gradually pulled up by the root. The contemplation of the aggregates as “not mine” obstructs the drive of craving to take them as “mine.” The contemplation of them as “not what I am” obstructs the drive of conceit to take them as “I am this.” And the contemplation of them as “not my self” obstructs the speculative tendency to erect views of self.

The next section of the sutta shows the progressive movement along the path to liberation. The noble disciple who has seen the five aggregates in this way—as not mine, not I, not my self—becomes disenchanted with them. His illusions are dispelled, he no longer seeks delight in

them, no longer attempts to possess them, no longer builds his sense of identity upon them. He has seen the aggregates for what they really are, mere impermanent essenceless phenomena. As this insight grows deeper and clearer, it results in a spontaneous turning away from the entire world of conditioned formations, a stage known as “disenchantment” (*nibbida*). When this disenchantment matures, passion fades away: the defilements of craving and clinging are uprooted, replaced by an unshakeable detachment called “dispassion” (*virāga*). With the fading away of passion the mind is liberated from the most subtle underlying taints, the *asavas*, and with its complete release there arises the retrospective knowledge of liberation: “Destroyed is birth; the holy life has been lived; what had to be done has been done; there is nothing further beyond this.”

With these words the Buddha completes the actual discourse on the characteristic of non-self. But the sutta as it has come down to us includes a final narrative paragraph which informs us of the impact of the Buddha’s words on his disciples, the five bhikkhus who were his first followers: “Now while this discourse was being uttered, the hearts of the bhikkhus of the group of five were liberated from taints through clinging no more.” That is, so powerful was the message being delivered, and so ripe the faculties of the disciples, that in the course of the sutta the five bhikkhus succeeded in eradicating all their defilements and realised the final goal of the holy life, the fruit of arahantship.

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