



Meeting the Divine Messengers

The traditional legend of the Buddha's quest for enlightenment tells us that throughout his youth and early manhood Prince Siddhattha, the Bodhisatta, lived in complete ignorance of the most elementary facts of human life. His father, anxious to protect his sensitive son from exposure to suffering, kept him an unwitting captive of nescience. Incarcerated in the splendour of his palace, amply supplied with sensual pleasures and surrounded by merry friends, the prince did not entertain even the faintest suspicion that life could offer anything other than an endless succession of amusements and festivities. It was only on that fateful day in his twenty-ninth year, when curiosity led him out beyond the palace walls, that he encountered the four "divine messengers" that were to change his destiny. The first three were the old man, the sick man, and the corpse, which taught him the shocking truths of old age, illness, and death; the fourth was a wandering ascetic, who revealed to him the existence of a path whereby all suffering can be fully transcended.

This charming story, which has nurtured the faith of Buddhists through the centuries, enshrines at its heart a profound psychological truth. In the language of myth it speaks to us, not merely of events that may have taken place centuries ago, but of a process of awakening through which each of us must pass if the Dhamma is to come to life within ourselves. Beneath the symbolic veneer of the ancient legend we can see that Prince Siddhattha's youthful sojourn in the palace was not so different from the way in which most of us today pass our entire lives—often, sadly, until it is too late to strike out in a new direction. Our homes may not be royal palaces, and the wealth at our disposal may not approach anywhere near that of a North Indian rajah, but we share with the young Prince Siddhattha a blissful (and often wilful) oblivion to stark realities that are constantly thrusting themselves on our attention. If the Dhamma is to be more than the bland, humdrum background of a comfortable life, if it is to become the inspiring, sometimes harsh voice that steers us on to the great path of awakening, we ourselves must emulate the Bodhisatta in his process of maturation. We must join him on that journey outside the palace walls—the walls of our own self-assuring preconceptions—and see for ourselves the divine messengers we so often miss because our eyes are fixed on "more important things," i.e. on our mundane preoccupations and goals.

The Buddha says that there are few who are stirred by things that are truly stirring, compared to those people, far more numerous, who are not so stirred. The spurs to awakening press in on us from all sides, yet too often, instead of acknowledging them, we respond simply by putting on another layer of clothes to protect ourselves from their sting. This statement is not disproved even by the recent deluge of discussion and literature on ageing, life-threatening illnesses, and alternative approaches to death and dying. For open and honest awareness is still not sufficient for the divine messengers to get their message across. In order for them to convey their message, the message that can goad us on to the path to liberation, something more is needed. We must confront ageing, illness, and death, not simply as inescapable realities with which we must somehow cope at the practical level, but as envoys from the beyond, from the far shore, disclosing new dimensions of meaning.

This disclosure takes place at two levels. First, to become divine messengers, the facts of ageing, illness, and death must jolt us into an awareness of the fragile, precarious nature of our normal day-to-day lives. They must impress upon our minds the radical deficiency that runs through all our worldly concerns, extending to conditioned existence in its totality. Thereby they become windows opening upon the first noble truth, the noble truth of suffering, which the Buddha says comprises not only birth, ageing, illness, and death, not only sorrow, grief, pain, and misery, but all the “five aggregates of clinging” that make up our being-in-the-world.

When we meet the divine messengers at this level, they become catalysts that can induce in us a profound internal transformation. We realise that because we are frail and inescapably mortal we must make drastic changes in our existential priorities and personal values. Instead of letting our lives be consumed by transient trivia, by things that are here today and gone tomorrow, we must give weight to “what really counts,” to aims and actions that will exert a lasting influence upon our long-range destinies—upon our final destiny in this life, and upon our ultimate direction in the cycle of repeated birth and death.

Before such a revaluation takes place, we generally live in a condition that the Buddha describes by the term *pamāda*, negligence or heedlessness. Imagining ourselves immortal, and the world our personal playground, we devote our energies to the accumulation of wealth, the enjoyment of sensual pleasures, the achievement of status, the quest for fame and renown. The remedy for heedlessness is the very same quality that was aroused in the Bodhisatta when he met the divine messengers in the streets of Kapilavatthu. This quality, called in Pali *saṃvega*, is a sense of urgency, an inner commotion or shock which does not allow us to rest content with our habitual adjustment to the world. Instead it drives us on, out of our cosy palaces and into unfamiliar jungles, to work out with diligence an authentic solution to our existential plight.

It is at this point that the second function of the divine messengers comes to prominence. For ageing, sickness, and death are not only emblems of the unsatisfactory nature of mundane existence but pointers to a deeper reality that lies beyond. In the traditional legend the old man, the sick man, and the corpse are gods in disguise; they have been sent down to earth from the highest heaven to awaken the Bodhisatta to his momentous mission, and once they have delivered their message they resume their celestial forms. The final word of the Dhamma is not surrender, not an injunction to resign ourselves stoically to old age, sickness, and death. This is the preliminary message, the announcement that our house is ablaze. The final message is other: an ebullient cry that there is a place of safety, an open field beyond the flames, and a clear exit sign pointing the way of escape.

If in this process of awakening we must meet old age, sickness, and death face to face, that is because the place of safety can be reached only by honest confrontation with the stark truths about human existence. We cannot reach safety by pretending that the flames that engulf our home are nothing but bouquets of flowers: we must see them as they are, as real flames. When, however, we do look at the divine messengers squarely, without embarrassment or fear, we will find that their faces undergo an unexpected metamorphosis. Before our eyes, by subtle degrees, they change into another face—the face of the Buddha, with its serene smile of triumph over the army of Māra, over the demons of Desire and Death. The divine messengers point to what lies beyond the transient, to a dimension of reality where there is no more ageing, no more sickness, and no more death. This is the goal and final destination of the Buddhist path—*Nibbāna*, the Unaging, the Unailing, the Deathless. It is to direct us there that the divine messengers have appeared in our midst, and the good news of deliverance is their message.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Publications

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- *Asoka—A Definitive Biography*. Ananda W.P. Guruge. ??? pp., hardback, 199?. 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.
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Acharya Buddharakkhita
Maha Bodhi Society
Bangalore, India

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Kristin Hardy
Winnipeg, Canada

Book Review

A Path with Heart: A Guide through the Perils and Promises of the Spiritual Life. Jack Kornfield. London: Rider, 1994 (1st ed. New York: Bantam Books, 1993). 364 pp., softback. £12.99.

As its subtitle makes clear, this is a very ambitious book: the perils and promises of the spiritual life are subtle and manifold, and the variety of advice proffered by different traditions can be quite bewildering. To provide a guide through the maze is a task demanding courage, dedication, and experience. The author, American Vipassanā teacher Jack Kornfield, has all three qualities in abundance. His experience includes several years as a Theravada bhikkhu in Asian monasteries, twenty years teaching meditation world wide, and professional practice as a psychotherapist with a doctorate in clinical psychology. His courage and dedication come through on every page of the book, as he attempts to give a comprehensive account of the subject without minimising its depth and complexity.

A Path with Heart is rather more than a meditation handbook. It sets out to cover the whole compass of spiritual endeavour, not only actual meditation practice (which it discusses quite extensively), but all the other aspects of life with which meditation is enmeshed in a dynamic reciprocal relationship, from such humble everyday tasks as washing dishes to the most elevated states of consciousness. It does so methodically, tracing spiritual progress from its first beginnings to its maturity in a carefully articulated four-part presentation, clearly signalled by the main headings.

Part I—*A Path with Heart: The Fundamentals*—starts with loving kindness as an essential first step (Ch. 1) and details the groundwork for meditation practice, concluding with a chapter on mindfulness of breathing (Ch. 5). Each chapter has a brief appendix with suggestions and instructions for simple meditation exercises to develop the qualities or deal with the problems discussed in it. The title of Part II—*Promises and Perils*—is self-explanatory. Here Kornfield deals with many of the lures and pitfalls that practitioners encounter in meditation and other aspects of the spiritual life. The nine chapters of Part III—*Widening Our Circle*—do indeed range widely, stressing the need to integrate the contemplative and active aspects of our lives. The author urges us to live daily life as meditation, i.e. with “wakefulness and freedom,” not only in our immediate circle of family and friends, but by extending the principles of spirituality to politics, economics, global peace, and service to the poor. This part also contains important discussions on *anatta* and psychotherapy and meditation, to which I will return shortly. Finally,

Part IV—Spiritual Maturity—draws together in three chapters the many threads of the rich tapestry woven by the author.

Despite my admiration for Kornfield’s courage in attempting such a wide-ranging account of spiritual practice, I repeatedly run up against two problematic themes that recur throughout the book. One, highlighted in Ch. 17, is his view that psychotherapy and meditation are ultimately inseparable, and that the latter cannot develop fully and properly without the former. As he puts it, “our deep personal work (i.e. in psychotherapy) and our meditative work must necessarily proceed together” (p.245, my paranthesis). Now it cannot be denied that going in for spiritual practice when one is mentally unstable is a recipe for disaster, and there are cases where psychotherapy can sort people out sufficiently for them to be able to undertake meditation safely. What worries me is the assumption that this is always the case, and that psychotherapy and meditation must proceed hand in hand, so to speak, all along the way.

Kornfield’s thesis seems to rest on a blurring of the essential distinction between the instrumental purpose of psychotherapy—to achieve what he describes as “a creative, loving, and full way to live in the world” (p.245)—and the ultimate purpose of the Buddha’s path, which is to transcend the world altogether in the attainment of enlightenment. Of course, the person who has attained Nibbāna in this life still lives in the world, and does so in the fullest, most loving, and creative way conceivable. But this is a consequence of enlightenment, not its purpose.

My second major disagreement with Kornfield concerns his syncretism, the idea that various approaches, seemingly different, are ultimately equivalent. As he puts it, “there are many ways up the mountain ... there is never just one true way” (p.32); and again, “all of the spiritual vehicles are rafts to cross the stream to freedom” (p.316). This surely needs qualification, for it is not the case that all rafts take you to the other shore: some founder in midstream, while others get stuck in swamps and marshes. But for Kornfield Buddhism (as well as Christianity, which he views only through its more radical mystics) is simply one particular strand of the non-dualistic contemplation tradition, differing only verbally from the other strands.

In order to bridge the manifest differences between the Buddha’s path to enlightenment and the other spiritual paths with which he would equate it, Kornfield reinterprets the Buddha’s doctrine of anattā (non-self or egolessness) in such a way that it comes out meaning “True Self.” In his view (developed at length in Ch. 14) egolessness or emptiness is not simply the absence of self or substance, but a “fertile ground of energy that gives rise to all forms of life” (p.200). This “ground of energy” he sees as our True Self, a reality he endows with divine attributes, so that our lives become “reflections of the divine” (p.51). He further identifies the “True Self” with “Buddha nature,” which is simply the other side of the medal: the transcendent and immanent aspects of the universal godhead.

Now this is all a bit surprising coming from a professed Buddhist who tells us that “the core of the meditations presented here (in the book) comes from the Theravada Buddhist tradition of Southeast Asia” and who states that he has taught and followed this tradition for many years (p.9). My problem with the “True Self” approach and the attendant theistic implications is that, to the best of our knowledge, the Buddha never presented his teaching in this way. Though Kornfield might regard such ideas as part of “skilful means” for communicating the Dhamma in our age, it seems safer to assume that the Buddha knew best what he was about when he eschewed all such notions completely in his teachings.

While taking all precautions to avoid spiritual pride, I believe we have to admit that there are striking differences between the Buddha’s way and other ways. All that the Buddha himself claimed was to teach “suffering and the end of suffering,” the ultimate healing of the human condition. Kornfield, as one who has dedicated his life to the healing of human suffering in the

way accessible to him, is to this extent surely a follower of the Enlightened One. Only it seems to this reviewer that there is sometimes in his enthusiasm and in his search for “skilful means” a certain confusion between ends and means, a syncretistic tendency, and a theistic tone which, at least to some minds, are more likely to be a hindrance than a help.

—Amadeo Solé-Leris

This is an abridged version of a review scheduled for publication in *Buddhist Studies Review* (U.K.).

Guidelines to Sutta Study

Reminder: In the last issue on the Kandaraka Sutta we examined the four jhānas, the states of meditative absorption.

The four jhānas belong to the second division of the threefold Buddhist path, the division of concentration (*samādhikkhandha*). In the next portion of the Kandaraka Sutta the Buddha takes up for explanation the third division of the path, the division of wisdom (*paññākkhandha*). He introduces the training in wisdom with a set of three higher knowledges called the *tisso vijjā* or *tevijjā*. These are:

- (i) the knowledge of the recollection of past abodes (*pubbenivāsānussati-ñāṇa*);
- (ii) the knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of beings (*cutupapāta-ñāṇa*); and
- (iii) the knowledge of the destruction of the taints (*āsava-kkhaya-ñāṇa*).

The first two knowledges in this triad are not indispensable for the attainment of arahatship, and the Pali Canon in fact suggests that only a minority of the arahats actually possessed them. Moreover, unlike the third knowledge, these two knowledges are not peculiar to the Buddha’s Teaching but have been realised to some degree by meditators and sages belonging to other spiritual traditions. Their proximate cause is concentration, not understanding or insight, and thus they do not require a knowledge of the principles peculiar to the Buddha’s Dhamma. For this reason the Visuddhimagga, in its arrangement of the path, assigns them not to the division of wisdom but to the division of concentration, treating them as auxiliary by-products of the jhānas.

In the Suttas, however, all three knowledges (along with certain other types of super-sensory knowledge) are classified in the division of wisdom (see, for example, DN 3, DN 4, DN 10, MN 53). In the Majjhima Nikāya especially the Buddha repeatedly shows the gradual training to culminate in these three knowledges. He describes his own enlightenment experience as the realisation of the triple knowledge, each knowledge occurring to him during one of the three watches of the night (see MN 4, MN 19, MN 36). He also includes the three knowledges in his standard model of the graduated course of training for disciples (see MN 27, MN 39, MN 51, MN 53). It is clear too from the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā, the verses of the ancient elders of the Order, that the first generations of enlightened monks and nuns held the triple knowledge in high esteem. We often find, in their poems, the joyful exclamation:

The three knowledges have been attained,
The Buddha’s Teaching has been done.

The Suttas themselves usually describe each knowledge by the same stereotyped formula but do not explore further their precise interrelationship. It seems reasonable to assume that the Buddha did not intend the first two knowledges to serve merely as extrasensory sources of

factual information. That these knowledges could serve such an end is clear from the fact that they were obtained by yogis with mastery over concentration, but this would not have fit in with the Buddha's insistence that his Dhamma is taught for the purpose of putting an end to suffering. Rather, the Buddha must have integrated these knowledges into his own system because the discoveries they make possible could be harnessed to the overarching aim of the entire training, i.e. direct penetration of the Four Noble Truths.

The knowledge of the recollection of past abodes reveals one's own transmigration through the round of rebirths; the knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of beings shows how all other living beings revolve from life to life in the same cycle of becoming. When this inexorable process of repeated existence, with its bewildering succession of scenarios and personal dramas, flashes by before the meditator's inner eye, the immense misery and hollowness of all conditioned existence will stand forth in bold relief. This will induce a profound perception of danger, heightening the sense of revulsion and the desire for deliverance from the round. Liberation can be achieved without this perception, simply on the basis of direct insight into the three characteristics of existence—the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness of the five aggregates. But when this "vertical insight" is accompanied by a panoramic vision of saṃsāra extending over aeons of world-expansion and contraction, the direct perception of the boundless expanse of universal suffering will deepen and extend the comprehension of the full significance of the Four Noble Truths. Thereby it will hasten the revulsion and dispassion in which the training in wisdom culminates.

(to be continued)

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