



Aims of Buddhist Education

Ideally, education is the principal tool of human growth, essential for transforming the unlettered child into a mature and responsible adult. Yet everywhere today, both in the developed world and the developing world, formal education is in serious trouble. Classroom instruction has become so routinized and flat that children often consider school an exercise in patience rather than an adventure in learning. Even the brightest and most conscientious students easily become restless, and for many the only attractive escape routes lie along the dangerous roads of drugs, sexual experimentation, and outbursts of senseless violence. Teachers too find themselves in a dilemma, dissatisfied with the system which they serve but unable to see a meaningful alternative.

One major reason for this sad state of affairs is a loss of vision regarding the proper aims of education. The word "education" literally means "to bring forth," which indicates that the true task of this undertaking is to draw forth from the mind its innate potential for understanding. The urge to learn, to know and comprehend, is a basic human trait, as intrinsic to our minds as hunger and thirst are to our bodies. In today's turbulent world, however, this hunger to learn is often stifled, deformed by the same moral twists that afflict the wider society. Indeed, just as our appetite for wholesome food is exploited by the fast-food industry with tasty snacks that are nutritionally valueless, so in our schools the minds of the young are deprived of the nutriment they need for healthy growth. In the name of education the students are passed through courses of standardised instruction intended to make them efficient servants of the social system. While such education may be necessary for social cohesion and economic stability, it does little to fulfil the higher end of learning, the illumination of the mind with the light of truth and goodness.

A major cause of our educational problems lies in the "commercialisation" of education. The industrial growth model of society, which today extends its tentacles even into the largely agrarian societies of South and Southeast Asia, demands that the educational system prepare students to become productive citizens in an economic order governed by the drive to maximize profits. Such a conception of the aim of education is quite different from that consistent with Buddhist principles. Practical efficiency certainly has its place in Buddhist education, for Buddhism propounds a middle path which recognizes that our loftiest spiritual aspirations depend on a healthy body and a materially secure society. But for Buddhism the practical side of education must be integrated; with other requirements designed to bring the potentialities of human nature to maturity in the way envisioned by the Buddha. Above all, an educational policy guided by Buddhist principles must aim to instil values as much as to impart information. It must be directed, not merely towards developing social and commercial skills, but towards nurturing in the students the seeds of spiritual nobility.

Since today's secular society dictates that institutional education is to focus on preparing students for their careers, in a Buddhist country like Sri Lanka the prime responsibility for imparting the principles of the Dhamma to the students naturally falls upon the Dhamma schools. Buddhist education in the Dhamma schools should be concerned above all with the transformation of character. Since a person's character is moulded by values, and values are conveyed by inspiring ideals, the first task to be faced by Buddhist educators is to determine the

ideals of their educational system. If we turn to the Buddha's discourses in search of the ideals proper to a Buddhist life, we find five qualities that the Buddha often held up as the hallmarks of the model disciple, whether monk or layperson. These five qualities are faith, virtue, generosity, learning, and wisdom. Of the five, two—faith and generosity—relate primarily to the heart: they are concerned with taming the emotional side of human nature. Two relate to the intellect: learning and wisdom. The fifth, virtue or morality, partakes of both sides of the personality: the first three precepts—abstinence from killing, stealing, and sexual abuse—govern the emotions; the precepts of abstinence from falsehood and intoxicants help to develop the clarity and honesty necessary for realisation of truth. Thus Buddhist education aims at a parallel transformation of human character and intelligence, holding both in balance and ensuring both are brought to fulfilment.

The entire system of Buddhist education must be rooted in faith (*saddhā*)—faith in the Triple Gem, and above all in the Buddha as the Fully Enlightened One, the peerless teacher and supreme guide to right living and right understanding. Based on this faith, the students must be inspired to become accomplished in virtue (*sīla*) by following the moral guidelines spelled out by the Five Precepts. They must come to know the precepts well, to understand the reasons for observing them, and to know how to apply them in the difficult circumstances of human life today. Most importantly, they should come to appreciate the positive virtues these precepts represent: kindness, honesty, purity, truthfulness, and mental sobriety. They must also acquire the spirit of generosity and self-sacrifice (*cāga*), so essential for overcoming selfishness, greed, and the narrow focus on self-advancement that dominates in present-day society. To strive to fulfil the ideal of generosity is to develop compassion and renunciation, qualities which sustained the Buddha throughout his entire career. It is to learn that cooperation is greater than competition, that self-sacrifice is more fulfilling than self-aggrandisement, and that our true welfare is to be achieved through harmony and good will rather than by exploiting and dominating others.

The fourth and fifth virtues work closely together. By learning (*suta*) is meant a wide knowledge of the Buddhist texts, which is to be acquired by extensive reading and persistent study. But mere learning is not sufficient. Knowledge only fulfils its proper purpose when it serves as a springboard for wisdom (*paññā*), direct personal insight into the truth of the Dhamma. Of course, the higher wisdom that consummates the Noble Eightfold Path does not lie within the domain of the Dhamma school. This wisdom must be generated by methodical mental training in calm and insight, the two wings of Buddhist meditation. But Buddhist education can go far in laying the foundation for this wisdom by clarifying the principles that are to be penetrated by insight. In this task learning and wisdom are closely interwoven, the former providing a basis for the latter. Wisdom arises by systematically working the ideas and principles learnt through study into the fabric of the mind, which requires deep reflection, intelligent discussion, and keen investigation.

It is wisdom that the Buddha held up as the direct instrument of final liberation, as the key for opening the doors to the Deathless, and also as the infallible guide to success in meeting the mundane challenges of life. Thus wisdom is the crown and pinnacle of the entire system of Buddhist education, and all the preliminary steps in a Buddhist educational system should be geared towards the flowering of this supreme virtue. It is with this step that education reaches completion, that it becomes illumination in the truest and deepest sense, as exclaimed by the Buddha on the night of his Awakening: “There arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, understanding, and light.”

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

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Book Review

The Selfless Mind. Peter Harvey. Curzon Press, Cloth U.S. \$40.00; paper U.S. \$14.99.

Peter Harvey's *The Selfless Mind* is a bold, far-reaching study of early Buddhism intended to unravel the inter-relationships between three of its most difficult elements: the teaching of non-self, the nature and function of consciousness, and the nature of Nibbāna. Although his work is based mainly on the Pali Nikāyas, he endeavours to unearth from his source material implications that have slipped through the filters of doctrinal orthodoxy. The book sparkles with illuminating insights and astute discussions. Finally, however, in the opinion of this reviewer, the author carries his argument through to conclusions that seem unjustifiable on the basis of the early Suttas themselves.

The book is divided into two parts, corresponding to the two words in the title: Part I focuses on the teaching of non-self (*anattā*), Part II on consciousness and Nibbāna. At the outset Harvey tacitly accepted some kind of metaphysical self that the Buddhist tradition itself had wilfully ignored. With persuasive arguments he shows that none of the attempts to justify such a self can

claim support from the Canon. Nevertheless, Harvey argues, contrary to what is commonly supposed the Buddha does not directly deny the existence of a self, for such a bald denial of self would have been a mere philosophical stance that does not conduce to insight and detachment. Harvey views the *anattā* teaching as at its core a liberative strategy—though not as pure strategy (a view held in certain U.S. circles), but as a recognition of the absence of selfhood in all phenomena, the *anattā* doctrine serves as a lens through which to view the things with which we identify in order to break the bond of identification with them.

After investigating (in Chaps. 3–5) the moral and psychological implications of the Buddhist views of selfhood and the world, in Chap. 6 Harvey focuses on the process of rebirth, sometimes taken to be the “thorn in the side” of the non-self teaching. He locates the crucial factor underlying the rebirth process in *viññāṇa*, which he renders “discernment” (a rendering I find far less satisfactory than the familiar “consciousness”). While the Buddha has clearly rejected the claim that the same consciousness migrates through *saṃsāra*, Harvey shows that the early Suttas view the stream of consciousness as continuing from life to life, thereby preserving personal identity. Between lives consciousness subsists in the form of a *gandhabba*, a spiritual entity which wanders about seeking suitable conditions for rebirth. Though an intermediate state is rejected by the Theravada commentators, Harvey appeals to several suttas which strongly support such an idea.

Part II, entitled “*Saṃsāric and Nibbānic Discernment*,” is devoted to a study of consciousness and its relationship to *Nibbāna*. In the first three chapters the author discusses the place of “discernment” in the empirical personality (Ch. 7), in the doctrine of conditioned arising (Ch. 8), and in the perceptual process (Ch. 9). These are dense chapters which draw together a wide assortment of texts and offer a wealth of original observations on subtle points of doctrine. While I would not agree with all of Harvey's conclusions here, his reflections are often incisive and illuminating.

Chap. 10 opens with a study of the *bhavaṅga*, the life-continuum, which in the *Abhidhamma* serves as an underlying, dormant type of consciousness occurring in the intervals between active frames of mind. He then turns to the famous passage on the “brightly shining mind” (*pabhassara-citta*), mentioned by the Buddha only at AN I,10, which the commentary interestingly identifies as the *bhavaṅga*. This identification seems strange, for the *bhavaṅga* operates below the threshold of full awareness while the word *pabhassara*, “brightly shining,” conveys the sense of full awareness. Harvey, however, goes along with the commentator, though he regards the “bright mind” only as an ever-present potential for enlightenment, not as a spark of enlightenment already actualised within the stream of normal consciousness, as was held in certain Mahayana schools.

The next three chapters (11–13), which take us to the climax of the book, aim to elicit from the texts a clear conceptual picture of *Nibbāna* and to examine its relationship to the empirical personality. It is at this point that Harvey swerves away from all established approaches to the interpretation of early Buddhism and fashions his own radical point of view. It is also at this point that I find his commitment to a predetermined conclusion gets the better of the care and restraint that characterise the preceding chapters.

His most startling thesis in this part of the book is announced in Chap.12: that *Nibbāna* is “a transformed state of discernment,” a *viññāṇa* which is “stopped, objectless, unsupported.” The sole text that seems to lend credence to this proposition is an enigmatic verse which appears in full only at DN I,223 (and in part at MN I,329–30), which speaks of “discernment non-manifestative, infinite, accessible from all-round.” Nevertheless, the many standard prose passages on *viññāṇa* and *Nibbāna* always describe *viññāṇa* as impermanent and conditioned and never give even a hint that *Nibbāna* might be a transfigured type of *viññāṇa*. Thus, if we grant

primacy to the standard prose passages, it seems safest to conclude that the idea that Nibbāna is an unconditioned discernment would be a misinterpretation of this verse, the exact meaning of which remains problematic.

In sum, *The Selfless Mind* is in many respects a thought-provoking study that glistens with original insights, and this alone makes it well worth a close and careful reading. It is refreshing too to see a present-day scholar try to restore to early Buddhism the profound spiritual dimension so evident in the Suttas, which is sadly lost when the world-transcending Dhamma is made out to be an ancient Indian form of empiricism (or pragmatism or existentialism) packaged with a doctrine of rebirth and bundled up in saffron robes. Harvey's quest for a satisfactory interpretation, however, is undermined by his final thesis on Nibbāna as an objectless, unconditioned type of *viññāṇa*. This introduces into the Dhamma a perspective that is difficult to square with the Buddha's repeated assertion—never qualified or muted—that *viññāṇa* is dependently arisen and conditioned, and that Nibbāna is as much the cessation of *viññāṇa* as it is of the other four aggregates.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Abridged from a book review scheduled for publication in Buddhist Studies Review (U.K.).

Guidelines to Sutta Study

Sutta: Vatthūpama Sutta
The Simile of the Cloth
MN 7 Wheel No. 61/62

The Vatthūpama Sutta, the Simile of the Cloth, is the seventh discourse in the Majjhima Nikāya. As its title indicates, this sutta centres around a simile. Although the Buddha's Teaching can be logically rigorous and conceptually precise, this does not mean that it is dull and dry. To the contrary, the Buddha constantly adorned his discourses with striking similes that testify to the multifaceted richness of the enlightened mind. These similes draw upon the full range of human experience, and their sheer breadth and variety is astounding: the change of seasons; the sun, moon, and stars; lakes, rivers, and oceans; trees and flowers; lions and elephants, hawks and crows; the arts and crafts; love, motherhood, and warfare; kings and cooks, accountants and merchants, goldsmiths and outcasts—all these, and many more, serve as raw materials for the inspired genius of the Enlightened One. Some similes are short and sharp, others are long and complex, but they all serve a common purpose: to drive home the message of a clear, practicable way to the extinction of suffering.

Usually the Buddha develops a simile in three steps. First he makes his point (e.g., that a monk should observe the length of his breath); then he formulates the simile (a lathe worker notices the length of his turns); then he connects the simile to the theme it is intended to illustrate (just so, a monk observes the length of his breath). Sometimes, however, for special emphasis, the Buddha introduces the simile first and then develops his exposition by filling in the simile. It is this procedure that he follows in the Vatthūpama Sutta.

The sutta begins straight off with the simile:

“Bhikkhus, suppose a cloth were defiled and stained, and a dyer dipped it in some dye or other, whether blue or yellow or red or pink; it would look poorly dyed and impure in colour. Why is that? Because of the impurity of the cloth. So too, when the mind is defiled, an unhappy destination may be expected. Bhikkhus, suppose a cloth were pure and clean, and a dyer dipped it in some dye or other, whether blue or yellow or red or pink; it would

look well-dyed and pure in colour. Why is that? Because of the purity of the cloth. So too, when the mind is undefiled, a happy destination may be expected.”

If we examine this simile carefully we will see that it is woven out of five main strands, which provide points of contact with the meaning.

(i) The first is the cloth, which represents the mind (*citta*). Just as a cloth may be either dirty or clean, so the mind may be either defiled or pure. The Pali word *saṃkiliṭṭha* is in fact used idiomatically in relation both to material objects such as cloth or metal (see MN 5) and to the mind. By its own nature a cloth is neither clean nor dirty but can take on either quality depending on extrinsic conditions; so too the mind is neither inherently defiled nor pure. Its function is simply to know, to experience. Through negligence and ignorance, however, it becomes soiled, while through understanding and effort it can be purified.

(ii) The second strand of the simile is the defiling agent: the dust, grease, and sweat which stain the cloth, the defilements that stain the mind. In this sutta the Buddha will enumerate sixteen such defilements (*cittass’upakkilesa*), which we will discuss more fully in the next instalment of this series.

(iii) The third strand is the dye. What this stands for is not immediately evident in the simile itself but will emerge as the sutta develops. We will see that the dye represents the wholesome qualities of the Dhamma with which the mind is to be imbued: the three lower paths and fruits, unwavering confidence in the Triple Gem, the four divine dwellings, and finally the supreme wisdom of arahantship.

(iv) The fourth strand is the way the cloth takes up the dye. This symbolises the receptivity of the mind to the wholesome qualities. Just as a dirty cloth does not take up the dye well, so the defiled mind is a poor receptacle of wholesome qualities; but just as a clean cloth absorbs the dye, so the pure mind easily absorbs such qualities and becomes even purer and brighter under their influence.

(v) The fifth strand, the natural consequence of the fourth, is the appearance of the cloth after being dyed. The dirty cloth still appears dirty and soiled; so too, the defiled mind remains unaffected by its exposure to wholesome qualities. Continuing in its familiar ruts, prone to mental, verbal, and bodily misconduct, it is heading for a bad destination (*duggati*): towards a miserable rebirth after death. The clean cloth, having absorbed the dye well, becomes clear and bright; so too, the purified mind, having absorbed the wholesome qualities, becomes bright and radiant and is heading for a good destination (*sugati*). Those who are imbued with the sublime Dhamma, but who are not yet fully liberated, pass on to a happy rebirth in the human realm or in the heavens. Those who eradicate the defilements completely are heading for the best destination of all: Nibbāna, release from all destinations within the round of rebirth.

Thus this simile, so short and concise, introduces us to the fundamental principles that underlie the entire Dhamma: mind is the hub of human experience and the main determinant of human destiny. Our future is governed by the moral temper of our own mind. A mind stained by the defilements will be intractable, prone to depravity, and will undergo a rebirth in the realm of misery. A mind which has been scraped clean of the coarser defilements will be easily tamed and transformed. Advancing steadily along the stages of spiritual development, it will pass on to a pleasant rebirth or, if all conditions are ripe, will arrive at the deathless element, Nibbāna.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

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