



## Self-Transformation

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

It is perhaps symptomatic of the “fallen” nature of the ordinary human condition that few of us pass the full extent of our lives comfortably reconciled to our natural selves. Even in the midst of prosperity and success, grinding notes of discontent trouble our days and disturbing dreams come to haunt our sleep. As long as our eyes remain coated with dust we incline to locate the cause of our discontent outside ourselves—in spouse, neighbour or job, in implacable fate or fluky chance. But when the dust drops off and our eyes open, we soon find that the real cause lies within.

When we discover how deeply the cause of our unhappiness is lodged in the mind, the realization dawns that cosmetic changes will not be anywhere near enough, that a fundamental internal transformation is required. This desire for a transformed personality, for the emergence of a new man from the ashes of the old, is one of the perennial lures of the human heart. From ancient times it has been a potent wellspring of the spiritual quest, and even in the secular, life-affirming culture of our own cosmopolitan age this longing has not totally disappeared.

While such concepts as redemption, salvation and deliverance may no longer characterize the transformation that is sought, the urge for a radical reshaping of the personality persists as strong as ever, appearing in guises that are compatible with the secular worldview. Where previously this urge sought fulfilment in the temple, ashram and monastery, it now resorts to new venues: the office of the psychoanalyst, the weekend workshop, the panoply of newly spawned therapies and cults. However, despite the change of scene and conceptual framework, the basic pattern remains the same. Disgruntled with the ruts of our ingrained habits, we long to exchange all that is dense and constrictive in our personalities for a new, lighter, freer mode of being.

Self-transformation is also a fundamental goal of the Buddha’s teaching, an essential part of his program for liberation from suffering. The Dhamma was never intended for those who are already perfect saints. It is addressed to fallible human beings beset with all the shortcomings typical of unpolished human nature: conduct that is fickle and impulsive, minds that are tainted by greed, anger and selfishness, views that are distorted and habits that lead to harm for oneself and others. The purpose of the teaching is to transform such people—ourselves—into “accomplished ones:” into those whose every action is pure, whose minds are calm and composed, whose wisdom has fathomed the deepest truths and whose conduct is always marked by a compassionate concern for others and for the welfare of the world.

Between these two poles of the teaching—the flawed and knotted personality that we bring with us as raw material into the training; and the fully liberated personality that emerges in the end—there lies a gradual process of self-transformation governed by highly specific guidelines. This transformation is effected by the twin aspects of the path: abandoning (*pahāna*), the removal from the mind of all that is harmful and unwholesome; and development (*bhavanā*), the cultivation of qualities that are wholesome, pure and purifying.

What distinguishes the Buddha's program for self-transformation from the multitude of other systems proposing a similar end is the contribution made by another principle with which it is invariably conjoined. This is the principle of self-transcendence, the endeavour to relinquish all attempts to establish a sense of solid personal identity. In the Buddhist training the aim of transforming the personality must be complemented by a parallel effort to overcome all identification with the elements that constitute our phenomenal being. The teaching of anatta or not-self is not so much a philosophical thesis calling for intellectual assent as a prescription for self-transcendence. It maintains that our on-going attempt to establish a sense of identity by taking our personalities to be "I" and "mine" is in actuality a project born out of clinging, a project that at the same time lies at the root of our suffering. If, therefore, we seek to be free from suffering, we cannot stop with the transformation of the personality into some sublime and elevated mode as the final goal. What is needed, rather, is a transformation that brings about the removal of clinging, and with it, the removal of all tendencies to self-affirmation.

It is important to stress this transcendent aspect of the Dhamma because in our own time when "immanent" secular values are ascendant, the temptation is great to let this aspect drop out of sight. If we assume that the worth of a practice consists solely in its ability to yield concrete this-worldly results, we may incline to view the Dhamma simply as a means of refining and healing the divided personality, leading in the end to a renewed affirmation of our mundane selves and our situation in the world. Such an approach, however, would ignore the Buddha's insistence that all the elements of our personal existence are impermanent, unsatisfactory and not self, and his counsel that we should learn to distance ourselves from such things and ultimately to discard them. In the proper practice of the Dhamma both principles, that of self-transformation and that of self-transcendence, are equally crucial. The principle of self-transformation alone is blind, leading at best to an ennobled personality but not to a liberated one. The principle of self-transcendence alone is barren, leading to a cold ascetic withdrawal devoid of the potential for enlightenment. It is only when these two complementary principles work in harmony, blended and balanced in the course of training, that they can bridge the gap between the actual and ideal and bring to a fruitful conclusion the quest for the end of suffering.

Of the two principles, that of self-transcendence claims primacy both at the beginning of the path and at the end. For it is this principle that gives direction to the process of self-transformation, revealing the goal towards which a transformation of the personality should lead and the nature of the changes required to bring the goal within our reach. However, the Buddhist path is not a perpendicular ascent to be scaled with picks, ropes and studded boots, but a step-by-step training which unfolds in a natural progression. Thus the abrupt challenge of self-transcendence—the relinquishing of all points of attachment—is met and mastered by the gradual process of self-transformation. By moral discipline, mental purification and the development of insight, we advance by stages from our original condition of bondage to the domain of untrammelled freedom.

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## Exploring the Wheels

*Kamma and Its Fruit: Selected Essays*. Edited by Nyanaponika Thera (Wheel No. 221/224). 120 pp. SL Rs. 40.00, U.S. \$3.25.

“What misfortune! Well, that’s my kamma.” No doubt you have heard such statements before; maybe you have had such thoughts yourself. But this stoic resignation is not the teaching of the Buddha. It is based instead on fatalism, confuses kamma with its result, ignores the element of freedom, and most important, it overlooks the need to change oneself. Yet right now, as you are reading this review, you are reaping the results of good kamma: you are human; you are educated; you have an interest in the Dhamma. And right now you are creating good kamma which will bring good results in the future.

While a complete understanding of kamma may be beyond our capacity, a knowledge of the basic principles of kamma and its results is essential for anyone interested in the Dhamma, let alone for those who wish to practise it. *Kamma and Its Fruit* is an excellent source for obtaining that knowledge. This jumbo Wheel presents eight essays by five authors who explore the doctrine of kamma from various angles. These essays offer a multitude of subjects on which to meditate and to use to make necessary changes in our ways of thinking and acting.

Francis Story, the outstanding English Buddhist writer, contributes four pieces to this collection. His little essay “Action” lucidly defines kamma and develops its ramifications. The following excerpt is a pithy starting point for reflection:

By our thoughts, words and deeds we create our world from moment to moment in the endless process of change. We also create our “selves.” That is to say, we mould our changing personality as we go along, by the accumulation of such thoughts, words and deeds. It is the accretion of these, and the preponderance of one kind over another, that determines what we shall become, in this life and/or subsequent ones.

In the essay “Kamma and Causality,” Story discusses the question “Does everything happen in our lives because of kamma?” and in the short but incisive “Kamma and Freedom” he deals with the vexing question of whether kamma excludes the possibility of freely chosen courses of action, a question on which the whole issue of moral responsibility rests. Story’s last contribution, “Collective Kamma,” is intended to reconcile apparent cases of “shared kamma” with the Buddha’s statement that kamma is an individual matter which each person bears as his or her own inheritance.

In “Action and Reaction in Buddhist Teachings,” Leonard Bullen discusses the place of kamma in relation to the general principle of lawfulness. In clear and simple language he relates the kamma doctrine to the practical challenge of dealing with one’s own experience in the world. Thus he offers the following piece of practical advice:

Even if you have no choice of external action, at least it’s possible to regulate your mental and moral responses to a situation, even to a slight extent... In this way, while going through a difficult period of painful reaction-force results, you’re at least building up within your mental structure new progressant reaction-forces, thus using the situation to its best advantage.

Nina van Gorkom, the well-known writer on Abhidhamma, contributes a dialogue which deals with “Questions and Answers about Kamma Result,” viewed from the standpoint of the Abhidhamma. She points out that “ignorance is the cause of greed, of aversion or anger, of delusion. Ignorance causes all unhappiness in the world. Ignorance can only be cured by wisdom. In insight meditation we develop the wisdom which can eradicate the delusion of self.”

In “Reflections on Kamma and Its Fruit,” Nyanaponika Thera sets out to investigate the implications of the principle that kamma results can be modified. To quote just one of the many insightful passages from this essay: “At this precarious and precious moment of choice we can rise above all those menacing complexities and pressures of our unfathomable kammic past. Indeed, one short moment can thus transcend aeons of kammic bondage. It is through right mindfulness that we can grasp that fleeting moment, and it is mindfulness again that enables us to use it for making wise choices.”

The collection concludes with Bhikkhu Nyanajivako’s essay “Karma—The Ripening Fruit,” a study of trends in modern philosophical thought that approach the Buddhist process philosophy underlying the doctrine of kamma.

—Ayya Nyanasiri

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## Book Review

*Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha.* Edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo. Snow Lion, Ithaca, New York, 1989. 346 pp. U.S. \$14.95, £9.95.

From ancient times Buddhist nuns have usually occupied the position of a silent minority within the Buddhist community, quietly pursuing their religious goals without the prominence accorded to their ordained brothers. Sometimes even their precise status has been a matter of doubt. One consequence of the Western encounter with Buddhism has been an enhanced awareness among Buddhist women of the need to improve their opportunities for making contributions to the continued development of the religion. Yet, while much attention in the past decade has been focused on the place of women in Buddhism, very little has been given to the special problems faced by Buddhist nuns. In an attempt to remedy this lack, in February 1987 an international conference of Buddhist nuns was held in India at Bodh Gaya, bringing together nuns and laywomen from the major Buddhist traditions to discuss issues of particular concern to nuns.

The book under review—named after the international organization that emerged from the conference—consists primarily of the papers and talks that were presented during the week-long convocation. Compiled and edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, an American nun who was one of the three conference organizers, the book is divided into ten chapters. The first deals with the general significance of the conference, the remainder with such topics as the meaning of ordination, the potentials of women in Buddhism, the lifestyles of nuns in different Buddhist countries, the role of Vinaya, etc.

In each chapter the presentations are preceded by a substantial introduction by the editor in which she explores various facets of the issue under discussion. These introductions are especially to be commended for the comprehensive and balanced perspectives they bring to bear on the topic being discussed. Often, in fact, their value extends beyond their specific application to Buddhist nuns, so that they can be regarded as carefully considered overviews of issues pertaining to the place of Buddhist monasticism in the modern world. In contrast to the bitter tone that sometimes rings through the feminist movement even within Buddhism, the papers in this collection generally display deep reverence for the inherited Buddhist tradition, and most contributors are keen on maintaining harmony with the Bhikkhu Sangha rather than opting for an independent route.

Although there is much material of interest in this book, I must confine my comments to two topics. The first of these is education. In most Buddhist countries religious education for nuns is

pathetically deficient, and as a result the nuns have not been enabled to take their rightful places in society as teachers, role models and perpetuators of the Dhamma. At a time when women in secular life can avail themselves of full educational opportunities and play significant roles in the social order, it is incumbent on the Buddhist community to ensure that parallel opportunities are open to women who choose the religious life. In the few countries where excellent educational facilities for nuns exist, they make valuable contributions to the dissemination of Buddhism and the upliftment of the lay community. It is revealing, and distressing, to compare the book's account of nuns' activities in Taiwan with the corresponding accounts of the life of nuns in Sri Lanka and Thailand.

The second issue calling for comment is the partly controversial case for the revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in those lands where it has disappeared. Lekshe Tsomo approaches this delicate issue with caution and good sense, holding that "To protest for bhikshuni ordination before the established Bhikshu Sanghas are convinced of its validity and value is futile and will damage our cause." However, while the contributors may present a cogent case for the value of a revived order of bhikkhunis, the sticking point from the Theravada viewpoint (apparently shared by more conservative elements within the Tibetan tradition as well) remains the validity of any proposed means of resuscitating the bhikkhuni ordination. A review of the entire issue by knowledgeable Vinaya specialists within the Bhikkhu Sangha—preferably by an international committee convened for that purpose—seems to be one of the most important tasks facing the Sangha today. It seems equally incumbent upon Buddhist women following the Theravada tradition to respect the judgments arrived at by those elders of the Order whose deep understanding of the Vinaya qualifies them to make such decisions.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

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## Notes and News

On 2 April 1990 Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera, the BPS's founding president, and now its Patron, received a unique honour from the University of Peradeniya. In recognition of the Mahathera's outstanding contribution to Buddhist scholarship and his long-standing service to the Dhamma through his many years of work for the BPS, the governing body of the university decided to award him the degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*. Since, due to his advanced age, Ven. Nyanaponika would not have been able to attend the university to receive the degree, the university came to him: the Awards Committee came to the Forest Hermitage and held the convocation ceremony in the clearing right in front of the Mahathera's dwelling, no doubt the first degree in the University's history ever conferred in a monk's hermitage. This is the second honorary doctorate degree conferred on Ven. Nyanaponika, the first having been awarded by the Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka in 1988. This past July the Mahathera celebrated his 89th birthday, and despite declining vision, remains in good health.

We thank those of you who replied to our query about interest in Bhikkhu Nanamoli's *Pali-English Glossary of Buddhist Technical Terms*. We are encouraged by the positive response, and assure those who coached us on quantities that we have quite discarded the idea that twenty-five copies, or even a few hundred, would be adequate. When the glossary becomes available (probably in early 1991) notice will appear in the newsletter and we will separately inform those who replied to our inquiry.

Several of our popular publications, out of print for some time, have now become available again, this time in attractive new well-printed editions. *Kamma and Its Fruit* (Wh 221/224) is explored elsewhere in this issue. Also back in print are Paul Fleischman's *The Therapeutic Action*

of *Vipassana & Why I Sit* (Wh 329/330), our best-selling Wheel for 1989, and Nyanaponika Thera's stirring essay on the Uruga Sutta, *The Worn-Out Skin* (Wh 241/242). We also hope that by the time this newsletter reaches you, the *Anguttara Nikaya Anthology, Part 3* (Wh 238/240) will again be available, thereby enabling us to complete the three Wheel-bound edition of the Anguttara Anthology.

Regrettably, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)* is still in the press, though we are optimistic that it will be out before the year is over. Among other problems that confronted us in the reprint of this monumental work was the loss of over 200 pages of carefully proofed text from our printer's computer disks, both the original and the backup! This required a complete retyping and reproofing of the lost pages, about a quarter of the book. *The Manual of Abhidhamma* is being recomposed from scratch in an entirely new edition. This edition will feature an extensive and detailed guide to the Abhidhammattha Sangaha prepared by Burmese Abhidhamma specialist Ven. U Rewata Dhamma and Bhikkhu Bodhi, based on the classical commentaries to the Sangaha. We hope that this vastly improved edition of the *Manual* will become available by the end of this year or early next year.

Recently several of our publications have appeared in translation into a variety of tongues. Among these is a series of booklets on Buddhism in Yugoslavian, entitled Biblioteka Ananda, modelled after the Wheel Series and including translations of selected Wheels. The translator and publisher would like to establish contact with any of our readers involved in computerized typesetting and desktop publishing. His name and address: Branislav Kovacevic, Bulevar 23, Oktobra 9/1, 21000 Novi Sad, Yugoslavia.

We are happy to announce that several book agents abroad will be carrying large selections of BPS publications, making it easier for our readers in those countries to obtain the books they need quickly. In the U.S.A., the newly established Bhavana Book Service will be readily accessible to East Coast readers: P.O. Box 13504, Silver Spring, MD 20911 (Tel. 301-587-8695). On the West Coast the Buddhist Bookstore has become a regular agent for BPS, at: 1710 Octavia Street, San Francisco, CA 94109 (Tel. 415-776-7877). On the other side of the globe, in Malaysia, a wide range of our titles are available from: Mandate Trading & Publishing, P.O. Box 388, Jln Sultan, 46740 Petaling Jaya, Malaysia (Tel. 03-7565180).

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## Guidelines to Sutta Study

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

The Anattalakkhana Sutta was taught by the Buddha for the purpose of exposing the egoless nature of the five aggregates, to which the uninstructed worldling is prone to cling as "mine," "I," and "my self." In his First Sermon the Buddha had alluded to the five aggregates in his analysis of the noble truth of suffering, when he declared: "In brief, the five aggregates of clinging are suffering." In the present sutta, his second formal discourse, the Buddha will examine the five aggregates more closely, focusing upon their three "general characteristics" (*sāmaññalakkhana*) of impermanence, suffering, and not self. Since the five aggregates form one of the major classificational schemes of the Buddha's teaching, figuring prominently in many discourses, it is important for a student of the suttas to know the general significance of this scheme and the precise denotation of each individual aggregate among the five. It is quite likely, in fact, that such an analysis was included by the Buddha in the unrecorded instructions he gave the five disciples in the interval between the two recorded discourses.

The five aggregates are the principal set of categories the Buddha employs to classify the physical and mental phenomena constituting personal existence. What is called an individual, person or living being is in fact nothing but a combination of these five types of phenomena, which are in themselves not substantial entities but evanescent events linked together in a continual process of arising and passing away.

The aggregate of material form (*rūpakkhanda*) comprises the physical side of existence, and includes two types of material phenomena: the materiality of the four primary elements—earth or solidity, water or cohesion, fire or heat, and air or motility; and the materiality derived from the four primary elements. The most important types of derived matter are the five sensitivities—the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body; and four of their corresponding objects—form, sound, smell and taste, the tangible object being identified (according to the *Abhidhamma*) with the primary elements themselves.

The mental side of existence is comprised by the other four aggregates. Of these, the aggregate of feeling (*vedanākkhandha*) includes all types of feelings. Feeling is the affective mode in which an object is experienced, and may be either pleasant, painful or neutral. Feelings are further analyzed as sixfold by way of the sense faculty through which they arise, the sixth being ideational feeling or “feeling born of mind-contact.”

The aggregate of perception (*saññākkhandha*) is also sixfold: perception of forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tangibles and mind-objects. Perception itself is the factor which takes note of or apprehends the qualities of objects; it should not be confused with the percept or sense datum, which belongs to the material form aggregate.

The aggregate of mental formations (*saṅkhārakkhandha*) is, in the suttas, defined as the six classes of volition, that is, volition regarding the six types of objects. Volition is especially important because it is the constructive, formative aspect of experience, and thus the factor ultimately responsible for kamma.

The fifth aggregate, that of consciousness (*viññānakkhandha*), comprises the cognizing or knowing of the object, and is again sixfold: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, etc., with mind consciousness as the sixth.

It is important to understand that while the five aggregates can be separated in thought, they cannot be separated in fact, since they occur within the functionally unified and interconnected whole of the experiential event. In human existence all five aggregates are present on any occasion of experience. There is the body with its sense faculties being impinged on by the sense data, one of which will be selected as object of cognition. There is feeling as the affective tone of the cognitive act, perception as the factor of apprehension and discrimination, mental formations as the volitional response to the object, and consciousness as the cognitive factor governing the entire act of knowing. It is just because the five aggregates occur so closely intertwined that they give rise to the delusion of self, and one of the Buddha’s aims in making known the distinct strands of this conglomeration is to provide a basis for dispelling this delusion.

(to be continued)

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