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To Live With Dignity

Is it possible to live with dignity in today's world, and if so, how can this be done? To raise such a question may sound strange in an age like our own, when our frantic struggle to make ends meet hardly allows us the leisure to ponder such abstract matters. But if we do pause long enough to give this question a little thought, we would realise soon enough that it is not merely the idle musing of someone with too much time on his hands. The question touches on the very meaning of our lives, and goes even beyond our personal quest for meaning to the very springs of contemporary culture. For if it isn't possible to live with dignity then life has no transcendent purpose, and our only aim in the brief time allotted to us should be to snatch whatever thrills we can before the lights go off for good. But if we can find a basis for living with dignity, then we need to consider whether we are actually living as we should and whether our culture as a whole supports a dignified lifestyle.

Though the idea of dignity seems simple enough at first sight, it is actually more complex than one might suppose. My Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (1936!) defines it as "elevation of character, intrinsic worth, excellence, nobleness of manner, aspect, or style." My Roget's Thesaurus (1977) groups it with "prestige, esteem, repute, honour, glory, renown, fame"—evidence that over the last forty years the word's epicentre of meaning has undergone a shift. When we inquire about living with dignity, our focus should be on the word's older nuance. What I have in mind is living with the conviction that one's life has intrinsic worth, that we possess a potential for moral excellence that resonates with the hymn of the galaxies.

The conscious pursuit of dignity does not enjoy much popularity these days, having been crowded out by such stiff competitors as wealth and power, success and fame. Behind this devaluation of dignity lies a series of developments in Western thought that emerged in reaction to the dogmatic certainties of Christian theology. The Darwinian theory of evolution, Freud's thesis of the Id, economic determinism, the computer model of the mind: all these trends, arisen more or less independently, have worked together to undermine the notion that our lives have inherent worth. When so many self-assured voices speak to the contrary, no longer can we view ourselves as the crowning glory of creation. Instead we have become convinced we are nothing but packets of protoplasm governed by selfish genes, clever monkeys with college degrees and business cards plying across highways rather than trees.

Such ideas, in however distorted a form, have seeped down from the halls of academia into popular culture, eroding our sense of human dignity on many fronts. The free-market economy, the task master of the modern social order, leads the way. For this system the primary form of human interaction is the contract and the sale, with people themselves reckoned simply as producers and consumers, sometimes even as commodities. In vast impersonal democracies the individual becomes a mere face in the crowd, to be manipulated by slogans, images, and promises into voting for this candidate or that. Cities have expanded into sprawling urban jungles, dirty and dangerous, whose dazed occupants seek to escape the pangs of wounded pride with the help of drugs and loveless sex. Escalation in crime, political corruption, upheavals in family life, the despoliation of the environment: these all speak to us as much of a deterioration in how we regard ourselves as in how we relate to others.

Amidst this wreckage, can the Dhamma help us recover our lost sense of dignity and thereby give new meaning to our lives? The answer to this question is yes, and in two ways: first, by justifying our claim to innate dignity, and second, by showing us what we must do to actualise our potential dignity.

For Buddhism the innate dignity of human beings does not stem from our relationship to an all-mighty God or our endowment with an immortal soul. It stems, rather, from the exalted place of human life in the broad expanse of sentient existence. Far from reducing human beings to children of chance, the Buddha teaches that the human realm is a special realm standing squarely at the spiritual centre of the cosmos. What makes human life so special is that human beings have a capacity for moral choice that is not shared by other types of beings. Though this capacity is inevitably subject to limiting conditions, we always possess, in the immediate present, a margin of inner freedom that allows us to change ourselves and thereby to change the world.

But life in the human realm is far from cosy. It is, rather, inconceivably difficult and complex, rife with conflicts and moral ambiguities offering enormous potential for both good and evil. This moral complexity can make of human life a painful struggle indeed, but it also renders the human realm the most fertile ground for sowing the seeds of enlightenment. It is at this tauntingly ambiguous crossroads that we can either rise to the heights of spiritual greatness or fall to degrading depths. The two alternatives branch out from each present moment, and which one we take depends on ourselves.

While this unique capacity for moral choice and spiritual awakening confers intrinsic dignity on human life, the Buddha does not emphasise this so much as he does our ability to acquire active dignity. This ability is summed up by a word that lends its flavour to the entire teaching, *ariya* or noble. The Buddha's teaching is the *ariyadhamma*, the noble doctrine, and its purpose is to change human beings from "ignorant worldlings" into noble disciples resplendent with noble wisdom. The change does not come about through mere faith and devotion but by treading the Buddhist path, which transmutes our frailties into invincible strengths and our ignorance into knowledge.

The notion of acquired dignity is closely connected with the idea of autonomy. Autonomy means self-control and self-mastery, freedom from the sway of passion and prejudice, the ability to actively determine oneself. To live with dignity means to be one's own master: to conduct one's affairs on the basis of one's own free choices instead of being pushed around by forces beyond one's control. The autonomous individual draws his or her strength from within, free from the dictates of craving and bias, guided by an inward perception of righteousness and truth.

The person who represents the climax of dignity for Buddhism is the arahat, the liberated one, who has reached the pinnacle of spiritual autonomy: release from the dictates of greed, hatred, and delusion. The very word arahat suggests this sense of dignity: the word means "worthy one," one who deserves the offerings of gods and humans. Although in our present condition we might still be far from the stature of an arahant, this does not mean we are utterly lost, for the means of reaching the highest goal are already within our reach. The means are the Noble Eightfold Path with its twin pillars of right view and right conduct. Right view is the first factor of the path and the guide for all the others. To live with right view is to see that our decisions count, that our volitional actions have consequences that extend beyond themselves and conduce to our long-term happiness or suffering. The active counterpart of right view is right conduct, action guided by the ideal of moral and spiritual excellence. Right conduct in body, speech, and mind brings to fulfilment the other seven factors of the eightfold path, culminating in true knowledge and deliverance.

In today's hectic world humankind is veering recklessly in two harmful directions. One is the path of violent struggle and confrontation, the other that of frivolous self-indulgence. Beneath their apparent contrasts, what unites these two vicious extremes is a shared disregard for human dignity: the former violates the dignity of other people, the latter undermines one's own dignity. The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path is a middle way that avoids all harmful extremes. To follow this path not only brings a quiet dignity into one's own life but also sounds an eloquent rejoinder to the cynicism and hollow pretensions of our age.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Notes and News

Free Dhamma Book

Paṭipadā: The Mode of Practice of the Venerable Acharn Mun. Acharn Maha Boowa Ñāṇasampanno. This inspiring book, translated from the Thai, is a rich account of the meditative practices and teachings of the Thai forest master Venerable Acharn Mun and his disciples. Acharn Mun was the meditation teacher most responsible for the revival of the forest ascetic tradition in Thai Buddhism in the first half of this century. This book of 450 pages with colour photographs will be sent free of charge upon request, an offer made possible through the generosity of the publishers.

BPS Distributors

We are pleased to announce the appointment of a new distributor of our publications in the West. In Europe our distributor is Wisdom Books: 402 Hoe Street, London E17 9AA, England; Tel: +44 (0)181 520 5588; Fax: +44 (0) 181 520 0932; Home page: www.demon.co.uk/wisdom/. This distributor should help to make ordering our books a quick and easy process for both retail and trade orders alike.

In Memoriam

We regretfully announce the death on 2nd November 1997 of Ven. Ayya Khema, the German-born Buddhist nun who was so well known around the world for her direct and lively style of Dhamma teaching. During the 1980s Ayya Khema had made Sri Lanka a frequent stop-off point on her global tours and in 1984 had established Parappuduwa Nuns' Island as a retreat centre for Buddhist women. Since 1989 she resided principally in Buddha-Haus, in her native Germany, and in June 1997 she inaugurated a monastery, Mettā Vihāra, in the Bavarian forest. For years she had bravely bore up with a debilitating cancer, continuing to teach the Dhamma despite a weakened body. Ayya Khema leaves behind several disciples to carry on her work and a rich legacy of books and tapes in both English and German.

Book Review

Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening. Stephen Batchelor. New York, Riverhead Books, 1997, xii + 127 pages, ISBN 1-57322-058-2, US \$21.95.

It has often been said that Western Buddhism is distinguished from its Asian prototype by three innovative shifts: the replacement of the monastery by the lay community as the principal arena of Buddhist practice; the enhanced position of women; and the emergence of a grass-roots “engaged Buddhism” aimed at social and political transformation. These three developments, however, have been encompassed by a fourth which is so much taken for granted that it is barely noticed. This fourth development might be briefly described as the transplantation of Buddhist practice from its native soil of faith and doctrine into a new setting governed by largely secular concerns. Stephen Batchelor’s *Buddhism Without Beliefs* is an eloquent and provocative attempt to articulate the premises of this emerging form of Buddhism and to define its style of practice. Batchelor is a gifted writer with a talent for translating abstract explanation into concrete imagery drawn from everyday life. His book is obviously the product of serious reflection and testifies to a deep urge to make the Dhamma viable in our present sceptical age. Whether his vision is adequate to that aim is a tantalising question which I hope to touch on in the course of this review.

The book is divided into three parts, each with several short sections. In the first part, entitled “Ground,” Batchelor sketches the theoretical framework of his “Buddhism without beliefs.” He begins by drawing a sharp distinction between two entities so closely intertwined as to seem inseparable, but which, he holds, must be severed for the Dhamma to discover its contemporary relevance. One is “dharma practice,” the Buddha’s teaching as a path of training aimed at awakening and freedom from “existential anguish” (his rendering of *dukkha*); the other is “Buddhism,” which he views as a system of beliefs and observances geared towards social stability and religious consolation. According to Batchelor, if the Dhamma is to offer an effective alternative to mainstream thought and values, it has to be divested of its religious apparel and recast in a purely secular mode. What then emerges is an “agnostic” version of the Dhamma aimed at personal and social liberation from the suffering created by egocentric clinging.

The most controversial plank of Batchelor’s agnostic Buddhism is his claim that the ideas of rebirth and kamma have no privileged place in the Dhamma. They are, he contends, merely part of the ancient cultural baggage that the Buddha inherited from his Indian background and need to be stripped away to reveal the Dhamma as “an existential, therapeutic, and liberating agnosticism” (p.15). For those of us who take a more traditional approach to the Dhamma, the twin teachings of rebirth and kamma are the girders that support the Buddha’s whole programme of deliverance. Within the framework of the teaching they do not function as articles of belief commanding intellectual consent, but as guideposts to right understanding that at once make known the condition from which we need liberation (i.e. the round of re-becoming) and the prospect of gradual progress towards the goal (i.e. through cumulative striving over many lives).

The sharp dichotomy that Batchelor posits between “dharma practice” and “religious Buddhism” is also hard to endorse. In its place we should recognise, rather, a spectrum of Buddhist practices ranging from simple devotional and ethical observances to more advanced contemplative and philosophical ones. What makes these all specifically part of the Buddhist Dhamma is that they are enfolded in a distinctive matrix of faith and understanding which disappears when “dharma practice” is pursued on the basis of purely secular premises. Even Batchelor’s contention that Buddhist religiosity is defined by a set of beliefs seems to derive its plausibility from viewing Buddhism in terms of a Christian model. As taught by the Buddha, the Dhamma makes no demands for blind faith, for the invitation to question and investigate is

always open. In the Buddha's version of the path, one begins with certain beliefs that one uses as guidelines to right understanding and right practice. Then, when one's practice matures, one goes beyond belief to personal realisation based on insight. Once one arrives at the far shore one can leave behind the entire raft (see MN 22), but one doesn't discard the compass before one has even stepped on board.

The middle portion of the book is called "Path" and provides a sketch of Batchelor's agnostic conception of dharma practice. His explanations here are clear and lively, allowing him to display the creative side of his literary gifts. Separate sections deal with mindful awareness, insight into emptiness, and the development of compassion, each introduced by a simple example. He also includes a section on the twelve links of dependent origination, which he interprets in an original way.

In the final part, "Fruition," Batchelor tackles the problem of the encounter between Buddhism and the contemporary world. He here argues that the meeting of Buddhism with the contemporary West has given rise to the need to create, from the resources of the dharma, a new "culture of awakening that addresses the specific anguish of the contemporary world" (p.110). Such a culture must respond to the unprecedented situation we find today, when the promise of spiritual liberation has converged with a universal striving for personal and social freedom. In attempting to create such a culture of awakening, he stresses the need for dharma followers to preserve the integrity of the Buddhist tradition while at the same time fulfilling their responsibility to the present and the future. With this much I am in full agreement. Where I differ with him is on the question of what is central to the Dhamma and what peripheral. In my view, Batchelor is ready to cast away too much that is integral to the Buddha's teaching in order to make it fit in with today's secular climate of thought, and I'm afraid that the ultimate outcome of such concessions could be a psychologically oriented humanism tinged with Buddhist philosophy and a meditative mood.

I would also maintain that when the secular presuppositions of modernity clash with the basic principles of right understanding stressed by the Buddha, there is no question as to which of the two must go. Saṃsāra as the beginningless round of rebirths, kamma as its regulative law, Nibbāna as a transcendent goal: surely these ideas won't get a rousing welcome from sceptical minds. A sense of refuge, renunciation, compassion based on the perception of universal suffering, a striving to break all mental bonds and fetters: surely these values are difficult in an age of easy pleasure. But these are all so fundamental to the true Dhamma, so closely woven into its fabric, that to delete them is to risk nullifying its liberative power. If this means that Buddhism retains its character as a religion, so be it. In this I see nothing to fear; the greater danger is in diluting the teaching so much that its potency is lost.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

This is an abridged version of a fuller review published in the online *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*.

Guidelines to Sutta Study

Vatthūpama Sutta (Simile of the Cloth, continued)

According to the commentary the sixteen defilements of mind are abandoned by the four noble paths in the following sequence:

(i) The path of stream-entry abandons six defilements: (5) denigration, (6) disputatiousness, (7) envy, (8) avarice, (9) deceit, and (10) hypocrisy.

(ii) The path of non-returning abandons four: (2) ill will, (3) anger, (4) malice, and (16) negligence.

(iii) The path of arahantship abandons the remaining six: (1) covetousness and greed, (11) obstinacy, (12) competitiveness, (13) conceit, (14) arrogance, and (15) vanity.

The path of once-returning does not abandon any defilements completely, but it weakens the coarser aspects of the defilements to be abandoned by the two higher paths.

The classification proposed by the commentary is not in perfect agreement with the suttas. There is one text in the *Anguttara Nikāya* (II,xvi,21; PTS ed. AN I 96) which states that the six defilements listed under (i), which the commentary says are abandoned by the stream-enterer, are obstacles for a trainee (*sekha*) bhikkhu, i.e. for one who is at least a stream-enterer. This, of course, would not be possible if the stream-enterer had abandoned them. It also seems that the suttas use the term negligence (*pamāda*) in so broad a sense that it can be taken to underlie all the other defilements, which would imply that it is fully eliminated only by the arahat.

Nevertheless, regardless of how this scheme is interpreted, the rest of the sutta makes it clear that at this point the monk is not yet an arahat, for the Buddha will go on to show what he must do to reach the final goal. While the text does not expressly indicate his level of attainment, it drops several hints that he is a non-returner. We will point these out below.

After declaring that the monk has abandoned (in part) these defilements of the mind, the Buddha next draws out the consequences. He first states that in abandoning the defilements the monk becomes endowed with confirmed confidence (*aveccappasāda*) in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, each of which is described by its standard recollection formula. Confirmed confidence in the Three Jewels is the unique faith of a noble disciple, possessed only by those who have reached one of the four stages of awakening. The confidence is said to be confirmed—*avecca*, literally “by having undergone”—because it is based on direct perception of the Dhamma. Having seen for themselves the truth of the Buddha’s teachings, the noble disciples never vacillate in their conviction that the Three Jewels are the supreme objects of trust and devotion. They place perfect trust in the Buddha as the peerless spiritual guide; in the Dhamma as the flawless map of the way to final liberation; and in the Ariya Sangha as the community of those who have won the transcendent path and gained access to Nibbāna the Deathless.

The faith of a worldling, no matter how fervent and sincere, cannot be described as “confirmed confidence,” for such faith is vulnerable to doubt and may even be discarded through a change in religious allegiance. When, however, a disciple arrives at the path of stream-entry, he or she penetrates the ultimate truth and eradicates the lower three fetters, including the fetter of doubt. With this step, the provisional trust the disciple invested in the work of treading the path receives indubitable confirmation, and this transforms that provisional faith into confirmed confidence.

As the monk reflects on the fact that he has partly abandoned the mind’s defilements, and considers further his fixed confidence in the Three Jewels, his reflection becomes the starting

point for a process of meditative development that culminates in concentration. We can see in this a “feedback mechanism” at work, by which the effort that the monk initially put into the practice culminates in penetration of the Dhamma, which in turn brings an upsurge of joy that inspires renewed effort and hence higher attainments. As the monk reflects he gains enthusiasm for the goal (*atthaveda*) and enthusiasm for the teaching (*dhammaveda*), and this gives rise to gladness based on the teaching. As the gladness deepens it turns into rapture (*pīti*); with his mind elated by rapture his body becomes tranquil; tranquil in body, he experiences inward happiness (*sukha*); suffused by happiness, his mind gains concentration (*samādhi*).

The Buddha praises this monk thus: “If a monk of such virtue, such concentration, and such wisdom eats alms food consisting of choice rice and various sauces and curries, even that will be no obstacle for him.” Reading between the lines, we see that these words imply that the monk is a non-returner. The reason is that a non-returner has eliminated all sensual desire, i.e. all desire connected with the “five cords of sensual pleasure,” and thus has no attachment to delicious tastes. Since the monk can eat choice food without encountering any “obstacle” (*antarāya*)—namely, any craving for tastes—this means he has overcome the fetter of sensual desire, which implies he is a non-returner. Thus elsewhere (SN 12:63/II 99) the Buddha says: “When the nutriment of edible food has been fully understood, the lust based on the five senses is fully understood; and when the lust based on the five senses is fully understood, there is no fetter bound by which the noble disciple will come back to this world.”

(to be continued)

The Buddhist Publication Society

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