



## The Problem of Conflict

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

It is one of the bitterest ironies of human life that although virtually all human beings cherish a desire to live in peace, we continually find ourselves embroiled in conflict, pitted against others in relationships marred by tension, distrust or open hostility. This irony is particularly poignant because it is immediately evident to us that cordial, harmonious relations with others are a necessary condition for our own genuine happiness. Not only do such relations allow us to pursue undisturbed the goals we consider essential to our personal fulfilment, but they bring us the deeper joy of meaningful communion with our fellow human beings. Contentious living, in contrast, is always intrinsically painful, involving a hardening of our subjective armour, a tightening of the knots of anger and hate. Indeed, whatever the outcome of conflict may be—whether victory or defeat—the result itself is ultimately detrimental for both victor and victim alike.

Nevertheless, although harmonious living promises such rich blessings while discordant relations entail so much harm and misery, for the most part our lives—and the lives of those around us—are entangled in a ravelled net of quarrels and disputes. Conflict may simmer within as silent suspicion and resentment or it may explode into violent rage and devastation. It may implicate us at the level of personal relationships, or as members of an ethnic group, a political party, a social class or a nation. But in one or another of its many manifestations, the presence of conflict in our lives seems inescapable. Peace and harmony hover in the distance as beautiful dreams for a summer's night or noble ideals to which we pledge formal allegiance. But when reality knocks and dreams are dispelled, we find ourselves drawn, usually against our better judgment, into an arena where the pleasures that we seek exact as their price the hard cash of struggle and contention.

The teachings of the Buddha, while framed around the goal of individual deliverance from suffering, are also expounded for the purpose of instructing us in how we can live in harmony with others. Such harmony is desirable not only as a source of satisfaction in itself, but also because it is a prerequisite for treading the path to the higher freedom. The final peace of enlightenment can arise only in a mind that is at peace with others, and the mind can only be at peace with others when we are actively committed to a course of training that enables us to extricate the roots of conflict that lie buried deep within our hearts.

Once, in ancient India, Sakka the ruler of the gods came to the Buddha and asked: "By what bonds are people bound whereby, though they wish to live in peace without hate and hostility, they yet live in conflict with hate and hostility." The Master replied: "It is the bonds of envy and avarice that so bind people that, though they wish to live in peace, they live in conflict with hate and hostility." If we trace external conflicts back to their source, we will find that they originate not in wealth, position or possessions, but in the mind itself. They spring up because we envy others for the qualities they possess which we desire for ourselves, and because we are driven by an unquenchable avarice to extend the boundaries of what we can label "mine."

Envy and avarice in turn are grounded in two more fundamental psychological conditions. Envy arises because we identify things as “I,” because we perpetually seek to establish a personal identity for ourselves internally and to project that identity outward for others to recognize and accept. Avarice arises because we appropriate: we attempt to carve out a territory for ourselves and to furnish that territory with possessions that will titillate our greed and sense of self-importance. Conflict being thus rooted in envy and avarice, it follows that the path to non-conflict must be a course of relinquishment, of removing the constrictive thoughts and desires that pivot around the notions of “I” and “mine,” the drives to identify and to possess. This course reaches consummation with the full maturity of wisdom, with insight into the empty, egoless nature of all phenomena; for it is this insight which exposes the hollowness of the notions of “I” and “mine” that underlie envy and avarice. However, although the final liberation from clinging may lie far away, the path leading to it is a gradual one, growing out of simpler, more basic steps that lie very close to our feet.

Two such necessary steps are changes in attitude with the power to transmute envy and avarice. One is altruistic joy (*muditā*), the ability to view the success of others with the same gladness we experience at our own success. The other is generosity (*cāga*), the readiness to give and to relinquish. The former is the specific antidote for envy, the latter the antidote for avarice. What is common to both is a lifting of the sense of identity from its narrow fixation on the self, and a broadening of it to encompass others who share our desire to be happy and free from suffering.

As private individuals we cannot hope to resolve by our will the larger patterns of conflict that engulf the societies and nations to which we belong. We live in a world that thrives on conflict, and in which the forces that nurture conflict are pervasive, obstinate and terribly powerful. But as followers of the Enlightened One, what we can do and must do is to testify by our conduct to the supremacy of peace: to avoid words and actions that engender animosity, to heal divisions, to demonstrate the value of harmony and concord. The model we must emulate is that provided by the Master in his description of the true disciple: “He is one who unites the divided, who promotes friendships, enjoys concord, rejoices in concord, delights in concord, and who speaks words that promote concord.”

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## Exploring the Wheels

*The Simile of the Cloth & The Discourse on Effacement.* Edited by Nyanaponika Thera (Wheel No. 61/62)

These two suttas, numbers 7 and 8 of the Majjhima Nikaya, are closely related in theme, for both deal with the means of eliminating the defilements of the mind. The translations included in the above Wheel issue were based on a manuscript rendering by Ven. Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, and the issue further gains from the insightful introductions and notes by Ven. Nyanaponika Thera. “The Simile of the Cloth” examines sixteen defilements of an ethical character which figure prominently as determinants of man’s social behaviour, both individually and collectively. All these sixteen defilements—which include envy, denigration, hypocrisy, etc.—are nuances or combinations of the three unwholesome roots, greed, hatred and delusion, states which impede social intercourse and have a negative effect on society as a whole. Hence Ven. Nyanaponika notes that the composition of the list of defilements makes it clear that the Buddha was aware of the social impact of these impurities, and he summarizes the first part of the discourse by saying that “our social conduct strongly affects the chances of our spiritual progress.”

The sutta indicates two main stages in the attainment of full purification, one marking the transition from the state of the worldling to that of the non-returner, the other the transition from the non-returner's state to arahantship. The first involves the elimination, at least in part, of the sixteen defilements, and this begins with self-knowledge. As Ven. Nyanaponika remarks:

In accordance with the method of Satipaṭṭhāna, right mindfulness, the presence of the defilements in one's behavior has to be clearly noticed and honestly acknowledged, without attempts at evasion, at minimizing or self-justification.

The sutta concludes with the Buddha's reply to the brahminical conception of purification by ritual bathing: true purification comes by the inward bathing effected by meditation.

"The Discourse on Effacement" lists forty-four defilements selected from various doctrinal sets, including the ten courses of wrong action, the five hindrances, the wrong eightfold path, etc. The stress of the sutta is on the practice of effacement; not the mere temporary suppression of the defilements but their radical uprooting is the key to human liberation.

The method of effacement follows a fixed formulation: "Others will be harmful; we shall not be harmful here—thus effacement can be done." Ven. Nyanaponika notes that "this bespeaks of the Buddha's realistic outlook as benefitting a world that cannot be improved by mere wishing nor by 'preaching at it.' ... If the aim is the radical effacement of mental defilements we cannot afford to waste time and be deviated from our task by sidelong glances at the behaviour of others."

In addition to the resolve to efface the defilements, and the following of the methods given for identifying them as they appear in our minds, the Buddha also shows the need to substitute for the defilements the positive states which are their opposites. The Buddha compares this to a road for circumventing the wrong path, and he shows that for every quality leading downwards there is an exactly opposite quality leading upwards, a quality that lies within our capacity to cultivate.

By effacing the defilements one by one, by weakening their strength, and by cultivating their positive counterparts, beneficial effects can be observed in this lifetime through the ease with which we can live with our fellow human beings. The practice of effacement brings positive results here and now, leads to a favourable rebirth, and unfolds our highest potentials.

Both these suttas combined in a single slim volume, if studied together with their introductions and notes will not only make inspiring reading but will give clear guidance to one's practice.

—Ayya Nyanasiri

*Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (Wheel No. 100)

This compact survey by H.R. Perera (originally published as *Buddhism in Ceylon: Its Past and Present*) is once more available. The book traces the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka from the arrival of Prince Vijaya to modern times. This new edition has been composed in clear computer-set type and bears a handsome full-colour cover from the Kelaniya Vihara.

## Book Review

*Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo.* Richard Gombrich. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London and New York, 1988. 240 pp. \$7.95.

In the present work Richard Gombrich, secretary of the Pali Text Society, adopts a sociological perspective in investigating the history of Theravada Buddhism from its origins in ancient India through its later development in Sri Lanka. Gombrich's book is not a work of original research but draws heavily upon the writings of other historical scholars. Its justification, and merit, lies in fitting their more specialised studies into a single connected account of Theravada history, explored by way of its social ramifications. As a social historian Gombrich avoids the reductionism fashionable in academic circles, which would explain away religious ideas and institutions as mere by-products of the socio-economic infrastructure. Committed instead to a "metaphysically neutral" stance, he sees his task to be to exhibit the reciprocal relations between the distinctive doctrines and institutions of Theravada Buddhism and the social conditions under which it has flourished. Although his perspective does not coincide in all respects with the view that Buddhist tradition takes of its own history, his account is sympathetic and grounded upon careful evaluation of the historical evidence.

Gombrich divides the history of Theravada Buddhism into three main phases. The first (dealt with in Chapters 2–5) is the rise of Buddhism and its early development. Gombrich locates the problem situation to which the Dhamma was addressed in the widespread anxiety and alienation caused by the disintegration of traditional brahminic culture in the urban centres of the Buddha's day. To deal with this problem the Buddha offered a universal ethic and a path to release from suffering that depended not on fortuitous externals but on individual effort and personal purification.

A full chapter on the Sangha (4) provides concise explanations of the disciplinary rules and delineates the relationship between monastics and laity in early Buddhism. The next chapter, the last on India, discusses Theravada lay religiosity and concludes with a section on King Asoka, whose patronage transformed Buddhism into a world religion. The Asokan missions form a natural bridge to the next division of the book, which focuses upon Ceylon to pursue the continued evolution of Theravada Buddhism outside India. Here Gombrich finds that while Theravada maintained its doctrinal conservatism intact, the social conditions it met in its new home—a feudally structured agrarian society—imposed upon it unforeseen developments. He traces the key points in the process by which Buddhism in Ceylon, along with its continuity with Indian Theravada, came to exhibit features discordant with the intentions of its Founder. Gombrich discusses in particular its emergence as a symbol of ethno-national identity and the evolution of the Sangha into a land-owning cultural elite regulating membership on the basis of caste.

Chapter 7, perhaps the most interesting in the book, is a study of what Gombrich calls "Protestant Buddhism," the brand of Theravada that emerged in the late nineteenth century under the impact of the Christian missions and the tutelage of their adversaries, the Theosophists. The salient characteristic of Protestant Buddhism, as befits its origins among the new English educated, urbanized middle class, is the increased importance assigned to the laity and the diminished role of the Sangha.

In his final chapter Gombrich discusses current trends and new problems in Sinhalese Theravada Buddhism. His comments here are a piquant reminder of recent events, but it is puzzling that in his discussion of the Sangha he does not mention its politicization, a very

important development. Gombrich promises another book dealing in more detail with Buddhism in present-day Sri Lanka, and it is to be hoped that this promise will soon be fulfilled.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Extracts from *The Light of Asia*. Selected by Triscella Kularatne; illustrated by Sisil Mendis. 1988. 80 pp. SL Rs. 250/US \$10 (plus postage).

Order from: Mrs. Triscella Kularatne, Tennahena Estate, Ranwala, Godakawela, Sri Lanka; or from: M.D. Gunasena & Co. Ltd., 217, Olcott Mawatha, Colombo 11, Sri Lanka. This is a jumbo edition of selections from Sir Edwin Arnold's classic poem on the life of the Buddha, with 22 pages of illustrations in colour.

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## Office News

At our Annual General Meeting held towards the end of 1988, the Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera announced his decision to retire from the presidency of the BPS, a position he has held since the post was established. He was replaced by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, whose contribution to the BPS as Editor for the last five years will be well known to our readers.

As a co-founder of the BPS, and its long-term President, the Ven. Mahathera always guided us with kindness and gentleness. He set for us an inspiring example of wisdom, helpfulness and diligence, which we have endeavoured to emulate in our work. At his advanced age (his 88th birthday fell on July 21st) he felt that the time had come for a younger person to relieve him of his duties.

The Buddhist world owes an immense debt to Ven. Nyanaponika for his valuable literary works, but for us here in Kandy he and the BPS are synonymous. We are graced that in retirement he has agreed to become our Patron. We wish him longer life and good health, so that he may continue to give us the benefit of his wisdom and experience.

Our Spanish readers may be interested to learn that a beautifully produced Spanish translation has been issued of Francis Story's well-known essay, *The Case for Rebirth* (Wheel No. 12/13). It is published under the title *Volver a Nacer* by Editorial Sirio S.A., Panaderos 9-29005 Malaga.

The Zen Lotus Society wishes us to inform our readers of a 2-hour video cassette they issue, *World Buddhism in North America*, a documentary intended to capture the spirit of North American Buddhism in the 1980's. The video is priced at U.S. \$65. Although it is VHS, it does not seem to be compatible with standard VHS players used in Sri Lanka, so we advise our readers to inquire first from the publishers about technical details: Zen Lotus Society, 1214 Packard Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48104 U.S.A. Tel: (313) 761-6520.

We wish to remind our Associate Members that they are entitled to a 10% discount: those abroad, on orders of U.S. \$25 or more; local members, on orders of Rs. 100 or more. Please cite your membership number when ordering.

Our Sinhalese readers should bear in mind that the BPS has back issues of almost all titles in our Sinhala series, Damsak, edited by Ven. Piyadassi Thera of Vajirarama. For a list of Damsak titles, please write. These titles are especially well suited as gifts to libraries, hospital patients, and friends who wish for reading material on the Dhamma.

—Albert Witanachchi

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## Guidelines to Sutta Study

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

In the last instalment of this series, we saw that in his first discourse, after teaching the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha declared that he had discovered three types of knowledge concerning each of the four truths: knowledge of the truth itself; knowledge of the task implied by the truth; and knowledge that this task has been accomplished. The task imposed by the first noble truth, the truth of suffering, is full understanding, and we saw that this means comprehending the five aggregates by way of their universal characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self. Completion of this task is the mark of the arahant, who has thereby dispelled the mist of ignorance covering over the true nature of being and fathomed the deepest, most rewarding knowledge. Each of the other three truths also implies a definite task, and by showing what these tasks are the Buddha makes it plain that the Dhamma is no mere system of thought, a theory about the world, but a practical discipline requiring us to order our lives in a manner conducive to the achievement of these tasks.

The second noble truth is craving as the origin of suffering, and the task imposed by this truth is abandonment (*pahāna*). To see that suffering originates from craving is to see that craving along with its attendant defilements must be abandoned. The abandonment of craving requires that we exercise diligence: diligence in controlling our actions, diligence in controlling and mastering our minds. The defilements must be removed gradually, in stages. First we have to eliminate their coarser manifestations in conduct, then their subtler irruptions in thought, and finally their finest hair roots—the latent tendencies—nestling in the hidden recesses of the mind.

The third noble truth is the cessation of suffering, Nibbāna. Nibbāna is the unconditioned element, and as such is something that cannot be produced, cannot be brought into being. Nibbāna is without an origin, ever peaceful, blissful and sublime. Yet, though unproduced, Nibbāna must be attained by experiencing it directly. Thence the task imposed by the third noble truth is realization (*sacchikarana*), the direct penetration of the unconditioned element.

Nibbāna is to be realized by developing the Noble Eightfold Path, described in the fourth truth as the way leading to the end of suffering. Thus the task implied by the fourth truth is development (*bhāvanā*); if we wish to realize the cessation of suffering, we must develop the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path, and this is done by entering the threefold training into which the eight path factors are grouped: the training in morality, concentration and wisdom. When the path is completely developed, the other three tasks are accomplished simultaneously: we fully understand suffering, we abandon craving and the other defilements, and we realize Nibbāna.

Thence the Buddha concludes his first sermon by declaring that only when his knowledge and vision regarding the Four Noble Truths and their respective tasks was fully purified, did he claim in the world to have awakened to the distinctive attribute of a Fully Enlightened One—the supreme perfect enlightenment.

*(to be continued)*

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# The Buddhist Publication Society

The BPS is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for all people.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is—a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

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