



Towards a Threshold of Understanding - I

Pope John Paul II's recent book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, is a collection of reflections primarily on issues of Christian faith; but the book also features the Pope's assessment of other religions, including a short chapter on Buddhism. The Pontiff's words in this chapter are far from appreciative. The release of the book in Sri Lanka on the eve of the Pope's visit to this country this past January stirred up waves of indignation in the Buddhist community that spread as far as the Vatican. The Buddhist prelates announced that they would not attend an inter-religious meeting requested by the Pope unless he formally retracted his unfavourable remarks about Buddhism. Although on arrival the Pope tried to appease the feelings of Buddhist leaders by declaring his esteem for their religion, even quoting the Dhammapada, he fell short of proffering a full apology, and this did not satisfy the Sangha elders.

The following essay is intended as a short corrective to the Pope's demeaning characterisation of Buddhism. It addresses the issues solely at the level of ideas, without delving into the question whether ulterior motives lay behind the Pope's pronouncements. The essay is based on an article written for a Polish publisher, Source (Katowice), which is presently compiling a book on the Buddhist response to the Pope's book.

The Pope states that "the Buddhist tradition and the methods deriving from it have an almost exclusively negative soteriology (doctrine of salvation)." Such a view of the Buddhist teachings was widespread among Christian missionaries in Asia during the 19th century, serving to justify their evangelical incursions into the heartlands of Buddhism. Serious scholars of comparative religion have long recognised this view to be a misrepresentation, rooted, in the case of the early missionaries, partly in misunderstanding, partly in deliberate distortion. It is therefore puzzling that the present head of the Catholic Church, otherwise so well informed, should repeat these worn-out lines, particularly at a time when greater mutual understanding is expected from the leaders of different religions.

The Pope does not explain exactly why he regards Buddhist soteriology as negative. Most likely, he takes this view because the Buddhist path of deliverance does not recognise a personal God as the agent and end of salvation. Like beauty, however, what is negative and what is positive lies in the eye of the beholder, and what is negative for one may turn out to be another's supreme ideal. If one seeks an everlasting union between one's eternal soul and a creator God, then a doctrine that denies the existence of an eternal soul and a Divine Creator will inevitably appear negative. If one regards everything conditioned as impermanent and devoid of self, and seeks deliverance in Nibbāna, the Deathless Element, then a doctrine of everlasting union between God and the soul will seem—not negative perhaps—but founded upon wishful thinking and unacceptable articles of faith. For the ordinary reader, however, the word "negative," when applied to Buddhism, will suggest something far different from a philosophically acute way of approaching the Ultimate, conjuring up pictures of a bleak doctrine of escapism aimed at personal annihilation. Behind the Pope's words we can detect echoes of the ancient texts: "There are, monks, some recluses and brahmins who charge me with being an annihilationist, saying that the recluse Gotama teaches the annihilation of an existent

being. That is false misrepresentation. What I teach, in the past as also now, is suffering and the cessation of suffering” (MN 22).

Even more worrisome than the Pope’s characterisation of the Buddhist doctrine of salvation as negative is his contention that “the Buddhist doctrine of salvation constitutes the central point, or rather the only point, of this system.” The conclusion implied by this pronouncement, left hanging silently behind the lines, is that Buddhism is incapable of offering meaningful guidance to people immersed in the problems of everyday life; it is an otherworldly religion of escape suited only for those of an ascetic bent.

While Western scholars in the past have focused upon the Buddhist doctrine of salvation as their main point of interest, the living traditions of Buddhism as practised by its adherents reveal that this attitude, being one-sided to begin with, must yield one-sided results. The Buddhist texts themselves show that Buddhism addresses as wide a range of concerns as any other of humanity’s great religions. Nibbāna remains the ultimate goal of Buddhism, and is certainly “the central point” of the Dhamma, but it is by no means “the only point” for which the Buddha proclaimed his Teaching.

According to the Buddhist texts, the Dhamma is intended to promote three types of good, each by way of different but overlapping sets of principles. These three goods, though integrated into the framework of a single internally consistent teaching, enable the Dhamma to address individuals at different stages of spiritual development, with varying capacities for comprehension. The three goods are:

- (i) the good pertaining to the present life (*diṭṭhadhammattha*), i.e. the achievement of happiness and well-being here and now, through ethical living and harmonious relationships based on kindness and compassion;
- (ii) the good pertaining to the future life (*samparāyikattha*), i.e. a favourable rebirth within the round of existence, by practising generosity, observing the precepts, and cultivating the mind in meditation; and
- (iii) the ultimate good (*paransattha*), i.e. the attainment of Nibbāna, by following the complete training defined by the Noble Eightfold Path.

For most Buddhists in their day-to-day lives, the pursuit of Nibbāna is a distant rather than an immediate goal, to be approached gradually during the long course of rebirths. Until they are ready for a direct assault on the final good, they expect to walk the path for many lives within *samsāra*, pursuing their mundane welfare while aspiring for the Ultimate. To assist them in this endeavour, the Buddha has taught numerous guidelines that pertain to ethically upright living within the confines of the world. In the Sigalovada Sutta, for example, he enumerates the reciprocal duties of parents and children, husband and wife, friends and friends, employers and employees, teachers and students, religious and laity. He made right livelihood an integral part of the Noble Eightfold Path, and explained what it implies in the life of a busy lay person. During his long ministry he gave advice to merchants on the prudent conduct of business, to young wives on how to behave towards their husbands, to rulers on how to administer their state. All such guidance, issuing from the Buddha’s great compassion, is designed to promote the welfare and happiness of the world while at the same time steering his followers towards a pleasant rebirth and gradual progress towards final liberation.

Yet, while the Buddha offers a graduated teaching adjusted to the varying life situations of his disciples, he does not allow any illusion to linger about the ultimate aim of his Doctrine. That aim is Nibbāna, which is not a consoling reconciliation with the world but irreversible deliverance from the world. Such deliverance cannot be gained merely by piety and good works performed in a spirit of social sympathy. It can be won only by renunciation, by “the

relinquishment of all acquisitions” (*sabb’upadhipaṭinissagga*), including among such “acquisitions” the bodily and mental processes that we identify as our self. The achievement of this end is necessarily individual. It must be arrived at through personal purification and personal insight, as the fruit of sustained effort in fulfilling the entire course of training. Hence the Buddha did not set out to found a church capable of embracing all humanity within the fold of a single creed. He lays down a path—a path perfect in its ideal formulation—to be trodden by imperfect human beings under the imperfect conditions that life within the world affords. While the quest for the highest goal culminates in deliverance from the world, this same ideal “bends back” towards the world and spells out standards of conduct and a scale of values to guide the unenlightened manyfolk in their daily struggles against the streams of greed, hatred, and delusion. Nibbāna remains the “chief point” and the omega point of the Dhamma. But as this goal is to be experienced as the extinction of greed, hatred, and delusion, it defines the condition for its realisation as a life devoted to overcoming greed through generosity, to overcoming hatred through patience and loving kindness, and to overcoming delusion through wisdom and understanding.

Bhikkhu Bodhi

(Part II of this essay will appear in the next BPS newsletter.)

Publications

Recent Releases

- *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Original translation by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli; revised and edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi. This book offers a complete translation of the Majjhima Nikāya, a collection of 152 “middle length” discourses of the Buddha, many among the most profound and inspiring in the Pali Canon. Produced as a high-quality hardback, 3 volumes in one, with notes, glossary, indexes. For sale in Asia only. (Outside Asia available through Wisdom Publications, Boston.)

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U.S. \$50.00; SL Rs. 2,400 BP 218H

- *Nyanaponika: A Farewell Tribute*. Edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi. A commemoration volume in honour of our late Founding-President, Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera. Includes a biographical sketch, bibliography, appreciations, excerpts from his writings, documents, and photographs.

Softback: 80 pages 140 mm x 214 mm

U.S. \$2.50; SL Rs. 100 Order No. BP 611S Back in Print

- *The Path of Freedom: The Vimuttimaggā*. Translated from the Chinese by N.R.M. Ehara, Soma Thera, Kheminda Thera. Written in Pali in Sri Lanka during the first century A.C., the *Vimuttimaggā* survived only in a Chinese translation, from which the present rendering has been made. Ascribed to the arahant Upatissa, the work is a meditation manual similar in structure to the Visuddhimaggā, but less analytical and more practical in its treatment of meditation.

Softback: 424 pages 152 mm x 227 mm

U.S. \$20; SL Rs. 450 Order No. BP 208S

- *The Great Discourse on Causation: The Mahānidāna Suttanta & Its Commentaries*. Translated from the Pali by Bhikkhu Bodhi. This is the Buddha’s longest and most detailed discourse on

dependent arising, generally regarded as the key to his Teaching. With the commentary, selections from the sub-commentary, and an illuminating introduction, this book is an important aid to serious study of the Dhamma.

Softback: 160 pages 140 mm x 214 mm
U.S. \$10.00; SL Rs.200 Order No. BP 211S

In Preparation

- *The Seven Contemplations of Insight*. Ven. Matara Sri Nāṇarama Mahathera. This is a profound examination of the “seven contemplations” of classical Buddhism and of the actual way they are experienced in the course of meditation. By one of Sri Lanka’s foremost meditation masters of recent times. Planned for late 1995 or early 1996.
- *Great Disciples of the Buddha*. Ven. Nyanaponika Thera & Hellmuth Hecker. This volume will combine all past issues of our Wheel titles in the “Lives of the Disciples” series. Planned for late 1995.

Corrections to Abhidhamma Manual

Students of A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma should note the following corrections, discovered after the book was in print: p.101 (Table 2.3): Under Supramundane and Sublime fourth and fifth jhānas: for `11–13’ read: 10, 11, 13.

p.112 (Table 2.4): Under the cetasika wrong view, the boxes for greed-rtd. cittas nos. 7 and 8 should be clear. Under the cetasika conceit, the box for greed-rtd. citta no. 6 should be clear.

p.118 (Table 3.1): As the fourth vertical heading, in place of `Rtls. result’ read: Functional.

p.131: Add to the list of 46 cittas (following 2 eye-consciousnesses): 2 receiving consciousnesses.

p.262 (Table 6.3): In blank space next to `Tangibility’ read: (= 3 great essentials — earth, fire, and air).

p.311 (Table 8.3): Under condition no. 24, in both columns, instead of `Same as 2’ read: Same as 21.

Book Review

The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture. Stephen Batchelor. Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax Press; London: Aquarian, Harper Collins; 1994. 432 pp. U.S. \$30 (hardback), \$18 (softback).

Since the 1980s, interest in Buddhism has escalated rapidly throughout Europe. A multitude of groups and centres representing almost all the Buddhist traditions have sprouted across the Continent, while the media too have recently discovered in Buddhism an exotic religious alternative to a slumbering Christianity. In *The Awakening of the West* Stephen Batchelor, a leading non-denominational “Dharma teacher” based in Britain, offers an admirable survey of the plurality of Buddhist schools evident in Europe today. His lucid study is not only a mine of information, but by reason of its narrative style and novel treatment of its subject matter, makes fascinating and entertaining reading as well.

Batchelor divides his account into five main parts with 21 chapters. The five parts delineate the historical course of the encounter of Buddhism with Western culture from the Buddha’s

Parinirvana up to 1992, the year of the latest European Buddhist Congress. These five parts are taken to reflect five different stances the West has adopted towards Buddhism. These, in the author's words, are: "blind indifference, self-righteous rejection, rational knowledge, romantic fantasy, and existential engagement" (p.xi). While the first two prevailed up to the 18th century, and romantic and rational interest characterised the 19th and early 20th centuries, "existential engagement," i.e. the application of Buddhist teachings to one's way of life, has been witnessed only since the turn of the present century. Batchelor does not tell his story as a straight, linear, historical thread. Instead he flashes back and forth in time, a technique that keeps the reader's interest on edge and gives the narrative a particular drive. He may begin a chapter with a present-day scene from a Buddhist centre—for example, a meditation session in a British Theravada monastery (chap. 4) or in a Soto Zen hall in Paris (chap. 9)—then he follows up with an exploration of the context and background of the situation described. Here the Buddhist concepts, principles, and practices of the tradition under discussion are set in historical perspective and elucidated in fair detail. Other chapters deal in a similar way with the Tibetan Nyingma, Kagyu, and Gelek traditions, and with Japanese Nichiren and Rinzai Zen. But Batchelor's focus is rightly placed on the contemporary manifestations of these schools and traditions in Europe; owing to limitations of space, he does not deal with Buddhism in North America. Informative historical chapters recount the encounters of ancient East and West (1–3), Catholic missionary activities in Tibet (7, 11), and the Western "discovery" of Buddhism" in the 18th and 19th centuries. The fourth part, on "Reason and Romance" (chaps. 14–15), is especially rich in insights, for the developments described there set the tone for the perception of Buddhism in the West in the modern era. Both the Romantics, by glorifying everything Oriental, and the Rationalists, by denying Buddhism its spiritual core, projected Eurocentric concerns, thereby conceptualising Buddhism as something "other." In order to surmount such "otherness" Batchelor stresses the need to practise Buddhism, "to make it one's own" (p.280). This process, which he hopes will lead to a distinctive Western Buddhist identity not yet achieved, makes up what he calls "the Awakening of the West" (chap. 16). Such an "awakening," though already alluded to in earlier chapters, is tentatively sketched in Part Five. He begins this division with the sad story of Buddhism's fate in Russia during the present century, followed by an account of the adventures of Alexandra David-Neel, the redoubtable Frenchwoman who became a Tibetan scholar and lama. The concluding chapters portray three important trends in contemporary Western Buddhism: Sangharakshita and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order; the Theravada meditation practice of "mindful awareness"; and the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh and his concept of "engaged Buddhism." A glossary, notes, bibliography, index, and four helpful maps round off the volume.

Owing to the vast amount of material that had to be covered, Batchelor's account is necessarily selective with regard to both emphasis and exclusion. The author himself is keenly aware of this problem, freely admitting that his story of the encounter could have been told differently, even more so as the story is still unfolding. But in my estimation as a historian of religion, I would say that the multitude of developments and mass of data have been masterly arranged and profoundly analysed. Finally, taking a historical viewpoint, one might question the title's implication of a sleeping Western culture first awakened by Buddhism. While the author's choice of title reflects his Buddhist point of view, others with a different viewpoint might demur. In a few centuries, perhaps even after several decades, Batchelor's presentation of "the awakening of the West" might prove to be even more convincing. Nevertheless, the author has composed a highly commendable and well-informed story of Buddhism's interaction with Western culture.

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Notes and News

Fragile Palm Leaves. One of the tragic results of the economic materialism and general disruption rampant in Burma today is that antiques, religious objects, and cultural artefacts are pouring out of the country, mainly to markets in Thailand. Among these are rare palm-leaf manuscripts containing ancient Pali literature and original compositions by Burmese scholars. The “Fragile Palm Leaves” Project was established to purchase traditional Burmese manuscripts from markets in Thailand and to keep them together as a single collection, with the aim of eventually returning this collection to Burma when conditions permit. These manuscripts are a precious and irreplaceable part of Burma’s religious and literary heritage, in danger of being irrevocably lost. The Project has no permanent funding and depends entirely upon donations. All funding goes to the purchase of the manuscripts and necessary materials. Contributions, whether from private sources or institutions, are urgently needed. The co-ordinators of the Project are Peter Skilling (Canadian Pali scholar, former bhikkhu) in Asia and H.K. Kuloy (Norwegian Buddhist scholar) in the West. For further information write to: Peter Skilling, c/o The Siam Society, 131 Asoke Road, Sukhumvit 21, Bangkok 10110, Thailand (fax: 662 / 980–0257); or H.K. Kuloy, Pilestredet 88B, 0358 Oslo, Norway (fax: 47–22565766).

New Bank Account for Foreign Payments. We are pleased to inform our overseas members, well-wishers, and customers that for their convenience we have opened an account in the Hongkong & Shanghai Bank in Kandy. We request all our foreign members and customers making payment to the BPS to mark their cheques, etc. A/C Payee Only, Hongkong & Shanghai Banking Corp. Ltd., Kandy. Those making direct payment should pay into our new account, No. 002-017689-040. Please state clearly the purpose of the remittance. Until further notice we will be maintaining our local account at the Commercial Bank of Ceylon Ltd., Kandy.

Guidelines to Sutta Study

The next step of the gradual training following the abandoning of the five hindrances, as taught in the Kandaraka Sutta (MN 51), is the attainment of the four jhānas. The word ‘jhāna’—derived from the verb ‘*jhāyati*,’ to meditate—is used by the Buddha to designate four stages of concentration in which the mind becomes so sharply unified on its object that it altogether transcends the level of sensory experience. While no English rendering corresponds exactly to the Pali term, the makeshift compound “meditative absorption” perhaps best conveys the intended meaning.

The jhānas belong to the second division of the Noble Eightfold Path, the division of concentration (*samādhikkhandhā*), and to the second of the three trainings, the training in the higher mind (*adhicittasikkha*). The jhānas themselves, as developed in the course of practice, are not supramundane (*lokuttara*) and do not guarantee the attainment of Nibbāna. But as part of the concentration group, they do serve as a powerful basis for the cultivation of wisdom and hence contribute to the mind’s liberation from bondage. The Suttas speak of various types of concentration but recognise the jhānas as the most eminent. In fact, in the analysis of the Eightfold Path (e.g. at DN 22/ii,313), the Buddha defines right concentration (factor no. 8) by the

stock formula for the four jhānas. We will explore this formula in the next instalment of these Guidelines.

Since the attainment of jhāna demands a high degree of renunciation, both inward and outward, and also generally requires sustained effort for long periods of time, the question is often asked whether the jhānas are indispensable for enlightenment. The answer to this question hinges, of course, on how one defines that elusive word “enlightenment.” If this word is taken to refer to the attainment of stream-entry (*sotapatti*), the first of the four stages of liberation, the texts seem to answer indirectly in the negative. In the Suttas we meet many noble disciples who remained in lay life, still enjoying sense pleasures, yet who attained to the first two fruits of the path, stream-entry and once-returning. For example, in a discussion with the wanderer Vacchagotta, the Buddha states that he has not merely a few disciples, nor merely even five hundred disciples, but “many more than that enjoying sense pleasures who are yet fulfilling my Teaching, who have crossed beyond doubt, and have become independent of others in this Dispensation”—this being the stock description of stream-enterers and once-returners (MN 73/i,491–93). Such disciples, we may suppose, reached these lofty stages of enlightenment with the support of concentration of a level lower than that of full jhānic absorption but sufficient to allow for the arising of insight wisdom.

Several suttas suggest that jhāna becomes of vital importance in making the transition from the stage of once-returner to that of non-returner. Thus, for example, when the Buddha explains the practice conducive to the abandonment of the five lower fetters (*pañc'orambhāgiyani samyojanani*), he explains this practice by way of insight contemplation based on each of the four jhānas and the lower three formless attainments (see e.g. MN 64/i, 435–37). As the path of the non-returner has the task of abandoning sensual lust and aversion, two fetters that bind beings to the sense sphere, the attainment of jhāna will lift the mind beyond the lure of sensual desire and thereby facilitate the arising of the wisdom that can eradicate the fetters inseparable from the sensuous realm. Hence the texts say that the stream-enterer and once-returner have fulfilled virtue but not concentration, while the non-returner has fulfilled virtue and concentration but not wisdom, while only the Arahats has fulfilled all three: virtue, concentration, and wisdom. The Commentaries even recognise a class of “dry-visions Arahats” who are liberated without the “moistening” influence of jhāna. In their case the lack of jhāna would be compensated for by a capacity for understanding sharp and powerful enough to cut off all the fetters without the stabilising base of jhāna.

Nevertheless, in the Suttas the Buddha always includes the jhānas in his complete exposition of the gradual training, and this fact is sufficient to underscore their importance. Since the maturation of wisdom depends on concentration, and the jhānas are the most eminent type of mundane concentration, any progress in the development of the jhānas will provide a much more steady and secure base of concentration for wisdom to stand upon. But the instrumental value of the jhānas as aids to wisdom is not the only reason the Buddha includes them in the gradual training. Besides their instrumental role, the jhānas possess an intrinsic sublimity that warrants their incorporation into the path. Representing the mind’s potential for self-mastery and inward purification, the jhānas confer, on those who attain them, an unworldly rapture and bliss. They heighten inward poise and restraint, they radiate forth as peace, equanimity, and detachment. They are the “foot tracks of the Tathāgata,” not identical with final liberation, but indicative of the purity of mind to be achieved by final liberation. For both reasons—because they are conducive to wisdom and because they are intrinsically lofty and sublime—the Buddha repeatedly exhorts his disciples to attain the jhānas and speaks praise of those who have mastered their attainment.

(to be continued)

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