

Navigating the New Millennium

Although our calculations of time's passage carries no more weight against the vastness of the cosmic process than a feather before a storm, still, being human, it is natural for us to nurture hope on reaching the threshold of a new millennium. Almost all people entertain hopes for themselves and those close to them: for good health, for an unexpected change in fortune, for the fulfilment of their deepest wishes. We must also cherish hope for our world, for humanity as a whole — hope that despite the dark predictions of dangers lying ahead, the change of digits will usher in a new era of peace, general prosperity, and good will.

Adherents of different religions also turn their thoughts towards the new millennium, and as Buddhists we might briefly ponder the question what the Dhamma can offer the world in the years that lie before us. From one angle it could be said that what Buddhism can offer humankind today is exactly what it has been holding out for the past twenty-five centuries: an acute diagnosis of the human condition and a clear path to full liberation from suffering. But while this statement is correct as far as it goes, it is not yet sufficient; for it does not take account of the fact that in any age the aspects of the Dhamma to be emphasised, and the way they are to be expressed, must address the particular problems faced by the people living in that age. The Buddha's teaching acquires its incisive relevance, not merely by the cogency of its broad generalities, but by attuning its formulations to the precise problems that loom so large in the consciousness of the particular period in which it has taken root. Thus for the Dhamma to recover its vitality and strength, it is not enough merely to repeat hallowed formulas inherited from the past, however true they might be in their own right. Rather, we must focus the lens of the Buddha's teaching on the deep problems faced by human beings today and determine how the teachings can help to resolve those problems as efficiently as possible. If what the Buddha taught is only suffering and the cessation of suffering, then the starting point for any convincing presentation of the way to suffering's cessation must be the specific forms of suffering characteristic of our time.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, two manifestations of suffering have become so prevalent that they seem almost the defining characteristics of the modern era. One is an invidious sense of meaninglessness, a feeling of alienation from life, now becoming almost as common in the more modernised quarters of Asia as in the West. The other, most marked in the Third World, is collective violence. The first problem has its locus in the individual consciousness, the second in the relationships among communities at different levels of social order. If the Dhamma is to bring benefits to humanity in the coming years and decade, it must show us a way out of the abyss of meaninglessness and offer guidelines for reducing the severity of collective violence.

The sense of meaninglessness as a widespread social phenomenon set in with the rise of modern industrial civilisation. As each new breakthrough in natural science dealt a fresh blow to the organic Christian world view that had prevailed during the medieval period, human beings could no longer regard themselves as the pinnacle of creation, the beloved children of an all-loving Father who had created the universe expressly as the stage for our unfolding march towards salvation. Instead, under the influence of the mechanistic sciences, we came to see ourselves as chance products of purely natural causes, born and dying in a universe cold and indifferent to our hopes. Our existence was inexplicable in terms of any objective source of meaning, and did not embody any higher purpose than the brute struggle to survive and propagate our genes before death.

draws the curtain closed on all our restless strivings.

The loss of meaning was further aggravated by the break-up of traditional forms of social order under the impact of industrial capitalism. The rise of the city and the compulsive work routine of office and factory cut the bonds of social solidarity, so that each individual came to see himself or herself as an isolated entity pitted against others in stark competition for dominance. The individual ego thus became the ultimate centre of experience and the sole determinant of value, but it was an isolated ego on whom the other-regarding virtues inculcated by religious ethics, such as generosity and self-sacrifice, no longer had any claims. Altruism and restraint were eclipsed by the new creed of self-indulgence, which gave precedence to wealth, power, and conspicuous consumption as the supreme goals of life.

As Western technology and its offshoot, the consumerist culture, spread to the far corners of the world, the breakdown of meaning and the sense of self-alienation became endemic to many lands, and today this sense of meaninglessness has reached a truly global scale. The culture of narcissism, which exalts the reckless quest for self-aggrandisement, has spread its tentacles everywhere, leaving behind the same debris: agitated minds and hollow lives. Bent on quick and easy gratification, we pass our lives perpetually shadowed by a fear that all our achievements are worthless, unable to deliver any deep and stable satisfaction. And when this fear reveals itself, the abyss opens up, the realisation that we have wasted our lives in the pursuit of empty dreams. Thus the high incidence of mental illness, drug dependence, alcoholism, and suicide, particularly in the more affluent parts of the world.

It is a telling sign that despite the impressive achievements of science and technology, a culture built on mere mastery over external nature is far from successful in meeting the deep demands of the human spirit. For those adrift in the sea of meaninglessness, the Buddha's teaching offers a sense of meaning stemming from a profound spiritual tradition that combines metaphysical depth with psychological astuteness and the highest ethical standards. Without calling for blind faith in dogmatic creeds or speculative postulates, the Buddha points directly to the invariable universal laws that underlie happiness and suffering. He insists that we can discover these for ourselves, simply by clear reflection on our own immediate experience, and he offers us methods of practice by which we can gradually dig up the buried roots of suffering and cultivate the causes culminating in the highest happiness.

His appeal is to immediate experience. We can see for ourselves that suffering prevails in a mind driven by greed, hatred, and delusion, and that happiness grows when the mind is suffused by the virtues of generosity, kindness, and understanding. On the basis of this experimental test, which lies within the scope of any thinking person, we can then extrapolate and see that for a mind fully liberated from all self-centred defilements and adorned with perfect detachment, love, and wisdom, happiness and peace will have become boundless and irreversible. Thus by showing us the way to inner peace and happiness, the Dhamma offers us an outlet from the abyss of meaninglessness, a way to confer on our lives an exalted meaning and purpose.

The second type of suffering that has become so pervasive in our epoch is social violence, which still wreaks so much misery across the globe. To be sure, communal violence is by no means peculiar to our era nor a product of modern civilisation, but has infected human relations from the days of our prehistoric past. But what has become so

disturbing in the present-day world is the eruption of violence between different ethnic communities that in the past had managed to coexist in a relatively stable degree of mutual acceptance. We have witnessed these outbreaks of enmity recently in the Balkans, Russia, Indonesia, Central Africa, northern India, and sadly in our own Sri Lanka. Violence manifests itself, moreover, not only in the conflicts that rage between groups of different ethnic stocks and communal loyalties, but also in economic oppression, in the widening gap between the rich and the poor, in the gargantuan arms industries that thrive on violent conflict, in the sexual exploitation of women and children, in the drug trade, and also in the reckless devastation of the environment, by which we risk ripping away the life support systems that sustain our life on earth.

While Buddhism cannot pretend to offer a detailed solution to all the countless forms that violence takes in the present-day world, the values emphasised by the Dhamma show what is required to arrive at any lasting solution. What is necessary for true peace and harmony to prevail among human beings is not the hammering out of a comprehensive treaty by which the various parties to a conflict compromise their hard and volatile demands. What is truly required is a new mode of perception, the acquiescence to a universal consciousness that transcends the narrow standpoint of egocentric or ethnocentric self-interest. This is a consciousness that regards the other as not essentially different from oneself, which detaches itself from the insistent voice of self-interest and rises up to a universal perspective from which the welfare of all appears as important as one's own good.

We can see the germ of this universal perspective in a principle that stands at the base of Buddhist ethics, even more fundamental to its ethical ideals than the Five Precepts or any other formal code of conduct. This is the principle of taking oneself as the criterion for determining how to treat others. When we apply this principle we can understand that just as we each wish to live happily and to be free from suffering, so all other beings wish to live happily and to be free from suffering; just as we are each averse to pain and hardship and want to live in peace, so all others are averse to pain and hardship and want to live in peace. When we have understood this common core of feeling that we share with all other beings, not as a mere idea but as the fruit of clear reflection, we will treat others with the same kindness and care that we would wish them to treat us. And this must apply at a communal level just as much as in our personal relations. We must learn to see other communities as essentially similar to our own, and entitled to the same benefits as we wish for the group to which we belong. Even if we cannot reach any expansive feelings of love and compassion for the others, we will at least realise that the moral imperative requires that we treat them with justice and kindness.

Thus the message of the Dhamma to human beings in the next millennium might be briefly summed up in these twin gifts. In the personal domain it gives us a precisely defined path that confers on life a deep sense of purpose, a purpose grounded in the cosmic order but which can be actualised in one's own immediate experience. In the communal dimension of human existence it holds out an ethical guideline to right action which, if diligently applied, can arouse a conscientious commitment to a life of non-violence. Though it is far too much to expect that these two blessings will become the common heritage of all humanity, we can at least hope that enough people will accept them to make the twenty-first century a brighter and happier century than the one we are about to leave behind.

Bhikkhu Bodhi

From Other Publishers

The Mission Accomplished: A Study of the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta. Ven. Pategama Gnanarama. 239 pp. U.S. \$8.00; SL Rs. 325.

Piyadassi: The Wandering Monk. Kirthi Abeysekera. 200 pp. U.S. \$5.00; SL Rs. 150.

The Spectrum of Buddhism. Piyadassi Thera. 447 pp. U.S. \$15.00; SL Rs. 350.

A Pali Primer. Lily De Silva. 152 pp. U.S. \$5.00; SL Rs. 175.

One Night's Shelter. Yogavacara Rahula. 462 pp. U.S. \$??.??; SL Rs. 275.

Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon. 154 pp. U.S. \$6.00; SL Rs. 180.

Humour in Pali Literature. Walpola Rahula. 42 pp. U.S. \$??.??; SL Rs. 120.

Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in 20th Century Thailand. 410 pp. U.S. \$??.??; SL Rs. 1500.

Notes and News

John D. Ireland. We regret to announce, somewhat belatedly, the death from emphysema of John Ireland, one of our esteemed authors, on 29 October 1998. Born in North London in 1932, Jack (as he was known to his friends) became a Buddhist at the age of 18, after reading Christmas Humphries' paperback, *Buddhism*. He immediately recognised his affinity with the Dhamma and soon began studying Pali. Jack was associated with the BPS from an early period and already in the 1960s had contributed essays to the Bodhi Leaves series. His translations of Pali suttas have appeared in the Wheel series, his most recent contribution being *Vaṅgāsa: An Early Buddhist Poet* (Wh 417/418). His best-known work, however, is his combined translation, *The Udāna and The Itivuttaka*. With reference to this work, shortly before his death, Jack wrote to a friend: I feel I could die contented in the knowledge that I have done something to repay the great happiness the Buddha-Dhamma has brought me in this life. By the merits of his service to the Dhamma, may he attain Nibbāna.

Translations. Recently, a spate of BPS titles have found their way into other languages. The *Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* has appeared in a beautiful Spanish edition published by El Colegio del Mexico under the title *Compendia del Abhidhamma*. The same work has also been published in a Chinese translation, intended for free distribution from Malaysia. Nyanaponika Thera's classic *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* has appeared in Dutch translation (Asoka, Nieuwerkerk a/d IJssel). The same author's *Life of Sāriputta* has been published in Chinese translation (Luminary Publishing, Taiwan), while a selection from our *Lives of the Disciples* series has been issued in Hindi (Institute of Spiritual Culture, Chakulia, Bihar). Bhikkhu Bodhi's *The Noble Eightfold Path* recently appeared in a Greek translation (Editions Kyveli, Athens), one of the very first books on the Dhamma to be published in the cradle of Western philosophy.

The Greatest Gift. The Buddhist Book Trust, based in Kandy, made a very generous donation to the Nyanaponika Dhamma Dana Project, enabling us to present over a hundred 2-volume sets of *The Long Discourses* and *The Middle Length Discourse of the Buddha* to schools, Buddhist societies, and libraries throughout Sri Lanka. We wish the members of the Trust, established in memory of the late Rim Conrad, deep joy and

satisfaction as a fruit of this magnanimous donation.

The Buddha's Teaching As It Is. A ten-cassette course on the Buddhist teachings, prepared and recorded by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi (in 1981), is available from: Lavis Marketing, 73 Lime Walk, Headington, Oxford OX3 7AD, tel.: 01865 767 575; fax: 01865 750 079; E-mail: lavismarkt@aol.com. The cassettes cover the following topics: the Buddha, the Four Noble Truths, the Three Marks of Existence, Dependent Origination, Karma & Rebirth, Nibbàna, the Noble Eightfold Path, Meditation, the Sangha, and the Social Dimensions of the Dhamma. The cost is £38 including VAT.

BPS's New Telephone Number. Please note that BPS now has a new telephone number: 08 237 283. This replaces 08 223679, now reserved for our fax.

Book Review

The Monk and the Philosopher: A Father and Son Discuss the Meaning of Life. Jean-François Revel and Matthieu Ricard. New York: Schocken Books, 1998. 310 + xxii pages.

The Monk and the Philosopher is a wide-ranging exercise in East-West dialogue in which the two participants are, significantly, both Westerners, joined in the relationship of father and son. The father, Jean-François Revel, is a French philosopher, political commentator, and author whose books are read both in Europe and the Americas. His son, Matthieu Ricard, is a Buddhist monk ordained in a Tibetan Buddhist order and occasional interpreter for the Dalai Lama. Before his encounter with Buddhism Ricard had earned a distinguished doctorate in molecular biology and had worked under Nobel laureate François Jacob at the Institut Pasteur in Paris. Then in 1972, in his twenty-sixth year, he left his home, job, and country to pursue the study of Buddhism full time under exiled Tibetan Buddhist masters living in the Himalayas. In 1979 he took ordination as a monk and presently resides at a Buddhist monastery in Nepal.

The discussions between father and son took place in May 1996 in a mountainside inn above Kathmandu. They were deliberately planned to produce material for this book. Though the dialogue begins with Revel's inquiry about his son's reasons for abandoning a promising career in biology to immerse himself in an exotic religion, it quickly turns into a stimulating and deeply engaging exchange of views about a host of issues relating to the encounter of Buddhism with the West. The book sustains a high level of discourse from start to finish, as both participants bring to their discussions formidable intellects, a clear and astute grasp of ideas, and a sincere desire to arrive at mutual understanding. Yet this desire for understanding is not mitigated by a readiness to compromise their convictions, and it is the tension between their personal openness and intellectual earnestness that enables the two partners to generate so many scintillating insights in the course of their dialogue.

In nineteen conversations the father and son explore a wide array of subjects, beginning with the story of Ricard's conversion to Buddhism and branching out into such areas as the problem of categorising Buddhism as a philosophy and religion; rebirth and the Tibetan reincarnating lamas; the Buddhist conception of mind; meditation as an experimental discipline; the Buddhist doctrine of nonself; the contrast between self-transformation and social action; the problem of violence; the relation between spirituality and politics; Buddhist meditation and depth psychology; and more. Generally, it is Revel who poses the questions and Ricard who replies, but the father often responds to his son's explanations with illuminating observations of his own. In

fact, while Ricard comes across as an intelligent, articulate representative of Tibetan Buddhism, his replies to his father's questions sometimes seem too doctrinally correct, while Revel stands out as the bolder and more creative thinker.

Beneath the diversity of topics covered by their conversations, the contrasting standpoints of the two partners emerge early on and remain constant throughout the book. Revel appears as a champion of contemporary secular humanism – sceptical and level-headed, but at the same time sympathetic to man's need for an art of wise and noble living. He sees Western civilisation as having fallen into a spiritual vacuum precipitated by the declining influence of theistic religion, the failure of the political utopias, and the abdication by philosophy of its classical role of providing guidance in the proper conduct of life. It is precisely this, he holds, that has set the stage for the spiralling Western interest in Buddhism.

Ricard proposes the full range of Buddhist philosophy and practice as the remedy for this spiritual desolation. Buddhism, he holds, offers a system of timeless wisdom that can meet the demands for experiential confirmation laid down by science and yet bring major transformations in the inner quality of our lives. But it is at just this point that Revel steps back. As a secular humanist he can appreciate the ethics and psychological acuity of Buddhist thought, but he also remains convinced that despite its empirical claims, Buddhism presupposes a metaphysics that cannot be objectively proven. As a modern European guided by a scientific orientation, he rejects as unprovable the Buddhist tenets of karma and rebirth, the continuity of mind beyond death, and the conviction that worldly life is so bound up with suffering that human beings require a transcendent sphere of liberation. In the end, he holds, the acceptance of these teachings requires a leap of faith, and this is a leap he himself cannot make.

For his part, Ricard speaks eloquently in defence of Buddhism, bringing to this task an intellect trained both in the scientific method and in Buddhist philosophy and meditation. Against his father, he insists that the choice of the scientific orientation as an exclusive criterion of truth is as much a metaphysical stance as the adoption of Buddhist doctrines, whose validity, he argues, can be confirmed by undertaking the appropriate training. In the final analysis, though, Ricard's commitment to Buddhism did not originate from a detached objective weighing of the truth claims of Buddhist doctrine. It sprang, rather, from personal encounters with Tibetan spiritual masters, who presented him with a living picture of a spiritual perfection he had never envisaged in the universities and laboratories of Europe. He plunged into Buddhism, not because it seemed more valid to him than secular materialism, but because it filled a personal need for inner contentment and self-understanding. Yet beneath this outward metamorphosis Ricard has not fully abandoned the scientific mindset engendered by his training; for he maintains that Buddhism offers us *a science of the mind, a contemplative science* more in tune with our times than ever, and one that will always be so – since it deals with the most basic mechanisms of happiness and suffering (p. 308, my italics).

Despite their openness and mutual tolerance, the two men do not come to final agreement. Perhaps in some respects the father proves himself more tolerant than the son, who occasionally seems too extreme in his rejection of Western values and attitudes. Yet the father as well seems too committed to his scepticism even to consider giving a trial to the Buddhist system of mental training. The reason, perhaps, is that despite his breadth of mind and intellectual grasp of the human condition, the problem of suffering has not yet bitten deeply enough into his own entrails to force him on to a

path whose entire rationale is that it offers liberation from suffering. But perhaps too the father's scepticism was nurtured by the cultural remoteness in which Tibetan Buddhism is packaged. It may be that if he had encountered Buddhism in a form more consonant with the Buddha's advice in the Kalama Sutta, with the cultural trappings stripped away, he would have found the Dhamma more congenial to his temperament.

Bhikkhu Bodhi

Review. After admonishing his disciples not to cling to views, even the right view of dependent origination, the Buddha enumerates the four nutriment on which life depends: material food, contact, mental volition, and consciousness.

A nutriment (*āhāra*) is explained by the commentaries to be a strong support for the continuity of life (*ajjhattika-santatiyā visesappaccaya*). As we know, the Buddha teaches that a living organism can be analysed into the five aggregates: bodily form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. These five aggregates are sustained by the four nutriment. Each nutriment makes its own distinctive contribution towards their sustenance. Material food is the decisive support for the physical body, and since the four other mental aggregates depend on the body, material food also indirectly maintains them as well. Everyday the food we eat is digested and metabolised by the body. Its vital nutrients are extracted and used for the growth and maintenance of the body, while the residual waste is expelled as excrement. If we do not receive a sufficient quantity of nutritious food, the body will grow weak and thin and become vulnerable to illness. If our food supply is continually cut off, we will wither up and die. Although we normally regard the partaking of food as an occasion for gustatory pleasure and social communion, if we look at the act of eating objectively, with all the frills of social conventions removed, we would see that it is a stark biological imperative imposed on us by the very nature of embodied existence.

Contact (*phassa*) is the coming together of consciousness with an object via a sense faculty. Whenever consciousness encounters an object, the resulting contact inevitably gives rise to a feeling, a perception, and a volitional response. Of these, feeling is singled out as the factor specially nourished by contact. What we seek in our encounters with the world around us is the enjoyment of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, and both pleasure and pain are feelings arisen from contact. Hence contact can be considered the special nutriment for feeling.

Mental volition (*manosa-cetanā*) is said to be the nutriment for rebirth. For volition is kamma, and following death, when all the conditions for rebirth are complete, past kamma propels the stream of consciousness towards the particular destination where rebirth is due to take place, and it is thus that conception comes about. Once rebirth has occurred, throughout life mental volition continues to operate behind the scenes, motivating and sustaining all our activities and bringing forth its results (*vipāka*) when the right conditions obtain. All actions of body, speech, and mind are expressions or materialisations of volition. These actions in turn leave behind new kammic deposits with the potential to generate still another rebirth in which volition will operate still again.

The last nutriment is consciousness (*viññāṇa*), which serves as the special condition for name-and-form (*nāma-rūpa*), the psychophysical organism. For the life-process to begin, the stream of consciousness of a deceased being must descend into the

mother's womb, where it impregnates the ovum and turns it into the germ of a living body. At the very moment that it arises, consciousness brings along name, the main collaborators of consciousness in the process of cognition: contact, feeling, perception, volition, and attention. None of these can exist or function without consciousness, and therefore consciousness is spoken of as their nutriment. Consciousness, however, is the nutriment of name-and-form, not only at the moment of rebirth, but throughout the entire course of life. During the embryonic period, as the foetus develops, it must be sustained by consciousness. If consciousness were to expire during the foetal stage, the life-process would come to a halt, leaving behind a dead foetus. Then, after the new being has emerged from the womb and grows towards maturity, it is again consciousness that underlies this process. And throughout life it is consciousness that enables us to go about our daily activities. Consciousness quickens the mass of tissues, organs, and fluids in which it is lodged and makes them function as a living body. Consciousness also nourishes contact, feeling, perception, volition, and attention so they can participate in cognition. If consciousness departs, the body collapses into a heap of dead matter and all mental activity stops.

But not only is consciousness the nutriment for name-and-form. Though not classified as a nutriment, name-and-form is also an essential condition for consciousness. For consciousness can only function on the basis of a physical organism equipped with its six sense faculties; if there is no body, consciousness cannot arise (an exception can be made of the formless realms, but since those are so remote from our experience they need not be considered here). Again for consciousness to know anything it must be accompanied by the basic retinue of mental factors: contact, feeling, perception, intention, and attention. Thus elsewhere the Buddha says, 'It is to this extent that one may be born and age and die, pass away and be reborn, that is, when there is consciousness with name-and-form as its condition, and name-and-form with consciousness as its condition' (DN 15; SN 12:65). The phrase 'to this extent' means that it is consciousness together with name-and-form that constitutes the entire fabric of experience. Beyond and behind this pair of consciousness and name-and-form there is no transcendental subject, no *ātman* or self, which performs actions, experiences their fruits, and moves from life to life retaining its essential identity.

(to be continued)