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The Twin Pillars and Other Essays

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By

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The Twin Pillars

“There are two pillars supporting the great edifice of Buddhism: great wisdom and great compassion. The wisdom flows from the compassion and the compassion from the wisdom, for the two are one.”

In those words from his Second Lecture to the Emperor of Japan, Dr. Suzuki reminds us of the Twin Pillars upon which Buddhism rests. Both pillars are needed, for the one without the other cannot support the whole edifice of religion. Even the atheist Bertrand Russell said that “the good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge,” and if you substitute “wisdom” for “knowledge” I would agree.

I would draw this distinction between wisdom and knowledge, for although the two often go together they are quite distinct. There are many knowledgeable people in the world—people who know a lot of things and who have a great many facts and figures at their finger tips—yet they are not wise because they have yet to learn how to use the knowledge which they have sensibly and responsibly, and to the best possible effect. Conversely, there are others, who perhaps

possess little in the way of academic learning, who have nevertheless mastered the art of using what little knowledge and experience they have, sensibly and responsibly, and to the best possible advantage, and are therefore wise men. It is not the amount of knowledge that a man possesses that makes him wise, but the way in which he uses it.

Having said this, we must also go on to say that the wise man is ever seeking to increase his knowledge. The wise man is never content with his present state of development but tries to reach out a little further. We are not to be despised if, having lacked the opportunity and ability to acquire an advanced education, we now have little knowledge. But we are to be blamed if we fail to stretch ourselves to the uttermost extent of our limits. Let us acquire as much knowledge as we can, however little that may be for some of us. Let us expand our minds as far as they will go. Let us not allow our brains to settle down into an easy retirement, but let us make them work, as hard as it is possible to make them work.

But chiefly, if we want to be wise, our study should not be of things but of people. It is sound advice that Francis Quarles is giving when he says: "Read not books alone, but men, and among them chiefly thyself." He is echoing the sage of Ancient Greece who exhorted: "Know thyself." It is a fact that we must

truly know and understand ourselves before we can begin to know and understand other people. How often do we subject ourselves to critical self-examination? How often do we search among the hidden crevices of our innermost being for some clue to our nature? Have we really made any effort to understand ourselves, to come to terms with our limits and to receipt our possibilities? And have we made any effort to understand other people? Or are we always making hasty and ill-considered judgements? Of all the knowledge a man can acquire none is more important or more useful than a knowledge of human nature.

But the wise man, however great his knowledge, is not overhasty in expressing his opinion. It is well said that a man has two ears but only one mouth and therefore he ought to listen twice as much as he speaks. How right William Penn was when he said: "If thou thinkest twice before thou speakest once, thou wilt speak twice the better for it." I once heard politicians described as "People who approach every problem with an open mouth!" The wise man keeps his mouth closed and his mind open. He is a good listener, yet not easily swayed by argument one way or the other. He is not impressed by the one who shouts the loudest, nor does he follow blindly in the crowd. He approaches each problem with an open

mind, unmoved by threats or bribes, unimpeded by preconceived notions and prejudices. He weighs up all sides of the case, sifts the evidence, considers what the consequences will be if he takes this course, or what they will be if he takes that course. He considers not only the immediate effects, but the long-term implications. He subjects everything to the careful process of thought and meditation and he makes no hasty judgement.

But wisdom needs to find an outlet, to express itself in a practical way, and this is where we come to compassion—the other great pillar upon which Buddhism rests. The Buddhist Scriptures—and other books of a Buddhist nature—are full of exhortations to exercise a ministry of love. A verse from *The Voice of the Silence* by H. P. Blavatsky is a particular favourite of mine and for me perfectly expresses the nature of Buddhist love: “Let thy soul lend its ear to every cry of pain, like as the lotus bares its heart to drink the morning sun. Let not the fierce sun dry one tear of pain before thyself hast wiped it from the sufferer’s eye. But let each burning human tear drop on thy heart and there remain; nor ever brush it off until the pain that caused it is removed.”

Unfortunately, the word “love” has become very much debased in recent times. We talk of loving ice-cream or loving television, when all that we really

mean is that we like these things. It is used too in a romantic, sentimental way, as when churned out in endless popular songs. Often the word “love” is used when the word “lust” would be more appropriate. This is why I much prefer the word “compassion” which as yet is not debased in this way. It suggests deeply concerned (“passionate”) caring. It suggests a complete and utter giving of oneself, unconditionally. It carries with it the suggestion of sacrifice in the service of others which is very far removed from the sickly sentimental love of the popular song.

So important is this idea of compassion that some would have us make it the be-all and end-all of religion. Yet I do not think we can do that, for as with all great forces, compassion needs careful handling and direction. It has got to be guided by wisdom. We have all seen the consequences of love that is not guided by wisdom. There is that of the spoiled child who, thanks to his parents’ foolish lack of discipline, has been ruined for life, and no example of misguided love could be more tragic. And we are all familiar with the well-intentioned “do-gooders” of this world who sincerely want to help but often only succeed in being a hindrance, and sometimes—even while meaning well—do great harm. Compassion is not enough. It needs to be guided and directed by wisdom. Sometimes we must have wisdom enough to know

when not to interfere in the problems of others, even when our natural inclination is to force our help upon them. Sometimes we need wisdom to recognise our limitations, to realise that we are only “first-aid workers” in the realm of the human spirit and human relationships, and that often the greatest kindness we can do to those in serious trouble is to direct them to those more skilled than ourselves whose specialised knowledge will be equal to their needs. Love, like all great forces, can be destructive. It needs careful handling. It needs to be yoked to wisdom. How aptly Kenneth L. Patton expresses this when he writes: “We will turn our whole persons to the use of love and understanding, for the one without the other is a fumbling hand, and ignorant mercy is a plague of death. Wisdom must be made the ready implement of love, and love the guide and repairer of knowledge.”

Wisdom and compassion, what nobler pillars could there be on which to base one’s religion?

Harvest Thoughts

The ingathering of crops—which in many countries gives rise to harvest celebrations—is an occasion not only for rejoicing but for sober reflection. At this time we are powerfully reminded that the law of nature is that whatsoever seed a man sows, the harvest that he will reap must be of like character to the seed. As in the vegetable kingdom, so also in the life of man:

That which ye sow, ye reap. See yonder fields!
The sesamum was sesamum, the corn was corn.
The silence and the darkness knew!
So is man's fate born.

So writes Sir Edwin Arnold in "The Light of Asia," while in his poem "Childe Harold" Byron says:

The thorns which I have reaped are of the tree
I planted—they have torn me—and I bleed:
I should have known what fruit would spring
from such a seed.

Such thoughts as these are both arresting and sobering, and the harvest unerringly brings them to mind. It is a source of regret when one has to look back on past years when little, or even nothing, of true good is to be shown as the net result of living—no fruit gathered, no harvest stored. Worse still is to reap a bitter harvest from our own foolish sowing. How true the old saying: "Whatsoever a man soweth that

shall he also reap." How true the words of the old jingle:

Sow a thought, reap an act;
Sow an act, reap a habit;
Sow a habit, reap a character;
Sow a character, reap a destiny.

Though the glory of autumn is what has been well described as "the glory of decay" this need not be a season of sadness. The decay appears to be but a peaceful time in which nature rests, storing up strength for a fresh output of energy when springtime comes round once more. Autumn is never fully an end; for nature does not know the meaning of utter cessation from movement and growth. In a way, this golden season is part of the preparation for a new beginning. Those of us who live in the cooler regions of the world cannot help looking ahead beyond the approaching winter to the greening season of springtime and the colourful warmth of summer. In the dark days of winter we can recall in gladness the wonder of the good days that are now past, and then look ahead in hope to the future. Such musings can lead us on from what Shelley speaks of as "the deep, autumnal tone, sweet though in sadness," and regard it as "the trumpet of a prophecy" asking with him:

O wind.

If winter comes, can spring be far behind?

Even autumn's decay and winter's sleep speak to us of the operation of the law.

... Nothing dies to die for good
In clay or dust, in stone or wood,
But only rests awhile to keep
Life's ancient covenant with sleep.

The Wheel turns, bringing each season in its time. Day gives place to night, and night to day. Birth gives place to growth, growth to decay, and decay to death, and in due course from that which seems to be dead there springs forth new life again. So too does the Wheel turn for us, mirroring nature in our lives. We sow our seeds of wisdom or folly, and we reap our fruits of joy or despair. But beyond our present period of sowing and reaping, beyond that "winter's sleep" which will come to each one of us, there is the promise of a new beginning, for, "as when the day's work is ended, night brings the benison of sleep, so death is the ending of a larger day, and in the night that follows, every man finds rest, until he returns to fresh endeavour and to labours new."

Nirvana

A question often asked of Buddhists by those who have some slight acquaintance with the subject is: "What is Nirvana?" Before attempting an answer we would do well to bear in mind the warning implicit in that verse from Sir Edwin Arnold's "The Light of Asia:"

If any teach Nirvana is to cease,
Say unto such they lie.
If any teach Nirvana is to live
Say unto such they err.

Those who attempt to pronounce on Nirvana run the risk of speaking falsehood, or a half-truth at the best.

A reverent silence would seem most wise, but this will not satisfy the sceptic. In one form or another he is likely to ask the questions: "If Nirvana exists why can you not describe it? If you cannot describe it what reasons have you for supposing it exists?" But such questions, which at first seem so damaging, are really ill-conceived and show a failure on the part of the questioner to understand the nature of the problem. The fact is that all the most profound things of life defy our efforts to define them. This is the case with

love. Examples of love can be given, but love itself remains indefinable and indescribable. The same is true of beauty. We say a sunset is beautiful, likewise a poem, a symphony, a fragrant perfume and the touch of silk or velvet. But what have they in common that makes them beautiful? What is beauty? No one is able to tell us.

This problem of trying to define the indefinable—with which poets and philosophers have wrestled for centuries—also vexes the scientists who are driven on occasions to make statements which are contradictory and seemingly nonsensical. In his Reith Lecture of 1953—“Science and Common Understanding”—Professor Philip Oppenheimer stated: “To what appear to be the simplest questions, we will tend to give either no answer or an answer which at first sight will be reminiscent more of a strange catechism than of the straightforward answers of physical science. If we ask, for instance, whether the position of the electron remains the same, we must answer, “No;” if we ask whether the electron’s position changes with time, we must say “No;” if we ask whether the electron is at rest, we must say “No;” if we ask whether it is in motion, we must say “No.” And then he added significantly: “The Buddha has given such answers when interrogated as to the condition of man’s self after death.”

The dictionary definition of Nirvana—as given by Christmas Humphreys in *A Popular Dictionary of Buddhism*—is: “The supreme goal of Buddhist endeavour; release from the limitations of existence, freedom from rebirth attained by the extinguishing of all desire ... a state attainable in this life by right aspiration, purity of life, and the elimination of egoism.” As definitions go, none could be better, but it does not really tell us what Nirvana is like, nor enable us to appreciate the state of mind of those who have attained it. What exactly is Nirvana? When asked to define it the Buddha simply said: “Nirvana is!”

Why did the Buddha refuse to attempt a definition? The cynic might reply that it was because he himself did not know that ‘Nirvana’ is a meaningless word, a make-believe carrot to be dangled before the noses of gullible donkeys. The Buddha himself said it was because Nirvana is beyond all description. It cannot be defined, only experienced. This seems reasonable. There are some things that must be experienced; they cannot be described. How, for example, would one describe a sunset to a blind man—a man who has been blind since birth? What words could one use to describe the experience to him? This thought came to me when walking along the cliffs late one summer evening as I watched the magnificent spectacle of the sun making its majestic descent into the sea. Watching

the most beautiful sunset it has ever been my privilege to witness I was brought to the humble awareness that it would be utterly beyond my powers to describe it to anyone, least of all to someone who lacked the gift of sight. Later that evening I penned the first draft of what became the following poem.

A man born blind can never know
The beauty of the sunset glow,
No words can make him understand
The splendour of the vision grand.

Nirvana cannot be defined
Or comprehended by the mind.
For what is Ultimately Real
No creed is able to reveal.

The Teacher can but point ahead
Along the road that we must tread.
Who walks the Path at last shall see
With inward eyes, Reality.

My experience with the sunset helped me to understand why the Buddha never attempted to give precise definitions of Nirvana. What the Buddha did was not to define the goal, but to show the Path that leads to it. He sought not to describe the experience of Nirvana, but to show others the Way by which they could come to that experience for themselves. As

Francis Story wrote in “The Buddhist Doctrine of Nibbāna” (Nirvana) in Wheel 165/166:

“Rather than misrepresent the truth, the Buddha preserved his silence even when some people concluded that because he did not answer he did not know. But he gave an answer that was of a different order, and more convincing that any fanciful description could be. He said: ‘Practise the method of attaining Nibbāna that I have given in the Noble Eightfold Path. Then you will come to realise the truth for yourself.’

“That is the only way in which we can really come to understand what Nirvana is—by realising it ourselves and so seeing the truth face to face. We will then understand why it is that all questions relating to it, so long as they are couched in terms of opposites and alternatives, are wrongly put. Such questions puzzle us only because of the limitations of the mind bound by ignorance and the peculiar nature of life as we experience it.

“But while the Buddha refused to describe or define Nibbāna, he never hesitated when asked to make a positive affirmation. The reply then was always ‘Nibbāna is.’”

We cannot do better than echo the affirmation of the Lord Buddha and point like him to the Path which leads men to their goal.

The Psychological Barrier

One of the harsh lessons that we have to learn in this world is that life does not run smoothly, or at least not for very long. As we go through life we are constantly faced with problems—barriers which we must face and overcome. Without doubt the greatest barrier of all is the one which exists in our own mind, and may be called the psychological barrier. We are all familiar with this barrier, it comes in the shape of a conviction that a certain task is beyond our capabilities, though our friends constantly urge that it is within our powers. Not until we come to share their view can we hope to approach it with any degree of success.

People accept as a matter of course that some things will always be beyond the realm of human

possibilities, and in thus accepting these artificial limitations they condemn themselves to a life of mediocrity. The world of sport provides ample illustrations of this point. Athletes dreamed for generations of running a mile in four minutes, but it was only a dream and no one seriously thought it could be done. Runners reconciled themselves to the fact that the human frame could not propel itself over such a distance in such a short time. But there was one man who was not content with second-rate mediocrity, a man who turned his dreams into reality, a man who made up his mind he could do it—and did. That man was Roger Bannister, the first athlete in the world to run a mile in under four minutes. But the point to note is this: in the years that have followed Bannister's great feat, literally dozens of athletes all over the world have run a mile in under four minutes. Why should this be? Why none at all for generations, and then suddenly within the space of a few years literally dozens? The answer quite simply is that Bannister had shattered the psychological barrier. He had proved that what was once thought impossible was now well within the realms of possibility. And so all over the world men began to say, "If he can do it, so can I," and of course they did, for their limitation was not in their physical prowess but in their minds; and Bannister had taken that limitation away.

Or think of mountaineering. Since men first began climbing mountains they dreamed of climbing Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world. Many tried, but all failed, and soon people began to say it was impossible. And so it seemed, until in 1953 Edmond Hillary and Sherpa Tensing reached the top together. Now the interesting thing is this: since that day many others have been to the summit of Mount Everest. One Indian team has been up and down no less than three times. Why is this? Has Mount Everest shrunk? Has it suddenly become easier to climb? No, it is still as difficult as ever. But the difference is this: people now know that it is possible to reach the top, and so they do. Hillary and Tensing have broken down the psychological barrier.

And in more important things too our great men break down the barriers that keep us from realising our possibilities. I think the great contribution of the spiritual leaders of mankind is simply this: they have shown us what human beings have in them to become. It is so easy for us to reconcile ourselves to a life which is lived on a fairly low plane, to insist that "to err is human," to excuse our baser actions with the plea that no one can be expected to be perfect. We shelter behind our all too convenient clichés: "You can't expect men to behave like angels;" "I don't profess to be a saint;" "We're all animals anyway;"

“It’s only natural;” “Nobody’s perfect.” But our great men give the lie to all this. They show that life need not be ugly, it can be beautiful. It need not be base, it can be noble. It need not be selfish, it can be self-less. In a nutshell they have shown that a truly good life is possible, and that human beings have it in them to live lives of nobility and virtue.

It has always seemed to me that Buddhists have cause to be grateful that they have never followed the example of their Christian friends in deifying the founder of their religion. To deify one’s Teacher is to transfer him to another plane where one cannot hope to follow. What relevance has the example of any great Teacher to us if he was essentially different from us? God—or a god—can be worshipped, he cannot be emulated. Buddhists do not worship the Buddha, but try to do what is much more difficult—follow his example. They recognise that if he lived such a good life AS A MAN, then there is no reason why they should not succeed in living good lives too, for they realise that the difference between the Buddha and ourselves is not a difference in kind but a difference in degree, and that there is hope that even we can follow where he has led. If the Buddha, as a completely normal human being, having known the full range of human experience from the sensuousness of Oriental palace life to the rigours of ascetic discipline, could by

his own unaided efforts find the way to Enlightenment, then so may we. Many titles have been given to the Buddha out of reverence— but not worship—for him. I do not know that he has ever been called the Great Revealer, but that essentially is what he is, for he reveals our possibilities to us.

Men no longer regard it as impossible to climb Mount Everest, or to run a mile in four minutes. Hillary and Bannister have shown that it is possible, and many have followed where they have led. They have broken down the barrier. In the same way we can no longer regard as impossible the life of utter self-forgetfulness, the life of compassion and purity, of nobility and virtue, the life of high endeavour and moral excellence. We can no longer regard as impossible the hope of finding Enlightenment. The Buddha has shown us that it can be done, that it is within the realm of human possibilities. The psychological barrier is down. The way is clear for us to follow.

Table of Contents

Title page	2
The Twin Pillars	3
Harvest Thoughts	8
Nirvana	12
The Psychological Barrier	17