



The Quest for Meaning

However much the modern world may pride itself on its triumphs over the follies and foibles of the past, it appears that the progress we credit ourselves with has been bought at a price so steep as to throw into question the worth of our achievements. This price has been nothing less than the shared conviction that our lives are endowed with ultimate meaning. Though in earlier ages men and women lived in a space populated largely by figments of the collective imagination, they could still claim a precious asset that we sorely lack: a firm and buoyant belief that their everyday lives were encompassed by a penumbra of enduring significance stemming from their relation to a transcendent goal. Present-day attitudes, however, moulded by scientific reductionism and technocratic audacity, have combined forces to sweep away from our minds even the faint suspicion that our lives may possess any deeper meaning than material prosperity and technological innovation. For an increasing number of people today the consequence of this militancy has been a pervasive sense of meaninglessness. Cut loose from our moorings in a living spiritual tradition, we find ourselves adrift on a sea of confusion where all values seem arbitrary and relative. We float aimlessly along the waves of caprice, without any supreme purpose to serve as the polestar for our ideals, as the wellspring for inspired thought and action.

But just as little as nature can tolerate a vacuum, so humankind can little tolerate a complete loss of meaning: Thence, to escape the plunge into the abyss of meaninglessness, we grasp after flotsam, attempting to immerse ourselves in distractions. We pursue pleasure and power, seek to augment our wealth and status, surround ourselves with contraptions, invest our hopes in personal relationships that only conceal our own inner poverty. At the same time, however, that our absorption in distractions helps us to cope with the psychological void, it also stifles in us a deeper and still more insistent need—the longing for a peace and freedom that does not depend upon external contingencies. One of the great blessings of the Buddha's teaching is the remedy it can offer for the problem of meaninglessness so widespread in human life today. The Dhamma can serve as a source of meaning primarily because it provides us with the two requisites of a meaningful life: an ultimate goal for which to live, and a clear-cut but flexible set of instructions by which we can advance towards that goal from whatever station in life we start from.

In the Buddha's teaching the quest for ultimate meaning does not begin, as in the theistic religions, with propositions about a supernatural scheme of salvation to be assented to in faith: It begins, rather, by focusing upon an experiential problem right at the crux of human existence. The problem, of course, is the problem of suffering, the boundaries of which are shown to extend beyond our immediate subjection to pain, misery and sorrow, and to encompass all that is conditioned precisely because of its impermanence; its vulnerability, its lack of abiding substance.

The goal of the teaching, the unconditioned element which is Nibbāna, then comes to have a decisive bearing upon our vital concerns because it is apprehended as the cessation of suffering. Though in its own nature it defies all the limiting categories of conceptual thought, as the cessation of suffering Nibbāna provides the final answer to our innermost yearnings for an imperishable peace, for complete freedom from sorrow, anxiety and distress. The way that the

quest for this goal intersects with the course of our everyday life is made plain by the Buddha's analysis of the cause of suffering. The cause of suffering, the Buddha holds, lies within ourselves, in our selfish craving conjoined with blinding ignorance, in the three evil roots that taint our normal engagement with the world: greed, hate and delusion. Thence the freedom from suffering that we seek lies in the eradication of these three roots.

To orient our life towards the goal of deliverance from suffering requires that we tread the path that leads to and merges with the goal. This path is the Noble Eightfold Path, which brings an end to suffering and bondage by enabling us to extricate the causes of suffering embedded in our hearts. We begin the path exactly where we are, in the midst of error and defilement, and by clarifying our views, transforming our attitudes, and purifying our minds, we advance by stages towards the direct realisation of the ultimate good.

If the goal towards which the path points lies beyond the pale of conditioned existence, to walk the eightfold path is to discover within the confines of conditioned existence dimensions of meaning previously unknown. This richness of meaning stems from a twofold source. One is the recognition that the following of the path brings a diminishment of suffering for ourselves as well as others, and at the same time an enhancement of joy, mental equipoise and peace. The other source of meaning is the conviction that the values we are pursuing are not merely subjective and arbitrary, but are grounded in an absolutely objective order, in the very nature of things.

As we embark on the way to the end of suffering, the final goal no longer appears merely as a distant shore but becomes refracted in our experience as the challenge of overcoming the unwholesome roots, and of assisting our fellow beings to do the same. This challenge, the task of actualising our own good and the good of others, becomes at the same time life's inner core of meaning: to transmute greed into generosity and relinquishment, to replace hate with love and compassion, and to dispel delusion with the light of liberative wisdom.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Exploring the Wheels

Early Western Buddhists. Edited by Francis Story (Wheel No. 42/43)

Recently a group of international intellectuals tried to find a phrase that would describe our present times, in the way that historians write of The Age of Reason, or The Baroque Era, or The Industrial Age. But a metaphor for today would have to include the atrocities of genocide, the fear of a nuclear apocalypse, the destruction of the earth's resources, the mass migration of refugees, as well as space exploration and scientific technology. It would need to account for the changes in artistic forms, the devaluation of ethics, and the increasing loss of traditional values, all from a global perspective. Lance Morrow in *Time* states: "In a world of blindingly accelerating change, language can no longer fashion its metaphors fast enough to stabilise people with a spiritual counterlife, and so self-knowledge may deteriorate to a moral blur ... The eyes do not have time to adjust to either the light or the dark."

In the early years of this twentieth century, a similar situation existed. New modes of artistic expression were taking place, reflecting the changes of the times: a strong reaction against the materialism of the 19th century, the ferment caused by Darwin's theory of evolution, a revolt against the traditional religious teachings which were found inadequate. These changes took place within a setting of increased anxiety due to political insecurity, and the mounting tensions of pre-world war instability. A need was felt for some teaching that would reconcile the material and the spiritual aspects of life, and for several renowned intellectuals Buddhism fulfilled that

need. The Buddhist Review was founded in 1909, and for the first time articles were written by Western Buddhists in the language of the West. These writers were pioneers, and as pioneers, dared to express their beliefs fearlessly in the face of not merely criticism, but sometimes open hostility. They carried on, writing with earnestness, with sincerity, with integrity.

In *Early Western Buddhists* Francis Story has compiled excerpts of their writings from *The Buddhist Review* 1909–1914. What is of great interest to us today is the way in which these writers applied the ideas Of Buddhism to their own situation, and the way they could, through Buddhism, see beyond the current problems, focusing instead on the problems which beset man in every historical age, in every human situation. These essays were written “yesterday,” but they could have been written today—or tomorrow.

The editor, J.E. Ellam, introduced this editorial in the first issue of the magazine:

The most striking phenomenon of our times, a process which has been going on for more than a decade, is the growing confusion in the Religious Thought of the West. With the weakening of theological dicta has proceeded an indifference to the higher, more spiritual aspects of life, together with tendencies towards gross superstitions which find their expression in diverse, and most unhealthy forms of heterodoxy.... The Buddhist method is now, as it has ever been, to refrain from the condemnation of other modes of thought, but simply, gently, yet with emphasis, to set forth its own teachings ...

An article by Mrs. Rhys Davids which appeared in the same issue raises these points:

Well, it is one thing to talk about achievements of modern science and advance of modern thought, and another thing to claim for this age in general that it is imbued with the scientific spirit, or that the views and conduct of the average man or woman are governed thereby.... Hence any movement of thought will have, more and more, to cope with the scientific spirit, and will stand or fall largely by its sanction. And hence all who call themselves Buddhists, or who are interested in spreading a knowledge of Buddhist doctrine or, at least, the spirit of that doctrine, should look into this claim that is made for it.

War was imminent in the early years of this century, and indeed, seems to be established as a permanent feature of the twentieth century. Marr Murray in his article “The Basis of Peace” writes:

What is war but the direct result of the sensual glorification of the ego? Victory, lordship, empire and the rest of them prove upon examination to be composed of nothing but the gross lust of the great “I am,” decked out with the flimsiest of tinsels; and like all lusts, they serve but to pile misery upon misery. World Peace must therefore arise from the subjugation of the ego, from the higher thinking and higher doing of humanity; in other words, an advance in morality must be the forerunner of Peace.

These excerpts reveal the anxieties of their age: the decline of spiritual aims, the advances of science, the aggression of man. But their anxieties are our anxieties, too. In “The Value of Buddhism to the Western Mind” Victor E. Kroemer writes of the root of these problems—and its solution:

What is the use of seeking solutions for problems in directions that only intensify the causes by destroying the effects, when in philosophical Buddhism we have a clear statement of all the causes which produce all the troubles and sorrows of existence? The cause of sorrow is desire, the cessation of sorrow is attained by conquering love of self and lust for life! Apply this to any Western problem, and there is the antidote. People will continue to have sorrow as long as their minds are centred in the causes that produce

sorrow, and will be released from sorrow when the causes of the cessation of sorrow are found and practised. True, sorrow in the larger sense is an outcome of manifested existence, and here again the antidote to sorrow lies in the cessation of birth and death; the overcoming of the desire for manifested existence.

The twelve articles in this collection cover such topics as karma, Buddhism and society, Buddhism on a day-to-day basis, the need for a personal evolution, and meditation.

The problems which these writers faced in 1909–1914 are the problems which we face now, eighty years later. Or perhaps they are the same problems—but different, for now the swift-moving current of change moves ever faster. But the solutions to the problems faced then are the same solutions to the problems of today, solutions which are found in the never-changing perennial teachings of the Buddha.

—Ayya Nyanasiri

Past and Future

As 1989 draws to a close, we can look back over the past year with a thought of satisfaction that in spite of the tumultuous events that have been ravaging Sri Lanka, we have not lost heart but to the contrary have become more firmly committed to our mission of disseminating the Dhamma. Delays have been frequent and at times frustrating, but to the best of our ability we have endeavoured to adhere to our regular schedule and to fulfil our service to our many members and friends. We feel consoled by the numerous letters of concern we have received from abroad and are glad that we could maintain our full quota of serial publications and issue several full-size book publications as well.

Over the past year the material quality of our publications has continued to improve, as several of our readers have pointed out in their correspondence with us. For this we have to thank in particular two people—one a young friend from West Germany who has helped us immensely with typesetting equipment, the other our Colombo printer, Mr. M. Karunaratne, who always attends carefully to our printing requirements.

Among the books we released this year were two new titles. One is Jack Kornfield's *Living Buddhist Masters*, long recognised as an important source book on modern Theravada Buddhist meditation and a work we are proud to issue under the imprint of BPS. The other new title is Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* and its commentaries, *The Discourse on the Fruits of Recluseship*. This book, like the author's previous translations, will be welcome by serious students of the Dhamma, from whom it merits close and careful study. We also reissued two titles that had been unavailable for some time—Nyanatiloka Mahathera's invaluable *Buddhist Dictionary* and *Last Days of the Buddha*. The last is our translation of the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, now removed from the Wheel series and issued instead in a handsome small-book format which makes it a worthy acquisition and a lovely gift.

Looking to the future we are happy to inform our readers that we have a fine lineup of titles scheduled for the coming year. We will begin the Wheel series of 1990 with a collection of essays on a key Buddhist virtue—*Dana: The Practice of Giving*—which will include Dr. Lily de Silva's comprehensive textual study of the subject. In midyear we will issue a tract on insight meditation long unavailable in the West, *Satipatthana Vipassana*, by the late Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma. And we will conclude the year with an important translation recently discovered among the papers of the late Bhikkhu Nanamoli—*The Discourse on Right View, the Samma Ditthi Sutta* and its commentary.

We regret that owing to minor technical problems we were not able to issue the *Udana* this past year, as we intended; but now the problems have been solved and the book is at the printers, to appear very soon, we hope. We are confident that this new translation of the Buddha's "Inspired Utterances" by John Ireland will make a wonderful addition to every reader's collection of Buddhist books and will earn for it the veneration it so much deserves. Later in the year we plan to publish a beautiful collection of texts on the qualities of the Buddha—*Buddha, My Refuge*—drawn from the Pali suttas by Bhikkhu Khantipalo.

We receive many orders for several standard publications of ours that to our regret have gone out of print. Particular mention may be made of three big titles—big both in importance and in substance—*The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, *The Manual of Abhidhamma (Abhidhammattha Sangaha)*, and *The Path of Freedom (Vimuttimaggā)*. Be assured that we are doing our best to get these books back in print as soon as we can. The *Visuddhimagga* is being recomposed from scratch in a new edition printed with sharp and clear types. The first proofs have already been corrected—the most daunting stage—and we hope the book will be available again in early 1990. The *Manual of Abhidhamma* is being revised and corrected for a new improved edition of enhanced accuracy. The *Vimuttimaggā* may be delayed until the end of the year, but it will eventually reappear.

We extend to all of our readers our sincere thanks and appreciation for bearing with us patiently as we operate with limited facilities in a strife-torn country under conditions that at times have appeared very uncertain. We are grateful to you for your staunch support both moral and financial, and we look forward to serving you with literature on the Dhamma that will measure up to the highest standards of authenticity, accuracy and personal relevance.

We enjoy very much receiving your comments on our publications and suggestions for Improvements, so please do not hesitate to write to us.

A Pali Glossary

During his lifetime the great English scholar-monk Van. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli compiled a *Pali-English Glossary of Buddhist Technical Terms*, drawn from his extensive readings in the Pali Canon and commentaries. This glossary consists principally of (1) Buddhist doctrinal terms, and (2) words and word meanings not found in the Pali Text Society's *Pali-English Dictionary*. It consists of about 100 pages in typescript, and gives not only English renderings but textual references, etymology, and analytical enumerations.

At the BPS we are now entering this glossary on computer disc with the intention of issuing a printed edition, which we believe will be highly useful for Buddhist scholars and students of the Pali texts. Our problem is that we have no clear idea of how much demand there will be for such a glossary—rough estimates of the need range from 25 copies to 10001. Thus we are unsure how many copies to print, or even what method should be used to print it.

To give us some idea of the extent of the interest in this glossary, we would be grateful for your co-operation. If you would be interested in acquiring this glossary for yourself, please drop us a note to inform us. If you know of others who also might be interested, let us know approximately how many others. Your response to this request is not an order, but you will be given priority consideration when the glossary does become available. Address your reply to The Editor at the BPS address.

Thank you.

Guidelines to Sutta Study

When the Buddha had finished expounding his first discourse, there took place an event which bore within itself a momentous significance. This event is described very succinctly in the sutta, so succinctly in fact that a hasty reader might even skip over it, yet upon its occurrence hung the future fate of the Buddha's mission in the world. The description immediately follows the exposition of the discourse, though it refers to the event as having taken place at some unspecified time in the course of the sermon: "While the discourse was being expounded, there arose in the venerable Kondañña the spotless, immaculate vision of the Dhamma: Whatever is subject to arising is all subject to cessation."

This event, the arising of the "vision of the Dhamma" in the venerable Kondañña, was the obtaining of the first noble path, the path of stream-entry, which is also the first glimpse of enlightenment. The goal of the Buddha's teaching, perfect freedom from all defilements, cannot be achieved at a single stroke but must be approached in four stages of realisation—the four paths of stream-entry, once-return, non-return and arahatship. Each of these paths eliminates a fixed quantum of defilements, thereby making accessible a corresponding degree of liberation designated the "fruit" of the path. Although the fourth path eradicates the subtlest residue of defilements and thence brings the practice of the Dhamma to completion with the "taintless deliverance of the mind," the attainment of the first path precipitates the most important inward transformation in the practitioner, which sets him irreversibly in the direction of liberation. This path receives its name, stream-entry, because with its attainment the disciple enters the stream of the Dhamma, which will lead without fail to the final goal in a maximum of seven lives. Those who have not reached this path remain *puthujjanas*, worldlings or commoners, still subject to all the uncertainties of aimless wandering in *saṃsāra*. But with the attainment of the path of stream-entry, the practitioner undergoes a new spiritual birth, entering the fold of the Buddha's noble disciples.

The sutta describes the attainment of the first path by way of its most distinctive characteristic, as an experience of vision, "the spotless, immaculate vision of the Dhamma." This vision, emerges from the insight contemplation of the three characteristics—impermanence, suffering and not self—through which the venerable Kondañña must have passed rapidly while he listened to the Buddha's discourse. When this current of insight reaches its climax, it penetrates the unconditioned element, *Nibbāna*, simultaneously fathoming the radical impermanence of everything conditioned: "Whatever is subject to arising is all subject to cessation." The next portion of the sutta involves a shift in attention. So far the focus has been on the Buddha teaching the five ascetics, highlighting the concrete human framework within which the Dispensation unfolds. Now the focus shifts to the vaster cosmic and universal dimension of the teaching. When the discourse is completed, the gods in each tier of the celestial hierarchy, who must have also been attending to the sermon, raise a cry which they hear t. from the gods of the lower tier, until the same cry resounds through the heavens up to the Brahma-world: "The matchless Wheel of the Dhamma has been set rolling by the Blessed One, not to be stopped by any recluse or brahmin or by anyone in the world." The ten-thousandfold world system shakes and rocks and quakes, and a great measureless radiance appears surpassing the divine splendour of the gods.

Then, just as suddenly as the sutta's spotlight had been expanded to take in this panorama of celestial glory, with equal suddenness we are again brought back to the concrete human dimension with the Buddha's joyful exclamation: "Kondañña has understood! Kondañña has understood!" For the Buddha this one event, almost eclipsed by the cosmic epiphany, must have been a cause of deep consolation. It confirmed his trust that with all their imperfections human

beings could comprehend the Dhamma, and thence that his sojourn in the world as a spiritual teacher would in time bring forth abundant fruit.

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.

For more information about the BPS and our publications, please visit our Webster, or contact:

The Administrative Secretary
Buddhist Publication Society
P.O. Box 61
54 Sangharaja Mawatha
Kandy, Sri Lanka
E-mail: bps@bps.lk
Web site: <http://www.bps.lk>
Tel: 0094 81 223 7283
Fax: 0094 81 222 3679