



## The Buddhist Goal of Nibbāna and Worldly Life

The attainment of the goal of Nibbāna is the sole aim remote or immediate of both Buddhist layperson and monk. The Buddhist moral life has this attainment as its ultimate objective. Given the facts about the nature of the universe and ourselves, this goal was considered in Buddhism as the highest and the supreme which each and every individual ought to attain sooner or later. In the history of Buddhist ideology many metaphysical questions have been raised regarding the nature of Nibbāna, and many answers that distort the original teaching have been given to these questions. Yet it may be said that according to the Buddha, the goal of Nibbāna has much to do with life in this immediate world. This however, contradicts the prevalent opinion among a large circle of scholars that Buddhism is an “otherworldly,” a “life-denying” and a “salvation religion” having nothing to do with this world. Buddhism does not see any opposition between an improvement of the conditions of this world and human striving for attaining liberation from suffering (*dukkha*).

Degeneration in the affairs of the world is, according to Buddhism, closely linked with the lack of a sound moral ideal. The ideal of Nibbāna, when correctly interpreted, introduces precisely the kind of ideal that is necessary for the promotion of a better and harmonious world order. Beings who pursue the goal of Nibbāna may be considered as an essential component in an ideal society. Such beings are the most competent to provide moral direction to society, without which no stable society can be founded. Contrary to the opinion of those who tried to introduce artificial dichotomies into Buddhism in terms of such categories as “Nibbānic Buddhism” and “Kammatic Buddhism,” the Buddhist view of an ideal social order effectively integrates its liberation ideal with the ideal of the creation and maintenance of a righteous social order.

According to the most authentic teachings of the Buddha, descriptions of Nibbāna are given in ethical and psychological terms. It is described as a state of moral purification, knowledge and happiness. The Buddha was interested in a positive characterization of Nibbāna only to the extent that it is attainable in this very life. He did not attempt, nor did he think it profitable, to speculate on the after-death state of a person who has attained Nibbāna. Suffering resulting from factors which are not within the power of the human will to avoid, such as old age, decay and death that we inherit with birth, all being instances of the transient nature of things, can according to Buddhism, be totally ended only by ending the process of saṃsāra.

Ending the process of saṃsāra occurs with the eradication of greed, hatred and delusion, which is the same as the attainment of Nibbāna. This signifies a radical moral and psychological transformation of the individual amounting to a total elimination of unwholesome mental traits and the perfection of wholesome mental traits. This latter aspect of Nibbāna has significant implications for the social life of this world.

Human suffering with the exception of that part of it which is brought about by natural material causes, is to a large extent a result of human action itself. Interpersonal relationships, particularly in terms of the workings of human social institutions are largely determined by the sort of individuals of which society is constituted. Harmony and conflict, war and peace, justice and injustice depend largely on the general moral standards prevailing in human societies.

The bulk of human suffering is, according to Buddhism, produced by human depravity. Violent and aggressive acts of war and terrorism, deprivation of basic human rights by dominant groups exercising political authority, drug addiction, alcoholism and sexual crimes are but a few glaring examples of social evils of the contemporary world. Buddhism sees these evils as rooted in greed, hatred and delusion, which are antithetical to the traits of character to be developed by those pursuing the goal of Nibbāna. According to Buddhism, a person who is greedy, hateful and deluded, overcome by greed, hatred and delusion not only commits deeds which cause suffering to oneself and others but also encourages others to behave as one does.

Buddhism believes that the cultivation of wholesome traits of character and the elimination of unwholesome ones by each individual is essential for the promotion of a harmonious social order. In so far as Nibbāna involves the elimination of greed, hatred and delusion and the path leading to it is a progressive fulfillment of this ideal of perfection, the pursuit of the goal of Nibbāna has important social implications. If it is agreed that human depravity consisting of unchecked greed and hatred, fed by delusion are the universal causes of social conflict, suffering and evil, then one cannot deny the universal social relevance of the Buddhist concept of Nibbāna for the betterment of the affairs of this world.

—Prof. P.D. Premasiri

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## Notes and News

We are happy to inform the Buddhist public, Especially in and around the city of Colombo, that we have expanded our sales activities by taking over the Management of Narada Centre bookshop at 380/9 Sarana Road, Colombo 7. Here all our publications will also be made available to retail as well as wholesale customers. In addition to this the books that were being published by the Sri Subodharama Samithiya at Peradeniya will also be distributed in the future by our society. The reprinting of any of those publications will also be undertaken by us, if it becomes necessary.

We have virtually completed all work in our new building and are presently in the process of shifting our stores there. We are also making some improvements to our office, library etc. in order to make them much more accessible to the Buddhist Public. A new spacious auditorium with more facilities will enable us to conduct our annual sanghika dana, the dhamma discussions, bhavana classes etc. in more congenial surroundings.

We take this opportunity to evoke the blessings of the Triple Gem on everyone who helped us to make our building project a success.

## Titles Available From Other Publishers

- *An Introduction to Theravada Abhidhamma* by G.D. Sumanapala (Associate Professor of Pali and Buddhist Studies — University of Kelaniya).
- *Buddhism its Religion and Philosophy* — Professor W.S. Karunaratne — Published in 1988 by Buddhist Research Society, Singapore.
- *Fundamentals of Buddhist Ethics* — Gunapala Dharmasiri — Third Edition 1998 (Revised and Extended).
- *The Chinese Version of Dhammapada* — Translated with Introduction and annotations by *Bhikkhu Kualalampur Dhammajothi* — Published by the Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka.

## Reprints Released

- *Rebirth as Doctrine and Experience* — Essays and Case Studies — Francis Story.
- *Buddhist Reflections on Death* — V.F. Gunaratne (Wh 102/103)
- *Foundations of Mindfulness* — Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta — Translated by Nyanasatta Thera (Wh 19).
- *The Four Sublime States* — Nyanaponika Mahāthera
- *Practice of Loving-Kindness* — Ñāṇamoli Mahāthera

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## Guidelines to Sutta Study

### Parābhava Sutta

It was the intention of the Buddha, Sakyamuni Gotama, soon after his enlightenment, to dispatch his first batch of the liberated sixty disciples, each one going singly on his own way, to preach the newly discovered *dhamma* for the welfare and well-being of the entire world (*bahujana-hitāya bahujana-sukhāya atthāya hitāya devamanussānaṃ*). The world of the Buddha never had chosen people, no *persona grata*, whom he favoured over and above others.

On the other hand, the world, both of gods and men, looked up to him for guidance to work out their success in life and to gain their final salvation. For the Buddha was their chosen guide and instructor (*satthā devamanussānaṃ*). We have already referred to in an earlier essay dealing with the Maṅgala Sutta that all beings in the universe, including the extra-terrestrial or *devā*, wanted to know from the Buddha as to what really generated success (*maṅgalāni*) in lives of people in the world. Many gods and men speculated as to what generates success in their lives. *bahū devā manussā ca maṅgalāni acintayum*.

Fully sensitive to the presence in the world of failure as the invariable complement of success, the Buddha appears to have been asked by the same interrogators who inquired about success as to what brings about failure or one's downfall in life (*kiṃ parābhavato mukhaṃ*). It is not to be forgotten that all religious instructions begin at the level of men and women of the world. The average thinking pattern of the world is unmistakably gross and mundane. It is such thinking which contributes to the material productivity of life in the world.

It is true that man shall not live by bread alone. But it is also true at the same time that he needs it for his sustenance “All life is founded on some form of subsistence or food,” (*sabbe sattā āhāraṭṭhitikā*) and that he has to earn it himself by fair means. That is why Buddhism goes to great lengths in dealing with means and modes of acquiring the wherewithal which makes the lives of humans on earth acceptably rich and comfortable, making their lives happy and comfortable, (*sukhī attānaṃ pariharanti*). This brings into the basic teachings of early Buddhism a great wealth of social philosophy which prepares the average worldling to undertake his stupendous religious journeying to reach his spiritual goal of Nirvāṇa by putting his house in order here and now. In his admonitions to the people of the world, the Buddha therefore has to refer to a great many problems of day to day life. These are down-to-earth realities dealt with in early Buddhist teachings which have essentially a sociological relevance like family relationships, domestic harmony, economic justifiability, community development etc.

No Buddhist scholarship, with whatsoever sophistication, needs to run away from these nor to stigmatize these as being too rustic or clay-footed. Or believe that the Buddha would not delve into such common place themes. Or argue that a Buddha does not need to appear in the world to instruct on these. Buddhism does not need to be made to look supersonic with super-dharma approaches or metaphysical interpretations and elaborations. Let us diligently keep out of Buddhist studies such attempts to filter these original down-to-earth realistic teachings through layers of imaginary and mysterious metaphysical strainers. We fail to see any justification, apart from being trendy with the rest of the community, for these supersonic flights and their newly delineated alliances and alignments as transcendental teachings or *paramattha-desanā*. Let us now turn our attention to the sutta under discussion, namely the Parābhava. The word *parābhava* itself means decline, deterioration, i.e. the downfall of a human, man or woman, as a social being. The genesis of the sutta, that is how the sutta came to be preached by the Buddha, is structured in the same pattern as that of the Maṅgala. Beings of the universe, including the extra-terrestrial, referred to as *devā*, are said to be interested in this problem of decline or *parābhava*. As for the devas as participants in this episode, it would have made very little sense at that time, quite contrary to the wisdom of some modern students of Buddhism today, both monks and laymen, to refer to these beings as classes of extra-privileged humans.

The sutta begins by saying that it is the conformity to norms of approved good behaviour (*dhamma-kāmo*) that leads to progress and well-being while rejection of such norms (*dhamma-dessī*) leads to decline and deterioration. We must immediately turn our attention to the word dhamma in this context. As we examine in detail the causes that lead to inevitable decline in society, we cannot but be impressed by the social considerations which are reflected regarding the security of the individual, community and the larger social organization of the world. Amazingly they are all within the scope of the said dhamma.

An unmistakable choice of the wild, disorderly and unjust [*asat*] marks the beginning of decline. Slothful, lethargic, unenterprising and lost in the crowds [*sabhāsālā*] one is said to be prone to decline and perish. As the fourth item in the list, the sutta brings up the care and maintenance of parents by children, by children who have the capacity to do so (*pahusanti na bharati*). Buddhist teachings bring up this issue of *mātā-pitu-upaññhāna* (attending on one’s mother and father) and *mātāpetti-bhara* (supporting one’s parents) again and again as a basis for the growth of human culture and that as a stepping stone on the path of Nibbanic aspirations. It is emphatically stated that an upholder of such virtues is called a *sappurisa* “a person who supports his parents ... is called a man of virtue.” (*mātāpettibharaṇ jantuṃ ... āhu sappuriso iti*) It seems most illogical to agree with those exponents of the Essence Of Buddhism or *Paramattha Desanā* who choose to say that the “Buddha was not born to this world, after having perfected the ten-fold preparations for many thousand eons, for the purpose of teaching the world a generally accepted fundamental social obligation of this nature or to vindicate the veracity of

the established ethics of the society.” This, we believe, far from upgrading it, leads to serious derailment of Buddhism. Closely following on parental care comes the respectful behaviour towards one’s religious clergy in society. They are indeed considered as part of the regular society. They are not to be cheated on any account (*musāvādena vañceti*). Conscientious recognition and productive and fruitful generosity towards fellow members of one’s own community seem to rank high as contributing towards the harmonious integration of society. Strictly individualistic enjoyment of possessions or *eko bhunñjati sādāni* is severely frowned upon. Respect for one’s communal groups is upheld as a virtue for strengthening social solidarity. Addiction or being addicted to women, wine and gambling is equally censured as a serious cause of social degradation and downfall. It primarily eats into one’s economic resources and continually drains away one’s earnings (*laddhaṃ laddhaṃ vināseti*). Healthy marital relations within the community, without any violation to conjugal fidelity and domestic harmony, is viewed with adequate seriousness. It is finally hinted at that whosoever aspires to be a ruler of the land must be a person of adequate economic resources. In the absence of such security, a head of state is apparently driven to seek alliances with vicious and unwholesome bargaining groups who promise to support a weak and tottering aspirant to political leadership. Herein lies the wisdom of ancient social and political philosophy of the Buddha. —Ven. Prof. Dhammavihari

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## Book Review

*The Connected Discourses of The Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom Publications (Boston) in association with the Buddhist Publication Society, Sri Lanka, 2000, originally in two volume, now available in a single volume. pp.2080, ISBN 0861 711, 688, £95.

The publication of this new English translation of the Pali Saṃyutta Nikāya (*Connected Discourses of the Buddha*) should be of great interest to practitioners and scholars of Buddhism alike.

The original Pali edition of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, prepared by L. Feer between 1884–1898, and published by the Pali Text Society served as the basis for the Pali Text Society’s five-volume translation *The Book of the Kindred Saying* by Rhys-Davids and Woodward, which was produced between 1917 and 1930.

The translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya by Bhikkhu Bodhi is based on a wider variety of Pali textual sources than was available either to Feer in his pioneering editorial work or to the Rhys-Davids and Woodward in their translation. Bhikkhu Bodhi calls his own translation a hybrid, as it is based on Pali editions coming from different lines of textual transmission. This allows him a greater choice in selecting what he considers to be the correct readings.

The Saṃyutta Nikāya obtains its name from the method used for dividing the topics covered within the text. Hence *Saṃyutta* meaning in Pali “connected” or “joined” refers to the way in which the suttas of this *nikāya* are compiled by grouping similar topics together in the same way that the Aṅguttara Nikāya groups topics, in numerical lists, although the word can also mean “section”. The Saṃyutta Nikāya consists of 56 *saṃyuttas* (sections), which each deals with a

certain topic, name or doctrinal issue, and they are divided among five *vaggas* (divisions or chapters). The organization of the translation is systematic and logical. A general introduction to the entire work deals with matters such as how Bhikkhu Bodhi initially undertook the translation project and what criteria were used in the selection of the Pali editions to be consulted. The five *vaggas* (books) of the Saṃyutta Nikāya have been treated as the main divisions of the work. It may be asked why a new translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya is necessary when there is already one complete English translation and numerous anthologies in existence. The answer is twofold: firstly, the Pali Text Society translation was a pioneering first attempt at rendering this work into English; secondly, knowledge of Buddhism and Buddhist doctrines has progressed markedly since the issue of the original Pali Text Society translation. Regarding the first of these points, anyone who has read the Pali Text Society translation is immediately struck by the dated use of English. Not only are there numerous instances of Victorian English usage but there are also many words that are decidedly Christian in connotation. Thus terms in the old translation like *brethren*, *Lord*, *Exalted One*, *Law*, *saint* and so on have an irksome ring to the contemporary reader. It is probably true that each generation requires its own translation in order to appeal to changing values and to reflect the changing English language. This is not to denigrate the earlier translators but only to say that they were people of their own era who could not have translated in any other way.

The second point is more important. As the Pali Text Society began to publish the Rhys-Davids and Woodward translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the only Pali-English dictionary available was that by Childers. Good though this was, and still is, the problem of how to render Pali technical terminology into English had not been solved. It has still not been entirely satisfactorily solved, but at least there is a general consensus on the translation of most of the important technical terms says Bhikkhu Bodhi, (vol. 1, pp. 42–52), giving his reasoning for choosing one English term in preference to another.

He has for the most part followed the conventional translation terms used in the academic world, thereby making his work acceptable in academic circles and also to Buddhist practitioners who need meaningful translations of these difficult terms.

The Pali Text Society translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya was the first attempt to render the entire Saṃyutta Nikāya into English. This new translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi is a considerable improvement on it and will supersede the earlier translation. It is a painstaking work of considerable scholarship for an individual translator over a ten-year period. It has the remarkable characteristic of being both readable and a reliable reflection of the original Pali. It also has an extremely useful set of appendices; these include concordances of verse parallels and sutta parallels, which are invaluable for easy location of similar verses or suttas. There is also a comprehensive Pali-English glossary and a set of indexes dealing with subjects, proper names and similies, which allow for easy cross-referencing of doctrines or people mentioned in the text. This work can be read as a simple translation, to obtain an understanding of the broad scheme and content of the Saṃyutta Nikāya or on a more scholarly level, by making reference to the notes and appendices in order to understand its relationship to other works in the Pali Canon.

[abridged]

—Sean Gaffney

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