



BIRKEN FOREST MONASTERY

Newsletter No. 14 Spring 2003

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ABBOT'S NEWS

by Venerable Sona

"Don't worry, everything is out of control." A phrase I often repeat to dhamma students and on which I also frequently reflect. It is a truth one can rely on in these "uncertain" times (as if there were some other kind of times). Ageing, illness, death, loss and, not so obviously, responsibility for one's own actions, are nicely in our face in this over-informed age.

The only remedy is to stop looking for refuge where it cannot be found, in the reshuffling of the world around us, and to internalise attitudes which allow anxiety to subside at the core of our being because they are in line with the way

things really are. We need to embrace our fragility so that we do not make the mistake of clinging to some fleeting situation.

In fragility we trust.

Renunciation is another way of saying that it is wise to let go of what cannot be grasped in the first place: people, places, identities and securities. We should ask ourselves, if we want to know where our fear comes from "what do I have to lose?" The answer to this will show us where our work lies.

"REMOTE POSSIBILITIES" & THE VIRTUES OF E-MAIL: COMMUNICATING WITH BIRKEN

Many of our readers are well aware of the frustrations that can accompany attempts to contact Birken by phone. Because of our remote location we do not have a regular telephone "land link" and must use cell service, which unfortunately has a weak signal and is *very expensive*. (E.g., we are billed even when you phone us.) Alternatives are regularly considered but tend to be no less costly.

On the other hand our satellite web service is quick and reliable. We are therefore asking that **whenever possible** people use **e-mail** as the preferred method for getting in touch. Underscoring this request is our recent decision to use a less expensive monthly telephone "package." This will only work if we keep telephone use to low levels.

<< [meditate @ birken.ca](mailto:meditate@birken.ca) >>

BIRKEN LIFE & EVENTS

by *Samanera Pavaro*

Thinking over recent newsletters I'm struck by how many words have been devoted to the prosaic features of monastery life: ditches, 2x6s, concrete trucks, nail guns.... Admittedly, attempts to delete all such reference from the current edition have not been successful. Wholesale construction at Birken will be slowing down this year, as so many items on our "must-do" list have become completed; nevertheless, several projects will occupy a good deal of our time during the next few months. As usual, details appear below. Nevertheless, I've determined to *begin* this report on a different, shall we say less "earth-bound," footing.

Speaking of birds. For some reason—perhaps it was the presence of Ajahn Viradhammo in the Fall, an attentive admirer of birds, or perhaps it's been Heather wandering around with her bird book under the tutelage of February guests Lorne and Merna Tesarski—for some reason birds have come to mind with some frequency this retreat.

Crows have been much in evidence, with their windy wing-sound (*shoof-shoof-shoof*) coming to the ear during afternoons on the walking path. They're a contented lot this winter, feeding on daily rations of kitchen scraps personally delivered by their amiable benefactor George. Of course, we associate crows with their rowdy "in-your-face" call, but the repertoire of expression produced by these commonplace birds is actually quite astounding. In solo flight they occasionally seem to mumble to themselves, or, perhaps when amused(?) to release a soft, echoed "*twooq ... twooq*"; sometimes I'm certain they emit little chuckles. *Note that these are all inexpert impressions.*

But the most surprising bird sound emanating from our environs comes directly from the library of cartoon sound-effects. I wonder how many of you remember (bear with me) the noise made by the Road Runner whenever it would burst away from the hapless, underfed Coyote? While I'm certain the crow possesses the *wit* for this, I've yet to spot the bird it actually issues from. (*Information welcome.*)

A brief diary:

March 12th: the first goose arrived, or at least made a fly-by, today. It offers a sign of spring's approach, even with a foot of condensed snow and weeks of unpredictable weather ahead.

March 15th, looking up from my walking path: a circling pair of geese, flying in tight formation. Their no-nonsense manner has the markings of a reconnaissance mission. It can't be long, now.

March 17th: several pairs of geese are now beginning to get a feel for the marsh. Most often they reserve early mornings and evenings to erupt into their communal honking and social commotion. Inexplicably, to me, one pair has settled away from the marsh, up in the forest beyond Mon's kuti. No sign, yet, of the Birken Ducks. ...

Much of our retreat has been spent in mild El Niño temperatures, mild enough to invite the return of red-winged black birds in mid-February (Samanera Nanda took note: the 13th). Although welcome, their exquisite, melodious trill, seemed a little too soon, perhaps a little too hopeful. Sure enough a grey cold front made a home here in early March, stilling their music for a time. Their silence made me wonder, how do such beings sustain themselves in bitter cold? Are they subject to desperation; do they ever *worry*? Might a bird succumb to death with feelings of loneliness, regret? What of acceptance? Does their nature permit them to arouse any of the patient endurance Ajahn Chah so often praised? ... Are such questions pure whimsy?



Retreat news. Supplementing Birken's monastic and steward residents, this year, we once again welcomed several long-term guests. Without ado, they all managed to blend into the resident community, participating in the rhythms of daily chores, sitting and silence. I find my mind moves to respect for these friends who make such efforts in the midst of busy lives to devote several mid-winter weeks, and *themselves*, in this manner.

Retreat schedules tend to vary considerably from those over the other nine months. Early in the New Year the Samaneras and Nuns began alternate morning Vinaya classes. These were followed by a few weeks of morning chanting sessions, in which our lay guests also took an active part, learning some of the intricacies of Pali pronunciation and phrasing. We monastics in training were also given the opportunity to develop our understanding of a Buddhist text: one week at tea time we read a selected *sutta* and the next week (one per night following the evening sitting) offered a formal Dhamma talk on some of its pertinent themes. Good talks; good training. (Yes, we all experienced a few jitters. Hence a note of appreciation for Sister Mon—who faced the added challenge of presenting hers in a “foreign” language!) The final two weeks of the winter retreat have been for “solo practice” with only mealtimes scheduled.

Throughout the retreat those of us here have been the appreciative recipients of Ajahn Sona's own Dhamma talks: both formal ones during the lunar observance nights, and, over afternoon tea, his lively extemporised responses to Dhamma questions and the ordinary, observed events of the day. All in all, the art of “spiritual friendship” is alive and well.

Ven. Thitapuñño has spent these months in Mexico and is scheduled to return in the middle of April. (An account appears later in this newsletter. See also his article on peace, in the concluding pages.)

Samanera Nanda and I have spent the retreat performing our normal duties with the added demands of robe-wearing to attend to. This becomes more “natural” over time, as one would hope. The retreat has also been a valuable period for learning about, and

“absorbing” at deeper levels, the added disciplines and rewards of monastic life.

With Venerable Thitapuñño in Mexico this winter, I have spent the retreat in his well-practised kuti overlooking the marsh. In addition to birdlife (as above), its view has made me more attentive to the incremental progress of the moon running its course. As always the lunar cycles have heralded the regular “events” of the retreat: head shaving, late-night sittings, lengthy chanting and the like.

Sister Mon has spent the retreat happily housed in one of the final kutis built last fall, which occupies a high point on our property. The welcome presence over the winter months of a monastic guest, Sister Elizabeth, has encouraged some valuable discussion on the changing situation of women monastics in Theravada Buddhism. Elizabeth's nearly seven years in Thailand, has also meant that flurries of Thai language have regularly erupted around tasks she and Mon have shared.

Early in the retreat, two of our resident stewards, Heather and Amin, “switched jobs.” (Ajahn suggested that they just switch names but this didn't fly.) Amin took over the bulk of the cooking duties assisted, naturally, by George, and after cooking countless meals during her 18 month stint, Heather became the office steward, in addition to her regular bookkeeping duties. It's a credit to flexibility of all three that things have continued to run with hardly a rumple.

Incidentally, by the time this newsletter reaches you we will have bid farewell to Heather Hutchinson. She was part of the select crew that accepted the challenge of getting this “new” monastery going from the very first day, when the questions being asked were not “shall I make the Thai noodle dish today?” but “any chance we'll have running water soon?” It seems clear that good stewards come with assorted, even quite diverse, talents. Heather has pitched in with contagious enthusiasm wherever needed, and we have been truly fortunate to be able to rely on her energy, good humour and tremendous resourcefulness during this formative period. *Anumodana!*

Road report. Travel through the winter has generally been aided by the relatively light snowfall. Even so, town trips require a good deal of “preplanning”—and, on occasion, some crossed fingers. Two mishaps with our old truck have left it a little more bent (though still unbowed). Its services were especially appreciated while insurance paperwork was sorted out for the van—a more lengthy process than anticipated, this year. Heather and George had several “long walks” back to the monastery when return trips from town were thwarted by deep snow a kilometre or two from our gate. Once again, the “little tractor that could” has done some stout work clearing snow and pulling vehicles from ditches. Samanera training takes on new dimensions, at such times, as Nanda or I hitch up the robes, don multiple layers of fleece, and brave the elements. Early melting in mid-March left Smith Lake Road mucky in places but it’s steadily improving and should be in good shape for our early April visitors. (*Late-breaking report: we remain confident the road will be fine for April, in spite of a heavy snowfall near the end of March—for the second year running it’s been “in like a lion, out like a leopard”*)

Recent projects. With our retreat schedule in effect, it often surprises people that some work projects still manage to be accomplished. The main item this winter has been to insulate and apply drywall to the basement walls. Sister Elizabeth has proved a very able hand at the finer points of drywalling. Among other things, we also played host to a pair of electricians and a plumber over several days. Presto! we now have some new light switches and a more efficient system to drain the kitchen sink.

The added insulation made things decidedly cosy in the library and walking paths over the colder months. This work, along with the sealing of cracks that occurred with the completion of siding last year, has brought about a noticeable reduction (my private estimate: 20%) in the amount of wood required to heat the monastery. It is a sweet luxury, indeed, to be able to report the presence in mid-March of perhaps 15 cords of high quality firewood still laid away in the wood shed.

Because there are always some, among our varied readership, with interest and expertise in

the finer points of Birken’s “operating systems,” mention also needs to be made of Samanera Nanda’s conscientious efforts with the inverter-battery bank system. Earlier in the winter it began to show signs of “strain,” with a worrying increase on its demands to the diesel generator. A lengthy series of tests and some meticulous record keeping by Nanda (which impressed the experts) isolated a pair of weak batteries. We are now able to report that the electrical system is working efficiently (and perhaps just as important: it’s much better *understood*).

Work pending. Many of our construction tasks this year fall primarily under the heading of “finishing details.” The main entrance will finally receive its lengthened roof and more “gradual” stairs, and with funds already donated for the purpose by members of the Sri Lankan community in Vancouver, we will install a wheel-chair access ramp. We also hope to bring the basement to completion—the installation of drywall to its ceiling is the major item remaining. Indeed, by early summer we should be able to have the final inspection on the main building and receive our long-anticipated “occupancy permit.”

This year we hope to build two kutis on the property. One is generously being donated *and built* by Bruce Armstrong. As for the second, we are gratified to announce that significant funds from several sources should permit us to begin work on a new kuti for Ajahn Sona. *Anumodana!*

As reported in the last newsletter, Kim Pham is once again generously donating his creative expertise for the design of this second kuti. It needs to be much larger than the others—enough for a good-sized area for interviews, monks’ recitation of rules and group meetings with the Ajahn Sona, in addition to his private living space. A lovely secluded site near to Ajahn’s present kuti has been selected. It will likely be built in “stages” as funds permit, with a planned start in September.

This will leave only two kutis to be built on our existing zoning allotment. Incidentally, we have recently had to “up” our estimate of the cost for these kutis to be constructed. When skilled,

hired labour is factored in, we're finding that a kuti can be expected to cost about \$8500.

As any visitor to Birken knows, years of small and grand landscaping projects lie ahead of us. This year, again, we hope to devote considerable time to them. For instance, we will be planting 720 birch seedlings sometime in during the spring (after we've installed some sort of fence to ensure they can flourish undisturbed by the annual range cattle). To remind readers of a pertinent linguistic point: the German word for 'birch' is '*birken*'

Other work this year will include stump removal, clearing deadfall and the continuation of refinements to landscaping in the immediate vicinity of the main building. Last summer we had waves of energetic guests eager to lend their hands and backs to this work—a repeat of the popular "Gardening Retreat" is listed on page 9.

'Going Forth'. Stepping back from these recent events and reflections, visitors to Birken's website will already have seen some photographs taken at the ordination of Samanera Nanda and myself on December 7, 2002.

Our preparation during the weeks leading up to the ordination began with us retiring each evening to our respective kuti or trailer to practise the chants we would need to have in flawless recall. Each of us employed a tape of Ajahn Pasanno for this purpose, meaning that we had this venerable teacher's voice "in mind" for much of the autumn. *It worked!*

A few days before the ceremony Ven. Thitapuñño began to give us lessons in robe wearing. All I can say is that seasoned monks make this look *very easy*. (The Thai method of wearing the upper robe is especially tricky to learn.) We struggled, all thumbs, under Tahn Puñño's patient guidance long enough to make it through the "big day" without mishap.



Samaneras Nanda & Pavaro

As I think of the time leading up to our ceremony, though, nothing stands out so clearly as the day when we "fired" our bowls. This is something of a tradition in the Thai Forest lineage—evidently Ajahn Chah thought it was good that monks' bowls (that is, after spiffy, virtually indestructible stainless steel became the norm) not look too... well, *spiffy*. Hence the act of imparting some character to alms bowls by submitting them to a good hot fire! Needless to say we always have plenty of firewood lying about. Each of the three bowls—Ajahn Sona's, Nanda's and my own—received utterly distinct colourings and markings from the process. Looking at them now is something of the monastic equivalent to a Rorschach test.



Fit for a forest monk

The ordination itself was witnessed by dozens of family, Birken supporters and well-wishers. Fortune was on our side, as between 50 and 60 guests were able to make their way here *in early December* (thankfully, the weather held). It was a day of serious intention, deep emotion and abundant laughter at the monastery, and one which, as Ajahn Sona observed, will take its own modest place in the history of Theravada Buddhism in the West.

For those with a memory for dates, it should be noted that the ordination day also fell on the 75th birthday of Venerable H. Gunaratana Nayaka Thera, who is Ajahn Sona's preceptor. In fact, the busy "Bhante G" had visited Birken only weeks prior to our taking up the robes. This was his third visit to the new property. As a true pioneer of Theravada Buddhism in the West (he arrived in North America in 1967), and the abbot of Bhavana Society Meditation Centre, North America's first forest monastery, we always feel very grateful to receive his blessings. (Incidentally, not long after the accompanying photo was taken, the venerable septuagenarian scrambled up Mt. Kinabalu,

which at 4095 metres is Malaysia's tallest peak!)



"Bhante G" during his recent visit

This, then, is a brief overview of the last few months at the monastery, and how Birken may be unfolding over the summer. Very soon, guests will be arriving once again. As always, we look forward to receiving people for silent periods of reflection and practice. In all, there is much to be grateful for, among which is the friendship and generosity of so many. Theravada Buddhism is setting down roots in this part of the world and it is a precious thing to say one is witness to these remarkable beginnings

BHIKKHU ORDINATION

The coming few months will see the bhikkhu ordination of Samanera Nanda and Samanera Pavaro. Ajahn Pasanno, co-abbot of Abhayagiri Monastery, will act as the preceptor for this important ceremony.

At this time, details such as date and location are unavailable. We will post them on our website as soon as they are known.

VISITING AJAHNS

Although dates are not yet established, we are expecting to receive return visits by Ajahn Thiradhammo and Ajahn Viradhammo over the next few months. They are, respectively, the abbots of Dhammapala Monastery in

Switzerland and of Bodhinyanarama in New Zealand. (Both hail from Canada hence their regular visits to these parts.) "Ajahn V" has spent most of the winter caring for his mother in Ottawa.

A WINTER IN THE SUN:

Venerable Thitapuñño's Mexican Retreat (*etcetera*)

Before arriving in Mexico in mid-December 2002, Ven. Thitapuñño briefly visited Seattle and Vancouver. While he stayed at Wat Atamayatararam in the Seattle area he had a chance to meet Ajahn Maha Ritti and his monks, to give some talks and lead a short retreat. Then he moved on to Vancouver and met with Venerable Gunaratana and members of the Sri Lankan monastic community, followed by a *dana* invitation and talk to several members of the Vancouver Buddhist community.

After arriving at Mexico City he stayed for a few days at the Casa de Meditación Vipassana giving daily talks, interviews, and meeting with new members of the Theravada Buddhist community. During this period final arrangements were made to publish a Spanish translation of *Mindfulness in Plain English* by Bhante Gunaratana.

Ven. Puñño then moved on to the city of Tehuacán (in the State of Puebla) and made preparations for his upcoming Winter retreat (held both there and at the Dhamma Vihara Forest Monastery in the State of Veracruz). Previous to starting his retreat period he visited and paid respects to Ven. U Nandisena—the Dhamma Vihara abbot—and went back to Tehuacán to lead a weekend meditation retreat and give talks. It is now the fourth consecutive year that he has visited and contributed to the practice of the small—but very dedicated—group of meditators in Tehuacán.

January and February were spent in retreat at Ven. Puñño sister's property, where he was able to go out early each day to collect *dana* at his mother's home. Some close supporters from the Tehuacán area regularly contributed food and had a chance to engage in brief Dhamma discussions.

During his Tehuacán retreat Tahn Puñño made some advance in the translation (into Spanish) of Nyanatiloka's *Buddhist Dictionary*, a project that had been kept in the back-burner for some

time and that he hopes to complete sometime this year. Mexican Theravada Buddhists are very keen to get their hands on Theravada works written in Spanish. An active, well-known publishing company in Latin America has already launched a program to publish Buddhist texts in Spanish, with the profits to be reinvested in further Dhamma publications.

After completing his initial retreat period in Tehuacán, Tahn Puñño returned to Veracruz, where he spent three weeks in the beautiful and peaceful environment of the Dhamma Vihara—the first Theravada forest monastery in Latin America. During the final week of April he traveled to the City of Monterrey (one of the largest urban centres in Mexico) and together with Ven. U Nandisena and Maechee Mam (a nun from Thailand) officiated in the inauguration of Theravada Meditation Hall. In addition to the short retreat and several talks that were part of the programme, many new contacts and friendships were made during the visit.

April 1st, 2003, marked Bhante Gunaratana's arrival for his 2003 Mexico Dhamma tour. The presentation of the book *El Cultivo de la Meditación Vipassana* (Spanish version of *Mindfulness in Plain English*) was held in Mexico City on April 3. Bhante G gave talks and led retreats at the Casa de Meditación Vipassana and at the Dhamma Vihara, respectively. During this period Ven. Thitapuñño assisted him as translator and attendant monk.

These assorted events reveal that the Theravada lay community in Mexico is growing at a steady rate. So while in other parts of the world people invade, inflict pain and suffering on others, the gentle and positive influence of the small but dedicated Theravada Buddhist communities in Mexico is quietly but steadily finding its way into that warm and sunny part of the world.

SUBMISSIONS NEEDED FOR BIRKEN RETROSPECTIVE

As reported in the last newsletter, we are eager to hear about some of your Birken experiences. We've received some interesting replies and, hoping for a few more, have extended the "deadline" for submissions. *Don't be shy!*

Perhaps a particular visit stands out; perhaps one of your interviews with Ajahn Sona really resonated, or maybe it's just that Birken has had an overall impact on your life and the life of your family. Whatever it is, we would like to hear about it! Please jot down what Birken has

meant to you over the years, in 100 words or less, and e-mail your submission to **donnajeanswoods@yahoo.ca** by **June 15, 2003**. A selected number of submissions will be published in our "Commemorating Birken" Summer Issue; some may be edited for space considerations.

We are also looking for old photos of "Birken I," near Pemberton, for this special edition. We will return the photos to you unharmed. *Thank you*

ADDRESS LIST: YOUR HELP IS NEEDED!

Thanks are due to many of you for responding to our last request for updated addresses. To repeat the message in our previous newsletter: since last spring we've been at work on a new database. Among other things, it simplifies the process of issuing tax receipts and enables us to send out this newsletter. However, in the process of implementing the changeover we've found many errors or old information in our existing address lists. For instance, we have

started a file of donors with tax receipts for whom we do not have a current address. We would very much like to bring all of this information up to date.

Unless you have heard from us recently (and therefore are certain we have your new or correct address), we invite all of our readers to send details for mailing/e-mailing/phoning as soon as it's convenient. Many thanks.

PRIVATE RETREATS: in addition to the *scheduled retreats*, Birken Monastery continues to offer the opportunity for people to book personal retreat time. That is, for nine months of the year Birken is open for guests to schedule periods most suitable for them. First-time visitors may stay for up to 10 days.

*Please book by emailing: **meditate@birken.ca** or by phoning (250) 318-2980 sometime between 8:30 – 10:30 am or 4 – 6 pm daily. (Please see p. 1—our cell phone is terribly expensive and unreliable. We strongly encourage you to communicate with us through e-mail or regular mail. Thanks.)*



FORESTRY MATTERS

In January Birken was visited by two helpful officials from BC Forestry. We received very useful, detailed information regarding current logging plans in our area as well as the possibility for Birken to purchase or lease adjoining property for future purposes.

The main purpose of our meeting was to receive current information on the pine beetle infestation that has affected such a large percentage of the province's forests. The Kamloops district officials have been very

aggressive in their campaign to slow down the advance of the beetles and several targeted blocks of forest are presently being logged in our area. We were also given instructions about what to look for, so that affected trees can be quickly cut down. Sister Elizabeth (once again!) has come to the fore in this regard. Her regular walks have lately been taken with coloured tape in hand to mark infested trees.

Notice of Annual General Meeting:

Saturday, September 27, 2003

at Birken Monastery

TREASURER'S UPDATE

by Heather Hutchinson

In addition to time and energy, bringing Birken Forest Monastery to a state where it can function well both as a centre for monastic training and residential retreats has taken a significant amount of money. Considerable attention is given to ensure that the money donated to the monastery is used in a responsible manner. Readers will recall that a loan in the amount of \$150,000 was assumed late last summer in order to repay a private loan and provide sufficient funds for projects such as the installation of siding to the buildings. While the rate of interest is quite reasonable, our requirement to provide an annual accounting review effectively increases this rate to 8%. Ajahn Sona is mindful of how significant this monthly loan payment (nearly \$1400) is to our operating expenses. Not surprisingly, he is reluctant to allocate more than is absolutely necessary of our supporters' *dana* to bank interest charges. Accordingly, Ajahn has determined that after completing the projects

noted in this newsletter, the monastery will begin to repay this loan as quickly as is practical.

Please note that one important consequence of our present need to concentrate on loan repayment is that over the short term we would prefer that donations not be "targeted" for future building projects. Many thanks for your understanding.

As we are approaching our income tax deadlines, this seems like a good place to remind members that all donations to the monastery receive tax receipts which are eligible for tax-refunds. On this subject, I'd like to "plug" the use of auto-debiting one's account on a monthly basis. Supporters of other monasteries have been finding this very practical and, needless to say, it offers the monastery itself a more reliable sense of the incoming donations.



Heather at-the-ready

DONATIONS

Birken Forest Buddhist Monastery is supported solely through the ancient tradition of Dana, or generous giving. If you would like to support the Monastery and resident community you can mail cheques or money orders payable to: The Treasurer, Birken Forest Buddhist Monastery Society, PO Box 5, Knutsford, British Columbia, CANADA V0E 2A0. Auto debits and direct deposits are also welcome. These can be made to: Account No. 7024342 Branch O7, Thompson Interior Savings Credit Union, #600 – 1210 Summit Drive, Kamloops BC V2C 6M1.

Non-monetary donations are welcome, please consult the monastics or Stewards to ensure that the article(s) to be donated is (are) allowable according to the monastic code.

Offerings of food are also acceptable. If you would like to offer prepared meal(s) please extend the invitation in advance. We have an adequate kitchen if you'd like to prepare the meal(s) at the monastery.

TO RECEIVE THIS NEWSLETTER

Our newsletter is widely distributed 2 – 3 times a year. The quickest (and least costly way) to receive it is via e-mail — we send out a notice when a recent newsletter has been posted on our website. If you don't have e-mail or would prefer a paper copy, we also mail the newsletters through the post. If you would like to be included on our newsletter (e)mailing list we invite you to contact us with the pertinent details.

INTERNAL PEACE & WORLD PEACE

by *Thitapuñño Bhikkhu*

Human beings in general long for peace in their personal and social lives. As an age-old project, however, people's search for peace has tended to leave much to be desired. While it is true that for periods of time diverse societies have enjoyed a degree of social stability and harmony, such eras have inevitably fallen under the yoke of impermanence. Social systems and governments change, new conditions arise and put an end to these fragile and hard-won accomplishments. The absence of peace is a facet of *dukkha*. The Buddha used this word to describe the inherently unsatisfactory state of existence, which we experience in terms of stress, friction, and other forms of "dis-ease." Indeed, his insight into *dukkha* comprises the First Noble Truth, while liberation from this "characteristic of existence" involves a triple imperative: that one recognise *dukkha*, understand it, and transcend it.

In the course of history—and perhaps in a more pronounced way during modern times—humankind has attempted to seek a "global" solution to the problem of socio-political unrest. Yet wars and conflicts among families, races, clans, tribes and nations, have existed in the past, exist at present and—according to the Buddhist outlook—will continue to exist. Now, this statement may seem fatalistic if one considers it in the absence of additional information. In Theravada Buddhism—the earliest surviving school in closest connection with the original monastic community established by the Buddha—it is established that the general problem of the absence of peace has very deep psychological roots. The origin of these roots lies in—and must be traced to—the individual mind. A society where individuals cannot cultivate personal peace will be incapable of manifesting itself peacefully and harmoniously. The converse is also entirely possible. If each individual within a group or society is established in a certain degree of peace and mental health, then the group as a whole will manifest a good level of harmony with its environment. This should be quite encouraging.

Thus the Buddha exhorts us to see clearly into ourselves, and thereby, into the psychological roots of human conflict. Without a clear understanding of the causal origin of conflict, we cannot transcend it. The Theravada Buddhist strategy for peace aims at moving from the particular to the general. As a process it is what we may figuratively call "inductive," since it compels us to work with ourselves as the starting point. Instead of trying to politically establish social programmes, government initiatives, and international treaties aimed at yielding social peace, the Theravada approach directs us to cultivate such change *starting* from the individual. In so doing it avoids the logical and practical inconsistencies of undertaking a socio-political transformation in which individuals remain unchanged.

To speak in "causal" terms of the psychological roots of human conflict, the Buddha establishes—according to the central tenet of early Buddhism—that all phenomena within the scope of the "real" arise and cease in relation to causes and conditions. The so-called specific principle of conditionality has bearing on the nature of any conflict.

In the *Great Discourse on Causation* (D. 15) the Buddha describes how desire for sense-gratification, for existence and non-existence, arises with feeling as condition. In turn, desire is the condition that generates clinging to sensual pleasures, to wrong notions about the nature of existence, precepts and rituals, and doctrines pertaining to the notion of self.

As detailed in this *sutta*, desire is the condition that leads to the pursuit of sense-objects. When these are gained, decisions arise in regards to "what is deemed mine and what is yours", "what is worthy and what isn't," "how much and how should I use that which is mine," etc. As a consequence of this decision-making process, the Buddha observes, thoughts of lust and desire arise, based on which clinging to these objects develops. The mind will then adopt a possessive attitude towards them, falling into avarice and refusing to share with others. Due to this condition the stage is set for the mind to establish itself in mental states of fear,

suspicion and distrust, which in turn lead to paranoid and protective attitudes towards what one “owns.”

When this covetousness and avarice is present in the minds of individuals, immorality and violence will inevitably manifest. In the *Discourse on Causation* (one of the deepest in breath and scope in the whole Pali canon), the Buddha describes the end of this causal sequence:

“...And due to the volition to protect [that which is owned], a number of phenomena of evil and unwholesome nature are generated—the taking of clubs and weapons, conflicts, strife and disputes, insulting language, calumny and falsehoods.”

Fortunately a positive resolution to this is possible. In following the whole sequence in reverse mode, the Buddha once again emphasizes the dependent nature of these phenomena, in particular: how in the absence of avarice, the compulsory volition to protect that which is owned does not arise; in the absence of a possessive attitude, avarice does not come about; in the absence of clinging, a possessive attitude does not arise; without desire and lust, clinging does not manifest; in the absence of decision-making [regarding the possessed], desire and lust do not arise; in the absence of gain, decision-making does not come about; without the pursuit of sensory objects, gain does not arise. And finally, in the absence of the cause, the origin, the source and condition for the arising of pursuit, namely *desire*, pursuit does not come about.

In this way desire is shown to be the origin of *dukkha*, as the causal root both of samsaric becoming, and of all conflict, friction and dispute. Clearly, desire stands in the way of peace and well-being at the personal and social levels.

In another important discourse called *The Great Mass of Suffering* (M. 13), the Buddha declares that it is due to sense desire that humans of all conditions and walks of life experience a “mass of suffering visible here and now,” including cruel and deadly wars. In addition, he frequently identifies two other root causes for all human conflict and suffering: aversion and delusion. It is for this reason that Buddhism encourages a

necessary and humane approach to end suffering: the skilful *restraint* of any thinking, speaking and acting that is informed by these three unwholesome roots (i.e., greed, hatred, delusion) and the wholehearted *promotion* of beneficial thoughts, words and deeds.

Kamma does not spare a single mind—sooner or later we reap in accord with what we’ve sown. Actions afflicted by animosity, cruelty, deceit, rapacity and violence promote the continuation of the same deplorable states. In our present times, it is ironic that awareness of the effects of ignorance appears to be absent in many individuals who have responsibility for the fate of so many. The following verses from the *Dhammapada* (137-140) are a sober reminder of the far-reaching consequences of abusing power:

“That person who inflicts violence on the defenseless and offends the harmless, soon will come to one of the following ten states:

“That person will experience sharp pain, disaster, bodily injury, dangerous illness, or a deranged mind, trouble from the government, or grave accusations, loss of relatives, loss of wealth, destruction of dwelling by ravaging fire, and upon death that ignorant person will be reborn in hell.”

As we have seen, though, the Buddha is not content merely to warn, *he articulates the solution* when he states that emancipation from the suffering caused by sense-desire is, in fact, realised through the destruction or abandoning of sense-desire. And this is a way of expressing the Second Noble Truth, the truth about desire being the causal condition for *dukkha*. The imperative in regard to this truth is to recognize it, understand it and finally abandon it. In other words, with the abandonment of desire, *dukkha* ceases.

Questions may not end here, however: But what about peace? Is it even possible to reach peace? Is true peace as real as suffering and strife? The answer to these is in the affirmative, making Buddhism an extremely optimistic doctrine and discipline. Nibbana, the state of final peace is within reach of beings—under the appropriate conditions.

In a fragment from a discourse from the *Collection of Discourses in Numerical Order* (A, III. 32), the Buddha affirms:

“This is peace, this is the exquisite – the resolution [the cessation] of all formations [fabrications], the abandonment of all acquisitiveness, the cessation of desire; dispassion; the cessation [of becoming in samsara, of rebirth]; Nibbana.”

This, then, is the Third Noble Truth. This truth, too, must be recognised and understood; it must be attained in an experiential way by any individual who aspires to the highest state of peace. Nibbana is the peace that does not allow an iota of space for suffering, nor any dissatisfaction, agitation, conflict, or stress.

And the way that leads to this final state of peace is none other than the Noble Eightfold Path: Right Understanding, right intention (thought motivation), right speech, right action,

right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. This is the Fourth Noble Truth, the way that leads to the cessation of *dukkha*. As with the preceding truths, this truth is to be recognized, practised and fully developed.

The degree to which individuals are able to understand and fashion their behaviour in accordance with reality—that is to say, the extent to which their minds undergo deep transformation as they attain right understanding—is the degree they will enjoy peace. The spiritual path that produces peace must start with the individual mind. By actively seeking and cultivating personal peace men and women contribute to social harmony and, even, social transformation. By way of conclusion we may paraphrase the Buddha by saying that “Protecting our own peace, we protect other beings’ peace. By protecting other beings’ peace, we protect our own peace.”

Edited by Samanera Pavaro

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