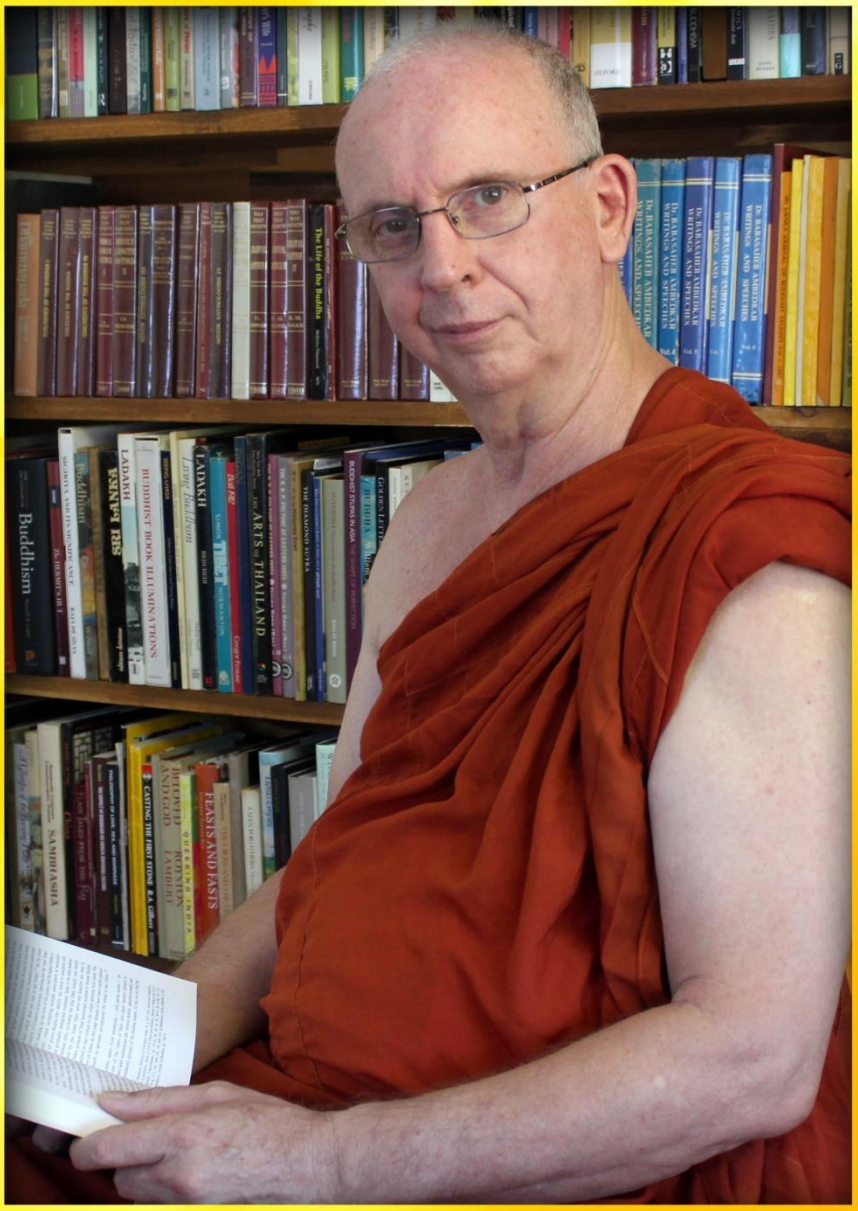
Dhamma Musings

Buddhist Blogs by Bhante Dhammika



by Ven. S Dhammika

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Preface

Between 2008 and 2017, I maintained a blog commenting Buddhist doctrine, Buddhist culture and art, and current affairs from a Buddhist and sometimes a personal perspective. At its height it got some 12,000 visits a day. Here is a selection of what I hope is some of the more interesting blog posts.

Dhamma for Sale?

The Buddha gave the Dhamma freely to all. He often underwent difficulties and inconveniences and on occasions even risked his life in order to teach the Dhamma to others (Ud.78). The monk Punna was prepared to teach the Dhamma in a district where the people were known for their violence and where he had a good chance of being manhandled or worse (M.III,269). Today, some Westerners go to traditional Buddhist countries to learn Dhamma or meditation, return to their homelands, and then charge for teaching what they were taught for free. Likewise, some Asian monks put a price on the Dhamma, certain Tibetan teachers being the worst offenders. I once mentioned to the student of a rimpoche that his teacher charged very high prices for his teachings – really high. Rather defensively the student said that air fares, accommodation, etc. all cost money. "Why not just ask students for a donation rather than charge them?' I said. "What if the costs were not covered?" the disciple shot back. I let the subject drop but it seemed a little odd after all the Mahayana insistence about infinite compassion for all beings. I also couldn't help thinking that Goenka and his assistant teachers rely entirely on donations.

In charging for Dhamma such teachers are turning the precious Dhamma into a commodity and the Buddha clearly said: 'One should not go about making a business out of the Dhamma' (Ud.66). When he said: 'The gift of Dhamma excels all other gifts" (Dhp.354) he clearly meant that the Dhamma should be a gift, not something to be sold. During the Buddha's time people knew that teachers of other religions charged a fee (*acariyadhana*) but that those teaching Dhamma expected nothing more from their students audience than respect and attentiveness (A.V,347). I think there is nothing wrong with charging for the food, accommodation etc. used during a meditation course. Nor is it improper for a

teacher to accept donations. But to charge a fee, even if it is called ‘sponsorship’ or to announce that a ‘donation’ of a certain amount is expected or required, contradicts the most basic ethics and ideals of Buddhism. Those who teach the Dhamma should see what they do as a rare and wonderful privilege and an act of kindness, not a means of livelihood.

Can Animals go to Heaven?

Recently Pope Francis raised eyebrows when he suggested that animals can go to heaven. During a public appearance while talking to a young boy distraught over the recent death of his dog, the Pope told the boy that 'paradise is open to all God's creatures'. While it would seem fairly clear, to me at least, that he was only trying to console and comfort the boy, conservative Catholics were quick to 'clarify' the Pope's statement and explain that as animals do not have souls they cannot 'literally go to heaven'. Others, pet lovers and animal rights groups, were ecstatic at the possibility of spending eternity with Spotty or Rex, Mr. Tabby or Blackie. Given that Christian orthodoxy is clear that salvation is only available to those who have faith in Jesus (and according to some, do good works as well) it is very difficult to imagine that the Pope was announcing a new dogma that would contradict orthodoxy and 2000 years of theology.

Whatever the case, the idea is an interesting one. What would Buddhism say about the possibility of animals in heaven? Interestingly, the question was raised and discussed during the Third Council (circa 250 BCE). Those who believed that this was possible pointed out that Eravana, the mount of the god Indra, was an elephant. The Theravadins countered this by saying that if this was taken literally it would require that there also be stables, fodder, animal trainers, grooms, etc. in heaven, something that was considered to be clearly ridiculous (Kathavatthu v.20,4). The question: 'Are there animals in heaven?' assumes various theistic concepts that do not apply to the Buddhist understanding of reality. According to the Buddha, beings can be reborn in a variety of realms, one of them being heaven and another the animal realm. The primary thing that distinguishes one realm from another is the experience of the beings there, and perhaps to a lesser degree the

physical form in each. As a human, one would have one kind of body, as an animal another, and as a heavenly being yet another. If an animal died and was reborn in heaven it would have a heavenly body, not an animal one, thus it would no longer be an animal, and thus the question: 'Are there animals in heaven?' is not really a meaningful one. Given this, the question needs to be re-phrased as: 'Can animals be reborn in heaven?'

According to the Buddha, once reborn as an animal it is difficult to rise to a higher rebirth. Difficult but not impossible. Books such as *The Emotional Life of Animals: A Leading Scientist Explores Animal Joy, Sorrow, and Empathy and Why They Matter* and Jeffrey Masson's wonderful *When Elephants Weep* demonstrate that animals have much richer and more complex minds than was understood until recently, and what was known to the Buddha and his contemporaries. Given this, I think it is likely that some higher animals have at least some rudimentary moral sense and thus could take a heavenly rebirth. Nonetheless, it should not be forgotten that the animal world is dominated by 'eating each other and preying off the weak' as the Buddha grimly but realistically put it (M.III,169). Perhaps another thing worth mentioning is this. It is important to try to distinguish between our desires and reality. Many people love their pets and would be very happy to have them with them in heaven. But wishes and hopes are one thing, reality is often another.

Buddhist Sanctuary

Sanctuary (*abhayaṭṭhāna* or *pujjaṭṭhāna*) is the right of asylum available in certain religious establishments and which is recognized by the government. The right of sanctuary in certain churches was recognized in English law from the 4th to the 17th century. Sanctuary in Buddhist monasteries had a long history in Sri Lanka lasting for at least 1000 years. Royal officers or those who believed a crime had been committed could easily be infuriated, jump to conclusions and dish out swift justice to whoever seemed to be the most likely offender. This sometimes led to innocent parties being punished. An accused who was able to flee to the nearest monastery would be protected from such mob justice. Sanctuary would give him an opportunity to explain himself and allow his accusers to calm down so that the facts could be more objectively examined. The monks in the monastery the accused had sought sanctuary in would also be able to adjudicate on the accused's behalf. Numerous documents from ancient Sri Lanka show that royal officers and others were forbidden to enter certain monasteries or sometimes even monastic estates, to apprehend offenders without permission of the resident monks.

The rules of sanctuary varied at different times and in different places but usually a person was given sanctuary for five days or until the next full moon. If the monks decided the person seeking refuge was guilty they would expel him or allow royal officers to enter the monastery to arrest him. On other occasions they might negotiate a settlement between the accused and his victim and the judicial authorities.

Sanctuary was usually given to those accused of committing what were called 'the five grave offences' (*pañcamahaparādha*), although exactly what constituted these is uncertain. It might have been breaking the most serious of the five Precepts or

five of the six 'acts of immediate retribution' (*anantariyakamma*, Miln.25), i.e. murdering one's mother, one's father or an arahat, injuring a Buddha or causing a schism in the Sangha (As.358). In this context injuring a Buddha was understood as stealing or desecrating a Buddha statues or other sacred objects. Other versions of the five grave offences included assault, killing cattle, banditry and rape.

Violating the right of sanctuary could have very serious consequences for those who did it. The *Mahavaṃsa* records an example of this. During political upheaval in the reign of King Udaya III (934-937) a number of court officials fled to the monastery of some monks revered for their simplicity and holiness. The king and his soldiers pushed their way into the monastery and summarily executed the officials. As a protest against this violation of the right of sanctuary and the shedding of blood in their monastery, the monks rose in a body and left the capital for the forest. In response to this protest riots broke out in the capital, sections of the army rebelled and the life of the king himself was threatened. To calm the situation the king had to send his senior ministers after the monks to beg for their forgiveness and plea with them to return to their monastery. The humiliated and chastened king had to promise never to violate the right of sanctuary again.

There is nothing in the Tipitaka addressing the matter of sanctuary in monasteries although it is may have evolved from a general respect for the Sangha and the Buddha's teaching allotting punishment with compassion.

Thoughts and Thinking

A thought (*cinta*) is a discreet mental event sometimes also called ideation or cognition. Thoughts can take the form of mental pictures or as sub-vocal speech. A string or flow of thoughts is called thinking (*cetana*). Some of the different types of thinking include problem solving, reasoning, reflecting, remembering, assessing, introspecting, decision making, imagining, etc. The Buddha classified thought processes as either logical thinking (*vitakka*) or wandering thinking (*vicara*). The first of these would be the deliberately sustained thinking that takes place during problem solving or reasoning, while day dreaming would be an example of the second. Thoughts and emotions are intimately connected, one often bringing forth the other. The Buddha gives as an example of this a man who thinks about some wrong he had done and then starts to feel guilty or depressed (M.II,165). He also recognized that deliberately thinking a certain type of thought often enough may result in the formation of a fixation and subsequent biases and prejudices. 'Whatever one thinks about and ponders on (*anuvitakka anuvicara*) often, the mind gets a leaning in that way' (M.I,115). The mind (i.e. its thoughts) 'precedes everything' (Dhp.1), is 'difficult to detect', 'very subtle' 'seizes whatever it wants' (Dhp.36) and 'thrashes about like a fish pulled out of the water' (Dhp.34).

The Buddha's main interest in thinking concerned its power to distort reality, to trick us into seeing things that are not there and failing to see things that are, and to be 'carried away' by thoughts. In his famous Madhupindika Sutta he analyzed the process of cognition, starting with sensory contact (i.e. seeing, hearing, tasting, etc), 'with sensory contact as cause feeling arises, what one feels one perceives, what one perceives one thinks about, what one thinks about one mentally proliferates. This mental proliferation (*papanca*), tinged with perceptions and

concepts, obsesses a person in respect to the past, present and future' (M.I,111-2). Thus the Buddha said: 'The world is led around by mind, by mind the world is plagued' (S.I,39) One of the preliminary goals of meditation is to slow down or if possible to minimise or stop the thought process so that the mind becomes more spacious and more quiet and rested. In the Vitakkasanthana Sutta the Buddha recommended five techniques for achieving this (M.I,119ff). Mindfulness of breathing can also help with this. The Buddha said; 'This concentration on in-and-out breathing, if cultivated and developed, is something peaceful and excellent, something perfect in itself and a pleasant way of living also. More than that, it dispels evil thoughts that have arisen and makes them vanish in a moment. It is just as when, in the last month of the hot season, the dust and dirt fly up and suddenly a great shower of rain lays it and makes it settle in a moment' (S.V,321). In insight meditation one trains oneself to observe thoughts without reacting to them, or as the Buddha put it 'in the cognized let there be just the cognized' (*vinnate vinnatamatttam*, Ud.8). If this can be done the power of thoughts to enchant and mislead is minimised.

Buddhist Monkey Business

The usual words for monkeys in Pali are *kapi*, *makkata* and *vanara*. These words seem to be used loosely and interchangeably in the Tipitaka as is suggested by the mention of a large black-faced monkey, a clear reference to the Hanuman Langur, and a small red-faced monkey, a reference to the Rhesus Macaque. In both cases the word *makkata* is used (Ja.II,445). However, many of the numerous stories about monkeys in the Jataka would seem to refer mainly to the macaque because this monkey would have been more familiar to most people and because of its more human-like appearance and often amusing antics. Monkeys pull faces and threaten people (Ja.II,70) and while moving through the forest they grab a branch and let go of it only to grab another (S.II,95; Sn.791). Hunters used to go into the forests of the Himalayan foothills and set traps of sticky pitch to catch them. The more curious monkeys would touch the pitch, get stuck and while trying to free one paw would get their other paws stuck. The hunters would then kill them, put the carcass on a spit and cook them over a fire (S.V,146).

The Tipitaka often uses the term monkey mind (*kapicitta*) to describe the agitated, easily distracted and incessantly moving behaviour of ordinary human consciousness (Ja.III,148; V,445). The Buddha said that a person with uncontrolled craving 'jumps from here to there like a monkey searching for fruit in the forest' (Dhp.334). The monk Valliya compared the body to a five-doored house and the mind to a macaque racing around inside it. Then he cried to himself, 'Be still, monkey, stop running. Things are not as they were before. Now you are restrained with wisdom' (Th.125-6). Maha Kassapa said that a monk who wears rag robes and yet is conceited, is like a monkey wrapped in a lion's skin (Th.1081). In a story meant to illustrate the idea that greed can make one blind to one's own welfare,

the Jataka tells of a langur who lets go of all the beans it had just to retrieve one that it had dropped (Ja.II,74). Street entertainers had monkeys which were trained to play with snakes and to do tricks (Ja.III,198). According to the Jataka the Bodhisattva was often reborn as a monkey and throughout the Jataka stories monkeys are depicted as having the best and worst human traits and attitudes.

The Best Dhammapada

Just the other day someone gave me a book that proved to be yet another translation of the Dhammapada. On seeing it my first thought was: 'Here we go! Probably another rehash of an earlier rehash.' I was tempted to put it aside and not even bother flicking through it. But the blurb on the back about the translator (Ph.D. in Sanskrit from Harvard, associate professor of religion, and meditation teacher at the Won Institute of Graduate Studies) made me think that it might be worth at least a quick look. Recently I wrote a review of the truly awful - one couldn't in all honestly call it a translation or even a rendering – a massacre might be a better description, by Tai Sheridan which is everything a Dhammapada shouldn't be. Glen Wallis' *Dhammapada; Verses on the Way*, is not only everything this little Buddhist classic should be, I would go so far as to say it is the best Dhammapada presently available.

Someone once said poetry translated from another language is like a desired woman; if it's beautiful it's not faithful and if it's faithful it's not beautiful. Well, Wallis seems to have managed to achieve both faithfulness and beauty. His translation has a cadence that reads exceptionally well, and given Pali's stylistic and grammatical particularities this is quite an achievement. And just as important, it is as faithful to the original as you could want. At the end of the translation Wallis has just over 100 pages of notes, but don't let this put you off. These notes include a learned but accessible account of the history, grammar and meaning of the Dhammapada and its place in Indian Buddhist literature. His comments on some of the similes and his numerous quotes from the *suttas* illuminate the verses in a way that really gives them depth and increased understanding. Of course one could quibble (and so I will). 'Unbinding' seems to be a rather odd translation/rendering of *nibbana*. But such minor things are more than made up for his truly informative

comments on other technical terms. See what he says about *bodhi* on page 135. From now on I think I will stop using the terms 'enlightened' and 'enlightened one' and switch to 'awakened' and 'awakened one' instead. If you want a 100% word-for-word accurate translation of the Dhammapada get K. R. Norman's *The Words of the Doctrine* with its 174 pages of notes on grammar, syntax, consonant groups, variant readings, the eastern form of *am*, etc, and do your best to keep awake. If you want an accurate, readable translation with helpful notes that is true to the Buddha's Dhamma get Wallis' *The Dhammapada; Verses on the Way*. I couldn't recommend it higher.

A Gay Tragedy

Occasionally someone, usually a young man but sometimes a young women or an older man or women, will approach me and after a few minutes of hesitation or beating around the bush, ask me what the Buddhist position on homosexuality is. When they do, I tell them that intentional actions (*kamma*) modify consciousness and that our kamma conditions our future. Positive intentional acts have positive effects (*vipaka*) and negative intentional acts have a negative effect. Sexual acts motivated by the usual intentions, feelings and emotions which exist between two people who love each other, would have a positive effect and would not infringe the third Precept, whether they be homosexual or heterosexual. I underline this point by saying that Buddhist ethics about sex are primarily concerned with the motives behind the sexual behaviour, rather than the gender of the individuals concerned. This being so, if two people of the same gender express their love for each other physically there is no good reason why the kamma this creates should be any different from when two people of the opposite gender do the same. Having said this, I then try to change the subject, not because I am embarrassed talking about homosexuality, but because I do not like the 'single issue' approach to Dhamma.

However, a few years ago I had an encounter which made me realize that inquiries about homosexuality, whether from gays themselves or their families, should be given my whole attention. However theoretical or marginal this issue may be to me it is likely to be of considerable import to the people who ask such questions. A young man named Julian rung me asking if he could come and talk to me about Buddhism. I said he could and on the appointed day and time he came. Julian turned out to be about 20 old, of slight build and with pleasant features. He was well groomed and neatly dressed. He started by asking me a few questions

about some aspects of Buddhism but I sensed that these were not really what he was interested in. Finally, the question came: 'Venerable, can a gay person be a good Buddhist?' I gave my usual reply but it soon became clear that this did not please him. He kept interjecting and expressing doubts about what I said. I answered all his objections, but he remained unconvinced. Arriving at a deadlock and not knowing what more I could say I asked him if he was gay. He blushed, cleared his throat and said that he was. Then he told me his story.

Since his early teens he noticed that he was attracted to other boys and had a particular interest in woman's clothes. Horrified by these feelings he kept them well under control. A year ago while doing his national service he had met another soldier who was gay and since that time they had been having a relationship, although a guilt-filled and fugitive one. Once or twice a month they would pool their recourses and book a hotel for the night. He would dress in woman's clothes, put on makeup and they would spend the night together. For Julian at least, this would be followed by days of self-loathing and resolutions never to do it again.

After he had finished telling me this he hung his head and said; 'This must be wrong.' 'Well,' I said, 'Some people would find it a bit strange. But from a Buddhist perspective I really can't see that it is particularly harmful. Satisfying sexual urges is a perfectly natural thing to do and it is acceptable where it does not involve adultery or harming others. The conflict you create within yourself by hating what are completely harmless feelings hurts you much more than being gay ever could. There is no reason why you can't practice the Precepts – respecting the life, the prosperity and the sexual feelings of others, their right to know the truth and keeping your mind free from intoxicants – while being gay.' He was silent but I could see that I had not been able to still his doubts.

Julian visited me two more time over the next two month and our conversations were about the Dhamma in general although we also went over the same territory concerning homosexuality with very much the same results. Then, after not having seen or heard from Julian for nearly six month I got a call from

him. He told me that a famous Taiwanese monk was in town giving a series of talks and that he had managed to get a few minutes with him. He had asked the monk the same question he had asked me and the monk had told him that homosexuality was a filthy, evil thing and that homosexuals get reborn in the lowest hell where they are boiled in excrement for eons. Julian said this in an almost triumphant tone, seemingly glad that he had proved me wrong or that he had found someone who agreed with him. I asked him what else this venerable monk had said. 'Nothing,' he replied. 'He was going somewhere and only had a few minutes to talk.'

How often has this happened to me? I have told an inquirer something about Buddhism which I know to be sound, sensible and in accordance with the Tipitaka, they go to another monk who tells them the exact opposite and then they come back to me asking me to explain the anomaly. Then I am stuck with the problem of either saying that the other monk doesn't know what he is talking about (which is often the case) and appearing to be an arrogant upstart, or biting my lip, saying nothing and letting the person go away with yet another half-baked notion or superstition thinking that it is Dhamma. How often? Very often! In most cases this is just frustrating. In this case it had tragic consequences.

Look Julian' I said. 'You asked me what Buddhism would say about homosexuality and I told you based on my 25 years of studying the Buddhist scriptures and thinking about various issues in the light of the Buddha's Dhamma. I don't know what else I can say.' I told him that if he wanted to talk with me at any time he was welcome to do so and then we hung up.

Four days later I was browsing through the paper and a small article tucked away on the eighth page caught my eye. The heading read 'Man's Body Found in Park.' I scanned the article briefly and was about to turn to something else when the name Julian sprung out at me. In an instant my attention was riveted. I read the part where this name appeared and sure enough it was about the Julian who had come to see me. I returned to the top of the article and read it all the way through. Four days earlier, perhaps only a few hours after ringing me, Julian had gone to a park in

the centre of Singapore late at night, taken an overdose of sleeping tablets and been found dead the next morning. A suicide note had been found in his pocket but the article did mention what it said. I was overwhelmed by sorrow. The thought of him lying there utterly alone, hating himself and in such despair that he would kill himself almost made me cry. But soon anger was welling up through the sadness and diluting it until it had completely replaced the sadness. I pictured the Taiwanese monk blithely dispensing his ignorant and ultimately toxic opinion before rushing off to give a sermon about compassion or receive the accolade of the crowd. I became so angry that I resolved to write him a letter and tell him what he had been responsible for. Then I thought it would probably be a waste of time. He probably wouldn't even remember talking to Julian.

It seems to me that most thoughtful people would agree that sex without love is a rather unattractive thing. Physically, it is little more than 'exchanging fluids' as the AIDS awareness literature so delicately puts it. What lifts sex above the fluids exchange level is the motives and emotions behind it – affection, tenderness, the desire to give and receive, the bonds of companionship, fun even.

This fits well into the Buddha's famous statement: 'I say that intention is kamma.' Is sticking a knife into someone a positive or a negative action? It depends! If the knife was held by an enraged, violent person it would probably be negative. If it is held by a surgeon performing an operation to save someone's life it would certainly be positive. From the Buddhist perspective, sexual behaviour is not judged primarily by the gender of the people involved, by the dictates of a code of behaviour drawn up in the Bronze Age or by whether a legal document has been signed, but by the psychological components motivating it. Homosexuals are as capable of wanting and of feeling love and affection towards their partners as heterosexuals are and where such states are present homosexual sex is as acceptable as heterosexual sex.

This is a simple and logical truth and it is in accordance with Buddhist teachings but circumstances were such that I was unable to help Julian see it. All

his experience had told him that being attracted to people of the same gender is wrong. Those around him had always expressed disapproval towards homosexuality and sniggered at gays. The law (in Singapore) told him that homosexuality is so heinous that it must be punished by 10 years imprisonment, more than for manslaughter. He knew that religious teachers, Christian, Muslim and even some Buddhists, consider it so evil that it will have drastic consequences in the life hereafter. All this denigration and ignorance prevented him from hearing the gentle, reasonable and kindly words of the Buddha. It caused him inestimable suffering and finally drove him to suicide.

I am reminded of Julian because three weeks ago I represented Buddhism in a seminar on religion and homosexuality at Catholic Junior Collage. Of the 800 students in the audience I assumed that a certain number would probably be homosexual and may be struggling to understand their feelings. Knowing that what I said may well have something to do with them growing up either happy and well-adjusted or tortured and self-loathing, I took great care to explain the Buddhist position on homosexuality.

Belated but the Better for it

It was the official launching of our book *The Buddha and His Disciples* at Borders Bookshop. Our publisher had arranged for an interview with Susan (she did the illustrations) and I to appear in the *Straits Times* the day before to publicize the book. The launching was a great success with about 250 people lining up to have us sign the copies of the book they had bought. Towards the end of the book signing a man appeared before me, gave me his book and while I was signing it he said to me 'Do you remember me?' I looked up at him, rummaged through my memory for a moment, then smiled and said, 'No I don't. When did we meet?' 'You used to know my father Dr. Chee', he said. Immediately memories flooded in, although not of him but of his father.

Some 10 years before when I first came to Singapore an Anglo-Chinese doctor named Chee used to attend my talks regularly. He stood out from the crowd because he would often ask questions, sometimes even challenging ones, something Singaporeans rarely ever do. I liked him for this, it made my talks a little more stimulating, and we became friends. He took me out for lunch a few times and would often ring me up to ask for clarifications on aspects of Buddhist doctrine. He had been brought up by particularly narrow-minded Christian parents and this it had left him with a strong dislike for the religion, although he continued to have a spiritual yearning. During the years he built up a highly successful medical practice he had no time to explore other approaches to spirituality, but now that he had retired he did have and he had become fascinated with Dhamma.

Despite his deep interest I noticed a strong restlessness and dissatisfaction in him. I encouraged him to do mindfulness of breathing and *metta bhavana* and it helped a bit but I suspected that his mind was too 'set in its ways.' Then, after not

having seen him for a while I got a telephone call from his son, the one who stood before me now, inviting me to his father's funeral. A bit surprised, I asked what had happened to Dr. Chee and was told that two days previously he had booked a room overnight in an expensive hotel, ordered and consumed a bottle of the best whiskey and then hanged himself. I was quite shocked. I went to the funeral, which was in a church, and never having met his wife or children spoke to no one and as is typical with Singaporeans, none of them introduced themselves to me. It was a bleak affair and I went feeling rather down.

I handed back the man's book, asked him how his family was getting along and then said: 'So why did you come today?' He replied, 'Well, I saw your picture in the paper yesterday and it reminded me that my father often used to mention you and say how much talking with you had helped him. Then I recalled that when you came to the funeral none of us even spoke to you. So I just came to thank you.' He took my hand, looked me in the face and said 'Thank you. Thank you very much', turned and then disappeared through the crowd. I was deeply moved, so moved in fact that that tears welled up in my eyes. Even though there were still a few people waiting to have their books signed I had to take a break for five minutes. It's funny but this 'thank you' was more important to me, more poignant and meaningful for having come after a gap of so many years. It was one of the nicest gifts anyone had given to me for a long time.

The Bodhi Banyan Bungle

Nowhere is the ignorance of and confusion about Buddhism better illustrated than in the widespread inability to distinguish between Bodhi trees and Banyan trees. I thought everyone knew that the Buddha was awakened while sitting under the Bodhi tree, otherwise known as *assattha* in Pali, *asvattha* in Sanskrit, *bo* in Sinhala, *po* in Thai, *bawdi* in Burmese, *pipple* in Hindi, Bodhi Tree or Sacred Fig in English, *Ficus religios*a in botanical writings; and that a Bodhi tree is one thing and a Banyan is another.

God! They look different enough! The Bodhi tree has thin, bright-green leaves with the characteristic long, pointed tip while the Banyan's leaves are ovate/elliptic-shaped, thick and dark green. The fruit of the former is small and brown while that of the latter is large and purple. Their botanical names are distinct too; *Ficus religiosa* for the former and *Ficus bengalensis* for the latter. But most

noticeable of all is that the Banyan puts forth numerous aerial roots which support its spreading branches and form accessory trunks, and the Bodhi does not.

Saying that the Buddha was awakened under a Banyan tree is a bit like saying Jesus was born in a milk pail or that he was nailed to an octagon, that a water melon fell on Newton's head, that Santa's sleigh is pulled by aardvarks or that the jolly swagman jumped into a bath tub. On one hand it's not really that important, on the other it shows a superficial and casual attitude to clearly discernible differences and easily discoverable facts. In 2008 *Time* ran an article on corruption at Bodh Gaya entitled 'Big Trouble Under the Banyan Tree.' The August 8th 2009 edition of the *Economist* commenced a column called 'In the Shade of the Banyan Tree' in which it stated that the Buddha was awakened under a Banyan. An excellent ecological website called Eco India ('Brings you down to nature') says that Bodhi is another name for the Banyan (just brings you down!). Another website, Science Museums of China, gives a picture of a Bodhi tree, has its correct botanical name, lists its proper colloquial names and then spoils it all by calling it a Banyan tree. The tourist website for Phimai in Thailand has a different version of the muddle, stating that the Buddha was awakened while 'standing' under a Banyan tree. Wikipedia, as I have come to expect by now, also buys into the confusion, at least in its article 'Banyan Tree'. Out of 40 websites I logged on to at random, 36 got it wrong.

Come on people! It's not that difficult! If you can tell a reindeer from an aardvark you should be able to tell a Bodhi tree from a Banyan tree.

Crazy Wisdom or Just Crazy?

Crazy wisdom (*yeshe cholba*) is a concept in Tibetan Buddhism asserting that a teacher may have reached a level of development whereby his/her behaviour appears highly unconventional or even immoral to others and that he/she may use such behaviour to jolt or shock their disciples into higher states of spirituality. Something like this has existed in several religions; being a fool for Christ as described in the Bible (1 Corinthians 1.18; 3,19; 4.10) and the clownish but wise figure of Chee Kong in the Chinese Buddhist/Taoist tradition would be examples of this. There are even suggestions of something approaching it in Tipitaka. Verse 501 of the Theragatha says: "Let one with sight be as though blind, and one who hears be as though deaf, let one with tongue be as though dumb, let one who is strong be as though weak." The Buddha said that if you do not retaliate to another person's anger, those who do not appreciate the Dhamma will think you are a *bala*, i.e. a fool (S.I,162).

However, the individual whose innocent and simple holiness is misunderstood and mocked by the majority is one thing, the articulate worldly-wise teacher who cleverly explains and justifies his unconventional or reckless behaviour another altogether. The most well-known exponent of crazy wisdom in recent times was Chogyam Trungpa. While Trungpa was clearly a dynamic and brilliant individual he made a terrible mess of his own life with his abusive sexual behaviour, drug taking and alcoholism, and caused a great deal of distress to others.

The idea of crazy wisdom presents several serious problems as far as Buddhism is concerned. It renders indistinct the boundary between morality and immorality. It raises the suspicion that those who indulge in it are not really wise but are just trying to rationalizing or excuse behaviour that in other context would

be unacceptable, immoral or even illegal. It is hypocritical in that crazy wisdom proponents such as Trungpa insist that their students should not emulate their behaviour. In Trungpa's case, at one point, when his alcoholism became really serious, he admitted himself into a rehab clinic to dry out and recover. Significantly, he did not apply to himself all the supposedly profound meditational and psychological techniques that he had been teaching to others. Surely this alone has to raise at least some doubts about the legitimacy of crazy wisdom.

But for me the most serious problem with the concept of crazy wisdom is its dependence on the assumption that the teacher is *ipso facto* enlightened, or at least highly developed. This assumption depends entirely on the acceptance of certain beliefs; e.g. in the Tibetan tradition that the teacher is supposedly the reincarnation of a great teacher of the past, in India on the traditional assertion that gurus have mystical powers and that surrender to them is the key to spiritual advancement. Like all such assumptions and assertions these ones are not open to critical examination but have to be taken on faith.

The Stupid and the Decent

Criminals are not so much fearsome or dangerous as stupid. A recent crime here in Singapore really underlined this point. A gang of young men attacked and robbed four immigrant workers, seriously harming them and killing one. Within a few days they were all caught except one who has probably fled the country. Three have now been charged with murder and if found guilty will probably hang, while the other four face a range of charges for which, if convicted, they will spend years in jail. And how much did they rob from their victims? Forty dollars and a few odds and ends. One life lost, three seriously threatened, five people severely injured, a widow and three orphans made, the best years of several young men's lives spent in incarceration. And for what? Forty dollars and a few phone cards!

This shocking and tragic case set me thinking. Does capital punishment really act at a deterrent? Maybe for the intelligent person tempted to commit a serious crime. But most criminals are, as I said, stupid. They commit their crime because they are stupid enough to think they can get away with it. Or perhaps because they don't think at all. In this recent case, only one of the accused had the sense to get out of the country. The others were caught within a few days. Stupid! Capital punishment may eliminate stupid people but it doesn't make stupid people smart.

The other thing this case did is remind me of how decent people can be. According to the newspaper when the body of the murdered man, Mr. Shanmneanathan, was returned to India, all his worldly goods accompanied it – several sets of cloths, a cooking pot and a small album of family photos. I was deeply moved when I read this. When I thought of the struggles and difficulties his wife will now have to face, I mentioned it to friends and students and they opened their hearts and their wallets. In no time we had collected $3000. This money has

been handed over to HOME, an organization here in Singapore that works for the welfare of immigrant workers and will be passed on to Mr. Shanmneanthan's wife. Just when some people make you lose your faith in human nature, others come along and restore it.

Meeting Vimalaji

I have met many of them – Sai Baba, Ramesh Belsakar, the16th Gyalwa Karmapa, Amma Amritananda, Sakya Trizin, Guru Bhava, Achan Yantra, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Krishnamurti, Namki Norbu, U. Pandita and a few others besides. But the one who impressed me most was Vimala Thakar. The Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh were close runners up while the others were strung out at various places further down the line. The Karmapa was last. Now that he had divided himself into two reincarnations, I'd have to meet both halves before I could revise this impression. What do you call the two new Karmapas? His Holiness the ½ 17th Karmapa and His Holiness the Other ½ 17th Karmapa? I'm just a simple monk so I don't understand the protocol of Tibetan monastic hierarchs.

I had gone to Mt Abu to meet Vimala Thakar and after a bit of looking around I found her house. I knocked on the door, her secretary appeared and when I asked if I could see Vimalaji, she bid me to wait and disappeared back inside. Reappearing shortly afterwards, she ushered me in and led me to a room where Vimalaji was sitting in a large easy chair. She rose as I came in and greeted me warmly. She was short, of stout build, with grey hair and wore a wispy pure-white sari. She also had a slight but serene smile on her face and dark, alert but restful eyes. I introduced myself and after giving her greetings from mutual friends in Sri Lanka, we have had a discussion that went for about an hour and a half. As to what she said I will deal with some other time. It very similar to Krishmamurti's teachings but without his double-bind 'if you ask how to do it this shows you don't understand' and was delivered without his emphatic, impatient tone. Vimalaji was clear, consistent and gave the impression of speaking 'as one who knows.' While I was deeply impressed by what she said I was equally impressed by what she was. Unlike nearly all the

other ‘great’ teachers I have met, Vimala Thakar was natural, unassuming and completely without formalities. In many ways she was rather ordinary, which probably explains why she never had the high profile or celebrity aura of many other teachers. She didn’t even have a fancy hat like the Karmapa. A nobody like me turned up unannounced at her door and was immediately able to see her. She gave herself completely to me while we talked and it was I, not her, who brought the discussion to a close. She was content to let me ask my questions for as long as I wanted.

When I left and Vimalaji’s secretary accompanied me out to the gate, I noticed on the right a large banyan tree with a circle of seats around it. ‘If you are having discussions would it be okay for me to join?’ I asked. The secretary replied, ‘The discussions are finished for the year. In fact, Vimalaji is quite ill and is leaving tomorrow to go down the mountain. She was packing when you came.’ I apologized for interrupting Vimalaji’s departure plans. “It’s perfectly okay” the secretary said with a smile. “Vimalaji is happy to speak with anyone who comes.” In the Vimamsaka Sutta the Buddha encouraged the prospective disciple to carefully examine a teacher before committing oneself to him or her and to carry out this examination over a period of time. The purpose of such examination is to allow the disciple to see if the teacher has the attainments they claim to have and that they practice what they preach. It is increasingly difficult to do this with most teachers nowadays. Most are surrounded by, or surround themselves with, an ‘inner circle’ who jealously guard their position by trying to keep everyone else in the ‘out group.’ Should you penetrate this barrier you are made to think how privileged you are to have been able to meet ‘His Holiness,’ ‘Guruji,’ ‘The Master,’ ‘Rimpoche.’ Long before you even see the teacher or hear him or her speak, slick brochures, personal endorsements and grandiose titles (my favourite is ‘Emanation of Manjusri’), sets the tone. So when the big moment comes, you don’t know whether you are experiencing what’s there or what you were told would be there.

All my study of the Tipitaka gives me the impression that the Buddha was, in this respect, not unlike Vimala Thakar. He was accessible to everyone, nothing was concealed and no image was projected. What you saw was what was there. His presence was not magnified by golden thrones, silk brocade or hats made out of dakini's hair. You didn't even have to buy a ticket to hear him teach the Dhamma. Like I said, Vimala Thakar was the most impressive teacher I have ever met and I was able to learn something from her simply because I was able to meet her.

Prayer Wheels

The capacity of the human mind to misapprehend and misunderstand seems to be almost infinite. And sometimes the results are startling. Take prayer wheels for instance. How did this (now I want to be culturally sensitive here) 'interesting' practice begin? On many occasions the Buddha said that it is good to listen to the Dhamma. For example, in the famous Mangala Sutta he said 'listening to the Dhamma from time to time, this is the greatest blessing' (Sn.265). Given my observation above this was a mistake on the part of the Buddha. What he should have said was: 'Listening to the Dhamma, paying attention to it and understanding it, is the greatest blessing' because it wasn't long before people came to believe that not listening to the Dhamma, but merely hearing it, not understanding it but just having the sound of the words go in their ears, was a blessing. When books came into use and the sutras were committed to writing the logical next step was believing that writing out the sutras, or even paying someone else to write them, was to receive a blessing. Mahayana sutras are replete with exhortations like this one, 'Anyone who listens to, writes out, has written out, bows to, worships, sings the praises of, sees, has faith in, honors, respects or enshrines in a stupa this sutra will accumulate merit as countless as the sands of the Ganges.' In the 23rd chapter of the *Saddharmapundrika Sutra* it says, 'If anyone copies this sutr*a* or pays homage to it with flowers, incense, garlands, perfume, sandal powder, unguents…oil lamps, the merit he earns will be incalculable.' Nothing about reading it.

Now a common way of paying respect to someone or something in ancient India was to walk around them or it – a temple, a stupa, a statue, etc. In time the practice developed of making merit by walking around libraries containing copies of the scriptures. By the 10th or 11th century some of the great monastic libraries of

India had book cases that turned on a pivot, apparently so that their books could be more easily reached. Pilgrims to these monasteries would visit the libraries and walk around or sometimes turn the book cases as a meritorious act. You can probably see where this is going.

The Wikipedia article on the subject says that the first reference to prayer wheels is in the account of a Chinese pilgrim to Ladakh in the 4th century. I know of no such pilgrim visiting Ladakh at that time and I don't think the region was Buddhist then either. However, we do know that by the 6th century Vietnamese, Chinese and even Japanese temples had octagonal wooden structures containing copies of the scriptures which later were turned for the purpose of 'making merit.' One of these things, called a *rinzo,* can still be seen, and turned, at the great Kannon Temple in Kamakura. Another version of the same thing is the disks (*jizo* wheels) sometimes found on Japanese tombstones which are turned to 'pray' for the person buried beneath. But of course, the most well-known outcome of this chain of just slightly off-centre ideas, misunderstandings and conceptual corner-cutting, is the Tibetan prayer wheels or *mani chos kor*. There are/were many different types of these. Some were huge and people would actually get in and turn them treadmill-style.

There have always been those who read, understood and tried to apply what the scriptures say as indeed there are today too, but the majority have always preferred the easy option, and in Tibet this meant turning a cylinder containing pages from the scriptures. And the final step in the process? Well, it can be a bit of a bother turning a prayer wheel all day. Throughout those countries and regions where Tibetan Buddhism prevails you'll find prayer wheels turned by wind, water, heat and nowadays, by electricity. It gives new meaning to the phrase 'praying in a mechanical fashion'. You can even buy prayer wheel earrings which you can turn as you fiddle with your ear lobes when you're bored. Well, it's been a long and interesting journey from the Buddha's original intention. Perhaps it time we went all the way back to it.

Misquoting the Buddha

Browsing through the internet really brings home to you just how much misinformation there is about the Dhamma. On non-Buddhist websites I have seen enlightenment described as 'the highest state of God-consciousness', the Buddha himself called a 'Nepalese' and of him attaining enlightenment under a banyan tree Another pervasive form of misinformation is attributing to the Buddha things he never said. I harvested these spurious saying in less half an hour on the internet. Apparently the Buddha said 'Not this! Not this!' (actually from the Upanishads); 'Look within. Thou art Buddha' (really penned by that old rascal Madam Blavasky) and 'Protect the Earth and be kind to all living things' (how comforting to know that the Buddha was actually a politically correct greeny). One website called Timeless Quotes had two dozen 'sayings' of the Buddha, a few authentic, some very loose paraphrases of something he did say, most of them spurious. This one, 'Your work is to discover your world and then with all your heart give yourself to it' makes the poor old Buddha sound like a forerunner to Norman Vincent Peel. And what about this one? 'Unity can only be manifested by the Binary. Unity itself and the idea of Unity are already two!' One of those Buddhism and Christianity are the same web sites claims that the founders of both religions called themselves 'fishers of men'. The Buddha compared himself to an elephant trainer, a chariot driver, a potter and even a nanny (A.II,110; M.I,395; M.III,118, etc). But a fisherman?

These and numerous other fake sayings infiltrate the general discourse on Buddhism, circulate for decades and are quoted as authoritative. Sad to say we Buddhists ourselves are partly responsible for this. The wed site of an organization called the Buddhist and Pali College has these quotes attributed to the Buddha:

'Ambition is like love, impatient both for delays and arrivals', 'Do not speak unless it improves on the silence' and 'All know the way but few actually walk it.' I would be most interested if someone at the Buddhist and Pali College could show me where these cheesy gems come from. Ven. K. Sri Dharmmananda often use to quote these words as having been spoken by the Buddha; 'A man should accept truth wherever he finds it and live by it.' In fact, it was one of his favorite sayings and he often used it in his sermons. When he was compiling his book *The Treasury of the Dhamma* he asked me to find the reference from the Tipitaka for this saying. Immediately I tensed up. I knew he did not like being contradicted or shown to be wrong. As tactfully as I could I told him that these words were not from either in the Tipitaka or the commentaries. There was a thunderous silence for a few moments, then he cleared his throat and said. 'It's there somewhere. I'll find it myself.' When his book finally came out I was relieved to see that this saying was not included.

Admittedly, most of the sayings passed off as being authentic Buddha Vacana show the Buddha in a good light. Even so, there is something mildly disrespectful about attributing to someone something they never said, quite apart from the fact that it shows lack of care, shoddy scholarship and a disregard for and an ignorance of what they did say. I can understand why non-Buddhists do this; they know no better and in many cases they have got their skewed quotes from we Buddhists. 'Look within. Thou art Buddha' is cited as being from the scriptures by none other than Christmas Humphries in his *Wisdom of Buddhism*.

But why are we Buddhists so careless about quoting our master? Amongst traditional Buddhists it almost certainly because they are so woefully ignorant of the sacred literature. In traditional Buddhists countries very few people ever read the Tipitaka. The Dhammapada usually gets a fair showing but that's about it. Another reason could be the prevalence throughout much of Buddhist Asia of the attitude reflected in the Thai saying 'Never mind' (*Mai pen rai*). Sometimes one gets the feeling that shrugged shoulders rather than the *anjali* should be the

archetypical Buddhist gesture. In the case of Western Buddhists it may be that just as we grew out of Theosophy we grew into New Ageism and we have never entirely succeeded in freeing ourselves from the influence of either. Whatever the case, it's time we stopped misquoting the Buddha. The bulk of the Buddha's words, at least as preserved in Pali, are now easily available in Walsh's translation of the Digha Nikaya and Bhikkhu Bodhi's accurate and readable translations of the Majjhima Nikaya, the Samyutta Nikaya and the Anguttara Nikaya.

I Hate the Dhammapada

I hate the Dhammapada! I often read books on Buddhism where the only quotes of the Buddha are all from the Dhammapada. Get a Vesak card or a Buddhist-themed bookmark and you can bet your life it will have a verse from the Dhammapada in it. The headings of Buddhist newsletters and the extra space at the bottom of their page, will inevitably be filled in with a Dhammapada verse. Countless Buddhist organizations have a verse or a line from the Dhammapada as their motto. In Sri Lanka, the main English newspaper has a small 'Thought for the Day' section, and if it's from Buddhism, it's always, you guessed it, a saying from the Dhammapada.

However, I should revise my opening statement. I don't hate the Dhammapada, but rather the way it is overused. This lack of imagination and ignorance of other books from the Tipitaka, has made the Buddha's precious words from the Dhammapada trite and commonplace. But that's not all. The over-reliance on the Dhammapada severely limits many people's exposure to the Dhamma. Although the Dhammapada is often thought of as being a summary of the Dhamma, it is not and was never meant to be. It was probably originally compiled as a handbook for novices and new monks. Most of its verses deal with concepts and ideas of interest to monastics, or relevant mainly to them. Many important aspects of the Dhamma get no mention in it at all. For example, the word *metta* only occurs once, and *karuna* is not mentioned at all. The Dhammapada is also rather poorly arranged, and in that sense is a typical Indian work. Two of the verses from the Citta Vagga are actually about the body and numerous other verses about the mind are not in the Citta Vagga. There are dozens of 'translations' of the Dhammapada available, a good number of these actually not translations at all but rehashes based on one or two earlier translations or rehashes. And some of these 'translations' are

truly awful. And yet, despite the pervasiveness of the Dhammapada, and how widely it is known, spurious Dhammapada sayings are all over the place.

The Out of Body Experience

The Buddha sometimes spoke of and believed in the existence of psychic abilities (*iddhi*). Several of these abilities seem impossible; being able to walk through walls, walking on water, levitating, etc. (D.I.78). Others seem problematic while not being totally impossible and are certainly intriguing; being able to hear things over a great distance and being able to read other people's minds being two of these. I am much more open to the possibility to these two, particularly the last, because I once had an experience which seemed to be something like it.

Late one night I was meditating in my darkened room. I had been in a deep, stable concentration for some time when suddenly I heard someone's voice in the room very near me. The voice was clear and loud. I was immediately jolted out of my meditation and opened my eyes to see who it was. I looked around the room (my eyes were accustomed to the dark and there was some light coming through the window) but could see no one. Intrigued and a little worried that there was an intruder in the premises, I got up and looked around. Again nothing. I went to the window and out in the street saw several young men fixing a motorbike under a street lamp. They were some distance away but I could just hear their voices. Initially it was the voice I had heard in my room itself which had startled me, not what it said. Now I recalled that the voice had been talking about things related to motorbikes. I realized that for a few moments or so I had spontaneously heard part of a conversation that had been going on out in the street as if it had taken place just a few feet from me. For the next few weeks every one of my meditation was a failure. I longed to get into a deep stable concentration so I could have a similar 'psychic' experience again. Of course this hope was the very thing that disrupted my meditation and blocked it from happening. And nothing like it has ever

happened again. However, since this experience I have met several deeply committed meditators who have told me that they have had similar experiences. Of course one meets plenty of meditators who are more than happy to tell you all about their amazing psychic experiences, often after just a few weeks meditation. I am referring to long-term mediators who have spent extended periods in silence and solitude.

Another psychic ability mentioned by the Buddha is what he called producing the mind-made body (*mano maya kaya*). He described it like this, "He (i.e. the meditating monk) draws out of his body another body, having form, made of mind, complete in all its limbs and faculties" (D.I,77). This sounds very like the often reported phenomena now called out-of-body experience, OBE. People who have been brain dead and then revived sometimes report having an OBE, others say it occasionally happens to them during sleep or during a period of intense physical exhaustion. Interestingly, the Buddha specifically says that creating a *mano maya kaya* is a willed experience, one has to 'apply and direct the mind' (*cittam abhiniharati abhininnameti*) to producing it. However, perhaps this does not cancel out the possibility of it happening spontaneously. OBE is often enough reported that it has attracted the attention of cognitive scientists and others and there is a surprisingly large amount of literature on the subject. The Wikipedia article Out-of-body Experience offers a good overview of this literature. Charles T. Tart's article 'Six Studies of Out-of-body Experience' in the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, No.2, 1998 is a good read; rigorously scientific while being open to the possibility of a spiritual/psychic, if that's the right term, explanation. But to return to the Dhamma; how does the *mano maya kaya* fit into the Buddhist model of consciousness? And is there anything in modern or neurological research that could explain it. Any opinions?

Does Religion Make People Better?

I have just read for the umpteenth time that 'morality only become meaningful with religion' and that 'without religion anything becomes permissible', and of course the word 'religion' is almost always used to mean belief in one or another deity or god, usually the Christian one. I have long had trouble with these claims, not because I dislike religion but because I like and take an interest in history. I know of few historical facts demonstrating that religious devotion made people better or that being non-religious made people worse. I have just read Nelson Mandela's *Conversations With Myself* – letters he wrote and notes he made during his long incarceration. Some parts are this absorbing book make painful reading. The loneliness, the separation from his family, the isolation and the physical hardship caused him, as you would expect, terrible distress. That he didn't give in to despair as the long years, the slow decades, rolled by says something about his incredible conviction. But it also made me question even more the often-repeated and widely accepted claims mentioned above.

Just a few facts. Apartheid, one of the more wicked and inhuman ideologies of the 20th century, was the brainchild of a group of deeply religious people, the Afrikaans. According to Wikipedia, and I've read the same claim elsewhere, Afrikaans have long had the highest rate of consistent churchgoing of any group of people in the world. D. F. Malan who set up the apartheid system in 1948 had studied theology and was an ordained Protestant minister. His successor, Hendrick, Verwoerd had doctorates in theology and psychology *cum laude* and was likewise a conspicuously pious man. Even those Afrikaans who had no part in establishing apartheid were happy to benefit from it, endorse it and vote for those who implemented it – as they regularly attended church – churches that were racially

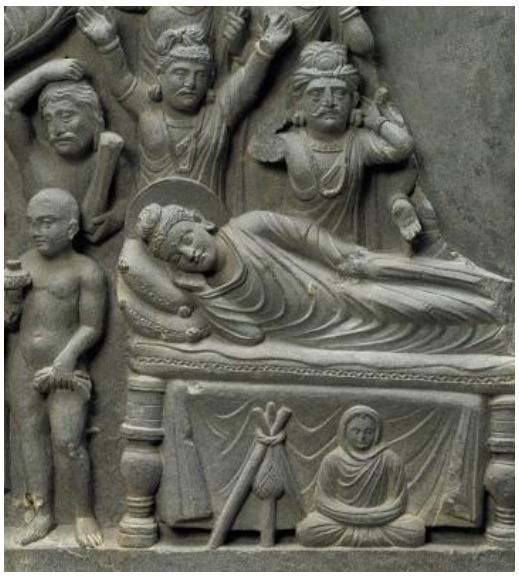
segregated after the Churches Native Laws Amendment Act of 1957. And as apartheid met with more and more resistance from people like Nelson Mandela, pious Afrikaans lied, bribed, fixed elections and stacked courts in their favor; they beat, tortured and murdered their opponents to keep apartheid going. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission even established that P. W Botha, another deeply religious man, had ordered the bombing of the South African Council of Churches headquarters in Johannesburg.

To dismiss Malan's, Verwoerd's and the others' piety as insincere and self-serving would be to ignore facts. Even their most bitter opponents acknowledged that they were staunchly religious men who prayed and read the Bible regularly. In fact, it was probably their firm, albeit it misguided, belief that they were doing what God had ordained that made them so determined to uphold apartheid. Oh, and just so one particular religion doesn't get all the thumping, it is equally true that other South African Christians opposed apartheid with a similar determination, and I know of deeply religious Sinhalese Buddhists who excused and justified some of the worst cruelty of Sri Lanka's civil war.

Nelson Mandela on the other hand, who is quite irreligious, stood up to apartheid long before it was popular to do so, endured decades of cruel imprisonment (and they really were cruel to him) and emerged from this martyrdom seemingly without any rancour or ill-will and with a readiness to engage with and forgive his former tormentors. So does 'morality only become meaningful with religion' and is it true that 'without religion everything becomes permissible?' I see no evidence for this. People can be deeply and devotedly religious and commit great evil. Likewise, someone could be without any conventional religious conviction and yet have the highest standards of morality and integrity. So it's not just religious conviction that makes the difference but something or some things else. But what?

The Monk with the Tripod

Subhadda was the last person converted by the Buddha. Once, the Buddha said: 'Even if you have to carry me around on a stretcher (because of sickness or old age) there will be no change in the clarity of my wisdom. If anyone were to speak rightly of me they could say that a being not liable to delusion has appeared in the world, for the good of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good and happiness of gods and humans' (M.I,83). In this sense the Buddha was true to his word. Only a few hours before his passing, as he lay surrounded by his disciples, the wandering ascetic Subhadda pushed his way through the crowd wanting to ask him some questions. Ananda held him back saying: 'Enough Subhadda, do not disturb the Tathagata, for he is weary.' The Buddha heard this and told Ananda to let the ascetic come to him 'for whatever he will ask is because he is questing for enlightenment.' Subhadda sat before the Buddha and the two men spoke for a while. Subhadda took to heart what the Buddha said and later he attained awakening (D.II,149). Such was the Buddha's compassion that he taught the Dhamma almost to his last breath.



Ancient depictions of the Buddha's passing often include images of a person grieving and another of a monk meditating. This first figure represents the Mallas sobbing, as mentioned in the Maraparinibbana Sutta. The meditating figure represents the monks who were enlightened who spent the evening the Buddha died meditating or discussing the Dhamma, again as mentioned in the sutta. However, not

infrequently, the meditating figure is flanked by what looks like a tripod supporting some kind of round object. What is this curious thing?

In the Anguttara Nikaya the Buddha mentions a sect of ascetics called the Tedandika, Those of the Three Sticks (A.III,276). This same sect is also mentioned in some early non-Buddhist texts, and an ascetic in the Jataka is mentioned as having three sticks (*tedanda*, Ja.II,3160). It seems that these ascetics carried a three-piece staff over their shoulders on the end of which they suspended their begging bowl water pot or water filter. When they rested they assembled the staff into a tripod and used it to support their accoutrements. Nowhere in the Tipitaka is Subhadda mentioned as being a Tedandika but there must have been an early tradition that he was. So when the meditating monk depicted in parinibbana scenes is shown with a tripod he is not representing the monks who remained calm after the Buddha's passing, but rather Subhadda, the Buddha's last disciple.

Lifesaver Cheng

Not long ago an elderly man came to my temple and asked if he could do some cleaning for me. I said he would be most welcome and he started coming once or twice a week. Diligently but without hardly ever speaking to me, he vacuumed, scrubbed, dusted and generally made himself useful. However, he always looked rather sad, as if he was carrying some heavy inner burden. One day as we sat sharing a 10 o'clock tea, I asked him about himself and why he was volunteering to clean. After some equivocation he told me his story.

He was a poor man with little education. For much of his life he did backbreaking work unloading cargo on the Singapore River. Some 15 years previously his father died leaving his house to him and his sister. She maneuvered him out of the house and for the next 10 years he lived on the street; begging, dodging the police and eating out of garbage cans. During this time, he stole a bunch of bananas from one temple and $100 from another. Eventually things turned around for him and he got a job, a place to live and since then he has been okay. Except for one thing. He still felt profoundly ashamed and guilty for having stolen from temples and feared that he will have to suffer what he called 'kammic retribution' in his next life.

After telling me about his thieving he quickly reassured me that as soon as he got his first pay packet he put $10 in the donation box of the temple where he had stolen the bananas and made a $100 donation to the other one. He was cleaning my temple he said because he was trying to 'clean away' the 'evil kamma' he had made. I told him that his thieving was to some extent understandable given his circumstances at the time, and the fact that he has made amends for it as soon as he

was able indicated that he was basically a good person. This did nothing to brighten him so I changed to subject and asked him about his life as a laborer.

During his reminiscing he mentioned in passing that once he had saved two people who had fallen off a ship from drowning. This interested me and I asked him for the details. Apparently his bold and quick actions in saving the people had briefly made him a minor celebrity and he even got his picture in the paper. It fascinated me that he was still torturing himself over his thieving but had barely remembered that he had once saved two lives. I mentioned this to him and added: 'If you had a large pair of scales and you put a bunch of bananas and a $100 note on one pan and two people you saved on the other, which do you think would be heaviest?' 'The two people' he replied. I continued: 'It is quite possible that those people you saved still remember you and bless you for what you did for them. And yet you hardly remember this noble deed. Stealing is not good, but saving a life is good enough to cancel out that bad many times over. And you saved not one life but two!' Over the next weeks I reminded him of this when we talked and even started jokingly referring to him as Lifesaver Cheng (Cheng was his name). He started to become more talkative, smiled a bit more and the last time I saw him he seemed to have become noticeably less morose.

I am often amazed and saddened by the way some people fixate on their mistakes, their failings, the wrong they have done, and dismiss as unimportant their good deeds, if they remember them at all. If ruminating on the negative changed their behavior for the better perhaps it would be justified, but all it seems to do is make them unhappy.

The Buddha and St. Francis

Today is the feast day of Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), one of the most interesting person in Western spiritual history. St. Francis was born in Italy into a wealthy family and led a worldly, reckless life during much of his youth. In 1202 he was imprisoned for several months and on his release became seriously ill. Dissatisfied with his life, he turned to prayer and four years later publicly renounced his family and his wealth, to the horror of his father. After this Francis lived as a simple hermit and spent much of his time ministering to the poor. Gradually he began to attract disciples and eventually founded an order called the Order of Friars Minor and later an order for women called the Poor Clares. However, Francis was not a good organizer and in time he handed over the day-to-day running of his orders to others and retired to a life of silent contemplation. It was during this period that he began to manifest strange wounds on his body similar to those of Jesus. Francis died in 1226 and two years later was proclaimed a saint by the Catholic Church.

For Buddhists, Saint Francis is the most attractive of all the Christian saints. In many ways his life was similar to the Buddha's. His behaviour and teachings manifested the best of Jesus' gospel of love, gentleness, forgiveness, simplicity and renunciation. St. Francis actually did 'go and sell that thou hast, and give it to the poor...and follow me' (Matthew 19,21). He was also particularly kind to animals, something that had no place in Christian theology up till then and only recently has been given attention. As a brief aside, it is worth pointing out that while 'official' Christianity gave no place to animals, Christians themselves, individuals and simple people, could be very tender-hearted towards them. On this subject have a look at W. E. H, Lecky's magisterial *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, Vol. II, pp. 161-73. You will be delighted and surprised.

If Francis had been one of his disciples, the Buddha would have praised him as an exemplary monk. However, the two men were also different in some ways. Francis was inept in practical matters while the Buddha showed sound judgment and common sense in most things he did. Francis' simplicity extended to intellectual matters; he was innocent, trusting and guileless in the best possible way. The Buddha by contrast, was thoughtful, knowledgeable and intellectually rigorous. Francis had all the endearing qualities of a child; the Buddha, all the finest attributes of an adult. In keeping with Jesus' teachings, Francis had a particular love for the poor and the neglected while this attitude was not characteristic of the Buddha. Not that the Buddha was callous towards such people but that he did not valorise them. The lives, teachings and examples of the Buddha and Saint Francis are important today in that they can serve as bridges of understanding between Buddhists and Christians.

Mummified Monks

Mummified monks are apparently quite popular in Thailand, Vietnam and in China, although less so. The Tibetans have or at least did have until the Red Guards destroyed them, a few mummified rimpoches and lamas too. Some of the saints in Catholicism are deemed to be 'miraculously uncorrupted'. I don't know what Communists call the mummified remains of Lenin, Ho and Mao, although when I saw the Great Helmsman back in the early 80s he looked decidedly waxy. 'Do Not Expose To Naked Flame!' and he was certainly no saint. Singaporean Buddhists returning from travels in Thailand sometimes ask me what I think about or how I can explain the famous mummified monk in Wat Khunaram in Ko Samui, the one with the sun glasses on (What's he need the sun glasses for?). In response I always tell them that amusing story about Rameses II.

Rameses was the greatest of all the Egyptian pharaohs, perhaps the greatest ruler of all time. His many titles included 'Conqueror of Syria', 'Subduer of the Hittites', 'Conqueror of Nubia' and the fact that he reigned for 66 years alone qualified him to be called 'The Great'. It is even thought by some that the Pharaoh mentioned in the Old Testament is Rameses. After his mummy was discovered in 1881 it was shipped off to England. When it arrived at Tilbury the customs officers had to charge some duty on it but they didn't know under what category it should be classed. Finally, Rameses II, King of Kings, was categorized under and charged duty as - dried fish.

To Kill or not to Kill? I

I have a problem. Well, actually I have many problems but right now I have one particular problem on my mind. Rats! Every night they dig the earth out of my flower pots, making a mess and sometimes killing the plants. I had put strong wire netting over some of the pots to prevent their burrowing and then the resourceful little devils chew through the hard plastic/resin pots and get in again. But their presence is not just seen in the garden. While we are meditating in the hall we sometimes hear the pitter patter of little rats' feet in the ceiling. Last month the hall started to smell and over a few days it got worse and worse. I removed one of the ceiling panels closest to where the smell seemed to be coming from only to have a shower of maggots fall all over me, an experience you would want to avoid if possible. These delightful creatures were feeding on a dead rat. Although it hasn't happened yet (at least I hope not) rats' feaces and urine mixed with dust in the ceiling can filter down and be breathed in causing several nasty diseases.

Anyway, something has to be done. Over the last week I have set traps, the type that catch rats without harming them. I have caught six so far, but all young ones, which I have subsequently released down on the bank of the Kelang River nearby. But I can't catch the adults. They are too wily to enter the trap and take the bait. Of course, wherever you find people you will find rats. But my problem is made worse than usual because of the open-air restaurant downstairs which means that there is plenty of food scraps for rats to eat.

My rat problem has made me think, and not for the first time, about the universal viability of the First Precept. Is it really possible to uphold this Precept in all circumstances? Could there be situations where it is actually wrong to practice the Precept? Here are a few actual, not hypothetical, scenarios. The Red Squirrel is

threatened with extinction in the UK due to the introduction of the more aggressive and disease resistant Grey Squirrel. To save the former they are 'culling' (an environmentally friendly way of saying 'killing') the latter in certain areas in the hope that the former can recover. There are quite a few other examples of where this sort of thing is being done. As a Buddhist what do you do? Let a species become extinct or do the needful?

You notice that the kids are constantly scratching their bums or itching their heads; the symptoms of bowel worms and head lice. As a caring and responsible parent, you shampoo the kids with Louse-Buster or give them a dose of worm medicine. But as a sincere Buddhist what do you do? And now you have discovered that Fido has 'flea issues' so you're going to have to do something about that too; quite apart from anything else he keeps bringing the fleas into the house.

The army of a blligerent power has just taken over the country and you have heard they are rounding up certain ethnic groups and rumor is they are 'resettling' them in large pits they have dug in the forests. You are a Buddhist. What do you do? Join or covertly support the resistance, or just keep your head down and hope you survive until others drive the enemy out? You run a Buddhist society in Singapore and…well, you know the situation. Rats multiply at an astonishing rate. What do you do?

The question does not seem to have worried traditional Buddhists too much. They have generally been quite kindly to animals although all have had armies and engaged in wars, some still do; e.g. the ethnic wars in north-east Burma, the insurgency in southern Thailand. I lived in Sri Lanka during much of the vicious civil war there and can never remember the contradiction between Buddhist ethics and the grim reality being discussed in any meaningful or honest way. They seemed to take what I call the Nike approach; Just Do It. But these Burmese, Thai and Sri Lankan examples are the extreme outer edge of the issue. What does a sincere Buddhist who takes the Dhamma seriously do about a rat infestation?

To Kill or not to Kill? II

Well, my post detailing a particular real-life problem and asking what could be done about it within the framework of Buddhist ethics certainly provoked a lot of interest. Both in comments on the post itself and in personal emails to me, suggestions have ranged from the 'grit your teeth and bare it' solution to the forthright 'be damned and get rid of them' approach. In between there were suggestions which might be called 'creatively impractical' such as sprinkling cats' droppings and even snakes' droppings around. I say 'creative' because I would have never thought of anything like this and it might well have some effect; and 'impractical' because of the difficulties, not just of getting such stuff, but getting a steady supply of it. Obviously, as soon as the odour wore off the rats would return and I'd have to keep trudging off to the zoo. There were of course the usual Theravadin 'pass the buck' suggestions; i.e. drop hints and get devotees or others to do the dirty work for you. Then there was advice such as chant mantras or the Metta Sutta at them or 'try to communicate with them' as shamans supposedly do to animals. Thanks very much for those who made such suggestions and I hope you won't take it too hard when I file them all under the 'New Age flim-flam' category.

The only advice that would not directly contravene the Precept and seemed to me to be practical, realistic and perhaps effective was 'get a cat'. But of course this could be seen as just another version of the 'pass the buck' solution. In getting a cat my intentions would be partly negative because I would be specifically getting kitty if not to kill the rats then at least to driven away, perhaps not as bad as killing but hardly an act of kindness.

I consulted a rat expert about my problem the other day and this is what he told me. 'Rats are very territorial. A family of rats in one location will fiercely

resist encroachment of other rats. If you kill them all off another group will soon move in to take their place. In crowded urban areas such as Singapore there are almost always rats, usually in two types of infestations - low-density or high-density. If you keep trapping the young one (those most likely to take the bait in a live trap) you will have a manageable, low-density infestation. This, coupled with an open, uncluttered environment where rats cannot hide or nest and an absence of food, will keep their numbers down.' This sounded like realistic, practical, well-informed advice to me, much more so that the 'move somewhere else' suggestion and some of the others. The one drawback to it is my immediate neighbour who has junk all over the place and the downstairs restaurant which despite their efforts to keep their outside eating area clean does provide the rats with easy pickings. Nonetheless, I intend to take the rat expert's advice and keep up the live trapping. My mantra for the time being will be 'Keep on trapping!'

Ancient Underwear

Early last year I embarked on a project to write a social history of northern India in the 5th/3rd centuries BCE based on the information in the Pali Tipitaka. Knowing more about the society the Buddha lived in can help us better understand why the Dhamma took the form it did. It can help us distinguish between the culturally specific teachings and the *sananta* Dhamma. I work on this project nearly every day and some of my material ends up on this blog. Of late I have been looking at clothes (No, not dirty laundry!). It is proving to be a bit of a challenge because it is often difficult to tell the differences between the different types of cloaks, hats, dhotis, belts and waist bands. Other early Indian literature may help throw light on some of these differences but unfortunately I don't have access to most of it. However, I'm struggling through. The Hindi *sari* is almost certainly related to the Pali *sataka*, the *choli*, the bodice that Indian women wear, is defiantly a developed form of the Pali *cola*, a sort of early brassiere. These are some of the things I have so far discovered about ancient Buddhist underwear.

The Vinaya says that when nuns are menstruating, they are allowed to wear either a *samvelliya* or a *katisutta*, apparently to hold a pad in place (Vin.II,271). *Samvelli* means something like 'that wrapped around' and *katisutta* comes from *kata* = hip + *sutta* = string and was probably something like what we call a G-string. It seems likely that *katisutta* was the literary form for *kopina*, an undergarment worn by lay men and women. The Vinaya includes the Buddha's comment about the prostitute lifting her *kopina* for the sake of a miserable coin (Vin.II,111). The Jataka describes a cook wearing a *kopina* squatting down washing the dishes (Ja.V,306). One of the disadvantages of getting drunk, the Buddha said, is that a man may expose his *kopina* (D.III,183). I think it's also one of the disadvantages of being

David Beckham and signing a contract with Calvin Kline. Now in Hindi, the *kaupina* is the G-string sort of thing worn by some yogis, by men doing messy work and in Indian wrestling (*kusthi*). In wrestling it is called *langota*, probably related to the Pali *langati*, 'to bind' or 'to tie'. This garment consists of a triangular piece of cloth with strings on each corner (hence the *sutta* in *katisutta*), two being tied around the waist and one pulled between the legs. The great Ramana Maharishi always wore one of these. Sometimes instead of strings there are ribbons which are wrapped around the waist, pulled between the legs and tucked in at the back and I suspect the Pali for this variation of the garment is *samvelliya*. According to the Vinaya, monks are not allowed to wear a *samvelliya* (Vin.II,137). This is interesting because today Hindu yogis and wrestlers wear G-strings in the belief that confining the genitals and pressing them against the body minimize sexual desire. I recall that Sankaracariya composed a five verses poem in praise of the G-string. I think it's called *Kaupina Pancakam*.

The Book of Hungry Ghosts

The *Petavatthu*, the seventh book in the Khuddaka Nikaya which is the fifth collection of the Sutta Pitaka, one of the three divisions in the Tipitaka, the Buddhist scriptures. This text and its companion text, the *Vimanavatthu*, is easily the least interesting book in the whole Tipitaka and one can only wonder how it ever got included in it. The title means 'Story of Ghosts'; *peta* = ghost + *vatthu* = story. It consists of about 814 verses embedded in prose stories. Only the verses are canonical. There are four chapters containing 12, 13, 10 and 16 stories each. The exact number of verses is unclear because it is sometimes hard to tell where the story ends and the verse begins.

The stories tell of the mean, nasty or immoral things people did which led them to being reborn as ghosts. Without exception these stories are dull, rather puerile and without literary merit. Winternitz commented: 'The truly great and profound doctrine of kamma…which has found expression in…Buddhist texts in so many beautiful sayings and legends, is most clumsily explained by means of examples in little stories, whose metrical form is their only poetical attribute.' And what about ghosts? The *Rg Veda*, the oldest Hindu scripture, speaks of the 'realm of the fathers' (*pitarah*), a sort of shadowy world where everyone went when they died. In later centuries this term fused with the term *preta*, 'departed' and led to the creation of the word *peta* and the idea of a ghostly realm or existence (Pali *pettivisaya*, later *petaloka* 'ghost world'). Brahmanism later developed the idea that making offerings to ghosts could raise the quality of their gloomy existence. The Buddha mentioned that one of the reasons people wanted a son was so he could make offerings to them after they had died (A.III,43). A brahman mentioned to the

Buddha that he made *saddha* offerings to the departed (A.V,269), a practice you can still being done in Gaya to this day.

The Buddha seems to have taken this belief for granted or at least saw that it might grow out of kindly motives, and he encouraged some people to make offerings to the departed. Typically, he added an ethical dimension to the belief, saying that not everyone, but people who had been immoral might get reborn in the ghost world. He said: 'By knowing his mind with mine, I have known a certain man who because of his behaviour has taken such a path so that after the breaking up of the body he will be reborn as a ghost and will experience much painful feelings. It is just like a tree growing on rocky ground with sparse foliage and casting an uneven shadow. One man might see another, exhausted by the heat of the day, weary, parched and thirsty, going on a path that leads directly to that tree and later he would actually see him sitting or lying in the shade of that tree experiencing much discomfort' (M.I,75). It seems that the early Buddhists incorporated the existing Brahminical belief in the ghost realm into their cosmology and then had to distinguish it from purgatory. They did this by saying that the committing of prolonged evil would result in rebirth in purgatory, lesser evil or evil associated with craving, longing and wanting would result in rebirth in the ghost realm.

Interestingly, the Buddha considered 'talk about ghosts' (*petakatha*) to be unedifying and unbecoming for serious Dhamma practitioners (D.I,8). The *Petavatthu* would by any interpretation qualify as 'talk about ghosts'. All scholars who have examined the *Petavatthu* – Rhys Davids, H. S. Gehman and Prof. Abhayanayaka – ascribe to it a late date. Winternitz wrote that it 'probably belongs to the latest stratum of literature assembled in the Pali Canon.'

Buddhism and the Ramayana

Although they are unlikely to have ever read it, most people probably know that the *Ramayana* is one of the two great Indian epics and is considered a sacred text by Hindus. It tells the story of Rama and Sita, their exile and their triumphant return. What most people do not know is that there is no single texts called the *Ramayana* but many of them. The most well-known is the version composed by Valmiki in 24,000 verses. This is considered the *Ramayana*, the standard one, the one by which all the others are judged. But there is no good reason for doing this other than that Valmiki's *Ramayana* is the most widely known version in northern India, that its contents are the most detailed and interesting and that its language is exceptional.

Valmiki used an earlier *Ramayana*, perhaps several of them, as the basis of his own great work. Some of the other versions of the *Ramayana* are the so-called Southern, the Western and the North-Western Recensions. Then of course there is the Jain *Ramayana*, which other than following the rough outline of Valmiki's is an entirely independent work. The Thai *Ramayana* differs greatly from the Indonesian one, not just in what it says but in its story line, and both are very different from Valmiki's. And when I say different, I mean really different. In one version Ravana not Rama is the hero. In some versions Sita is Rama's sister, not his wife. The Malay *Ramayana*, *Hikayat Seri Rama*, and the Lao version, *Phra Lak Phra Lam*, make Lakshmana the hero and Rama his sidekick.
None of this detracts from the *Ramayana*'s, or more correctly, the *Ramayana*s, importance, their influence has been enormous. They have left their mark on nearly every aspect of Indian life. Tulsi Das' rendering would easily be the most widely read book ever written in Hindi.

It could be plausibly argued that the Indonesian *Ramayana* has had more influence on that country's art, sculpture, architecture and literature than Islam has had. And Thailand? Go to Wat Phra Keo, the most important Buddhist temple in the country, and it is not the life of the Buddha that is depicted on the walls of the passageway around the main shrine but scenes from the Thai *Ramayana*, the *Ramakien*. The former capital of Thailand was named Ayodhya, after Rama's home town, not Kapilavatthu. All kings of the present ruling dynasty of Thailand take the throne name Rama, not Siddhattha, Suddhodana or even Buddhadasa. What the Bible is to Europe, the *Ramayanas* have been to India and wide areas of South-east Asia.

Now this is a Buddhist blog so what am I doing going on about the *Ramayana*? Well, here is another fact that I suspect you didn't know. The earliest version of the great epic is the Buddhist one, the one found in the Jataka (No 461). It's called the Dasaratha Jataka, Dasaratha being of course the name of Rama's father. Now although the Dasaratha Jataka is immediately identifiable as a version of the *Ramayana* it differs greatly from most other versions. For example, Rama and Sita are siblings, not husband and wife; Lakkhan is Rama and Sita's brother, not Rama's loyal friend, Dasaratha does not banish them but sends them away to protect them from their jealous step-mother; they are exiled to the Himalayas, not to Dandaka in the Deccan; there is no reference to Lanka or Ravana; Rama and Sita return to Benares not to Ayodhya after their exile, and somewhat uncomfortably, they then marry.

Now reading Valmiki's *Ramayana*, and I confess to not having read it all, one discovers little bits of Buddhism popping up here and there throughout it. For example, the story of King Sibi giving his eyes to the blind man (Jataka No 499) is there. I strongly suspect that the exile of Vessantra as told in the Vessantra Jataka (No 549) was the inspiration for Rama and Sita's exile in Valmiki's Ramayana, although I don't know what scholars say about this. Having said all this, it is also true to say that the Dasaratha Jataka is not a literary masterpiece and Valmiki's

Ramayana definitely is. It is nowhere near as long (is any poem?), it lacks its narrative charm and excitement, and its didactic elements are much more limited. If you are interested in reading the *Ramayana* (and you have 6 month to spare) have a look at http://www.valmikiramayan.net/ where you will find the Sanskrit text and a word by word translation of it with notes.

The Dhamma in Decline?

Recently the statistics for Singapore's 2010 censes were released. For local Buddhists they make sad but perhaps not surprising reading. In the 10 years between 2000 and 2010 the number of Buddhists dropped from 42.5% to 33.3%. A further breakdown of the figures also showed that the older a person was and the lower their education standard the more likely they are to be Buddhist. During the same period Christianity in the republic grew from 14.6% to 18.3% and the younger a person is and the better educated, the more likely they are to be Christian. The same was true for those who described themselves as having no religion. They grew from 14.8% to 17%. The trend is clear. Even having no religion is a better option that Buddhism. Sorry to say statistics from Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan have shown similar trends. Buddhism is failing to speak to young, well-educated, modern people. A visit to a good number of temples and Buddhist societies will show the reasons for this trend; commercialized spirituality, absence of Dhamma education, lack of social engagement, poor leadership, etc. The almost complete absence of networking between Buddhists also doesn't help either. 'You do your thing. I'll do mine' is the norm for Buddhist groups, temples and organizations. In contrast to this, Christian churches in Singapore and everywhere else in Asia, are dynamic, socially engages, highly motivated and well-organized. Their outreach strategies are also highly effective, although some would describe them as intrusive and aggressive as well. Nonetheless, they bring in the converts. Trying to find out about Dhamma from the average Buddhist rarely works because they rarely know any. Temples and societies emphasise ritual activities rather than solid Dhamma education. During the 1980s the decline of Buddhism slowed somewhat, probably because of the introduction of religious knowledge in schools. This meant that a

generation of nominally Buddhist kids got from school what they never got from the temple – some basic knowledge of the Dhamma.

Of course, the recent statistics could be read from another perspective. It is actually likely that there are more 'real' Buddhists ('real' in the sense that they are more than just nominal Buddhists) today than there were in 2000. It may be that nominal Buddhists are simply defining themselves differently, as non-religious or as Taoists. Whatever the case, there is no room for complacency, although I suspect that the complacency will persist.

A Difficult Customer

A few years ago, I had to wait eight hours in Dubai airport for a connecting flight. I spent most of the time keeping boredom at bay by reading a book. At one point I became aware of an argument going on somewhere. Looking around I saw two women in the distance coming towards me, angry words getting louder as they approached. They stopped near me and one woman, apparently an airlines passenger liaison officer, opened her office and invited the other woman to come in. The other woman shouted: "I will not come in. I want another ticket, I want it now and I will not pay a cent extra for it!" Problems at airports can test patience and fray nerves but this woman was being very unreasonable. After five minutes of watching her tantrums even I was starting to get irritated. She was not just angry, she was refusing to be placated. She shouted, hurled abuse, threw her arms around and at one point even raised her fist as if to strike the other woman. The amazing thing was that throughout this whole incident the liaison officer never raised her voice or appeared to lose her temper, although she did look harassed. After at least 20 minutes of tantrums and yelling the angry woman stormed off.

I was so impressed by the officer's behavior that I went to her office, introduced myself and said to her: "That is the most impressive thing I have seen for a long time, I mean, how you dealt with that lady." She smiled tiredly, thanked me and said modestly that she was only doing her job. "Maybe" I said, "but it is quite an achievement to keep your cool in such a situation. How did you do it?" She told me that the airline she works for has special training programs on how to deal with difficult customers. Then she added: "I do a bit of meditation too." I was so pleased to hear this, and I asked her what sort of meditation she practiced. Just then a passenger in need of help came and we couldn't continue our conversation.

But whenever I start to get annoyed by some small matter, I try to remember how this woman remained civil and calm ‘in the midst of the storm.’

The Dhamma Wheel

The wheel (*cakka*) is a flat circular object that turns as it moves. The ancient Indians used the wheel as a symbol for political sovereignty and dominion. The first Buddhists used it as a symbol for sovereignty too, but for spiritual rather than for political sovereignty. The Buddha's first discourse is called 'Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma' (S.V,420 ff). Generosity, kindly speech, doing good for others and treating them with impartiality are to the world, the Buddha said, what the linchpin (*ani*) is to the wheel (A.II,32), i.e. they keep it turning smoothly. A wheel flanked on either side by a deer has long been used to symbolize the Buddha's teaching of this first discourse in the Deer Park at Sarnath.

Today the wheel as a symbol for Buddhism is often depicted with eight spokes representing the Noble Eightfold Path although this is a relatively recent innovation. In the scriptures the Dhamma wheel, called either the Supreme Wheel (*brahmacakka*) or Highest Dhamma Wheel (*anuttaram dhammacakkam*, A.III,9; 148), is described as being 'a thousand-spoked' (*sahassaram*, D.III,60). Until about the 3rd century CE the Dhamma wheel was almost always depicted with multiple spokes suggesting the thousand spokes. The oldest depiction of the Dhamma wheel, on King Asoka's lion capital, has 24 spokes. The most spokes on a Dhamma wheel from ancient India that I have been able to find is 32.

Before the advent of statues, the Buddha was often represented by a wheel. What the cross is to Christians, the *menorah* to Jews the *ying yang* symbol to Taoists and the *Om* sign to Hindus, the wheel is to Buddhists.

The Buddha and the Bomb

I think it's true to say that Buddhism generally is and is for the most part thought of as being a peaceful religion. Given this it is curious how often the poor old peace-loving Buddha has been associated in one way or another with instruments of death. The earliest known depiction of a gun is to be found in a painting of the Buddha being attacked by Mara's army from Dunhuang (10th century) in China. In the top right-hand of the painting is one of Mara's minions pointing a 'fire lance' (Chinese *huo giang*) at the Buddha. The fire lance was the prototype of the gun. Moving to our own times, in 1948 India initiated research into nuclear technology. One of the first parliamentary decisions of the newly independent country (Gandhi was safely dead) was to pass the Atomic Energy Act 1948 for developing nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, but of course with an eye on building bombs. In 1954 the nuclear weapons program got into full swing and by 1974 the first bomb was ready for testing. The building and testing of this bomb was codenamed, somewhat eerily, "Smiling Buddha."

The Oldest Printed Book

I spent the day in the British Library yesterday. At 11.15 I went out to have my lunch and stopped off on the way out to have a quick look at their bookshop. The very first book I saw was Frances Wood and Mark Barnard's *The Diamond Sutra; the Story of the World's Oldest Dated Printed Book*. A sticker on the front said '£4 off' making it £16. I quickly checked my bag. Seventeen pounds! It was going to be either the book or a burger – and of course in a competition like this the book will always win with me. The book is a fascinating account of the *Vajracchedika Sutra* found by Aurel Stein in the Dunhaung Caves at the beginning of the 20th century. Of course Stein's a discoveries and adventures in Central Asia have been told quite a few times before and they are reiterated here in chapters 1, 2 and 5. But the book also explains the invention of paper and printing in ancient China, the trials of the famous sutra subsequent to its discovery, its significance and the recent conservation efforts it has undergone.

For those of you who don't already know this book is one of several thousand copies printed by a man named Wang Ji in 868, making it the oldest known printed book, 500 years older that Gutenberg's Bible. The colophon reads 'Devotedly made for wide and free distribution by Wang Ji on behalf of his two parents on the fifteenth day of the fourth month of the Xiantong reign'. Wear and tear on the book shows that it must have been read for a long time after it was printed, perhaps for several centuries, and then confined to its cave. I find it inspiring that the Buddhist custom of printing Dhamma books for free distribution has persisted right up till today. I hope that one of my books that someone printed for free distribution is still in circulation in 200 years later – although I doubt it. Wood and Barnard mention that amongst the other books discovered by Stein was another copy of the *Vajracchedika*

printed for free distribution, although without a date. The colophon on this one says that it was printed by a man in memory of his old ox in the hope that it would be reborn in Amitaba's Pure Land rather than on earth where it would have to endure so much hardship. So it seems it is not just out own generation that has developed a fond regard for its pets and or domestic animals.

Ceremonies for the Departed

Brahmanism at the time of the Buddha taught several contrasting, even conflicting ideas about what happens to a person after they die; that they go to heaven, that they are dispersed among the elements, that they become plants or that they join their ancestors, the fathers (*pitamaha*), in some kind of shadowy afterlife. All these notions are mentioned in the Vedas. The last of them was probably the most widely accepted as it is the one mentioned most frequently in the Tipitaka. During the Buddha's time there seems to have been only the beginning of an idea that one's post-mortem state, whatever it might be, was determined by one's moral or immoral behaviour while alive. Everyone, it was assumed, went to the world of the fathers. Some days after the funeral the oldest son, directed by a brahman, performed a ceremony called the *sraddha* (Pali *saddha,* A.V,273; D.I,97) in which small balls of dough (*pinda*) and other food were offered to the departed person as this invocation was made: 'May this offering benefit our ancestors who are dead and gone. May our ancestors dead and gone enjoy this offering' (A.V,269). The belief was that this food would be received by the departed and help to sustain them. Gifts were then given to the brahmans directing the ceremony. Only a son could perform the saddha rite, which was one of the main reasons people so strongly desired to have a son (A.III,,43). Performing this ceremony was one of 'the five offerings' (*pancabalim*) every person was expected to make (A.II,68). Evidence of the enduring nature of Indian spirituality is that this ceremony, little changed, is still done today by Hindus. If you visit the Vishnupada Temple in Gaya you can see this ceremony being done. In the last decade or so Hindu pilgrims have started doing it at Bodh Gaya.

As with many other contemporary beliefs, the Buddha ethicized Brahmanical ideas about the afterlife, and shifted the practices associated with them from the material to the psychological. He reinterpreted the 'fathers' (*pita*) as the 'hungry spirits' (*peta*) and said that only greedy, immoral or wicked people might get reborn as such unhappy beings (A.I,155). A good and kindly person, he said, would probably be reborn as a human or in heaven, rather than the world of the fathers. When the brahman Janussoni asked if it were really possible for the departed to receive and benefit from the material offerings made to them the Buddha replied that this could only happen if they had been reborn as a hungry spirit (A.V,269).

However, it seems unlikely that the Buddha would have believed the rather primitive notion that material offerings could actually be conveyed to another dimension. More likely the Buddha was using skilful means, adopting or taking into account the questioner's standpoint in order to speak to him or her in terms they could understand. In this case he probably did so because although he would not have accepted that material things can be conveyed to another world, he could see that Janussoni's desire to do so was based on good intentions -love, gratitude and concern for his departed ancestors.

When the Buddha was addressing his instructed disciples, he would say that the best way they could give their departed relatives something that would benefit them would be to lead a good and moral life here and now. Once he said: 'If a monk should wish, "Those departed relatives and ancestors of mine who I recall with a calm mind, may they enjoy great fruit and benefit," then he should be one who is filled with virtue, who spends time in solitude, dedicated to meditation and calmness of mind' (A.V,132). The Buddha's idea seems to have been that if you wish to give happiness to your departed loved ones lead a life of kindness and integrity.

In keeping with this interpretation, the *Kathavatthu* specifically denies that the departed can receive or benefit from material things offered to them (Kv. XX,4). In traditional Buddhists countries today, people will do good deeds, usually making

offerings to monks, and then in a simple ceremony dedicate the merit they have created to their departed loved ones. Although people are told by monks and often believe that they actually ‘transfer the merit’ to their departed loved ones this is a misunderstanding of Buddhist doctrine.

The Strangest Sutra of them All

There is a sutra in the Chinese Tipitaka called *Kuan-fo-san mei-hai-ching* which means something like 'The Buddha's Meditation on Oceanic Concentration Discourse' in English. It is very difficult to reconstruct its original Sanskrit name. It was translated into Chinese during the Liu Sung Dynasty (420-43) so it must have been written before then. It is sutra 643 of vol.15 of the Taisho Tripitaka. Mahayana sutras have a pronounced tendency towards fantasy, hyperbole and unreality but this one goes far beyond this. It is the three stories that make up the seventh chapter of the sutra that I will focus on here.

The first story takes place in Prince Siddhattha's palace before he renounced the world. The ladies-in-waiting bring up a rather sensitive subject with Yasodara, prince Siddhattha's consort. In all the years they have waited on the princess and her husband they have never seen Prince Siddhattha's... his, you know... umm... well let's be adult about this... his penis. Equally strange, they have also noticed that he does not even have a bulge in the place where such things usually appear in males. Now the ladies-in-waiting are wondering if the prince is really a man. As it happens, Siddhattha overhears these doubts being expressed so he takes off his clothes, spreads his legs and shows the ladies what is there - and what is there is his *kosohitavatthaguyha* glowing with a golden light. Then a lotus appeared and from its centre a baby boy's penis emerges which gradually grows into an adult's. More lotuses appear, each with a bodhisattva in it. The sutra doesn't record what the ladies-in-waiting said about this extraordinary exhibition. I imagine they were speechless.

The next story takes place when the Buddha is staying in Savatthi. There is a brothel in the city which is causing a lot of social problems and King Pasenadi asks

the Buddha what can be done about this. He decides to ask the monks to meditate for seven days and then go to the brothel and try to reform its prostitutes. But as often happens with such anti-vice campaigns, the 'working girls' take absolutely no notice. One of the prostitutes, a saucy young lady named Lovely, says to the others: 'Men without lust are not real men. The Buddha talks about suffering and the cooling of desire because he is incapable of desire. He probably insists on desirableness because he himself doesn't have the necessary equipment. If he was a 'real man' I would be more than happy to become his disciple.' The Buddha hears this, a challenge that apparently even an awakened male cannot let pass, and he shows Lovely and the other prostitutes his penis. It is so long that it reached down to his knees. But these ladies have seen a lot in their careers and they are completely unimpressed, in fact they just laugh. It could be only be an illusion, they scoff. So the Buddha exposes his chest and the miraculous swastika on it and suddenly he appears to the prostitutes as an extraordinarily handsome and desirable young man. He exposes his penis again and performs the previous miracle of the golden light, the lotus, the child's penis gradually turning into a fully mature one and the multiple lotuses each with their bodhisattva. The prostitutes are amazed and are finally converted.

The third and last story is supposedly told by the Buddha to Ananda. Once, the Buddha says, while he was staying in Gaya, five Sivite ascetics, leaders of hundreds of disciples, came to see him with their penises coiled seven times around their bodies. The spokesman of the five told the Buddha that even though he and his companions are celibate their penises are as virile as Mahesvara's (Siva) and are quite capable of doing what such organs are supposed to do. You, the Buddha, claim to be a 'great man' (*mahapurisa*). Prove it! Once again the Buddha exposes himself while performing several astonishing miracles, one of which involves wrapping his penis seven times around Mt. Meru. And once again the interlocutors are converted. What could have been the point of this bizarre sutra and what are we to make of it? Firstly, we need to know that it has some precedent in the Pali suttas - go to

http://www.buddhismatoz.com/ and look up 'Penis' and 'Signs of a Great Man'. There is also an incident in the Pali Tipitaka in which the Buddha exposes himself (M.II,135). The meaning of this and the other 31 *mahapurisalakkhana* is very interestingly dealt with in Ven. B. Wilamaratana's *Signs of a Great Man* published by the Buddhist Library here in Singapore. We also need to know something about Indian society during the first centuries of the Common Era when our sutra was probably composed. While Indian Buddhism was at its zenith during the Gupta period it was also being vigorously critiqued by a resurgent Hinduism. It seems likely that some Hindus were passing aspersions on Buddhist monks and the Buddha himself by claiming that they preached celibacy, not because they had passed beyond desire and lust, but because they were sexually inadequate, that they were 'eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven' to use the biblical phrase.

It is possible that this sutra was composed in an attempt to answer this challenge. There was, and still are, Hindu ascetics who ostentatiously and unhesitatingly displayed their genitals to stave off exactly this accusation. I have seen Naga Babas and other swamis lifting quite large rocks tied to their penises and wrapping them around their staves. Such demonstrations remind one of the Sivite ascetics who came to the Buddha with their penises wrapped around their bodies and challenging him. All this no doubt explains the origins and purpose of the sutra under discussion. But whether we laugh at it, blush as we read it, or dismiss as of no significance, it does underline a serious problem with ome Mahayana sutras.

In the Theravada tradition, as new ideas evolved, new challenges arose, or new questions were asked, works were composed to explain, meet or answer them, but these were never attributed to the Buddha, they were never put into his mouth. Even the books of the Abhidhamma Pitaka, which Theravada tradition attributes to the Buddha, do not make this claim themselves. Most Mahayana sutras are attributed to the Buddha and if the ideas they contain happen to be absurd, unbelievable or blatantly false, the poor old Buddha gets loaded with them and we Buddhists have to struggle to justify or explain them. As Mahayana literature

becomes more available in translation this is going to become an increasingly awkward problem. Just imagine what those who would disparage the Buddha or Buddhism could do with the *Kuan-fo-san-mei-hai-ching Sutra*.

What makes a Bodhisattva?

My post on Dr. Ambedkar a few days ago has attracted a few interesting comments. Teck pointed out that some of the 'bodhisattvas' I mentioned had their shortcomings and I have replied to this comment. Richard has asked: 'Christians consider Father Damien to be a saint. Would you consider him a bodhisattva?' Two questions are implied here; (1) What is a bodhisattva? and (2) Could a non-Buddhist, say a Taoist, Muslim, Christian, a Jew or Sikh, qualify to be considered a bodhisattva? I will give my take on this issue.

A bodhisattva is someone fully committed to complete awakening, a Buddha in the making if you like. I interpret this to mean someone totally focused on the Absolute, however they understand it. A Hindu will see the Absolute as Siva or Visnu, a Christian will see it as God, a Taoist as the Great Tao and a Buddhist as Nirvana. By this I do not mean that Visnu, God, the Tao and Nirvana are the same. They are not. But at an early stage in a bodhisattva's progress they may well see the Absolute in terms of their conditioning and pre-conceived ideas. This will gradually give way to a more realistic understanding as they draw near the Absolute.

The second thing that makes a bodhisattva is that their passion for the absolute, however they may see it now, inspires them to practice one or several of the Perfections (*Parami*) to an extremely high degree. The Perfections are generosity (*dana*), virtue (*sila*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), wisdom (*panna*), energy (*viriya*), patience (*khanti*), integrity (*sacca*), resolve (*adhitthana*), love (*metta*) and equanimity (*upekkha*). Okay! That's what a bodhisattva is. Now could a non-Buddhist be a bodhisattva? I think they could. After all, Gotama was a bodhisattva in his earlier lives and he was a non-Buddhist at that time. He had to be! There was no Buddhism then! It seems to me that most of the major world

religions teach all the Perfection (except perhaps wisdom) although they do not call them that. History also shows us that most of these religions have produced exceptional individuals from time to time. I have mentioned Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Maximillian Kolbe but I could think of others. So Richard's question was: 'Would I consider Father Damian to be a bodhisattva?' and the answer is: 'I would.'

Father Damian was a Catholic priest living in Hawaii and by all accounts was a rather uncouth man who wasn't particularly fond of washing. In those days there was a horror of leprosy and when someone was found to have it they were forcibly confined on the isolated island of Molokai and basically left to fend for themselves. The leper colony was a vision of hell – the strong dominating the weak, little food, inadequate housing and everyone slowly rotting for want of any medical attention. Realizing that something needed to be done, in 1873 the Bishop of Hawaii called for a priest to volunteer to minister to the lepers knowing that it was tantamount to a death sentence. Surprisingly there were four volunteers, of whom Damian was selected because of his apparent enthusiasm. He spent the rest of his life with the lepers, producing food, building a church and houses, giving them medical treatment, counselling and consoling. Inevitably he contracted leprosy himself and died of it in 1889.

There is little doubt that Damian's inspiration was the stories of Jesus healing lepers. Now it seems to me that whether such miracles actually happened is irrelevant. The point is that such stories inspired in him a self-sacrificing compassion and renunciation that few of us could muster. In fact, we stand in awe at his behaviour. And the fact that he was a bit rough around the edges should not lessen our awe. He was prepared to give his life for others, inspired by his vision of the Absolute. So to me, that would make Father Daman a bodhisattva. In traditional Buddhist iconography bodhisattvas are depicted as beautiful youths bedecked in jewels. Father Damian looks ordinary, human, un-special, real. Mahayana sutras are full of legendary stories of bodhisattvas giving their lives for others, although

Buddhist history or hagiography offers very few examples where people actually did this.

One last point. If a non-Buddhist can be a bodhisattva, could a non-Buddhist attain awakening? The attainment of awakening is not dependent of winning the approval of a deity but by realizing certain natural truths, which everyone has the capacity to do. This being the case, it is conceivable that even those who have never even heard the Dhamma could become enlightened. However, we could say this. Openness to the Buddha's teaching makes an appreciation of it more likely. Appreciation of the Buddha's teaching would make the desire to practise it more possible. Practising the Buddha's teaching would make attaining enlightenment many times more probable'.

The Advent of a God

I get the *National Geographic* every month and always enjoy reading it. Last month's issue is particularly interesting. One article is about the ancient tea route by which bricks of tea were carried from China to Tibet right up until the 1950s. Even more interesting is the article by Alma Guillermoprieto about religious changes that have been taking place in Mexico in the last 20 years, in particular the coming into being of two new gods. Nearly all the gods worshiped today have been around for at least a few thousand years. Although they had a beginning we know very little about it. Contemporary Mexican society is allowing us to actually see the advent of a god, or specifically at least two gods. Their origins are not lost in time or myth, it is unfolding before our very eyes.

The two gods feature in the *National Geographic* are Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverte. It is thought that Santa Muerte now has something like two million devotees, but many others worship her while still attending church. Her cult has now spread to the US and popular devotional songs to her are beginning to be produced. There are also videos on how to worship her and everything else the devotee might need. Despite condemnation of Santa Muerte by the Catholic and other churches and efforts to discourage it by the Mexican authorities, her cult continues to grow There are numerous house churches and shrines to Santa Muerte around Mexico and a huge new cathedral in her honour is under construction in Mexico City right now. Another god who has really hit the big time is Jesus Malverde. According to the story, Jesus Malverde was a good-hearted bandit who used to rob from the rich and give to the poor and who was captured and hanged some hundred years ago. So one might think of him as a real person who eventually

got deified. The problem is, investigators have yet to come up with any evidence that such a person ever existed.

Jesus Malverde is popular with drug gangs who want protection and with others who want to be rich and powerful like them. And by all accounts Jesus Malverde, like Santa Muerte, delivers the goods. The numerous shrines to him are plastered with 'thank you' letters by devotees who have had their prayers answered and a monthly Santa Muerte magazine with a circulation of about 30,000, includes dozens of testimonies from grateful petitioners. How can non-existent gods answer prayers? Are these devotees lying? Are they deluded? Is it just their imagination? And is there a difference between these people and those who worship older, more popular, more 'recognized' gods and claim that their prayers were answered?

It would be really interesting to come back in 200 years and see if the Jesus Malverte and the Santa Muerte cults have evolved into 'legitimate' religions with a priestly hierarchy, sacred text, an 'official' theology and an acceptable and 'respectable' pedigree. After all, I can think of a few gods of very doubtful origins and individuals who never existed but are now worshipped as gods, and their cults are generally taken seriously.

What Makes a Real Man?

In the blurb on the back of this book Charles Prebish says it is 'one of the most creative and remarkable manuscripts on an Indian-Buddhist related topic I have read in the past quarter century'. I would agree completely. John Powers' *A Bull of a Man*, Harvard University Press 2009, is an in-depth study of masculinity, male sexuality and the male body in Indian Buddhism, from the Pali Tipitaka, Sanskrit Hinayana texts, Mahayana texts and in Vajrayana literature. It makes fascinating, and at times rather disconcerting reading.

In the second chapter Powers looks at the Buddha's body as described in the Tipitaka. He takes the position that the Buddha's physical beauty, so often mentioned in the Tipitaka, must be the result of the doctrine of kamma, the idea that physical attractiveness is the result of good done in former lives. While this is possible I see no good reason to doubt that the Buddha was handsome (some people are) and that the Tipitaka is recording an authentic memory of how the Buddha really looked. Powers then examines the *maha purisa lakkhana*, the 32 signs of a great man, probably the strangest doctrinal idea in the Tipitaka.

If the Buddha really had some of these physical characteristics one is tempted to think that the midwives would have suffocated him as soon as he was born. But the reality is that the ancient Indians considered such characteristics not just auspicious but also charming and beautiful. Later Buddhist literature like the *Paramitasamasa* never seem to tire of praising the Buddha's tongue, so long that he could lick his forehead, and his webbed fingers. Special attention was also given to his penis which could be drawn into his body like those of male elephants and horses. In his *Abhidharmakosa*, Vasubhandu contradicts the Vibhasika's contention that the Buddha's penis was ugly, maintaining that it was actually beautiful to behold. It's

enough to make you blush! The origin of the *maha purisa lakkhana* has so far foxed scholars but they are usually said to be a Brahmanical concept incorporated into Buddhism at an early date. The problem with this theory is that the idea is found nowhere in pre or post-Buddhist Brahmanical texts.

Powers uses his very considerable knowledge of Indian medical texts to examine the *maha purisa lakkhana* and although he comes to no firm conclusion, it looks like the 32 signs might have their origin is early medical ideas. Powers maintains that the early Buddhists were concerned that the Buddha should not be thought of as impotent or in any way inadequate, even sexually inadequate, and to this end they emphasized his masculinity. This seems like a plausible theory and would certainly explain the noticeably macho epitaphs the Buddha and other awakened males are given throughout the Tipitaka - the Bull of Men, Leader of the Caravan, Stallion, Hero, etc. Later tradition would seem to verify Power's theory too. He recounts a popular legend from Laos about the Buddha's virility.

According to this story, some evil disciples were claiming that celibacy was unnatural and that the Buddha practiced it only in order to hide his impotence. When some other monks heard this and thought that perhaps their might be some truth to it the Buddha asked them: 'Do you really doubt my virility?' Their silence indicated that they did. The Buddha then went to a secluded place and returned sometime later (the story doesn't say exactly how long later) with cupped-hands full of his own semen. He showed it to the doubting monks saying: 'Here is proof of my manliness' and then went to the Mekong and washed his hands. It so happened that the fish goddess just happened to we swimming past, she became pregnant and later gave birth to the boy child who would grow up and become the arahat Upagta, a mythological saint popular in parts of S.E. Asia. Good God! What a story! That would have to be the most bizarre Buddha legend I have ever heard.

According to Powers, the modern popular images (conceptual and actual) of the Buddha as asexual or even effeminate are actually a recent idea. I'm not sure about this. I think it would be more true to say that the ancient Indians considered

the Buddha to be unambiguously masculine but that their image of masculinity was/is somewhat different from that of other peoples. Powers must have missed Daud Ali's *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India* (2004), a brilliant study which includes an examination of ancient Indian ideas of masculine beauty. The virile Indian male was, at least to Western thinking, soft and effeminate. Like his modern counterpart he held his male friend's hands and lounged in his arms, painted his eyelashes and spent an inordinate amount of time looking at himself in the mirror. Al Baruni (11th cent.) found Indian men distinctly dandified and effeminate compared to what he was used to. 'The men wear articles of female dress; they use cosmetics, wear earrings, arm-rings, golden seal-rings on the ring-finger as well as on their toes.' This is not to say that South Asian men are incapable of doing everything other men are but only that their concept of masculinity was/is different.

In the seventh and last chapter 'Adepts and Sorcerers' Powers examines Indian Vajrayana. It is only a brief survey but the material he assembles is enough to contradict the Western Tibetan Buddhist contention that Tantra had little to do with sexual indulgence and promiscuity. Even allowing for so-called 'twilight language' some of this stuff was clearly meant to be practiced and is pretty bizarre by any standards. Some is so bizarre and extreme it simply couldn't be practiced. Sex itself may not be adhammic, but that unrestrained lust, sexual indulgence and sexual magic are a means to enlightenment, was a major departure from early Buddhist and Mahayana teaching. Powers makes another point that may well be unpalatable to Western Tantric enthusiastic, particularly women. 'All of the tantras I have studied assume a male perspective, were written by men for men, and assume that males would be performing their rituals. The descriptions of sexual yoga are always, as far as I am aware, addressed to males, and female consorts are not described as deriving any spiritual benefits from their participation. The Indian Buddhist tantras provide no guidelines for woman who want to engage in these yogas. The female consort does not attain any soteriological benefits in any of the

text I have studied, and her role is as a facilitator in her partner's progress. I have not encountered any evidence of a corresponding women's spirituality in any Buddhist tantric text.'

Untying the Knot

Divorce is the legal ending of a marriage. In many religions, marriage is a religious act and thus there are various restrictions on divorce. In some religions such as Christianity, divorce allowable but only if one partner commits adultery while in other religions divorce is allowable but is the prerogative of the husband only. The *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* has no entry of divorce and even the entry on marriage does not mention divorce. The new *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* (Macmillan Reference USA, 2004) doesn't have an entry on divorce and the only reference to marriage is to clerical marriage. Does this say something about Buddhism?

I have been unable to find anything in the Tipitaka that the Buddha says about divorce. Indeed I can't even find a Pali word for it except perhaps *vikirana* meaning 'to break' or 'to separate' which is sometimes used in reference to marriage (D.I,II). According to the Vinaya, 'being told "Enough"!' (*alaṁvacanīyā*) by one's husband was the usual way of dissolving a marriage (Vin.III,144). I have been unable to find any incident of divorce in the Tipitaka. However, there are at least two stories in which a man decides to become a monk and in one case just walks out on his wife, and in another he tells his wives that he will give them to any man they would like to be given to (I can't find the references right now but they are there). It would seem that while marriage was a formal matter, divorce was informal. If a wife didn't like her husband she just went back to her family and if a husband didn't like his wife he just told her to leave. In the Jataka there are several stories where a husband puts his wife away (e.g. Ja.II,115). More interestingly, in the Godha Jataka, the Bodhisattva tells a woman that if her husband does not love her and treats her with disrespect, that she should leave him (Ja.III,107-9). He gives her this sound advice:

Revere the reverent, honor the honorable,
Be dutiful to he who does his duty.
But not to one who does you harm,
Or give your heart to one who loves you not.
Leave him who does not care for you,
Who would without a thought abandon you.
Finding that the tree has no fruit,
The wise bird flies off into the big wide world.

In later Hinduism it seems that it was impossible for a wife to leave her husband although a husband could expel his wife on whim. This is affirmed by the *Ramayana* where Rama abandons Sita just on the suspicion that she had been unfaithful. At least in India, probably within both Buddhist and Hindu communities, the fate of an abandoned wife was probably a grim one. In his beautiful book about pre-modern Burma, *Soul of a People*, Fielding-Hall says that when a young man and woman fell in love they just moved in with each other and if their feelings towards each other changed they just parted company, the woman often keeping the house or took everything he considered hers with her. Even today apparently, the Burmese government has trouble getting people to register their marriages. I can't remember what traditional Kandyian law in Sri Lanka says about divorce but as I recall it was regulated by law.

Because Buddhism does not see marriage a sacrament but as an agreement between two people or two families, it accepts that if the two people involved agree to end their relationship they can do so. Buddhism and all Buddhist cultures have always seen marriage as a relationship to be treasured and which is worth maintaining but at the same time they have rarely had legal restrictions on divorce. I have always been bewildered by the conservative religious hostility towards and opposition to gay marriage. The usual justification for this hostility is that it 'undermines the family'. But being just a simple monk, I would have thought that

the biggest danger to 'the family' would be the liberal divorce laws in most developed countries. And there is no doubt that such laws have had an impact on divorce rates. In the US in 2008 40% of marriages ended in divorce and in the UK in 2007 11.9 per 1000 of the married population got divorced. And then there is co-habitation, living together without being married. In my country, Australia, a whopping 22% of couples were co-habiting in 2005 rather than being married. In the US in the same year 4.85 million couples were co-habiting. It is even illegal in seven states but the law is no longer enforced. Isn't it strange that religious conservatives are not campaigning against liberal divorce laws and pressing for the criminalizing of co-habitation in the name of 'the family'. In Australia they now have a political party called Family First Party led by an Assemblies of God pastor. The party predictably opposes same-sex marriage but just as predictably is silent about the country's burgeoning divorce rate and high rate of co-habitation.

On Bed Bugs and Buddhism I

I'm something of an expert on bed bugs – having lived in India for a few years. Generally, I like all creatures but there three that I just cannot abide, at least in my private space – flies on my food, cockroaches in my kitchen and bed bugs in my bed. Years ago, before I was a monk, I was in Kashmir going from Jammu to Srinagar and had to spend a night in a truck-drives' stop. This insalubrious establishment consisted of one large windowless room with an earthen floor and filthy quilts and blankets scattered around the place. Some dozen men were olso sleeping in the room. My companion and I selected the least filthy of these quilts, found the least dirty part of the floor (near the wall), blew out the lamp and huddling together against the cold, settled down to try to get some sleep. About half an hour after the light went out we both began to itch, first just a little then a lot. Grumbling and sighing, we lit the lamp again and found dozens of bed bugs on our clothing. Then a look of horror came over my companion's face and he pointed towards the wall. I looked to where he was pointing and there, marching down the wall, were hundreds of thousands of bed bugs. There were so many of them they literally formed a rusty-colored curtain on the wall. Believe me when I say: 'I hate bed bugs.'

From one perspective *Cimex lectularius* is a fascinating little creature. They are mentioned in the Tipitaka (e.g. Ja.1,10; III,423) where they are called *mankuna*. They can live for up to a year without feeding. Although slow-moving, their repulsive taste protects them from predators and even we humans are reluctant to squash them because of the offensive smell they give off. They even have a political dimension. By the early 60s they'd been almost eliminated in the UK. Then Mrs. Thatcher was elected and within four or five years they returned with a vengeance. If bed bugs could vote they would always support the candidates advocating

‘trickle-down economics’ and promising to cut welfare payments and ‘streamline’ the health services.

The other thing you have to admire bed bugs for is their tenacity. Once you get bed bugs they are extremely difficult to get rid of. Well, a fortnight ago I found a bed bug in my bed. I was not a happy monk. The next morning I thoroughly checked the mattress, sheets, pillows, the bed itself but found none of the tell-tale signs of their presence. A week later another bug crawled out of a book I was reading. Then a day later I found another one. I realized it was time to take action. I took all the furniture outside and tipped boiling water over it – not just to kill the little blighters but also any of their eggs that might be there. Then I went out and bought some insect spray and sprayed every nook and cranny in the room. I soaked all my bed sheets, pillowslips and robes in boiling water and then put them through the washing machine twice. Then I put all my books in large plastic bags, sprinkled them with moth balls (naphthalene) and sealed the bags for a week. Now I’m waiting. I’ll keep you updated.

But while waiting I am also thinking. I know I deliberately and with full consciousness killed three living beings and maybe killed at least a few more with my boiling water and insect spray. I’m a Buddhist monk, supposedly a model for how the devote Buddhist should live. But are their circumstances when killing, at least killing insects, is justifiable, or perhaps understandable, or perhaps excusable?

On Bed Bugs and Buddhism II

My post of two days ago dealing with my bed bug problem has created some interest. Some readers have expressed gratitude that I have dealt with the very type of problem they have confronted and been unsure of how to respond to. One has taken me to task for admitting to breaking a Precept, several have applauded my 'practical' approach. A good number suggested that killing a few bed bugs is too minor to lose much sleep over, while others have given their thoughts on what might be the kammic results of killing insects. In particular, I appreciated Ven. Jo Jo and Kurt's comments. So tomorrow I will try to deal with the issue of killing and kamma and Dhamma.

In the meantime, here are a few real scenarios which have made me think more deeply about the first Precept.

(**1**) A species of goose native to Europe but very similar to a Canadian species was introduced into Canada. Being more aggressive, the European goose is interbreeding with the native one which as a result is now threatened with extinction. The wildlife authorities are considering culling the European geese in the hope that it might save the native bird. Catching the European geese and confining them has been ruled out as being prohibitively expensive. What should they do?

(**2**) Last time either you or one of your kids got worms what did you do? What were your motives in doing whatever you did? How did you feel while and after you did it?

(**3**) A few decades ago Thailand's Malaria Eradication Authority embarked on a comprehensive spraying program in a district which had been plagued by malaria

for as long as anyone could remember. The abbot of a temple in a village near a swamp known to the locals as the Buzzing Swamp, protested that killing the mosquitoes would be breaking the first Precept and urged the villagers not to co-operate with the program. Apparently no one took much notice of him. However, did he do the right thing?

(**4**) In Austria hunters buy a licence to hunt. In return they have to manage the wildlife in the area allocated to them, which includes culling (killing) a given number of deer, rabbits, etc. each year. As the deer's' natural predator, the wolf, is now extinct, the hunters have taken their place so that the existence of wildlife can be balanced with the needs of agriculture. What do you think about this arrangement?

(**5**) A man in Queensland, Australia, has just discovered that his house is infested with termites. If not dealt with they will completely destroy the house within about five years. He's a regular at the nearby Buddhist group so he goes to ask the nun there for her advice. If you were the nun what would you say to him?

On Bed Bugs and Buddhism III

According to the Buddha, kamma is the intention (*cetana*) behind our physical, verbal and psychological actions (A.III,415). In other words, kamma is primarily how we use our mind and the effects it has. It is not some sort of force outside ourselves that decides what action will have what reaction. There are positive, negative and mixed (*vitimissa*, sometimes 'partly a dark partly bright', *kanhasukka*; M.I,318; 389) actions which must be such because the intentions behind them are correspondingly positive, negative or mixed. Even in ordinary parlance we speak of being in 'two minds' about or 'having mixed feelings' about something. Each of these types of actions will of course have a corresponding positive, negative or mixed *vipaka*.

Although the mind is a subtle and complex phenomena and its workings are difficult to plumb, the doctrine of kamma is all too often presented in the most naive and simplistic terms. For example, one often hears people say 'If you kill you will...(be killed in your next life, be reborn as a worm, go to hell, etc.).Interestingly, although not surprisingly, the Buddha criticized such generalizations.

'If anyone were to say that just as a person does a deed, so is his experience is determined by it, and if this were true, then living the holy life would not be possible, there would be no opportunity for the overcoming of suffering. But if anyone were to say that a person does a deed that is to be experienced, so does he experience it, then living the holy life would be possible, there would be an opportunity for the ending of suffering. For instance, a small evil deed done by one person may be experienced here in this life or perhaps not at all. Now, what sort of person commits a small evil that takes him to hell? Take a person who is careless in the development of body, speech and mind. He has not developed wisdom, he is

insignificant, he has not developed himself, his life is restricted, and he is miserable. Even a small evil deed may bring such a person to hell. Now, take the person who is careful in development of body, speech and mind, He has developed wisdom, he is not insignificant, he has developed himself, his life is unrestricted and he is immeasurable. For such a person, a small evil deed may be experienced here or perhaps not at all. Suppose someone throws a grain of salt into a little cup of water. That water would be undrinkable. And why? Because the amount of water is small. Now, suppose throws a grain salt in River Ganges. That water would not be undrinkable. And why? Because the amount of water is great'(A.I,249).

So let's say, Mr. X kills a friend during an argument that gets out of hand, and you say 'He will have a negative rebirth.' Such a statement assumes several things. (1) That what Mr. X did during the (let's say) 19 minutes of the violent and ultimately lethal argument, will completely overwhelm and cancel out everything else he did during the other (let's say) 68 years of his life; and (2) that his murderous act will have absolutely no effect on him in this life, only in his next life. Both these assumptions are highly doubtful. Mr. X may have been a caring and compassionate social worker, he may have been a thug and a bully. Surely what he was like and how he behaved during his whole life would have some impact on the intensity of the *vipaka* he will experience as a result of his murder! If he was a caring and compassionate person the vipaka from that may well dilute the vipaka from his murder. And when we speak of vipaka, why do we always insist that this must manifest only in the next life? Perhaps Mr. X feels a deep and painful remorse for his behaviour and that he spends 15 years in prison because of it. If so, this would be the *vipaka* for the murder he committed. In fact, it may well be that by the time Mr. X passes away his subsequent remorse and contrition and the good deeds he does after the murder, exhausts the negative *vipaka* he had generated.

So I maintain that the usual mechanistic and simplistic understanding of kamma does not take into account the complex and multi-faceted phenomena that is human intentions, human behaviour and human consciousness. Perhaps this is

the reason why the Buddha mildly rebuked those who confidently and glibly proclaimed which good or bad act would have what *vipaka*. When the Buddha heard that Migasala was proclaiming that a certain deceased person had been reborn in a certain place because of their kamma he said, 'Who is this Migasala...to know the complexity of the human character?' (A.III,351). *Purisapuggala paropariyanana* is a difficult compound but the translation 'the complexity of the human character' does, I think, capture its general meaning.

One other point relevant to the 'killing bed bugs' issue. I know of no place where the Buddha makes a distinction between killing, i.e. between species (human and animal), between the size of the victim (cow and ant) or between intention in killing (e.g. self-defence and hunting for pleasure). However, the Vinaya makes one such distinction, considering murder an offence so serious as to require permanent expulsion from the Sangha (Parajika 3), while killing an animal is a far less serious offence (Pacittiya 62), on a par with insulting someone, idle chatter and having a non-regulation size sitting mat. This distinction is probably based on the idea that the intentions behind killing a fellow human would be markedly stronger and more intense than those behind killing an animal.

Each of us has probably noticed that we differently about the death of a person, the death of a warm blooded animal and that of an insect. Likewise, we probably notice a difference in how we felt if we were to kill a chicken and an ant. These feeling must be partly socially conditioned but whatever their cause they do affect our minds differently and therefore probably have different *vipaka*. I am not stating this as a fact but only as a possible explanation for the Vinaya's (and most peoples') distinction between killing a human and an animal.

I will continue this examination tomorrow. If you have any comments which include some of the theoretical and complex ideas about the different types of kamma, please distinguish between (1) the Buddha's words from the Tipitaka, (2) concepts from the Abhidhamma Pitaka and (3) concepts from later medieval abhidhamma literature.

Buddhism and Bed Bugs IV

On 2nd March I related my bed bug problem and asked the question: 'Are their circumstances when killing, at least killing insects, is justifiable, or perhaps understandable, or perhaps excusable?' On the 5th March I gave some background information pertaining to kamma that might have some bearing on answering this question. Today I would like to try to answer the question according to my understanding. According to the Buddha, the killing of any 'breathing thing' (that counts out bacteria) is negative. In the Vinaya the Buddha is depicted as saying: 'A monk should not intentionally deprive a living creature of life, even if it be only an ant' (Vin.I,97). So there is no doubt that in getting rid of my three bed bugs I did something with negative consequences. So now the question is: 'How negative?' What will be or would be the kammic consequences of killing a bed bug or some other insect? We saw that according to the Vinaya killing an animal is on a different level to killing a human, although the reason for this distinction is not given. We also saw that the Buddha recognized that an action can have 'mixed' intentions and thus mixed kammic consequences. I am going to argue that killing an insect would have minor kammic consequences and this negativity would be even further diluted if the intention/intentions behind the act was mixed with concern for one's health, one's kids well-being, etc. If I do this sort of thing rarely and with hesitation (and I do), and I generally have a kindly and nurturing attitude towards others, including small creatures, I suspect that like the salt in the great river, the consequences of killing three bed bugs would actually be quite small. So in answer to our question we could perhaps say this. Wherever and whenever possible do what you can to preserve and uphold the life of others, even that of humble creatures while

understanding that there might be times when you feel this is difficult. What do you think?

One other thing. In the comments, some of my readers said that 'killing for any reason must have a kammic consequence.' While I agree completely, this sort of comment implies that the whole purpose of Buddhism is not to make any negative kamma no matter what, to go through life ultra-careful not to do anything that might 'make bad kamma'. Clearly the less negative kamma we have to deal with the better. However, we should keep in mind that the purpose of Dhamma is to develop that wisdom and understanding that can free us from the rounds of samsara. There may be times or situations in life where we genuinely feel that we can manage a bit of negative kamma, or that the consequences of doing some action are less negative than abstaining from doing it.

The Vedas

Understanding what the Buddha said requires looking at your mind, your motives, feelings and behavior. Through understanding the language that the Buddha used (turns of phrase, similes, analogies, etc.), the subjects he discussed and how he chose to approach them, requires knowing something about the world he lived in. Take for example the Vedas, the sacred scriptures of Brahmanism. Knowing at least something about the Vedas makes sense of how and why the Buddha presented some of his teachings the way he did. Vedic brahmans used to keep three sacred fires burning and worship them. In reference to this the Buddha spoke of the need to extinguish the three fires (i.e. greed, hatred and delusion). A brahman was considered accomplished if he knew (i.e. was able to recite from memory and to explain) the three Vedas. For the Buddha, a person was spiritually accomplished if he has realized the Three Knowledges (*tevijja*); arising and passing away of beings according to their kamma, and the knowledge of the destruction of the defilements (A.I,165). According to the Vedas, the brahmans were the apex of humanity because they were born of or created from Brahma's mouth. The Buddha said his enlightened disciples were the apex of humanity because they were 'born' of the Buddha's mouth, 'born of Dhamma, created by Dhamma' (It.101). And of course, the Vedas taught that one could only be a brahman by being born of brahman parents. For the Buddha, one became a brahman by acting the way a brahman was supposed to act (*tam aham brumi brahmanam*, Dhp.397-411). The brahman sages spoke of the blissful, eternal Self (*atman*); in later Upanasadic thought *sat*, *chit*, *ananda*) while in contradistinction to this the Buddha a taught *dukkha*, *anicca* and *anatta*. These and dozens of other aspects of the Dhamma mirror, contrast and are

presented as an alternative to one or another Vedic concepts, the Vedas being the basis of mainstream religious thought during the Buddha's time.

Another important aspect of the Vedas that influenced Buddhism was how they were preserved and passed on. The old canard that critics of Buddhism always raise is that in being orally preserved for several centuries the records we have of the Buddha's teachings must be unreliable, worthless even. In reality, long before Buddha, the brahmans had evolved ways of remembering and passing on the Vedic hymns with an extraordinary degree of accuracy. Many of the Buddha's disciples were brahmans and they bought to their new faith the skills they had been schooled in as part of their education and used them to preserve the Buddha's words. There is an excellent article on Wikipedia called 'Vedic Chant' which explains how this was done. The article 'Vedas' is very informative too. Quite apart from all this, at least some familiarity with the Vedas is a good anyway. They are amongst the most beautiful religious literature ever written. If you want to do this I would recommend Wendy Doniger's (she of the new *Kama Sutra* translation, and numerous other excellent works) *The Rig Veda* published in Penguin Classics and available in most bookshops. Doniger's translations are readable, clear and not overloaded with notes. Her selection and arrangement (108 hymns altogether) also offer a good introduction to this wonderful literature. All the old favourites are here – The Hymn to the Water, the Gambler's Lament, the Hymn to Creation (*Nasadiya*), In Praise of Generosity, and my favourite, The Croaking of the Frogs. Some of this must have been familiar to the Buddha and he must have sometimes heard the melodious and hypnotic sound of the Vedas being chanted. If you want to go into the Vedas deeper there is always Jamison and Brereton's new in three volumes *The Rigveda* (2014).

There are four Vedas, although only three are mentioned in the Buddhist scriptures (M.II,133). They are the *Rg Veda*, the *Sama Veda*, the *Yajur Veda*, all composed between a 1,000 and 500 years before the Buddha, and the *Atharva Veda*, included into the sacred canon only several centuries after the Buddha. The Vedas

are believed to be an eternal (*sanatana*) revelation (*sruti*) of divine origin (*apauruseya*). Those who deny the authority of the Vedas are said to be 'impure' (*nasitaka*). The Buddha said that nothing is eternal, he considered revelation to be an unreliable means of knowledge, and he rejected the idea of a supreme god as unconvincing. He also cast serious doubts on the claim that the authors of the Vedas had divine knowledge. Once a brahman asked him what he thought of the claim that the authors of the Vedas had direct experience of the divine. The Buddha replied:

'What do you think about this? Is there one brahman who says, "I know. I see. This alone is true, all else is false"?
'No Gotama.'
'Did any of the teachers of the brahmans or even their teachers going back through seven generations ever say that'?
'No Gotama.'
'Then what of ancient brahman sages who composed the Vedic hymns, who chanted, uttered and compiled them and which the brahmans of today still chant and recite, just repeating what has been repeated and chanting what has been chanted? Did they ever say "We know. We see. This alone is true, all else is false"?'
'No Gotama. They did not.'
'Imagine a string of blind men each touching each other. The first one does not see, the middle one does not see and neither does the last. The claim of the brahmans is like this. The first one does not see, the middle one does not see and neither does the last. So it seems that the faith of the brahmans turns out to be groundless' (M.II,169-70).

The Buddha dismissed the worship of the sacred fire (*aggihotta*), the central sacrament of Brahmanism, as 'an outlet to failure' (*apayamukhani*, D.I,102). The practice of animal sacrifice, the efficacy of rituals, the caste system, the belief in an eternal soul and indeed nearly all practices legitimized by the Vedas, were similarly

rejected by him. Those who say that the Buddha was a Hindu or that Buddhism is a reformed version of Hinduism are seriously misinformed.

You can give a little Hiss

The story goes that once a cobra was so impressed by the gentleness of a monk who lived in a forest hermitage nearby that he asked to become his disciple. The monk agreed and knowing that snakes can be quick-tempered thought it appropriate to teach him *metta* meditation. The cobra proved to be a good student, meditating regularly and becoming more good-natured as a result. One day while basking in the sun he noticed a woman nearby collecting sticks for the household fire. Rather than slither away or stand erect with his hood open so as to scare her, as had been his habit, he decided to remain where he was and radiate *metta* to the woman. She got closer and closer until she had collect enough sticks and then began looking around for something to tie them up with. Seeing the cobra and mistaking him for a piece of vine she picked him up by the tail, gave him a violent flick, wrapped him several times around the sticks, pulled him tight and then tied him in a knot. Then she put the bundle on her head and walked home. When she got there she untied the 'vine' and threw it away. Battered, bent and wincing with pain the poor cobra made his way back to the hermitage and told the monk what had happened. 'You tell me to cultivate *metta* and this is what I get for it' he complained mournfully. The monk replied: 'Just because you have *metta* doesn't mean you can't sometimes hiss.'

Was the Buddha a Know-it-all?

The Buddha said that all sentient life can be classified according to whether it is egg-born, womb-born, sweat-born or spontaneously-born (S.III,240). The first two of these are clear enough. The fourth one refers to the devas. It's the third one, swear-born (*sansedaja*), that needs a bit of explaining. The ancient Indians, like almost everyone else in the world until the 19th century, believed in spontaneous generation - the idea that life can emerge from lifeless matter. They would wash, bathe, put on clean clothes and in a day or two they would have head and body lice again. They couldn't understand where these tiny creatures came from so they deduced that they were born out of their sweat. Maggots in rotting meat were believed to have spontaneously generated too, and for the same reasons – people couldn't see where they came from. In believing in spontaneous generation the Buddha was in good company. Aristotle accepted it as did St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas after him. In the late Middle Ages spontaneous generation was used as evidence for the doctrine of Immaculate Conception - if life can come from dead matter, why can't conception take place without sex? Franceaso Redi in the 17th century did a few experiments that cast serious doubts on spontaneous generation and finally in 1854 Louis Pasteur proved conclusively that it is false, although I know that many simple people in Sri Lanka still take it for granted.

Anyway, if the Buddha is 'all-knowing' (*sabbannu*) how come he accepted spontaneous generation? Well, there are two ways of understanding *sabbannu*; the Flat-Earth Buddhism way and the other way. According to Flat-Earth Buddhists the Buddha knew absolutely everything - how many bricks there are in the Great Wall of China, the number of grains of sand on Bondi Beach, that I was going to fail my maths exam in 1967, etc. They insist that 'all-knowing' means all, everything,

every event and occurrence, that ever has and ever will happen. Concerning spontaneous generation and other evidence that the Buddha did not know everything, Flat-Earth Buddhists will cast aspersions on science. They can and do say: 'Well, science might be wrong. Perhaps one day we will find out that some life is spontaneously generated. After all, science has been wrong before.'

The other way of looking at it is within the context of the Dhamma. In the very interesting Sabba Sutta (the Discourse on the All, S.IV,15) the Buddha says that for him 'the all' means the senses and their objects, i.e. the eye and visual objects, the ear and sounds, etc. In other words, the process of cognition and the desire, craving and conceptualizing that it triggers, was fully understood by the Buddha. In another place the Buddha denied that he was omniscient but affirmed that he had the Threefold Knowledge (*tevijja*, M.I,482). So the Buddha was not a Mister Know-it all, although he did know everything necessary to attain awakening.

On Tulkus

Yesterday a reader left a comment on my blog asking about the origins of the Tibetan *tulku* concept. So here goes. Now I'm venturing into an area which is not really my forte, so someone can correct me if I'm wrong. But this is my understanding. The *tulku* system evolved in response to a problem, the problem of political succession. For some centuries the Sakya sect of Tibetan Buddhism held power in Tibet. Being lay rulers, the male heir of the earlier ruler inherited the throne. At one point, a power struggle resulted in two branches of the family assuming the throne in turn, a system that still prevails. In the late 16th century the Gulupa sect became the dominant power in Tibet with the help of their Mongol enforcers and after a good deal of killing and sacking of monasteries, let it be said (The Chinese communists were certainly not the first to destroy Tibetan monasteries and murder monks). But this created a quandary. As the head of the Gulupa sect (later to be called Dalai Lama) was a celibate monk, he would have no natural heirs. This problem was solved by 'recognizing' where the former head had been reborn and 'reinstating' him. This was, one would have to admit, a rather ingenious solution - it fitted comfortably with the doctrine of rebirth and also with the idea that a *bodhisattva* would be willing to be reborn again and again to help sentient beings, in this case by being their ruler.

Unfortunately, it also had one very serious drawback. As the new ruler would always be a child, it would be at least 20 years before he would assume power. This interregnum gave whoever was appointed regent time to establish his own power base before the new Dalai Lama came of age. The reason why most Dalai Lamas 'left their bodies' while still young was so that the regents could hold on to power.

Apparently, the *tulku* system existed before it was institutionalized by the Gulupa, but only intermittently and mainly within individual monasteries. Today, most positions of power in Tibetan Buddhism – abbots of monasteries or heads of sects – are filled by persons who are supposedly their predecessors reborn. These positions are often monopolized by certain families and occasionally involve a great deal of political wrangling (e.g. the two Kamapa Lamas).

Tulkus are, in effect, petty medieval monarchs - their births are accompanied by miraculous signs, they are 'enthroned', their position is legitimized by being officially 'recognized' by another high lama, the sons of married *tulkus* inherit their position, and their writ is presented as a 'Dhamma teaching'. In imitation of ancient Indian monarchy, many *tulkus* also claim to be deities or 'emanations' of deities; Avalokitesvara, in the case of the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa lamas, Amitabha in the case of the Panchen Lama, etc. Some of the more powerful and influential *tulkus* (or those who aspire to it) effect all the splendour and rituals that are usually associated with monarchs. As is well-known, Chogyam Trumgpa had his own private army, the so-called Vajra Guards, by no means the first *tulku* to do so.

As a cultural phenomena, the *tulku* system is a fascinating one. But I'm not at all sure the best way to transmit the insights of the Vajrayana tradition to the West is through the medium of medieval Central Asian power structures. I also have very strong doubts that someone must be a great Dhamma teacher simply because he was born into a particular situation. Did not the Buddha say: 'No one is born a brahman'? When a Westerner becomes a Buddhist should he or she have to buy into all the trappings of traditional Asian culture - be it Tibetan, Thai, Japanese or Sri Lankan? Shouldn't I be able to practice vipassana without believing in *nats* as the Burmese do? Why can't I develop Bodhicitta without spinning a prayer wheel like a Tibetan? Can't I practice the Five Precepts without reciting them in Pali with a Thai accent?

During the 19th century Western missionaries in Asia insisted that their converts wear trousers, eat with a knife and fork and swear allegiance to Queen

Victoria, in short, become an Englishman. They mistook their culture, which is limited in time and space, with the Gospel, which is universal. They finally realized that this approach did not work. It's a lesson many Asian Buddhist teachers in the West and their Western disciples still have to learn.

In 2007 when I was in Dharmasala I witnessed something which epitomized to me one of the problems of the transmission of the Dhamma to the West. As I stood on the side of the main thoroughfare watching the crowds go past, I saw two young Tibetan monks greet each other by giving a 'high five'. A matter of moments later a Western woman walked passed wearing Tibetan dress, her hair in plats like those worn by Tibetan women, a prayer wheel in her hand and even imitating that Tibetan swaying way of walking. Again I ask – can't a Westerner practice the Dhamma without becoming a Tibetan, Thai or Burmese clone?

Michael Jackson and Popular Culture

Now that the funeral is over I would like to make a few comments on the death of Michael Jackson. Some aspects of the whole business illustrate some interesting trends in popular culture. The first is what I call the exaggeration of emotion. Both here in Singapore and in reports in the foreign media I read expressions like 'I am devastated', 'The whole world is in mourning', 'My family and I am in a state of shock'. Really? When I was in the Medical Corps in the army in the late 60s I sometimes saw severely wounded soldiers evacuated from Vietnam, some of them in shock. Believe me, no one 'is in a state of shock' over the death of MJ. And the whole world mourning? I wouldn't mind betting that a couple of hundred million peasants in India have never he heard of MJ and even those who have are far more concerned about the fact that the monsoon is late this year. I suspect that hundreds of millions of poor villagers in South America, China and Africa have hardly given MJ's death a second thought either, even if they have heard about it. Devastated? Now I saw devastated people on a recent news report of a bombing in an Iraqi market. None of the numerous reports I saw about MJ's passing showed 'devastated' people.

The problem with using absurdly exaggerated terminology to describe ordinary experiences, in this case a degree of sadness, is that when something really shocking or devastating happens we don't have adequate words to convey its true seriousness or impact. It is diminished. This misuse of language also encourages people to over-express themselves about what are actually rather commonplace events. Sobbing, huddling in weeping groups arms over each other's shoulders, and gasping 'Oh my God!' over the death of someone you have never met or even seen

at a distance on stage, is completely inappropriate. It leaves you with nothing to do when someone you are personally connected with is struck by real tragedy.

Did you also notice that during the memorial concert and in the thousands of cards people wrote and left at the hall where it was performed, that MJ was constantly addressed as if he were present. 'We love you', 'We will always remember you', 'You enriched our lives', instead of 'We loved him', 'We will always remember him', etc. I find this sort of thing, very common in funerals nowadays, rather weird. And this is not just a matter of the proper use of language. It grows out of and reinforces a sort of pseudo-mysticism in which a vague sentimentality replaces more thoughtful idea about death and the after-life.

Another interesting thing about MJ's passing is how quickly the recent deep concern and even disgust about aspects of his private life has been elbowed aside by an avalanche of accolades, a genuine and meaningful eulogy to him would include mention of his very real talents in some areas, his great generosity, but also the fact that he apparently made a mess of his life. On several occasions I read of or heard people say things like 'His message will live forever', as if he was some great prophet or spiritual teacher. I must say, I find this sort of thing to be the height of vulgarity. It also obscures an extremely important point. If MJ's life conveys any 'message' it would have to be that talent, celebrity and unimaginable wealth do not guarantee happiness. The Buddha said: 'Truly dire are gains, honor and fame. They are serious and difficult obstacle in the way of attaining true safety' (S.II,226).

Floating Buddhist Monk Women

'So how was your trip to Thailand?' I asked.

'Wonderful' he replied. 'We went to that famous temple in Kanchanaburi and saw those women who can levitate.'

Now of course I'm never surprised by anything I hear about Thailand, especially if it concerns Buddhism, or what passes for Buddhism in that country. You know, the Phra Ajahan who can blow cigarette smoke out of his ears, the other one who stands on your passport and can see all your former lives, the one who can see all your future lives without standing on your passport, and the temple full of tigers. Then of course there is the beloved old Lung Po somewhere in Ubon whose aphrodisiacal potions have even been investigated by the Viagra company, or so the story goes.

'The women who can levitate?' I asked.

'Yes Bhante. They are *mai chis* and they levitate in water.'

'Do you mean float?'

'That's it Bhante. They float.'

I was silent for a minute while I tried to think what connection there might be between floating and practicing or comprehending the Dhamma. Human fat tissue is lighter than water and the Dhamma is…No. Air-filled lungs are lighter than water so one-pointedness of mind is…Nope. No connection there either. Now this place is a temple and in temples monks are supposed to…Nothing there. Finally I gave up.

'And?'

'Well, they use the supernormal powers they have developed through meditation to float in a swimming pool-like thing.'

'Why?'

'Eh, um. Well, um, I suppose to show how highly developed they are'.
'Why would they want to display such powers? I would have thought that a highly developed meditator would want to avoid celebrity, crowds and self-promotion. Let me guess. Do you have to pay to see these floating ladies?'
'Yes, lots of people come. There are seats around the swimming pool. You have to pay extra to video it.'

By this time I remembered that I had better things to do like tidy the kitchen or something and I drew the conversation to a close. That evening my friend rung me and told me that the floating women of Wat Tham Mungkornthong are on YouTube. As I happened to be online at the time I had a look at it. It's called *Floating Buddhist Monk Woman of Kanchanaburi, Thailand*. If you have nothing better to do, have a look at it. But believe me, you do have something better to do - like reading this passage from the Tipitaka.
'Now it happened that a rich merchant of Rajagaha got a block of expensive, quality sandalwood and he thought, "Why don't I have a bowl carved out of this sandalwood. I can keep the off-cuts for myself and the bowl I can give to someone else." And this is exactly what he did. Then he had a string tied around the bowl and hung it from the top of a long bamboo pole. Having done that he made an announcement: "Any monk or brahman, perfected in psychic powers, who can take down this bowl can have it." Purana Kassapa, Makkhali Gosala, Ajita Kesakambala, Pakudha Kaccayana Sanjaya Belatthiputta and Nigantha Nataputta all tried to get the bowl but none were unable to. Now it so happened that Maha Moggallana and Pindola Bharadvija had gone to Rajagaha and heard about the sandalwood bowl on the top of the pole and Pindola said to Moggallana: "You are enlightened and you have psychic powers. Get the bowl and it is yours." But Moggallana replied: "Pindola, you are enlightened and you have psychic powers. You get the bowl and you can have it." So Pindola rose off the ground, took the bowl and then circled Rajagaha three times in the air. Now the rich merchant happened to be standing on the roof of his house with his wife and children and

seeing Pindola he joined his hands towards him in salutation and said: "Please land here in my house" and this Pindola did. The merchant took the bowl from his hands, filled it with expensive food, returned it to him and them Pindola went back to his monastery. Now people heard about what had happened and noisy, excited crowds began following him around. And hearing all this noise the Lord asked what it was about and Ananda told him. Then the Lord convened all the monks, questioned Pindola in front of them, and having been given the details said: 'It is not appropriate, it is not becoming, it is not worthy of a true monk and it should not be done. How could you, Pindola Bharadvaja, in front of householders, display the achievements of spiritually accomplished people for the sake of a miserable wooden bowl? You are like a prostitute who exposes her underwear for the sake of a miserable coin".' (Vin.II,110-11).

The Medium and the Message

We have just had a tragedy here in Singapore. Two 16-year olds youths jumped from the 9th floor of a building and died. Six others who had planned to join them pulled out at the last moment. Who or what was responsible for this shocking tragedy? Religion! Or I should say a particular religious belief; the belief that it is possible to communicate with divine beings. Ku Witaya, a spirit medium, was convinced that if he and his friends died they would be reincarnated at warriors in the coming World War III and battle demons, an idea picked up from a video game called Slayers. One-way communication with a deity (prayer) is acceptable I suppose; two-way communication (mediumship) is fraught with problems. When you pray you inform your god of what you want, thank him for what he has given you and or tell him what you think of him. You feel good and if he's really there presumably he feels good too. In mediumship something is added to this; you get instructions on what to do or information about what's going to happen. Mediumship is very widespread in Singapore. In Shenism, Chinese folk beliefs, incorrectly called Taoism in Singapore, many temples have mediums who are regularly consulted on a wide range of issues, including quite important ones. I have seen some of these mediums in action and I must say, I was very impressed. Some of them must be faking it, but the ones I saw were definitely in trance states and must have genuinely believed they were communicating with God or gods.

When young Singaporeans become more Westernized, wish to appear smart, or perhaps wish to please their friends, they abandon the smoky and sometimes untidy Chinese temples and start going to Christian churches instead. There the mediumship is of a much more 'modern' form and it is buttressed by detailed religious instruction, scriptural authority and 'witnessing' by those who vouch for

its validity. But whatever variety of mediumship you go in for, it is as I said before, fraught with problems.

If I 'channel' messages from a deity, whether occasionally or on a regular basis, whether for my personal use or to give help others, how do I know it's him (or her) speaking to me and not just my imagination? When I'm given messages from on high by a *ji tong*, a priest or a pastor, how do I know he's genuine and not deluded, or even a charlatan? Most people who believe in a divine power also believe in its opposite, sometimes called Siong Shen, Ibils or Satan. This being is dedicated to using all his wiles to harm and deceive. So how do I know the message I'm receiving, either directly or through the medium, has not been 'intercepted' and distorted by this Evil One?

Mediums are notorious for 'receiving' information that turns out to be wrong. The famous American televangelist Pat Robertson regularly gets communications from God. His divinely-inspired predictions are interesting because he usually announces them on TV so it's possible to later verify whether they were accurate or not. So far all Robertson's predictions have been wrong. For example, two years ago he prophesized that a huge terrorist attack on the US was imminent. In 2006 he predicted that a tsunami would strike the US that year. In 1976 God told him that the world was going to end in 1982. Incidentally, I have been told that there is a very exclusive society in the US only open to those who have confidently predicted the end of the world. They have a membership of 123,000 and a past membership of three and half a million.

Getting predictions about the future is one thing, receiving guidance on what to do in the present is another. About two years ago a man came to see me, introduced himself and then airily announced: 'God has told me to come and speak to you.' Without missing a beat, I replied: 'It's a pity he didn't tell me you were coming, because I have an appointment in 20 minutes and have to get ready.' I walked passed him and went up to my room leaving him standing there. Apparently some of these divine instructions are very precise and specific, like this one. In this

case as with most others, acting on the divine message only caused minor inconvenience to the receiver. But I know of many others where it led people to refuse medical treatment, stop taking medication, bring a mentally disturbed child to church instead of a social worker or psychiatrist, fork out large amounts of money, sell their house and move somewhere else, turn against a spouse, etc. Occasionally, as happened a few days ago, it can even lead to people losing their lives.

Female Monks

I received a long and appreciative letter the other day and it happened to refer to the former Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, now ordained as Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, as 'a female monk'. Now I don't think I am particularly fussy about words or word usage but this term and its ugly sister 'female priest' annoys and baffles me. I can well understand why Christians use the term female priest; the proper usage 'priestess' sounds just a little too pagan. But why do we Buddhists refer to nuns as female monks when the correct, universally understood, still not dated, without negative connotations and seven-letters-shorter word 'nun' is available? We readily refer to someone being an actresses, a princess, a seamstresses or an heiress, so what's wrong with calling someone a priestess, or if they are a woman ordained in the Buddhist tradition, a nun?

I suspect that that insidious disease called political correctness is at work here and indeed it is mainly in American Buddhist publications that I see these terms. But if it is political correctness then it is a poorly considered expression of it. 'Female monk' clearly still tips the balance towards the masculine gender; you are merely a female version of the male. If you genuinely wanted to redress the gender prejudice and add a bit of affirmative action language as well, you should start calling priests male priestesses and monks male nuns.

Buddhism and Phallic Worship

Syncretism is the adoption of elements of one religion into another. All religions are syncretic to some degree. Despite the widespread assumption to the contrary, the Buddha adopted very little from the religions or the folk beliefs of his time and included nothing at all from them into his essential teachings. Buddhism as it has evolved in traditional Buddhist countries is another matter. There, Buddhism has been far too casual (tolerant?) about accepting all sorts of superstitious beliefs and practices. To my mind, the most primitive of these is phallic worship.

There are several Buddhist temples in Japan associated with phallic worship. The most famous of these is Mara Kannon in Tawarayama in Yamaguchi Prefecture, supposedly dedicated to Avalokitsvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. For reasons that I have been unable to discover (other than that proclivity to corruption so common in Buddhism) the statue in this shrine has become associated with fertility which in turn has led to an unabashed phallicism. Men who have erectile problems, 'size issues', bed wetting, infertility, low sperm count, venereal diseases, etc. come here and offer small phalluses (bring your own or purchase one at the temple's gift shop) in the hope of getting help. The Mara Kannon Matsuri Festival held on the 1st of May every year and during which huge phalluses are carried through the streets, apparently attracts thousands of people. I have never seen it but I am told that thousands of prostitutes, cross-dressers and bawds from all over Japan come and there is much bacchanalian revelry. Very Buddhist indeed!

Wat Po is one of the largest monasteries in Bangkok. Go to the main shrine, pay your respects to the large and very beautiful Buddha statue there, then stand to one side, look up at the statues serene, half-closed eyes and follow its gaze. You will see that it looks out the main door of the shrine directly to a large, realistic

stone phallus, usually with pink or yellow ribbons tied around it and garlands draped over it. There are several phallic shrines in Bangkok but this is the only one I know that is actually in a Buddhist monastery. I have been told there are others. If you want your own phallus – you know, to hang around your neck or worship in the comfort of your own home – the place to go is to the amulet market held every Sunday at Wat Mahathat, Thailand's premier Buddhist university. They have all kinds there; small, big, very big, enormous, being hugged by little figures, with faces or legs on them, inscribed with *mantras*, blessed by famous monks, made of wood, bone, plastic or metal. I went to this market once and couldn't help noticing how many monks there were inspecting the wares.

Drukpa Kunkey is a semi-mythological character in popular Buddhism in Bhutan and southern Tibet. The various legends about Drukpa Kunley are not only funny but are meant to be a healthy poke at monastic formalism, ostentatious piety, sanctimony and clerical pretence. Having evolved amongst peasants many of these stories also contain a good deal of bawdy humor and imagery, particularly related to Drukpa Kunley's apparently enormous member. I do not know that his phallus is actually worshiped but paintings of it appear on many houses in Bhutan while wooden versions of it hang from the corners of the roofs of others. On the main shrine at Chimi Lhakhang, the temple dedicated to Drukpa Kunley, there is a large red-painted wooden phallus and with a tassel on its end. When women wanting children come to this temple, the presiding monk touches them on the head with this phallus. Incidentally, the paintings in this temple, depicting the life of Drukpa Kunley are the finest I saw in all Bhutan. If you ever go there take Keith Dowman's *The Divine Madman* with you. It will help you understand the paintings.

When I visited the famous Kaniska Gompa in Zanshar I noticed a large wooden phallus sticking out of the wall at the entrance to the temple. I asked the lama with me why it was there and he told me it was to frighten evil spirits so that they wouldn't go in the temple. I didn't ask why such spirits should be frightened

by a phallus. If they are male I would expect them to admire it rather than be frightened of it.

From one point of view worshiping a sexual organ is not much different from worshiping any other part of the human body - e.g. Jesus' 'precious blood', his sacred heart or guruji's lotus-like feet - or even the whole body, e.g. the actual person themselves. On the other hand, the sexual organs are the physical manifestation of sexual desire and pleasure, something the Dhamma teaches us to de-emphasize and eventually try to transcend. I know of nothing in either Pali or Mahayana literature attributed to the Buddha that could be described even with the broadest interpretation as 'a celebration of sexuality'. The only thing I could imagine further from the Dhamma than phallic worship would be killing and perhaps hatred.

I know that many Westerners attend the Mara Kannon Matsuri Festival and go to Khajuraho to gawk in wonder at the supposed lack of prudery and 'healthy attitude towards sex' of Asians. This is of course complete nonsense. What could be more twisted than the Japanese attitude to sex! Who could be more sexually suppressed than the Indians! And anyway, these and several other examples of phallicism in Buddhism have nothing to do with openness or healthy attitudes. They are just examples of where the guardians of the Dhamma have either acquiesced to popular desires or needs or where, out of lack of commitment to the Dhamma, they have allowed vulgar superstitions to creep into it. Sociologically and psychologically phallic worship is very interesting. Spiritually it offers nothing of any value.

Dying with Dignity

A few days ago, Sherwin B. Nuland died. Some of you may know him as the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning and bestselling book *How We Die*, published in 1994. Nuland sought to dispel the popular myth that most deaths take place the way they do in the movies – a few poignant, funny or enigmatic last words, then the eyes closing and finally a peaceful and swift slipping away. As a doctor, Nuland knew that only a few have the good fortune to end like that, and he did not flinch to describe in detail what it is often really like. It is for the most part pretty much how the Buddha described it – *dukkha*, sometimes extreme *dukkha*. Nuland added to this that modern medicine sometimes actually contributes to the *dukkha* by prolonging it.

Only recently I read an article in the local newspaper about the death by cancer of a Singaporean personality. The writer commented approvingly that she 'fought it to the last' This unhelpful attitude, part of what Oliver Burkeman calls 'the cult of optimism', is also a cause of a great deal of pain and suffering in the months or weeks leading to up to death. The old idea of having the wisdom of knowing when your time has come, accepting it, and letting the process take its course, doesn't accord with the popular insistence of putting a positive spin on everything, Nuland wrote: 'If the classical image of dying with dignity must be modified or even discarded, what is to be salvaged of our hope for the final memories we leave to those who love us? The dignity we seek in dying must be found in the dignity with which we have lived our lives.' Nuland was 83 and he died of prostate cancer. I hope it was for him a peaceful and easy end.

Ethnic Buddhism and Dhamma

Buddhism is my religion and has been for nearly 43 years. I consider the Buddha to have been the greatest mind in human history. I believe that the Dhamma is the closest humanity has come to ethical and spiritual perfection. I have been teaching Dhamma for about 25 years and I have never got tired of it, and I still discover aspects of it that I had not noticed before. As an outgrowth of all this I have also developed a deep interest in Buddhist societies and cultures and have been fortunate enough to visit nearly every region where Buddhism prevails. During my travels I have generally found Buddhists to be open, gentle, generous and kindly folk which I think can be plausibly put down to the influence of Buddhism.

But I am not blind. As *samsaric* beings Buddhists have their defilements just as people of other faiths do. They are capable of being stupid and greedy, prejudiced and uncaring, provoked and provoking, self-centred and inflexible, tradition-bound and superstitious. They practice their religion as often as they fail to practice it – just as people of other faiths do. Despite this there has long been the illusion in the west that Buddhists, unique amongst humanity, practice their religion with complete fidelity - that because the Buddha taught gentleness, understanding and love, Buddhists follow these teachings unfailingly.

Well, it looks like those with such illusions might be about to be disillusioned. It started some years ago with news reports of Sri Lankan monks being involved in racist politics and ethnic violence. The Dorje Shugden and the Karmapa rumpus had little impact on public opinion because of the obscure issues involved, although they shocked and perhaps disillusioned some western Tibetan Buddhists. Then the riots in Tibet gave a rather un-Shrangri La picture of the troubles in that country. Now it's the ethnic riots in Burma. I quite understand that

thoughtful people are deeply disturbed by these happenings. I am too. But there is an added dimension to the reports about these as opposed to troubles beyond the Buddhist world. And it is this. Commentators and observers continually express their surprised to discover that Buddhists, monks included, can be provoked to violence, that they have chauvinistic feelings, that they are capable prejudices, and that they can resort to violence.

On the one hand this disillusioning worries me. Why? Because it tends to happen that when an illusion gives way to reality there is often a strong reaction in the other direction. When the deluded finally see the real situation they do not blame themselves for being unrealistic, they blame that which they were previously deluded about. I suspect that Buddhists, and by implication Buddhism, previously held so unrealistically high is gradually going to be put down far lower than it should be.

On the other hand, I am not entirely unhappy that a more realistic view of Buddhists and Buddhist lands is beginning to emerge. Why? Because I have long seen the danger, not to say the foolishness, in the 'ethnic' approach to Dhamma. When a western monk in the west asks to be addressed as *ahjan* or *gelong*, *saydaw*, *roshi* or *sensei* rather than their English equivalent, he is identifying himself, not just as a Buddhist, but with a particular ethnic expression of Buddhism. When they chant in the Tibetan or the Burmese or the Chinese way the same impression can be created. When you tie yourself to a particular culture or country you involve yourself in people's minds with that culture or country. And when that country or culture looks bad people see Buddhism as bad. Dhamma is universal, it transcends culture and ethnicity. The practice of the Dhamma is not the special preserve of any particular ethnic group. Let us practice the Buddha's teaching, not Thai Buddhism, not Tibetan Buddhism, not Burmese Buddhism or any other culturally-specific expression of the Dhamma. Let us practice the Dhamma with a minimum of cultural trappings.

The Bodhisattva's Engagement Ring

The *Lalitavistara* is one of the earliest attempts to write a biography of the Buddha although it only goes up to the First Teaching. It is in highly ornate Sanskrit and is full of fantastic details, in contrast to Asvaghosa's much more sober *Buddhacarita*. The *Lalitavistara* is an important work for the history of Indian literature although it tells us little of any historical importance about the life of the Buddha. It does nonetheless contain several interesting details about society at the time it was composed, probably between the 1st century BC and the 2nd century CE. To me, one of the most interesting such detail is to be found in chapter twelve which recounts Prince Siddhattha's first encounter with Yasodhara, there called Gopa. Meeting her and being attracted to her he gave her his finger ring (*anguliya*). Apparently, this was how a man, at least a high-status man, expressed his wish to marry a woman at this time. Thus, the giving of a ring would be equivalent to our engagement. The scene is depicted on one of the panels on the great stupa of Borobudur in Java.

Finger and toe rings were used in India centuries before the Buddha. One whole chapter in volume II of Sir John Marshall's *Taxila* (1951) concerns rings found during excavations at the famous site. In a footnote Marshall says that the Dulva (Tibetan translation of one of the Vinayas) allows monks to wear rings made of base metals but not gold or silver. I have not been able to verify this but if monks in later centuries did wear rings they would have been signet rings; used to seal letters and documents and verify the writer's identity.

Wedding and engagement rings go back a long way in history. The Egyptians and the Romans used wedding rings. They were discouraged in Christendom for centuries because of their association with classical paganism. That changed after 860 when Pope Gregory I decreed that as proof of nuptial intent a man had to give

a ring to the woman. Thereafter engagement and wedding rings started to became common although conservative Protestants still shunned them, indeed all jewellery, well into the 19th century – i.e. the first Methodists, Mennonites, the early American Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, the more strict Pentecostals, etc. Most of these sects have now given in to popular culture although I think Jehovah Witnesses, the Brethren and a few others still will not use wedding rings. Other than the *Lalitavistara* I have not been able to find any ancient Indian source mentioning the giving or exchanging of rings.

Don’t Take Life Lightly

Yesterday I read that the British footballer Daniel James had gone to a euthanasia clinic in Switzerland and committed suicide, assisted suicide being legal in that country, even for non-terminal patients. James had been paralyzed from the neck down in a sporting accident and decided his life wasn’t worth living. When I heard about this I was both appalled and saddened.

A few years ago, while I was staying at a Buddhist society in Europe I was informed that at three in the afternoon someone was coming to see me to talk about the Dhamma. Just before three I heard the front gate open, looked out the window, and I saw a man in a wheelchair entering the premises. After a bit of fuss getting the wheelchair through the front door the man was pushed into the library by the person accompanying him and I entered to meet him. As we introduced ourselves he held out his hand, I took it and his grip nearly crushed my hand as he shook it. He was a good-looking man of about 25 with a fine complexion and well-developed arms and chest.

Almost immediately he got down to business. ‘Two years ago I was in a car accident in which the driver, my friend, and another person were killed. I was left paralyzed from the waist down. I’m undergoing therapy at present but the doctors tell me that if I have not regained the use of my legs within another 12 months I probably never will. I have decided that if I can’t walk again by that time I’m going to kill myself.’ He paused for a moment, letting this piece of information sink in. Then he continued. ‘I have gone to Catholic and Protestant clergymen, a rabbi, a Baha’i teacher and a Hindu swami to ask them if they can give me good reasons why I should not end my life. Now I want to know what a Buddhist would say about this. That’s why I’m here.’

All this was said in a no-nonsense, matter-of-fact manner that convinced me he meant what he said. I asked him: 'What did these other religious teachers say to you?' 'They all said I shouldn't do it' he replied. 'Is being in a wheelchair so terrible,' I asked him. 'I will never get an erection again. I leak urine. You can probably smell it a bit. I can't shit any more like normal people. Every morning I have to remove it manually. I used to love sports. I was a real sportsman. I'll never be able to run and jump like I used to. For the rest of my life I'm going to have to depend on others and quite simply, I don't want to live like that.' As he said this I detected a hint of emotion in his voice for the first time. I asked: 'And have you given any thought to how you intend to kill yourself?' 'Gas' he replied, 'Its quick, clean and painless. So that's it. Can you, as an expert in Buddhism, give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill myself?'

I listened to all this and decided to take the approach I have sometimes found useful in such cases. I spent a few moments appearing to ponder his question and then I said. 'No I can't. Given your circumstanced I think your best option is suicide.'

He opened his mouth to say something but nothing come out. He must have assumed that I was going to try to convince him not to kill himself and when I didn't respond as expected he was knocked off balance. His friend who was standing behind him gave me a horrified look and waved his hand indicating that I should not say such a thing. 'So you agree. You think I should kill myself?' 'Yep, I said.' Now it was my turn to be silent while my words sunk in. Finally, I said: 'The only thing I think you should reconsider is how you're going to commit suicide. May I recommend another way?' 'Er, yes' he said. His friend looked down and shook his head in despair.

'This is what I would recommend. I live in Sri Lanka, in Kandy up in the mountains. Every time I go to the town market I see dozens of young guys on all fours crawling around amongst the crowd begging for money or food. They've all been crippled by polio. Now because they spend all their time down near ground level and are

always breathing in dirt and dust, they often get lung infections. And of course because they crawl around their hands and knees are bruised, calloused and covered with scabs. I also know that almost none of them get any help from the government or any charitable organizations. They live by begging and petty theft. Now this is what I recommend you do. Sell everything you have, go to Sri Lanka, get yourself a one year visa, and do everything you can to improve the lives of these young guys. They have lived on the streets for years so they are a pretty tough bunch. I will be more than happy to give you contacts in Kandy who can help you get a house and the other things you will need. Of course there are no facilities for wheelchair-bound people in Sri Lanka, no ramps or anything. The pavements are uneven and the roads full of pot holes, so getting around will be a constant struggle. I calculate that two years of this plus the strain of working with these very difficult kids should finish you off. I think the only problem you might have is that someone might come to know of what you are doing and try to help you which might prolong your life or even stave of death altogether. But you can always tell them to piss off.'

I said all this in the same no-nonsense tone that he had used when telling me of his resolve to commit suicide. He sat looking at me for a while and then we had a long talk. I can understand and sympathize with the terminal patient who is in great pain and who wishes to end (or perhaps better, to shorten) his or her live. But to want to kill yourself just because your life is not going the way you want it, is to me at least, narcissistic, selfish and stupid. The 'If I can't win I'm going to take my ball and go home' attitude to life bewilders me.

In Vienna I met a distinguished surgeon who told me his life had become meaningless since he retired some years previously. He didn't know what to do with himself and was increasingly suffering from bouts of depression. I felt like grabbing him by the collar and shouting: 'You selfish old man!' With the skills he had developed during his career there was so much he could do for others; tutoring young medical students, volunteering his knowledge to some charitable organization, spending periods during the year in an undeveloped country passing

on his skills to surgeons there. And even if he didn't want to share what he knew, he could travel, write a book, do some research or take up a hobby. But for whatever reason such possibilities just never occurred to him.

The Buddha said that to be reborn as a human is a rare opportunity pregnant with possibilities (S.V,457). To squander that opportunity, to fail to see its potential or to be so fixated on one particular course that it blocked out all others, seems to me to be a terrible tragedy; far worse than being confined to a wheelchair or paralyzed from the neck down. I am not advocating that 'you can achieve anything if you really want it' or that 'never give up' approach to life advocated in those self-help books. The first is a delusion; you can't achieve everything you want; life is full of limitations. And the second is almost a recipe for unhappiness. Knowing when to gracefully surrender, when it's time to call it quits, is a mark of courage and good judgment. I am talking about an appreciative awareness of the fact that we are alive and using the time we have well. Yes, we may find obstacles in our way, sometimes very serious ones, so we may have to modify our goals, adjust our expectations or consider completely new ones. I am constantly astonished at how people with serious disabilities find fulfilling and creative ways to spend their time or make their lives meaningful. Daniel James' self-pity, lack of imagination and wilfulness led him to take his life. How sad.

When I returned to the Buddhist society the next year the young man in the wheelchair came to see me again. He invited me to lunch in the flat he had just bought and where I met his new girlfriend, who quite coincidently, happened to be a Buddhist. I didn't ask him if he had changed his mind about killing himself but it appeared that he had. Sometimes you have the privilege of making a significant difference to someone's life. If Daniel James had made the goal of his life inspiring and encouraging those less disabled than he himself, I wonder how many lives he might have been able to change.

The Color of Saffron

I often come across the term 'saffron robes' being used to describe the Buddhist monk's attire. A report about the recent disturbances in Burma described the monks as 'a saffron clad army of peace'. The writer could not have seen the attached photo which showed monks clad in maroon-colored robes. Let's just straighten a few things out. The English word saffron comes from the Arabic *sa'faran* and is used as the name of the plant *Corous sativus* and for a bright orange/yellow color the same as or similar to the color derived from the stigmas of this plant. Saffron was unknown to the Buddha's India, growing only in Persia at that time. The Pali/Sanskrit word for saffron, *kunkuma*, does not occur anywhere in the Pali Tipitaka.

Saffron was imported into northern India in later centuries but never used to dye cloth. It was used in medicine, to flavor and color food but it has never been used as a fabric dye because it washes out after the third or fourth wash. A further reason why it has never been used to dye monks' robes or any other cloth is its expense. In Singapore today an ounce of saffron sells for a little less than an ounce of gold. It was even more expensive in ancient times.

City monks in Thailand often wear robes that could well be described as saffron-colored although safety-helmet orange would be a more accurate description. But just as many monks and especially forest monks wear robes of a soft brown color. Monks' robes in Burma are uniformly purple/brown and in Sri Lankan they range from Communist Party red to dark brown. If Tibetan monks' robes were to be given a botanical association it would have to be beetroot. So how has saffron come to be so associated with Buddhist monk's robes?

Religion and the US Elections

Studies have shown that some 40% of Americans attend church regularly although another study conducted from the 1980s to the present has shown that it might be only half that. Nonetheless, even 20% is high when compared to other developed countries. And in survey after survey Americans assert that they have a deep commitment to religion, even when they do not go to church regularly. Some denominations are more pious than others. Amongst Mormons 67% say they attend church once a week or more, and 89% say they pray daily. Controversies over issues that overlap on religion are regular occurrences in America and you haven't a chance of winning an election, local or national, in the country unless you claim to be "a person of faith".

I bring this up because of the US presidential election which is to take place in a few days. Even a casual observer like myself cannot but be dismayed by how much rancour, bitterness, calumny and mutual recrimination have marked this election. Mr. Trump, who says the Bible is his favourite book, seems to be the worst offender, Mrs. Clinton much less so. But the supporters of each have pulled out all stops in their efforts to bad-mouth their candidate's opponent. The book many of them claim to read and guide their lives by is pretty clear, "Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Leviticus 19:18) but not much notice seems to be taken of this or other biblical teachings. The advocacy group Grass Roots North Carolina, operating in the so-called Bible Belt, is holding a competition to raise funds for Mr. Trump; first prize being a AR15 rifle, a thousand rounds of ammunition and a target with Mrs. Clinton on it. Mr. Trump has been married three times, his many

adulterous affairs are common knowledge and yet this and recent revelations about his sexual advances towards woman have caused only a slight drop in support for him by evangelicals who always say how concerned they are about "family values".

I have long given thought to what statements such as "I'm very religious", "I believe in (fill in the gap)", "I'm a person of faith", actually mean or what they might tell us about the individuals making them, whatever their religion. Generally, I have come to the conclusion that they don't mean very much and they tell you almost nothing about how those persons might behave in the ordinary process of living.

It seems to me that considerable numbers of people who think of themselves as religious take their belief mainly as a sort of totem, a peg to hang their identity on, as notions that give them comfort or a feeling of belonging, as something to cling to, rather than as instructions about how to behave, particularly towards their fellow human beings.

As far as I can see, when a religion, any religion, is thought of as a social necessity the way Christianity is in the US or Buddhism is in Sri Lanka or Thailand, or when it is made compulsory as it is in parts of the Middle East, it does not make people pious, it just makes them hypocrites. And when religion gets involved in politics the religion concerned and the individuals who do it are usually both discredited. I think genuine religiosity flourishes best when it remains a matter between the individual and his or her conscience. And people who spend more effort removing the beam from their own eye rather than trying to push their faith in the public domain are likely to be the least hypocritical.