

佛學論文

TOPICS ON BUDDHISM

WHY DO PEOPLE DESIRE
EMANCIPATION?

by

Rev. James E. Wagner

The yearning to be freed from the constricting shackles that bind us to the wheel of life is perhaps as old as man himself. To be shackled is to be bound, tied, restrained or limited in our physical or mental endeavours as we plod through life in search of that elusive commodity we call "happiness". No one seems to know exactly, what this happiness is or just where it can be found. It cannot, in fact, be truly sought after unless there is a flicker of aspiration from at least a spurt of logical thinking. The overwhelming majority of the masses of this world is content to exist from day to day with scarcely a thought of either the past or the future. Indeed, I've known a good number of them who apparently had never entertained very many thoughts in their entire lifetimes. There are, of course, ideas which flit and bounce across the convolutions of our thinking machines, but these are mostly random, disjointed impressions which have been born largely from sensual contacts. By "thinking" I have in mind a deliberate, sustained and analytical examination of conceptual belief.

The very concept of emancipation may be called the result of this type of thinking. For ages past cultures, civilizations, religions and philosophies have given prominent recognition to this general idea of the individual's eventual attainment to a higher status of existence. We know this condition by many names, such as heaven, paradise, Utopia, the Great Beyond, Nirvana. And there have been dozens of methods prescribed, each guaranteeing to produce the desired effect of permitting the individual to accomplish the destruction of unhappiness either in this world or in the next. When the world's thinkers had deduced their systems for salvation or liberation, the rank and file of the human race eagerly clutched at them in grateful appreciation and made

integral parts of their cultural patterns. Whatever strides in morality and spirituality which exist in the world have their foundations, usually, in one or more of these systems.

Virtually all of these systems have, at some time or another, been either exalted or perverted by the persons who claimed them. If, as I believe, there are two general categories of people then such treatment of the systems is inevitable. If we divide humanity into two broadly classified groups, each group could be distinguished by a specific characteristic. And these two characteristics would be in direct contrast to one another.

By far, the larger group would consist of those beings who are content to exist in a mental and spiritual semi-vacuum. As is obvious to the observant individual, serious thinking is not a popular pastime for the greater portion of humanity. Their inspiration, for activity is not so much intellectual as it is physiological. Satisfaction to most of them ends in the climax of filling the belly with food and the pandering to a few of the other baser sense desires. In short this group, as a group, contributes little to civilization in the broader sense of the term. I don't mean to imply a blanket incapacity for thought, but rather to point out the absence of any inspiration to real thinking, or any aspiration to the spiritual mindedness and growth.

The second group would be considerably smaller and distinguishable by the presence of intelligent thinking carried out into direct activity. Upon these people would rest the responsibility for the perpetuation of what we term civilization and the advancement of culture. The philosophers and religionists in all probability would come from this group and would give to the world organized systems of thinking by which to live. Indeed, without them the masses would be pathetically lost in the swamp of sensual indulgences and life would be truly chaotic.

Please do not think I am being condescending or that I do not understand the limited capacities of those beings who have yet to evolve to higher stages of existence. Nor am I unaware of the fact that in each group there would be found many persons on the edges who could easily fit into the edges of the other group. In any general classification

such as this, these characteristics would be obvious, as would some of the people who didn't seem to fit into either group.

Now what are the reasons for anyone to desire emancipation? Well, to any person who can reason even a little bit, the spectacle of humanity's having to struggle in a constant battle to gratify the never satiated senses, the idea of freedom from these demands would loom favourably. And to become acquainted with suffering and unhappiness of so many of the world's peoples, either directly or indirectly, would in itself be an incentive to seek for spiritual peace and contentment. This applies to all those individuals who have the capacity for emotion or sentiment. But the manner in which spiritual contentment could be gained, in all likelihood would come from the smaller group.

The fact of suffering in the world, in whatever shape or degree, cannot be denied, for countless thousands of examples of it can be enumerated. But when we come to suffering's antithesis we have more difficulty in trying to pinpoint it. Liberation, emancipation, freedom and other terms are all loose words which are often used without a very clear conception of what they really mean. I often have the impression that many Buddhist people believe that freedom or salvations means that man's spiritual nature goes to some other realm where it can enjoy all the pleasures of the senses without having to answer for any of the actions committed in the name of these senses.

This is unfortunate, because according to such a concept the ultimate goal is so similar to our daily gratification of the sense desires that there is little or no incentive to transcend these things and really achieve spiritual emancipation. Yet this is what must be done. Our Buddhist writings, if studied sincerely by the serious seeker, point out the way in which liberation may be attained. Any average person can learn enough in a week's time to realize a spiritual awakening. If he will honestly apply what he learns to every waking moment.

For man to become aware of his spiritual growth he must become cognisant that what he calls or thinks of as being his soul is no different, essentially, from the Soul of the Universe. Therefore, salvation for any man,

whatever he may understand by the term, must start from within. At some time or another in his life every person gets a hint into the nature of his own soul. But almost immediately we translate this hint into terms of our sense impressions and we erroneously believe that it is separate and distinct. Because we live in a worldly plane, where we find it convenient to interpret things according to our senses, this is inevitable. However we must realize that spirituality is another realm and we must rise above the normal processes of cognition if we are to experience it.

According to our Buddhist Texts every individual has a perfect right to seek, or not to seek, his own emancipation and the means thereto. No other person has the right to try to force or coerce you into submitting to any particular doctrine or belief. All of us are in different stages of evolution and I, for example, may not be sufficiently evolved to receive the same spiritual truths which you can readily assimilate. Each of us can go only to the limits of our capacities in any one lifetime. However, this limitation cannot be used as an excuse, for most of us, as human beings, are capable of far, far more than we normally attempt.

Whatever we decide to do as individuals will be based largely upon all of our past thoughts and actions in previous lives and in this one. we are not imprisoned in our circumstances by some mysterious force called Fate or Destiny. we have made our own conditions and we have the utmost freedom of will to react to them as we please. The most important thing we must remember, particularly if we don't like our present conditions, is that the circumstances under which we will live in the future will be determined by the way we exert our freedom of will now.

Every thought we think or action we take is determined by what we have become to be at the time we commit it. If we aspire to become something better in the future we can condition that future by directing our Will to that end and following it up with appropriate actions. Thus in a sense predestination and Free Will are two sides of the same coin to a Buddhist. Our present was predestined by our own past actions and Will. And when on the

cross of time and space we arrive at some particular point in the future we can then say that our conditions are the result of predetermination. But our actions now will determine them then.

That all conditions arise from causes is a cardinal tenet of the karmic law. And this law further asserts that the direction of our future cannot be rapidly or radically changed. No god or Buddha can forgive us for any wrong or sinful actions and thereby transport us to where our karma cannot reach us. Karma can be changed only by self-effort. Therefore, the present is the the time to begin to create the terms under which we wish to live in future existences.

For the persons who have attained to an awareness of their own spiritual natures and to some of the basic spiritual truths, a change in attitude is usually apparent. They realise that life has much to teach them and that evolution is never a rapid thing. The man who has definitely put his feet upon the path leading to the goal knows that it may take him many life-times to reach it. And his determination to reach it no matter how long it takes him is not, I believe, the kind of desire which becomes a fetter. In my opinion it is the higher desire from which an honest faith is born.

Such a one stands out from the general run of individual who is ordinarily so devoted to sensuality that his excuse for not trying to advance either mentally or spiritually is that his hands were tied by his circumstances. This lesser-evolved person has yet to realise that the only barriers to his self advancement were placed there by himself and can be removed by no other being. The idea of liberation often never occurs to such a person because he thoroughly enjoys living by sense contact alone. The unhappiness and frustrations that result from this kind of life are brushed aside without a thought in the search for more of the same.

A little while ago I mentioned that one of the strongest incentives for seeking liberation or emancipation was to become acquainted with the suffering and unhappiness of so many of the world's peoples. Perhaps I should qualify this a little and say that, more specifically, it is the becoming aware of the

nature of pleasure. Pleasure, like all other phenomena, falls in the realm of the pairs of opposites and is therefore transient. To us, life seems apparently gratifying. But where is the dividing line which makes the difference?

Pleasure is not only fleetingly transient but also essentially selfish. In most instances it consists of catering to one or more of our sensuous desires in some futile attempt at satisfying their ever-demanding appetites. And even when it is not the senses, it is often the ego. How many times do we hear it said that the giving of gifts to the less fortunate gives us a sense of pleasure? Why should we get "pleasure" from an act of charity or mercy? We should instead have the marks of pity and compassion stamped indelibly upon our hearts. Righteousness and pleasure are sometimes confused. Good deeds should be performed because it is essentially 'right' to do them and not because of any pleasure, reward or merit which might accrue of them. Any righteousness performed for any motive of less noble character than this is, by its very nature, inherently selfish.

If we as Buddhists are sincerely interested in emancipation or liberation from the ills of mundane living, and there is no other reason for being a Buddhist, then we must make serious attempt to dedicate our lives to doing all that we know to be worthy. And if there should be any doubt in our minds as to the determination of worthy actions, we have only to consult that part of our Buddhist texts which deals with the Noble Eight-fold Path. The doing of any deeds, whether they be good or evil, comes under the category of simple morality. And to my knowledge no creed, or religious doctrine, has ever surpassed that one laid down by the Lord Buddha Shakyamuni.

Please do not think, however, that mere morality by itself will permit us to transcend the confining limitations of worldliness and attain to spiritual freedom, for it cannot. But it can and will prepare the ground so that the seed of our higher self may be cultivated, grow and ripen. In every religious creed the world has ever known morality has been an uncompromising platform from which the doctrine grew. Indeed, the virtuous threads of morality are so inextricably woven into the warp of spirituality that without it any

religious thinking is incomprehensible.

Therefore, thinking people who have awakened to the realization of their religious natures begin immediately to strive for moral perfection. They are well aware that the goal of Nirvana, for most of them, is far beyond the horizon of their vision. But they also know that none other can walk the path for them, for spiritual perfection and moral refinement come from within. Many life-times may be required to complete the journey, and while speed is always desirable, it is not always possible in reaching the goal.

Those individuals whose spiritual sides have become attuned to the symphonic strains of the orchestration of the Universal Law, show the utmost kindness, pity and compassion toward those persons to whom the sense world is still the ultimate. For to live at the stage where sensual gratification is the prime reason for life, is a pitiable thing. Such persons, and there are thousands throughout the world, are on only a slightly higher level than our four-footed brothers who want nothing more than a warm place to sleep and an occasional scratch on the back simply because it feels good. All of us in our evolution have passed through this stage ourselves and because we are now beyond it, it becomes our bounden duty to render all sympathetic assistance possible in leading our less fortunate brothers to the path which leads to the joys of liberation.

By way of a very brief recapitulation, I point out again that the desire to be released from the sting of worldly ills and frustrations is as ancient as mankind. Those who rose to what we can loosely term positions of leadership by their ability in sustained thinking, gave to the rest of humanity the concept of salvation, and then devised systems by which it could be attained. The desire of the masses to be released from the confines of mundane existence induced them to eagerly adopt such systems and incorporate them into their cultural patterns. But the general mental and spiritual make-up of human beings divided them into two general categories. The system then were alternately or simultaneously perverted or exalted, depending upon which group is being considered.

The two distinguishing features, each the

opposite of the other, are the desire in the larger group to live by catering almost entirely to sensual inclinations. And in the second group the principle mark of identity would manifest itself in the attempt to rise above worldly affairs to a higher plane of thought-existence. It has been this group which has given the world its philosophies and cultures.

The desire for liberation is usually brought about by the realization of the futility of trying to satiate sensual appetites, or because of the wide-spread prevalence of suffering and unhappiness in the world. When this realization is accompanied by a flicker of spiritual awareness, we set out to accomplish our salvation through self-effort and moral perfection. We know that religious emancipation and unblemished morality are so closely interwoven that neither one can be consummated without the other. And we know, further, that many life-times may be needed before we reach our goal. No other can walk the path which leads to freedom from unhappiness for us. We must proceed along the path ourselves with firm determination and, sooner or later, the blissful reward of self-effort will be ours, and the happy state of Nirvana will be realized. Begin now; put your feet upon the path, if you have not already done so, and walk steadily onward!

NOTE:- The above lecture was delivered at The Penang Buddhist Association, Penang, on Monday, 11th. March, 1957, (BE. 2500) by The Rev. James E. Wagner, an American Monk.

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The photo of The Rev. Wagner, The author of this article, with Upasaka F. Chu, the chief editor of Bodhedrum, before the Hungfa Vihara at Chuenwan, Hongkong,

