BEHIND THE MASK

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ANATTA

MALAYSIA 1997

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This book is printed for free distribution.
3,000 copies.
Not For Sale.

The cover-picture is by an Italian
Renaissance artist, *Domenico Del Ghirlandio,*
and is appropriately called
Old Man and a Child.
I was unable to contact him,
so am reproducing his painting
without his permission,
hoping he won't mind.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated

to the suffering people of Tibet

and their non-violent struggle

to regain their independence

from a ruthless occupying force.

May they soon succeed

and live in peace forever!

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INTRODUCTION

I have chosen for the cover of this book a painting by a Renaissance artist entitled *Old Man and a Child*, to illustrate that, even though the outside might be quite ugly, inner qualities can and do shine through. It is my own interpretation or evaluation, of course, and is open to challenge, but in this picture, I see a wonderful rapport taking place between the subjects (I don't know who they are; maybe they are grandfather and grandchild; it looks like). The child is gazing into the other's eyes with ..... what is it?—is it wonder, amazement, curiosity, love, or what? The innocent manner of the hand laid lightly on the other's chest suggests that there is no fear or aversion but a complete acceptance of him as he is—*warts and all!* And the old man returns the gaze with a look of compassion and understanding. He has seen life, has suffered, and knows that the child is in for its share of difficulties and pain.

Have you ever seen a particularly-ugly person who is happily married to someone quite good-looking and thought to yourself: "How could anyone possibly love such an ugly person?"? It may be because the other was able to see something inside him/her that more-than made up for the ugly exterior. If we love someone for what they are, the exterior ceases to be of great importance.

It is said that *beauty is in the eye of the beholder*. If we have a beauty-base inside us—a sense of beauty, or an appreciation of it—then we may see beauty outside, and the more beauty there is inside us, the more we will see outside, even in things that other people find unremarkable or perhaps even ugly. If, on the other hand, we lack such a sense, how shall we see beauty

outside or in others? If we have only ugliness inside, what we see outside will appear ugly, too.

Another old proverb runs: *Handsome is as handsome does*, meaning that, ultimately, our actions are our measure, not our appearance; there are plenty of good-looking people who behave in very ugly ways, and ugly people who behave very well.

Most people would like to have a good-looking partner, but there are those who bitterly regret marrying a beautiful woman or handsome man. Beauty is often its own worst enemy, in that it deceives us into thinking that the external appearance is of paramount importance, so we rest content, and look for nothing more. And ugliness is often its own best friend, in that we are forced to look beneath the surface, where we might discover more durable and valuable qualities than just the ephemeral skin-deep aspect.

If we are unaware of *the world within*, unaware of the importance of the spiritual life, what is left but to live on the material level? We lose touch with ourselves—if we ever *had* touch with ourselves to begin with—and live largely to impress others and look good in their eyes (which is what fashion is all about; if we were honest about it, we would recognize that we follow fashion more for others than for ourselves). If we are 'good-looking', pride of appearance easily arises, and is often accompanied by disparagement of others less handsome. This is dangerous, and invites retribution, and it would be wise to keep in mind the case of Johnny Weissmuller, the actor who played Tarzan in the old movies: he had a splendid physique and was an Olympic champion-swimmer, but that did not prevent him from becoming a quadriplegic, unable to do anything for himself, or even to speak, but having to depend upon others to do everything for him. It is said that 'pride

goes before a fall'. I don't know if he was proud before *his* fall, but in his position—as a star adored by his fans—I guess it would be hard not to be proud.

Now, no-one chooses to be ugly; neither do people become handsome by choice; these things—like everything else—are results of causes, most of which we had/have no control over. So there is no reason to be proud of being handsome and to look down on others, but every reason to treat it cautiously, for—like everything else—it is subject to change; moreover, it is a mixed blessing.

I called the first printing of this book *WARTS AND ALL* is because we all have 'warts' of various kinds—not on our skin, but on our character—that is, negativities and deficiencies, which again, are not of our choice (who would *choose* to have such things?), so there is no need to feel too bad or guilty about them, as there are plenty of others with the same faults and failings as us; we are not alone, and knowing this makes it easier for us to bear our insufficiencies and imperfections, until eventually, we may throw them off and leave them behind; if we were the only one, we would be in very serious trouble, but we are not, so it makes it 'not so bad' or hard to bear.

But we are ashamed of our imperfections and would like to be free of them. This often leads us to disguise and try to cover them up, or deny that they exist. But if we do not acknowledge and accept them, we will never be able to deal with them, as it is hardly likely that they will go away by themselves. So, first of all, we must recognize and admit the existence in ourselves of our 'warts' and imperfections, and be open about them—not in an exhibitionist way, but honestly and fearlessly. As I've just said above, we've all got them, and if we would see them as *human* or *common* failings rather than as

personal faults, we would be able to assist each other in dealing with them.

If, in places, I have been rather blunt, it is because I considered it necessary, so I make no apologies. If we are shocked by straightforward words and ideas in this day and age, how shall we deal with the much-more-shocking realities of life?

Where I have criticized anyone in this book, I have not done so maliciously, but with the purpose in mind of drawing lessons therefrom. And I would now like to express my gratitude to them for providing me with things to write about. It should be noticed, however, that I have named no names (I find that kind of thing distasteful), and it should not be thought that I am making a thing of personality of it all. I have just said that the things I have criticized and drawn attention to are *human* failings, and they are useful in that we can learn something from them; it is therefore that I am grateful. Eventually, everything might be regarded as Dharma, and not just things that we think of as 'good'. So, thanks for being imperfect, everyone! Thanks for your 'warts' (and mine)!

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I came across the following article in 1994, and found it so open and refreshing that I requested the author, Venerable Visuddhacara, for permission to re-print it herein. He kindly gave it, and I am grateful to him for both this and his words. Venerable Visuddhacara was, at the time he wrote this, the resident monk at the Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Centre in Penang, which is where I stayed prior to and shortly after my ordination there. He is a Theravada monk, while I am not (I left Theravada a long time ago), but, as he said or implied below, as human beings we all have many things in common and can all learn things from each other, without subscribing to each other's viewpoints in totality].

{ INCLUDEPICTURE C:\\WINWORD\\CLIPART\\BOOKS.WMF * MERGEFORMAT } <u>HOW TO READ A BOOK</u>

"When you read a book, you must keep an open mind. Do not allow prejudice to cloud your judgment. Instead, try to read and understand what the author is trying to say. Try to give him a sympathetic ear. He is trying to convey something he seriously thinks about and which he seriously believes in. At least, give him a chance to say his piece. You need not agree with everything he says, but you may find some common areas of agreement, or you may find something new, something you can actually learn from him. Then you can pick out what you can relate to, learn something from him, and as for what you cannot relate to, and concepts you cannot agree with, you need not accept them, you can reject them, or just let them be. Or in areas you are not so sure about, you can say without rejecting or accepting, *Well, I'm not so sure about this; it may or may not be;*

who knows? I'll just keep an open mind and see how it will all eventually work out, and you can read on.

"But at least now you know about his point-of-view, about another's point-of-view. In that sense you are not so ignorant; you have some understanding of others' concepts or viewpoints, some of which you can agree with, and some of which you just cannot; it doesn't matter. What matters is that you have learned something about others' views, and when you give talks and have discussions, you will be better able to discuss and relate with others. You can speak with more knowledge and understanding. You can point out *both* the differences and the similarities, and you can also appreciate the goodness in others' traditions, for they too are trying to practice compassion and transcend the ego. And oftentimes, their compassion and practice put us and our own practice to shame, do they not? For we may claim to know, but how much of what we know do we practice? How wise and compassionate are we? Do we really know what we claim to know? Do we not have doubts sometimes, and if we have, can we admit them? Can we say we don't really know fully as yet, that our understanding is still incomplete, and therefore we should not think or behave as if we know everything, as if we are an authority, or that we hold the monopoly of truth, wisdom and compassion?

"It is good to have knowledge of each other's religious views as this will foster religious tolerance and understanding; it is also good to have knowledge of other Buddhist schools and traditions so that we can understand our differences and still have respect for each other. Sometimes, as I said, we can learn wonderful things from another. For example, reading a non-Buddhist book about dying entitled *FINAL GIFTS*, I learned a lot about death from people who have wit-

nessed it first-hand; yes, from hospice-nurses who with great compassion tended to the dying, and who related for our benefit their experiences with dying people. I learned a lot about compassion from that book, how, by just being present, by giving a gentle squeeze to a hand, by tenderly stroking a forehead, by saying a soothing and comforting word, one can bring relief to a dying person. I learned how a dying person can die peacefully—with understanding, love and comfort from his loved ones and friends. I marvel at the hospice nurses who, in their great compassion, sacrificed so much of their energy and time for the dying, something which I myself cannot do. It makes me more humble, more appreciative and respectful of others and the wonderful work they are doing.

"Reading a book entitled *HOW CAN I HELP?* by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, I learned some more about compassion, about how people from all walks of life serve society, each in their own wondrous ways. It was a very eye-opening and touching book. It made me feel humble and wanting. I know we are all here to serve. Why, even the Buddha asked the *Arahants* not to just sit back and relax after attaining their goal. No, He asked them to travel all over the place to spread and share the beautiful Dharma.

"Today, many people are serving in their own ways. Mother Theresa cares for the sick and destitute in Calcutta; the Dalai Lama preaches peace and non-violence throughout the world; Thich Nhat Hanh asks us to be mindful in our everyday life and shows us how in very simple and delightful ways. For example, we can be mindful when answering a telephone-call or when we are stalled at the traffic-lights. He says: Don't look at the red light as your enemy, as something to beat before it turns green, but look at it as a mindful-

ness-reminder, as if it is blinking at you and telling you: "Hey there! Be mindful!" And when we wake up every morning, he asks us to wake up with a smile on our face and a resolution to live every precious waking moment fully and to look at all beings with eyes of compassion.

"Yes, I always say we can learn from others, if only we don't close our minds and hearts altogether. When I read the Dalai Lama, I see that here is a very compassionate and wise person, and a very humble one, too. When he is questioned and doesn't know something, he says so openly, even to an audience in an auditorium; he's not afraid to admit it. He'll say: "This beats me; I don't know. You tell me". He can speak to psychiatrists and psychologists on their own level. He can ask incisive and profound questions which reveal his depth of understanding, concern, sincerity and compassion with regard to whatever is being discussed.

"True, I may not agree with the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh with regard to certain Vajrayana or Mahayana concepts, but I respect their rights to their views, and I can appreciate how through their concepts and school of thought, they too express wisdom and compassion in their daily lives and practice in ways which show that they live what they preach; they are not just talkers but doers. And more, they have won world recognition and acclaim for their work of propagating peace, non-violence, mindfulness, understanding and compassion. Their significant accomplishments and contributions as Buddhists to the world at large is something which we all, as brothers and sisters in a big Dhamma family, should be proud of.

"I can appreciate their skills in relating to and communicating with people, their genuine love and com-

passion for all beings. Why, they too are teaching people to be mindful, to uphold the five precepts, to have love and compassion for all beings. And, more importantly, it would appear that they live up to what they teach. I learned a lot from their ways of expression, especially Thich Nhat Hanh's skills in communicating the mindfulness practice in the context of everyday life, in the mundane activities of everyday routine.

"Yes, what I am trying to say here is that we should not close our minds totally; there are things we can learn from others. We too must realize and concede our own limitations—that we are not perfect and our understanding is still incomplete. As Theravadins, we should not think that we have a monopoly on wisdom and compassion, that we know best, that we are superior to others in both theory and practice. We should recognize, appreciate and respect the goodness in other traditions too; otherwise we might just be caught in another ego or conceit trip.

"If we nurture a humble attitude we stand to gain a lot, we open up, we are not so narrow or dogmatic, we can begin to learn from others, a whole new wide world will open up. By opening up, it doesn't mean that we throw away what we already have. No, on the contrary, we reinforce what we already have. How? We'll learn how to apply our own beliefs and understand more skillfully. We take what is helpful from others, their skillful ways of practicing which do not conflict with ours, and with those views or ideas which we cannot relate to or agree with, we just leave them alone, just let them be. After all, you cannot expect when you read a book to agree with everything in it, can you? There will always be some differences in opinions and interpretations. We can acknowledge the differences and adhere to our viewpoints, but we can now understand another's view-

point. And we can see where we share similarities, and we can learn how skillfully others apply the practice, especially in the areas where we share similar viewpoints and understanding. We can learn from them skillful ways. And we can appreciate and be grateful to them for teaching us those ways.

"If we will read only what we consider as 100% Theravadin books, then we will have closed our minds, and how can we then learn from others? Have others nothing to teach us? Do they not practice compassion and wisdom in their own ways, too? Can't we see the beauty and goodness in their practice and work, even though we may not agree with certain of the religious concepts they subscribe to? And do you know that even Theravadin writers have their differences in opinions and interpretations of Theravadin doctrine and meditation? Yes, as students of Dhamma, it is for us to read intelligently, to think for ourselves as the Buddha wanted us to, not just to accept or reject blindly. So, having understood somewhat our Theravadin Dhamma, we should be able to read others' viewpoints too, and decide for ourselves what we can accept and what we cannot. We need not throw everything out. We can see common principles that underlie different techniques and approaches.

"In this way, we can study more intelligently and maturely; we can have a more intelligent and mature approach. This way we have nothing to lose but everything to gain. I, for one, can tell you I have learned and gained a lot by listening carefully to what others have to say, by reading with an open mind, taking what I can relate to and leaving alone what I cannot. I trust and pray that I will continue to grow in humility, compassion and wisdom as I try, according to my ability, to apply as

faithfully as I can, the spirit of the Dhamma as taught by the All-Compassionate and Wise Buddha.

"May all beings be well and happy. May they keep open minds. May they know how to take what is good and leave what might not be so good. May there be tolerance, loving-kindness, compassion, appreciation and understanding. May all sincere and compassionate seekers and practitioners, by whatever path they may have chosen to travel, eventually reach their goal of wisdom and happiness, of Nibbana and the cessation of all suffering".

Visuddhacara. 27-Sept-1993.

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LIFTING THE VEIL

Outside, on a clear night, more than in the daytime when the stars are hidden from us, we can feel the infinity of space. Apart from the beauty of it—which is merely our own subjective judgment or opinion—what does it do to us? How do we feel? Appalled and intimidated by the inconceivable vastness that surrounds us on all sides, we have created religions and philosophies to console us in our tinyness and give meaning to our brief lives. Have these attempts to make sense of things withstood the test of time, however? That which might have satisfied us hundreds of years ago—does it continue to do so? Are we content with such explanations? Or are we sufficiently mature to say, "I don't know", and courageous enough to face the fact that this life might be all that there is for us? I am not saying it is, mind, but can we face the possibility that it might be?

For thousands of years—yearning for personal immortality—men have sought a meaning to life, but might it be that there is no meaning other than that which we ourselves give it? What is the meaning that you try to give life by your living? We must, I feel, constantly review our living, keeping in mind our aims and values. We worry about the meaning of life only when we are not sure what to do with our lives, when we are not actively participating in life as component parts. It is like when someone has been out of work for a long time, though he might have diligently sought for work: having been unable to find anything, he might eventually conclude that he is not employable, and lose his vital sense of self-worth.

He came to see me one afternoon, this tall Australian, and said his name was Tom, and that he felt confused and adrift since he lost his Catholic faith eight years before, and had found no replacement for it. He complained that, though he was quite successful in business, he had so far found no meaning in life, and had become aware of the existence of evil in the world which he felt should not be there.

Awakening from illusion can be, and often is, somewhat of a shock, and some people wish they had remained asleep, for illusion is warm and comforting, like the mother's womb, and frees us from a great deal of responsibility, which we have to face, along with the harsh facts of life, if we wake up. Is it that some of us wake up too soon—in the middle of a pleasant dream, as it were—and resent it? It would seem so.

Does your religion 'deliver the goods'? In order to answer that question, you must first under*stand* your religion and know what it claims, promises and holds out as an inducement, otherwise you will never be sure if you are living in a castle-in-the-clouds—a mental construction—or not.

If we begin to question what we've been taught for centuries, and lift a corner of the tapestry that has been draped before us, to peep behind, we might find that it conceals something quite different. Are you ready to look? Dare you? Be warned first, lest you see that which, in your complacency, you do not wish to see!

The 'truths' that religions put forward should not be viewed as things irrefutably demonstrated and established for all time, not to be questioned, but as things to be discovered and realized by the individual. To adopt and conform to a system or set of theories in its entirety, and regard it as true, is a mistake, for it *is* not,

and *cannot* be true for us unless and until we have verified it for ourselves by our own experience, and for this there can be no substitute. Just as no-one can eat for us and satisfy our hunger thereby, so no-one can vicariously discover truth for us; that is something that each person must do for himself. For example, how do we know that sugar is sweet if not by our own experience? It is not enough to be told so, to be assured that it is, or to believe it.

The following four paragraphs are extracted from Thich Nhat Hanh's highly-readable rendering of the story of the Buddha in his book, *OLD PATH, WHITE CLOUDS:*

"The Buddha once said that if a person is caught by belief in a doctrine, he loses all his freedom. If he becomes dogmatic, he believes his doctrine is the only truth and that all other doctrines are heresy. Disputes and conflicts all arise from narrow views. They can go on forever, wasting precious time and sometimes even leading to war. Attachment to beliefs and opinions is the greatest impediment to the spiritual path. Bound to narrow views, one becomes so entangled that it is no longer possible to let the door of truth open.

"To illustrate this, the Buddha told a story about a young widower who lived with his five-year-old son. He loved his son more than his own life. One day, he left his son at home while he went to work, but while he was away, a band of brigands robbed and burned the whole village and kidnapped his son. When the man came home from work, he found the charred corpse of a young child lying outside his burnt house; he took it to be the body of his son. Overcome by grief, he cremated what was left of the corpse. Because he loved his son

so much, he put the ashes in a bag which he carried with him wherever he went.

"Several months later, his son managed to escape from the brigands and make his way home. He arrived in the middle of the night and knocked at the door. At that moment, the father was hugging the bag of ashes and weeping. He refused to open the door even when the child called out that he was the man's son. He believed that his son was dead and that the child knocking at the door was some neighborhood child mocking his grief. Finally, his son had no choice but to wander off on his own. Thus, father and son lost each other forever.

"The Buddha concluded: If we are attached to some belief and hold it to be the absolute truth, we may one day find ourselves in a similar situation as the young widower. Thinking that we already possess the truth, we will be unable to open our minds to receive the truth, even if truth comes knocking at our door".

When people adopt and embrace a system in totality, there is often a tendency to try to make everything conform thereto, and if something does not, then *it*, rather than the system, might be regarded as being at fault. This is notoriously so with new converts or those 'born again'; it is common for them to come with a zeal that is usually lacking in those who have been born into and raised according to a particular religion, and who have therefore, for the most part, accepted it without question. Such zealots might object that our knowledge of life is insufficient to measure, judge, confirm or disprove 'revealed religion' by (and by 'revealed religion' is meant religion that is based upon so-called 'divine-revelation' or the 'Word of God'). But is it, really? Have not many of the claims of 'revealed religion' been de-

bunked by discoveries and proofs to the contrary? Just one outstanding example of this: the Christian Church had for centuries taught that our planet was the center of the Universe, around which everything else turned, and when the Italian scientist, Galileo, stated that this was not so, he was persecuted by the Church authorities, made to recant his 'heresy', and put under house-arrest until he died. It is only within the last few years, under Pope John-Paul II, that the Church has acknowledged its error and 'very kindly' exonerated Galileo, *350 years later!* It is the *Church* that needs *Galileo's* pardon, *not* the other way around!

There are numerous other extravagant and preposterous claims made by religion, but which are considered fundamental and indispensable, like virgin births, resurrection from the dead, infallibility of the Pope, etc., which cause religion to be held in contempt by many people, and its adherents regarded as simpletons. The lives of countless people are built on such fallacies.

We must not be too sweeping, however, and deny that there is beauty in religious forms and ceremonies—something impressive in the pageantry and solemnity, the melodious and inspiring hymns, the sonorous chants, the gorgeous priestly vestments and trappings, and the profuse symbolism. In every way, in every country and time, man has lavished his best on expressing his religious feelings, and the resultant art, architecture and music are truly magnificent testimonies of man's devotion to his beliefs. But, while marvelous edifices were built, and priests maintained in luxury, the masses starved in the shadows of the churches. The marvelous buildings remain, while both the priests who lived in luxury and those who starved in their shadows have long ago gone back to the elements, but what does it all mean? Is there substance behind all the

symbolism? Is it anything more than expression of ignorance or fear of what we do not understand, of attempts to propitiate, cajole or bribe the imagined gods, spirits, or personified forces of nature? If man had not feared such things, his creative energy would no doubt have been expressed in other forms, for we can see that religious structures are not the only beautiful structures in the world. Therefore, people who are not the least religious in the formal sense can enjoy and appreciate the art and beauty of churches, temples and mosques without subscribing to the beliefs that inspired them. A thing of beauty can be enjoyed by all, regardless of religious or political affiliations, or lack of such.

If, when the Industrial Revolution had begun in Europe, the West had had a religious philosophy to suit the times, instead of a set of supernatural concepts that science was in the process of tearing to shreds, things would probably have gone in quite a different direction. As it was, however, there was a reaction against religion in the West that continues until now (it is known as Materialism), and Karl Marx's famous dictum: "Religion is the opium of the masses", was eagerly embraced by many people and applied indiscriminately to religion as a whole, rather than to that aspect of it which laid stress on the 'afterlife' as a palliative for the ills and misfortunes of *this* life and was used by the rulers and priests to keep people 'in their places'. We can understand why Marx denounced the corruption, venality and amassing of wealth that went on under the cloak of religion, but was he against those aspects that stressed practical morality, charity, social involvement and justice? Or had these been relegated to the attic by people in power, in favor of supernatural and unverifiable things, and no longer formed a prominent part of religion? Thus, when religion was shunted aside and re-

jected in totality as anachronistic, 'the baby was thrown out with the bath-water', and the succeeding system became more monstrous and oppressive than that it replaced. And now that Communism has suddenly collapsed, great numbers of people, taken by surprise, and not knowing how to use their new-found freedom, turn back to their old superstitions and are spiritually little better-off than before the time of Communism. The 'morality' of the Communist system was imposed on people by the State, instead of something they chose through understanding. And the morality that people embrace when they turn back to religion is also an external morality, undertaken through fear of God, desire for Heaven, and so on. But how long will they obey an external authority without wanting to rebel?

Buddhism, too, is priest-ridden and afflicted with superstition. Using our imagination a little, it is not hard to understand how the Buddha's final exhortation to "Work out your own salvation with diligence", and not to look for a refuge outside of oneself, was not very appealing to the masses of the people—most of whom were illiterate and uneducated at that time—because the masses in any age tend to look outside of themselves for help and salvation. It was not long, therefore, when the Buddha was no longer around to discourage this inevitable tendency, before He came to be thought of as super-human or divine, rather than as someone who had developed His human potential and had shown others the way to do this, too. It then became more important—and easier, of course—to worship Him as a savior rather than to practice what He had taught. Today, many Buddhists are under the erroneous belief (but it is nothing new, having gone on for a long time), that explaining the Dharma is the prerogative of monks, and that only monks, in fact, are able to fully under-

stand Dharma, while 'ordinary householders' are not. Now, that is something that the Buddha never taught; He never made understanding of Dharma conditional on wearing a yellow robe and having a shaved head. While He *did* design the way of life of the monks to make it easier for them to follow the Way (free from the emotional entanglements of family life, the necessity of earning a living, and so on), He never said that anyone who is not a monk or nun could not understand the Dharma or become enlightened. Dharma is not narrow and restrictive like that, but is open to anyone with a heart and mind who will make an effort.

Imagine how this world would now be if Christians had tried to apply what Jesus was talking about and Buddhists had tried to experience what the Buddha tried to indicate, instead of merely believing. We can be sure that it would be quite different than it is now.

Once in a while it is good—and necessary—to step back a bit and detach ourselves from our search—to unyoke the oxen from the plough, as it were, and let them graze a little—for by so doing, our vision might be refreshed and renewed, and things seen in clearer perspective. It should not be considered a waste of time to do this but rather an investment, because if we stand long with our noses against a picture that covers an entire wall, we may forget the complete picture and see only the few details and colors before our eyes.

So, Tom, take a look around you, and you might realize that you are not the only one with troubles in the world, you might realize that this is the common condition and has always been like this. The reason you didn't see it before is not because it wasn't there, but because you were living under illusion, convinced that

'God' was in control of everything, and that therefore everything should be alright. And now that you have discovered that everything is *not* alright, what can you do about it? Nothing? No, there *is* something that you, and we, and everyone can do, if we realize that most of the suffering and all of the evil comes from people like us and that therefore it is unnecessary and can be avoided. And if we consider that religion is something that inspires us and helps us to become active participants in the world, and put something back into it, instead of as a means of getting more out of life than we have already got, it will take on quite a different meaning, and we will probably find things coming to us as a matter of course, without looking for them. If, however, we focus on ourselves in isolation—as many of us do—we will indeed feel despondent and lost, for the fact is we belong, like pieces of a jig-saw puzzle that have their places in the overall picture, and can only be understood in context—can only understand ourselves in context—not as separate, isolated units.

It is therefore, in the midst of the ecological mess that we have inherited and added to, that many of us are awakening to the fact that we are connected to and dependent upon other things—indeed, everything—and are not, as we hitherto thought in our ignorance and arrogance, independent and in control.

There is no need for belief in all this—people have been shackled and blinded by belief for aeons, and where has it got us?—but of seeing clearly how things are.

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CRABS FIRST

When, in 1984, I went from the Philippines to visit the Vietnamese Refugee Camps in Hong Kong and eventually got permission to do so, I was approached in one of the Camps by a government official—(my activities in the Camps until then had almost surely been monitored and approved, otherwise they would soon have been terminated)—and politely asked if I could/would visit the Camps on a regular basis, or, failing this, if I knew of any monks in Hong Kong who would do so. He said that there were numerous Christian missionaries visiting the Camps regularly, but so far no Buddhists.

Sadly, I had to tell him that not only was I unable to visit the Camps regularly myself—as I was only passing through Hong Kong—but I did not I know of any Hong Kong monks who would do. I didn't tell him—because I was ashamed to—that the previous year, while I was staying in the Bataan Refugee Camp in the Philippines, I had heard of the neglected plight of the Buddhist refugees in the Hong Kong Camps, and had written to a prominent Hong Kong monk about it. My letter to him is here reproduced:

"Philippines. 29-March-1983.

Dear Ven. ..... (name omitted here),

allow me to introduce myself: I am the monk in charge of Buddhist affairs in the Philippines Refugee Processing Center. I have been here for three years, during which time we have built two small temples for the Buddhist Refugees.

I have had the pleasure of meeting you on two occasions—once in Bogor, Indonesia, in 1978, and again, in Taipei in 1981—though probably you will not remember me.

My reason for writing to you now, Venerable, is to ask for your assistance: you are well-known for your compassion, and I am confident that you will help. The problem is this:

I have heard, from several refugees who arrived here from Hong Kong, that there are two Vietnamese Buddhist monks in two separate Camps there; they are very much in need of help since, apparently, no-one is allowed to go in to see them. Somehow, though, it seems that Christian missionaries *are* allowed inside the Camps, and are very active trying to convert the refugees. What a shame for our religion that no-one is allowed to go there to minister to the needs of our co-religionists! (Even in Thailand, where there are about 300,000 monks, the Buddhists just sit idly back and permit the endless streams of Christian missionaries to commit their outrage against Buddhist refugees—buying them, and otherwise influencing them to change their religion).

Ven., please try to help these two monks; they need Buddhist books, Buddha-pictures and other articles for distribution to their faithful followers; ceremonial instruments such as a wooden-fish, gong and bell, would be very much appreciated. I also understand that they are personally in need of clothes. More than anything else, though, they are in need of care and moral support from local Buddhists. [The names and addresses of the two monks were included].

Many Thanks and Sincere Regards—

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There was no reply to this, but *that*, I since learned, is not unusual. I have written to several monks about different things since then, and was not graced with replies. Although I spent many years in Asia, I am still a Westerner, and look at things from a largely Western point-of-view. Perhaps I'm a bit old-fashioned in this, but I consider it ill-mannered not to reply to letters of a personal nature. In Asia, however, the standard seems to be somewhat different.

Anyway, I was rather disappointed at the non-response of this Hong Kong monk—hence my writing about it now—as he had probably been a refugee himself years before, fleeing Communist oppression in China; there is also the possibility that he will become a refugee again in the near future, when Hong Kong reverts to China. He likes to print photos of himself in his Buddhist magazine, in the act of releasing fish, crabs, turtles, etc., as an act of compassion. Did I expect too much of him to think that his compassion might extend a bit further than to such dumb creatures and the pages of his magazine, to refugees like himself? Obviously, I did, because he did nothing about my request, and when I tried to see him the following year in Hong Kong, he made an excuse for not meeting me. So much for his compassion!

Now, the refugees were of a different nationality than this particular monk, but so what? Was he not a Buddhist? And does Buddhism not help us to see beyond such things as nationality? We had no control over where we were born; we might have been born elsewhere than in the place of our nativity, but we can be born in only one place per life. There is really no reason to be proud of our nationality, as it is not some-

thing we achieved by our own efforts; if it were a matter of choice—as some *reincarnationists* believe—who would choose to be born in countries which suffer regularly from famine, drought, pestilence and war? No, nationality is a consequence of being born where we were. However, if we understand something of Dharma, it enables us to look at this matter somewhat differently than most people do, and see it in clearer perspective. This idea is one of many that we become liberated from as we go deeper and our consciousness expands. Therefore I say that although I was born in England, and cannot deny this, I *do* deny that it makes me English. I don't *want* to be English, because I have found something bigger and better than that; if other people consider me English just because I was born in England, that is up to them. Of course, before anyone asks, I should say that I cannot dispense with the formalities of passports and so on, and still travel on a British passport, which identifies me as 'British"; I am also a citizen of Australia now, so have an Aussie passport, too. What I mean, however, is that I do not think of myself as 'English', and when, after the ceremony whereby I became an Australian citizen, someone said to me: "So, now you are an Australian", I objected and said: "No I'm not; I'm a citizen of Australia. I don't want to be English, and am not about to start thinking of myself as Australian". If asked where I am from, sometimes I answer: "When?" "No, *where* are you from?" they repeat. Again, I say, "*When* am I from *where*?—this morning, yesterday, last year? *When* do you mean? If you mean where I was born, I was born in England—or at least, I was told so, though I don't remember it myself (to be more accurate, I was born in my mother's bed, and that, as far as *I* was concerned at the time, could have been anywhere). Since then, however, I have been to and come from many places. But

where I am *really* from, I don't know, any more than you know where you came from!"

We learn to see beyond such artificial divisions to the basic fact of our humanity. Shall we therefore restrict our compassion to just one group of people? What kind of compassion would that be?

The Buddhist scriptures record the story of a certain monk who was so ill and incapacitated that he could do nothing for himself and was left lying in his own filth by the other monks, who wouldn't go near him because of the smell and dirt. When the Buddha heard of this, He called for water to be heated and cloths to be brought, and went to clean up the sick monk with His own hands. Of course, when He did so, many monks rushed to help, but the Buddha insisted on doing the onerous job Himself, as an example to all. He explained that, since none of them had mothers, wives or anyone else to take care of them, they should take care of each other when necessary, living as a community, in brotherly love. This incident led Him to utter His famous words: "He who serves the sick serves the Buddha".

Before I went to Thailand in 1972, in my naiveté I expected to find such a spirit of brotherhood in the monasteries there, but was soon disillusioned and found little or nothing of it. Instead, I found that Buddhism had become merely a thing of tradition, and no longer something to live by. Fortunately, I had already realized the difference between Buddhism as a religious organization, and the Buddha's Teachings, and so was able to continue; had I not realized this I would probably have abandoned everything in disgust and gone on my way long ago. Since then, therefore, I have been trying to share this realization with others, as I consider it of great importance. It has stood me in great

stead many times, like when I went to the Philippines in 1979, and stayed in the largest temple in Manila. From the moment I went there until I left five years later, some of the monks never even smiled or nodded to me, but looked through me as if I were invisible. True, the language-barrier prevented verbal communication, but even that was not insuperable. I might have understood their attitude if, after I had been there long enough for them to get to know me somewhat and possibly conclude that 'this fellow is no good', they had become cold towards me, but to treat a complete stranger like that didn't say much to me about their understanding of Dharma. And my opinion of them was not improved by their concentration on performing lucrative ceremonies for the dead, whereby they had their pious but gullible followers 'over a barrel'. Such monks become very rich, financially, by their activities, but one really wonders about their spiritual wealth!

I must, at the risk of becoming tedious, emphasize the vast difference between the Container and the Contents: Buddhism and the Teachings of the Buddha. If people are satisfied with Buddhism it is alright, of course; but for those who are not, and who want something more than mere name-and-form, it must be said that though Buddhism—the Container—is now old, tired and travel-stained, having come a long way and suffered many vicissitudes, the Contents—by which I mean the Teachings of the Buddha—are still quite intact. However, these, too, should not be looked upon as something magical in themselves, that will produce miraculous effects just by being believed in or recited, but should be understood and realized, for they are only 'a finger pointing at the moon', *not* the moon itself. So, there are three levels, as it were: (1) Buddhism, the organization, which deserves our respect for having

preserved the Contents thus far; (2) Buddha-Dharma, or the Teachings of the Buddha; and (3) Dharma itself, that which, upon realizing it, *Sakyamuni* became the Buddha, and which He thereafter tried to indicate to others. If we insist on clinging to the Container while understanding nothing of the Contents and making no attempt to do so, it is rather a waste, to say the least.

Compassion is one of the central elements of the Buddha's Way, but so many Buddhists obviously think of it as just something of the scriptures—a word or concept—and seldom apply it in their lives; we talk so much about it, and this shows that we haven't got the real thing. Some monks have spots burned on their heads when they undertake 'Bodhisattva precepts' (some lay-devotees have spots burned on their arms). Now, a Bodhisattva is someone who dedicates himself to developing and acquiring spiritual qualities which will better enable him to help others, and he does this by—among other things—devoting himself to the selfless service of others, and the term 'selfless service' here is most important, as such a person would not look for or expect recognition for doing what he does; he would not make a show, but would do good merely because he sees it as the only thing for him to do; at that stage, he has gone beyond choosing between good and evil, and does good with an undivided mind full of love and compassion. A person becomes a Bodhisattva not by mere talk about compassion and 'saving all beings', by having spots burned on his head or by taking 'Bodhisattva precepts', but by serving others and showing compassion towards them. Moreover, such a person would never think of himself as a Bodhisattva, and would not even know that he/she is one. It is only upon complete enlightenment and the attainment of Buddha-

hood when, looking back, that person sees that he has been a Bodhisattva before.

We must be very careful, therefore, when talking about compassion and Bodhisattvas, lest we injure ourselves spiritually and set ourselves back by casual and thoughtless words.

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KALI YUGA

As an explanation for the condition of the world right now, many Buddhists are prone to saying: “Oh well, it’s the *Kali Yuga* now; what else can you expect?”, and with this they comfort themselves and go back to sleep.

“*KALI YUGA*’ is a Sanskrit term meaning ‘Dark Age’, and signifies a period when Dharma, in the sense of righteousness, declines and all kinds of corruption flourish. Do we see such a state right now? It is a matter of opinion, of course, because while we cannot deny that corruption, terrorism and injustice are rampant now—maybe more than ever before, by reason of our vastly-increased capacity for more-or-less anything—at the same time, in some ways, the world is much better now than it was, and there are many people who live responsibly and caringly; if there were not such people, we would not have organizations like *Amnesty International*, *Greenpeace*, or the environmental movement—though these organizations exist and are necessary only because of the situation. The picture is not totally black, as some people appear to think. And who would return to ‘the good old days’, even supposing they could? They were not as good as we like to think they were; time has dulled the memories of the things from those days that were not good, and we tend to look back through rose-colored spectacles.

‘Kali Yuga’ is frequently translated as ‘The Dharma-Ending Age’, so it is necessary to point out the error of this, for the purpose of clarification. We must be careful what we say, lest in repeating things that we do not fully understand, we limit ourselves needlessly. I object to this translation because Dharma, in the sense of Reality—or how things are, which the Buddha perceived and

understood beneath the Bodhi-tree, rather than invented or formulated Himself—has no beginning and therefore will not end. What *will* come to an end and disappear, because it *did* have a beginning, is *Buddha-Dharma*, or the Teachings of the Buddha—His attempt to point out what He had found. As time goes by, Buddha-Dharma becomes more and more obscured by interpretation, translation, misunderstanding and superstition. Nor is this surprising, but quite in accordance with what the Buddha said about the universal law of Impermanence: everything changes. So, the corruption and the decline itself, being part of reality, is also Dharma, is it not? This does not mean, however, that we should accept things complacently, and do nothing to try to change things. The Buddha's Way is one of strenuous effort to overcome the negative things in our lives and to acquire and cultivate the good; it is not a way of saying: "Well, that's just how things are; I can't do anything to change it", for it is not true that we can do nothing to change things; in fact, it is just the opposite: that we cannot *not* change things, because all the time, moment by moment, merely by being alive, we are doing things—consciously or unconsciously—to change things, by adding drop after drop to the ocean of cause-and-effect that is our world. We *are* involved and responsible, whether we know it or not.

So, Kali Yuga is something that we are all responsible for, we are all creating it; it comes from our minds and appears in the world around us. And if we create it, we can, with a little thought and care, reverse the process—or at least, put the brakes on it somewhat.

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NO LOSS, NO GAIN

During what was supposed to be the final week of a trip in India, in January 1994, misfortune—or what might be considered such—overtook me, in the following way:

I had just revisited the cave-monasteries of Ajanta in Central India, and was on my way back to Madras in the south. To reach that city, however, meant a journey of 24 hours by train, and I was unwilling to travel without a reservation, as Indian trains are usually unpleasantly crowded. I bought a ticket at *Bhusawal* junction, but was unable to get a reservation for that evening's train and had to settle for one the next evening; this meant that I had to stay overnight in Bhusawal. Inquiring about accommodation, however, I was told I might get a place in the first-class air-conditioned retiring-rooms of the station itself, but when I went there, I was informed that there was only one place left, and that I would have to share a room with someone else. Well, since it was for only one night, and the rate not excessive, I agreed to do so. This was my first mistake; I should have sought out a room for myself. But if we knew, in advance, that we were about to make mistakes, we would not make any; it's always easy to be wise after the event.

I was taken up to the room, but the other occupant was out at the time. When he returned, we introduced ourselves, and he seemed to be well-educated, decent and friendly, and gave me one of his business-cards, saying that he had traveled overseas on business, and had even stayed in the famous *Raffles* Hotel in Singapore. He said he had to meet a business-associate the next morning, and would not be leaving until the afternoon. Other than small-talk, however, we did not have a lot to say to each other.

The next morning, I rose at my usual early time and went into the bathroom, careful to take with me the small bag containing my passport, camera and Indian currency; my travelers' checks were in a waist-pouch, and my other bags were kept locked beside my bed. Later, when I went out for breakfast, he must have observed that I took my small bag with me, and waited for an opportunity to get his hands on it. This came later, when I went into the bathroom to get some water and carelessly left my bag on my bed. No sooner had the bathroom door closed behind me on its spring-hinges than he jumped up, bolted the door from the outside, and made off with my bag and his own stuff, ripping out the phone before he went. By the time my shouts and bangings had brought someone running to let me out it was too late for pursuit, of course, and I could do nothing but go to the nearby police-station to make a report.

When I finally completed this rather-lengthy and slow process, I asked where I might change money, as all my Indian currency—enough, I had thought, to last for my few remaining days in India—had gone in my bag; I had not a single rupee left. One plain-clothes policeman offered to drive me to a bank on his scooter, which was very kind of him as it was not part of his duty. The bank, however, would not cash a travelers' check for me, and told me that I would have to go to the next town for this, but I didn't want to do so. The policeman then dropped me back at the railway-station, but came running after me and pressed 40 rupees into my hand, knowing that I had no Indian money; then, without waiting for me to get his name and address so that I might send him back the money, he went off.

I then went over to the reservations-office to report the loss of my ticket, and while there, I met someone who was willing to change some money for me, though at a very low rate. Then I was sent back to the ticket-

counter to get a replacement ticket, for which I had to pay a 25% fee. I also went back to the police-station, but the officer who had helped me had already gone home, so I left a sum of money for him with other officers, trusting them to pass it to him.

All this time, I had not been feeling very happy, of course, but I consoled myself with the thought that whatever *can* be lost *will* be lost, sometime or other. I also reminded myself that I was lucky, as it was my eighth trip in India and this was the first time anything like this had happened to me, while I had heard of people going there for the first time and losing everything except the clothes they were wearing! It could have been much worse, I reasoned; I could have lost everything, too, and even been physically wounded or killed, instead of losing just one small bag and its contents.

My train was five hours late, and I boarded it for the long trip to Madras, hoping to find an Australian Consulate where I might get a new passport. Arriving there, however, I discovered that there was none, and so had to return to Delhi. To save time, I reluctantly paid US$170 for a plane-ticket, and flew out the next day. In Delhi, I underwent the usual hassles of finding a taxi and a hotel-room, but finally triumphed, and the next morning, went to the Australian High Commission where I was told a new passport could not be issued that day, and that I should come back for it the following day. I was greatly relieved to hear this, plus being surprised at the friendliness of the staff there, as I fully expected to have to wait about a week for it.

The next day, when I went to get my new passport, I met someone from Tasmania who was there for exactly the same reason; *his* passport had been stolen in Madras airport, just as he was about to leave for Australia! With so much in common, therefore, we decided to

travel back to Madras by train together, so we obtained tickets for that evening's express, at about $10, with sleeper reservations for the 36 hours' trip south. Eventually, we arrived in Madras, tired and dirty from the journey, and found a hotel before setting about getting new Indian visas in our new passports, without which we would not have been allowed to leave the country.

Several days later, new visa in new passport, I boarded a flight back to Malaysia, and this was perhaps the happiest part of my trip in India; it was so good to get back to friendly faces in Malaysia!

This was not the end of the stolen-stuff saga however; there was a sequel to it: Three months later, while I was still in Malaysia, I received a letter from my sister in Adelaide saying that a big envelope—containing my old passport, address-book and some other papers—had arrived for me from the Aussie High Comm in Delhi. It had received these things from the police-station in Bhusawal; how the police-station had got them, I do not know, but I presume the thief had felt some remorse at stealing my stuff and somehow handed them in to the police, because I'm pretty sure that if he had just discarded them at the roadside or somewhere, they would never all have come back to me like that. I was very happy, therefore, because although the old passport had been cancelled, and I had back-up copies of most of the addresses in my address-book anyway, it indicated to me that the thief had learned something from it all; had he not stolen my stuff, perhaps he wouldn't have learned what I think he did. It made my loss appear quite differently, and I am, after all, in the business of trying to help others understand things like this, am I not? Can I expect any success without any outlay or expenditure? And this is also probably not the end of the matter; there might be further developments yet.

TO JUDGE OR NOT TO JUDGE

Not long before I wrote this, something happened in New South Wales that sent shock-waves through Australia: a six-year-old boy was so badly beaten by the de-facto husband of his mother that he sustained brain-damage and died shortly afterwards. When the mother and her lover realized what they had done, they concocted a story that the child had been set-upon by a gang of teenagers while on the way to the shops with his elder brother; they even coached the elder brother to corroborate this lie. But their deception was soon discovered and they were arrested and charged with murder. Not surprisingly, this crime provoked outrage in their community, and indeed all over the country.

We hear of old people being bashed and murdered for their meager savings, of old ladies being raped and killed; violent crimes against the very young and the very old—those least able to defend themselves—are increasing, and terror spreading.

The cry for the execution of people who commit such crimes grows louder day-by-day, and it is hard to imagine how the politicians will continue to ignore it much longer; any *polly* who makes it a point in his next election-campaign is almost sure to get lots of support.

With horrific crimes like this not infrequent now, and the judicial and law-enforcement systems obviously unable to cope, more and more people are calling for the reintroduction of the death-penalty. In this article, I would like to look at the controversial issue of capital-punishment.

It is only within this century that most Western countries have abolished the death-sentence, but it is still very much in force in the majority of other countries for

crimes such as murder, drug-smuggling, treason, espionage, kidnapping and—in some countries—adultery, rape and prostitution. In countries where law has been suspended by dictators, people lose their lives for much lesser crimes, or merely on the whim of those in power.

Capital-punishment has been meted out for as long as people have gathered together in organized groups, when it became clear that certain laws and standards were necessary for the sake of cohesion and social harmony; and as communities became more organized and occasion required it, more laws were enacted and rulers and judges appointed, with others being assigned the task of enforcing the laws, and of bringing to justice those who broke them.

Serial-killings, shoot-out massacres, armed-robbery, pack-rape, sex-crimes, child-abuse, torture, burglary, township-violence, aerial-bombardment, smart-bombs, nuclear, chemical and biological weapons: the list goes on and on, and paints a very grim picture of the human race. With our amazing science, technology and widespread higher-education, we are not, on the whole, as civilized as we like to think, for a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and the chain seems to be getting weaker and weaker and in imminent danger of snapping; the forces of law-and-order seem unable to contain or curb the rising tide of crime and violence, and many people fear that we are on the edge of another age of barbarism like that which engulfed Europe for almost a thousand years after the collapse of the Roman Empire in the 5th century, and which we appropriately refer to as *The Dark Ages*. Moreover, the forces of law-and-order have lost the respect and support of vast numbers of people and become tarnished by the exposé of their faults and excesses. The world's richest and most-powerful country, the USA, is no longer 'the

land of the free' but of the fearful, where it is unwise to go alone on the street at night—or even in the daytime in some cities! It is still 'the home of the brave', however, because people have to be brave to go on living there! The Western social system quite clearly seems to be disintegrating.

The death-penalty has been meted out in many ways over the ages, from burning, drowning, strangulation, hanging, poisoning, decapitation, to shooting, gassing, electrocution, lethal-injection, and so on. Man has lavished all his ingenuity on devising and using instruments of torture; the fiendishness of them staggers the imagination! Legalized mass-murder is called War, and the most bloody conflict ever—the Second World War—claimed 50 million lives, and still we have not learned!

For many centuries until this one, the moral and legal codes of most Western countries were based on the Judaeo-Christian Bible, and the savage "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" justice propounded therein. Thus, sentencing of criminals tended to be vengeful and punitive rather than educative and corrective. But even today we have not advanced so far along the path of reform; many prisons remain universities of crime, with drugs readily available, where inmates are brutalized and often become worse than they were before, and come out with a huge grudge against the society that took away their freedom and incarcerated them.

People who oppose capital-punishment call it barbaric and inhumane, and reduces those who support and advocate it to the level of those they condemn. Moreover, they say that innocent people are sometimes executed on wrongful charges and false evidence, and that fresh evidence exonerating the executed person and exposing the fatal mistake sometimes turns up later, but too late, of course, to bring the innocent per-

son back to life. Also, they maintain that life is sacred, and no-one can create it, so no-one has the right to take it away. But this is something that those who commit premeditated murder should consider before taking the lives of others, is it not?

If only we were taught in school from childhood and helped to understand that our life-span, at most, is brief, and to be honest and fearless about what we do, so that when and if confronted about our misdemeanors, we would not deny them and lie about them, even going so far as to swear on books regarded as sacred that we didn't do them. By denying the wrong we have done, we become not only miscreants but also liars and cowards; we are brave enough to do wrong, but not brave enough to admit it. This is cowardly, and certainly nothing to admire or be proud of.

Are we still morally and spiritually children that we can claim credit for our good actions but deny responsibility for our bad actions or blame them on temptation or mitigating circumstances? No-one is perfect and error-free, and to pretend to be is just another error. We are human, and so have the limitations of our unenlightened state, though it is as humans that we may achieve enlightenment, and should indeed strive to do so. It arises through understanding ourselves just as we are, rather than as we would like to be. It means accepting our faults and failings without trying to gloss over them and being honest about our mistakes. We all tell lies at times, for example, not necessarily to deliberately deceive, but simply because it is often hard not to, and anyone who claims that he never tells lies is probably lying right there and then!

We could be taught and shown that it is human to make mistakes and sometimes give way to our negative inclinations, but that it is better and more manly to admit

them, honestly and fearlessly and to accept the consequences thereof, than to cravenly deny that we did them, and seek to escape the results. “Yes, I did it”, we might say, “I regret it now, but I did it, and am ready to accept the consequences”. If we could bring ourselves or be brought to this degree of maturity, we would live much more responsibly and be more in control of ourselves. So, once again, we are led back to education: the education-system is to blame for most of our ills, personal as well as social. It aims only to make us academically successful and denies us a moral basis for living; thus, we may be highly qualified in a particular area, but dishonest, ruthless and unscrupulous in our dealings with others, and our education—or rather *mis*-education—is largely to blame for this, for providing us with knowledge, but not showing us that it is to be used for the benefit of the community we live in, instead of against it and for self-aggrandizement.

Must we be saints to be honest? Is honesty beyond the average person? In the Buddhist scriptures it is stated that a *Sotapanna* (“Stream-Enterer”)—that is, someone who has reached the first stage of enlightenment or sainthood—though still capable of committing bad or unwholesome actions, cannot and will not knowingly conceal them or pretend that he didn’t do them, but will honestly and fearlessly admit them—not in an exhibitionist manner, of course, but as things to be given up. And if a person of such attainment can still make errors and do things wrong, we may derive some consolation and feel that there is still hope for us.

But if we cannot live like this completely, it is possible, I am convinced, to create a mental climate educationally, wherein we would be less afraid and more willing to ‘own up’ to our misdeeds; we could be encouraged to be honest and not to be dishonest, instead of

the other way around; by being realistic about ourselves as humans, we would not impose impossible standards on ourselves and others, and this, far from increasing licentiousness, would, with proper guidance, inspire and give rise to a greater sense of responsibility and maturity. A lesson in this might be learned from the attitude shown in the Netherlands towards the use of 'soft' drugs like hashish and marijuana: while not actually legal, the authorities and general public turn a blind eye to it, and such drugs are openly sold and smoked in many coffee-houses. This takes it off the black-market and removes the morbid fascination of the 'forbidden-fruit' aspect of it, with the result that the Netherlands now has the smallest proportion of people who use hash and marijuana, and the lowest crime-rate attached thereto, of any country in the Western world. Compare this with Australia, where drug-use is on the increase, and possession of hash and 'mary-jane' is a punishable crime, and hidden plantations of 'grass' valued at millions are frequently discovered and destroyed. But how does such stuff—a weed—come to be so preposterously valued?? To me, it is neither expensive nor cheap, but simply worthless, as it is something I don't need or want. The value is totally artificially!

Years ago, when I worked in the Manila City Jail, I was appalled to see young children living there with their parents. I remember in particular one little boy of about four (he would now be about 22, if he is still alive), because some of the inmates had trained him to draw his forefinger across his throat—to signify throat-cutting—whenever someone asked him the question: "What are *you* in for?" What an education!

From my work in that jail, I learned a number of lessons, among them being not to think of people as bad just because they had done bad things. When I first

went there, I used to recoil inwardly when, upon asking people what they were in for, they said “Murder”. But upon reflection, I came to see that it is not difficult to kill someone—we are all capable of it; all we have to do is to become angry, ‘lose our minds’ for a moment, pick up something lying nearby, like a knife, bottle or axe, and hit someone with it, and that person could easily die. It would then be too late to say: “Oh, I’m sorry! Don’t die! I didn’t mean it! Please don’t die!”

I have strayed a bit, I know, from my discussion of capital punishment (maybe some people will say I’ve been beating around the bush), but I must please myself with my writing, too, otherwise I could never sit down to write, and my meanderings herein have been both interesting (to me) and enabled me to touch on various other points and weave them into a pattern. But let us get back to the main topic, and look at the arguments for the reintroduction of the death-penalty for certain serious and cold-blooded crimes.

Supporters of capital-punishment maintain that the law favors the criminals over their victims, who pay twice: once by suffering at the hands of the criminals, and again through their taxes being used to pay for the incarceration of the perpetrators of the crimes. They hold that the punishment should be made to fit the crime, and that if the punishment for certain illegal activities is the death-sentence, and if people insist on committing crimes in full awareness of what they are doing and the risks involved (drug-smuggling, for example, which is done for the sake of potentially-huge profits but which ruins the lives of people who become addicted), they cannot reasonably complain if they are caught and punished. They know the law; they know the risks. They would rejoice if they succeeded in their venture; they shouldn’t protest if they fail and are

caught, but should accept it stoically and honestly, for it is of their own making, and no-one else's. And whoever believed the naïve tale told by the two young British girls who were caught attempting to smuggle heroin out of Thailand a few years ago? They claimed that they had met someone in a Bangkok nightclub—a complete stranger!—who had asked them to carry something out of Thailand for him. Now, everyone who visits countries like Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore—and most other countries nowadays—is warned not to carry anything for anyone that they are not absolutely sure of, and upon leaving the country, at the airport, people are questioned about this, and whether or not they have packed their own bags. A large quantity of heroin—more than 20 kgs, if my memory serves me correctly—was found in the girls' baggage at the airport, concealed in containers of talcum-powder, of all things. They were found guilty of smuggling, and given sentences of 24 and 18 years in the notorious 'Bangkok Hilton' jail, and were lucky, some think, not to be given the death-sentence. But, because of behind-the-scenes intergovernmental negotiations, they were recently freed on an amnesty of the King of Thailand, and the press-people turned out in swarms to meet them upon their return to London. From being treated as criminals, they had become celebrities, and there was talk of half-a-million pounds sterling or more for their story! Who says that crime doesn't pay?

Freedom is a wonderful thing that we can have too much of and which many people are obviously not ready for. Without laws to live by, and without enforcement of those laws, society would quickly sink into a state of anarchy and chaos. We are already in a mess and getting worse, and do not have the luxury of time needed to educate people and get them to understand

the value of life. If the death-penalty is reintroduced, and if it is proved beyond reasonable doubt that people are guilty of crimes carrying the death-sentence—and in many cases it *is* clear—the sentence should be carried out forthwith, rather than prolonging the suffering of the condemned person by keeping him on death-row for years. If the authorities waver and lose their nerve and show unwillingness to carry through the laws they have enacted, they had better not make them in the first place, or they will not be taken seriously.

And what about compassion?, some people will ask. Compassion is something that the perpetrators of crime should think about before victimizing others, and not after they have been caught and found guilty.

Jesus is reported to have said: “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone”, meaning that no-one is innocent and in a position to blame others. Thinking to have this applied to himself during his trial, a man in America, upon being convicted for terrorizing his former employer, told the judge that at 54 he was too old to be sent to jail, and asked for a public stoning instead. His one condition was that only those without sin should be allowed to throw the stones. The judge sentenced him to 5 years in jail. (Culled from *THE WORLD ALMANAC AND BOOK OF FACTS*).

To take a rather philosophical view of it all: We are *all* under sentence of death, for life is a terminal disease, and as Bob Dylan sang: “He not busy being born is busy dying”. To ponder on this might help us understand the importance of living responsibly. I said above that we are all capable of killing, and of many other things, but most of us restrain ourselves, and it is herein that our morality lies: by *not* doing things that we may sometimes feel inclined to do, or by doing other things that we might not like to do. It is important to know why

we restrain ourselves so. Is it because we fear retribution or being found out? Is it because we hope for some reward for not doing what we might otherwise do? Is it because we want recognition and praise from others? Or is it because we look on others as ourselves and identify with them, so that we would try not to inflict upon them what we ourselves do not like? Since most of us have not reached the stage of motiveless morality yet, it is useful to examine our motives for our doings and not-doings.

And as for judging others, how can we *not* do that? We all have standards for many things, and measure people and things by these standards. To say that someone or something is 'good', 'bad', 'beautiful', 'ugly', 'nice', 'nasty', 'greedy', 'fat', 'thin', 'big', 'small', 'short', 'tall', 'wise', 'ignorant', 'intelligent', 'stupid', etc., is to pass a judgment or express an opinion. Comparisons like 'cheap', 'expensive', 'shoddy', 'good value', 'economical', etc.—which we make when we go shopping—are also judgments, as are opinions of the weather: "Nice day, isn't it?", "Terrible weather today", etc. And when we say that someone is polite or ill-mannered what is it but a judgment? Concepts of good and bad, justice, honesty, fair-play, brutality, callousness, indifference, generosity, stinginess, and so on, are all judgments, are they not? However can we live without judging and assessing? While cooking we must judge; while driving we must judge; while working we must judge and discriminate. Judgment forms a vital part of our lives, and we would not be able to function without it. So, are not people talking nonsense when they say we shouldn't judge? Perhaps they are unclear about the difference between judging and prejudice, which is unwise judgment, or judgment based upon insufficient evidence or without being in full possession of the facts.

Judgment based upon the egoistic feeling of superiority, of feeling better than others, is also wrong.

Footnote: Some years ago, I wrote the following letter to a newspaper in Malaysia; it was published, and received some favorable comments:

"In medieval Europe, criminals who were caught were placed in the *stocks* in the marketplace in full view of the public. A sign stating their offence would be displayed so that people would know what they had done and treat them accordingly, with abuse, scorn, ridicule—and often with over-ripe fruit and rotten eggs.

"Such treatment surely had a great psychological effect on the offenders—*and* on the bystanders—for who enjoys being publicly humiliated and embarrassed? Many offenders, one feels, would prefer a thrashing with a cane than to be put on display in public.

"Stocks can be easily and cheaply erected, with a roof to protect the offender from the sun and rain. An officer of the law could be stationed nearby to prevent undue violence on the part of the public to the offender, who would be made to stand or sit there and review the folly of his misdeeds and perhaps resolve not to repeat his mistakes.

"Is this kind of psychological deterrent against crime not worth a try? It might have a great effect on some would-be law-breakers (and we are *all* potential law-breakers in the sense that we have the capacity, and sometimes the inclination, to break the law). With crime on the increase, all preventative measures should be considered".

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COMPETITION

A young woman had come to inquire about meditation, thinking it might help her overcome the nervousness she felt when she participated in karate tournaments. Not surprisingly, a little inquiry revealed that her motive for entering the tournaments was to win, and while in other areas of her life she was confident and relaxed, she felt nervous and tense only when she was about to participate in a tournament. A little research on her part, a little objective analysis, would probably have shown that hope of winning is invariably accompanied by fear of losing, as hope and fear are obverse and reverse sides of the same coin. Is it possible to hope for something without fear of not getting it?

It is not rare for people to think of meditation as something like a magic wand—something that will produce miraculous and immediate results and solve all problems. Thus, disappointment cannot be avoided, and meditation undertaken with such expectations would soon be dropped in favor of another 'quick fix', and any good results that might have come about through persisting in it for a while would be forfeited. People turn to such expected means of salvation when they have been unable—or perhaps have not even tried—to work things out for themselves, or have not understood their motives for doing things.

Some years ago, in Norway, I attended a Vietnamese Cultural Festival and found it both entertaining and interesting, reminding me that what had been Vietnam's loss had been the gain of the West (although, to be fair, it must also be said that the West lost by gaining from Vietnam and other countries people that those countries gained by losing, and so the West now has elements that it could well have done without, having plenty of its own already; Pauline Hanson—Australia's maverick

politician, who has stirred up a bit of a hornets' nest there recently—*does* have a point; *some* Asian immigrants have demonstrated their gratitude for being taken in by behaving in antisocial ways, thus gaining a bad reputation for all Asians in the eyes of people who don't need much of an excuse to express their racial prejudice). This show included a traditional-dress competition, and a succession of pretty girls paraded across the stage displaying their graceful dresses, all of which were very nice, of course. Each girl had probably entered the competition in the hope of winning first-prize, but in this they were courting disappointment and inviting suffering, for only one person can win first-prize, and the others will lose or take lower places, and while everyone likes to win, no-one enjoys losing.

Now, the winner would be happy for a while, until, in a future competition, perhaps, the first-prize would be given to someone else. And loss is a form of suffering, is it not? But where does this suffering come from? Certainly, there is sometimes bias and favoritism on the part of judges, especially when they make personal choices, unsupported by verifiable facts. In the case of the traditional-dress competition—and in countless other cases—the losers' suffering would come from nowhere but themselves, from the desire of winning and the fear of losing.

Even before the judges' decision, the competitors would be anxious about the results, each secretly eyeing the others in an attempt to calculate her own chances. Oh yes, it's all very exciting, of course, and there *is* a chance of winning, but the chances of losing, and of feeling bad, are much greater. And the happiness of the winner, too, would not be unalloyed happiness, as she would probably detect some inner resentment on the part of the some of the losers. Moreover, her happiness would not last very long and would soon

be just a fading memory. Competition is therefore destructive and harmful as it encourages egoism, pride, vanity, bitterness, resentment, hate and fear. In the above-mentioned case, it would have been much better had it been just a display instead of a competition, with each girl happy to model her own beautiful dress and to receive the applause of the audience, without any thought of winning or losing; the audience was certainly happy to see this parade of pretty girls in lovely dresses; could it not have been enough for those girls to have pleased people that way, without inviting disappointment?

This crazy game is avidly played by so-called 'religious' people, too, with much pettiness and scheming for power and position. They are so concerned about being accorded their correct ranks and titles, and are always looking for ways to extend their influence—all of which means egoism, of course. Is *that* the purpose of religion? J.C. spoke about such people—how they expect the prominent seats at meetings, feasts or public gatherings—and he advised people to always take lower seats, in case the higher seats have been reserved for others; if the host wishes someone to sit in a higher seat, it is not difficult to elevate him, but if he wishes him to sit elsewhere, it causes embarrassment for everyone.

Although competition goes on among the followers of every religion—for an extreme example of this, take the intrigue, scheming, bribery and even murder that has accompanied the election of popes in the past—I will not, at this time, concern myself with other religions, but just with Buddhism, as we must be capable of and willing to turn the spotlight of criticism on our own religion first, with the aim of uncovering, understanding, and correcting its weaknesses and faults. And if and when we *do* criticize other religions, it should be done con-

structively and always for the purpose of discovering the Truth, remembering that Truth can be approached only by a process of negation—*not this, not that*—until, having eliminated everything that is *not* Truth, we may be left with what *is* Truth. It is like the process of panning for gold in a stream or river: scooping with a basin in the river-bed, one first removes the larger stones, leaves and twigs from the basin, then the smaller stones, then the sand and grit; and then, when everything that is not gold has been removed, if one is lucky, one might find some particles of gold there: a process—a *positive* process—of negation.

It is a pity that many Buddhists will listen to an exposition of Dharma only from monks or nuns, even if the experience and understanding of Dharma of non-clergy surpasses that of many—or even most—monks and nuns; it means they are attached to persons and external appearances, not understanding that Truth is not a person and should not be personified. It is said that enlightened people will hide their attainments from others rather than display them (the ancient Greeks believed that the gods sometimes disguised themselves as beggars in order to test people, causing them to be careful in their treatment of beggars. And I know personally of a monk who wished to acquire a piece of land next to his temple, and the owner of this land—an old and pious Buddhist lady—intended to donate the land to the temple, rather than sell it. Her son, however, was not so pious or eager to 'make merit', so one day, dressed in old and dirty clothes, he went to the temple to ask for something to eat. The chief monk there, not realizing who he was and thinking him a beggar, told him that, because it was after noon, there was no food left, as the monks there did not eat after midday. Not to be put off, however, and seeing some biscuit-tins through the open door, the man then asked for some

biscuits. “We haven’t any”, said the monk. “Well, then, could you give me a little money?”, persisted the man. Again, the monk said he didn’t have any, and the man went away. A few minutes later, though, to the monk’s surprise, he drove into the temple-compound in his Mercedes, still wearing his old clothes! The monk did not get the land he desired). We should beware of judging by external appearances. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas can be seen standing or sitting on gigantic lotus-flowers, with haloes around their heads, only in pictures, images or movies, and would not appear so in real life!

It is rare for monks to compliment each other for a Dharma-talk, so rare, in fact, that when it happens it is remarkable. Indeed, many monks never give talks at all, but focus on performing ceremonies with lots of noise and smoke, bamboozling people into thinking that such ceremonies are essential, while explaining the Dharma is of secondary importance, or even less. I was recently told of a Chinese lady whose husband had been killed in a car-crash in Australia contacting a monk to ask if he could perform a ceremony at the site of her husband’s death to ‘free’ his spirit from that place and enable it to ‘go on its way’. She was surprised and not a little disappointed when the monk told her that he could and would do it—for A$10,000! I was then asked if *I* could perform such a ceremony, and I replied that I can also perform ceremonies for the dead, but cannot guarantee any results, and I don’t think anyone else can, either. And moreover, from the way that I have seen ceremonies performed in Asia, I am extremely doubtful about their efficacy, and have explained elsewhere that I think the nearest and dearest to the deceased are the people best qualified to help him/her; there is no need to spend a lot of money, nor even a single cent! These ceremonies are a great rip-off, an exploitation of people’s grief

and bereavement, the only results being a lightening of their pockets and a feeling that Buddhism is becoming more and more materialistic. The real meaning of the ceremonies has been forgotten; they should be performed in the hope that, if the spirit or consciousness of the deceased person is still near and is aware of what we are doing, it might take heart from our thoughts of goodwill and encouragement and proceed with its onward journey. More than that, however, because—according to what the Buddha said about it—each person has his or her own karma, which is non-transferable, there is nothing that the living can do for the dead.

It is saddening to see the pious lay-people being ripped-off for these ceremonies. I would like to see people demand and require an explanation from the monks and nuns about how these ceremonies are supposed to work—an explanation in line with the Teachings of the Buddha. If they were required to explain the rationale behind these ceremonies, I doubt it would be very convincing and their lucrative businesses would probably soon dry up. It is in their own interests, therefore, to keep the people ignorant about Dharma. Sadder still than this is the fact that many Buddhists seem to *prefer* to remain ignorant, and never want to strive for understanding. And many of them are obviously of the opinion that the more expensive something is—like a ceremony—the more effective it must be; following that conviction, if something is free or doesn't cost much, it can't be much good. It is so much easier to cheat and exploit people than it is to enlighten them that one feels tempted to say, in exasperation, that people get what they deserve!

It is only a matter of time, I feel, before such money-making 'Buddhist' ceremonies are attacked by certain *non*-Buddhists who mean us harm. Personally, how-

ever, I think this might not be a bad thing and will welcome it; it might be just what we need to wake us up and force us to evaluate these ceremonies. Come, then, inimical people, and help us!

If I am able to do something to help someone—by ceremony or by any other way—I will try to do it, happily, and without a fee. If people wish to offer me something, as is the custom, I will accept it, gratefully. People understand that monks, like everyone else, have certain needs, and are not supported by the government; and although people occasionally invite monks to tell them if they need anything, and will supply it if it is within their capacity to do so, there is seldom any need to ask, as people are sufficiently generous and supportive without.

Sadly, as in other religions, there are people who use Buddhism as a means of business and who have no real interest in propagating Dharma. This indicates that they have had no direct and personal experience of Dharma and do not value it. I have come across this very often.

In one way, however, I can understand this 'fee-setting', because, as I have said above, many people do not value anything that is freely given and without charge, whereas they think that the more a thing costs, the more valuable and efficacious it must be. Thus they easily fall into traps set for them. It is rather like what has happened with many doctors in Australia: people go to them for medical-certificates in order to get time off work or draw sickness-benefit, whether they are genuinely sick or not. If the doctor refuses to give them such a note they will go to another doctor who will, and the doctor who conscientiously refuses will lose patients and revenue, while doctors who write out notes willy-nilly, without even a cursory examination, will get plenty of patients, but for entirely the wrong reasons. The

whole medical-system suffers as a result, and eventually the patients, too, for when someone is really in need of treatment, and goes to a doctor who has grown used to just scrawling notes, they would probably not get the treatment they need (I have met such 'doctors' and was not favorably impressed; one Melbourne 'doctor' (I am tempted to call them quacks) that I went to see about pains in my chest made an appointment for me to see a heart-specialist some weeks later, without as much as putting his stethoscope on me! Had I really been suffering from heart problems, I might not have lived long enough to see the specialist!) In this way, both doctors and patients become the victims of each other. It is much the same when monks pander to the superstitions of the people in order to gain from them, instead of instructing them in Dharma and helping them understand and overcome their superstitions.

It has been my good fortune to meet monks who are learned, wise and humble at the same time, but they have been very few in number. On the other end of the scale, I have met monks who are learned and well-read but who are lacking in humility; they are always more numerous, of course, and one might be forgiven for thinking that the Dharma has the effect of making people proud rather than humble, when actually, it is the other way around. As an example of the former, I would like to tell here of my meeting with the Karmapa Lama in the Philippines in 1980, before he passed away: I felt so good to be in his presence; he spoke no English, and I no Tibetan, but he emanated warmth, friendliness and humility, and had a special childlike, simple, uncomplicated aura about him; there was a communication beyond words with him.

There is no need to give examples of the latter kind as they are frequently encountered, and anyone who makes a career out of self-centeredly talking about him-

self is more to be pitied for not having found anything of greater value when he had the opportunity to do so.

Some monks refer to themselves as 'priests' or allow others to refer to them as such, but the term 'priest' is something alien to Buddhism, which is a non-theistic religion, and therefore needs no-one to mediate between people and God; and, since the Buddha never claimed to be divine and never told or asked people to pray to Him, there is no question about anyone interceding with Him on anyone's behalf. Unfortunately, over the ages, as people have forgotten or have never understood the position of the Buddha as a teacher or Way-pointer, many monks have assumed the role of priest, as the brahmins of India, but it is something that I flatly refuse to be called; *I am not a priest!*

Someone once told me that one of the monks of the temple in Manila where I spent five years had complained of me that "He never prays to the Buddha!"—meaning that I didn't participate in their ceremonies for the dead, I suppose. My response to this was: "Too right I don't, and if he does that's *his* delusion, as the Buddha was a man, not a god, and never called anyone to pray to Him; in fact, He discouraged it, and exhorted people to strive for their own enlightenment, as He couldn't do it for them".

Although I will readily admit to not liking certain people (nobody likes everyone, and if we were honest about our preferences; they would be less likely to cause trouble), I am not the kind of person who deliberately overlooks someone's good points just because there are things about him that I may not like. A person does not have to be a saint before I will acknowledge his good points; neither will it prevent me from learning something useful from him if I can. I am not looking for someone to save me or forgive my sins, but if I learn

something from someone that might be useful to me in my own life, I feel grateful to the person from whom I learned it or who helped me to understand. And my reason for writing the above is to urge people to see beyond personality and not to make it the basis for their learning; what is important is *what* we learn, not *who* we learn it from. I recall the Dalai Lama saying that Mao Tse Dung was one of his best teachers, in that he helped him—the Dalai Lama—to develop patience. That's it! Anyone and everyone may be our teacher, if we know how to learn!

A very old and justly-famous monk from Sri Lanka used to visit South Vietnam before the tragic fall of that country to Communism in 1975, in order to teach the Dharma there. He had been a monk since his teens and had written numerous good and clear books on Buddhism, through which many people both in the East and the West had come to know the Buddha's Way. I met him in Singapore in 1973, on his way back to Sri Lanka from Vietnam, and he gave me one of his books in which he signed his name, simply: 'Narada' —no 'Venerable' or 'Dr.' In front, and no 'Ph.D.' or other 'Christmas-tree decorations' after. He had something more important than such words or symbols, I feel. Years later, someone told me that when he first went to Vietnam, he was asked about his rank by some distinction-and-protocol-loving person, and whether they should address him as Reverend (Dai Duc), Venerable (Thuong Toa), or *Most* Venerable (Hoa Thuong). Well, although he was a very senior monk and had been ordained over forty years at that time, he answered: "Reverend will do". And so, to this day, many Vietnamese Buddhists continue to refer to him as 'Dai Duc Narada'. But does it really matter, to one who is in search of the Nameless, what he is called? Is it not written in a Chinese scripture: "The name that can be named is not

the Eternal Name"? Why are we so attached to such superficial things? Is it perhaps because, not having attained anything of real value, and hating to be empty-handed after so many years, we are prepared to grasp onto anything as a substitute? Back in 1981, I attended an International Sangha Conference in Taiwan, along with monks from all over the world. Each monk was introduced as "Ven. So-and-so", regardless of how long he had been a monk. It was conspicuous, therefore, when a certain Vietnamese monk, arriving after the conference had started, had himself introduced as "The *Most* Venerable So-and-so"! Names and titles are given or awarded us by others, *not* by ourselves, and titles of respect and politeness should be treated cautiously—like a landmine about to be defused—as they are dangerous and might easily lead us astray.

In the *Dhammapada*, verse 73, it is written: "The fool will desire undue reputation, precedence among monks, authority in the monasteries, honor among families". Compare this with the story of *Upali*, the barber of King *Suddhodana*: After hearing the Buddha preach the Dharma, some young noblemen wished to become monks, so set off to the place where He was staying, accompanied by Upali, who also wished to ordain. When they got there, the young men requested the Buddha to ordain Upali first so that he would be senior to them in monkhood. They had been of high rank before and Upali of low, but the Dharma had so affected them that they stepped back and allowed—no, *requested*—Upali to be given the senior place. This is just one instance of many in the Buddhist scriptures where humility is extolled. And surely, this is one way to test our progress—or lack of it—in the Dharma: are we becoming more or less proud and egoistic? If more, something is wrong. On the other hand, we must take care that we don't become proud of being humble, which is

really a contradiction in terms, as such 'humility' is only inverted pride.

I would also like to mention something about King Suddhodana, the Buddha's father. After the Buddha's Enlightenment, the King sent messengers to request Him to visit His hometown, and the Buddha agreed to do so, out of gratitude and love for His father. News of the Buddha's homecoming preceded Him, and the King and all the people were in a state of great expectancy and excitement. When word came that the Buddha would arrive the next day, large crowds, including the royal family, were at the main gate of the town to welcome Him, from early in the morning. There was a guard of honor, dancers, musicians, elephants and horses. But the Buddha approached by the back way instead of using the main highway, along a rough road that led through the slums and hovels of the low-caste and poor people, going from house to house with His alms-bowl, receiving gifts of food from those who had some to offer. When news of His arrival in this manner reached the King, he was very angry and quickly rode to the place where his son, the Buddha, had entered the town, surrounded now and followed by great crowds of people. Charging through the crowd, who had barely time to scatter, with cries of "Bow down—the King!", he shouted: "Is it thus that my son returns to his city, begging from base-borns?! Why do you humiliate me in this way, Siddhartha?!" The Buddha raised His eyes to the King on his horse and answered: "It is the custom of my race, O King". "What are you saying?" gasped the King. "Our ancestors have been kings for many generations, and never have any of them done anything like this!" "When I spoke of my race", replied the Buddha, "I was not speaking of my kingly ancestors, but of my ancestors the previous Buddhas. There have been many

Buddhas before me, and what I do now they all did. It is no shame".

So sweet was the Buddha's voice and so tender was the way He looked at His father that the King's anger melted away. He dismounted from his horse and knelt at his son's feet, saying: "Welcome home, dear son". Then, taking the Buddha's alms-bowl, he led the way into the palace, where the Buddha and His monks were served and fed, after which, He preached the Dharma to His father, His wife *Yasodhara*, and His son, *Rahula*, whereupon, hearing and understanding, they took refuge in the Three Jewels.

The Buddha had gone beyond all desire for power and fame; He was not in competition with others for disciples and never called anyone to believe Him or follow Him. His purpose was to help those who were ready to be helped and who could be helped to find Enlightenment. Though He had His share of enemies, He was no-one's enemy, but everyone's friend.

A person may be a Buddhist without calling himself a Buddhist since Buddhism teaches that everyone—and not just Buddhists—has Buddha-nature. When a person acts from his Buddha-nature—with wisdom, compassion and love—he is a Buddhist, even if he knows nothing at all about Buddhism. This accords with what the Buddha said about caste: that a person becomes high-caste or low not by birth into a certain family but by his actions. Buddhism—or the essence of Buddhism rather than the form—is so expansive that nothing and no-one is outside its range; it is truly a Universal Way. Therefore, each and every one of us has a place, and we need to realize that place. There is no need for competition here or to fear that we might be left out or forgotten. The Dharma is limitless; unlike money or land, it can be used and shared without it

ever becoming less; in fact, the more it is used and shared, the more there is!

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THANKS

It has long been in my mind to write a book about people to whom I feel grateful for the help they gave me along my way, but never made a start on it as I felt that if I began, I would never finish because there were just so many, and as I go on, I receive more help, like we all do.

Now, however, I've decided to delay no more but to make a start, even if it's not a whole book on the subject, and even if I limit myself to mentioning just a few people who helped and encouraged me, as I feel that, in our day and age, when so much is taken for granted, and we have become jaded and mediocre, it is good to be reminded, now and then, of how much we depend upon others. I hope no-one will be upset for not receiving a mention, and that everyone will understand and rejoice with me in expressing my gratitude in these pages. I also wish to say that if, in my humble and limited capacity, I am able to pass on something useful to someone—and without boasting, I *know* that this sometimes happens—it is only because of the help and support I have received from others. No-one acts alone, lives alone or dies alone, but only in concert with others.

We are as we are not just because of our own efforts (which, if analyzed carefully, contributed not as much as we think to the overall effect), but mainly because of the influence of countless others, living and dead, met and unmet, known and unknown. Just think of how much our lives depend upon the language, for example—together with countless other things of local and world-wide culture—that we were born into; as we think, so we speak and act, and so we become; our lives are greatly conditioned by words, by language, and moreso if we are not aware of it.

We are all flowers on the human tree, and it would not be incorrect to say that the whole of human history and prehistory is present in all of us, with the influence of active, inventive, thinking individuals more present in us than that of the passive and thoughtless masses which populate the Earth in any age. However, it should not be forgotten that the high rests upon the low—we can have the foundations of a building without the roof, but we cannot have the roof without the foundations or the walls—and without the latter kind of people, the former could not exist. The influence of the active but negative people is also present in us, as positive and negative always go together, inseparably, and as we all know, it is easier to learn and acquire something negative than something positive, just as it is easier to fall down a tree than it is to climb one.

If we've never thought of ourselves like this it is not too late to do so, and to consider this body-mind that we have somehow evolved into. In taking stock of it and understanding more of it than we did before, we will be better able to control and direct our lives and have more choice in the way we want to live, instead of always being under the control of our feelings or outside influences. Right now, we cannot talk of 'free will' as our will is not free but heavily conditioned. If it can ever be totally free, completely *our own*, I don't know and dare not say, but it can, I am sure, be more ours than it is now.

Now, I do not claim to know myself very well, as there are many things that I am only dimly aware of and surely many things that I know nothing of at all; in spite of this, however, I feel that I know myself better than anyone else does, especially as I do not live long in one place but move around a lot. I am aware that I have a number of faults and imperfections (who doesn't?) and they do not go away merely because I'm aware of them and don't want them. But, on the other hand, because I

do not accept the basic Christian idea that man's nature is totally corrupt and can only be redeemed by 'God's grace', I am convinced that there is goodness in everyone, including myself. I have some positive qualities (if I were to be falsely modest and deny that I have any, it would be a contradiction of what I have said above about positive and negative always going together inseparably). And because I know myself better than anyone else does, I advise people not to look too closely at me or place importance on my personality, but to divorce this from what I say and try to find something in my words that might be useful to them long after I've gone and been forgotten. In spite of this exhortation, however, I know that some people will insist on picking up my 'droppings', as it were, instead of the occasional pearl that might be found in my words. (This applies not just to myself but to others, too). What can I do about this? If that is what they prefer, in spite of my warnings, well, let them have it!

Where my spiritual search began, I cannot say, for if we look for the beginning of anything, it leads us back and back, from one thing to another, and outwards and outwards, and no sooner do we think we have found it than we find something else before that, and something before *that*, on and on, until finally, we realize that there is no beginning to anything, but just links in a chain—or knots in a net, to use a better analogy—that stretches out to infinity. And we may suppose, from such observations, that just as a beginning to anything cannot be discovered, so also, a final end to anything cannot be conceived of. We are told now that nothing can be totally destroyed but only transformed into something else. We might consider ourselves in this light: where we came from prior to our birth we do not know, and must admit this, just as we don't know what will happen to us after we die. This, however, we *do* know: we were

born. We also know that we did not remain babies, but grew and developed from that state to the state we are now in. We can see, too, that we will not remain like this but will grow older (even if we don't become old; not everyone becomes old), and sooner or later we will die. This is certain. After that, although we can see that the body is transformed, either quickly, through cremation, to ash, heat and smoke, or slowly, by decaying in the ground and becoming something else, we cannot say for sure. And what happens to the mind after death? We may surmise that such a potent thing—and who would deny that it is this?—can't just abruptly cease to exist. We must, for lack of evidence or personal experience, plead ignorance and suspend judgment about this. It's no use repeating old beliefs and theories that we have inherited from the past, for although these might be comforting and reassuring, we still don't know!

However, for the sake of conveniently relating part of my story, I will choose something that took place in 1970, when I was in India. My purpose had been to travel overland from Europe as far as possible and then to go by plane or ship the rest of the way to Australia to join my parents, who had recently migrated there; I supposed Australia would become my home too, and so, thinking that it might be my last time in India (I had been there before), I decided to wander around for a few months and visit some of the ancient and holy places before leaving for Australia.

While in South India, in the holy town of Rameswaram, where there is a huge and marvelous Hindu temple, I was approached on the street one day by a *yogi* or *sadhu*—a middle-aged man with very long hair and beard, his thin and wiry body clad in just a loincloth. He spoke no English and I spoke very little Hindi, which was his native tongue, being from North India; but somehow, we were able to communicate. This

meeting was a major turning-point in my life, for whereas before, I had had no real direction in my life, after that I embarked upon the journey that I'm still on. He invited me to stay with him in a nearby pilgrims' rest-house known as a *dharma-sala*, and I accepted, sleeping on the cement floor and bathing at the well. I stayed with him only a few days before resuming my wanderings, and although during this time he gave me no specific lessons that I can remember and put my finger on, I think of him—**Jagadish Narayan**—as having played an important role in my life. May he be well and happy now, wherever he may be!

Leaving Rameswaram, my trip took me from Kanyakumari—the southernmost tip of that vast and fascinating country—through the southern states of Tamilnadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, the central states of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, the Western states of Gujerat and Rajasthan, to the northern states of Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. In one of my previous books—*BECAUSE I CARE*—I told of several illuminating experiences I had at the caves of Ajanta-Ellora and the old Buddhist site of Sanchi, so will not repeat that here. Instead, I will pass on to New Delhi where, late one afternoon, as I was making my way out of the city by foot to a highway where I hoped to be able to hitch a ride in the direction of India's holiest city, Benares (or Varanasi, as it is more commonly known), I was overtaken by a Buddhist monk (the first I had ever met), who asked me where I was going. When I told him, he said that as it was getting late, it might be better if I spent the night at his temple nearby, and go on the next day. I accepted his invitation and went with him to the temple, which was a simple building of corrugated-iron with a banyan-tree in the compound, and little else. He introduced me to his brother-monk there who, like himself, was from Chittagong in what was then East

Pakistan, but which soon afterwards became Bangladesh. I was received hospitably and a *charpoy* (a wooden bed-frame interlaced with rope) was placed out in the yard for me to sleep on under the stars; in October, this was quite suitable as the rainy season was over and the nights were mild. I don't recall being bothered by mosquitoes, so there probably weren't many, and those there were I was able to tolerate, having traveled widely in India and grown used to sleeping outside on a rush-mat I carried with me.

The next day, **Venerable Dhammika**—for such was the friendly monk's name—invited me to accompany him to the home of some of his supporters. I accepted, and on the way there, by scooter-rickshaw, he told me that, a few days before, one of the children of the family we were going to visit had been knocked down by a car and killed; the funeral was already over, and he was going to the house to give a memorial sermon.

Before I go any further, I should say that, Venerable Dhammika being the first Buddhist monk I had ever met, I knew nothing at all about the lifestyle of monks. Therefore, I thought nothing of it when he instructed the family to prepare a seat for me alongside his against the wall, and to serve food to both of us, while the family sat facing us. So I sat there and ate what was served, unaware that monks of the Theravada school of Buddhism—of which he was a follower—never ate together with non-monks but always separately. Maybe he thought it would be inconvenient and embarrassing to explain about this to me, or maybe he placed little importance on this custom and was ready to overlook it; I do not know. Maybe he was just kind; this I know.

After eating, he took his long-handled fan (which I since learned was used while preaching) and, holding it before him so that the people could hear his voice but

not see his face, he began to speak. Now, I understood not a word of what he was saying, although I presumed it was about the death of the child. But, whereas the people in front of him could not see his face because of the fan, I, still sitting beside him, could, and I saw that, while speaking, he was weeping, with tears rolling down his cheeks. This moved me, for I saw that he cared so much about the people to whom he was speaking, and shared their loss and sorrow. I didn't know, at that time, that monks are not supposed to show their emotions so but to restrain themselves. On the other hand, however, we are taught to consider others as ourselves, and to feel their suffering and pain as our own, for it is by identifying with others that compassion arises.

I will state unequivocally here that I was far more impressed with Venerable Dhammika of New Delhi, who was not ashamed to weep with the family over their loss, than with all the stony-faced monks and nuns I've seen performing ceremonies over the years—*far* more impressed, and favorably so! Should a monk make his heart cold and hard like a stone, which almost nothing can move? We all know, of course, that no-one lives forever and that it's only a matter of time before we all pass through the gateway of death. Increasing detachment and equanimity result from reflection on this and insight into how things are, but have nothing to do with mere unconcern or indifference towards others.

I stayed with the two monks for three days, during which time, the brother-monk, noting my interest, asked me whether I would like to become a monk, and if so, he would ordain me. I told him that I would (I'd already decided this after my experience at Sanchi), but that I wasn't yet ready as I first wanted to go to Australia to visit my parents and tell them, in person, that I would be going back to India to become a monk. Thanking them, I left, and went on my way.

Over the years, I have thought many times about Venerable Dhammika and his kindness to me, but this is the first time I have written about him; I confess my neglect. In 1988, I was back in Delhi for the first time since 1970, but I couldn't remember just where his tiny temple was located, as Delhi had changed so much in the meantime. I made some inquiries and a monk at another small temple that I came across told me he had died some years before; I don't know if this was true (I remember feeling somewhat doubtful about it at the time, as the monk didn't seem sure himself), and when I was in Delhi again at the end of 1993, I made a further search for him, by taxi and on foot, but had no more success than in 1988. Reluctantly, I abandoned my search, but the fact that I wasn't able to see him again does not diminish the respect I still have for him. He was the first monk I met, and without intending to, he gave me something that has stayed with me until now: an example of humility, kindness and concern for others. I am fortunate to have met him, particularly at that stage of my life; his example has helped to sustain me through times of doubt and depression. Wherever and however he is right now, I wish him well in every way, and am grateful to him forever!

The next year, after visiting my parents in Australia and telling them of my intention to return to India to become a monk, I went to Indonesia, as the cheapest route out of Australia, and it was there, on my 25th birthday, that I met the chairman of a Buddhist Society in Semarang, Central Java, and was invited to stay with him for a few days and make use of his extensive library. His name was **Pak Sadono**, and he was very kind to me, providing me with different kinds of Indonesian food every day. He also gave me letters of introduction to several other Buddhist Societies and temples on my way, and I was thus able to travel from one place

to another in Java and Sumatra, receiving much hospitality and kindness.

Then, in the North Sumatran city of *Medan*, I met another beautiful person: an Indian gentleman by the name of **Kumarasami**, who took me, a waif and stray, under his wing during the few days I spent in the temple there, making me feel like one of his sons. I recall him speaking to me of the love that develops as one follows the Path; he himself manifested it in abundance, and I have since felt it at times and know what a wonderful thing it is, but—like humility—it cannot be practiced; it must *come* from inside, as a result of understanding or seeing things clearly. Before I left to go to Malaysia, he also gave me letters of introduction to temples in Penang and Kuala Lumpur, but sadly, these letters were not received in the same spirit as they were given to me.

In 1978, I was again in Indonesia, and was looking forward to seeing both Pak Sadono and Mr. Kumarasami again, but alas, this was not to be. I learned that Pak Sadono had died some years before. And, two weeks before I got to Medan, my dear benefactor there also passed away. This was a cruel blow to me, but I survived and have good memories of both these men, both of whom were householders and had families, and it is because of this that I can say, with authority, that the Dharma is not only for monks or other people who stay in temples or monasteries.

If, now, I am able to pass on and share something with others, it is only because I received so much from people like those I have mentioned in this article, and in so sharing, perhaps I am able to repay them in some measure for their love and kindness to me. I bow to their memories!

BEHIND THE MASK

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I *WILL* LET YOU DOWN

We often hear people say things like: “Don’t worry; I won’t let you down! You can rely on me!”, but this is frequently just a prelude to doing the very thing that they say they won’t do! This is not to imply that nobody keeps their word nowadays, because this is also not so; there are still people who regard giving their word or promise as something serious and important, but compared with those who think lightly of such things, they are a minority—a *small* minority. Many of us think nothing of breaking our word when it is inconvenient for us to keep it, or we simply forget. While we don’t like others to let us down, we are often guilty of doing that to others.

Now, rather than saying to people who listen to me speak or read what I write: “I won’t let you down”, I will say, on the contrary: “I *will* let you down”, in order to make it as clear as possible that if we are sincere in our pursuit of Dharma we should beware of the unreliability of personality—our own as well as that of others—and not use it as a foundation; we should realize that Dharma is impersonal.

Personality-cults abound and flourish in the world, from major religions like Christianity (with the person of Jesus indispensably at the center) to small groups like that which coalesced around David Koresh in Waco, Texas, and the stir among expatriate Vietnamese Buddhists by the bogus nun named Thanh Hai (Ching Hai, in Chinese), who sometimes dresses like a movie-star or a fairy-tale princess and claims to be not only a ‘Living Buddha’ but ‘supreme’ and even higher than the founder of Buddhism Himself, the historical Gotama Buddha! The gullibility of humans is truly marvelous; there is nothing so preposterous and foolish that some

people will not eagerly accept and believe! And although it is true that, by closing their eyes and living in a dream-world, they derive a certain amount of comfort and assurance, they are eventually let down (unless they die under their illusions) and find them-selves worse off than before, being older and less-able to make a new start.

We have come a long way since the time of the Buddha, and the movement that He started has been considerably corrupted and distorted, both from within and without. Just as Buddhism had a great impact on the religious life of India during the centuries of its ascendancy, so too, it was greatly influenced by Hinduism during its period of affluence and decline, and was eventually swallowed up by it, so that what we have today is a mixture of what the Buddha taught, Hindu influence, and the cultural barnacles it gathered as it spread outwards from the land of is birth. This is clearly seen in the role of priest that many Buddhist monks have assumed—unknowingly, in most cases, it must be said, but nonetheless that is the role they have taken—and the ceremonies they perform, together with what the Buddha termed 'low arts' like palmistry, astrology, geomancy and other forms of divination, which He forbade His monks to engage in because such practices attract people for the wrong reasons, and are not the work of monks. Today, more—*far* more—monks are involved in such things than in propagating Dharma, so much so that it is commonly expected of monks to 'tell fortunes' and calculate / predict 'lucky days' and so on.

Given the propensity of people to fall at the feet of 'savior-figures', it seems that the simple, clear message of the Buddha to "Be an island unto yourself, be a lamp unto yourself, be a refuge unto yourself" will never be widely accepted, but even so, there are always some

people who will rejoice in hearing this clarion-call to develop self-reliance and throw off the chains of psychological dependence upon others. If it is only for the few, so be it. The fact that it might not be accepted by the majority of people does not invalidate it.

I will try not to deliberately let anyone down, but the nature of personality makes it likely that I will do so, in one way or another. Therefore, I will warn people about this first, so they will be able to listen to what I say without attaching much importance to me personally—either negatively or positively—and will not be too disappointed when I unintentionally and inevitably let them down. I feel that what I write and talk about can—or should be able to—stand on its own, and not upon my personality. This is because I take seriously the Buddha's advice and exhortation to test His Teachings as a goldsmith would test gold, instead of merely believing; if this applies to *His* Teachings, how much more does it apply to *my* mumblings?!

I have stuck my neck out to say this not just about myself but about anyone and everyone. What we should be seeking is not a person but the unshakeable facts of life that do not change and will not let us down: *Universal Dharma.* If I have pointed my finger at anyone in this or other writings, it is done not with the desire to camouflage myself or distract attention away from my own shortcomings or gloss over my faults—like a thief being pursued might shout "Stop, thief!", to create the impression among bystanders that he is one of the pursuers rather than the pursued—but to indicate something more firm, reliable and true than personality.

It is a commonly-held belief that unless a person is enlightened himself, he is not in a position to help anyone else to become enlightened, but I do not share this

view. It would be much like seeing someone injured and bleeding and saying to him: “I’m so sorry; I would like to help you, but I’m not a doctor”. Every mother—and most other people, too, for that matter—knows how to treat minor injuries; there is no need to go to a doctor for every little wound or pain. Likewise, we all have the capacity—in varying degrees—to help others along the way; we don’t need to be fully-enlightened for that. And, in doing so, we express the enlightenment that we already have—in whatever small amount—and thereby increase it. If we were to hold back and refuse to help others until we are fully-enlightened, nobody—including ourselves—would get any help at all! That would be just as foolish as making it a condition that someone must be enlightened before we listen to or learn from him/her.

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SARNATH ENCOUNTER

On the 1st of January, 1994, I was in Sarnath, where the Buddha preached His first discourse, known as *The Turning of the Wheel of the Law*. I had arrived there from Kathmandu the previous evening, and was looking forward to spending time in this generally-peaceful place. But upon entering the grounds of the sacred site after returning from an excursion in nearby Varanasi, I found it very *un*peaceful, as—being a public holiday—it was crowded with holiday-makers. They were everywhere, sprawled on the grass around the central *stupa** and among the ruins, picnicking, playing football and cricket—some young people were even dancing to music from their cassette-players!—although there were signs around the place forbidding such activities. Rules like this are seldom respected or enforced in India.

At one side of the main stupa a Tibetan lama was giving a Dharma-talk to quite a large group of people, most of whom were Westerners, many of them monks and nuns. I didn't want to join them, however; I only wanted to be quiet. But how to be quiet with so many noisy people around, and harsh music blaring from the ubiquitous loud-speakers outside the grounds? I felt sad at the irreverence of the local people, although I had seen so much of it before in other places that it should have caused me no surprise and I should even have expected it. Contrary to what many people think about Indians, they are, in general—though we must always be wary of generalizations—not highly spiritual, but, in reality, among the most materialistic in the world; the fact that they might not have the opportunities or financial means to indulge their materialistic desires does not disprove this, and the frequent occurrence of so-called 'dowry-murders' overwhelmingly supports it.

I passed through the crowds and went over to the Burmese monastery on the far side of the park, hoping to find some quiet there. Well, it *was* quieter, to be sure, but none of the monks I met or saw showed much friendliness, and I was either ignored or met with quizzical looks, probably because of my dress, which is different from theirs. It has been my experience, over the years, that Theravada monks, in particular, find it very hard to deal with monks who do not 'belong' or subscribe to their type of Buddhism (once, at the Great Stupa at Bodnath, Kathmandu, I saw a Nepalese Theravada monk, and greeted him in the customary way with joined palms and the word "Namaste". Getting no response from him, I then said: "No Namaste?", at which he hurriedly mumbled "Namaste". Sometimes, I wonder why I even bother). Sadly, sectarianism is widespread among Buddhists, although it has never given rise to violence, as it has among the followers of other religions.

Preferring the noise of the crowds to the non-friendliness of the Burmese monastery, I went back to the Deer Park, to look for a place to sit; I had a feeling that something was about to happen, although I had no idea what. So I sat down cross-legged beneath a tree, on an ancient wall of a ruined monastery, with my eyes half-closed and downcast, and my mind soon became focused and calm. Although curious people kept coming by to look at me and make fun and silly remarks, I ignored them and didn't allow it to disturb me. After a few minutes, someone came and stood at one side of me, looking intently at me; I could feel his gaze; but I didn't move or acknowledge him in any way. After some more minutes, he sat down nearby, and I thought: "He wants something. Well, let him wait; I'll test him to see how much he wants it". So I continued to sit there, unmoving, for maybe another twenty minutes, and then I

stirred, at which he stood up and came over to me with his hands joined in *anjali* (the Indian form of greeting). Politely and respectfully, he said: “I noticed you sitting there and was impressed, so asked my friends to leave me here for a while and come back later. I am interested in meditation”, he said, “and wonder if you would explain something about this for me”.

I asked him if he knew the significance of the place we were in, but he said, “Not really”. I found this a bit hard to believe, as he had already told me that he was studying philosophy in the nearby Varanasi University, so how could he know nothing about this Buddhist holy place? Maybe he just said this to see how much I would tell him.

Anyway, I told him that this was the place where the Buddha gave His first sermon to the five ascetics who had formerly been his companions, and I related to him the reason they had left Him. Before his Enlightenment, they had followed him in his austere and extreme practices, waiting for him to make the breakthrough, and feeling that he would then show them the way. But when Siddhartha failed to achieve his goal by fasting so much that he was reduced to just skin and bones and almost died as a result, he realized that this was the wrong way and that, just as a life of luxury and pleasure, as he had lived in the palace, was ignoble and unprofitable, just so was a life of self-mortification and deprivation, which he had recently followed; both ways make the mind dull and incapable of seeing things clearly. He felt that there had to be a middle way which avoided these two extremes, and that it would be the way of meditation such as he had experienced in his boyhood when he had been taken out to the countryside and left in the shade of a tree while his father and courtiers went off to lead the Spring Ploughing Festival. Gradually, the young prince became aware of the suf-

fering all around him: of how the oxen that pulled the ploughs were beaten and goaded to make them pull harder, how the ploughmen sweated and strained under the hot sun, how worms and insects were exposed and died as the plough-shares cut through the earth, and how birds came down to devour them, how big birds attacked small birds; he noted how life lived on life, from the smallest of its forms to the largest, and how man was also a predator. His observations moved him so profoundly that he seated himself cross-legged, with back erect, and his mind automatically became calm and clear. It was the memory of this incident so many years before that now showed him the way to go: not by torturing and starving the body shall I find liberation, he thought, but by observing how things are.

But when he began to eat again, the five yogis who had attended him thought he had abandoned his search and returned to a life of sense-pleasures, so left him in disgust; alone again, he nevertheless determined to continue his quest. Slowly, his strength returned, and after some weeks, recovered and refreshed, while seated beneath a tree respected by Buddhists ever since as the 'Bodhi-tree' or 'Tree of Awakening', he became Enlightened, became a Buddha, an Awakened One. He had achieved His goal, had clearly understood Suffering, the Cause of Suffering, that Suffering can Cease, and the way that leads to the Cessation of Suffering.

After His Enlightenment, He was at first inclined to remain alone in the forest, thinking that what He had discovered was very hard to comprehend, and that if He tried to share it with others, no-one would understand, and it would only be needlessly troublesome for Him. But we know that He eventually decided to go forth and teach, and when He had so decided, He considered who He should teach. He turned His thoughts to his five

former companions. “They were intelligent and good, even if a little misguided”, He thought; “They will understand”.

And so He set off to join them in the place where, by His psychic vision, he saw them to be staying. This was in a park just outside Varanasi, about 200 kms from where He had become Enlightened. It took Him maybe two weeks or more to walk there as He was in no hurry. When He arrived there, the five saw Him coming in the distance, and said to each other: “See who is coming: it’s Siddhartha! Ignore him; we don’t respect him anymore; he abandoned his search for truth”. But as He came nearer, so impressive was His appearance and bearing that they forgot their resolve to ignore Him, and spontaneously rose to receive Him respectfully. One took His alms-bowl, one took His upper robe, another brought water for Him to wash His face and feet, another gave Him water to drink, and the other prepared a place for Him to sit. Then, refreshed and seated, He addressed them thus: “Open is the Gate to the Deathless. I have found that which I sought! Listen, and I will reveal it to you”, and He explained about the Middle Way He had discovered, which avoided the extremes of a life of pleasure and luxury on the one hand, and a life of self-mortification and deprivation on the other, and which leads to Enlightenment. He explained the Four Noble Truths: how all living things Suffer, how Suffering arises, how Suffering ceases, and the Way that leads to the Cessation of Suffering. As He spoke about these things, one of the five—Kondanya, by name—became enlightened, and the Buddha saw it on his face, because when a person understands something very deeply and clearly, it *does* show on his face, like a light radiating outwards through the skin. The Buddha exclaimed: “Kondanya has understood! Kondanya has understood!”

At this point in my narrative—and I must confess that I have fleshed it out a bit in writing here for the sake of further clarification for my readers—I asked the young man—as I will now ask my readers—to visualize the scene of the Buddha speaking to the five yogis; it is most important to do so. What the Buddha looked like, we really don't know, but He certainly would not have looked like the images we have made to represent Him. If He had not yet shaved His head at that time, as an example of what He later asked His monks to do, He probably looked like a yogi Himself, with long, matted hair and beard. And if *He* didn't look like that, the five almost certainly would have done, and not as most Buddhist art since then has shown them, *as Buddhist monks,* with shaven heads and faces, clad in typical Buddhist robes; we must keep it in mind that, at this point, there *were* no Buddhist monks; they were about to *become* the first; and it was some time after this that the *uniform* of the monks was decided upon. They—and the Buddha Himself—would have looked weather-beaten and not overly-clean, living the life they did.

We have idealized the Buddha so much that it is now hard to imagine Him as a normal-looking human-being, yet such He was, behind all the deification of Him that has gone on since. Indeed, there are still Buddhists who believe that He was about five meters tall! And in Thailand, there is a beautiful temple built around a depression in the rock that is believed to be a footprint of the Buddha, but it is so big that a person could get into it and lie down! This is not realistic and merely increases superstition and ignorance instead of diminishing them! Buddhists are often guilty of idolatry—as we are sometimes accused of being—but we are by no means the only ones; it is really quite common, and comes about through mistaking the form for the essence. (Besides, the Buddha never went to Thailand,

and probably never even went beyond the Ganges river-valley, or saw the sea).

Continuing, I asked the young man if he imagined the five yogis to all be sitting in the same position—the posture we associate with meditation: cross-legged, straight-backed, hands in lap and eyes downcast—like statues, or photo-copies of each other, as they appear in Thai or Indian pictures of this scene? Would they not probably—I went on—have been sitting in various postures—maybe with chin in hand, and so on—relaxed, yet perfectly attentive? We can be attentive without sitting cross-legged, can we not? And in that attentive state, they would not have been thinking about the past, the future, or even the present; nor would they have been thinking about or *practicing* meditation, as do so many 'meditators'; they would have been rapt, paying complete attention; they were *in* the present, *in* meditation. Have we not all known this kind of meditation at times? Of course we have, but we pro-bably didn't realize what it was, and so we ask around about meditation, thinking that it must be something exotic and special instead of something we have known—in one way—for most of our lives. But it is because we have not understood what we have known that we continue to jump around, seeking teachers, doing meditation-courses and retreats, and so on, looking, but not seeing, and in the end we have to come back to ourselves, having gone a long, circuitous way around, when a little intelligent thought would have saved us so much time and trouble. It is rather like rubbing two sticks together—and *wet* sticks, at that!—in order to produce fire, when there are matches and other means of ignition at hand. Why do we insist on doing things the hard way? What are we aiming for with our pious and strenuous practices? What kind of race do we think we are running—a marathon or something? If the aim of our meditation-practice

is insight—insight into how things are—do we think that insight can only be 'attained' by doing things like sitting cross-legged for hours and hours? Obviously, we think that insight can be *made* to arise, and that it is within our capacity to *do* it—to 'storm the gates of heaven', as it were. The corollary of this is to conclude that people who don't practice such things are incapable of experiencing insight, which is a great misconception and reveals our greed and desire to get something in return for our efforts, instead of seeing things as they are and what we've already got. Thus, our religious practices become materialistic—what the late Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche—a well-known Tibetan lama—referred to as 'spiritual materialism': the craving for and attachment to results.

Still with my young inquirer: I asked him if he had seen the Tibetan monk over near the main stupa, speaking to a large group of mostly Westerners. He said he hadn't, but I told him they were there anyway. These people, I went on, had left the comfort and luxury of their homes on the other side of the world, to come to dirty and smelly India where one must undergo so many hassles as a matter of routine (anyone who has been to India will surely know what I mean here), in search of Dharma. And all around them are native people oblivious to this, just enjoying themselves with picnics and games. Why should this be? And why are *you* different? Why do *you* want to know about these things? Why aren't *you* enjoying yourself instead, like your people here? Don't even try to answer, I told him, because you don't know, which is how it should be, as the roots of the present—and of any situation and thing—are hidden in the past, and very few of them can be perceived. There are no accidents in life, but neither is everything pre-ordained; everything arises from causes, and there are so many contributory causes to each effect that it is

simply impossible to imagine or perceive them all. You must accept the fact that you are different, even though it is often difficult to be different and 'odd'. And try to keep the flame of your inquiry burning steadily—not high one minute and low the next. Ask questions, yes—ask questions of anyone and leave no stone unturned—but do not accept their answers unthinkingly, as *their* answers will not be *your* answers, and in such matters, second-hand answers will never completely satisfy us; at most, they can reassure us somewhat and help us to check and confirm our experiences; we must find our own answers; there is no substitute for this.

The young man seemed satisfied with my explanation and went away with a light step; and as for me, I knew that this was the reason why I had felt the need to sit down; my feeling had been vindicated.

Our desire and search for results from our efforts often blinds us to what is here. The Buddhist scriptures tell of many people becoming enlightened by listening to the Buddha speak, and often, these were people who had no conscious knowledge of meditation and had never 'practiced' it. So, to maintain that "meditation is the *only* way"—as a well-known Buddhist figure in Malaysia has said—is incorrect, unless we consider meditation in a much broader way than most 'meditators' consider it: that there is nothing outside of it, that it is all-inclusive. Enlightenment arises as a result of seeing things clearly—not with our *physical* eyes, but with the 'third eye' or 'eye of understanding'. Understanding plays such a big part in our lives—from very basic things like how to tie our shoelaces or make tea, to perception of reality. So, we might say meditation concerns understanding, and understanding is not something we *do*, but is rather something that happens to or in us, something, in fact, that *does us!* In this way, who *doesn't* meditate? Who has *not* known meditation?

Away with these foolish and elitist questions of “Do you meditate?“, “What kind of meditation do you practice?”, “Who is your meditation-teacher?”, and so on. Come on; wake up!

The Pali word ‘bhavana’ is usually translated ‘mental development’, and includes what we generally mean by words like concentration, meditation, contemplation and mindfulness. As ‘mental-development’, therefore, what is it *but* bhavana when we learn how to read and write in school? This is also mental-development, no? Moreover, being a healthy kind of mental-development, it is in line with the Buddha’s Teachings.

If you wish to ‘practice’ meditation, by all means do so; do whatever you wish, as long as it’s not harmful to anyone or anything, and as long as you are prepared to accept the consequences of your actions without complaining or blaming others for them. Whatever you do, however, whether it be chanting, praying, ‘practicing’ meditation, keeping moral precepts, giving, abstaining from eating meat, etc., be careful not to become proud of it, as that would only defeat the purpose, and you would become like a dog running round and round in circles, chasing its own tail. It is not rare to come across people who are proud of their practices, thinking they are better than those who don’t do such things; but they should be regarded as our teachers, too, in that they show us, by their example, what not to do or how not to do it. Thus, everything becomes positive.

Care should be taken about one’s motives for ‘practicing’ meditation, and what one expects to get from doing so. We should know *why* we are doing *what* we are doing. Some people, overly concerned with results from their efforts, not only become blind to what is often right in front of them, but sometimes become mentally unhinged or disturbed. If one is not careful, and in a

great hurry for results, *medi*tation may easily become *madi*tation! There are many cases of it.

Approach life with Dharma and everything becomes meditation; anytime, anywhere, insight might arise.

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* (A ‘stupa’ is a reliquary monument, usually with a hemispherical base surmounted by a spire; they are objects of devotion and pilgrimage. Some stupas, as found in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand, are huge and can be seen from far away).

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MY EXPERIENCE OF SAI BABA OR *HIS* EXPERIENCE OF ME!

Because I am often asked if I know about Sai Baba or have met him, it might save me some time if I wrote about my experience of him. Although I've not actually *met* him, I have seen him at his place, at the end of 1987. What I have to tell of him, however, took place ten years earlier, in the following manner:

One evening, in mid-1977, while I was strolling up and down in front of a temple where I used to stay in Singapore, an Indian woman and her teenage daughter came up to me and asked where she could find a certain Thai monk who was staying there and who was well-known for fortune-telling, palmistry, and so on. I directed her to his quarters and continued my stroll. A few minutes later, she came back and said: "He's sick and cannot help me. Can *you* help me?" I said, "What's the matter?" She then told me that her husband had gone off with a young woman, and she—the wife—thought that the woman must have charmed him away from her (the vanity of the thought!), and she wanted him back. When she said this, I heard alarm-bells ringing and thought: "Beware; this is not your thing!" But as I could see that she was genuinely upset, I said to her: "What I can and will do for you, if you like, is go with you to your home and bless it". "Oh, would you?" she said, "I would like that very much. Thank you".

I asked someone from the temple to accompany me and we set off down the road to find a taxi. On the way, she said: "I am a devotee of Sai Baba". "Oh", I replied, "I was at his place in India just a few weeks ago, but he

was away at the time, so I didn't get to see him". "Really!?" she said, "that's interesting, because before I came here just now, I was in touch with him, mind-to-mind, and he told me to come to this temple where I would meet a monk who would go with me to my home and explain everything to me. But I didn't think he would be European!"

When we arrived, she showed me her shrine-room where she kept pictures of Sai Baba, and all over the walls, the ceiling and the floor, in great quantities, was ash—*vibhuti*—the materialization of which Sai Baba is famous for; it was as if someone had taken handsful of wet ash from a dead campfire and thrown it around. "I don't know where it came from or how", she said. "One day there wasn't any, and the next day it was everywhere, just as you see it now". She then told me about her husband—who was her second husband, and much younger than she—how he was very lazy and never worked and just lived off her. When she couldn't or wouldn't give him money, he would take her things, like camera or cassette-player, and sell them. I thought to myself: "She's better off without this fellow; why is she worrying and wanting him back?" But I didn't voice my thoughts; instead, I asked her for a photo of him that I might take back with me and meditate over. She gave me one, I blessed the house, and went back to the temple. That evening, I meditated over the photo and tried to tune-in to the person thereof.

The next day, when I was in downtown Singapore for something or other, about to cross a busy street, I found myself standing next to the man in the photo! "Should I say something to him?" I thought, but decided not to. When I got back to the temple, I called her, but she said: "I can't talk to you now; would you call me back later?" When I did so, she explained: "I couldn't talk to you before as my husband was here; he had

come to collect his things and told me that he would not be staying with me anymore but would visit me from time to time. And when you called before", she said, "he asked me who it was, and I told him it was a European monk I had met. 'Oh', he said, 'does he wear glasses and look like ..... ?' 'Yes', I said, 'how do you know?' 'Oh, I saw him on the street today'".

A few days later, when I was passing nearby, I went to see her again, and she said to me: "After you came the first time, I contacted Baba again, and he told me: 'Yes, that's the monk I meant'". This time, I told her, indirectly, "Look, better let this fellow go; he's not worth bothering about".

Does this mean that Sai Baba knew me, even though I'd never seen him before? I really cannot say; however, it seems beyond doubt that he does have powers that most of us would consider 'miraculous' but which have been spoken of in India for thousands of years. India is a special country in this way; strange things go on there. Can we say it is all a hoax just because we—in our sophistication—do not understand the principles behind it, or do not even know of the possibility of such powers? That would be to display our ignorance and dogmatism, would it not? There is just too much evidence and too many reliable witnesses for us to take such a stand. All we can say, if we don't know, is simply that: "I don't know. Maybe".

Now, I am not a follower of Sai Baba, but I will not knock or decry him as his teachings are eclectic and not narrow; moreover, he has given many people a sense of direction in life that they didn't have before; surely, he is to be commended for this, not denounced, as someone in Malaysia once requested me to do. Knowing that I was quite close to some of Sai Baba's devotees, and thinking that they might listen to me, this person wanted

me to denounce him as a charlatan and 'magician' who was not worth consideration. I refused to do this on the grounds just given: that he has helped lots of people find a sense of purpose in life when they were otherwise lost.

I was at *Puttaparthi* again in December 1987, but it was so crowded, with Westerners forming about half of the 4,000 people there, and many of them had clearly come in hope of cures of their various ailments, so I didn't even bother asking for an audience; I thought that others needed his time more than I did, and that if he wanted to see me, he would send for me. I guess this was a kind of test of him on my part. He didn't call me, and after a few days I left and went on my way.

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DON'T PUSH THE RIVER

So what if a person calls himself
A Hindu, Christian, or Jew?
Does that make him less than human?
The fact that he might not yet
have understood what it means to be human—
always special, without trying to be so—
does not mean that one day he won't.
Did you yourself always know
that names mean very little?
Were there not times when you
were proud to call yourself Christian,
or Buddhist, and think yourself
superior to others thereby?
Remember this, and be more tolerant
of those whose eyes are still closed to it;
it is individually, and not all together
that we wake up.
Having seen it yourself, you may try
to help others see,
but you cannot force them.
If they see, be happy,
but if not, don't be sad;
the odds are against success.

Bhusawal, India. Jan. 1994.

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THE CHAINS OF CONVENTION

While in India in 1993, I had a discussion with a Muslim I met outside the Taj Mahal, and among the things he said to me was “The right hand is good, the left hand is bad”. When I asked him why this should be so, he replied, “Because our Holy Koran says it is”. Upon my request for further elucidation, he explained: “Well, the right hand is for eating with, and the left hand is for toilet purposes”.

Unwilling to let such gross unreason go unchallenged, I then said: “But if you wash both hands with soap and water after answering the calls of nature, they will both be clean, and there will be no question about one hand being better than the other”.

With this conversation still fresh in my mind, I went into a restaurant and ordered a right-handed *chapatti* (Indian unleavened bread). The waiter looked puzzled and asked what I meant. I said: “A chapatti made with just the right hand”. “No such thing!” he retorted; “we must use both hands to make chapatties!” “Ah, but I thought the left hand was bad and only to be used for toilet purposes”, I said. “We wash both hands”, he said sullenly, but I wasn’t convinced, and abandoned my idea of eating chapatties.

I went to another restaurant nearby and sat on the verandah, and while waiting for the food I had ordered, I observed an old man pull down his pants, in full view of everyone, and squat over an open drain across the narrow street from where I was sitting, and calmly and unconcernedly *do his thing*, using a can of water that he had brought with him to clean himself afterwards! This must have been his regular spot! And people were passing by within arms-reach of him! But this is not

unusual in India; in fact, the country is just one big open toilet, where people *do it* anywhere and everywhere: on the streets and in the fields, just wherever and whenever—so it seems—the mood comes upon them. Beautiful beaches and other scenic spots are befouled, and one really has to be very careful where one is walking! I got the impression that they consider themselves invisible while doing it, as they seem oblivious to everything going on around them. One can see rows of men along busy highways and railway lines in the early morning, separated from each other by just a few meters, hard at it, with traffic streaming past (women work the night-shift, apparently, as they are seldom to be seen); indeed, some of them gaze up at the buses and trucks as they go by, and smile! It's quite remarkable to people unfamiliar with such habits, but to the natives it's normal, of course. Perhaps they feel claustrophobia inside an enclosed toilet, or maybe they just like to be close to nature and see the sky and hear the birds sing while doing it.

Mahatma Gandhi's exhortations to dig latrines obviously went unheeded. Even in the major cities of India, people urinate wherever they feel like, and government attempts to rectify this by building urinals have been in vain. Never, anywhere, have I seen so many public urinals as in Delhi, and never, anywhere, have I seen so many people peeing anywhere—anywhere except in the proper place, that is. Consequently, many visitors associate the acrid odor of urine with Delhi; it's omnipresent, even in the tourist areas! Not just this, but many urinals are avoided because some people use them to defecate in!

Indians seem to have a fixation with—let's not be squeamish about words here—*shit*, leaving it around for all to see, as if it's something lovely. Cow-dung is at

least useful and forms an important item of their home economy, assiduously collected while still fresh, and put to numerous uses, like plastering walls and floors; much of it is mixed by hand with grass or straw and cakes of it are then stuck onto any available surface to dry, with a handprint visible in every cake. It is then used as fuel for heating and cooking and burns without much smoke or smell while giving off quite a bit of heat. Cow-dung also forms part of their traditional pharmacopoeia—another reason why cows are so highly prized in India. If only they would find use for their own excrement instead of leaving it lying around; someone could make a fortune from it. India really is a shitty country!

Most people in the West would not remember—or would only dimly remember—the days when many houses had no flush-toilets but only an 'out-house' in the back garden, with a bucket that had to be emptied into a pit now and then. Now we just press a button or pull a chain and our waste-matter goes gurgling out of sight so conveniently. We've come a long way.

Now, the whole world—or most of it, anyway—is under the conviction that the right is somehow better than the left. Why do I say this? Well, just look at how we shake hands: except for the Boy Scouts (though why *they* should be contrary, I don't know), everyone offers their right hand for others to shake, and some people would be offended if they were offered the left hand. But I can think of no good or logical reason why the right should be regarded as in any way better than the left; it is just a matter of convention and we are stuck with it, because to change it now would be almost impossible, and what would we change it to that would not also be—or soon become—a thing of convention? There are so many things we are stuck with that have no foundations in reality, but to change them would be

very difficult. Another example is our dating-system, which is really relevant only to Christians, yet the whole world conforms to it. Such things should be regarded as what Buddhism terms 'relative truth' and as useful for the purposes of communication; but they have nothing to do with 'ultimate truth'—that is, to things that are as they are, or to the principles of life, that do not change. There is no need to change them; rather, we should understand them as what they are: just social conventions, which are useful as such. We have lived with them for a long time already and can continue to do so, as long as they don't cause inconvenience or trouble.

Buddhists *also* think of the right as better than the left, as shown in the way that Buddhist monks dress, with the right shoulder bared in the case of Theravada monks (monks of other sects also dress with something distinctive about the right shoulder); then there is the way they circumambulate stupas or holy places: always clockwise, with their right side towards the object of veneration. Once, when I was in Budh-Gaya—which is the place where Siddhartha attained Enlightenment and became the Buddha, and where there are always people circumambulating the stupa, chanting, reciting mantras, prostrating, telling their rosaries, or sitting quietly in meditation—I saw a Western monk going in the *opposite* direction. When I asked why, he said that one doesn't always have to do what everyone else is doing, but can do whatever one wants. Well, in principle I agree with this, of course, but I feel that to deliberately *try* to be different, instead of letting one's natural differences flow out, is an expression of ego, and therefore defeats the whole purpose. He knew the custom, but while he didn't see anything intrinsically wrong with it, he just wanted to be different; or maybe he just wanted to see what would happen if he went the other way

around. I don't know what—if anything—happened, but while I was there, I didn't see anything extraordinary take place, and he wasn't struck by a thunderbolt for his 'impiety'.

There is nothing wrong with convention as long as we understand it and as long as it's useful, or at least, not harmful. If we decided to shake hands with the left hand instead of with the right merely to go against convention and to demonstrate our 'independent thinking', we would not be arrested and charged with committing a crime, but it would create unnecessary confusion and would serve no useful purpose. We can be—and many of us are—bound by convention, or we can understand it and follow it accordingly. To offer one's right hand to someone to shake rather than the left means that we are being mindful, to some extent, and mindfulness is always good. To make a point of giving something—*any*thing—with one's right hand rather than with one's left probably means that one is aware of what one is doing, whereas to give with either hand, not much caring which, would indicate unawareness or even sloppiness. Better still if we would give with both hands as that would indicate much more awareness of what we are doing, and the person to whom we are giving might feel honored to be made the object of such special attention.

Manners are another form of convention, and though there are certain manners which not everyone would agree upon or share—for example, the custom, in some countries, of burping loudly after meals to indicate satisfaction over the food—many things are generally accepted without question, and courtesy and politeness would facilitate one's passage in most parts of the world, whereas roughness and rudeness would cause doors to close in one's face.

Back to India, though, where I have been many times and have traveled widely: it is a place to really tax one's patience, and though one does, at times, meet friendly people, I have found myself becoming suspicious and thinking, "What does he want?" as one meets so many people there who are not friendly. And very often, it turns out that one's suspicions are justified. It is not good to feel like this, I know, but what is the alternative? If one did not, one would be ripped-off on every side. And after nine times in India, I know no-one there who I consider a true friend. Then—it might be asked—why do I keep on going there? I don't know; sometimes I think I must be mad, or masochistic, or maybe I have to pay some ancient debt to that land and its people.

It is common to be verbally abused in India; Indian people are very good at that. But to be apologized to is something quite rare. Once, I was sitting quietly alone at Ajanta Caves when a group of Indian tourists came by and, for no reason that I could think of—as I had done or said nothing to them—they began to abuse and make fun of me. I sat there, and did not respond, but after they had gone, someone who had been standing nearby listening to their abuse, consoled me by saying: "Don't worry, they do this to Indian monks, too; my brother is a monk, so I know".

Another time, I was sitting in a crowded bus in Benares, minding my own business and bothering no-one, when a little girl sitting besides me threw up, and some of her vomit went on my clothes; instead of apologizing to me for the befoulment, however, the girl's mother scolded me for not getting out of the way! Amazing people!

In India, it is so easy to become a *Maharaja* or a *Mahatma*; the beggars will call you such and more in

hope of getting something. Indians—it is another generalization, of course, but as a generalization, not inaccurate—can be so obsequious and ingratiating, bowing and touching your feet and calling down the blessings of heaven upon you. When they don't want anything from you, but you want something from them, it is another story; any little power or position they happen to get goes to their heads and they become arrogant tyrants. Many times, while looking for a hotel room, I have been turned away with the single, rudely-uttered word, "Full!"—no such thing as "Sorry, we have no rooms available right now".

I experienced ill-manners so often in India that one day, when someone wheeled his bicycle into me in a crowd and *apologized*, it was so unusual that I almost laughed aloud, and felt like asking him to bump into me again, just so I could hear another apology!

There is something positive about being verbally abused—and I always try to perceive and point out the positive in anything—and it is that, having been on the receiving end, one knows how it feels and so has an incentive—if one is needed—to restrain oneself from doing the same thing to others. Rude people are good teachers of manners—just as good, in fact, as polite people who set a positive example for us—in that they show us what not to do.

In rebelling against the past, we must be careful not to discard the good with the bad. Some traditions and conventions might be obsolete and no longer valid, but not all; many things, having passed the repeated tests of time, are still good and shouldn't be changed just because they are old. Things should be investigated carefully and intelligently.

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PLEASE DON'T EMBARRASS ME

Does it—and *must* it—happen in every generation and age that parents and children embarrass each other? Turbulent feelings arise because of it, so it is something to be seriously considered, in order to find ways of dealing with or lessening this distressing emotion.

These days, parents usually *decide* to have children, rather than having them uncontrollably; with multiple means of birth-control available, it is their choice, but it is still a tremendous gamble, as there is just no way of knowing how children will turn out, even with the best of nurturing. Children, however—as far as we can tell—have no choice about being born, although some people who subscribe to the concept of reincarnation believe that we *do* choose, in order to learn certain lessons in a particular family and environment; but the realities of life do not support this idea, as many people appear to learn very little from their experiences, and when people are so poor and suffering, it is hard to imagine them considering the lessons to be learned from their situation when they can think of little else than how to survive. Other people believe that at a certain level of development, we can choose where we will be reborn, into what kind of family, and for what purpose. They maintain that the majority of people are like coconuts falling from their trees: it cannot be predicted where they will come to rest; others, however, who have cultivated and developed their minds to a high degree (very few people, obviously), *do* have some control over where they will be reborn, much like a bird flying from one tree to another. (Tibetan *tulkus* or 'incarnate lamas' would slot into this category, if it is true, though I've often wondered why we hear only of Tibetans reincarnating like this, when *all* Buddhists, of what-

ever sect or school, accept the concept of reincarnation or rebirth). However, who knows about this for sure? For most of us it is just a matter of speculation.

Obviously, most parents derive a great deal of joy and pleasure from their children, and willingly put up with the expense and unpleasant aspects of taking care of them such as changing dirty diapers, getting up in the middle of the night to tend them, nursing them through sickness, and so on; crying is also something that parents must learn to deal with, as a baby's cry can be quite nerve-grating, especially if kept up for long periods; it is almost like a weapon that children soon learn how to use effectively to get what they want.

From early years, children begin to display their personalities, each one different. Some children are inexplicably hyperactive and naughty, and this causes anguish to their parents, who must often try to explain it away to others and make excuses and apologies; it is both exhausting and embarrassing. Everyone would like to have polite and well-mannered kids, but why some kids are naturally better-behaved than others, we don't know; it is not always a result of nurture, as naughty children are sometimes born to cultured and sensitive people, while well-behaved kids are sometimes found to have rough and careless parents.

There must be many embarrassing moments in the lives of parents caused by their children, directly or indirectly, as parents are responsible for their kids, of course. But it is not one-sided. As children grow up and their personalities develop, they become more sensitive about what other people—and especially their peers—think and, just as parents want to be proud of their children, so children want to be proud of their parents and hate to be embarrassed by or because of them.

Now, embarrassment happens; it's part of life. But much of it could be avoided if we understood that, just as it is abhorrent to us, so others also dislike it, and therefore there are good reasons for not deliberately embarrassing others; also, if we thought a little bit ahead and used our imagination, we might be able to avoid causing embarrassment unintentionally.

Dialogue between parents and children is absolutely indispensable if there is to be understanding. They might ask each other what embarrasses them and try, thereafter, to avoid doing or saying anything that causes this horrible feeling. Family secrets—and all families have them—should not be brought out into the open, for one thing; embarrassing incidents should be, as far as possible, left to die natural deaths, and should not be resurrected for the sake of amusing others, unless with the consent of all concerned.

Can parents and children respect—for that what it comes down to: respect—each other's sensitivities enough to want to avoid causing them the pain of embarrassment? Let them try treating each other responsibly and consulting each other about it in a mature and open manner; much good might come of it. If people find it hard to talk about things face-to-face, important matters could be 'discussed' by writing, and if the point is expressed by one party and understood by the other in this way, *that* kind of embarrassment might be avoided. All possible things should be tried for the sake of better communication.

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OPEN UP

You don't need to be an ornithologist to know that swallows feed in flight, pigeons on the ground, and ducks in water; they are programmed like this and have no choice about it; they cannot change their eating-habits. Imagine pigeons diving for tadpoles and ducks looking for insects in the air!

Man, however, is much more complex than birds and has vastly more potential to evolve. Sadly, though, many of us know little of this and it is very easy to lock ourselves into fixed and rigid positions which we then feel we must defend, with the conviction that we are right; we become polarized and unable/unwilling to look at things except in our own narrow ways. Consequently, the worlds we create for ourselves—and yes, we *all* have our own personal worlds, as well as the great communal world in which we all live together—are small and restrictive, and if there is anyone to blame for this it is ourselves.

It seldom happens that we think: "I am wrong and you are right", for if we did, many of our problems and conflicts with others would immediately dissolve. As it is, many of us are victims of our own short-sightedness. But does it have to be so? If we are so sure we are right we wouldn't be afraid to bend and look at things from the viewpoints of others; fear and unwillingness to do so indicates a state of insecurity and uncertainty about our own viewpoint; like this, therefore, to be sure is to be unsure. This can clearly be seen in people who cling fanatically and fearfully to religious beliefs and ideas—especially fundamentalists, who seem unable to reconcile life in the present with their concepts, and reject the former in favor of the latter, which they consider more

valid. Thus, the letter of the law is seen as more important than the spirit. Just think of the undue importance that some people attach to religious circumcision, for example: how does the removal of a little bit of skin make a person morally or spiritually any better? But the idea that it does makes them bigoted, which is a loss rather than a gain. And does bathing in rivers considered sacred make a person any more holy or enlightened? It depends more upon the state of mind of the bather than where he bathes; so if he considers all water to be sacred, he could stay at home and bathe and save himself all the trouble and expense of going on pilgrimage to the Ganges!

Joseph Campbell was being a mite sarcastic when he wrote, in his book, *Occidental Mythology:* "One of the glories of the Bible is the eloquence of its damnation of all ways of worship but its own. Furthermore, Yahweh's frustration of the work [the building of the tower of Babel as told of in Genesis] through multiplication of the people's languages and scattering of them all over the earth (as though until about 2500 BC there had been but one language in the world and no dispersion of peoples) is chiefly valid as a text to the old Hebrew notion that all languages but Hebrew are secondary. On opening a pleasant little Hebrew primer dated as recently as 1957, the student learns that 'this is the language that God spoke'. The idea is the same as that which underlies the Indian regard for Sanskrit, namely, that the words of this holy tongue are the 'true' names of things; they are the words from which things sprang at the time of creation. The words of this language are antecedent to the universe; they are its spiritual form and support. Hence, in their study one approaches the truth and being, reality and power, of divinity itself".

Our ways of looking at things might be right from where we stand, but if that is the only angle we look a

things from, we will get only a two-dimensional picture, like a photograph. We must try to realize that just as we have our ways of looking at things, so others have theirs, which, to them, are equally as valid as ours to us. We do not have to agree with other people's ways of looking at things, but if—once in a while—we would try to see things from *their* point-of-view, we might get a clearer picture, more complete, and with the third dimension of depth, than by just looking from our own angle. It is a fundamental error, from which countless conflicts stem, to suppose that just because it *is* our point-of-view it must therefore be right. And while we are often generous in our criticism of others and their opinions, we should be prepared to turn the spotlight of scrutiny on ourselves now and then. This might sometimes be uncomfortable, but it would certainly help us to be less critical of others and also be of benefit to our own search for ourselves.

Gold—unlike plastic—doesn't fear fire.

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TOILET TRAINING

Sometimes, convinced that certain ideas I've had for years are my own—that is, are results of my own mentations or insight—I have been somewhat chastened, when re-reading a book I'd read long ago, to come across one or more of 'my' ideas there! They were not mine at all, and never had been; I had merely picked up and absorbed them from somewhere else. I now realize, however, that these ideas, whatever they were, must have impressed me so much, struck me with such force, gelled, had made so much sense to me, that they had become an integral part of me to such an extent that there was no space between us. But isn't this what teachers and writers attempt and hope to bring about by their words: a transmission of some knowledge or information that will deeply touch the recipient?

Perhaps there are no original ideas; maybe they have all been conceived before at some time or other. Why should we always want to claim things as our own, and make something egoistical of it? Is it not enough for an idea to strike one and bring about some transformation? If learning about life becomes sufficiently important to us, we might discover that we are living in a treasure-house of wisdom and always have been; the world's accumulated wisdom is available to us all, to make use of in whatever way we see fit.

The subject I am about to comment on is not one that I've picked up from someone else, but is something fairly obvious, which I've thought about for some years already. And recently, when I read *Sangharakshita's* little book concerning his ordination as a monk—*Forty-three Years Ago*—I found the same idea expressed there, and will take the liberty of reproducing it here

(indeed, I would recommend the whole book to anyone because, like all Sangharakshita's books, it has a rare depth of objective perception and provides the reader with many good and solid points to ponder on). But before I do so, let me say that my purpose is not to criticize for the sake of criticizing but to criticize constructively; I feel there is great need for some critical thought on this matter, as the whole thing has gotten quite out of hand, and I've said and written before that Buddhism has become too *monkocentric*—that is, the monks have taken over the central place when only Dharma, in the sense of Truth, merits this. Many people have become 'monk-addicts' (with just a *little* help from the monks), and feel that they cannot do anything without monks, who, of course, must always be on a pedestal; monks have, in fact, become like the brahmin priests of the Buddha's time, and so we have come full-circle.

Sangharakshita says, on page 35: "During my fourteen years as a bhikkhu (monk) in India, I came to the conclusion that the extreme veneration shown to bhikkhus by the Theravadin laity is really quite a bad thing for them. I am not saying that respect itself is a bad thing. Neither am I saying that the showing of respect to others is bad for one. On the contrary, I believe parents, teachers, elders, and the truly great ought to be shown more respect than is customary nowadays. What I am saying is that the kind of veneration shown by the Theravadin laity to bhikkhus by prostrating before them, seating them on a higher level, serving them on bended knees, and giving even the juniormost of them precedence over the highest lay dignitaries, has a negative rather than a positive psychological effect on them. The effect is somewhat less negative in the case of a few of the more conscientious bhikkhus, for whom such veneration acts as an incentive so to live as to deserve veneration. In the case of the majority the ef-

fect is very bad indeed, serving as it does to reinforce their sense of the superiority of the bhikkhu over the layman, and giving them, in some instances, a quite inflated idea of their own importance and even of their own spiritual attainments. Indeed, bhikkhus of long standing may have become so accustomed to being treated with the kind of veneration I have described, that they are unable to imagine being treated in any other way and unable to relate to the laity except on the basis of such veneration. Should Western converts to Buddhism, for example, happen to treat them with no more than ordinary politeness, they are liable to become uneasy, disconcerted, or even annoyed. 'These people have no faith', they have been known to remark on such occasions, by 'faith' meaning faith in the superiority of bhikkhus.

"In making this criticism, as I am afraid it is, I am referring specifically to Theravadin bhikkhus. I am not referring to those Chinese or Tibetan monks who follow one or another version of the Sravastivadin Vinaya, a Vinaya [a system of discipline or training] which is in substantial agreement with its Theravadin counterpart. Tibetan monks, in particular, are far less concerned to insist on the difference between the monk and the layman. They have no hesitation, for example, in returning the salutations of the laity, which Theravadin bhikkhus rarely if ever do. The reason for this difference may be that Tibetan monks are psychologically and spiritually more sure of themselves, or it may be that in Tibet the veneration that in Theravadin countries is shown to bhikkhus is (or was) directed towards the tulkus or 'incarnate lamas'. Most likely the main reason is that the monk and layman alike accept the Bodhisattva ideal, which has been described as the 'Presiding Idea' of Tibetan Buddhism. Whatever the reason for it may be, the difference undoubtedly exists, Theravadin bhikkhus

being not only more concerned to insist on the superiority of the monk but also more concerned that the layman should give practical recognition to that superiority by supporting the monk and venerating him. Often, one of the first things to be taught by Theravadin bhikkhus working in India and the West is 'how to pay proper respect to bhikkhus'".

(Concerning the returning of salutations: I have just read the Dalai Lama's book, *FREEDOM IN EXILE*, and on page 214, this is what *he* said on the matter of monks returning the greetings of lay-people: " .... there are certain rules of etiquette to be observed in Thailand which I found distinctly difficult. According to Thai custom, the laity should always show respect for the Sangha, as Buddhist monasticism is properly known. However, it is considered entirely wrong for a monk to acknowledge such reverence, even when a person prostrates him or herself. I found this extremely hard to get used to. Under normal circumstances, I always try to return greetings. And whilst I did my best to restrain myself, I often found my hands behaving independently!" Upon his third visit to Thailand, the Dalai Lama decided to ignore this Thai custom, and saluted people whenever they saluted him; he said that while doing so, he could feel the eyes of Thai monks looking at him disapprovingly.

The reason why Theravadin monks do not return the greetings of the laity is because they say the laity are saluting the robe as a symbol and not the wearer of it. Yes, it's good to keep this in mind, as it helps to check the arising of pride; pride easily arises when this is forgotten. But, since even Theravadins acknowledge that everyone has the capacity or potential to become enlightened, when or if a monk returns people's respectful greetings, he could do so with the thought that

they are saluting the enlightenment-principle in him and he in them; it would be much nearer to the friendliness, compassion and humility as taught by the Buddha. It depends what is in one's mind when one does it**)**.

Such respect is based upon custom rather than upon understanding, and is bestowed instead of being earned. Moreover, respect of this nature can be, and often is, more intoxicating than whiskey. Several times, I have known people who were friendly, humble and easy-going as laymen but not long after ordaining as monks have changed and become aloof, proud, and condescending, ordering lay-people around, treating them like servants, and referring to others as their disciples; it is not nice to see, and is surely a loss. In such cases, I think to myself that they have not undergone proper toilet-training and have forgotten or failed to understand that no matter how high, famous, rich or powerful a person might be, he still has to use the toilet every day, like everyone else; he cannot pay or delegate someone—an employee, servant, disciple, friend, child or slave—to do it for him. If they were concerned about Dharma, they would understand that a toilet is an 'enlightenment room', not just in the sense that whoever goes in comes out somewhat lighter physically, but in the sense that what goes on there is a rather shameful bodily function, reminding us that, though we like to gather together to eat and enjoy the food, we perform the other end of the process alone and in private.

A toilet is a good place to meditate and remind ourselves that when we've got our head in the clouds, our butt is still on the seat. Following up this natural lead might well produce or give rise to some enlightenment of the spiritual kind. And so, toilet-training is not just something we undergo as infants, but something that

everyone, regardless of age, needs to practice regularly.

Many people use the time spent in the toilet to ponder on things, and many inspired ideas come from there. Others smoke there, read books or magazines, dream, fantasize, pick their nose, and so on. What a versatile room is the toilet!

Monks should keep it in mind that if they disrobe—as they may freely do anytime—people will no longer respect them as they did before; they would still be basically the same persons and might continue to live virtuous lives, but the form would have changed, and the form is very important to most people. Actually, we pay too much attention to the form and not enough—not *nearly* enough—to the essence, and thereby deprive ourselves of so much.

There is absolutely nothing that a monk can do that a lay-person (I feel uncomfortable about this word; it has derogatory overtones; a 'lay-man' or family-person is also a human-being, is he not?) cannot do, if he wants to, and I am speaking from experience, with authority, as I've seen things from both sides of the fence. If I were not a monk, I could say exactly the same things that I say as a monk, but few people would listen; by saying them as a monk, they somehow have a greater impact, greater weight; it's silly, but so, and means that people respect persons and appearance instead of what is true; as I just said above: sadly, the form is more important than the essence. Were it the other way around, people would not be afraid to investigate and question things; there would be no 'sacred cows'—no taboos—and everything would be out in the open.

Observing the state of things in many temples, we might be excused for thinking that pride, rather than

humility, is one of the results or effects of living as a monk; it is so widespread—*so* widespread, in fact, that when one has the good fortune to meet a humble monk, it is remarkable and refreshing. I regret having to say this, and I've not said it from malice; it is a shame to say it, and I only wish it were not true. But there are some people out there who are ready for, and who deserve, something more than just the name-and-form of things, and it is for such people that I write and speak. There is a price for everything, I know, and I am ready to accept the consequences of speaking so—and there probably *will* be consequences; no-one can please everyone, and if we try to, we might end up by pleasing no-one, and also losing our integrity. *Evam:* So.

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THE FORCE

Many of us are inclined to live overmuch in our heads, giving intellect the supreme position—or the *only* position—and ignoring or relegating the feelings to a greatly inferior station. Somehow, we must try to find a balance between these powerful forces.

The intellect is generally considered to be located in the brain; indeed, how could it be elsewhere? The heart is—or *was*—considered to be the base of the feelings, as the heart beats faster when we are emotionally aroused; but with the advent of heart-transplants this concept has been debunked, as people who have had such operations have not acquired the feelings of the person whose heart now beats in their breast, but feel pretty much as they did before. Therefore, we must conclude that the feelings are also part of the mind, though in a different department than the intellect.

But what do we mean by 'feelings'? Perhaps we had better try to define this term, insofar as we are able to. We are obviously not referring to physical feelings here—things like sensations of pain, discomfort, heat and cold, and so on—nor are we referring to things of the emotions, like grief, anger, joy, sorrow, etc. We are talking more of the intuition, whereby we *feel* that we *know* something to be so, without being told or previously investigating it; we sometimes say things like: "I have a *feeling* that this is right/wrong"; "I *feel* that something is going to happen". It has something to do with *insight* or a direct seeing or knowing, beyond the intellect. We feel *convinced* that something is so.

There are many things in our minds that we know little or nothing of: memories, tendencies, abilities and so on; we actually know things that we do not consciously

know, that we are not consciously aware of, having never learned them—not in *this* life, at least. At times, things come up in our minds that surprise us and cause us to think: "Now where did *that* come from? I didn't know that I knew *this!*" The mind is like the lake of boiling pitch in Trinidad which is constantly bringing things to the surface and taking them down again: old cars, tree-trunks, bones of prehistoric animals, and so on, things that, in some cases, have been there for so long that their existence was never even suspected.

There is a *force* working in us that we feel at times, without knowing or understanding anything about it. Let us look at the story of Prince Siddhartha with this in mind before examining it in ourselves:

Undoubtedly, he must have been a very special child, but was he *aware* of this, and of what did his specialness consist? He was provided with luxury, pleasure and entertainment befitting his station, but was pensive by nature, and as he matured into manhood, he was often observed sitting alone in the garden, lost in thought. If asked why, or if anything were wrong, he might have answered: "No, there's nothing wrong; I just want to be alone and quiet". The real answer was that he didn't know; it was the *force* working within him, not allowing him to be lost and swallowed by the pleasures of the palace; he *felt*, rather than *knew*, that it was all hollow and empty and had no real value, and that there had to be something more to life than this.

I have written elsewhere that, since his birth—and, according to the story, for many lifetimes previous to this—he had been a Bodhisattva (that is, an aspirant to Buddhahood or an 'apprentice' Buddha). While he was a Bodhisattva, however, he didn't know it; it was only after his attainment of Buddhahood, at the age of 35, when he looked back on his life, that He realized He

had been a Bodhisattva for so long before. Now, Siddhartha—or Gotama, to use His family-name—is the only historical Bodhisattva that Buddhists of all schools will accept, and it is from His case that we may conclude that while a person is a Bodhisattva, he—or she (let's not be sexist here)—does not know that he/she is. This throws a much clearer light on the idea of Bodhisattvahood, around which there is so much confusion and even acrimony in Buddhist circles.

When, after seeing the four startling sights—an old person, a sick person, a corpse and an ascetic, which the story says he had never seen before—he left the palace and went off into the forest to seek for truth, did he really *know* what he was doing, or was it again something that he *felt* he had to do? He had not had any experience of this kind of thing, nor did he, at that stage, remember his past lives, so he must just have been following his feelings.

It must have been tremendously difficult for him to do this, having led such a sheltered and pampered life in the palace. Imagine what it must have been like to change his fine clothes for the filthy, stinking, lice-infested rags of a beggar! If *we* do not have clean clothes every day—and sometimes more than once a day—we do not feel comfortable. Then, to beg for food at the hovels that he came across in the forest must not have been an easy thing for him to do, but he did it, and forced himself to eat the scraps of coarse and unfamiliar food that were offered to him, when he must have felt like vomiting. Could *we* do such a thing? Why did *he* do it? Why should he feel that only by leaving his home and family might he discover the causes of why we grow old, get sick, suffer, and finally die? Was the sight of just one ascetic enough to convince him that this was the way to go? Did he fully understand then that the emotional entanglements of family-life are not condu-

cive to detachment and seeing things clearly? Later on, he said that this is so, but did he *know* it when he left the palace to go off into the forest to search for truth?

He went to study under the most famous spiritual teachers of his time—noble-minded men who lived what they taught—and quickly mastered all they had to teach but felt it was not enough and that it would not lead him to enlightenment. No-one told him this because no-one knew, and he had no previous experience of it. So why should he even *think* that there must be something more? What the teachers had taught him was already a high stage—much higher, in fact, than anything he had known before in the palace—so why should he think there was anything higher? He didn't *know* there was, but *felt* that there must be, that there *had* to be, and so he left those teachers and went off on his own, and we learn that later on he did, indeed, find what he was seeking and became a Buddha, an Awakened One. Thereafter, He began to teach and explain to others about what He had found, but now it was a matter of *knowledge*, of conviction and certainty, rather than of *feeling.* It was his *feelings,* however, that led to His *knowledge. Feelings* came first; *knowledge* afterwards.

The Buddha came and He went; He is no longer with us to guide us and clarify our doubts. His Teachings are still with us, but we cannot be 100% sure that they are exactly what He taught, as things change with time, and His Teachings cannot be an exception; in fact, we can be 100% sure that what we have today in the books is *not* exactly what He taught, but this doesn't really matter as long as we perceive the essence, which is still there. There is much, so much, that we can learn from His Teachings, and I am in no way underestimating them here or implying that they are unimportant; certainly not. What I am saying is that they must be used as far as they can take us, and that we must ex-

perience reality for ourselves; books cannot do this for us; there is no substitute for direct personal experience, and we cannot regard a thing as true unless we have directly experienced it for ourselves; until that time, it will be just a matter of hearsay or conjecture.

Now to ourselves: It is imperative for *us* to feel the Force operating in *our* lives. Just because we might not have noticed it or even thought about it doesn't mean it's not there or that we've not felt it; it's there alright, and we *have* felt it. What is it, for example, that caused us to learn how to walk? We were not taught, and we did not learn by imitating others, because even babies born blind somehow learn to walk. We—or at least, I (and I presume this about others, too)—do not remember learning how to walk, but we can all see babies doing it and it doesn't look easy; we can see them trying and failing, falling down, bumping their heads, crying, but getting up and going on, until finally they succeed and don't fall down anymore. Why don't they give up in despair, as adults often do when they don't succeed after trying to do something a few times? Is it because they have no choice about it but must just follow the *Force*? And does the Force cease to operate in us when we have mastered the ability to walk? Surely not; it is there, although we are unaware of it; we have never been told of it and so, in most of us, it remains unknown, undiscovered, usually all our lives. What a pity! What a tragedy that so much is available to us that we know nothing of! In *The Voice of the Silence*, a mystical work of the Theosophists, it is written: "Alas, alas that all souls should possess *Alaya*, but that, possessing it, *Alaya* should avail them so little!" ('Alaya' is a Mahayana Buddhist term that is usually translated as 'Storehouse Consciousness'—that is, an aspect of consciousness that we all share; this is the *real* meaning of the term 'common sense'—that is, a sense that we

have *in common,* rather than something ordinary or commonplace; in fact, it is far from being common).

I can see now, looking back, how the *force* was operating in *my* life, although I still cannot explain it, and do not know, until the present moment, whether I was pulled out or pushed out of England, or both; all I know is that I couldn't stay but had to set off on my wanderings, which eventually led me to India, where, in 1970, I stumbled upon Buddhism, and what I learned of it made sense to me, although I had not been looking for it—consciously, at least. What I *had* been looking for, I did not know; in fact, I didn't even know that I was looking at all! Only when I found it (or *it* found me!) did I realize that I had been looking for something, because it filled a vacuum in me that had been there a long time.

Ah, but it didn't begin there, if it—or anything—can be said to have a beginning. Where—if anywhere—it began, I have no idea, but I can trace it as far as my childhood, where two things of significance stand out as I now look back: (1), in a family of meat-eaters, I was the only one who didn't like to eat meat. In itself, this might not be anything special as lots of kids don't like to eat meat; but together with the second factor, it seems meaningful: (2), I always felt drawn to India. None of my family had been to India, and none of them had the slightest interest in it, but India *called* me, and even the word 'India' did something to me, conjuring up images in my mind. And it was there, many years later, that I found 'it'. And India, by the way, is a land where vegetarianism has been a way of life for centuries.

I can account for these things in no other way but by *The Force*.

Sometimes, when giving a talk, I ask the audience: "Why are you here like this?" Before anyone can offer an answer, I say: "Don't even try to answer, because I

can tell you, you don't now, which is how it should be. If you can explain, it will not be right, as there are just *so* many things involved, and we can see only a few of them. But although you don't know, how does it *feel*? Does it *feel* right to you?

Carlos Castañeda, who wrote several books about the teachings of an American-Indian medicine-man by the name of Don Juan, some years ago quoted his teacher thus:

"Any path is only a path, and there is no affront, to oneself or to others, in dropping it if that is what your heart tells you .... Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself—and yourself alone—one question: Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn't, it is of no use".

No-one can ask, or answer, this question for us; we must decide for ourselves.

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A TRIBUTE

In 1993, just as I was about to leave Melbourne to make another trip to Malaysia and India, I came down with the 'flu, so decided to delay my departure for a week, preferring to be sick in Australia than overseas. Two days after I did so, my father, who had been very ill for over a year, and in and out of hospital quite frequently, died. For him, it was a release as he was 84 and had suffered a lot through his illness; moreover, it was clear that there was little chance of him recovering. It was not a shock for me to learn of his death, therefore, as I had been expecting it.

I returned to Adelaide for the funeral, which I would not have done if I had already left the country; and it was good that I went back, as I could feel his presence around the place as if he were still there, as he might well have been. I lay on his bed and meditated, trying to tune in to him and send him positive thoughts; at night, I sat outside his work-shed where he used to potter around, and sang his favorite song: "English Country Garden". I got a lot of energy coming through, and felt good.

Because my mother is a Christian, the funeral was conducted accordingly, with a minister of the Salvation Army presiding. But I stated my intention to speak, too. The minister spoke first, and said quite a lot about God, Jesus, life-after-death, Heaven, and so on. Then it was my turn to speak, and though I had prepared some notes beforehand, I spoke extemporaneously. The gist of my talk was as follows:

"It is not a strange thing that we should grow old and die. The strange thing, on the contrary, is that we

should live as long as we do! And who would wish to live forever? We get bored with our limited lives as it is!

"My father couldn't complain that life had short-changed him; he lived for 84 years and witnessed many momentous changes in the world in this most-momentous century of all. And it is appropriate that the father should precede the son into the Unknown; this is the natural order of things; it would be more sad if it were the other way around.

"I am of the opinion, after many years of experience, that a funeral-ceremony is more for the living than for the dead, as the dead have left us to follow their destiny, while the living remain, hopefully to learn more about the life that is ours for just a while. At a funeral-ceremony, the living are faced with the stark reality of life: that we will all go the same way as the one who has just gone. And death, strangely enough, is the key to life; instead of being something morbid to think about, it provides us with an incentive to live life more fully, while we have the opportunity to do so.

"Where we came from before we entered this world, and where we will go when we leave it, no-one knows. There are many theories and beliefs about this matter, but they often conflict with and contradict each other. We may believe this or that, but to be honest, we simply do not know.

"Buddhism, too, has its concept about what happens after we die, but since I, as a Buddhist monk, have had no direct personal experience of it, I am not qualified to say anything about it; were I to do so, I would merely be repeating what I have read or heard from others, and to me, that is not good enough. I prefer the answer that Confucius is reported to have given when someone asked him: "Master, what happens after we die?" He

said: “Why do you want to know about that? You don’t even know how to live now!”

“But, although I know nothing about life-after-death, I *have* had some experience of *this* life, and am therefore somewhat qualified to speak about it.

“My father was nominally a Christian, as that was the only religion he had been exposed to. But a name means very little, and sometimes less than nothing. However, he belonged to the religion that we all belong to, and cannot get away from, but which very few of us know much about, as it is so ordinary and every-day: the Religion of Life and Living. There are differences between people, of course—differences in race, nationality, religion, politics, culture, language and so on, but they are not nearly as important as we make them out to be. The similarities, the *common denominators*, on the other hand, are more numerous and much more important: people everywhere wish to be happy and free from suffering; all have hopes, fears and aspirations. And if we understand our own feelings, hopes and desires, we will also understand others, and know what to do in our relationships and dealings with them, for they feel basically the same as we do. The practice of the Religion of Life and Living, therefore, necessarily begins with ourselves, but should not end there. From understanding ourselves, we must extend our understanding outwards and expand our horizons to embrace an ever-greater portion of the world we live in.

“Life is precious, but the only place and time we ever have for living is HERE and NOW, for in reality, the past and the future do not exist. As far as we are concerned—each one of us—there is only the Here and Now; we cannot live anywhere else. Just try to live anywhere other than where you are: you will find that, wherever you are, it is always HERE. And whatever

stage of life you might be in—infancy, youth, maturity or old age—it is always NOW. It is therefore of great importance to live as close to the present as possible.

Science has shown that nothing can be completely destroyed without trace; things are merely transformed into other things. We should consider death, therefore, as a transformation, and that the life which informed our bodies here will flow on into other forms.

"So now, I hope and pray—and I'm sure you will join with me in this—that the person, force or energy which was my father in this life will go on into a higher and better life, will go on fearlessly and with a light heart. May he be well, courageous and safe now, wherever, however and whatever he might be! Thank you for your attention".

There were no Buddhists at my father's funeral, but after the service almost everyone there came up to me and said things like, "You gave us so much to think about!" The best part about it all, however, was that both my eldest sister and her husband—who have never been at all religious (I am from a family of 'heathens', apart from my mother, who have not the slightest interest in things of the spirit)—both had tears in their eyes, and my brother-in-law was so stuck for words that his handshake was followed by a hug! I was amazed, as he is an unemotional person and we have never been close. I thought: "If *only* my Dad could see this now! It would almost have been worth dying for!"

That afternoon, after we had returned home, the phone rang and my sister answered it. It was a Sri Lankan lady in Adelaide, wanting to know my number in Melbourne, as some friends of hers wished to invite me to preside at a memorial service for their late mother the following Saturday; she was pleasantly surprised, there-

fore, to learn that I was there in South Australia. I told her that I intended to return to Melbourne on the Friday as I was booked to fly out to Malaysia on the Sunday. She requested me to delay my departure yet again, assuring me that her friends would pay any cancellation fees. To accommodate them, and also because I saw an opportunity to propagate Dharma somewhat, I agreed to her request, and made a further postponement of my trip.

That Saturday, I was picked up and taken to the house where the ceremony was to be held. Many people had assembled, and after a sumptuous lunch that had been prepared, I began my talk, which went on for about two hours. At the end of it, someone whom I didn't at first recognize came up to me and said that he had enjoyed my talk. Recognition then dawned: it was a man with whom I had had some disagreement way back in 1975 and had not seen since. How good it is to resolve old conflicts and allow the wounds to finally heal!

This was yet another spin-off or follow-up of my father's death; but there were others, too, and I will recount some of them here in order to show how one thing leads to another in chain-like sequence. There is really no beginning or end to anything; everything has causes and in turn becomes the cause of something else. My father's death was not an accident but an effect, and led—like everything does—to other things.

After this talk, there was a request for another talk that evening, also to Sri Lankans. There is no Sri Lankan monk in Adelaide, nor, it seems, any monk who speaks English well, and so, whenever I'm back there and the Sri Lankans know it, they invite me to give talks, and I comply. They are concerned—and rightly so—that their young people, who have grown up there

and whose first language is English, do not understand their religion well, and might lose touch with it. Some of my talks there have gone on for almost five hours!

Between the talks in the afternoon and evening, the lady who had made the initial phone-call that located me, discovered that I was suffering from pains in my chest and left arm, so called a Sri Lankan doctor to come over and check me. Now, for the sake of anyone else who might be suffering from similar pains, I would like to say that I have had these pains, on and off, since 1976, but all the tests I underwent in various places (I even paid US$190 in Chicago for a stress-test), revealed nothing; all I was ever told was that it was not my heart at fault; I was never told what it was. The pain was so bad at times that it felt as if I were being stabbed or having a heart-attack. And in 1993, in Melbourne, I had a prolonged bout of this pain that spread from my chest down my left arm into my hand, where it had never been before, and so concerned was I by this that I went, late one night, to the emergency-ward of a large hospital nearby and had an ECG, but again, it showed my heart to be normal. The pain, this time, lasted for several months and was quite debilitating; I could neither sit, stand nor walk for long without the pain increasing; the only position that I felt reasonably comfortable in was lying down; it quite curtailed my activities. Numerous acupuncture sessions failed to bring any relief, nor did copious draughts of bitter Chinese medicine, or Western analgesics.

Dr. Karunaratna—for such was the name of the good doctor who came to check me—asked me some questions and inquired if I had ever had a neck x-ray. When I said ‘No’ he suggested that I have one, as he felt that the trouble stemmed from pinched nerves in my neck. Strange, but not long before, I had thought that the pains might be caused by nerves. Over the years, I

was given various ‘diagnoses’, including a blockage of the vital-energy (‘chi’), inflammation of the rib-cartilage, and even spirit-possession! Dr Karu’s explanation made more sense than even the sanest-sounding of the others, and I resolved to follow it up on my return to Melbourne.

When I got back to Melbourne the next day, I was met at the airport, and on the way back to the temple where I was staying, was asked if I would like to visit a friend on the route. “Why not?”, I said, and so we went. Upon arriving there, I was told that the father of someone who had been my Vietnamese translator for some years was near to death in hospital. I asked the man who had picked me up if we might go to the hospital next, so we went directly there. Making our way to the ward where the man was confined, we found all his family gathered around his bed, on which he was lying in a coma, connected to life-support apparatus, with tubes running in and out of him in all directions; it looked as though he was already dead. His family was standing around numbly and quietly, and I said to my translator that this was an appropriate time for a Dharma-talk; he agreed, and called everyone to listen. I spoke about the need at that time for everyone to control their grief, which would not help the departing person in any way and might even impede him, and to think with one mind in sending him positive thoughts. He loved you, I said, just as you loved him, and if he is still aware of us now, he would wish you to be happy, not sad. We cannot bring him back but must let him go, and in doing so, you should now focus on the good times you shared with him, and think positively, in order to speed him on his way. As I spoke like this, my translator noticed tears coming from his father’s eyes; had he understood what I was saying? It is nice to think so.

He died soon afterwards, and I was requested to speak at his funeral, which I did.

I was unable to get an appointment to see a neurologist in Melbourne before I flew out to Malaysia a few days later, as the waiting-list was too long, but in Kuala Lumpur, some friends took me to a doctor who had treated me for pneumonia there in 1991. I told him—Dr Joseph Soo—what Dr Karunaratna had said, and he immediately made an appointment for me to see Malaysia's leading neurosurgeon, who was a personal friend of his. Dr Bala's clinic was crowded and I had to wait for several hours before being called into his examining-room, by which time, the x-rays that had been taken on my neck while I was waiting, were ready. Again, I was lucky to meet a kind and sympathetic doctor—the third in a row—and he showed me from the x-rays and explained in terms that I could understand, the cause of the pains that had troubled me for so long. Not only this, but he told me it was quite a common complaint—known as *cervical spondylosis*—and that, in fact, he himself had had it some years before, but it had responded to medication without requiring surgery. He said that a minor operation could fix it permanently but advised against it at my age, as it might cause complications. He prescribed and supplied me with medication and I was happy to pay the bill of M$150; it was such a relief to finally know the cause of the pains, as not-knowing was just as bad as the pains themselves! If anyone else who has been suffering from this ailment, without knowing what it is, reads this and gets some insight into it, my pain will not have been in vain; I have told of it here in case there are other sufferers of the same thing who might get some relief.

The medication worked and, some weeks later, the pains had subsided to such a degree that I no longer needed to take it. I am under no illusions, however; the

pains will probably return, as they used to do from time to time over the years, as the condition has not been corrected. But, having discovered the cause, when they do return, I will know better how to deal with them, and there will not be the fear that it is life-threatening.

To conclude: Where my father has gone, I do not know, but I *do* know that I cannot now think anything negative about him; such thoughts do not come into my mind, and I'm happy about this, for he had many negativities, as we all do. There were many times when I thought badly about him, I must confess, but now these burdens have been put down and I must express my gratitude to him for all the help he gave me, directly and indirectly. He wasn't the best father in the world, perhaps, but neither was he the worst. He was, simply, my Dad.

THE DAWN OF WONDER

Ignorance is good, *if* we know it, because it then provides the basis, the material, to learn from, and discovering something that we have not known before is usually exciting and accompanied by joy. Not to know that we are ignorant—and we *are* ignorant, so *damned* ignorant!—deprives us of the possibility of learning or discovering the things that we are ignorant of or don't know. What we already know we can't learn; we can learn only things that we don't know, and as there is so much that we don't know, the field of learning is inconceivably vast, and consequently, the joy of discovery awaits us all in incalculable amounts.

While recently re-reading Fritjof Capra's book, *The Tao of Physics*, (I last read it in 1978 and it must surely be expected that my mind has opened a bit more since then), I came upon a passage about the space in an atom, how atoms are composed more of space—that is, what is *not* there—than what *is* there: the nucleus and the electrons that whirl around it. I would like to quote the passage here so that I won't get it wrong by putting it into my own words:

"Far from being the hard and solid particles they were believed to be since antiquity, atoms turned out to consist of vast regions of space in which extremely-small particles—the electrons—moved around the nucleus, bound to it by electrical forces. It is not easy to get a feeling for the order of magnitude of atoms, so far is it removed from our macroscopic scale. The diameter of an atom is about one hundred-millionth of a centimeter. In order to visualize this diminutive size, imagine an orange blown up to the size of the Earth. The atoms of the orange would then be the size of cherries; myriads of cherries, tightly packed into a globe the size of the

Earth—that's a magnified picture of the atoms in an orange.

"An atom, therefore, is extremely small compared to macroscopic objects, but it is huge compared to the nucleus in its center. In our picture of cherry-sized atoms, the nucleus of an atom will be so small that we will not be able to see it. If we blew up the atom to the size of a football, or even to room-size, the nucleus would still be too small to be seen by the naked eye. To see the nucleus, we would have to blow up the atom to the size of the biggest dome in the world, the dome of St Peter's Cathedral in Rome. In an atom of that size, the nucleus would have the size of a grain of salt! A grain of salt in the middle of the dome of St Peter's, and specks of dust whirling around it in the vast space of the dome—this is how we can picture the nucleus and electrons of an atom".

So, why have I written about atoms here when I started out talking about ignorance? What have atoms got to do with our spiritual lives? Quite a lot, actually; in fact, everything being interconnected, there is nothing that does not touch and affect us in some way or another. Apart from us being made up, physically, of atoms, the illustration above serves to show how much we do and do not know, how great is our ignorance. What we know might be compared to the atom's nucleus or the grain of salt, while our ignorance, or what we don't know, might be compared to the atom's space or the dome of St Peter's. Terrifying, isn't it? But it is also very exciting, as it means there is so much ahead of us to discover. Thus, ignorance, in one way, might be regarded as an asset, or undeveloped resources, something like iron-ore in the ground: if there is a lot of ore, much steel might be made from it! Of course, we cannot measure ignorance in the same way we can measure atoms and their components; moreover, there

are different degrees of ignorance. But a little bit of hyperbole can sometimes be useful in striking us and causing us to think; it is often used in the Buddhist (and other) scriptures.

I discovered the following passage among my notes, taken from *The Tangled Wing*, by Melvin Konner. It says what I feel, and I am going to reproduce it here, with this comment:

We seem to have largely lost our sense of wonder—that is, our ability to marvel at things—if we ever had it or were aware of it to begin with. This applies especially to children today, who have a superabundance—a gross superfluity—of means of entertainment in the form of electronic gadgetry, which robs them of the ability and need to entertain themselves, and inculcates in them a drug-like dependence; ever more and more stimulation is required to maintain the 'high'. It is, in my opinion, a loss rather than a gain, though having known nothing else, many young people probably would not agree with me.

"The dinosaurs ruled this planet for over a hundred million years, at least a hundred times longer than the brief, awkward tenure of human creatures, and they are gone almost without a trace, leaving nothing but crushed bone as a memento. We can do the same more easily and in an ecological sense, we would be missed even less. What's the difference? seems an inevitable question, and the best answer I can think of is that *we* know, *we* are capable of seeing what is happening. We are the only creatures that understand evolution, that, conceivably, can alter its very course. It would be too base of us to simply relinquish this possibility through pride, or ignorance, or laziness.

"It seems to me that we are losing the sense of wonder, the hallmark of our species and the central

feature of the human spirit. Perhaps this is due to the depredations of science and technology against the arts and the humanities, but I doubt it—although this is certainly something to be concerned about. I suspect it is simply that the human spirit is insufficiently developed at this moment in evolution, much like the wing of archaeopteryx. Whether we can free it for further development will depend, I think, on the full reinstatement of the sense of wonder. It must be reinstated in relation not only to the natural world but to the human world as well. At the conclusion of all our studies we must try once again to experience the human soul as soul, and not just as a buzz of bio-electricity; the human will as will, and not just as a surge of hormones; the human heart not just as a fibrous, sticky pump, but as the metaphoric organ of understanding. We need not believe in them as metaphysical entities—they are as real as the flesh and blood they are made of. But we must believe in them as entities; not as analyzed fragments but as wholes made real by our contemplation of them, by the words we use to talk of them, by the way we have transmuted them to speech. We must stand in awe of them as unassailable, even though they are dissected before our eyes.

"As for the natural world, we must try to restore wonder there too. We could start with the photograph of the Earth; it may be our last chance. Even now it is being used in geography lessons, taken for granted by small children. We are the first generation to have seen it, the last generation not to take it for granted. Will we remember what it meant to us? How fine the Earth looked, dangling in Space? How pretty against the endless black? How round? How very breakable? How small? It is up to us to try to experience a sense of wonder about it that will save it before it's too late. If we cannot, we may do the final damage in our lifetimes. If

we can, we may change the course of history and, consequently, the course of evolution, setting the human lineage firmly on a path towards a new evolutionary plateau.

"We must choose, and choose soon, either for or against the further evolution of the human spirit. It is for us, in the generation that turns the corner of the millennium, to apply whatever knowledge we have, in all humility but with all due speed, and try to learn more as quickly as possible. It is for us, much more than for any previous generation, to become serious about the human future, and to make choices that will be weighed not in a decade or a century but in the balances of geological time. It is for us, with all our stumbling, and in the midst of our dreadful confusion, to try to disengage the tangled wing".

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RELIGION DIVIDES, DHARMA UNITES

While in Malaysia in 1994, I was exhorting people to ask questions during one of my Dharma-talks, and someone responded: “But Malaysians are not in the habit of asking questions; it’s not the Malaysian way”. I replied to this: “What is a Malaysian? Can you really stereotype people like that, as if they are identical? Moreover, you cannot speak for other people but only for yourself. Do you presume to know others so well that you can speak *for* them and say that it’s not the Malaysian way to ask questions? Can you—or anyone else—give a description of a Malaysian that would fit *all* Malaysians? You obviously have the idea that Malaysians are like items from a factory, mass-produced and identical. Are you content to identify yourself with a large group of people, or do you want to find yourself and become an individual?”

What we say about others often says more about ourselves than about them. It happened that after I had explained about this, there were quite a few questions from my audience, but the person who had raised the objection earlier was silent. He should have said: “*I* am not in the habit of asking questions; it’s not *my* way”, rather than speaking for all Malaysians, because Malaysia, like every other nation, is composed of many kinds of people; also, each person is not constant but changes, and at one time might be like this, and another time, like that. It is really a mistake to categorize ourselves and others, as it prevents discovery.

When we say *what* we are—that is, when we say “I am a Buddhist”, for example—simultaneously we are saying, unspokenly, what we are *not*, that “I am *not* a

Hindu, am *not* a Christian", etc. We categorize and thus limit ourselves—put ourselves in a box with a label on it, as it were. And, because we do not know who or what we are—we *really* do not—however can we call ourselves anything at all? It is not only inappropriate to do so but it acts as an obstacle to finding out who we are, as it often happens that the names become so important that we think we have already arrived; we take the words/names for real, when a little investigation would reveal that a name is not a thing, is not the thing that it refers to. *This* side of Enlightenment, it is inappropriate to call ourselves 'Buddhists', as we do not know who or what we are, so how can we call ourselves anything? *That* side of Enlightenment, all words and names are meaningless and superfluous. So, when *is* the name 'Buddhist' appropriate?

It is derived from the root-word *Budh* or *Bodh*, meaning 'awake' or 'enlightened'. Does calling oneself 'Buddhist' make one enlightened, or does it not restrict and impede one from learning from non-Buddhist ways? And who is so bigoted as to think that Dharma is the monopoly of Buddhism, not to be found in other ways?

If we would relax our grasp on the names we call ourselves and others, and cease to identify with them as closely as we do, if we would see through and beyond them to our basic humanity, to see that "I am a human being, and you are, too", instead of dividing ourselves with names—"I am a Buddhist and you are a Christian", and so on—we would be in a much better position to avail ourselves of the accumulated wisdom of the human race, and it would certainly help us in our search for Truth, if that is what we are really *looking* for, as many of us say we are.

BEHIND THE MASK

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NONZENSE

In our haste or greed to get something, find something, or learn something, we often block ourselves, fall over our own feet, or overlook what is right in front of us. Our looking prevents us from seeing, because we always look with something in mind, with an idea of what it is we are looking for.

Not long ago, someone told me that she wished to make a trip to Taiwan in order to learn something of Dharma there, and asked my advice. I encouraged her to go but not to think about learning anything there; just go and see what happens, I said, and you will be sure to learn something; but if you go to deliberately learn something you will be inviting disappointment, because although you would probably still learn something, it might not be what, or as much as you expected.

As long as we have a basic understanding of Dharma and, very importantly, are interested in it—that is, take joy in understanding and discovering things—learning more, or the arising of insight, is assured; there is no need to constantly think about learning; after all, Dharma—in the sense of reality—is all around us and never absent for a moment; all we have to do is turn to it and tune into it; it is nothing special.

So, do not try to learn anything. By this, I mean, forget about learning and you will learn. But in case anyone misunderstands me here, I should say that this is something quite different than trying not to learn, which is a deliberate turning-away, resisting, rejecting and refusing to acknowledge what is here.

Because of our misguided efforts, we often cheat or rob ourselves of their full effects. Take the idea behind ‘making merit’, for example: certainly, we need merit; it

is the foundation of our Dharma-life, and without it, we won't get very far. But to have merit constantly in mind and to let it guide our actions, makes it into something like a business-investment and only increases our greed and attachment instead of reducing it.

Some people give things to others with the idea of getting a 'good return', which clearly reveals their motive; it is rather like buying shares on the stock-market. It is a pity that our actions are not better guided or rooted in clearer understanding. Obviously, like this, we think that merit is something that comes to us from outside, from other people or things, when, in reality, it comes—like enlightenment—from inside ourselves.

As a monk, I depend upon the support of others (we *all* do, in various ways, either directly or indirectly) and although I am grateful, of course, for people's kindness (without which I could not live as I do), I must say that it is uncomfortable to be seen as a 'field of merit' in which to plant good seeds. Needless to say, I want to be enlightened, but *wanting* to be enlightened and actually *being* enlightened are two quite different things. How far from enlightenment I am I cannot say, of course, but I'm afraid that offerings made to me, as a monk, will not produce great results, and I want to warn people about this. If people like to support me in my efforts to propagate Dharma, however, it is another thing, especially if they themselves have been able to learn something through me, but I don't like to be used as an investment. I would also like to advise people to give for the joy of giving and because they have the opportunity and capacity to give, and not from thoughts of what they might get in return.

Many years ago, a small group of people supported me with the obvious aim of 'making merit' thereby; they were obsessed with merit, and treated me as their 'pet

monk', more like an object than a person, or as someone who should obey them and live up to their expectations. It was uncomfortable, and I felt sorry that they could/would not see any further than this. When, in '76, I changed robes from the Theravada to the Chinese style, these people were most upset and behaved as if I had betrayed them; they left me and ceased to support me, but this was a relief to me rather than a disappointment. They were so attached to the form that they didn't even bother to inquire *why* I had changed robes, and didn't see that I was the same person as I was before, with the same ideas. I never saw them again, but I hear they are still hung-up with form and merit.

The Buddha once told Anathapindika—one of His wealthy patrons, who offered the Jetavana garden to Him and the Order—that alms given to the Order of Monks, together with the Buddha, is meritorious; more meritorious than such alms, however, is the building of monasteries for the use of the Order; more meritorious than the building of such monasteries is Taking Refuge in the Three Jewels; more meritorious than Taking Refuge in the Three Jewels is the observance of the Five Precepts; more meritorious than observing the Five Precepts is meditation on Loving-Kindness; and most meritorious of all is the development of Insight into the fleeting nature of things.

Venerable Narada, in his book, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, says: "It is evident that generosity is the first stage of the Buddhist way of life. More important than generosity is the observance of at least the Five Rules of regulated conduct, which tends to the disciplining of words and deeds. Still more important and beneficial is the cultivation of such ennobling virtues as loving-kindness which lead to self-development. Most important and most beneficial of all self-discipline is the sincere effort to understand things as they truly are".

Let's examine the concept of generosity a little here: Is it generosity to give something in the hope of getting something in return or as a result? That is really giving to oneself, not to others, is it not? Should we not give from the joy of giving and because we have the opportunity and capacity, and not from what we might get in return? We have already received so much from life; how can we—how *dare* we—think of getting anything more, without understanding what we already have? What we can give or put back is very little compared with what we have received. So, have we not, in our greed for results and 'merit', forgotten the meaning of generosity, and turned the very basis of our spiritual discipline into a materialistic pursuit? I know, as I say this, that I risk cutting the support away from under me, but I would willingly make do with less for the sake of helping people understand something more of the great spiritual Way of the Buddha; it pains me to observe the excessive emphasis on 'making merit' nowadays, when there is just so much to be discovered and so far to go, and I say this out of appreciation for people's kindness; I don't want their kindness to be wasted and in vain.

I would like to quote here a short extract from Sangharakshita's recent book, *Forty-three Years Ago* (page 26), where he speaks of the relationship between monks and lay-people; he explains that many people have fallen into the erroneous way of thinking that the spiritual life is something reserved for 'ordained people', and therefore the layman " .... does not seek liberation from mundane existence. Instead, he seeks to attain a state of greater happiness within mundane existence, both here and hereafter. Such a state is not attained by means of wisdom, but by means of merit. 'Making merit' thus comes to be the principle religious activity of the Theravadin layman, and the best and easiest way for him to make merit is by supporting the monks, in the

sense of providing them with food, clothing, accommodation and medicine (the traditional 'four requisites'), and, in modern times, many other things besides. Supporting the monks is the best and easiest way of making merit because monks are leading the spiritual life and because, according to tradition, the more spiritually-developed the person is to whom offerings are made the greater is the merit that accrues therefrom".

In Thailand, where Buddhism has largely degenerated into a thing of mere tradition, and is no longer a thing to live by (of course, there *are* people there who understand and live by it, but they are in a minority, which is why I said *largely*), there are about 300,000 monks; they can be seen everywhere, in their distinctive saffron robes. Every day, most of these monks go out with their alms-bowls to receive—*not beg for*—the food that people have prepared to offer them. But, because there are so many monks in some areas, it is sometimes difficult for some of them to obtain enough to eat. On the days of the new-moon and full-moon, however—days which, according to tradition, are considered special—so many people wait to offer food to the monks that they receive too much. Now, why this imbalance? Why, on most days, do some monks get barely enough to eat, but on two days of the month, they get too much? It is because these days are considered special and that therefore food offered then will produce more merit than food offered on other days. It is not so, of course, but that's what people believe, and it is a clear sign that greed for merit is behind their offerings on these days; thus, monks are used as business-investments!

Since not everyone knows who *Bodhidharma* was, I would like to introduce him somewhat, before telling something of him that is relevant here. Bodhidharma was an Indian Buddhist monk who lived in the 6th cen-

tury CE and was acknowledged to be the 28th patriarch of a line of masters going back to one of the Buddha's chief disciples, Mahakasyapa. This lineage of teachers had preserved a special kind of teaching on meditation. When Bodhidharma went to China to propagate these teachings he became the 1st Patriarch of the Ch'an School of Buddhism there (which later became known as *Zen* in Japan).

Not long after arriving in China, his fame reached the ears of the Emperor, who was a good and pious Buddhist, and he invited Bodhidharma to the palace for an audience. When he came, the Emperor received him respectfully, and told him of all the good deeds he had done to help Buddhism flourish in his realm. When he asked Bodhidharma how much merit he had made from all his good deeds, however, he was surprised when Bodhidharma bluntly replied: "None whatsoever, your Majesty!" His further pronouncement that Buddhism was "nothing holy, but pure emptiness", confused the Emperor even more, and Bodhidharma left without explaining what he meant.

This story has been told and retold countless times over the centuries, and it has been accepted that the Emperor was suffering from delusion and wrong view; Bodhidharma's manner is seldom if ever questioned. It is generally assumed that he was enlightened before he went to China, but if so, why would he need to sit in a mountain-cave for nine years, seeing no-one and saying nothing? And why, if Bodhidharma was so wise—even before his complete enlightenment, if that is what happened in the cave—and cared enough about the propagation of Buddhism to go to China in the first place, did he not explain his meaning to the Emperor, who was not only a good man, but also had tremendous capacity to lead many others to a better understanding if he had understood better himself? Surely, this was a

mistake on the part of Bodhidharma. Why did he speak so cryptically when a simple explanation might have produced a much better result? (It is said that, later on, when someone else explained Bodhidharma's meaning to him, the Emperor *did* understand, so why didn't Bodhidharma explain it himself?) Many followers of Zen—especially Western Zen *afficionados*—are guilty of this kind of thing, and it is done, in many cases, to display their grasp of the subtleties of things they think are beyond 'lesser mortals'; it is often just a game, a silly show.

Bodhidharma might have explained that actions done with the aim of getting a return—as had been the Emperor's motive—will produce corresponding results on the material level, but not *merit,* which has the function of *decreasing* the defilements of Greed, Hatred and Delusion; in fact, our greed is only *increased* thereby. Merit is the result of actions done through understanding, of actions done knowing that they are the right things to do. And the freer our actions are from the desire to get a return, the greater will be the merit; conversely, the more we act from the desire to get a return, the less our merit will be therefrom. How we do things is just as important as what we do.

In 1973, I used to visit someone who was seriously ill in a small-town hospital in Malaysia. My visits often used to coincide with those of the patient's younger brother, who was about thirteen at that time.

One day, a prisoner from the local jail was brought into the ward and handcuffed to the bed he was to occupy. He was studiously avoided by the other patients and their visitors and consequently spent most of his time alone. *I* went over to speak with him, but the language-barrier did not allow much communication.

The younger brother of my patient must have been thinking about this because, after a few days, without any prompting from me, he went over to the prisoner, removed the chain with his Buddha-pendant from around his neck, and unspokenly offered it to him.

This action, performed without any idea of 'merit', touched the prisoner and brought tears to his eyes. Later on, after he had served his sentence and was released from jail, he went to visit his young benefactor and kept in touch with his family for quite a while; he had seen that someone—a complete stranger—cared about him, a criminal.

To give with love, with no other motive, is surely a real act of merit, regardless of who one gives to. But if our giving becomes calculative—that is, looking at the person to whom one is giving and considering if he is worthy of our gift or not, or wondering how productive of merit giving to someone might be—can there be merit therefrom? This is something to be pondered on. Merit, like enlightenment, comes from inside, not from outside.

Why should we always worry and crave for more when we have already got so much out of life? This is low thinking, and demonstrates lack of insight.

Somewhat the same idea might at first seem to be found in the words of Jesus: "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing"; however, the full text of the Christian admonition changes the point of view, and we can see that there is still an aim in mind:

"Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their

reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you". (Matt 6:1-4).

DO IT YOURSELF

If anyone can help a deceased person in any way, who would be better-qualified to do it than his or her own family members? If we demystify the ceremonies that are performed for the dead and if they cease to be looked upon as sacred traditions, then we might understand their purpose and what lies behind them.

If, as all religions claim, life does not die at the body's death, if something immaterial survives and continues—soul, spirit, consciousness, mind, call it what you like—how is it possible to help it? Surely, food, clothes, flowers, money and other offerings are of no use but are just symbols, tokens of respect, love and concern for the safety and well-being of the deceased.

Recent research* has turned up many cases of people being declared clinically dead, but after some time, returning to life, with accounts of how it felt to be dead. Such accounts, from people of various cultural and religious backgrounds, tally to a remarkable degree in many ways. Many of the dead-who-returned-to-life told of how they were aware of what was going on around their just-vacated bodies from their own remote, outside viewpoint; they recounted, in accurate detail, what doctors, nurses, and other people said and did in their efforts to resuscitate the body, of the grief of relatives, etc. But, although the 'dead person' could hear and see all that was going on, he/she/it could not communicate with the living in any way; it was strictly a one-way thing. *(See *Life After Life* by Dr. J.D. Moody, and other books on the subject).

From this, it can be seen that the 'dead' can be contacted, though—as far as this particular type of research has extended—on a 'speaking-*to*' rather than on

a 'speaking-*with*' basis. It is not known, however, for how long this one-way channel of communication is open, nor if it is open in the case of *all* dead people; it might be for just a short time, while the spirit or the consciousness is in the immediate vicinity of its corpse and before it passes on to new fields of experience; of that, we are not qualified to speak, as we have only personal opinions and not verifiable facts. Some religions tell of an 'intermediate' period between the death of the body and the re-embodiment or rebirth; some say that this can last as long as 49 days (49, it will be noticed, is the multiple of 7 x 7, and to many people, 7 was/is a mystical number for some reason or other, though there is no objective evidence to support this, any more than there is for 13 being regarded as an unlucky number; it is probably just an old superstition, given weight by people's accumulated hopes and fears). Others believe the intermediate period can last for hundreds of years as we reckon time on *this* side of death, while others say that rebirth takes place immediately upon bodily death. So on this point there is disagreement and it is best to keep open minds, without forming any conclusions, as nobody knows and neither can it be proved one way or the other. We are concerned here with how to help dead people, if this is at all possible, and not with metaphysical speculation.

Let's suppose—just suppose—that a just-deceased family-member or friend is still 'within range' of us: what can we do to help him? We cannot pull him back to his *abandoned vehicle*, and it is worse than useless to try, for that might 'tear him apart' between staying and continuing on the way he must go; we can impede as well as expedite his passage, and so we should know how to go about the latter.

If we love someone, we want him/her to be happy, not to be sad; if we saw him sad we would be sad, too,

and would try to cheer him up and encourage him to overcome his sadness, would we not? So, suppose the deceased could see his family and friends sad and grieving over his death: would he not also feel sad about that? By grief, we cannot help a 'dead' person; in fact, our grief might only intensify his uncertainty over his new and unfamiliar condition. Therefore, the best way the living might help the dead (who are not really dead, but just in a different dimension or frequency, having left behind their physical forms), is not to be sad and to mourn, but to send positive thoughts—and even spoken words; there is no harm in that—of love and encouragement, bidding the 'dead' person to be strong and to go on with his journey, as there is no use in 'hanging around'. This 'transmission' (like a radio broadcast), would be best done in surroundings where the deceased lived and was happy, and no-one is better qualified to do this than his immediate family members or close friends. Why should we consider anyone more qualified than these? There is no need to call in outsiders, with whom the 'dead' had little or no connection, outsiders who might not really care, in many cases, about the welfare of the 'dead', and to whom it's 'just another'. Moreover, it is not necessary to spend anything on the 'send-off'; it wouldn't be disrespectful on the part of the relatives to do things by themselves without spending a large sum of money. However, the thought of what others might think and say if the family does not comply with tradition impels people to spend money that sometimes they cannot afford. Would this please or help the deceased?

Years before I saw the movie, *Ghost*, starring Patrick Swayze, Demi Moore and Woopie Goldberg, I had felt that some people die so suddenly and unexpectedly that they don't realize they are dead, and can get stuck in that condition for a long time. They can see and hear

everything that goes on here, but cannot be seen or heard except by clairvoyants or other gifted people. This must be a miserable condition, but it is possible—at least in some cases—to help such spirits, by explaining to them that they are no longer part of our world, so should 'let go' and continue with their journey. The movie strengthened my conviction that this is so. I recommend watching it with this idea in mind; it makes a lot of sense, and it would be interesting to know of the research that went into the making of this film.

In the obituary columns of the newspapers we can sometimes see the words: 'No flowers, please; instead, donations in the name of the deceased may be made to cancer-research [or similar cause]'. This shows more understanding and is certainly of more use; moreover, if the dead person was of a charitable nature while alive, and if he could observe such donations being made in his memory, he would probably feel happy thereby, which might cause him to be released, mentally, from any miserable condition he might be in—or to rise above it—for joy makes the mind buoyant and light.

Following tradition, some Chinese people burn paper houses, paper cars, and other things made of paper, as well as token bank-notes—'hell-money'—in the naïve belief that their departed ones will receive these things in more-real form on 'the other side'. What a quaint idea, and also, what a waste of money, as these things are far from cheap, produced, as they are, by people who depend for their living on the superstitions of others who ask no questions or who are afraid to go against the traditions of their ancestors. But such practices are rather incongruous now, and should be quietly left behind. There are much better uses for money than that! In short: *DO IT YOURSELF!*

Now, having reached my half-century, wondering how I ever managed to get to such a 'ripe old age', I think more and more of my own demise, and the funeral, if any, that will follow; it cannot be far away, at the most.

Since 1993, I have carried a note around in my passport, with the following text:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

Since I found Dharma some years ago, I have tried to serve others in various ways. I would like to continue to be useful even in death, and so, wherever I die, I wish my body to be used for medical research and/or organ transplants.

To date, and as far as I know, my kidneys, liver and heart are functioning well, and might be useful. However, since 1976, on and off, I have had severe pains in the left side of my chest, and none of the numerous doctors I have consulted about it over the years have given me a satisfactory explanation; they all concurred though that it was not my heart. The pain has recently spread into my left shoulder and arm, where it has never been before.

My bronchial-system has also been weak for many years, rendering me susceptible to coughs lasting months that responded to almost no kind of treatment. In 1991, such a cough developed into pneumonia.

I have been free from headaches, but have had sharp nervous pains in my arms, hands, legs and feet for no apparent reason. During my years in the tropics, I also had some rheumatism, but that faded away. For

the past seven years, a pinched nerve in my right hand has caused permanent semi-numbness in my little finger and the finger next to it, and that half of the palm; there is also pain there at times.

There is no need to consult my next of kin about this my decision, as I am a monk and have no wife, children or other dependents to consider.

This note is now a bit out-of-date, as since writing it, I finally discovered the cause of my chest-pains, and have also developed diabetes, so I'll have to update it, but the rest of it still stands.

At one point, I had some hesitation about it because of the widely-held belief that the body should not be disturbed for several days after death, in order for the spirit or consciousness to disengage itself and complete the process of leaving the body. But, recalling the story that, in one of his previous lives before the one in which he attained Enlightenment and became the Buddha, Sakyamuni had offered himself to a starving tigress in order to save her and her cubs, I have decided to go ahead with the idea for my body to be used for medical research and 'spare parts'; I do not want it to take up space needed by the living (by burial), nor do I wish it to cause pollution in the atmosphere (by cremation). If my body is not used for medical research and spare parts, next in line of preference would be sea-burial, to become food for fish; there is little likelihood that this would be allowed, however—nor burial at the foot of a forest tree, to nourish its roots—so the next alternative would be cremation, but in the most economical way possible, and the ashes scattered on the sea or somewhere on land, not kept anywhere to cause bother to anyone. A cardboard coffin—such as is now coming

into use in the West—or simply a shroud like Muslims use, is all that is needed.

I do *not* want a ceremony, with monks, priests, beating of drums, ringing of bells, clanging of cymbals, lots of smoke and so on, as I do not believe in such ceremonies and am in fact opposed to them! If I die in a place where I have friends, I would like a few selected songs to be played in my memory, as they have Dharma content, and were meaningful to me, and I have tried to live by their spirit; also, some readings from the scriptures. I have made a tape of these and am carrying it around with me, in order that it may be played at my funeral and so that I can *do it myself.* There is no need for anything other than this. Oh, and no flowers; leave them growing where they are. Anyone wishing to make a donation in my name may do so for the purpose of printing Dharma-books to help someone understand something.

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LIVING TOGETHER

Do people not yet have enough suffering that they do such evil things as killing and maiming innocent animals just for their pleasure? Do they want more suffering? Is anybody so stupid?

The monkeys, deer and other animals, fish and birds are happy in the forest, living out their short lives. Why do we not allow them to stay there? They are also like us, wishing to be happy and free from pain; no living thing likes to suffer.

Causing pain to others will only result in pain to oneself. If we really love ourselves we should do good to others instead of inflicting pain on them, because—surely—by hurting others, it is a way of showing hatred to ourselves, rather than love.

When we have suffered enough, and are tired of suffering, this will be shown in our abstinence from hurting others. On the other hand, hurting others is a sign that we have not yet had enough suffering. But that is easily remedied if that's what we want, as suffering is not hard to find; it's not in short supply.

Many people are under the false impression that the animals in the world around us are for our use and pleasure; this idea is even propagated by some religions. What a cruel idea to teach! It surely could not come from a religion with any degree of compassion! If people have just a little wisdom, they will easily see the errors of such teachings, and reject them as leading the wrong way.

Men do not own this planet; we share it—for a while, until we die—with other forms of life. Just because man is the strongest form and can easily destroy things, that

does not mean that the other forms are there for him to exploit and destroy; we should not be so selfish and foolish as to think like that. We must learn to live together with other living things, seeing that they also have a right to live.

[I wrote the above passage at the Bataan Refugee Camp, Philippines—where I spent several years—after an old lady had brought to the temple a young monkey she had just bought in the Camp market. This monkey, when it had been trapped by some refugee in the nearby forest, had had one of its hands cut off at the wrist. I have written about this incident elsewhere, and how I learned so much from this monkey that I came to regard it as one of my teachers].

SEEING BEYOND SELF

Someone once came to me to complain that his mother was overly-superstitious and believed in untenable things. I told him that he was lucky to have such a mother and that he should regard her as his teacher, as she unintentionally provides him with an example of things to be avoided, if possible.

It is normal and natural for kids to rebel against authority, but often, it is just rebellion for the sake of rebellion—a blind hitting-out at things that are not understood. If we understood things clearer, and rebelled intelligently, our rebellion would not only satisfy our need to rebel and assert ourselves—a normal part of growing up and learning to stand on our own feet—but would enhance psychological growth and maturation. Indeed, such rebellion should go on throughout our lives and not just when we are young (*that's* just a 'practice-run'), because the forces of darkness, ignorance and oppression are always with us—within and without—and our search for truth necessarily entails rebellion—rebellion against everything that is not true, everything that is wrong and harmful.

It is just as important to know what is wrong as it is to know what is right, and if we can perceive and understand wrong in others, we might be able to avoid such wrong in ourselves. Imperfections in others provide us with a platform for going further than them ourselves, and so we should be grateful to other people for their faults and failings as well as for their good points and things we admire in them. This requires discernment on our parts, not fault-finding, and we must keep it in mind that no-one wants to be wrong or bad. We all

have negativities of character, but this is not because we want such things (we are all mentally imbalanced to some degree, as we are *this* side of Enlightenment, but we are not *that* crazy!) So, recognizing that we have *our* faults and limitations, we learn to be more tolerant of, and to make allowances for such things in others, and in this way, something positive can be seen in negativity; there *is* white in the black.

No-one is 100% bad, and to say about someone—as we sometimes do—that, "he is no good", is not only incorrect but is a limitation of ourselves, and actually says more about ourselves than about the one we are referring to, as it means we have failed to perceive anything good about that person, and there *is*—there *must* be—something good about him, as he is a human being. Thus, that is something we should never say.

When we turn our gaze inwards, introspectively, to see what is there, we must be equipped with honesty and courage, as we are sure to find, almost immediately, frightful and horrible creatures lurking there, things that, hitherto, we have managed to suppress and contain quite well, or to disguise with reason and rationalization in order to preserve our relative sanity and self-respect, or have pretended that they didn't exist.

To many of us, it comes as a shock to discover the presence of such disreputable characters as ambition, pride, envy, anger, hatred, jealousy, lust, greed, deviousness, hypocrisy and so on, ensconced in our minds. It is even more of a shock to realize that these things are not mere guests in temporary residence, who can be given notice to leave at any moment, and who will readily comply, but are elements of what we call our character—that is, they are parts of our psychic make-up. Compared with positive things like generosity, self-

restraint, kindness, understanding, forbearance, willingness to step back at times and make way for others, ability to recognize when we are in the wrong and to apologize, and so on—the negativities are stronger, more numerous, and more tenacious.

The shock of discovering and recognizing what is there is too much for many of us—understandably—and we hurriedly back off and close the door on it all, never to open it again, preferring to let things be as they are and to live under the illusion that "all's well with the world".

But a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. We have names for things like jealousy, anger, greed, pride and so on, and recognize them as such, only because they are there in us. If they existed only in other people and not in ourselves how would we be able to recognize and understand them? They are probably remnants of our remote and primitive past, when personal survival was of the utmost importance and everyone had to look out for themselves. We can see these things openly manifested in animals; they are not found only in humans.

We do not live alone in this world, however, and although, individually, we may turn away from and refuse to admit the existence of negative states of mind in us, collectively we cannot. The world is made up of individuals, and if we ourselves, and even the majority of people like us, refuse to see and accept what is there within us, there will always be some brave pioneers who will dare to venture where most of us fear to tread. And their discoveries, painfully gained and dearly bought—like the discoveries of science—will then be available to the human race as a whole, for people good and bad, weak and strong, rich and poor, young

and old, near and far, just as, when a cure for cancer is finally found, it will benefit humanity as a whole, and not just the nation or race of the person who discovers it. It is fascinating to see how, when we discover something good, beautiful or true, we transcend the barriers of like and dislike we have erected—or have been erected—in our minds; our discoveries are made available not just for people of our own various groups, like family, nation, race, religion, or to people who we like for whatever reason, but to all, without distinction, including those we don't like. Discovery of the Good, the Beautiful and the True liberates us from the narrow limits of self and gives rise to love, and love, in this sense, does not choose or divide and say: "I love these but not those". It embraces all equally, without discrimination, as it is not born of self but of understanding; it has no center and therefore no circumference.

Although the present is the result of the past, we have not made ourselves—you and I—as we are now. It is very important to understand this, so that we may cease feeling guilty and responsible. This body-mind of ours is not of our own deliberate creation, but is rather a product of countless forces working together, and involving not a little ignorance. Actually, we—as we are now—had very little to do with its creation; we merely inherited it, like something passed down in the family for generations, although it never belonged to anyone else before us. Imagine, if you had used your choice, intelligently, from childhood, and if your choice had been enough to bring about change, would you have chosen to be as you are right now? Are there not things about yourself that you are dissatisfied with, ashamed of, and would like to be rid of, if you could? While everything arises from causes, and nothing by accident, it does not mean that we have carefully and consciously

orchestrated the causes to become as we are, for it is plain to see that we are nowhere near to being masters of ourselves, but are more like victims, led hither and thither by our whims and fancies, which again, are things that we do not understand, and which we did not deliberately cultivate.

I am speaking of conditioning. We are products of our environment and our times, results of countless causes conspiring together, of innumerable influences pressing on us from all sides, bending, turning, twisting, molding, nurturing, brainwashing, indoctrinating us: parents, siblings, friends, teachers, leaders, colleagues, strangers and even enemies, by society and its ideals and standards in general, language, education, politics, religion, philosophy, climate, food, clothes, music, television, fashion, the media, and so on. Simply put, we are not ourselves, but neither are we the creation of any one thing like a God, a factory production-line or an artist's studio; we are results of causes, of conditioning; we react according to our conditioning, and will continue to do so until we learn to understand it, and then we might begin to operate more freely and independently, might begin to rebel intelligently instead of blindly, to put our powerful preferences aside and look at things less subjectively and more objectively, and to be more in control of our lives than we are.

Even our names are not ours, but were given to us, applied to us, stuck on us by others to enable them to conveniently identify us and distinguish us from others. We have accepted their names for us without question and have taken them for real, so that, when asked: "Who are you?" we answer with the name that others have given us. This is a great mistake, and a great loss, because, first of all, we do not know who or what we are, and secondly, names and words are not the things

they refer to. We are much more than a name that distinguishes us from others, much more than a sound in the air or a word on paper; but how much more, and who or what we are, we have yet to discover.

Looking at things like this, we see that people cannot be held totally responsible for their actions, as they really do not know why they are doing them, but are often merely reacting, as programmed victims, according to their conditioning.

Poor humans! We stagger through life, not knowing who we are, why we are here, where we came from, or where we are going, subject to our blind urges and fears, searching for and grasping after happiness but usually finding only more of its opposite; confused and suffering, we move ever forwards to the dreaded finalé of death. Our situation as individuals and even as members of the human race, is pitiable, and, as we peer into the mists of the future, trying to perceive something there and make sense of it all and find some light therein, we may be excused for feeling lost and hopeless.

Yet all is not black and bleak. If we look back on the way we have come, and review our history as a species, we may see a pattern in our sorrow and madness, and path that twisted and turned, rose and fell, doubled back on itself, came up against obstacles, and indeed, often seemed to disappear altogether, only to reappear elsewhere. Our collective history has not been just a series of blunders, wars and crimes, a record of man's inhumanity to man, an utmost unbroken trail of tragedy and suffering; we have also made progress, not just in a material sense, but mostly in a mental and spiritual way. We have achieved widespread literacy in a very short time, and this is a great leap forward, as it has

altered our attitudes and behavior and broadened our horizons tremendously. And although we still give vent to our violent tendencies in aggression and war, deep inside us, we know that the old conviction that 'might is right' is not so. Our conscience is alive and well, though not yet strong enough, perhaps, to prevent our passions from carrying us away and leading us to do things which we know to be wrong. But do we not respond, on an unprecedented scale, to disasters and misfortunes far away, by donating to help the victims, who are often of different races, nationalities and religions than our own? We *are* making progress, even if only slowly and painfully; the picture of human-nature is not totally black and negative; there is *Yin* as well as *Yang*, and so much that is positive remains to be discovered in us.

Life is like a river:
Straight, it seldom flows,
But twists and turns and winds about,
As on and on it goes.

Life is like a play, in which
We are all actors.
But the script is written as we act,
Not before, and no-one knows
What will happen next.

Alone, and by ourselves, we simply do not exist; in isolation, our lives simply have no meaning. Only when seen as parts of something else—in context, like a piece of a jigsaw-puzzle—do our lives have any sort of

meaning. We do not live alone, by and for ourselves. In order to make sense of our lives, in order to be more in control of our lives than we have been so far, in order to go in the direction that we wish to go, in order to live more positively, we must understand two things. First, our conditioning: how we have come to be as we are, that is, as the result of many causes, and not by choice or plan; and secondly, that we do not live alone. Our lives can only be lived effectively if we understand that we are parts of the community, and that whatever we do has an effect upon the community, just as what all the other members of the community do has an effect—even if we do not see or feel it—upon us. We henceforth work, not just as a way of earning a living and supporting our families, but as a way of serving others; whatever work we do, as long as it is within the limits of the Right Livelihood of the Noble Eightfold Path, can and should be seen as a way of contributing something to society, and making the world a better place for all to live in; one's work therefore becomes—and is seen as—part of one's Dharma practice; it becomes a spiritual or religious activity. Imagine how this world would be if everyone would consider their work in this way. People would find joy in their work instead of working only for money, with long faces; they would have much more energy and work more efficiently.

So, too, with study. We spend years in school and university, some of us, all the time thinking that we are studying for and helping only ourselves instead of realizing that our studies enable us, first of all, to overcome ignorance with knowledge, and secondly, to be of more help in the world around us than if we remained ignorant. It is not—or should not be—just a matter of studying so as to become better qualified and earn more money. But most people do not realize this, and so

study and work only for themselves, locking themselves up and depriving themselves of the satisfaction of knowing that what they are doing is serving others and benefiting them, just as they themselves benefit so much from the labors of others. We are often so short-sighted that we see no further than our own noses.

If and when we understand that almost everything we have, as well as most of what we know, has come from others, we cannot help but ask ourselves: "What can *I* give? What can *I* put back, after receiving so much?" The answer is, of course: *In reality, very little. In fact, we can put back almost nothing that we have not first received.* But what little we can put back we should do so, not with the idea of getting something else out in return, but because it is the only thing we can do when we see how much we benefit from belonging to the community we call the World. And if the Communist leaders had understood this, and had helped their people understand it, their system might have stood a better chance of success. Communism failed because it was an idea whose time has not yet come; it was premature in a world that was not ready for it; people cannot be made equal, but must *think* equal, and treat others as they would like others to treat them. The psychological basis for Communism to succeed wasn't there, and so the leaders tried to force it to succeed, and we have all seen the results of that.

We often hear Buddhists talk about 'renouncing the world', by which they mean leaving their homes and families, shaving their heads, and becoming monks and nuns, instead of abandoning or transcending selfishness. How can we 'renounce the world' when we *are* the world, when we can understand ourselves only in context, as parts of something much bigger than ourselves? It is not a question of seeing ourselves as

separate from the rest of life—'I' as apart from 'You'—but of realizing the Oneness of Life—not mine, not yours, but *ours!*

We live in this world for only a short time and then die. We do not know what happens—or even if anything happens at all—after we die; we merely believe. About this life, however, we *can* know something, and the time we spend here can be either wasted or used to good effect. We leave our marks in passing and, just as we have inherited so much from people who lived here before us, we too will leave something behind for those who come after us. We create gardens, we create garbage. What are we—you and I—going to leave behind us for those who will follow?

We must have a vision of how we fit into and belong to this world as integral parts, and how we have a responsibility to live as members of it. Hate the world and cause trouble in it, and we hurt ourselves deeply thereby; love the world and do good in it, and we help ourselves. It is in our own interests, therefore, to live responsibly, thinking not just about ourselves.

I would like to supplement and enhance what I have written above with a passage from *The Lessons of History* by the famous American historian, Will Durant:

"We should not be greatly disturbed by the probability that our civilization will die like any other. As Frederick the Great of Prussia asked his retreating troops at Kolin: "Would you live forever?" Perhaps it is desirable that life should take fresh forms, that new civilizations and centers should have their turn. Meanwhile, the effort to meet the challenge of the rising East may reinvigorate the West.

"We have said that a great civilization does not entirely die. Some precious achievements have survived

all the vicissitudes of rising and falling states: the making of fire and light, of the wheel and other basic tools; language, writing, art, and song; agriculture, the family, parental care, social organization, morality, and charity; the use of teaching to transmit the lore of the family and the race. These are the elements of civilization, and they have been tenaciously maintained through the perilous passage from one civilization to the next. They are the connective tissue of human history.

"If education is the transmission of civilization, we are unquestioningly progressing. Civilization is not inherited; it has to be learned and earned by each generation anew; if the transmission should be interrupted for one century, civilization would die, and we would be savages again. Our finest contemporary achievement is our unprecedented expenditure on higher education for all. Once, colleges were luxuries, designed for the male half of the leisured class; today, universities are so numerous that he who can run may become a Ph.D. We may not have excelled the selected geniuses of antiquity, but we have raised the level and average of knowledge beyond any age in history.

"None but a child will complain that our teachers have not yet eradicated the errors and superstitions of ten-thousand years. The great experiment has just begun, and it may yet be defeated by the high birth-rate of unwilling or indoctrinated ignorance. But what would be the full fruitage of instruction if every child should be schooled till at least his twentieth year, and should find free access to the universities, libraries and museums that harbor and offer the intellectual and artistic treasures of the race? Consider education not as the painful accumulation of facts and dates and reigns, not merely the necessary preparation of the individual to earn his keep in the world, but as the transmission of our men-

tal, moral, technical, and aesthetic heritage as fully as possible to as many as possible, for the enlargement of man's understanding, control, embellishment, and enjoyment of life.

"The heritage that we can more fully transmit is richer than ever before. It is richer than that of Pericles, for it includes all the Greek flowering that followed him; richer than Leonardo's, for it includes him and the Italian Renaissance; richer than Voltaire's, for it embraces all the French Enlightenment and its ecumenical dissemination. If progress is real despite our whining, it is not because we are born any healthier, better, or wiser than infants were in the past, but because we are born to a richer heritage, born on a higher level of that pedestal which the accumulation of knowledge and art raises as the ground and support of our being. The heritage rises, and man rises in proportion as he receives it.

"History is, above all else, the creation and recording of that heritage; progress is its increasing abundance, preservation, transmission, and use. To those of us who study history not merely as a warning and reminder of man's follies and crimes, but also as an encouraging remembrance of generative souls, the past ceases to be a depressing chamber of horrors; it becomes a celestial city, a spacious country of the mind, wherein a thousand saints, statesmen, inventors, scientists, poets, artists, musicians, lovers, and philosophers still live and speak, teach and carve and sing. The historian will not mourn because he can see no meaning in human existence except that which man puts into it; let it be our pride that we ourselves may put meaning into our lives, and sometimes a significance that transcends death. If a man is fortunate, he will, before he dies, gather up as much as he can of his

civilized heritage and transmit it to his children. And to his final breath he will be grateful for this inexhaustible legacy, knowing that it is our nourishing mother and our lasting life".

Yes, we need a vision—a broad vision—of how the present has arisen from the past, and how we are now—and always—in the process of creating the future, which is a result of everything that has gone before. Only the present, however, is in our hands, only this is ours, and here and now we must act with wisdom, to learn from the past and endeavor to bring about a better future.

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IN THE BEGINNING

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God". So goes the opening verse of the Gospel of John in the New Testament. Is this the reason why Christians talk so lightly about God, thinking that, just because they know the word, they also know that which it represents? Or does it mean that God *is* just a word?

Not bothering to investigate and find out what the word 'God' represents, or whether it *is* just a word, with nothing behind it, Christians have waged wars, carried out merciless persecutions and crimes, and egoistically gone forth to conquer and colonize other countries in the name of this 'God' or 'word', which they claim to be good, loving, omnipotent and omniscient. Regardless of whether there really is such a God or not, they were laboring under tremendous delusion, for if their God were really as they claimed of It—not 'He'—It could have brought 'true religion' (as they like to call it) to everyone in the world had It so wished, without leaving others to do it by violence. All this is such a blatant sham that it is truly remarkable that people—any/all people—should not have seen through it long ago, or to have entertained the notion for even a minute! But was it not said by the Buddha that there are two things without limits: Space and human stupidity?

To merely know the word and to think that we know what it represents is a great mistake, which we are all guilty of by reason of our upbringing. We use words so lightly, seldom stopping to think about what they mean. If we were to stop and think about them, many doors would open where we didn't know there *were* doors. A little examination would probably reveal that narrow-minded and bigoted people are tremendously ignorant

about the words which form the basis of their belief that they alone are right while everyone else is wrong. The word 'God', for example, has been—and continues to be—the cause of untold suffering. The Crusades (or 'Holy Wars') of the 11th-13th centuries were carried out ostensibly because of God, called by one side Jehovah and by the other side Allah. They both worshipped the same God but called it different names, which was enough to cause incredible carnage and destruction on both sides, and it's still going on today. This is just one example of many where words have been responsible for bloodshed; the list, if compiled, would go on and on!

Yes, those people believed in God, whatever their concept of God was, but could they, with minds full of hatred and cruelty, be regarded as religious? What did their belief in God mean except, in many cases, a license or excuse to fight and kill? And this is still going on in numerous places, with Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland—who both believe in the same God—killing each other relentlessly, and Jews and Arabs—who are both Semitic, having the same common ancestors, whose languages are very similar, and who worship the same 'One God'—living in conflict with each other. What has their belief in God done for them? It has certainly not made them peace-loving, has it? If it has improved them in any way, what must they have been like before? It doesn't bear thinking of!

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COMPASSION WITHOUT WISDOM

It is a common practice, among Buddhists, to buy and liberate birds, fish, turtles and other living things as an 'act of merit'. I would like to look briefly at this custom and its ramifications.

If it is considered good and 'meritorious' to release animals and birds, it must, as a corollary, be considered bad and demeritorious to capture and sell them in the first place.

Now, without buyers, there are no sellers; we can sell something only if someone buys it. Therefore, these creatures—which, in many cases, are just common sparrows and finches—are captured and sold to the people who buy them to release. Are not the buyers therefore responsible for them being caught in the first place? If no-one bought these birds, would they be caught like this? Are the buyers not involved in and responsible for the demeritorious act of trapping these wild birds and animals?

And to think of making merit from or through these animals: are we not just using them for our own ends? Can *that* be considered meritorious? We should think clearly about things and not be too hasty in our desire for merit.

If the welfare of the animals and birds is the motive for buying and releasing them, why wait for some time after buying them before freeing them? Why not release them right outside the shop and give them that extra period of freedom? Instead, they are kept for long hours in small cages until a ceremony is performed of which the birds and animals understand nothing and

couldn't care less, and in the meantime, often some die. Who, therefore, are we doing it for—the birds and animals, or ourselves? If we are using them for our own gain, then, far from 'making merit', we are making *demerit!* It is wrong to use others for our own gain like this.

If we are really concerned about the birds and animals, we would realize that the people who buy them are responsible for them being caught in the first place, and as long as there are people to buy them, there will be people to catch them. We can put a stop to the demeritorious action of catching them to sell for release if we refuse to buy them; in the long run, this would be the best way of helping the fish and birds.

When Prince Siddhartha was born, his father the King called in eight astrologers to predict his son's future. After carefully scrutinizing the marks on the body of the child, seven of them raised two fingers and said that the child would grow up to become either a great monarch or an enlightened spiritual teacher. The eighth seer raised only one finger, however, and stated that, without doubt, the baby prince would definitely become a Buddha. We know that the prince later gave up his life of luxury in the palace to go out into the forest in search of truth, and that he finally became enlightened, becoming known thereafter as the Buddha.

If Prince Siddhartha had remained in the palace instead of going off into the forest to seek for truth, he would have been able to help a few people by ruling wisely and well, helping the poor, raising the standard of living of his people, and so on, but his influence would probably not have survived much longer than he. As it was, by becoming a Buddha, he was able to help incalculable numbers of people, and His benign influ-

ence continues until today. I am writing this, for example, because of the Buddha, more than 2,500 years after He passed away.

We must follow things through, and not see just the immediate results of our actions, but also their long-term effects. So, before you buy birds or animals for release, ask yourself why and for whom you are doing it. Are you really doing it for the benefit of the animals, or for your own sake?

While I was staying in a Chinese temple in Melbourne in 1994, some ladies from the RSPCA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) came there to complain about the practice of buying birds to release, saying what I have said above: that a high percentage of birds die in their tiny cages while waiting for the ceremony to be performed prior to freeing them. I told them that I was in complete agreement with them, but that the people in the temple were so attached to their traditions that they had refused to listen when I had tried to explain to them, and had even complained about me complaining, and told me not to talk about such things if I wanted to continue staying there. My responsibility, however, is to what I perceive to be right, and *not* to tradition and superstition. Dharma is not—or should not be—a thing of tradition, something of the past, fit only for museums, nor should it be something negotiable, but something of the present, to live by. In this case, I am on the side of the birds, and will say what I feel should be said, regardless of what other people say.

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BEYOND HAPPINESS

Someone once asked me if I am happier as a monk than I was before. What prompted this question I don't know, but I considered it for a few moments before answering: "No, I'm not", and went on to explain that, before, I was ignorant about ignorance, and so could be somewhat happy. But now that I'm aware of ignorance, and of how deep and strong it is—both in myself and in the world around me—how can I be happy? Happiness rooted in ignorance is false happiness, an illusion.

Some words of an old Beatles' song—*Strawberry Fields Forever*—say pretty well what I'm trying to say here: "Living is easy with eyes closed, misunderstanding all you see". Before, I was carefree—or rather, care*less*—and stupid, understanding nothing and thinking only of myself (and not doing a very good job of that, either!) Fortunately, I didn't remain like that forever, as some thing or things happened to wake me up a bit, to *open* my eyes and show me that happiness of the kind I had been concerned with, or had known before, is not a worthy goal in life—in fact, is not a goal at all, for, like the horizon which ever-recedes from us as we move towards it, it cannot be attained, grasped or possessed, but always slips through our fingers, leaving us feeling hollow, empty, frustrated and unsatisfied.

Before anyone gets the idea from my words that it is therefore better to know nothing and remain ignorant and be happy than to know something and not be happy, I should explain that I am not saying that I am unhappy now, because although sometimes I am (being *this* side of enlightenment), sometimes I am happy, too. However, I know that, because they depend very much upon circumstances, both happiness and unhappiness are impermanent, and come and go. I have also found

something more important than personal happiness, and that is *Joy*—the Joy of seeing through ignorance, of seeing through something that binds us all, and which we all suffer from in various degrees; and, because it involves us all, seeing through it takes us beyond the petty concerns of self. My search now is not just for my own interests, as it was before, but for humanity's, because whatever—if anything—I find of the Good, the Beautiful and the True, will not be for me alone but for as many others as I am able to share it with.

Like most people, I feel sad at times (for reasons known and unknown, no doubt), but when I am sad, I don't feel sad about feeling sad, because I know that, like everything else, it will pass. And it does, and often in a way that I don't notice until later I realize that I'm not sad anymore. If we make a big thing about sadness, as if it's going to last forever, we only prolong it and make ourselves suffer needlessly. And would you like to be happy all the time? If you say "Yes, of course", it is only because you have never thought it through.

Forget about personal happiness, as far as possible, and find Joy instead; it is a much more refined and spiritual quality than happiness. If we were happy all the time, we wouldn't be happy for long but would soon become bored and find it monotonous. It would be like having our favorite food for every meal, day in and day out, with nothing else; we would soon get fed-up with it and wish for something else, would we not? Our lives need variety, so that we have a basis for comparison. Sadness can be seen to have a positive aspect, as it gives meaning to happiness, and helps us to appreciate it, which it would be hard to do if there were no sadness.

If/when happiness arises, be happy, but if it doesn't, don't be sad and don't worry. Constantly thinking about

happiness is the thing most destructive or preventive of happiness. If/when sadness arises, hold on; it is ultimately unreal, because it changes. Don't grasp at either of these things but understand their nature: how they arise and pass away. True, you might not soar as high as you did before—'get high', so to speak—but neither will you fall so low. And it won't—as you might think—become boring. In fact, when we see it as it is—impermanent and ever-changing—it becomes more interesting, as we can see the interplay of things. It is seen as boring only when we do not understand it and think that things are 'always the same'.

It is not uncommon to find that life seems to get harder when we follow a spiritual way. But perhaps this should be expected, as we have assumed responsibility for our lives, and can no longer turn away and pretend we don't see. If things are unfolding as they should, however, this is not the only thing we find; at the same time, we grow correspondingly stronger, and able not only to carry our own burdens of life, but also to reach out to help others who might be struggling under theirs. It is not just for ourselves that we live, therefore, but for the community that we call the World.

***THIS* SIDE**

Some years ago, I was invited to give a Dharma-talk in a small temple somewhere. Never having been there before, however, I didn't know what to expect, so went with an open mind, but was a bit surprised to find that the room which had been allocated to me was completely bare; there was no bed, nor even a sleeping-mat or pillow; moreover, the linoleum-covered floor had not even been swept and was quite dusty. It was interesting to observe my reaction to this form of welcome: I watched thoughts of annoyance arise and pass through my mind; it is rather rude and disrespectful to invite someone to speak and then treat him like this, I thought, especially as the custom is just the opposite. But such thoughts were quickly followed by one more compelling: "I came here to give a Dharma-talk", I thought, "not to live comfortably. It is up to me to make what I can of the situation. I have slept on floors many times—I've even slept on the bare ground, and *even* in the rain and snow!—so this is nothing to me!

My talk that evening flowed, and was well-received, and I was not sorry I had gone there. Moreover, by the time it came to sleep, the floor had been swept and a mat and pillow provided, but even if they had not been, I would still have managed to sleep, following the successful talk.

If we grow used to preferential treatment, and expect it as our due wherever we go, we shall often be disappointed, as there are many impolite people in the world. Is it our *right*, as monks, to always be treated respectfully? Many monks and lay-Buddhists obviously think so, but such thinking is corrosive. If we were to become upset when we do not receive the kind of treatment we think we should get, how would it be pos-

sible to carry on? If we often have to swallow our pride, it is because the pride is there in the first place; were it not there to begin with, we would not have to swallow it.

This is not to condone ill-manners, of course; certainly not. And it is one thing to show disrespect to a person, and another for a Buddhist to disrespect the Dharma. It is perhaps time that something were said about this, as it is harmful to the one who so shows disrespect. The above-mentioned case was not the only time I have been invited to talk and been rudely received; it has happened a number of times, and for the sake of helping people to avoid doing this in future—not just towards myself, but towards anyone—I would like to say (though I'm sorry I feel it necessary to say it), that without due respect for the Dharma, it is better not to invite anyone to give Dharma-talks, as the basis for success will not be there. There must be respect towards the Dharma.

We are often confronted with rudeness, either deliberate or unintentional. Why are we—and let's not separate ourselves from the masses too soon here, as most, if not all of us are rude at times—ill-mannered and impolite? It comes back to the tap-root of all our troubles: Ignorance. This can be conscious, as when we are deliberately rude and wish to offend someone, or unconscious, as when we show bad manners without knowing it or intending to. Either way, it can be traced back to ignorance, or not understanding.

I will not tell much of the unequal way I was treated in the place I was staying when I first wrote this (in 1994), as it might seem that I was dissatisfied with my conditions when I was actually very grateful, having all that I needed, but something said about it might serve a useful purpose. It was noticed—by others as well as myself—that I, as a Westerner, received less-than-

equal treatment compared to the Asian monks there, who were treated very ceremoniously and respectfully. There *really was* a distinction, which might almost be considered racist. However, I did not really mind this, and actually prefer to be disregarded than to be made such a fuss over. Perhaps the reason for the disparity in treatment was because I do not, as a Westerner, come from a traditional Buddhist background, and because I am not much concerned with tradition, considering the Buddha's Way to be something to live by rather than a thing of tradition; I avoid ceremony and show whenever I can. And, as for people not paying much attention to me, well, I realize I do not have something for everyone, and feel that if and when people want what I have to give, they will come for it, like a bee to a flower, not the other way around, and that if they don't want it, it would be useless for me to try to give it to them. Have I not said elsewhere that this thing must be wanted and not just needed if it is to be of any use? Everyone needs Dharma, but few want it.

This means that I must often keep things to myself, but occasionally, someone comes along who is ready for, and wants, something more than just bowing and chanting in languages that they do not understand, and if they want it, I might be able to provide it. So, I must wait patiently, and try not to force things.

If people are enlightened already, they do not need all this; but those of us who are *this* side of Enlightenment—which means most of us, of course—will be ill-mannered at times, because we are still ignorant, still in the state of unknowing.

No-one is exempt from being abused and taunted. In the Buddhist scriptures, there are a number of cases of the Buddha Himself having to deal with rude people, but He understood that it was through not understand-

ing that people behave so, and was often able to help them realize their mistakes. Once, when someone scolded Him, He remained calm, as always, and when the man had finished, the Buddha said: “If you offer something to someone and he doesn’t accept it, to whom does the offering belong?” The man replied: “To the one who wished to offer it, of course”. The Buddha then said: “In the same way, I do not accept your abuse, so it belongs to you”. The man understood, and humbly begged forgiveness. On another occasion, He explained that abuse not accepted falls back on the abuser like dust thrown into the wind.

Since we are, as I have said, *this* side of Enlightenment, it is hardly surprising for us to think negative thoughts, and feel upset by rude remarks and behavior; it may be considered quite ‘normal’. However, if and when such thoughts come into our minds, we need not permit them to remain there and dominate us. After recognizing them for what they are, we can change them into something else, or, using one of the Buddha’s techniques, remove them with a thought of a different, more-positive, kind, just as we might use one thorn to remove another thorn from the flesh.

Frequently, we take personally rudeness from others who do not know us, and whose abuse is not directed at us personally, but is just an expression of how they are feeling, or the level of their evolution, for which we are in no way responsible. At such times when we might be abused by strangers, it helps to think about it so: “This person doesn’t know me, so how can his abuse apply to me? *If* he knew me, he would speak to me differently; he might even be *more* abusive than this!” Also, if people knew of the Law of Karma, and of the Golden Rule, they would restrain themselves more and not abuse others, for by so doing, they only hurt themselves, and are therefore to be pitied. We do not

like it when others are rude to us, and we should realize that others don't like it if we are rude to them.

We are imperfect not because we want to be but because we are not enlightened, and if we understand this, we will more-readily forgive people who are rude to us and offend us, and, at the same time, restrain ourselves from behaving like that to others.

When we call ourselves by a religious brand-name (*Jew*, *Buddhist*, *Christian*, *Hindu*, etc.), or a nationality (*English*, *German*, *Thai*, *Australian*, *Indian*, and so on)—at the same time we are saying, without words, what we are not. In this way, we limit ourselves and deny ourselves the possibility of drinking at the well-springs of many sources.

If we were not so attached to and preoccupied with names and labels and saw, instead, our basic humanity, the wealth of the world's wisdom would be available to us in incalculable amounts, and we would feel no shame or hesitation in picking up gems wherever we find them; after all, a diamond is a diamond no matter where it is found, is it not?

We could avoid religious and racial conflict and antagonism if we realized that we do not live in water-tight compartments, shut off from people of other races, nations, and religions, and that we are now well-into a world culture; our lives touch and overlap those of others like tiles on a roof or the scales of a fish. Even if we never travel abroad, we depend so much upon people from all over the world simply because of the global economy. These are things to be considered.