TOWARDS A THRESHOLD OF UNDERSTANDING  
(Part I)  

by  
Bhikkhu Bodhi  

BPS Newsletter Cover Essay #30 (2nd Mailing 1995)  

Copyright 1995 Buddhist Publication Society  

* * *  

DharmaNet Edition 1995  

via DharmaNet by arrangement with the publisher.  

DharmaNet International  
P.O. Box 4951, Berkeley CA 94704-4951  

* * *  

//Pope John Paul II's recent book/, Crossing the Threshold of Hope,  
//is a collection of reflections primarily on issues of Christian  
faith, but the book also features the Pope’s assessment of other  
religions, including a short chapter on Buddhism. The Pontiff's words  
in this chapter are far from appreciative. The release of the book in  
Sri Lanka on the eve of the Pope's visit to this country this past  
January stirred up waves of indignation in the Buddhist community that  
spread as far as the Vatican. The Buddhist prelates announced that  
they would not attend an inter-religious meeting requested by the Pope  
unless he formally retracted his unfavorable remarks about Buddhism.  
Although on arrival the Pope tried to appease the feelings of Buddhist  
leaders by declaring his esteem for their religion, even quoting the  
Dhammapada, he fell short of proffering a full apology, and this did  
ot satisfy the Sangha elders.//  

//The following essay is intended as a short corrective to the Pope's  
demeaning characterization of Buddhism. It addresses the issues solely  
at the level of ideas, without delving into the question whether  
ulterior motives lay behind the Pope's pronouncements. The essay is  
based on an article written for a Polish publisher, Source (Katowice),  
which is presently compiling a book on the Buddhist response to the  
Pope's book.//  

The Pope states that "the Buddhist tradition and the methods deriving  
from it have an almost exclusively negative soteriology (doctrine of  
salvation)." Such a view of the Buddhist teachings was widespread  
among Christian missionaries in Asia during the 19th century, serving  
to justify their evangelical incursions into the heartlands of  
Buddhism. Serious scholars of comparative religion have long  
recognized this view to be a misrepresentation, rooted, in the case of  
the early missionaries, partly in misunderstanding, partly in  
deliberate distortion. It is therefore puzzling that the present head  
of the Catholic Church, otherwise so well informed, should repeat  
these worn-out lines, particularly at a time when greater mutual  
understanding is expected from the leaders of different religions.  

The Pope does not explain exactly why he regards Buddhist soteriology  
as negative. Most likely, he takes this view because the Buddhist path
of deliverance does not recognize a personal God as the agent and end of salvation. Like beauty, however, what is negative and what is positive lies in the eye of the beholder, and what is negative for one may turn out to be another's supreme ideal. If one seeks an everlasting union between one's eternal soul and a creator God, then a doctrine that denies the existence of an eternal soul and a Divine Creator will inevitably appear negative. If one regards everything conditioned as impermanent and devoid of self, and seeks deliverance in Nibbana, the Deathless Element, then a doctrine of everlasting union between God and the soul will seem -- not negative perhaps -- but founded upon wishful thinking and unacceptable articles of faith. For the ordinary reader, however, the word "negative," when applied to Buddhism, will suggest something far different from a philosophically acute way of approaching the Ultimate, conjuring up pictures of a bleak doctrine of escapism aimed at personal annihilation. Behind the Pope's words we can detect echoes of the ancient texts: "There are, monks, some recluses and brahmins who charge me with being an annihilationist, saying that the recluse Gotama teaches the annihilation of an existent being. That is false misrepresentation. What I teach, in the past as also now, is suffering and the cessation of suffering" (MN 22).

Even more worrisome than the Pope's characterization of the Buddhist doctrine of salvation as negative is his contention that "the Buddhist doctrine of salvation constitutes the central point, or rather the only point, of this system." The conclusion implied by this pronouncement, left hanging silently behind the lines, is that Buddhism is incapable of offering meaningful guidance to people immersed in the problems of everyday life; it is an otherworldly religion of escape suited only for those of an ascetic bent.

While Western scholars in the past have focused upon the Buddhist doctrine of salvation as their main point of interest, the living traditions of Buddhism as practiced by its adherents reveal that this attitude, being one-sided to begin with, must yield one-sided results. The Buddhist texts themselves show that Buddhism addresses as wide a range of concerns as any other of humanity's great religions. Nibbana remains the ultimate goal of Buddhism, and is certainly "the central point" of the Dhamma, but it is by no means "the only point" for which the Buddha proclaimed his Teaching.

According to the Buddhist texts, the Dhamma is intended to promote three types of good, each by way of different but overlapping sets of principles. These three goals, though integrated into the framework of a single internally consistent teaching, enable the Dhamma to address individuals at different stages of spiritual development, with varying capacities for comprehension. The three goods are:

(i) the good pertaining to the present life (ditthadhammattha/), i.e., the achievement of happiness and well-being here and now, through ethical living and harmonious relationships based on kindness and compassion;

(ii) the good pertaining to the future life (samparayikattha/), i.e., a favorable rebirth within the round of existence, by practicing generosity, observing the precepts, and cultivating the mind in meditation; and

(iii) the ultimate good (paramattha/), i.e., the attainment of Nibbana, by following the complete training defined by the Noble Eightfold Path.

For most Buddhists in their day-to-day lives, the pursuit of Nibbana
is a distant rather than an immediate goal, to be approached gradually during the long course of rebirths. Until they are ready for a direct assault on the final good, they expect to walk the path for many lives within samsara, pursuing their mundane welfare while aspiring for the Ultimate. To assist them in this endeavor, the Buddha has taught numerous guidelines that pertain to ethically upright living within the confines of the world. In the Sigalovada Sutta, for example, he enumerates the reciprocal duties of parents and children, husband and wife, friends and friends, employers and employees, teachers and students, religious and laity. He made right livelihood an integral part of the Noble Eightfold Path, and explained what it implies in the life of a busy lay person. During his long ministry he gave advice to merchants on the prudent conduct of business, to young wives on how to behave towards their husbands, to rulers on how to administer their state. All such guidance, issuing from the Buddha's great compassion, is designed to promote the welfare and happiness of the world while at the same time steering his followers towards a pleasant rebirth and gradual progress towards final liberation.

Yet, while the Buddha offers a graduated teaching adjusted to the varying life situations of his disciples, he does not allow any illusion to linger about the ultimate aim of his Doctrine. That aim is Nibbana, which is not a consoling reconciliation with the world but irreversible deliverance from the world. Such deliverance cannot be gained merely by piety and good works performed in a spirit of social sympathy. It can be won only by renunciation, by "the relinquishment of all acquisitions" (sabb'upadhipatinissagga/), including among such "acquisitions" the bodily and mental processes that we identify as our self. The achievement of this end is necessarily individual. It must be arrived at through personal purification and personal insight, as the fruit of sustained effort in fulfilling the entire course of training. Hence the Buddha did not set out to found a church capable of embracing all humanity within the fold of a single creed. He lays down a path -- a path perfect in its ideal formulation -- to be trodden by imperfect human beings under the imperfect conditions that life within the world affords. While the quest for the highest goal culminates in deliverance from the world, this same ideal "bends back" towards the world and spells out standards of conduct and a scale of values to guide the unenlightened manyfolk in their daily struggles against the streams of greed, hatred, and delusion. Nibbana remains the "chief point" and the omega point of the Dhamma. But as this goal is to be experienced as the extinction of greed, hatred, and delusion, it defines the condition for its realization as a life devoted to overcoming greed through generosity, to overcoming hatred through patience and loving kindness, and to overcoming delusion through wisdom and understanding.

Bhikkhu Bodhi

//Part II of this essay will appear in the next BPS newsletter.//

* * * * * * * *

THE BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

The BPS is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for people of all creeds. Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of
Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is -- a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose. A full list of our publications will be sent upon request with an enclosure of U.S. $1.00 or its equivalent to cover air mail postage. Write to:

The Hony. Secretary
BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY
P.O. Box 61
54, Sangharaja Mawatha
Kandy Sri Lanka

or

The Barre Center for Buddhist Studies
Lockwood Road
Barre, MA 01005 USA
Tel: (508) 355-2347

* * * * * * *

DISTRIBUTION AGREEMENT
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

FILENAME: ESSAY_30.ZIP
AUTHOR: Bhikkhu Bodhi
AUTHOR'S ADDRESS: Buddhist Publication Society
P.O. Box 61
54, Sangharaja Mawatha
Kandy, Sri Lanka
PUBLISHER'S ADDRESS: <same>
DATE OF PUBLICATION: 1995
RIGHTS AND RESTRICTIONS: See paragraph below.
DATE OF DHARMANET DISTRIBUTION: November 1995

The copyright holder retains all rights to this work and hereby grants electronic distribution rights to DharmaNet International. This work may be freely copied and redistributed electronically, provided that the file contents (including this Agreement) are not altered in any way and that it is distributed at no cost to the recipient. You may make printed copies of this work for your personal use; further distribution of printed copies requires permission from the copyright holder. If this work is used by a teacher in a class, or is quoted in a review, the publisher shall be notified of such use. See the title page of this work for any additional rights and restrictions that may apply.

It is the spirit of dana, freely offered generosity, which has kept the entire Buddhist tradition alive for more than 2,500 years. If you find this work of value, please consider sending a donation to the author or publisher, so that these works may continue to be made available. May your generosity contribute to the happiness of all beings everywhere.

DharmaNet International, P.O. Box 4951, Berkeley, CA 94704-4951

[end]