

FOR THE WELFARE OF MANY

by
Bhikkhu Bodhi

BPS Newsletter Cover Essay #28 (3rd Mailing 1994)

Copyright 1994 Buddhist Publication Society

* * *

DharmaNet Edition 1995

via DharmaNet by arrangement with the publisher.

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

* * *

In the hour before dawn on Wednesday, 19th October 1994, our esteemed Founding-President and Patron, Venerable Nyanaponika Mahathera, passed away peacefully at his residence, the Forest Hermitage in the Udawattakele Reserve, Kandy. His death took place on the last day of the Vassa, the annual rains retreat observed by Buddhist monks since the days of the Buddha, in the quiet of the forest he loved so much, before the screeching of the fruit bats and the chatter of the monkeys could herald the approach of dawn. Three months earlier Ven. Nyanaponika had celebrated his 93rd birthday, frail but still in remarkably good health for his advanced age. In late August, however, the wheel of aging accelerated rapidly, ushering in a combination of illnesses that ended two months later in his demise.

The passing away of Ven. Nyanaponika marks the end of an era, both in the annals of the Western encounter with Buddhism and in the history of the BPS. Among Western Buddhists he was perhaps the last survivor of what might be called the "second generation" of pioneers, comprising those who forged their initial contacts with the Dhamma during the 1920s and 1930s. Ordained as a pupil of the illustrious German elder Ven. Nyanatiloka Mahathera in 1936, Ven. Nyanaponika was for decades the seniormost Theravada Buddhist monk of Western origin in the world. On the day of his death he had just completed his 57th rains as a member of the Sangha. He was also one of the four "Great Mentors, Ornaments of the Teaching" (//maha mahopadhyaya sasanasobhana//) in the Amarapura Nikaya, the monastic fraternity to which he belonged.

Through his own writings and in his editorship of the BPS, Ven. Nyanaponika played a momentous role in shaping the expression of Theravada Buddhism appropriate for the latter half of the twentieth century. Gifted with keen intelligence, a profound grasp of the Dhamma, and extraordinary sensitivity to the needs of his fellow human beings, he endeavoured both in his personal writings and in his publication policy to articulate a vision of the Buddha's teachings that underscored its crucial relevance to humanity in the present age. The early decades of the century provided the background to this vision. In his own mature years he had witnessed two world wars (one

involving the mass extermination of his own ancestral people, the European Jews), countless small-scale social conflicts, and the breakdown of existential meaning in the lives of so many thoughtful, well-intentioned people. Against this background he constantly sought to emphasize, from different angles, those aspects of the Buddha's teachings that speak most directly and meaningfully to men and women earnestly searching for clear spiritual direction. His writings, though sparse and compact in expression, constitute a veritable "Guide for the Perplexed" in this age of confusion when it often seems that the only alternative to rampant materialism and religious fundamentalism is the bewildering potpourri of cults and fads that make up the spiritual supermarket.

Ven. Nyanaponika did not pursue his aim of sharing the Dhamma by sweetening and diluting the original doctrine in order to make it more palatable. His interpretations of the Dhamma always flowed from a clear personal discernment of its innermost essence -- the Four Noble Truths and the three characteristics -- and were built upon a solid respect for the commentarial tradition that has come down from the ancient elders. He based his writings, not only upon sound and thorough scholarship, but also upon a penetrative understanding of the human condition rooted in a deep sympathy with his fellow human beings. Hence his books and essays go far beyond the repetition of stale, stereotyped formulations of the teaching. They refract the Dhamma through the prism of a highly astute Western mind shaped by the best qualities of the European intellectual heritage, presenting it in a way intended to teach, to transform, and to edify his readers at the very core of their being.

His appreciation of the Buddha's teachings was as comprehensive as it was profound, as vitally direct as it was systematic and orderly. In his view the Dhamma offers a sublime ethics that can provide a psychological basis for morality in place of a theological one. He found the teaching fully acceptable to the most critical demands of rational thought, yet capable of providing sustenance for the nourishment of our emotional life, so badly impoverished by scientific objectivism and economic consumerism. Above all, he stressed the importance of self-knowledge and inner self-transformation and the role of Buddhist meditation as a means for knowing, developing, and liberating the mind. His book //The Heart of Buddhist Meditation//, translated into seven languages, still remains today, after 33 years, the clearest, most thorough, and most convincing contemporary account of the Buddha's way of mindfulness.

The supreme expression of Ven. Nyanaponika's endeavour to share the Dhamma with others was his commitment to the work of the BPS, which he helped to found and served as its first Secretary, first President, and longtime Editor. From the inception of the BPS in 1958, Ven. Nyanaponika dedicated himself completely to the work of the Society. During the first three years of its life, in fact, the Society was quartered entirely in his study at the Forest Hermitage. During this period he himself personally shouldered a large portion of the routine paperwork, though he soon divested himself of this when Richard Abeyasekera assumed the position of General Secretary, leaving him more time to attend to the editorial side.

As Editor, he carefully examined every manuscript to ensure that BPS publications accurately reflect the spirit of the original Buddhist teachings. It was above all his sagacious guidance, his overflowing compassion, and his dedication to the Dhamma that transformed the BPS into a major Buddhist publisher bringing the teachings of the Buddha to over eighty countries around the world. Even after his retirement from the editorship (in 1984) and from the presidency (in 1988), as

our Patron he continued to take an active interest in the Society's development. We always apprised him of any important decision or line of policy that required consideration, and he was always ready to offer his wise advice.

On a personal note I must state that with the passing of Ven. Nyanaponika I have lost my life's closest friend, my teacher and spiritual guide. The last ten years, during which I had the privilege to live with him and to look after him at the Forest Hermitage, were indeed a blessing hard to encounter in the round of rebirths. Yet, although we shall miss his wise and loving presence, his subtle humor and sympathetic counsel, it is not sorrow and grief that we should feel at his parting, but rather a serene joy over a noble character that embodied the most worthy human traits, and immense gratitude for a life supremely well lived for the welfare and happiness of many. By the vast merits of his life's achievements, may Ven. Nyanaponika be able to pursue his aspiration unhindered in future existences and may he attain the supreme bliss of Nibbana.

* * * * *

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

~~~~~

TITLE OF WORK: For the Welfare of Many (BPS Newsletter Cover Essay, No. 28, 3rd Mailing 1994)

FILENAME: ESSAY\_28.ZIP

AUTHOR: Bhikkhu Bodhi

AUTHOR'S ADDRESS: Buddhist Publication Society  
P.O. Box 61  
54, Sangharaja Mawatha

Kandy, Sri Lanka

PUBLISHER'S ADDRESS: <same>

COPYRIGHT HOLDER: Buddhist Publication Society (1994)

DATE OF PUBLICATION: 1994

RIGHTS AND RESTRICTIONS: See paragraph below.

DATE OF DHARMA NET DISTRIBUTION: April 1995

ORIGIN SITE: Access to Insight BBS, Pepperell MA \* (508) 433-5847 (96:903/1)

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]