

emergence of early Mahāyāna. One does not find a practice of this nature in early Buddhism. However in later Buddhism along with the gradual development of Bodhisattva ideal the dedication as well as sacrifice of life, if necessary, were considered as the highest liberality one could practice. The Chinese practice of the ritual established on the teachings of Mahāparinirvānavāda was regarded, according to the author as a part of Mahāyāna Vinaya.

The final essay, Chinese Buddhist Confessional Rituals, is presented by Hsiang-Chou Yo. Hsiang-Chou Yo explains the origin and spiritual implications of this ritual as found in the Chinese Buddhist monastic tradition. According to the author, Master Tao An promulgated the rules necessary for the confession of mistakes and wrong-doings by monks and nuns in their daily life. The practice of confession in Chinese monasticism has turned into a system of rituals. The author has not paid any attention to explain the importance of early Buddhist as well as today's practice of fortnightly Prātimokṣa recital and confession as practiced in Theravāda countries.

The essays in the present work are well written even though there are certain minor issues regarding some papers. On the whole this collection is a valuable contribution to the vast field of Buddhist studies.

— *Kotegoda S. Warnasuriya*

## **Facing the Future: Four Essays on the Social Relevance of Buddhism**

**By Bhikkhu Bodhi**  
**Published by Buddhist Publication  
Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka, 2000**  
**Wheel Publication No. 438/440**  
**ISBN: 955-24-0215-8**

Ven. Bhikkhu, an American Buddhist monk currently in Sri Lanka directing the

operations of the Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka, has made a distinct mark among international Buddhist scholars with his excellent monographs on a number of important discourses of the Pāli Canon and his enlarged version of Ven. Narada's Manual of Abhidhamma. The world-wide network of recipients of the publications of BPS have been equally impressed by the insightful newsletter which accompanies the publications.

The four essays of the booklet under review deal with topical issues on the current position of Buddhism in the world. "A Buddhist Social Ethics for the New Century" is an in-depth analysis of the social system fostered by global capitalism and the social organization which could emerge from the practical application of Buddhist principles. He views the world today as a living paradox and attempts to formulate a Theravāda Buddhist response to heal the wounds of the world. Starting with the methodological perspective of not rushing to foredrawn conclusions but investigating every underlying cause, Ven. Bodhi argues in favor of a transformation which goes further than personal. His is a systems approach and involves interpersonal relations, social order, political agenda and the environment. Through a series of convincing arguments, he reaches the following conclusion:

Surely such goals as social justice, relief from poverty, an end to communal conflict, and the protection of our natural environment deserve a top place on our agendas. But what the Buddha's teaching leads us to see is that we cannot reasonably expect to resolve these formidable social problems as long as we continue, in our personal lives, to move in the same familiar ruts of greed, carelessness, and selfish-ness. To heal the wounds of our world we must work to heal the wounds of our heart, the deep hidden wounds of greed, hatred, and delusion. The message, admittedly, is a

difficult one, for inner changes always require greater effort than outer achievements, especially when the first step is self-understanding. In the final analysis, however, it is the only approach that will work, and this certainly makes it worthy of our attention.

The next essay "A Buddhist Approach to Economic and Social Development" is presented as an attempt to use the Buddha's teachings as a lens through which to examine the conception of economic and social development prevalent in today's world. He compares and contrasts the impact of the current model of development highlighting its negative heritage in the form of poverty, violence, injustice and ecological disasters and offers in its place a Buddhist model which fosters a high degree of social cohesion and strong sense of community. He concludes.

Today this web of deception is dissolving on many fronts: in ecological disasters, in increasing unemployment and economic injustice, in the waves of crime, exploitation, and social degeneration so visible everywhere, especially in the Third World, where most of the world's population lives. Large numbers of people, who have seen through the mirage of technological progress and global capitalism, realize that this system is unsustainable, indeed that it is ultimately harmful for its beneficiaries as much as for its manifest victims. In many quarters—grass-roots organizations, counter-culture movements, and alternative think-tanks—the search is on for a way to preserve this planet in the new century. To such people Buddhism offers a message which is at once lofty and sublime yet capable of addressing in lucid terms the hard realities of social and economic

life. It is the responsibility of the Buddhist community to sound that message, in its spiritual heights and earthly applications, for the benefit of all living beings.

These two thought-provoking essays deserve to be brought to the attention of the readers of this Journal as they support in no small measure the principles, values and practices of Humanistic Buddhism. In the other two essays, he raises a multitude of questions pertaining to Buddhism in the traditionally Buddhist countries and the role of the Sangha:

- Murder, theft, rape, drug-trafficking, the sexual exploitation of children—all have become so widespread that even the most gruesome criminal act barely pricks our sense of moral outrage.
- Alcohol, drug use, and suicide are the most common escape routes, especially for the poor, but their popularity is hardly a sign that Buddhism is thriving.
- If Buddhism is failing to penetrate deep into the hearts of those who profess it as their faith, we have to ask ourselves why, and to ask what can be done to reverse present trends.

It is Ven. Bodhi's appeal that one of the primary tasks facing Buddhism in the global world is to develop a comprehensive vision of solutions to social, economic and political problems that loom large today. For this he advocates the following:

From the perspective of the great spiritual traditions, what we must do to redeem ourselves and preserve humanity's place on earth is to abandon our obsession with narrow selfish goals and re-align ourselves with the fundamental law of the universe, with the timeless Dhamma. The Buddha teaches that we can only achieve our own true good when we transcend the standpoint of

self and set our hearts on the welfare of all. This principle is not the preserve of any particular religion but can be understood by anyone of good will. What Buddhism gives us is a clear-cut path to master ourselves and to bring forth the wisdom and compassion so sorely needed as we enter the new millennium.

Ven. Bodhi discusses the role of the Sangha with a challenging diagnosis. He says:

The problem lies not with the teaching itself, but with those responsible for bringing the teaching to life. What is lacking above all is a combination of skills that can be summed up in three simple words: comprehension, commitment, and translation. *Comprehension*: a clear understanding of how the teaching applies to the hard realities of human life today, to a society and world in which the old certainties of the past are being scattered like leaves before a storm. *Commitment*: the willingness to apply the teachings in the way they were intended, even when this means defying the encrustations of established tradition. *Translation*: not stereotyped "sermons," not sweet consolation, not religious lullabies, but solid, sober explanations of how the timeless principles of the Dhamma can resolve the distinctive problems and quandries [sic] of our age.

What follows is a series of timely and far-reaching recommendation:

- The Sangha could vastly improve its ranks by imposing more stringent criteria for admission.
- What is equally essential is to offer the ordained monastics training programs that will promote their wholesome balanced development.

- What is necessary above all is for the young monk to find meaning and happiness in his chosen path of life, a path that does not offer the immediate satisfactions available to his comrades who remain behind in the world.

I have read these four essays with immense pleasure and profit. His thoughtful, perspicacious analysis of problems and apt solutions spell out a practical agenda for those in the forefront of engaging Buddhism for social well-being here and now.

—Ananda W. P. Guruge

### **Swallowing the River Ganges: A Practice Guide to the Path of Purification**

**By Mathew Flickstein**

**Published by Wisdom Publications**

**Boston, 2001**

**ISBN: 0-86171-178-5**

Based on the *Visuddhimagga*, which was written by the fifth century Indian monk Buddhaghosa, *Swallowing the River Ganges* is a valuable distillation and summary of the seven "paths" of purification discussed by Buddhaghosa in his encyclopedic work that stands as one of the most important essays in the southern Buddhist tradition. Flickstein handles his material with an admirable mixture of clarity and restraint. Using modern examples and psychological terminology, he discusses most of the core ideas of the *Visuddhimagga* in an engaging manner that is readily accessible to modern readers.

Buddhaghosa's reasons for writing the *Visuddhimagga* could not have been all that different from Flickstein's reasons for reintroducing the text. Though the *Visuddhimagga* is far more detailed than *Swallowing the River Ganges*, it was intended to be an exposition of Buddhist practice, as taught at the Mahavihara Monastery in Sri Lanka, where Buddhaghosa had settled after moving to