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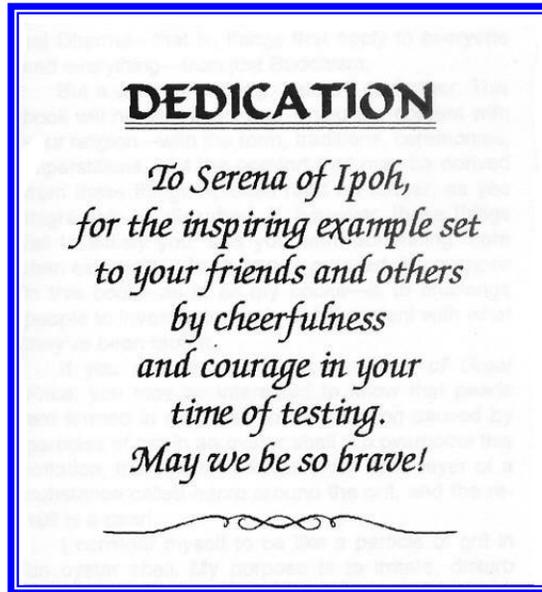


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INTRODUCTION

ALTHOUGH I WRITE mainly for Buddhists, it is not exclusively so and is more about Universal Dharma—that is, things that apply to everyone and everything—than just Buddhism.

But a word of warning, before I go further: This book will not suit everyone. If you are content with your religion—with the form, traditions, ceremonies, superstitions, and the comfort that may be derived from these things—please read no further, as you might only be disturbed. If, however, these things fail to satisfy you, and you want something more than externalia, I invite you to proceed. My purpose in this book—as in all my books—is to challenge people to investigate, and not be content with what they've been taught.

If you are searching for the Pearl of Great Price, you may be interested to know that pearls are formed in response to the irritation caused by particles of grit in an oyster shell. To overcome this irritation, the oyster secretes layer upon layer of a substance called nacre around the grit, and the result is a pearl.

I consider myself to be like a particle of grit in an oyster shell. My purpose is to irritate, disturb and stimulate people into thinking, into finding or creating a pearl within themselves.

But many people don't want to be disturbed, and are content to remain as they are, living on the material level; preferring what they've been taught or told to finding out for themselves, they resent any effort to get them to think about things. Because of unwillingness to think and question, therefore, religion has degenerated from a living experience and a means of discovery into a thing of belief and superstition.

Superstition finds fertile soil in religion, and thrives mightily therein. But there is less excuse for it in Buddhism than for other religions, because Buddhism states very clearly that we shouldn't simply believe and follow blindly, but should investigate and strive to know.

In this book, although I have aimed strong words at superstition, I must express my gratitude to it, because it helps us to understand. How can we

know what is right if we do not know what is wrong first? Even superstition and ignorance are useful, therefore.

S.E. Asia is going through an economic crisis as I write this, and countless people are suffering. Some, not knowing how to cope with their changed situation, already gave up and committed suicide; one man even killed his wife and children so that he would not die alone! In times like these we need to apply Dharma in our lives, to be able to say *Boleh Tahan!* This is a Malay expression, which means *Can Stand* or *Can Bear*. We should recall that we have not always lived on the crest of a wave, and that there were many times before—were there not?—when we were down in the trough, but we survived anyway; and what we have done before, we can do again. Hold on, therefore, it will pass!

It was the Buddha's way, when visiting the sick—either monks, nuns or lay-people—to ask: "Are you bearing up? Can you stand your pain?" He encouraged them to face their difficulties with fortitude, knowing, from His own experience, that they had the capacity to do this. He didn't expect them to be supermen, but urged them to go beyond what they thought were their limits, and find what was needed in their own minds. It's surprising what we can do, if we have to!

See how the lotus grows: rooted in mud, it comes up through dirty water, but stands pure and unstained above it. Without mud, the lotus cannot grow; such are the conditions necessary for its growth. And shall we grow otherwise?

If we are ignorant and suffering, remember this: nothing comes from nothing. Stainless steel is made from iron ore; without iron ore (ignorance) we cannot make stainless steel (wisdom). You see, there is something good about ignorance and suffering, after all. It depends upon how we look at it.

Not understanding how everything comes and goes, when we gain something, we feel good, and when we lose something, we feel bad. We adapt very easily from not-having to having, but not so easily from having to not-having. In many ways, we are much more fortunate than our ancestors; indeed, not so long ago, houses didn't have running water or electricity and all the things powered by it. Although we find it hard to

imagine how people managed without everything we take for granted, they did, and did so quite well; in fact, they were probably happier, in their simplicity, than we are in our complexity!

We have been living in a fool's paradise, thinking the good times would last forever. And now that things have come tumbling down we suffer. But if we can collect ourselves and take a clear look at what is happening, we might be able to find treasures of a different kind: inner resources that will help us to deal with all kinds of adversity.

Times of adversity are times when we can get a good look at ourselves, which we seldom have—no, don't want to do—when times are good. Our principles are put to the stress test: how far will we bend before we break? How far will we go before we say: "No, enough; I'm not going any further!" It is at times when we are thrown back on ourselves that we find true the old saying: Necessity is the Mother of Invention. And it's exciting, too, because we find that we've been expending too much energy on flying high, when we could have managed with much less. And who was it all for? Not really for ourselves, but more to impress others by; uncertain of ourselves, and seeking reassurance from others, we actually live more for them than we do for ourselves, ridiculous as it may sound!

Some people commit suicide not because they find life too hard to bear, but because they do not get what they want from it; living self-centeredly, when life doesn't bring what they want when they want it, they simply give up. Their desires and their looking prevent them from seeing what they've already got.

The Dharma provides us with the means to help people—some people, at least. If anyone reading this book would like to talk to me about anything, I invite them to contact me at the address given. Don't simply give up and throw away your treasure just because you have not found what you want; try to look at things in a different way; try to discover what you have and are! Remember the words *Boleh Tahan!*

HOW OLD ARE YOU?

"WHAT'S YOUR EDGE?" said the fierce personnel manager at the supermarket where I'd gone in search of a Saturday job while I was in high school. "Edge?" I repeated, "What do you mean?" "Edge!" he roared, in his strong regional accent; "How old are you?!" "Oh, sixteen", I hastily offered, realizing that he had meant 'age'. "You're a bright spark, aren't you?!" he said sarcastically. Thus began my relationship with this tyrant, and it didn't improve over the year I spent there, working all day for just £1:00. Thanks, Jacko; I never imagined you would come into my life again, or that I'd be grateful to you, but there you are!

It is a common question: "How old are you?" We usually think nothing about it, and answer with our bodily age, as if we were the body only, and nothing else. But are we? The body is a lump of meat without the mind, consciousness or vivifying principle to make it function; we are more psychic than physical, as it is through the mind that we perceive things; it is through the mind that we live.

But if we are more mind than body, how old is the mind? We cannot really say how old we are unless and until we know who we are. And do we know who we are? Don't be hasty and say, "Of course I know", because if you think about it for a moment or two, you will realize that you don't. Funny, isn't it? You have lived so many years but still don't know who you are. And if you don't know who you are, how can you know who anyone else is? You are much more than a name—a name which, by the way, was stuck on you by others. Are you ready to begin your journey of discovery? This is what it will be if you respond to this question instead of merely shrugging it off and saying, "Who cares?"—a journey that goes on and on, with no perceivable end. But the joy of discovery as you go will offset any concern about never reaching the end; what you discover when you discover it, is an end in itself. Enjoy the trip!

Someone—Paul Lowney—has written: *"No-one owns his own life. Everyone—no matter how insignificant—has an effect on someone else, just as a stone sends out ripples when cast into water. A*

person whose life doesn't touch another's is a person without a shadow." A person without a shadow doesn't exist, of course; every one of us touches others.

But this is just the beginning. Once we discover this, things really start to open up and become exciting. Further on, we might find—as someone else; I forget who—said: "No-one can know everything about anything". Why is this? Because one thing always leads to another, and when we investigate anything, we find so much involved in it, and so much involved in that, and so much involved in that, to infinity; there's no end. It is like this quotation from a contemporary dance master, Martha Graham—whoever she is; I must confess I don't know, but it doesn't matter; what she said makes sense:

"It takes about ten years to produce a dancer. That's not intermittent training; that's daily training. You go step by step. In ten years, if you are going to be a dancer at all, you will have mastered the instrument. You will know the wonders of the human body, and there is nothing more wonderful. Next time you look into the mirror, notice the way the ears rest next to the head; look at the way the hairline grows; think of the little bones in your wrists; think of the magic of that foot, comparatively small, upon which your whole weight rests. It's a miracle. And the dance is the celebration of that miracle."

Because we are burdened with the need to earn a living, our area of interest is narrowed down considerably; we feel jostled and hemmed in by the cares and worries that spring up like weeds. After a while, our energies having been expended in trying to just keep afloat, we forget there are other things to life than earning a living, supporting a family, and enjoying ourselves a little, and lapse into a state of dull acceptance, taking everything for granted. When this happens, life is virtually over, or—to put it another way—hasn't yet begun.

In freeing us from drudgery and insecurity, the welfare state has fostered mediocrity and drug like dependence in us; we've become addicted to a life of pleasure and ease, and forgotten how to strive and accomplish for ourselves, to face the difficulties that life throws at us as challenges, and

overcome them. Having had things so good for so long, we've become bored and restless; nothing holds our attention for long.

If we view life as boring, as something to be endured, tolerated, put up with, and got over with as soon as possible, then we will have little interest or energy, of course. But if we see it as a thing of possibility, of unfathomed potential—to learn more of which brings joy—then our energy level will increase and may make us feel like shouting from the roof-tops.

"Shouting from the roof-tops!?" you may say. "Are you mad? What is there to shout about?" You have said it. By not saying it, you have said it! Your ignorance has revealed and strengthened it! It's what you don't know that is worth shouting from the roof-tops. And what is it that your response has demonstrated you don't know? Obviously, that you are alive—alive as a person—with incredible, untapped riches and resources. If you knew this, you would not say "Are you mad?" The mad one is not he who shouts from the rooftops about human potential, but he who thinks there's nothing to shout about!

A Norwegian philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, wrote: "If I were to wish for anything, I would not wish for wealth or power but for the passionate sense of the potential, for the eye which, ever young and ardent, sees the possible. Pleasure disappoints, possibility never. And what wine is so sparkling, what so fragrant, what so intoxicating, as possibility?"

We need to be bold and daring, to be able to say "I don't know", and recognize that we are far from fulfilling ourselves. Don't be satisfied with mediocrity! Don't give up! There's so much waiting for you!

CROW JUNCTION

During one of my recent talks, I was asked a very plaintive question. She—at least, I think it was a lady, but am not sure, as the written question was passed out to the front—said her father, who was a vegetable farmer, had to use pesticides to protect his crops. She was worried because many insects are killed by this, of course, and, being Buddhist, wondered what will happen to her father as a result. "Will he go to Hell?" she asked. "He is kind and not a bad man, and always taught us to do good. I love him and don't want him to suffer. Please tell me what to do".

Near the temple where I usually stay whenever I'm in Kuala Lumpur is a busy road-junction, with many trees beside it. These trees—though I don't know why, as trees in other places are not so frequented—are the roosting-place of so many crows that when they are all settled there for the night, there seem to be almost as many crows as leaves on them!



Before dawn, I see them flying past the temple, bound to wherever it is they go at that time, to do whatever crows do (mainly scavenging for food, no doubt), and in the evening, before darkness falls, they return to their places at what I have come to call Crow Junction, undisturbed by the roar of the traffic beneath them. This has probably gone on for many generations, offspring instinctively following their parents without question. I've not seen any nests at this place, so I guess they only roost there, and nest elsewhere.

It is teeming with rain as I write this, and the poor crows must be huddled on their branches in the dark. What if I were to take an umbrella down to the Junction and offer them shelter? Quaint idea! It would be just as kind but hopelessly sentimental and impractical as Francis of Assisi's

efforts to repair a spider-web he had accidentally brushed against with threads pulled from his own garment. The spider, in his case, would not have appreciated his kindness in the least, and the crows, in mine, would only flutter and flap their wings in alarm and get out of my way. They might not think me mad—as would any onlookers observing my bizarre behavior—but would not accept my well-intentioned albeit foolish offer, and I would only get wet myself.

We should use common-sense with religion and try not to be too idealistic or sentimental. What are we to do about the precept to abstain from killing if, when we need to shower, there are ants all over the bathroom floor? To remove them, one by one, would take too long. Are we to forego showering because of this? Or will we go ahead, knowing that many ants will drown while we are doing so? Well, why do we shower? Is it to kill ants or to cleanse ourselves? It is unfortunate that they die because of our shower, but it is not our purpose to kill them. We may try to stop them from getting into the bathroom before we shower, but we cannot absolutely prevent it.

And if we discover termites in the woodwork of our home, will we just resign ourselves to the destruction and let them go ahead? Whatever we do, or whatever is done for us, somehow involves the death—if not the killing (the two are different: death and killing) of other things. If we continually worry about killing things, we will never get anything done. The important thing is to live with the intention to cause as little pain as possible as we pass through this world, but not to feel too bad if we cannot completely succeed. I don't think anyone will go to Hell for killing insects in the course of their work. And anyway, I'm not convinced there is such a place; I may be wrong, but I think it's a state of mind.

We cannot always have things our own way, and must often compromise. This is why we should meet and assess each situation as it arises instead of with minds already made up. A way of dealing with one situation may not be right for another; each situation, being different, requires a different approach; if one approach doesn't fit the situation, another might. And if you make a wrong decision or use an unsuitable

approach, well, who has never made a mistake? Don't castigate yourself too much; try to learn something from it.

When my father was sick, just before he died, out of curiosity, I asked an old monk who was visiting Melbourne if he could give me some advice for him. I was not surprised or disappointed when he replied: "Tell him to chant the Buddha's name"; I didn't expect much else. I wonder what my father would have said if I had told him this? It was, in his case, useless advice. If he had said, "Tell him to recite 'Hammer, nails and saw'", this would have been much more meaningful, as my father was a handyman, not a Buddhist. What we think is good for us is not automatically good for everyone else.

Some Buddhists say: "It's not enough to read books; we must practice the Dharma!" What does it mean? Sometimes, it seems, they speak without thinking, and their words have no meaning. What do they expect to get from their practices? They say their aim or purpose is insight or enlightenment. But that is a result or an experience, not a practice; we cannot do insight! There is no insight-button we may press; it is not within our capacity to make it arise. It arises—if it does—when we are not looking for it or thinking about it. And it may arise while we are reading no less than by anything else we might be doing. Why discriminate against books? Is not reading books also a practice?

It is true, of course, that "reading books is not enough"; we must also eat, drink, sleep, relieve ourselves, bathe, and do countless other things; we cannot live just by reading books. But it is a mistake to look down upon and despise reading; like everything else, books are in the mind—how else do we process the information registered by our other senses? Books are one of many means to liberation—and not a minor one, either; we may save ourselves lots of time and trouble through reading. Much of our knowledge of Dharma comes from books; it doesn't all come from practicing. The Buddha's Teachings were preserved in books, and even people who emphasize the importance of oral teachings also read.

Practices of any kind are always carried out with the idea of getting something in return; can we practice anything without thought of result? Would we practice anything if we thought we could get nothing in return?

So, I do not agree with the statement "reading books is not enough", in the sense it is used here, and would say: "Practicing Dharma is not enough". We have to let the Dharma practice us! When we draw near to Dharma by rejoicing in it, the Dharma starts to work in us like yeast in dough, making it rise. Practicing Dharma is self-conscious, self-centered, contrived and artificial, something with a purpose or motive in mind. Why are we doing what we are doing? What do we expect to get from it? If we are not careful, we may become entangled in a web of our own spinning. Why do we continue to produce fire by rubbing two sticks together—and sometimes wet sticks, at that—when there are better and easier ways of doing it? Why do we insist upon doing things the hard—and not necessarily the best—way? We should take care that we do not become pious hypocrites.

Our practices are often based upon fearful self-concern, which distorts things, of course. We set ourselves apart from others by practicing things that they do not; do you see the danger in this? It is easy to consider ourselves better and more enlightened than people who don't do what we do.

If, however, we observe how life is: how we depend so much upon others and benefit from them in so many ways, something gets freed up in us—something that's long been jammed—and we begin to respond to life from gratitude and love. Deep inside, we know what is what, and need only give this knowing chance to operate, instead of always trying to control and manipulate things the way we want them. Is it not sufficient to do good or right simply because we know it to be so, and not because of what we think we might get in return?

Are we separate from and better than others just because we have seen some light and set our feet upon a spiritual path? Or are we not part of the whole, and subject to the force of evolution, too? We have not reached our present state of—what shall we call it?: evolution, progress, development?—by our own efforts, but only because we belong to something infinitely bigger than our tiny selves. We are humans, members of the human-race, and it is only because we are so, that we are able to even think as we do; we have no right to hold up our heads and arrogantly say: "This is mine! I have achieved this! This is my enlightenment, a result of

my own efforts." Where is the self that thinks and says such things? When everything is selfless—empty of self—they cannot, therefore, be said.

"You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind
blows".
(Bob Dylan)

THROUGH MY EYES

SOME YEARS AGO, I was told that one of the monks in the large and very wealthy temple in Manila where I was staying at that time, had complained of me "never praying to the Buddha", as I did not join in their ceremonies for the dead, by which they made so much money. I pleaded guilty to the charge, readily. Pray to the Buddha? Why on earth should I do that, to someone who spent His entire life trying to help others understand? There is a little verse that expresses how it is:

*"No-one saves us but ourselves;
No-one can, and no-one may.
We ourselves must walk the Path;
Buddhas only show the way."*

It is time I made it clear—at the risk of being branded a heretic—how I see the Buddha, and not how other people might expect me to see Him; I should have done it long ago, leaving people in no doubt as to where I stand.

I feel the centuries have distorted Him to such an extent that He's almost not visible at all, and His words in the scriptures seem disconnected and disembodied. People deify Him because—in my opinion—they don't understand the meaning of His Teachings; they want Him to be a God so that He will save them, instead of making the effort to become enlightened; consequently, what happens is they become enlightened.

I do not accept that he was born in any but the normal way; nor do I accept the miraculous stories concerning his birth; it was common, in those days—and for many centuries after—to glorify and embellish the stories of the founders of religion (it's called 'gilding the lily'); Buddhism is no exception. So, I do not believe that the new-born baby could walk and talk. Neither do I believe he was born with teeth—let alone forty teeth, which is held to be one of the thirty-two major marks of the Mahapurisa (Great Person), according to the popular divination. Nor do I believe that he had

webs between his fingers and toes, like a duck. Nor do I believe that, after He left home and cut off His hair, it never grew again, but remained as tight little curls covering His head; although I have never seen a statue or a picture of the Buddha with a shaved head, He did shave it, just as He expected His monks to shave theirs; nor do I believe His hair was blue. Nor do I believe that He had such long ears that the lobes touched His shoulders. Nor do I believe that he grew to be about sixteen feet tall! Nor do I believe that He was effeminate looking, as He is often shown in Indian or Thai pictures; He was a man, a male, not a hermaphrodite! Nor do I believe that He was omniscient, knowing everything about the past, present and future; I think that He knew and fully understood the facts of life, not the kind of things that we know. I don't care what other people believe, or how many people believed such things in the past; I do not believe them!

I do not believe that in His previous lives, He was an animal—sometimes a deer, an elephant, or a monkey, and so on—who could speak human language; we shouldn't take everything in the scriptures literally; much is only symbolic. If we set out by believing a thing to be true just because it is in the scriptures, we will find a way to explain it, even if we have to twist it and stretch our imagination to do so. We will see only what we want to see and not necessarily what is there. Hope, fear, insecurity and desire are quite capable of constructing convincing philosophies, but a thing is still not true for us unless and until we have experienced it directly and by ourselves. To approach things with minds fully made up, believing they must be true because they are found in religious scriptures is piety without foundation, and is wrong.

I do not believe that Prince Siddhartha had never seen old people, sick people, dead people or ascetics before the age of 29, and that he had been kept as a prisoner in the palace until then; I think that, like you and I, he had seen such people before, but on that particular occasion, he saw them as if for the first time, with new eyes and clear perception. One day, this—or something similar—might happen to us. We have never really seen; we have only looked!

I do not regard the Buddha as a cosmic savior or superman, with the power to help or save; praying to Him is useless; He never asked people to do that. We should try to apply His teachings in our lives, instead, in order

to find out if they are true or not, and whatever success we have in this will encourage us to go further.

There are two parts to Buddhism: the part of the past, (this includes the life story and legends of the Buddha), which we cannot verify, and the part of the present—the Eternal Now —the Dharma, which it is within our capacity to apply, test, and realize. I respect the Buddha as a Teacher or Way-pointer, who revealed the Dharma, but I do not pray to or worship Him.

Although I tentatively accept the concept of ‘rebirth’ as a hypothesis, I know nothing about life after death, nor do I know anyone who does. I have read what others have written about it and heard others speak of it, but I wonder if they are speaking from their own experience or are merely repeating what they’ve heard others say. Anyway, without seeming to contradict myself, I must say that, according to Buddhism, there is really no such thing as ‘rebirth’; it is another case of words being misleading. Seldom is it questioned, but the word—which really means ‘born again’ (‘re’=again)—is not appropriate for what Buddhism maintains happens when we die: like a stream, our consciousness, ever changing, flows on; there is nothing that remains the same or is reborn. The Pali word that is unfortunately translated as ‘rebirth’ is bhava, which means ‘becoming’—becoming other than we are.

Likewise with the concept of ‘karma’; I accept it, but guardedly and not in a fatalistic way whereby each and every thing that happens to us is attributed to ‘our karma’; there are forces other than the law of karma working in our lives, shaping, molding and influencing us. Personal karma accounts for only some of the things that happen to us, and not, by any means, all. Also, unlike the Law of Cause-and-Effect, the Law of Karma cannot be demonstrated and proved; it remains a hypothesis.

There, I have expressed my unbelief, and what has happened? The earth didn’t quake and swallow me up; lightning didn’t flash and strike me. No doubt some people would like to see it, but will I be excommunicated? There are no fixed and binding dogmas—no creed—that we must accept and profess when we take up the Buddha’s Way. Our responsibility is not to believe but to find out. At times, we should do a bit of stock-taking, should

cut the dead wood from the tree, and separate culture, belief and legend from the Dharma.

Even before I became a monk, I learned how to chant in Pali (I have some musical ability, so it was not hard), but soon became disillusioned by what I saw chanting being used for. I do not believe in the miraculous power of chanting; the scriptures are supposed to be the teachings of the Buddha, not magic charms. If I had learned how to chant in Chinese and perform funeral ceremonies (as I could easily have done; it is not difficult), I would have been very rich—in terms of money—long ago. But I regard such ‘work’ as abhorrent and unmanly, fit only for eunuchs! I refuse to lower myself to such a level!

INJECTION

WHEN I WAS A SMALL BOY, my mother took me to the family doctor for a vaccination of some sort or other, and held me in her arms with my pants down. When the doctor came towards me with the syringe, however, I lashed out and punched him in the face! Needless to say, he wasn't very happy about this, but neither was I about having a needle stuck in my butt! At that tender age, I didn't realize that it was for my own good!

It often happens that our fear of, and efforts to avoid pain only increase it. This is not to say we should masochistically enjoy it or even go looking for it, but to realize that Life involves pain. We can lessen it, but can never completely overcome or avoid it. It is, therefore, something we should try to understand.

When we turn towards Dharma, we should not expect it to adjust to us or our desires, for it will never do that. It is we who must adjust to it. If this is sometimes hard, it is because of our pride. We have certain images of ourselves and often feel no need to change, which is why spiritual friendship is so important. We need a kalyana mitra—a good friend—someone who, with our welfare always in mind, will advise, restrain, cheer, soothe, exhort and encourage us. A friend of this type will put friendship before self-interest. He will not remain silent if he sees us straying into unwholesome ways, though his disapproval will be kindly and without self-righteousness; it won't have the flavor of "I am right and you are wrong".

But how to find such a friend? They don't come easily, with Kalyana Mitra stamped all over them. How will we know one if we meet one? There is risk of being hurt when we go in search of a friend; if we open ourselves and make ourselves vulnerable, we may find the wrong kind of friend. Feeling this, and perhaps having been hurt by 'friends' in the past, some people—my eldest sister is one—lock themselves up and prefer to have no friends. There are such friends in the world, however, and the benefits of

having one are immense—making it well worth the risk of opening ourselves.

But are we worthy of such a friend? Do we deserve one? What kind of friend are we? Are we trustworthy? Can others depend upon us to do what we say we will do? Or do we expect more of others than of ourselves? Is our word our bond? Is it always others who should keep their word and not us? Can we be honest, and assess ourselves objectively? Are we the kind of friend to others that we ourselves would like to have? We fall far short of our own standards, do we not? Even so, never mind; it is as it should be, because we are on a journey and have not reached the end; as long as this is so, there will always be a space—a difference—between what we are and what we would like to be; but if we recognize and understand this, there is no need to feel so bad about it; we will not be forever at this stage. Some discomfort and embarrassment about our shortcomings, however, is good, as it keeps us awake and moving, instead of lapsing into lethargy and indolence. It is good to have standards, but they should not be double standards; we should apply our own standards to ourselves as well as to others.

Some time ago, while visiting a small town in Sarawak, someone told me about an American pastor who was working there. Apparently, he disagreed with something in one of my books that someone had given him, and asked to meet me. I had no objection, and an appointment was arranged. He came to the place where I was staying, and our discussion went on for two hours. Although he was rather naïve in some ways (aren't we all?), I found him otherwise very nice.

He said he had detected some bitterness in my book and asked me why I was so biased against Christianity. I told him of my years in the Refugee Camps of S.E. Asia, and how unethical I considered the conduct of the flocks of Christian missionaries there, all doing their utmost to convert the Buddhists. I had no choice but to protest against this, I said, and if the situation had been reversed and Buddhists were trying to convert Christians, I would have said the same thing: "Don't do that! It's wrong! Help where and if you can, but do not use your help as a lever to pressure others to convert to your beliefs!"

The pastor's response to this was revealing. With disbelief in his voice, he said: "Would you?" "Yes", I said firmly, "I would". Again, to make sure his ears were not deceiving him, he asked: "Would you, really?" and again I gave the same answer.

I will probably never find myself in that situation, because over its long history, Buddhism has never spread by such means. And precisely because of this, I can say that I would oppose any efforts to convert others to Buddhism by unethical means such as are used by others. I never tried to convert anyone to Buddhism during my work in Manila City Jail.

Conversion, as I see it, is not a matter of a change of name, but a change of heart; I don't care what people call themselves, and in fact, would prefer it if they did not call themselves anything. I know my own mind in this.

The pastor was surprised when I told him that Buddhism was also a missionary religion, and had been from its beginning, over 500 years before the birth of Jesus. He registered even more surprise upon hearing that blood has never been shed in the name of Buddhism, and that there has never been a Buddhist war. "We are not proud of that", I said, "because this is just how it should be". Unwilling to let this pass unchallenged, he said: "But just last year, a foreign tourist was killed by a Buddhist in Thailand!" "No", I said, "she was killed by a Thai, not by a Buddhist, and though he called himself 'Buddhist'—as do most Thais—and even wore a monk's robe, it was not a Buddhist action and was not carried out in the name of Buddhism. There is no way that Buddhism can be held responsible for that". (That particular 'monk' had a history of mental illness, and should never have been ordained in the first place; ordination is just too easy in Thailand; they will ordain anyone!)

Buddhism was old long before Jesus was born. Isn't it time Christians came out of their spiritual shells and realized that there are other ways in the world beside theirs? We're not asking for tolerance; it's not enough. What we want is fairness. Would Christians like it if others tried to convert them by telling them that their religion is no good, that Jesus is a demon and anyone praying to him will go to hell? Of course they wouldn't! So they should learn not to do that to others, should learn to follow the Golden Rule which they shout so much about, and claim that Jesus taught: "Do unto others as you would like others to do to you". Jesus might have taught it, but

he did not originate it; many others had said the same thing before him (actually, Jesus didn't say much that was original). The world has had too much of Christian hegemony—century after long century of it!—and unless and until Christians renounce and abandon this, there will be no possibility of religious cooperation. There should be a demand on the part of followers of other religions for Christians to publicly disavow this practice and openly accept and respect other religions. This is my demand, and I will continue to speak and write about it.

Buddhism teaches that everyone—no matter what they call themselves—has Buddha-nature, or the capacity to become enlightened. It's intrinsic—inside us—no-one gives it to us. And you don't have to call yourself a Buddhist to be a Buddhist. What freedom!

"You don't need a good voice to be able to sing". If you have a song in your heart, sing it!

THE LARK'S SONG

HAVING LEFT THE LAND OF MY BIRTH many years ago to travel around the world, I am a stranger there now, and know countries like India and Malaysia much better than I do England. But this doesn't bother me, and I don't suppose I'll ever return to live there permanently. The place where I was born and grew up, however, was really quite beautiful, being in the countryside, and for many years, feeling the urge to trace my roots, I had wanted to go back for a visit.

In 1995, therefore, I made the effort and went back, and in this article, I want to tell of some of my observations there.

Although our family was not well off, neither were we poor by the standards of that time and place; in fact, we were really quite lucky, as we always had a car, and later on, we were among the first in our village to have a TV set (yes, the 20th century, not the 19th, and after World War II, not before; sounds incredible, doesn't it?). I do not remember it, but food-rationing went on for several years after the war; you couldn't just go out and buy whatever you wanted, even if you had the money; they were not the easiest of years, but after the War that practically bankrupted Britain, anything was good. (Until now, it is still spoken of as 'the war', as if there was only one war! It shows how, when we are involved with something directly, it becomes ours, subjectively, whereas other things— even though they are similar—are remote from us and somehow far away).

Our village was lovely—so lovely!—with hills, fields, woods, streams, ponds for fishing, various kinds of fruit- and nut-trees, and even old castles within range of our wandering feet. During holidays—weather permitting (though I don't recall it raining as much then as it seems to do now)—my younger brother and I would leave home in the morning, with sandwiches packed by our mother, and cover many miles before coming home in the evening, tired but happy from the day's adventures, with something or other in our pockets or over our shoulders. Our parents didn't worry about us; it was just the way things were; there was almost no crime in our area then.

School was not the most favorite part of my life; it wasn't that I was dumb and incapable of learning, but that I didn't like being made to learn, and wanted to learn in my own way. I was somewhat like Mark Twain, it seems, and preferred being in the open air to being confined in a classroom. It was not uncommon for me, therefore, to decide at lunch time that I wouldn't go back to school afterwards and instead, went off into the nearby woods. When classes resumed, my absence was discovered, and—twice that I remember—upon being informed that someone had seen me going into the woods, the headmaster brought the entire school out to search for me (I guess it was a nice break for him, too). But I knew the woods better than they did, and was, moreover, very good at hiding, so they would be all around me and still not see me. After a while, the search was abandoned and they returned to school, and I, thinking how smart I was to outfox them, then went home. The next day, however, I had to go to school again, where the teacher was waiting for me with his cane! I was so happy to leave school!

There was one spot in the woods that I particularly loved: a rocky outcrop that soared like the bow of a ship above the waves of the tree tops. I would sit there for hours, dreaming away. I even scratched my name in the rock. Far below was a farm house among the trees and patchwork fields; I used to call and wave to the people there, and they would wave back. Carefree, simple days. On the other side was one of the two castles in our vicinity—a mock-Norman fortress, built only 150 years ago in the forest. For young boys, of course, such a place drew us like a magnet; it was irresistible. Round and round the walls we would go, hoping somehow to find a way in. Years after first discovering the castle, we did manage to get in, and how happy we were to have a castle all to ourselves! Our imaginations, given free rein, went wild!

In our village, there were two places of worship: the Church of England and the Methodist chapel. People were divided in their loyalties between them, although there was little difference in belief. My family—led by our mother—went to chapel (we didn't call it 'church'; it was chapel, and nothing else). It was, for me at that time, rather boring; you could count on seeing the same people there week after week, and people were noticeable if they didn't turn up. There was David Dodd, who invariably

went to sleep during the sermon, grumpy old Eric Chesters, the farmer who used to yell at and chase us if we set foot in his fields, though we were doing no harm, and Mary Hassle, the organist. My mother was active in the chapel, and often used to conduct the services. The whole service—consisting of two prayers, three hymns, some announcements, and the sermon—lasted an hour. The sermon should not have gone on for longer than twenty minutes, and if it did, people would become restless, coughing and looking at the clock on the wall, wondering when it was going to end; it was a formality; the content wasn't important. Such was my religious background, and though I was later to abandon and reject it, I learned something from it, and am grateful.

Every summer we spent two weeks at the seaside in a rented chalet. Such chalets—which were really only shacks; there were caravans and even converted buses, too—clustered in the hollows between the sand dunes; most of them had no running water, so we had to carry it from the taps placed at intervals along the road; at times, when usage reduced the pressure to a trickle, we had to stand in line for quite a while, little by little shifting our buckets and cans nearer to the solitary tap, hoping it wouldn't run dry before we got to it. Nor were the shacks wired for electricity; we made do—and quite well—with kerosene lamps. And, needless to say, there were no flush-toilets, but little out-houses with buckets that had to be periodically emptied in pits dug for that purpose. It was all part of being on holiday; we didn't mind.

The dunes were covered by rushes with spiky tips, which would break off in your skin and fester if you brushed against them; among the rushes, here and there, were patches of sea-holly, and black berries, with fruit and thorns. The unspoiled beach stretched for miles and miles, and sloped very gently. The sea would recede so far, then advance almost to the dunes; what fun we had with an inflated airplane-inner-tube that our dad had acquired somewhere! (He was somewhat eccentric, and an inveterate patron of junk shops and sale rooms, coming home with all kinds of odd things—treasures as well as trash). A light house stood on the beach, alone, aloof, mysterious, unoccupied, and slowly lapsing into ruin.



As a child, I loved nature, and was given to solitary musings. It was not unusual, therefore, for me to go off on my own at the beach and sit or lie quietly in the dunes. There, I would listen to the sky larks sing high above, and strain my eyes to locate them; I could hear them, but where were they? Why did they fly so high to sing like that? Such a beautiful sound—I can hear it now!

I stayed with my second sister when I went back in '95, and from her home I made my forays to the scenes of my childhood, fifteen miles or more away. My village had changed quite a bit, and wasn't as well kept as I remember it; the grass verges at the roadsides—which used to be so neat—were overgrown with weeds and briars. The house where I was born had gone—almost without a trace—demolished long ago (it was so old that to renovate and modernize it would have cost too much); the garden was like a jungle. I lived there for many years? I was born there? Not much remained apart from an ash tree I used to climb, an oak gate post—still solid—set firmly in the ground by my dad, a lilac bush that my mother had planted, and a few moss-covered stones in a garden wall.

Wandering around the village, I noticed some new houses, and gaps where others—like ours—had been. I met several people I knew and who remembered me; some had even heard that I had become a monk; looking back now, I suppose I was always odd; whoever would have supposed that a village boy like me would wander the world and return a monk? But I didn't find the hospitality I'd grown accustomed to in S.E. Asia; no-one invited me to stay with them. Someone who I had gone to school with for ten years kept me talking outside his farm gate for quite a while without even asking if I would like a cup of tea! Would I have done that to him, if it were he coming back after almost thirty years away?

Visiting the church yard, and the graves therein, I came upon that of my school teacher; thinking thoughts of "Thanks for your efforts with me; even the canings were good!" I moved on. Names of many other people I had known stared up at me from the stones; I read their touching epitaphs. "Rest in Peace", David Dodd and Eric Chesters.

The Chapel, because it was situated on a slope that had begun to subside, was closed until funds could be raised to strengthen and make it

safe; the church, in the meantime, had offered to share their premises with the chapel-goers, until their own were again usable—quite a development, considering how at odds they used to be.

The forest surrounding my rocky eminence had become a game-reserve for breeding pheasants (for shooting in the autumn; cruel sport!), and was out-of-bounds. Having come so far to revisit it, however, I wasn't going to allow a few signs to deter me; early one morning, therefore, before the game-wardens were around, I went there and sat pondering on how strange my life has been. It seemed to be like a river—its source at that place—twisting, turning and meandering its way into the distance, but to no perceivable end. My name was still there, etched in the rock.

Our castle had been opened to the public as a tourist attraction, so this time, I paid to go in, but it was so many years since I'd last been there that it seemed different, somehow. Perhaps the difference was more in me than in the place, however; I was seeing it with different eyes this time—eyes that had seen so many other castles and things since then.

I was never very close to our relatives—aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.—but when one of my cousins discovered I was back, and decided it was a good excuse for a family get-together (she's very much into such things, and together with another cousin, is engaged in tracing back our family tree), she set about arranging it. Not having seen some of these relatives for almost thirty years, I thought it would be interesting, but the actual event was somewhat of a let-down. While I did not expect or want to be the center of attention, I found their topics of conversation banal; it was as if I had never been away; no-one asked me anything about my travels. It was not because they were Christians, either; although they might call themselves so, they are not practicing Christians, or religious in the real sense, at all. Maybe my life style and the things I've done are so different and removed from their routine world that they considered me a threat to their security. (Their reaction—or non-reaction—to me was quite different than had been that of other relatives in the US, when I met them there in '85; they were Christians—white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPS)—whose cold unfriendliness indicated their disapproval of my abandonment of the family religion to become a 'heathen'). What you do not understand may be

dangerous; you must be cautious, even afraid. It's probably the last time we will meet.

A visit to England for this purpose would not have been complete without going to our holiday beach. I went alone, as I had done to our village. What a change! The shacks among the dunes had vanished, as if they'd never existed; only when I searched did I discover a pathway to one of them, overgrown with weeds. I was told that the area had been bought by a consortium years before, but the plans they had to develop it into a resort had come to nothing. What a pity. Many people had happy times there. Now, those same people—or their children—probably jet off to the Costa del Sol, but are they happier there than they were in the rustic shacks among the dunes? A moot question.

Nearby was a caravan-park, but since it was not yet holiday season, there weren't many people about. The beach was deserted, so I was able to wander and muse undisturbed. The dunes looked much the same, although some had gone altogether—trucked away to glass factories, perhaps. The lighthouse still stood, solitary, lonely, unused.

Apart from the cries of a few gulls and the sound of the sea far out, it was very quiet. I sat on the sand to eat the lunch my sister had kindly packed for me. There, along the beach, I 'saw' my father with his inner-tube, and two young boys beside him; I 'heard' a black dog barking, happy to join in the fun (he was such a faithful old dog, the black one we had so long ago). Of that small group along the sand, only one remains, and he is no longer young. I have come a long way since then.

As I sat there, suddenly, a sound I'd been waiting for came from far up in the sky: the silver song of a sky lark. I lay back and closed my eyes, not even bothering to search for the bird. Memories welled up in my mind, of things long not thought of, that if told of here might mean nothing to others. It's amazing how much is stored away in the files of the mind.

My eldest sister in Australia had shown no interest in my desire to trace my roots, saying, "You can never go back", which is true, of course; we can only go forwards. But the past has not really gone like we think it has; it is still here, and we carry it with us; in fact, we are the past; the present is the past with a little bit more added to it. And we can make sense

of the present only by understanding the past, for without the past, the present doesn't exist. The more we understand of the past, therefore, the more sense we'll be able to make of the present. This is why I wanted to go back to England: to take stock of my life before going any further. I'm glad I went; I think I understand myself a bit better than I did before.

Recently, in a magazine more than thirty years old, I came across an article that inspired me; the song of the lark reminded me of my own experience. It says many things that I feel. I decided to include it here, acknowledging its author, Wayne Amos, with thanks. It is entitled:

THE ROUTE TO THE ETERNAL NOW

"What is the secret of those
rare moments of ineffable happiness,
when all the world is in tune?"

"After many years in New York and Europe, I was back in the plains-states visiting my cousin Riley on the farm he had never left. We walked through the fields and sat on a log. Alert, amused, Riley whittled on a stick as I told stories of London, Paris, Madrid.

"The leaves of the cottonwoods rustled in the summer breeze. A redbird called, its notes so clear they seemed to split the air. I forgot my story as I listened to the leaves and the bird and felt the same inexplicable happiness I had felt a lifetime ago on this same farm.

"I was 15 then, Riley 20. Riley had wanted to get the ploughing done and was working all night. I had just learned to drive the tractor and was eager to help. We took turns ploughing and sleeping in the haystack. The hired girl would bring us coffee and sandwiches at midnight.

"When I awoke at 11:30 the three-quarter moon had risen. The tractor droned powerfully, its light eating into the furrows. At the end of a row Riley would jump down and hold a book in the light for half a minute. He was memorizing a poem, something by Walt Whitman about " ... rich, apple-blossom'd earth! Smile for your lover comes!" He was a great reader;

the librarian used to say he checked out more books than anyone else in the county.

"As I was watching the scene, some strange sort of light seemed to turn on for me. I saw the moon, the tractor, the field, the trees, the house, the haystack, as if from all sides at once. It was so beautiful, so magical, I feared to breathe lest I change something. Time seemed to stop, and I wanted it never to start again.

"And now, sitting on a log many years later, I felt the same ineffable happiness. I heard the bird, the leaves. I was in the scene, part of it.

"I tried to explain to Riley but knew I couldn't. I recalled the tractor, the moonlight. I was there, I said. The moon was there. Oh, it was hopeless trying to put it into words. But Riley nodded, and suddenly I realized something. Riley knew all about that magic. He had experienced it often.

"You know the secret!" I cried. "What is it?"

"Riley smiled and put aside his whittling.

"No-one can explain it," he said. "Oh, I've found hints in many of the books I've read. But first I felt it, just as you did. And so did the men who tried to write about it. They felt it independently, separated by oceans and centuries; yet they all shared the same experience."

"But what is it?"

"If I had to put it in one sentence," Riley went on, "I would say, 'Full consciousness brings joy.' One of the mysteries is that the Universe contains innate joy. Once you fully open your senses to anything—a sunset, a waterfall, a stone, a blade of grass—the joy comes.

"But to open the senses, to become really conscious, you have to drop out of the future and the past and remain for a while on what T.S. Eliot, in his poem, 'Burnt Norton', called 'the still point of the turning world,' the present. The only true reality is the present. The past is gone; the future is not yet.

"That long-ago night was beautiful to you because of the unusual circumstances. Waking up at midnight in a haystack turned you upside down. You stopped planning into the future and thinking into the past. You were there in the Now.

"Children have these moments frequently. But they grow up and lose the capacity. Yet, with the dim memory of ecstasy and the hope for more,

they pursue this hope for the rest of their lives, forever grasping and forever analyzing. They're on a journey which has no destination, except death. For this reason, most men do actually live 'lives of quiet desperation'.

"Schopenhauer said that most men are 'lumbermen'. They walk through a beautiful forest always thinking: 'What can this tree do for me? How many board-feet of lumber will it produce? Last year I netted such and so; this year I must do better'. They are always in the past or future; they are always becoming, they never are.

"Then through the forest comes the artist, though maybe he never painted a picture. He stops before a tree, and because he asks nothing of the tree he really sees it. He is not planning the future; for the moment he has no concern for himself. The self drops out. Time stops. He is there, in the present. He sees the tree with full consciousness. It is beautiful. Joys steps in, unmasked.

"It is not important how you explain this; it is the feeling, the experience that counts. Some people believe everything in the Universe—a field of wheat swaying in the wind, a mountain, a cloud, the first snowfall of winter—has a being, an intelligence and soul of its own. When we can think of things in this way it is easier to love them, and love is the prime ingredient of these experiences. But our love must not be possessive. William Blake put it perfectly when he said, 'He who binds to himself a joy, does the winged life destroy; but he who kisses the joy as it flies, lives in eternity's sunrise.'

"Martin Buber says we can learn to love the world— things, animals, people, stars—as Thou. And that when we do love them and address them as Thou, they always respond. This is probably the greatest thrill of all—the response of joy to joy.

"I believe most men can have their glimpses of the eternal, their timeless moments, and almost any time they choose. Many of our little practical tasks—say we are hoeing the garden, picking fruit or trimming a hedge—require only 1/100 part of our consciousness. We use the other 99 parts daydreaming of tomorrow or remembering yesterday. If we can only watch the movement of our hands, the trembling of a leaf, feel the sun on our skin, the breeze in our hair and eliminate quickly the constant intrusion

of thoughts of past and future, if we can successfully do this for even tens of seconds, the joy will come.

"The eyes will shine with a new light, and if a stranger passes during one of these moments and you exchange a glance, the chances are", said Riley, "that he, too, will share in the mystery."

"Driving back to town alone, I stopped the car and walked down a winding lane. Pulling a leaf from a bush, I tried to "see" it. But I found immediately that I was planning tomorrow's appointment. I studied the leaf, stared at it—and was remembering some trivial thing from the past.

Suddenly, out of the clear sky came a clap of thunder: a plane breaking the sound barrier. In the silence that followed I heard, to the exclusion of all other perceptions, the musical call of a meadow lark. There was strength in the loud, brief song and a flutelike delicacy, peaceful, plaintive; and, over all, there was a joyous acceptance of the eternal now, astride the centuries and millenniums".

"Full consciousness brings joy". Yes!

MORTALITY

My teacher lies there on the floor:
a butterfly, fluttering away its final moments.
I watch, feeling its life-force slip away,
unable to help or console.
I am the same as it in my mortality;
the life-force will leave me, too.
But I am also different,
in that I can know and understand,
It suffers; I suffer;
who suffers more: it or I?
The butterfly cannot recall its past,
and knows nothing of the processes
which rule its life,
so just accepts, unquestioningly,
whatever happens to it.
I do not.
I think, I feel, I wonder why,
and want to know,
and this increases suffering,
yet necessarily, so that,
in facing it, it may be overcome.

MY BROTHER AND THE YETI

ONCE A WEEK, when I was a child, my parents used to take my younger brother and I to the Movies (we called it "The Pictures" in those days), usually on Friday evening. After five dreary days of school, it was really something to look forward to.

The nearest town to our village had four cinemas, the names of which—if I remember correctly—were Odeon, Gaumont, Regal and Tatler. Near each of them was the inevitable sweet-shop, into which we were taken before going into the cinema, and given free choice. Supplied then, with a bag of sweets and chocolate, we would enter the dark womb of the cinema and join the hushed and expectant crowd waiting for the movie to begin; it was another world, and we were about to embark upon adventures.

Many people would say, "Yes, but a fantasy world, not real". Not real? What do you mean—not real? What is real? You mean this world is real, but that is not? Now, hold on a minute! Life is like a dream—and sometimes a nightmare. It is real only in context, only at the moment, but because of the element of constant change, which we cannot do anything about, ultimately, it is not real; it comes and goes, whether we like it or not, and we cannot catch, hold or possess it. Can we really say that this life is any more real than a movie? When we watch a movie and are interested in it, it is as real to us as the life passing endlessly by; what is the difference? When a thing has passed, it has the same substance as a movie, as a dream; we cannot be certain that it ever really happened, or if we just dreamed it.

Everything is empty, void of lasting substance. What we think of as ours is not ours at all. Our houses are not ours, our cars are not ours, all our possessions, our money, our food and clothes are not ours—not just because we didn't make them and that they came to us from others, but because even our lives are not ours. Our lives are not ours because we have no control over them; they come and go, without our permission. And if our lives are not ours, how can anything else be ours? Quite a sobering thought, is it not? So, is nothing ours—nothing at all? No, I didn't say that. There is one thing—just one thing—that we may consider ours: the present moment,

which is where we live, and where we have some choice and control. But it is not something to talk about, for no sooner have we opened our mouth to speak about it than it has gone; it is not a word and cannot be caught with words; it can only be lived. We can choose how we are going to live, what we are going to do in the present moment. Only this is ours; only the present moment is real, not the past, for it has gone, and not the future, for it never comes. And both that which we take for real, and that which we say is not real (like the movies), exist, to us—each one of us—only in the mind, and nowhere else. We experience things—whether it be eating ice cream, reading, brushing our teeth, surfing the net, or sitting through a movie, and so on—essentially only by the mind, via the senses. We call it perception. How do we decide what is ‘real’ and what is ‘not-real’? Life is like a movie, too; it moves, and never remains the same. Movie-making has come so far and reached such a stage that the special effects are so realistic they almost jump out at us, and we are absorbed by, engrossed in them! But it is all ‘unreal’, we say. What can we catch and hold and call ‘real’ that won’t change and slip from our grasp?

The Buddha rejected the common belief in a soul—something immortal, personal and separate from others—and showed, by analysis of the component-parts of a person, that no such thing exists. This is the most shocking thing that many of us can hear, as it undermines our whole belief in, or conception of ourselves, and removes—or so we think—our reason for continued living. But He did not say or imply that life was therefore worthless, and in fact, placed the greatest value and importance on being born human, as it provides us with the opportunity for spiritual growth and realization up to and including enlightenment. He said: "Here in this body of ours, but a fathom in length, is to be found the World, the Origin of the World, the End of the World, and the Way to the End of the World". His was not a doctrine of pessimism or annihilation, but one of Liberation and Light.

Anyway, back to my childhood and our movie-going. One of the movies we saw involved the Yeti (otherwise called The Abominable Snowman)—a gigantic, hairy anthropoid which legend holds lives in the snowbound fastnesses of the Himalayas. Now, yetis are supposed to be shy

and elusive, so none have ever been filmed or captured, except in this particular movie, which was only fiction and not true, of course. A British expedition went in search of this legendary creature, and—because it was a movie—it was not long before their Sherpa guides succeeded in tracking down not just one, but a family of yetis, and cornered them in a cave, where they turned and tried to defend themselves. Well, because the expedition was determined to capture at least one yeti at all costs, the mother yeti and child were shot, and the father yeti trussed up and shipped off to London, to be exhibited as "The Missing Link".

Infuriated to the point where it could no longer bear abuse, the Yeti managed to escape from its cage and took refuge in the London Underground, where it went on the rampage, venting its fury on unfortunate commuters. Attempts to recapture it only resulted in more deaths, until finally, it was shot dead.

End of movie. But not end of the effects of the movie on me. I was so terrified by this creature, and could not get it out of my mind. My other brother—ten years my senior—knowing this, took delight in scaring me further, by telling me, just as I was about to go upstairs to bed: "The Yeti is up there waiting for you!" This fear lasted for a long time, and I do not remember when I outgrew it.

Two years ago, I saw this old movie on Australian TV, and could not believe how I had ever been scared of such a silly thing; it was ridiculous; but at the time, so many years before, the Yeti of the movie, and the irrational fear of it, were as real to me as the brother who got his kicks by scaring a child in this way! Children do not know the difference between fear of real things—fear that can protect us from danger and harm—and fear with no foundation in fact; to the child, it is simply fear. To purposely frighten kids with horrors stories and tales of ghosts is therefore not just stupid and wrong, but bad, and has a negative and sometimes long lasting effect on their impressionable minds. We should be concerned with the cultivation of the mind, not with its destruction.

But fear is part of the deluded mind, and it is heartening to learn that even Prince Siddhartha himself, before his Enlightenment as the Buddha—that is, while still a Bodhisattva—experienced fear; he knew what fear was like. It was fear that lay behind his questions when he went out of the palace

one day and was confronted and shocked by the sights of the old person, the sick person and the corpse: "How do people become like this? Can it happen to me? Can my wife become like that?" These questions are very strange—coming from a Bodhisattva—and make no sense unless we realize that, while he was a Bodhisattva, he wasn't aware that he was; it was only after his Enlightenment as a Buddha that, looking back, he realized He had been a Bodhisattva before.

Many years later, He related that after he had left the palace and gone into the forest in search of truth, at times, sitting alone at night, he would be scared by his imaginings and the noises all around him. Fear arose in him, he said, and his hair stood on end. What did he do? What could he do? He didn't jump up and flee from the forest back to the palace, but sat there and faced his fear, and slowly brought it under control. He faced the fear, instead of being afraid of it, and by facing it, found courage. It sounds strange, but it's true: Courage does not mean the absence of fear, but the presence of it; without fear, courage cannot arise; there is no question of courage apart from fear. Just as a large deposit of iron-ore may be turned into a lot of steel, so fear may be transmuted into courage; without iron-ore in its natural state, there can be no steel.

Sometimes, I'm not very happy with myself, and think I'm getting nowhere, or even slipping back. It is encouraging, therefore, to look back and see that I have made progress in this life, and am not finished yet. I mean, I might have remained scared of yetis all my life, mightn't I?

"It is curious that our own offences should seem so much less heinous than the offences of others. I suppose the reason is that we know all the circumstances that have attended them and so manage to excuse in ourselves what we cannot excuse in others."

(Somerset Maugham)

GALLIPOLI

"Hate is not overcome by hate;
only by Love is Hate overcome".
Thus reads the Dhammapada.

IT IS SAID THAT, AT ONE TIME, THE BUDDHA was surrounded by a great company of disciples waiting for Him to address them, but instead of saying anything, He held up a flower. The assembly was mystified: Why was the Buddha holding up a flower without saying anything? Finally, one of the monks smiled, and the Buddha knew he had understood.

What was the Buddha's meaning? There must have been a meaning, and everyone would have expected one; He was not holding it up as if to say: "Look what a nice flower I've got!" And how did the monk understand His meaning? Could he read the Buddha's mind, telepathically? Or did he realize, intuitively, that the flower could have been anything at all and still have the same meaning: that, being empty of self-being, it is, at the same time, full of everything—is everything; because of the interconnectedness of things, everything is—or involves —everything else. It wasn't the flower that was important, but what it symbolized by its being.

Now, if I knew this myself, but didn't explain it to anyone, would anyone understand my meaning if I were to hold up something? And I am holding something up. Do you see what I am holding up? I am holding up my words. What is the meaning of my words? Don't just listen to or read the words, but try to understand what my meaning is. For this, we must be together, must be one in our meeting of minds.

My talks usually go on for two hours or more, during which I say many thousands of words. Just another talk; you have heard so many. Afterwards, out of politeness and custom, you might say: "Oh, very good"—whether you think so or not—offer your red envelopes, and go home. And what has happened, during and after all the talks you have

heard, the purpose of which is to try to awaken people, to help them become a bit more enlightened? Has there been any effect from all the talks you have listened to? How are my talks any different from all the other talks you have heard? They are different simply because they are my talks, and no-one else's. You may decide whether you think they are better or worse than other talks you have listened to; that's up to you, but it will be your opinion. And if you listen (or read) with a mind full of expectations about what I'm going to say, it will prevent you from hearing. It would be better if you listened without expectations, without preconceptions and minds already made up, without ideas of good or bad, better or worse. This talk—this different talk—might be the one that strikes a chord in you after so long, and might make you exclaim, "Ah!" It's not impossible.

Just now, as I write this, I had a call from a lady who had recently attended talks by a Korean Zen Master who was passing through Kuala Lumpur—talks that drew large audiences. She said the talks had frequently been punctuated by applause from the audience, though she, not understanding the points he had made, had not joined in. She asked if it were appropriate to applaud in the middle of a talk, and I told her that it depends upon different things. If it is a response to genuine understanding, it is appropriate, but very often, I feel, people attend such talks with minds already made up, and full of expectations about what would be said, so that, even if the master said a lot of old rubbish, they would still applaud, as a sign that they were so attuned to him and had understood; how come no-one applauds during talks by other teachers? The applause seems to be part-and-parcel of a talk on Zen. There is a great deal of hypocrisy and intellectual snobbery attached to so called 'Zen', and the name-and-form become all important. Without them, many 'Zennists' see nothing of the Zen that is all around them, and need someone to point it out before they will see, and then, of course, it's no longer Zen! Zen is never second hand.

For many years, I had wanted to revisit Turkey. I had been there a number of times before becoming a monk—first in 1967, and last in 1970. During these visits, on my way to and from India, I had several unpleasant experiences. I was twice attacked on the street, for no apparent reason, as I'd not done or said anything to my assailants; I was spat upon and verbally

abused, and had stuff stolen. However, these experiences did not prejudice me to the extent that I held the whole Turkish nation responsible; it was only a few people who did those things to me. Also, I reasoned that, because they knew nothing at all about me, they were not doing it to me personally, but maybe had had some negative experience with other Westerners before me, and so were merely reacting. Always, since then, I wanted to go back, feeling I had missed something, and that the Turks deserved ‘another go’.

In 1997, therefore, while in Malaysia, I made up my mind to go before I became too old to do so. When I announced my intention, not a few people were surprised, and said things like: "Why do you want to go to there? Turkey is a Muslim country. There are no Buddhists there!" I replied: "Yes, I know it's a Muslim country, and that there are no Buddhists there—I've been there—but the Turks are also human beings, are they not? If we are concerned only about people who call themselves ‘Buddhists’, what kind of Buddhists are we? How many people do you know who say they are ‘Buddhists’ but who know nothing—and in fact, mis-know—about Buddhism? The name doesn't make one a Buddhist. Also, I do not care what people call themselves; it's more important what they are. Nor is it my aim or hope to convert people to Buddhism. I'm only concerned with people as people; in fact, I want to help Buddhists become free of Buddhism and discover their humanness, for this—to me—is what it's all about." A name is not enough.

So, I went to Turkey, and now have a completely different impression of Turkish people than before. To overcome prejudice is always good, as it makes the mind so much lighter, which is what enlightenment is all about. I would like now to tell of some of my experiences there, but for my story to make sense, I must start by saying that I went in ordinary clothes, not dressed as a monk. There were several reasons for this: Firstly, had I gone in robes, it would only have attracted unnecessary attention and served no useful purpose. In Malaysia—and in other countries with large Buddhist communities—many people are very respectful towards monks, often even without knowing anything at all about them; they react to their appearance. Knowing this, certain persons have dressed up as monks and gone begging on the streets, and because this has become quite common (a number of

such fake ‘monks’ have been arrested), there is now a call for monks to carry special identity cards.

On the other hand, in some Western countries, I have been abused with obscene language on the street because of my appearance: same appearance, different reactions, and in both cases, by people who knew nothing about me personally.

I decided to go incognito, not as a monk, but as a human being, and relate to people on that level, to communicate with them by my own ‘merit’, if you will. I wanted to make it on my own, without the robe. In retrospect, I see this was the right decision. In Malaysia, no-one ever mistook me for a Malaysian, nor for an Indian in India, but I was able to blend in so well in Turkey that people often spoke to me in Turkish, thinking I was a Turk! And whereas I’ve quite often been verbally abused in other countries, I was never once hassled there, but experienced much kindness and helpfulness. People would willingly leave whatever they were doing—their work, shops, and so on—and go out of their way to show me directions, often without knowing any English and without expecting anything in return. Turks also smile easily. It made me feel good!

It was pleasant to move around unhindered, and not to stand out in the crowd, and one time, because of it, I was even arrested! I had boarded a tram for the first time there, and had bought my ticket before getting in, as is the way there, but not knowing that one should enter by the front door, I went in by the middle door. No-one paid me much attention. I got down at my stop and was walking away, when I felt a hand on my shoulder. Turning, I found myself face-to-face with the tram-driver! He thought I had ridden without a ticket! I opened my hands in a gesture of helplessness, saying "I don't know!", then fumbled in my pocket for the ticket, at which he realized I was a foreigner and said: "Oh, tamam, tamam"—"Okay, never mind!" I walked away smiling.

I would often meditate in the marvelous mosques of Istanbul, wherein there is a very special atmosphere; their lofty minarets and soaring domes lift the mind to spontaneous calm and quiet. I met several interesting people this way.

One day, after my meditation in Fetiyah Mosque, I was approached by an elderly man who spoke to me in fluent English and said he was curious,

as he had never seen anyone sitting like this before; he asked if he might talk with me. "Certainly", I said, so we sat on the carpet in that tranquil setting and had a nice conversation. We introduced ourselves, and he told me his name was Ali, saying he was a retired school headmaster. When I told him I was a monk, he said: "Oh, I've read something about Buddhism; but the Buddha was not a prophet, like Mohammed; he was only a philosopher."

"You are right", I said; "he was not a prophet", but did not add that he was also not only a philosopher. He then spoke to me at some length about Islam and tried to convince me of its superiority. I listened, without interrupting, and when he had finished, I told him something about Anicca— Impermanence, or Change— and how we can hold on to nothing and claim it as a possession. I also told him that by ourselves, we know so very little, that most of what we think we know is not our knowledge at all, but has come from other people or books. And, because he had spoken a lot about God, I asked him about that word: "Where have you got it from? Is it something of your own experience? Did it suddenly come into your mind one day when you didn't know it before? And do you have only the word, God, or do you know what it represents, what it symbolizes, what lies behind it, if anything? A word is not a thing, not the thing it stands for."

It caused him to think, and he did not really know what to say. Instead, he took from his pocket a rosary, and presented it to me, and I, in turn, took from my bag one of the geodes I carry with me to give to people who I think might appreciate them: hollow pebbles with quartz-crystals inside, called in Australia, 'thunder-eggs'. I explained the meaning—or rather, my meaning—before giving it to him: "What we are looking for is not outside of ourselves". He was surprised at the difference between the outside and the inside of this stone. He then invited me to a nearby coffee shop where he introduced me to some of his friends and we spoke more before going our different ways.

The next day, I visited him again, although I had not intended to do so and he wasn't expecting me. He was pleased to see me, but was different from the previous day— not so assured or pushy; in fact, he was contrite and almost abject, and said to me, in a choking voice: "I am a bad man. I've

done so many bad things and made so many mistakes; I will go to Hell forever; there is no hope for me!"

You can imagine that I did not agree with this, and said to him: "I don't think it matters if you do not pray five times a day" (as Muslims are supposed to do, but which many do not, and of those who do, many pray mechanically and as something expected of them, rather than because they want to do it. In this, they are not unlike followers of other religions, most of whom do not really understand why they are performing the things their religions require of them); "our right actions are our prayers." Then I told him a story from The Hadith, which is a book recording tales of and about the Prophet Mohammed:

It is about a prostitute who had lived an immoral life and had been in no way religious. One day, however, she came upon a cat lying beside the road, dying of thirst. Feeling pity for this cat, the woman took off one of her shoes and scooped some water from a nearby well in it, and gave it to the cat to drink. The book says that because of this kind action, when she died, the woman went immediately to Paradise.

Telling this tale had the effect of cheering Ali up. He had been feeling so sorry for himself, and here I come— a Buddhist monk— and tell him a Muslim story to restore his spirits! We parted friends.

(The story I told him, however, contrasts and contradicts something found earlier in The Hadith: how, four months after the moment of conception, an angel is sent to appoint the destiny of the foetus in the womb: what kind of person it would become, what kind of actions he or she would perform, the livelihood he/she would engage in, and whether, after death, he/she would go to Paradise forever, or to Hell. The person would have no choice about it, as everything had already been divinely appointed for it. [St. Augustine, and John Calvin, the founder of Calvinism, said much the same thing]. This, surely, presents the Muslim with a problem as to what to believe here. On one hand, they are told that everything is predetermined, and on the other, the story of the woman and the cat indicates that destiny can be changed. Buddhists do not have this problem, as Buddhism teaches that everything happens because of causes, and though the past has conditioned the present, here, in the present, we have some

choice, and can change the conditions; it does not hold that things are predestined).

After retracing my old footsteps in Istanbul and exploring this history-steeped city, I set off on a long trip around the provinces, visiting places I had been and not been before. The easternmost point of this trip was Erzerum, where I had formerly had several negative experiences. Though it is a very old town, with ruins dating back to Roman times, my purpose there was not sight-seeing, but to finally lay those old experiences—like old ghosts—to rest; I achieved this, and now feel peaceful about Erzerum. While there, I had an experience which, though neither good nor bad, holds a lesson, and may be of interest to some people. Someone came up to me on the street and tried to sell me a carpet (this is common in Turkey, which is famous for its hand-made carpets). I told him I didn't need a carpet, and that if he could sell me one, he would be the best salesman in the world. "But everyone needs carpets", he said, and when I repeated that I didn't, he asked why not. "Because I have no home", I said. "Then where do you live?" he asked. "I live here", I replied. Puzzled, he said, "Here, in Erzerum?" "No, here", I said, stamping my feet on the ground, meaning that I live just where I am and nowhere else (in fact, we all live just where we happen to be at the present moment; it's not possible to live elsewhere). Unprepared for such an answer and not understanding my meaning, he said: "You're crazy!" and walked away, abandoning any hope of selling me a carpet. But does it mean I'm crazy because he didn't understand me? Perhaps I am crazy, but not because of that!

The best part of my trip in Turkey was towards the end, in the west, when I arrived in Canakkale, a small town situated at the entrance to the narrow strait of water that separates Europe from Asia known—from ancient times—as the Dardanelles. It is from Canakkale that most people visit the ancient city of Troy and the First World War battle site of Gallipoli. I also had come for this, and had been advised, by people I had met along the way—other travelers—to join a tour-group rather than doing it alone. This, therefore, is what I did, and found myself in the company of mainly young Australians.

The tour began at 9:00 a.m. with a visit to Troy. Our guide was a retired submarine-commander also named Ali, whose manner of narrating facts and stories was quite endearing; he clearly loved his work; I can hear his voice now: "Ladies and gentlemen", he would begin. He made Troy live for me; I 'saw' scenes described by Homer in *The Iliad*: of King Priam and his son Paris, whose abduction of Helen had precipitated the war with the Greeks; of the fierce combat between Achilles and Hector, in which the latter was slain; of the Wooden Horse, by which subterfuge the Greeks finally gained entrance to Troy and destroyed it.

Always interested in history, I asked Ali a number of questions about Troy and his answers satisfied me. We returned to Canakkale and crossed the Dardanelles to Gallipoli. I'd heard of Gallipoli before, of course, but until going there, knew little about it. Now I know more, and would like to tell something of it before going further.

When the First World War broke out in 1914, Russia took Britain's side against Germany, and Turkey—enemy of Russia almost by tradition—found itself on Germany's side (European alliances were so complex and changed so often, that this year's enemy might be next year's friend).

Britain, at that time, had the largest empire the world has ever known, and could call upon almost unlimited manpower. Australia and New Zealand, until then, had never been involved in overseas wars, but when the call for volunteers went out, many Aussies and Kiwis—either from patriotism or desire for adventure—enlisted to serve in places that most of them had never even heard of. From cities and farms they came to fight for the King-Emperor, knowing nothing of those they would face. They were then shipped off to places like Egypt, to be given basic training in military discipline and the use of arms, before boarding other ships for the invasion of Turkey, the aim being to capture Istanbul, and thus knock Turkey out of the war.

Had these plans succeeded, Istanbul—which consisted mainly of wooden buildings at that time—would have undergone a fire-storm. But the Turks were anticipating invasion, and had mined the waters of the Dardanelles, so when a joint French-and-British fleet—the vaunted British fleet that controlled the oceans to the anthem of Rule Britannia, Britannia

Rules the Waves—tried to enter, several of its ships were sunk by mines in the first day, forcing withdrawal and reconsideration.

The powers in far-off London then decided to land troops on a peninsula not far from the entrance to the Dardanelles, at a place known as Gallipoli. But again, the Turks were prepared, and although the Allied ships launched a terrific bombardment of the Turkish positions, the invaders were unable to advance very far and were pinned down by Turkish fire; thus began trench-warfare. To protect themselves from enemy fire, both sides dug trenches for shelter; but were so close to each other that in places the distance separating them was only 10 meters. The battle went on for 8 months, during which British / Australian / New Zealand casualties (killed and wounded) were 205,000 out of 410,000, French casualties 47,000 out of 79,000, and Turkish 250,000 to 300,000 out of 500,000. The suffering was incalculable, but the stories of courage and heroism that emerged from it have become legendary, and made of the Battle of Gallipoli something unique in military history. (It is not my intention to glorify war and fighting, and I hope it doesn't seem as if I am doing so here; my purpose in writing this is to point out that the Dharma was present—or perceived by some—during the madness of war, and to show that even on a battlefield, with death and suffering all around, people are still able to see beyond to a higher dimension).

Following military custom, orders were periodically given for bayonet-charges to be made. The men, though naturally afraid and wanting to live, obeyed without question and went over the top to almost certain death. They did not say, "I don't want to go! I don't want to die!" but climbed out of their trenches and faced the withering fire of the enemy's machine guns. The carnage during these futile and stupid charges was horrific!

After one such charge by the British, when the survivors had withdrawn to their trenches and the gunfire had ceased, from the blood-stained and corpse-strewn ground between the trenches came the cries of a badly wounded British officer calling for help. No-one dared go to his assistance, however, as they would have been immediately cut down. But then something amazing happened: A white flag appeared from the Turkish trenches, and out climbed a burly soldier, who went over to the wounded British officer, picked him up and carried him to the British trenches, where

he gently put him down and went back to his own position. No-one knows the name of this valiant and compassionate Turk, but such acts—it wasn't the only one; there were others, on both sides—gave rise to deep respect in each for the other.

The night before the tour, together with many other tourists, I watched a video-documentary about Gallipoli, showing survivors from both sides, now very old men. Almost invariably, they said that although they fought and killed their opponents, they never hated them, but merely followed orders. They spoke, too, of the respect and admiration of the courage shown by their erstwhile enemies.

With such background information, we trod the hills and sand dunes of Gallipoli with awe and reverence. It has become a sacred place, a place of pilgrimage, visited by millions from both sides with homage in their hearts. Young Australians especially (I met so many of them in Turkey that half of Melbourne seemed to be there!), are drawn to this place, as it has a special place in Australian history: their baptism by fire, as it were. Every year, on ANZAC Day, people march down the streets of the towns and cities of Australia (and New Zealand, too), in remembrance of those who died in such battles. Survivors still march if they can, in their old faded uniforms with medals on their chests, tears in their eyes and thoughts of fallen comrades, heads held high; some go by wheelchair. There are not many left now of those who fought at Gallipoli. In fact, I just heard that the oldest remaining Australian survivor of the battle of Gallipoli—Ted Matthews, one of the first men to land at Anzac Cove at Gallipoli, and one of the last to leave—had died in December 1997, aged 101.

In the trenches, unable to advance and the battle at a stalemate, men from both sides resorted to making hand grenades from tin cans filled with stones, bullets, lead-shot and so on; but the fuses on these bombs were so long that they would take up to 30 seconds to burn down and explode—ample time to pick them up and toss them back to where they had come from. The deadly missiles would go to and fro like ping-pong balls before exploding, and no-one knew where they would go off; sometimes they would explode in the places where they had originated! It was soon realized this was too risky; they were killing themselves as often as their opponents!

Then, someone must have seen the irony and stupidity of the whole situation—maybe someone with some understanding or feeling for Universal Dharma—and from the Australian trenches, instead of bombs, chocolate bars began to fly across no-man's land! The British and Australians—unlike the Turks—had supplies of chocolate. When the Turks—who I saw have a good sense of humor—recovered from their surprise at such strange weapons, they expressed their appreciation and reciprocated by tossing back fresh fruit, which, being on home-ground, they had in abundance, while their enemies lacked this.

One day, from the Turkish trenches, a packet of tobacco came flying over, with a note on a scrap of cloth written in broken English, saying: "I, you, tobacco. You, me, paper. Okay?" They had tobacco but no paper with which to make cigarettes; the British and Australians had paper, but were short of tobacco. So, from the British and Australians magazines and newspapers started to fly. Each side got what they needed.

This and other tales told by Ali—one of whose grand fathers had been killed at Gallipoli—brought tears to my eyes; many of the young Australians in the tour group I had joined were similarly moved. But there was more:

When the British War Office in London finally realized it had made a huge blunder and could not win this battle, it reluctantly decided to evacuate its forces from Gallipoli. But how to get out? The Commander-in-Chief of the invasion force was asked how many casualties must be expected during the evacuation. His casual reply of 50% caused outrage in Britain; he seemed to regard the troops as 'throw-aways', with plenty more to replace those lost. He was replaced by someone less callous and more efficient—someone to whom men were not so expendable. Plans were made to withdraw during the dark phase of the moon, and orders given to make no sound that might alert the Turks to what was going on; elaborate devices were rigged up to create the illusion that life in the trenches was as normal.

It is impossible to move a whole army quietly, however; the Turks knew what was happening, but their Commander-in-Chief, Mustafa Kemal—who later became the first President of the Turkish Republic, and was honored with the title of Atatürk, meaning Father of the Turks—had given an order, of just three words: "Follow your tradition", which was

taken to mean: Do not shoot a retreating enemy in the back. So, whereas the British had expected to lose many thousands of men, they lost not a single one, only two men being wounded. So deeply had the Turks grown to respect their valiant enemies that they allowed them to go peacefully. What honor! Where can we find another such example of it?

Wandering around the Allied cemeteries at Gallipoli, reading the epitaphs on the stones, I was stunned that the overwhelming number of soldiers who took part in this deadly conflict were just boys in their late teens and early twenties. Most of them had enlisted to go and fight for king and empire in places many of them had never heard of; Gallipoli became the graveyard of about 28,000 British, almost 9,000 Australians, over 2,000 New Zealanders, and unnumbered Turks.

Because I had asked Ali a number of questions during this tour, too, towards the end, he took me aside and pulled from his pocket a tiny box containing bullets and shrapnel from the battle site, and gave it to me. I was very touched by his gift, but not more touched than he was when, in turn, I presented him with one of my 'thunder-eggs', saying to him what I had said to the other Ali in the mosque: "What we are looking for is not outside of ourselves". When he opened it, he was so moved that he said: "I will keep it in my pocket always!" A few words had affected him so much! Just as the monk understood from the Buddha's flower, so Ali got something from my stone. I then told him that I am a monk—the word in Turkish for monk (it's actually Arabic), is rahib—and he said: "I knew there was something different about you!"

At the end of the tour, I thanked Ali, and told him that although I'd had a good trip in Turkey and visited many wonderful places, this had been the best part of my trip there, and I would surely write something about it for my next book (this one; I have kept my word about it). He shook my hand very firmly and warmly; I had made a new friend.

Over the years, I have given such stones to many people in many places, with differing effects. Some people merely said "How nice!" and stored it away with their other nice things. But others, like Ali, the Turkish tour guide, were deeply touched. As Lao Tsu wrote: "More words count less".

A few days later, before I returned to Malaysia, I wrote to Ali from Istanbul, but because I knew neither his full name or address, I sent my letter to the hotel—ANZAC HOUSE—that had arranged the tour, hoping it would reach him, but not knowing if it would. I will have more to say about this in the next article, COROLLARY.

COROLLARY

RETURNING TO MALAYSIA IN November '97, I told in many places of my trip in Turkey, and the response—especially to my story of Gallipoli—was usually good; not a few people rejoiced with me in my sharing of Nameless Dharma. However, I knew that not everyone agreed with me wearing ordinary clothes in Turkey. Due to their attachment to form, some people consider a monk donning ordinary clothes as tantamount to disrobing, or, if not that, that he has some unworthy purpose in mind that he couldn't carry out while in robes and wishes to conceal.

If we extend this idea to its logical conclusion, it follows that anyone not wearing robes must—inevitably and without doubt—be living in unworthy ways. But is this so? I do not subscribe to a Buddhist caste system, with monks at the apex, and lay-people at the base. First and foremost, I am a human being, and then a monk, not the other way around. Many Buddhists 'invest' in monks and want them to play a defined role and live up to their expectations; it is as if the monk is public property with no private life of his own. I won't say that I don't care what others think of me, because I do, but not to the point where I will allow it to keep me quiet about things that must be said. It cannot be stressed strongly enough that Universal Dharma takes us beyond the limitations of name-and-form, and I will hold to that no matter what others may think of me.

At one place where I was scheduled to talk, several young Thai monks turned up. I had not expected this, as it is something quite rare, so debated with myself: "Should I change my mind and not tell of my Turkey trip, in case it upsets them?" But I decided, "No, why should I? I'm not ashamed of what I did, and am not going to be hypocritical about it; I will tell it as it was, and if they don't like it, well, too bad". I don't know what they thought, and don't particularly care; they must find their way just as I must find mine. But at least one person in the audience must have been shocked at my revelations, and came straight out with: "Before you took off your robes and put on lay-clothes, did you undergo a ceremony? And before re-donning the robes, did you have another ordination ceremony?" I replied:

"If I must have a ceremony every time I take off my robes and before putting them on again, I'll have two ceremonies a day, as I certainly don't bathe in my robes! I did not disrobe when I went to Turkey".

If I disrobe—as I may and might do (I've taken no life-long vows about this)—I won't bother with a ceremony, but will say to myself: "Okay; now I disrobe", and do it. Until then, because I feel I have something useful to say and share, and because there are people—only a few, perhaps, but there are some—who will receive it, I'll continue as I am. I make no apologies for not being as enlightened as I would like (and hope someday to be), or for not living up to others' expectations. I often tell people, that just as we are (as human beings) we—myself as well as others—are tremendously successful already, and should try to understand this, before thinking about more. And, while I do appreciate people's kindness and support, it is still my life, not theirs. I am nobody's monkey, and am not for sale. My real responsibility is to Universal Dharma, and whatever I am able to discover of this, I will try to pass on to others and not keep just for myself; this, I feel, is the best and only way I can repay them for their kindness. If people think of me as a 'field of merit' in which to sow seeds—like speculating on the stock-market—they risk disappointment. But if they will listen to what I say, and think about it, they may get something better than a few paltry grains of merit.

Not long ago, someone in Penang who I've known since 1971, asked me if I ever thought of disrobing. I replied: "No, not really, and anyway, I can't think of anything else I'd rather do".

Not long ago, too I was invited to lunch in someone's home, where a sumptuous meal was served. The hosts were so solicitous of my welfare, however, that it reminded me of when I was newly ordained. People would bring food-offerings to the temple, but unused to being served so respectfully, I felt quite uncomfortable. They were too kind, standing over me while I ate, watching my every move, ready to pile more food on my plate when it showed signs of becoming clear. I did not enjoy their devotedly prepared food—maybe I was not meant to?—and often did not eat enough to satisfy me (without feeling like a glutton, this would have been difficult, with so many eyes on me). I felt so self-conscious, and wanted to say: "Thank you for your kindness, but I would prefer to be left

alone to eat in peace", but of course, did not. This is just another example of how people expect a person to be different—and maybe not to have feelings—just because he’s a monk. Really, such ideas should be updated, and the role of the monk in society re-evaluated.

Kindness should be balanced with wisdom, or may lead to suffering. I once stayed briefly at a Buddhist Society in Johor Bharu, where so many people turned up to offer breakfast that there were about 50 dishes on the table before me! How much can one man possibly eat? Sadly, they had very high but unrealistic expectations of monks—serving them lavishly, out of desire for merit, and desperately wanting them to be saints. With a little wisdom they could have avoided the disappointment that they consequently underwent time and time again.

The story of Sakyamuni’s search for truth illustrates how attachment to beliefs and opinions can impede our progress in Dharma. Impressed with the austerities they saw Sakyamuni practicing in the forest, five yogis banded around him, feeling that if anyone could make the breakthrough and reach enlightenment, it would be him, and he would then show them the way. But Sakyamuni almost died of starvation before he realized this way would never lead to his goal. And when, in order to regain his strength for a fresh approach, he started to eat again, the five yogis thought he had given up his search and returned to a life of sense pleasure. Stuck on the view that liberation can only be gained by self-mortification, they were disappointed in him, and left. Fortunately for them, after Sakyamuni achieved enlightenment and became the Buddha, he sought them out and led them from their wrong views to enlightenment.

At a place where I had been several times before, I began a recent talk by saying: "Every time I come here you ask me what is the topic of my talk, although you should know by now that I don’t put a topic or title on them. There are several reasons for this: First, I do not plan my talks and seldom know what I will talk about before the time, and, secondly, because if I were to put a topic on my talks it would make it too easy for you, so that, if someone were to ask you afterwards, ‘What did he talk about?’, you could answer with the title, even though you might have understood little else. I want you to get something more from my talks than just the title; this is not

asking too much, as I usually give lots of simple illustrations. Attending a Dharma talk should not be a matter of formality, otherwise it will be waste of your money (as you must pay my fare here) and of my time, and I don't want that. So, I would like to ask what you remember—what you learned—from my previous talks here, and I expect some answers—at least three—and if there are no answers, I won't say anything else and will go back early."

There was a long and noisy silence until they finally realized that I meant what I said, and then someone answered, but not to my satisfaction, so I insisted on more. Slowly, more came, but clearly, they had learned or remembered little from my previous talks. Not wanting to hurt their feelings, I went ahead in spite of this, but really, I felt it was a waste of time.

A month after leaving Turkey, I was pleasantly surprised to receive a postcard from Ali, the Troy-Gallipoli tour-guide; he had received my letter from Istanbul. Addressing me very respectfully, he said he had been expecting to hear from me one day, and that he really appreciated the teaching I gave him; "the secret truth in it will lead me all the time", he wrote. Because he expected nothing from me he got so much, and in turn, gave me so much; this card confirmed something I already knew: that my trip in Turkey had been a great success, and not just because I was able to touch someone deeply, but because I had done it without the support of the robe; in fact, I had only been the agent, and it was the Dharma—Universal Dharma—that had done it. The center place belongs to the Dharma alone!

REFLECTIONS

The incense-urn bristles with
burning sticks, and the
blue-gray smoke curls lazily upwards
in the old Chinese temple
until a sudden breeze sends it swirling
in all directions.

The sun shines brightly on the courtyard
from a clear blue sky,
leaving the interior dimly lit and in shade,
cooler there than in the glare;
several people sit here and talk,
their voices humming, barely heard.
The tiled roof and upturned eaves
are cleanly outlined;
the tall red pillars stand contrasted
against the gloom behind;
the gilded carvings gather dust and grime;
the incense ash sits deep.

The painted door guards look on
with unseeing eyes, challenging no-one,
their job symbolic.

The ancient stones are worn still more
by soles of many feet;
the shrine is well frequented.

Lamps and candles burn on altars,
'mid offerings of fruit and flowers.

The statues sit unmoving,
unmoved by the prayers and cries
of their supplicants.

We create the statues and then begin
to worship them, and often,

become afraid of not doing so,
or of displeasing the gods in some way.
This tendency's been with us
from primitive times;
how strange, how amazing,
that it remains till now, when
we should have outgrown it long ago!
'Tis not, as some have said and hold,
that God created us,
but rather, the other way around.
Who, then, are we worshipping,
but ourselves?
Better to understand than to merely pray!

SECTARIANISM

WE ALL HAVE OUR OWN WAYS OF looking at things, of course, but if we were to examine them, we'd probably find that they are very much conditioned by factors outside our control. Really, therefore, they are not our ways of looking at things at all, but more the ways of other people that we have inherited. It is like the houses we live in: they are not really our houses in the sense that we didn't build them ourselves, but more the houses of others—those who contributed in any way to their construction, and there were literally millions of them, stretching back over the ages to the infinite past. Everyone depends upon others before them, back and back and back.

So, where did we get our views from? Where did our conditioning begin? Are our views consistent with reality? Are they supported by and based upon facts? Are we mature enough to think about this and face the fact that what we have assumed until now to be right and true may actually not be so, and that we might have to start from scratch in constructing a workable philosophy of life? This is a very disconcerting prospect, and one which the vast majority of people would turn away from, preferring the consoling illusions that they may have been brought up with and have accepted without question. But there are always some brave enough to doubt the accepted norm, who will not be content with the mere name-and-form of religion, and provisions must be made for them.

When I was in Australia in 1996, a census was conducted, and everyone was required to respond, under threat of being fined if they failed to do so (Australia, I regret to say, is becoming like Singapore: a fine country, with voting compulsory, and fines imposed for failure to vote; many countries have insufficient democracy, but in Australia, we have maybe too much! Earlier this century, people struggled and suffered for universal suffrage (the right to vote); perhaps now, we need to struggle for the right not to vote! The whole idea behind the right to vote is the freedom to choose; surely, this should include the right not to choose, too!)

There was a question about religion on the census-form, but since it was not compulsory to answer this, I left it blank. I feel that we should not

label ourselves or others; if others wish to label me a ‘Buddhist’, that is up to them.

Checking to see how my eldest sister and her husband (with whom I was staying at the time) had filled in the form, I saw that they had answered the question about religion with ‘Church of England’. I didn’t say anything about this to them, of course, but thought it would have been better for them to have left it blank, too. They are not practicing Christians, never go to church, and I doubt very much if they would be able to explain what Christianity is all about!

Later, when the results of the census were made known, it was stated that about 2 million Australians (over 10% of the population), claimed to have no religion. While this would be true in many cases (and not just with 2 million, either, but with many more), it would not be true with all, as many of them would probably be quite religious in the sense of living by principles that are important to them. What they probably mean when they say they have no religion is that they do not call themselves by any particular ‘brand name’, and are able to see through and beyond the form and externalia of religion to the essence. I have much more respect for people who live religiously without calling themselves ‘Buddhists’, ‘Christians’, ‘Hindus’, etc., than for those who make a show about the superficialities of religion but ignore the essence.

Disregarding other religions for now, and their claims to exclusive possession of truth, let us focus on the divisions of Buddhism, which continue to cause friction. Historically, Buddhism went through three main phases of development in India, each lasting about 500 years: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. I don’t intend to go into the causes of their development here, but will say that the development of one into another does not necessarily prove the superiority of the succeeding one; we must keep it in mind that there is not just evolution but devolution too: things do not always evolve and become better, but sometimes devolve and degenerate. I’m not saying that this happened in Buddhism, but neither am I saying that it didn’t; it is a matter of opinion, and we should make up our own minds about it.

Very often we find that the adherents of particular schools or sects of Buddhism are not very clear as to why they have chosen one sect over

another; indeed, in most cases, they didn't choose at all, in the sense of making an informed decision to follow this rather than that; it is more that they fell into it as into a hole, and then, embracing it as their own, proceeded to feel that it must be better than all others, must, in fact, be the best. What does this mean? Nothing more or less than egoism, the sense of 'I, me and mine'. We become so bound up with thoughts of self that we forget, if we ever knew, the boundless 'beyond-self' that the Buddha tried to indicate. Let us be very clear about this: the Buddha had nothing to do with sectarianism; what He taught was Dharma, nothing less.

Sectarianism is like the nun in the parable who was so attached to a particular Buddha image that she would offer incense only to that one and not to the numerous other images in the shrine hall of her nunnery. Noticing that the smoke from her incense didn't go straight up to her favorite image, however, but dispersed throughout the shrine hall, she wondered how she could get the smoke to go just where she wanted it to go, instead of straying to the other images. Finally, she hit upon a solution and made a funnel above the incense urn to direct the smoke upwards to her Buddha image. How happy she was to see the smoke finally obeying her wishes! It wasn't long, however, before the funneled smoke blackened the nose of her beautiful Buddha image, making it quite ugly!

It cannot be said often enough that the Buddha did not teach what we call Buddhism, let alone sectarian differences that come under names like Hinayana, Mahayana, Vajrayana, Zen, and so on, but a way of discovering Reality or Universal Dharma, which applies to everyone and everything, in all times and places, which is all inclusive and all embracing rather than exclusive and partial. We must remember, too, that He didn't set out to teach only Buddhists, as there were no Buddhists when He began; He didn't care what people called themselves or thought of themselves as; He was concerned with human beings, and their potential to understand and grow. Are only Buddhists capable of this?

To understand this Universal Dharma we must be able to put aside, if only briefly, the fearful concern for self—my religion, my merit, my practice, my progress, my development, my enlightenment—and see, or realize, that there is really no separate self, that we are part of something infinitely bigger and more important than self, and that only by

understanding ourselves as part of everything, instead of apart from it, does it make any sense at all; in other words, the part, by itself, simply has no meaning and does not exist.

This realization is of the utmost importance, as the struggle for personal enlightenment is self-defective and doomed to failure. The Buddha once compared His teachings to a snake, which, if caught by the tail, may turn and bite, but if caught behind the head, cannot bite. Right Understanding is the first stage of the Eightfold Path, because without it, our subsequent efforts may easily come to naught; it is indispensable.

We must begin with ourselves, understanding how we are, as that is the only place to begin. Looking back on the way by which we have reached the present (and the present is all we ever have; it is always only the present, the Now), we can see that we have been supported at every step upon our long, long journey by countless others, and that we have not come here merely by our own efforts. By honestly asking ourselves what we really want from life, we arrive at simple conclusions: basically, we want to be happy and not suffer or feel sad; we like others to be kind to us and help us rather than be unkind to us. By understanding this about ourselves, we will also understand about others, as they feel very much the same as we do. We will then know what to do, and how to live; we won't need anyone else to tell us because we will know by ourselves. We must begin with ourselves, yes, but we must not stop there; from understanding things in this way, our hearts and minds begin to open, to take into account other fragments of life—fellow-travelers—struggling along all around us, to show compassionate concern for them, and to reach out and help them according to our limited capacity whenever we have the opportunity to do so; and such reaching-out would come as an expression of our understanding of how things are, instead of with the idea of 'making merit' or getting more out of life than we have already got.

In this way, therefore, we find that Understanding and Love overcome the fearful concern for ourselves. If we were really as small and insignificant as we often think we are, there would be good reason to be afraid—in fact, we could not feel otherwise; but since we exist interdependently, there is no question about being alone. We just have to

see and feel how things are, and then the fear for self will diminish, will be overcome.

But it is not only the fear for self that Love overcomes; there are other things, too. If we consider others kindly, with love and understanding, we are able to overlook their imperfections and failings, and see them, with their hopes, fears, and aspirations, as just like us: frail and fragile, struggling along, usually with no real sense of direction, but nevertheless lovable as human beings, worthy of respect and admiration. Love here, then, overcomes aversion and feelings of dislike towards others; it helps us to accept them as they are.

Love, too, may overcome enmity and unkindness in others; the Buddha said "Hate is not overcome by hate; only by love is hate overcome". If this doesn't always immediately work for us every time we try it, we shouldn't be dismayed and give up, but should persevere; we cannot make others understand us or respond to us in the way we would like them to, but we can try to understand them. In fact, when we know something of the Dharma, the responsibility is more with us to understand others than with others to understand us.

The transition, development or upward growth from Understanding to Love—from Mind to Heart, as it were—typifies the almost traditional idea of the difference between Hinayana (and here, I do not mean the Theravada school of Buddhism, but an attitude of mind: the Hina or Smaller, Lesser, Lower, Inferior state of mind that is concerned primarily with self), and Mahayana (again, an attitude of mind rather than a sect or school of Buddhism, the state of mind that sees clearly how we are not separate from others, that is free from a fearful preoccupation with self, and that looks with Understanding and Love instead).

Our movement along the Path to Enlightenment is not just a matter of making effort, essential though this is; there is also the very strong and essential element of the Dharma working within us. Without trying to change for the better, even an intellectual study of the Dharma brings great results; but when we consciously turn towards Dharma and strive to align ourselves with it, and live according to its principles, our progress is greatly accelerated. The Dharma is so effective, and it is for this reason that we say from our hearts: Dharmam Saranam Gacchami.

*"Only in dying is there life.
If one can die before one dies, perhaps one will discover
that one does not die when one dies".
(Krishnamurti)*

WHAT CRAP!

DURING WORLD WAR II, my father made a number of good friends in the Army. He also told me of the dastardly things that some soldiers used to do. One of them stuck in my mind until now; it's shocking that anyone would even think of this: Secretly, someone inserted razor blades into the soap bars in the bathrooms; it was only while washing and getting cut that the blades were discovered. My father and some of his friends mounted a watch to try to catch the culprit(s), but didn't succeed. And this was during a war! What patriotism! With people like that on your side, who needs enemies?!

It is not surprising to find that, after over 2,500 years, Buddhism—like other religions—is beset by superstition, but this doesn't mean we should just shrug complacently and accept it lying down, as if there is nothing we can do about it.

After His Enlightenment, out of compassion for others, the Buddha set out to counteract ignorance and superstition, which He saw as the root cause of most of humanity's sufferings. He knew that this is not something fixed and immutable, and that man may rise above it and become free or enlightened. This was why He left the peace and tranquility of the forest and went back to the world; what He had found was not for Himself alone.

Originally, the Buddha's Way was one of Understanding, but today's Buddhism has often little to do with that, and has devolved into a system of Belief; as such, it is little different than other belief systems. The Buddha tried to show the Way to others, to help them become enlightened. But even with His great wisdom and ability to teach people according to their levels, He couldn't make anyone understand. It is like the old saying: "You can take a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink". He was a Way pointer, not a Savior, and told, quite clearly, "within yourselves deliverance must be sought; each man his prison makes". I rejected Christianity, and because I

saw something of Dharma, am not about to bedrape myself with the chains of another belief system.

Few people—in any age, it seems—can understand and accept such clear and simple teachings; most are weak-minded, lazy and want someone to do it for them. Slowly, so as not to lose such people to other ways, the teachings were modified to accommodate them, and as a result they became diluted and unclear. People began to think of the Buddha as a God—or at least a cosmic Savior—who would answer prayers, bestow blessings, save them from danger, sickness and death, etc.; they began to look upon Him as more divine than human. His Teachings about finding salvation within were ignored as people looked to Him for help, which was something He never taught.

These days, there are spurious ‘sutras’ in circulation, encouraging and strengthening superstition and ignorance, playing upon fear, pandering to greed. One of the most common of them is called The Cause-and-Effect Sutra—otherwise known as The Karma Sutra—running into many editions; people keep reprinting it, thinking to gain merit thereby. If we keep quiet about such ‘sutras’ and false teachings, we thereby give them our tacit consent and support. We must speak out, and this is the purpose of this article, regardless of whom I might upset thereby. The propagators of such anti-Buddhist teachings have their die-hard supporters who are unlikely to change their ideas soon.

Recently (Nov. 1997), I came upon a booklet (in English and Chinese) in Malaysia entitled More Vicious than AIDS: The New PNEUMONIA. It was transcribed from a talk by a famous monk in Los Angeles in 1992; he has since died. It is not necessary to mention his name here.

This monk was famous for making grandiose and unfounded claims about his psychic powers (something monks are forbidden to do); he also had a tremendous sense of self-importance, which is reprehensible in a monk. While in Hong Kong many years ago, he stated that as long as he was there, there would be no big typhoon. Later, he established a large center in California, and made an equally unfounded claim: "As long as I'm here, there will be no big earthquake". Why did he say such things? What have such claims got to do with the propagation of the Buddha's teachings,

which have the effect of reducing pride and egoism rather than increasing it?

I will quote from this ‘doomsday booklet’ about ‘The New Pneumonia’, which is before me now as I write. The spelling mistakes and grammatical errors I will leave exactly as they appear in the book; they are not mine.

"Now we have come to the Dharma Ending Age. What is ‘Dharma Ending’? It means the Dharma is about to fade away and trail off. Few people have real faith in Buddha, and the Buddhists are slandering the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. How can this be called believing in Buddha? Believing in demons, they come to destroy the Buddha-dharma".

It continues: "And so all kinds of evil phenomena appear in this world, be they natural disasters, man-made calamities, or the spread of epidemics. Natural disasters include swarms of locusts, droughts, and floods. Man-made calamities include plane-crashes, derailed trains, and car collision, all happening without any apparent reason, and resulting in a multitude of human crises. Then there are earthquakes which have been occurring everywhere, frightening people.

"But people only know how to become scared when the catastrophes occur. They don’t know to look for the root of it. Natural disasters do not belong to Nature. Nature has no disasters. It is the human species which suffers disasters. Man-made disasters are disaster which we bring upon ourselves. Earthquakes occur because people are fond of war, have big tempers, and kill countless people. "Do you want to die? Fine, we can all die together!" and so the earth quakes. These are all various kinds of evil phenomena. We people! Why do we fail to investigate and find out where the roots is at? Let me tell you, that these natural disasters, man-made calamities, and earthquakes, all the various accidents of planes crashing, train derailling, ships sinking, and cars colliding, are all created by the minds of people. People’s minds are not as they used to be, and virtue and morality have deteriorated, and so these unusual phenomena have appeared".

It is embarrassing than anyone can spout such unabashed nonsense today, let alone a Buddhist monk! It is no better than the fundamentalist Christian belief that God created the universe only 6,000 years ago, or such

preposterous claims made by the charlatan Ching Hai that whoever recites Homage to Ching Hai, the Supreme Master will be saved and liberated!

Although he uses two terms on page 10—Dharma and Buddha-Dharma—he uses them interchangeably and seems unaware of the distinction, and there is a distinction, a big one. The Buddha did not invent Dharma, but only discovered it. Dharma has no beginning and no end; it does not come and does not go. What ends, because it did have a beginning, is Buddha-Dharma, the Teachings of the Buddha, whereby He tried to help others realize the Dharma for themselves. So there is no such thing as ‘Dharma-Ending Age’. He talks about "believing in Buddha". The Buddha did not call people to believe in Him or follow Him, but to examine what He taught and find out for themselves. Buddhism is not a way of Belief like other religions, but a way of direct and personal experience, for which there is no substitute. So there is no question of ‘believing or not believing the Buddha’. We must strive to know!

He goes on about "evil phenomena" like "natural disasters, man-made calamities, or the spread of epidemics", attributing them to human activities. After talking of natural disasters, he says that nature has no disasters, and that "earth-quakes occur because people are fond of war", etc. Well, I don't know where or if he went to school, but it doesn't say much for his teachers, or for his realization as a meditator (perhaps this is a classic case of how meditation may easily become maditation!) Earthquakes occur because of tremendous pressure beneath the earth's surface, causing the tectonic plates of the crust to shift and move against each other; it has nothing to do with man's activities. Does he think there were no earthquakes before humans appeared on this Earth?

On page 16, he increases the tempo of his fear-mongering and expresses his homophobia:

"The most frightening thing in the human world now is homosexuality. Homosexuality is a practice which opposes the life principle of the universe, which goes against the creative energies of Yin and Yang, and which violates the laws of the nation.

"This kind of behavior will cause the country to perish and the human race to become extinct. If the country perishes, then it's no longer a country,

and the human race is also cut off. Although homosexuals are so infatuated with one another, they cannot reproduce, so the seeds of the human race will be lost. To plant corn, corn-seeds are required. To plant melons, melon seeds are needed. To plant beans, bean seeds are needed. Not only do corn and beans have seeds, everything has seeds. Humans also have human seeds. If the human seeds are destroyed, then humans will all perish, and humanity will come to an end".

Without appearing to condone homosexuality, I must protest his fear that the whole population of a country or countries will become homosexual and thus cease to procreate; it is simply inconceivable. There have always been homosexuals, but they formed—and still do—only a tiny minority. We are more aware of homosexuality now because it is out in the open to a degree unknown before. That the human race is in no danger of extinction through homosexuality is clearly shown by the ongoing population-explosion. Maybe he would like witch-hunting reintroduced?—"Burn the damn gays!"

On page 20, he goes on: "The practice of homosexuality has produced Aids. Some say AIDS originated in Africa, but Africa is not the source of AIDS. The source of AIDS is homosexuality. When homosexuals catch this disease, they have no medicine to treat it, and no way to cure it. The doctors all have their hands tied, with no strategy for dealing with it".

He clearly didn't know that heterosexuals are susceptible to AIDS as well as homosexuals; no-one is immune; the virus doesn't discriminate on the basis of sexual preference. And though it is claimed that it cannot be transmitted by mosquito-bites as is dengue or malaria, I wonder; if it can be transmitted by shared hypodermic needles, why not by the shared proboscis of a mosquito, which is very similar to a syringe?

More: "What kind of disease is AIDS? It's an epidemic which cannot be cured by any medicine. There are still people studying AIDS right now, trying to find a way to cure it Alas! This is called knowing something cannot be done, yet insisting on doing it anyway. Attempting to cure it by force, they not only fail to cure AIDS, but what happened is that from AIDS came another "AIDS", which is pneumonia".

What makes him such an authority on AIDS? If a cure for AIDS has not yet been found it doesn't mean it won't be. Does he suggest we give up

the search for a cure, and accept it as ‘fate’? If everyone in the past had had his mentality, no-one would have done any research, and found cures for the numerous diseases that have been brought under control. Such thinking is quite unBuddhistic!

"This pneumonia is even more vicious than AIDS, once you catch it. This illness can be transmitted through the mere shaking of hands. If the sick person merely opens his mouth to speak, he can pass the disease to you. Not only ordinary people have no way to treat this disease; even among the doctors and nurses, in the last year alone in the US, nearly 20,000 have died from the new variety of pneumonia. There's no way to avoid it—even face masks don't work. When there is body contact, the infection is transmitted. It can even be passed through the air".

Well, just because I've not heard of his ‘new pneumonia’, it doesn't mean there is no such thing, of course, but if it is as widespread as he claims, how come no-one else I know—including doctors—has heard of it? Surely, it would be front page news, and wouldn't take five years for everyone to know of it. Where has he got this disease from? From where are his statistics?

"This kind of illness is more devastating than the atomic bomb. It's more devastating than the hydrogen bomb. That's why this is a catastrophe of epidemic proportions. Now that this epidemic has struck, not only do men have this disease, a great number of women have also been infected. And not only do women have it, even babies are getting born with this kind of pneumonia and with AIDS. Just look! How terrifying this is!

"Throughout the world now, if we count it up, we find that the number of people with AIDS and this pneumonia is not small, for some are infected with the germs of pneumonia while still in the womb. That's why all over the world, the final days of the human race have arrived. The so called ‘final days’ means that all will be annihilated, all will disappear".

I can imagine this prophet of doom on the streets of San Francisco or L.A. with a sandwich-board around his neck bearing the words: "Repent! The end of the world is nigh!"

"Among the human population in the entire world, more than half are infected with the germs of this disease, so when this disease breaks out, it will be like an overwhelming deluge which cannot be stopped by anyone.

"So what should the human race do when it encounters this kind of calamity? We should recite the Great Compassion Mantra with the utmost sincerity and earnestness. The Buddha said that the Great Compassion Mantra can cure the eighty-four thousand illnesses of the world. All the eighty-four thousand kinds of diseases are covered, including AIDS and pneumonia".

We've all heard of magic wands, but only in fairy tales. Does he wish Buddhism to become a laughing-stock with such teachings? How do we know what the Buddha said? A thing is not true just because it is written in books; we should not be so naïve as to believe that! Buddhism was—and still should be, still could be—based upon reason and common sense, instead of upon such superstition and hocus-pocus.

"We should bring forth a mind of utmost sincerity, and be as earnest as when we are eating, as earnest as when we are dressing, and as dedicated as we are to sleeping, so much so that we cannot miss any sleep. We have to merge the Great Compassion Mantra into our daily activities, so that it becomes an integral part of our everyday life. If we can do this, then AIDS will be afraid and pneumonia will also be afraid. But this requires our utmost sincerity".

Can we imagine the viruses quaking in terror at the sound of this mantra? He has personified the AIDS virus and endowed it with consciousness. In the 13th century, when The Black Death (Bubonic Plague) swept through Europe, wiping out about one third of the population, such was the ignorance and superstition of the people that they attributed it to demons or witches; they had no idea at all about hygiene or sanitation, and because the microscope was not invented until several centuries later, they knew nothing about germs, viruses, bacteria, etc. Nor did they know that the plague was spread by rat-fleas. So, most of the cats having been killed—together with everyone suspected of being a witch (in their simple minds, witches and cats were always associated)—the rats multiplied uncontrollably and consequently the fleas, too. Terrified, the people flocked to the churches to pray for deliverance, but in such close proximity to each other's sweaty and smelly bodies, the fleas had a ball.

"Over half of the human population in the world is going to perish, and those who will be left will be people who cultivate the Way, who cultivate

truly, those who recite the Buddha's name, those who recite sutras, those who are vegetarian—these people will be able to remain".

Only half will perish? We're all going to perish, but not because of his 'new pneumonia'; we are going to die because we've been born.

"I am not saying this to terrify you. It's just that the time has come when I can no longer refrain from shouting and crying out, to tell all of you that this current age is not a time of peace. It is very dangerous, and each morning we have no guarantee that we will see the evening, for the danger can come at any moment".

So, what else is new? When has life ever been any different? It is not just at this time that life is insecure, but all the time; such is the nature of life.

I've written at length about this baseless book as there are so many gullible people who would accept whatever this monk says just because he was so well known. Well, I don't care who he was or how well known; what he said in this book (unfortunately, it is not his first and only book containing such gross superstition and false Dharma; there are others), is still a lot of b.s. Although he claimed to represent "orthodox Buddhism" and strongly hinted that he was enlightened himself, the author of the above book is responsible for the decline of Buddhism, and we can quite understand people rejecting Buddhism on the basis of his garbled ideas, which are diametrically opposite to the rational way of the Buddha.

I do not want people to believe me, any more than I want them to believe him; in fact, I don't want people to believe anyone, but to use their intelligence, and think for themselves; if they did, they wouldn't be cheated or exploited so much, and religion would not be the mass of superstition it has become.

Another very active and vocal charlatan, is self-styled Living Buddha Lian-sheng (meaning 'Lotus-born': Padmasambhava), a.k.a. Grand Master Lu, who, it goes without saying, claims to be Perfectly Enlightened. From where is this 'Grand Master' title? It sounds like the Ku Klux Klan's 'Grand Wizard'! Next he'll be styling himself Chief High Priest of the United States and Canada!

In 1996, he was granted an interview with the Dalai Lama, who "favorably received Grand Master Lu and the information he offered about the True Buddha School and of the Grand Master's personal achievements in knowledge and cultivation"; he also told the Dalai Lama about his "thirty temples and 300 Buddhist chapters, and the over four million disciples from around the world". (Quotes from an article by one of his four million disciples). His audacity and arrogance is amazing, and he is now using this interview to extol and elevate himself even further. I will quote now from his Spring '97 Purple Lotus Journal:

"I met with the Dalai Lama and conversed with him for thirty minutes. The Dharma Protectors had told me ahead of time what I would run into, but I was not afraid. While there, the Dalai Lama asked me many questions which I answered. When it was my turn to ask him questions, he stood up. [laughter and applause].

"The Dalai Lama kept asking me questions, one after another, and I kept answering them. He asked some pretty tough questions, relating to Tantric practice. The questions might have rendered another person mute, but my answers elicited only nods from him. So he kept asking and I kept answering, until finally it was my turn to ask him and for him to be stumped, and he stood up. [audience laughter and applause].

"I was going to ask him two questions but he knew he probably could not answer them, so he quickly stood up. Well, I let that go. Those are difficult questions because only direct experience could have provided one with the answers".

He might have 4,000,000 disciples—probably has some psychic power, too—but that no more impresses me than his arrogance. It is just another example of how stupid people can be. And being highly educated in a particular area doesn't alter this, either; it doesn't mean that one is wise, or even intelligent; there are many highly educated fools in the world.

Now, before I end this, to show that the above is not an isolated instance of such blatant superstition being presented as Dharma, I will tell briefly of several other cases of the same thing, one of which has gone on for many years, and the others that I came across recently; it won't take long.

There is a Thai temple in Penang with a huge image of the Buddha in a reclining position. Not only local Buddhists frequent this temple; it is also visited by many foreign tourists. I once counted no less than forty donation boxes in the hall housing the main image! There are many smaller images of the Buddha, each with a donation box in front of it, bearing messages like: "If you pray to this Buddha, you will be happy", "If you pray to this Buddha, you will be wise"; "If you pray to this Buddha, God will bless you"; "If you pray to this Buddha, you will be lucky", and so on.

Now, gullible people—and unfortunately, there is no shortage of them in the world—desirous of all these ‘benefits’, will put money in each box, which is just what the temple authorities want. But what impression will foreign visitors and others get from such a temple, when they otherwise might be quite sympathetic towards Buddhism? They could be excused for thinking: "Well, if that’s Buddhism, I want nothing of it!", could they not? I would, if I didn’t know better.

The first of the other cases is from the notice-board of a Buddhist Society and is a way of raising funds for their new building. It was headed: "Some Benefits of Donating a Buddha Image" beneath which was a list, thus:

- ▶ Good health and longevity.
- ▶ Increase prosperity and good affinity.
- ▶ Rebirth in Pure Land.
- ▶ Upbringing of wise and dutiful children.
- ▶ Happy and harmonious family.
- ▶ Steady accumulation of wealth.

Now, what has donating a Buddha image—or, rather, a sum of money (and also not a small sum) for a Buddha tile to be stuck on the wall, with the donor’s name beneath—got to do with all these things? What is the connection? Are such things for sale? Can they be bought? If people think so, how will they feel when they fail to materialize? Are they not inviting disappointment? Everyone knows that funds must be raised for building

temples, but to do it in this way is contrary to the purpose of a temple and only leads to the increase of ignorance and superstition instead. A Buddha image symbolizes enlightenment, not superstition. In my opinion, it's better not to have a temple if it's going to be the cause of that!

The second case I came across on the notice-board of another Buddhist Society where I have stayed several times and also concerned mantras. It was written by a Tibetan 'Rinpoche'. It stated that by reciting a certain mantra, and then spitting on the soles of one's feet, any insects or tiny creatures that one might accidentally tread on thereafter would immediately be reborn as devas in heaven! So easy to go to heaven now, is it? Come on!

Then, there are stories that people hear and repeat like the following: In ancient China, damp scripture books would sometimes be laid out in the sun to dry. A cow once happened to sniff at such books, and consequently, was reborn as a human, became a government official, and later even became enlightened. All this because of sniffing at books laid out to dry!? Why should we go to such lengths to discipline ourselves when we may become enlightened merely by sniffing sutras?

Another such ridiculous story I heard from a Tibetan Lama during a meditation course he conducted in Nepal many years ago: There was once a fly that flew from pile to pile of dung around the Great Stupa at Bodnath, and because of this it became enlightened! I recently heard a variation on this theme told by a Lama in Malacca, only it was a pig instead of a fly going around the Stupa! Do these Lamas really believe such things themselves, or do they take us for complete idiots, thinking that they can foist off any old crap on us?

A recent letter from someone in Australia told me that a big new temple outside Sydney is persuading people to part with their hard-earned cash by offering what they call a 'Long-life Candle/Lamp' to the image of Kwan Yin, costing up to or even more than A\$2,500, depending upon its proximity to the image, the implication being that the closer to the image one's candle/lamp is placed, the more blessings one will get and the longer one will live. So, an image—of wood or stone!—is able to lengthen one's life, when even the best doctors are unable to do so, eh? What is this but idolatry? How foolish can we be to believe such things!

Conclusion: There will always be ignorance and superstition in the world, and people to cheat, deceive and exploit the unwary, too. Is there anything we can do about it? Of course there is; lots! We cannot prevent it, but what we can do is try to understand things clearer and overcome ignorance ourselves, and help others to do so, too. Begin by not allowing all this to go unchallenged. Speak out and expose it—even if you risk becoming unpopular as a result—because if you do not, you are thereby giving it your approval and prolonging it.

A GIFT OF TEARS

NOT LONG AGO, I heard something on the radio: "Happiness consists in doing what you like and liking what you do." Of course, it didn't mean that we should do just whatever we like, regardless of the rights and feelings of others, but that we should identify what we would really like to do, and strive to do it. Not many of us, it seems, ever manage to do this, which is a pity, as we have more opportunities for it than most of us realize.

My search—the search for diamonds—is often frustrating but also very rewarding. Needless to say, I don't find diamonds every day, but I know they are there, deep inside people, and when I'm able to indicate them to their 'owners', I feel fulfilled, and all my frustration pales in comparison to the success; in fact, the frustration validates the success. The robes I wear allow me access to people that I otherwise would not have, and let me touch them, one here, and one there. These days, it is known as 'job satisfaction', and although there are setbacks and periods when I think I'm wasting my time and had better quit, I get enough of it to keep me going.

"Our son is lazy", the man said, "and doesn't like to study. When he comes home from school, he goes into his room and turns on his music, but leaves his homework until the last minute instead of doing it first and getting it over with."

"His grades are poor because of it", said his wife; "and we are afraid he'll fail his exams. He is our only son, and we have high hopes for him and would like him to become a doctor. We are not rich, so must make sacrifices to help him succeed. But he won't listen, and we don't know what to do."

They had come to enlist my help in what they perceived to be a problem. But I had met their son several times at the Buddhist Society where he was active, and come to know him as an honest boy who was willing to help others, not a silly boy who spent his time hanging around the streets in bad company; I told his parents so.

"You are lucky to have a son like this", I said, "even if he is not a brilliant student. Not everyone is good academically, and some who are,

aren't good otherwise. Maybe you are placing too much emphasis on academic success, and disregarding other forms of success. Would you rather have him good academically but poor socially, ambitious for himself to the detriment of others, as is often so? Of course, it would be better if he could be successful all round, but if he cannot—and how many can?—you must love and support him—and take joy in him being your son—anyway. Support him and love him, but do not try to force him into something that he has no aptitude for. He knows the importance of study, I'm sure—how can he not, when it is being rammed down his throat all the time? He is already under terrible pressure from the education system and the crazy competitiveness among students, without you adding more to the burden; the pressure on kids these days is so great that some cannot stand it and opt out by committing suicide. If you try to force him, it will only make him feel miserable and want to rebel. He needs your support and approval, however he is. Perhaps you should consult him about things instead of feeling that you know what is best for him; maybe you do know what is best for him, but he should still be treated responsibly and consulted, as it is his life, not yours. It is vitally important for you to see this. It is not right to compare your son with others' sons, for they are they and he is he. And while it might be true that he can do better—it is true, and not just in his case, either, but in everyone's case, yours and mine included—he could also do worse.

"A flower opens in its own good time; if you force it to open, you will destroy it, and then regret it. When you married and planned a family, you did not place an order specifying what kind of children you would like, did you? And you had no way of knowing what kind of children would come through and how they'd turn out; was it not a tremendous gamble? There are lots of well educated people—the greatest criminals are well educated; that is how they can commit their crimes and get away with it!—who don't give a damn about others as long as they succeed and achieve their ambitions.

"You must also be clear in your minds about why you want him to excel in his studies. It should not be in order to hold him up later as "Our son, the doctor", as that will merely be an ego-trip, like showing off a pedigree dog or horse. You should just be proud of him as "Our son." If he

has the inclination to become a doctor himself, well and good, but if not, and you pressure him to pursue that line, his heart will probably not be in it, and he will become one of the mediocre doctors that the world has already far too many of. If you really love him and want him to be happy, help him to find what he would like to do with his life."

They listened patiently and didn't object to what I had said. But to put their minds more at ease, I assured them I would have a word with their son.

He came to me the next day, knowing that his parents had been to see me and why, so was somewhat prepared for what I would say. What he expected to hear from me I don't know, but I began by telling him what his parents and I had said to each other the day before, and added that my words should not be taken as an endorsement of laziness. I emphasized that his parents loved and cared for him, and were concerned that he would waste his opportunities, and for his own sake, he should settle down to his studies.

He responded to my words so: "I know they love me, and I love them, too, but I'm just not so good at studying as they want me to be. They always compare me with others, saying, 'Look at so-and-so: how well he does in school. Why can't you be like him?' It hurts and makes me feel so bad, as if I've let them down or betrayed them. I know it's important to study, and I do what I can, but it's just not good enough for them. They don't understand me."

His eyes had filled with tears as he said this, and when he could hold them back no longer, they rolled down his cheeks. I said nothing about this, so as not to embarrass him, and continued talking as if I hadn't noticed. But really, I felt honored that he trusted me enough to weep before me, when he probably would not—could not—have done so with even his best friend. I took his tears as a gift, and far from considering them a sign of weakness, saw them as a sign of courage. I gave him my ears, and he gave me his tears, and I've told his story here for others who are under similar pressure to conform and perform to the standards and expectations of others. I want to encourage them to understand both themselves and others. Actually, as I often say, I feel children have more responsibility to understand their parents than their parents have to understand them, knowing, as I say it, that

it imposes another burden on young people, but one that I think they can and must learn to bear. Moreover, by putting it like this, it provides them with a different way of looking at their situation. And why do I say it? Because there is so much new information now—more than there has ever been throughout history—that most older people will never come to terms with, while the young are born into it and absorb it naturally. This is the way of Nature: each generation takes over from the preceding one, and, in turn, must pass things to those who follow. There is no shame in recognizing and accepting that this is the way it has always been and always will be.

A woman once came to see me and told me she had been having nightmares, and asked if I could help her.

"When did they begin?" I asked.

"About six months ago", she replied.

"Can you think what might have caused them?"

"My daughter", she said.

"Tell me more", I probed.

"Well, she is eighteen now, and is in the habit of coming home late from school, and instead of doing her homework, she goes out with her friends whenever she likes, without telling me where she is going".

"Have you told her that her behavior is causing you nightmares?" I asked.

"No", she said.

"Why not?"

"Because she wouldn't listen to me; she never does".

"Do you scold her?"

"Sometimes, of course. It's hard not to".

I asked her if she knew what was a bird's nest, and she said everyone knows that. "But what is a bird's nest?" I persisted.

"The home of the bird", she replied.

"No, it's not; birds don't have homes. A nest is a nursery where the young birds are raised after hatching from the eggs, and when they are old enough to fly and fend for themselves, they leave the nest and go; they don't stay there forever.

"Likewise with young people", I went on; "they must also leave the nest and go, and in learning how to stand on their own feet and make the break from their parents, they need all the understanding and help they can get, as it is seldom easy. You did it, but perhaps you don't remember it now, as you are in the same position that your mother was then, and the immediate situation often obscures the past. Do you think it was easy for her to let go of you after giving birth to you and raising you for so many years? She loved you just as you love your daughter, and if life continues in the same way, your daughter will love her children in turn. Why don't you talk with her about this, and let her know you are with instead of against her? Maybe it will make a lot of difference, while scolding might only alienate her further. I offer you this as an alternative; anything's worth a try when so much is at stake, no?"

I was 18 when I left home to set out on my travels. I thought I was grown up and knew everything (something common in youth). Looking back on it now, I see I was so young and knew almost nothing, but it was where I had to begin. It was hard, and if I had known what was ahead of me, I don't think I could have gone. But what would have happened if I had stayed in the warmth and security of home? Would I have found what I think I have found? Discovery—finding that we have wings and can fly—is not easy and pain free. I was lucky, however, in that my parents supported me and never opposed me, even though they could not understand what I was doing and maybe didn't agree; I am grateful to them for this and many other things; it made the going easier, and led me, eventually, to the joy I experience when I see that I'm able to touch others in ways that make a difference. That's job satisfaction!

WHAT IS DHARMA?

IT WAS IN 1969 THAT I FIRST SAW the pearly glory of the Taj Mahal, and though I have been back several times since, I'll never forget that time.



The gleaming domes and minarets are visible from afar, but awe and suspense mount as you get nearer to the vast walled compound. Entering the gate—itsself a marvel—you gasp, for there, beyond the symmetry of the reflecting pool and geometrical gardens, shimmers the vision you've come to see. It seems so near that you feel you could reach out and touch the smooth white marble, but the tiny figures up against it remind you that it is actually still some distance away.

Walking reverently down the path, you reach the terrace and remove your sandals; the marble feels so cool; does it not absorb the sun's heat? With heightened rapture, you approach the shrine, its walls inset with arabesques and floral motifs done in gem-stones—agate, jade, turquoise, lapis lazuli—28 kinds of them, all told. Through the massive doorway you pass into the dim interior of the tomb, where a splendid sarcophagus hides

the bones of Shah Jahan, beside those of his beloved wife, Mumtaz, to whom he had raised the mausoleum. The dome is so immense and lofty that the slightest noise causes an echo. In those days, there were fewer tourists, so I was able to enjoy this wonder in peace (it is different now, sad to say). I recall the thrill I felt to play a flute inside; the silvery sounds reverberated and lingered on the still, cool air!

The gardens of the Taj are alive with birds and animals. Green parrots screech their zigzag way between the trees, halting suddenly against trunk or limb; the ubiquitous crows caw hungrily, eyes keen for scraps of food; striped palm-squirrels scamper hither and thither, tails twitching. Soaring high above, vultures effortlessly rise on the thermal currents, scanning the earth beneath for signs of death; on land, their ungainly bodies are repulsive, but in the air they are graceful masters of flight; the turn of a feather or twist of a wing-tip sends them spiraling higher, or plunging swiftly; it's fascinating to watch them until they are just tiny dots against the boundless blue. Nor are they alone in their airy realm; it is shared by other birds of prey: eagles, hawks and kites.

Security wasn't as tight as it later became, so, with two friends—Laurie, from Sydney, and Bruce, from Edmonton—I stayed inside the gardens after closing time, though we knew it was not allowed (nice to break the law sometimes, isn't it? We did no harm). Spreading our sleeping-bags on the lawns, we settled down to watch. There, within the space of twelve hours, we were privileged to see the Taj change in different lights: sunset, rain, full moon, and sunrise—a pleasure few have had.

Countless people have tried to describe this marble poem, but words fail to do it justice; it is simply ineffable. Those who have never seen it themselves can't get a clear idea of it from words; if you want to understand what people have been talking about and eulogizing for so long, there is no other way but to go and see. If you see only this in India, it is worth a visit, but of course, there are so many other marvelous places.

In this and other books, I have often used the word Dharma—and sometimes, Universal Dharma—so now, before someone who is not intimidated by words asks what it means, I will try to explain it. This is very difficult, and I feel like I'm digging my own grave, for it is rather

amorphous. But, having used it, I am responsible for it, am I not? Please bear with me, as it is more something one feels than knows by intellect, and I must fumble for words to explain this word.

It is a word of many meanings, and often, we can get the meaning only from the context in which it is used. It means—to Hindus—duty or responsibility, according to one's caste, high or low. It can mean teaching or doctrine, as in Buddha-Dharma or Hindu-Dharma. It can mean phenomena, as in things momentarily arising and passing away, like the images on a movie screen. It also stands for Truth or Reality, as in things that apply to everyone and everything, at any and every time, everywhere. It is in the latter sense that I usually use the word Dharma. If we talk about the Buddha's teachings, we should be specific and say Buddha-Dharma, because there is a difference. Dharma is what the Buddha discovered as He sat under the tree that has, since then, been known as the Bodhi Tree, or Tree of Awakening. It was not called that before His Enlightenment, so it is a mistake to talk of Sakyamuni (or Siddhartha) going to sit under the Bodhi tree.

After His Enlightenment, the Buddha started to explain about what He had discovered, and His teachings are known as Buddha-Dharma.

There is a sutta (sutra, in Pali) called the Dhammaniyama Sutta, or The Discourse on the Fixed Law of Dharma. It concerns what is known as The Three Characteristics, and is as follows:

"Thus have I heard: At one time the Exalted One was staying at Savatthi in Prince Jeta's Grove, in the Park of Anathapindika. Then the Exalted One spoke thus to the monks: "O monks". Those monks replied to the Exalted One: "Lord". The Exalted One then said: "Monks, whether there is the appearance of Tathagatas or there is not the appearance of Tathagatas, there is this established condition of Dhamma, this fixed law of Dhamma: All that is conditioned is Impermanent. That a Tathagata has fully awakened to, He fully understands. So, awakened and understanding, He announces it, points it out, declares, establishes, expounds, explains and clarifies that 'All that is conditioned is Impermanent'.

"Monks, whether there is the appearance of Tathagatas or there is not the appearance of Tathagatas, there is this established condition of Dhamma, this fixed Law of Dhamma: 'All that is conditioned is Dukkha'. That a Tathagata has fully awakened to, He fully understands. So, awakened and understanding, He announces it, points it out, declares, establishes, expounds, explains and clarifies that 'All that is conditioned is Dukkha'.

"Monks, whether there is the appearance of Tathagatas or there is not the appearance of Tathagatas, there is this established condition of Dhamma, this fixed Law of Dhamma: 'All dhammas are not-self'. That a Tathagata has fully awakened to, He fully understands. So, awakened and understanding, He announces it, points it out, declares, establishes, expounds, explains and clarifies that 'All dhammas are not-self'".

Thus spoke the Exalted One. Delighted, those monks rejoiced in what the Exalted One had said.

Before commenting on this passage, let me explain some of the unusual terms in it. Exalted One is an honorific used for the Buddha by others (another is Blessed One). Tathagata was a term He used to refer to Himself; it means: One Who Has Thus Gone. Anathapindika was a wealthy supporter of the Buddha. Dukkha means Suffering, Woe, or Unsatisfactoriness. Dhamma is the Pali form of the Sanskrit word Dharma; they have the same meaning. dhammas refer to phenomena—events or appearances. not-self means nothing has self-existence, nothing exists in and by itself, but only in dependence on other things; in other words, nothing is what it seems to be.

This Sutta makes it very clear that Dharma (or Dhamma), in its highest or Universal meaning, does not depend upon the Buddha—"Whether there is the appearance of Tathagatas or there is not the appearance of Tathagatas". The Buddha has put Himself aside here and given Dharma center place. It is very important for us to understand this; Buddhism is not a personality cult.

Nothing comes from nothing, and nothing goes to nothing. We can add nothing to nor take anything away from the universe; things come into being as a result of certain causes, and likewise pass out of being. Like Lego bricks, from which so many different toys can be made, things are merely shuffled around, and new things formed from old. Recycling is not a new concept, but the way the universe functions.

Everything, animate and inanimate, is ruled by The Law of Cause-and-Effect; nothing is outside its sway. Because of it, everything changes; nothing remains the same (Impermanence); because of this, everything is Unsatisfactory (Dukkha); and nothing exists in and by itself (Not-self). What is outside the Three Characteristics? Is there anything else? No, not outside, but behind. Though they are negative propositions, they have positive aspects. It is not as gloomy as it seems to be. How can there be negative without positive? One implies the other.

What, then, is the positive aspect behind Change (Impermanence)? That which does not change; we call it the Absolute, but because we are prone to taking words for what they indicate and get stuck on the verbal level, we do not—cannot—talk much about it. It—like the positive aspects of the other two Characteristics—has to be experienced to be understood, just like the Taj Mahal, only moreso. We must experience the Absolute beyond Change, must experience the Bliss behind Dukkha, must experience who and what is behind everything that is not.

The experience—personal and direct—of these things reveals that everything is Dharma. And I have a feeling that eventually, when we look back from a higher vantage point and see things in clearer perspective, we might realize that everything is good, as everything has a part to play. (It reminds me of the words from an old song: "Even the bad times are good"). Everything, without exception, manifests or reflects Dharma—maybe we can even say, is Dharma. Dharma is impartial, and is not in the good without being in the bad; even things we call 'bad' are Dharma, for they are also effects of causes; everything is.

Unlike Buddhism and Buddha-Dharma, which had beginnings in time, Dharma does not come and go, begin or end; it is not subject to birth and death. Everything else—parents, children, friends, money, possessions,

health, strength, power, position, even our body—will let us down, as they are subject to change, and therefore cannot be a true refuge; only that which is not subject to change can be a refuge.

Towards the end of His life, the Buddha's aunt-and-foster-mother, Mahaprajapati, and Yasodhara (formerly His wife), who were both nuns and had attained enlightenment, came to see Him, knowing they were about to die. Mahaprajapati—who was, of course, a very old lady—came first, and thanked him for having given her the happiness of the Dharma, for her having been spiritually born through Him; for the Dharma having grown in her through Him; for her having drunk the Dharma-milk from him; for her having plunged in and crossed over the Ocean of Becoming through Him—what a glorious thing it has been to be known as the mother of the Buddha, she said.

She went on: "I desire to die finally having put away this corpse. O Sorrow-ender, permit me". The Buddha cheered her with Dharma and didn't try to dissuade this grand old lady with false comfort, saying empty things like: "Oh, don't talk like that. You are not going to die, but will live for many more years yet". At that stage, fear of living and dying no longer exists.

Yasodhara later came for the same purpose: to take her leave of the Buddha. Addressing Him respectfully, she said she was seventy eight years old. The Buddha replied, "Yes, I know, and I'm eighty".

She told Him she would die that night. But her tone was more self-reliant than that of Mahaprajapati. She didn't ask His permission to die nor did she go to Him as her refuge. Instead, she said: "me saranam atthano" ("I am my own refuge").

She came to thank Him because it was He who had shown her the way and given her the power. She had found what was in her mind, and which could be found only there.

From this it can be seen that there is no reason at all to regard the doctrine of the Buddha as pessimistic or gloomy merely because it rejects the idea of a personal, unchanging, immortal soul; it simply states how things are, with the aim of liberating us from things that prevent us seeing what we really are, which is far more than we think.

To return to and end with the question that started all this: What is Dharma?

Dharma is Law, Universal Law—Cause-and-Effect. This being so, perhaps the question can best be answered by asking: What is not Dharma?

"Herein, Monks, the yeoman farmer gets his field well ploughed puts in his seed lets the water in and turns it off quickly. These are his three urgent duties. Now, monks, that yeoman-farmer has no such magic power or authority as to say: 'Let my crops spring up today. Tomorrow let them ear. On the following day let them ripen'. No. It is just the due season which makes them do this.

"Now, the monk has no such magic power or authority as to say: 'Today, let my mind be released from the asavas (impurities) without grasping, or tomorrow, or the day after'".

The Buddha: Gradual Sayings 1.219.

HOW BIG IS BIG?

THE CUSTOM OF SHAKING HANDS was originally a demonstration that people were not holding weapons and therefore came in peace. Smiling was also a sign of friendship. Nor is this limited to humans, but is a characteristic of certain animals, like chimpanzees and monkeys, who draw back their lips and show their teeth as a sign that they mean no harm. Human smiles, however, can mean many things, and are often a disguise for true feelings. We can be such hypocrites!

All words—whether we call them nouns, pronouns, verbs, and so on—are adjectives; that is, they represent or describe (attempt to describe) things. But a word is not the thing it represents or describes. We have words for qualities and words for quantities. The word ‘big’, for example, represents something of size, or quantity; the word ‘good’ represents a quality. We do not say: "Thank you very big", or "He is a much man". So, we have to be very careful, and understand that the words we use often limit things and prevent us from comprehending them. Buddhists are fond of using the word ‘Enlightenment’, for example, but what does it mean? Does it mean the same thing to everyone who uses it? Are we in substantial agreement about it? Or have we—like the Godists—only got the word but not the thing? It is such an abstract term that not many people will have really thought about it.

Without being as dogmatic as those who maintain that there is a God by saying that there is no God, let us look into the matter somewhat.

The word ‘God’ is English. Every language probably has an equivalent word, but they are only words, whatever. The words we use—of any language—have come down to us from the past; we have inherited them. Most people just repeat—like parrots—the words they have inherited without ever bothering to investigate them, without ever asking what they really mean, stand for, or symbolize; thus, they live their entire lives on the level of words and derive very little benefit therefrom; not only this, but

they become prisoners of them. Words, not understood or misunderstood, cause a lot of trouble.

So, we know the word—everyone knows the word—but what does it mean? Does it mean anything at all? By this, I mean: is there anything behind the word, does the word represent anything real, or is it just a word? Do you, who use the word God, know if it is anything more than a word? Have you seen God, or in any other way experienced It? Be honest and tell the truth: Have you? How could you see It when It is supposed to be infinite, formless, absolute, and transcendent? When you say the word God, are you not speaking about something that you have no knowledge or experience of? Is it not just a matter of imagining or wishful thinking, a mental projection, a thing of ego? You say It is the Divine, the Ultimate, but these are also only words, and what you do with your words is pull down the Absolute—if there is such a thing—to your own grubby level.

When asked about things that are—for the time being—beyond the knowledge of most of us, people sometimes admit their ignorance and say: "I don't know. Only God knows; God knows everything!" But what are they saying thereby? By saying "God knows everything" they are claiming to be omniscient themselves, otherwise how could they say "God knows everything"? It is a contradictory statement, a statement with no meaning! How do you know "God knows everything" unless you know everything yourself? Do you want to measure the Infinite with your tiny mind?

Although we've been to the moon, sent space probes to Mars, Venus, Saturn and wherever else, fathomed the oceans, and performed many other wonders, it is still not uncommon to hear people saying things like "Buddhists will go to Hell! Only through Jesus can you be saved!" I inwardly cringe when I hear such things, and feel embarrassed for them; they are usually people who know nothing of other ways, or even misknow, and only show off their ignorance thereby. Are they not already in Hell, with such fearful and narrow beliefs, when a little investigation and research would dispel their ignorance?

There was a report in Malaysia's SUNDAY STAR newspaper on the 24th of October, entitled: "BAPTISTS' PRAYERS OUTRAGE HINDUS".

I will reproduce it in full here to show that religious bigotry is still alive and well.

"WASHINGTON: US Southern Baptists, the largest Protestant religious group here, outraged Hindu followers on Friday by promising to launch a prayer event to convert the world's Hindus.

"The prayers are "aimed at dispelling the darkness that holds more than 900 million Hindus in spiritual bondage", a Baptist statement declared.

""We're outraged. It's offensive," responded Suresh Gupta, president of the Durga temple in Fairfax, Virginia.

""It's just a call for them to disturb the peace and tranquility of people who want to do good. They should refrain from acting like this," Suresh added.

"Southern Baptists will begin their prayer event on Nov 3 and have published a prayer booklet to guide their followers on how to participate in the effort.

""As Deepavali begins, we want to invite Southern Baptists to pray that the world's Hindus might be convicted of sin and see Jesus is the Light of the World," said Randy Sprinkle, director of the International Mission Board (IMB) prayer strategy office.

"The mission board's press release said Hindus "worship a total of 330 million gods and goddesses, from whom they seek power and blessing.

""Achieving unity with their Gods represents the only hope Hindus have of escaping the circle of birth, death and reincarnation in which they believe they are trapped."

"Sprinkle also said that "Hindus believe life is an endless cycle of reincarnation and appeasement of the Gods. Most know little or nothing of God and His great, saving love for them in the Saviour, Jesus Christ."

""We believe it is the Christian's responsibility to evangelize everyone. The New Testament talks about reaching people from every tribe, tongue and nation," said Bill Merrill, vice president of communications for the 15.8 million member Nashville based group.

""We believe (evangelism) is the task of telling the 'Good News' of Jesus Christ to people. That's it. It's not coercion . . . each individual is competent to make his own decision before God."

"The IMB Hindu prayer guide is the third in a series of publications.

"The first two similarly covered Muslim and Jewish religious festivals.

"A fourth is to focus on Buddhism, the statement said.

"Suresh has asked US President Bill Clinton to step in and comment on the Southern Baptists' statements, which the Hindu leader described as "offensive literature."

AFP/Reuters."

But Christians are not the only ones guilty of this; there are Buddhist fanatics, too. I recently met one in Singapore, who claimed that Buddhism is the best religion for everyone. When I asked what he knew of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Taoism, Judaism, etc., he said, "A little", which was just a way of covering up his ignorance. "If you know only a little, and have never bothered to learn anything about ways other than your own, what gives you the right to say that Buddhism is the best? You aren't qualified to say so, and only make yourself look silly by saying it. Moreover, as Buddhists, we may not say that. The most we can say is that Buddhism is the best way for us—each one of us—alone; we cannot say it is the best way for anyone else, let alone everyone else". (This same person vehemently defended China's violent and genocidal takeover of Tibet, claiming that Tibet was always part of China. I had to disagree with him about this, too, of course).

Although it has come near to it once or twice, until now, Japan has never really apologized for its war crimes. In an attempt to assuage its guilty conscience, it even tried to rewrite its history and gloss over its bloody past, but there were world wide protests about this. There are people too, who claim the Nazis never perpetrated the Holocaust. We must not let their words confuse us, nor time dim our memories. Though we can forgive, we must never forget, because if we do, the world may again fall victim to this kind of horror.

The Pope and other Christian leaders are concerned about the spread of Buddhism and other Eastern religions in the West, and not without reason; their thrones are shaking and they are losing their followers. But why is Buddhism spreading in the West? It is spreading not just because it is a reasonable and rational way that does not demand blind faith or insult our

intelligence, but because Christianity is not. Dogmatism and intolerance help Buddhism to spread by providing such a contrast. After so many centuries of darkness and suppression, the West is now free to choose, intelligently. (Some people will say we've been free to choose for a long time, and this is true, too; but not until quite recently has the man-in-the-street had access to many alternatives to choose from). Who will choose to continue living in a cave with candles for light when he can live in a modern house with electricity? As time passes, more and more people will abandon Christianity to embrace Buddhism. But the Pope need not fear that one day he'll be left all alone in the Vatican; Buddhism will not be adopted by the average Westerner. I don't imagine it will ever become popular in the West, and indeed, I hope it doesn't, because when something becomes popular, and the masses get hold of it, it loses its meaning; I want it to be something for those who will think about and appreciate it. (If this sounds elitist, I'm sorry, but I won't retract my words).

I am often asked why I am against Christianity. I admit it, and will not pretend otherwise; I am against Christianity. Why? Because I regard it as pernicious, and feel I have no choice but to oppose it. If Christians were content to follow their way and leave other people alone, I probably would not say anything (don't think that I enjoy complaining and wasting my energy this way! I only wish it were not necessary!). But because they are not content, and because their agenda is still to convert the world to their belief system, I cannot and will not keep quiet, and will speak out to expose this fraud.

It is fashionable today for prominent religious leaders to engage in 'dialogue' with each other. Inter-religious conferences are called to discuss war, crime, terrorism, injustice, human rights, and other things affecting the world. And while this is laudable and a step in the right direction, I feel that such gatherings often avoid the real issues, and degenerate into smug little hypocritical meetings of "I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine". People attend wearing their insignia and smiles, claiming to represent vast bodies of followers, and prepared to make concessions on minor points, but with self-righteous thoughts of, "Ours is still the best way" in their hearts. Little is resolved—nor ever can be—with such attitudes; indeed, if we will just look back a little, we will see that they have caused countless conflicts!

And unless and until we bring this erroneous way of thinking out into the open and confront it, we are not going to get very far with our stage-managed conferences. We've been burdened with these illusions since prehistoric times, and need to get rid of them.

Is the Pope prepared to humbly abandon the supremely arrogant concept of 'papal infallibility', and the 'frog-in-the-well' belief that only in the Catholic Church is salvation to be found? Dare he be honest and admit that he doesn't know what happens after we die? (Dare we all admit this?) Or will he continue to cling to these dogmas—and expect his flock to adhere to them unthinkingly? He is in a very difficult position, caught between a rock and a hard place, as it were. But is he aware of it? He gives no sign of it, and is as conservative and unbending as ever. Will he be the last of his line, as predicted by Nostradamus? Meanwhile, many Catholics, are questioning things (and why not?); their formerly narrow little world, where-in everything was neatly mapped out for them, has burst open at the seams, and they can no longer live in a comfortable cocoon of priestly spinning. This is a multi-cultural and multi-religious world; we can remain ignorant of other ways only by choosing to.

How can we ever move towards peace in the world when people cling to medieval beliefs in the supernatural, thinking that they are right and others are wrong? Only when we are prepared to say, honestly and humbly, "I don't know", can peace stand a chance. But how hard it is to say this, when we have, for so long, held the belief of being 'chosen people' and others as 'rejects'! How hard it is to let go, and accept oneself and others as simply human! But if we are not to destroy ourselves, we must come back, eventually, to the basics; life on this earth should be our primary concern, not what happens (if anything) after death. We will find out about that soon enough. If we do not live well on this earth, how should life for us in the hereafter be any better? Maybe we should regard this as a trial-run for what comes after; if we did, we might take better care of our planet, instead of polluting and destroying it. Really, our profligate use and abuse of our poor suffering planet is an indication that we think there is nothing at all after we die. And if there is, what will we do to that world? Will we treat it any better or differently than we treat this one?

For too long has the world suffered under religious darkness. Why do we continue to put up with it? Let's challenge the dogmas and unsubstantiated theories we've been fed, and demand proof—or at least, better explanations than we've been given so far. Does the Pope really believe he is infallible? Someone should put him on the spot and ask him about this. Let us put our skepticism to good use by debunking some of these illogical claims.

Buddhists: you are so attached to words like Karma, Rebirth, Nirvana, Enlightenment? What would happen if you honestly and fearlessly admitted that you know nothing about such things and let go of them? Would your spiritual foundations immediately crumble? Is it not enough to understand something of the Law of Cause-and-Effect? Is it not enough to feel part of this world, to know that you belong, and that you can and do make a difference? Is being Buddhist a matter of calling oneself so, or of loading up our already cluttered minds with a set of beliefs? What do we know of Enlightenment? Does it help us make sense of life, and to see all living things as fellow-travelers, or does it give us a feeling of superiority: "I've got it and you have not"? Fear of-and-for self can only be overcome by understanding, only by seeing who and what we are, only by opening ourselves and becoming vulnerable, only by love.

Christians: Ignorance is ignorance, not Buddhist or Christian. Are you any better than Buddhists in your unknowing? Dare you offer your self, your ego—that feeling of 'I, me and mine'—for crucifixion by admitting that you do not know, instead of arrogantly thinking and claiming you do? It requires courage, as it is not easy to do. Belief and faith are two different things. We believe when we do not know; when we know, we do not believe. Faith, however, arises from direct personal experience of things. Which do you have: Belief or Faith? Can you honestly say that you have Faith instead of Belief? Remember and take care: one of the cardinal sins of Christianity is spiritual pride—the very thing that persuades one into feeling superior to others.

Only when religion becomes a thing of living, instead of a name to hide behind, only when we stop playing games and saying "My religion is better than yours"—like children with their toys: "Mine's bigger than

yours!"—shall religion have a serious role to play in the world. If it cannot or will not update itself, it will become anachronistic, and we shall eventually outgrow it. Hasten the day!

HOW CAN IT BE?

ACCORDING TO BUDDHISM, if we do good we shall be happy; if we do bad we shall suffer. Nice idea, but is it supported by the realities of life? We should always test things instead of merely believing, before inimical people come along and pull the carpet from under us.

We've all seen people who lead very good lives, who are kind and considerate of others, but who suffer and undergo so many hardships, have we not?. We've also seen people who lead very irresponsible lives, who are virtually criminals, completely disregarding the rights and feelings of others, but who seem to prosper and be happy. What are we to make of this? It is not an idea, but a reality; there are people like this, and not a few, either! Does it not cause us to think and wonder why? Something seems to be wrong, does it not? Why should this be? Should not the good and kind folks be happy instead of suffering, and the cheats, exploiters and criminals suffer instead of prospering? Where is the justice in all this?

If we are not careful, our indignation and sense of right and wrong might cause us to doubt the teaching that 'if we do good, we shall be happy, but if we do bad, we shall suffer as a result', and even to abandon the Dharma.

It is not uncommon for people to ask: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" We may have asked it ourselves. Let us examine this question to see what it means; perhaps it will reveal something we were not aware of.

In order to ask it, we must first have an idea that there is such a thing as 'a good person'. You might say I am good, and I might say that you are, but if we say we are good ourselves, are we? We can't even think it. On the other hand, if we think or say we are bad, it is also incorrect. We must try to be fair with ourselves as well as with others, and not falsely modest.

During one of my talks to a large audience last year, I asked: "How many good people are there here tonight?" After a few moments, two people raised their hands, though why they did so I don't know. Then when I asked: "How many bad people are there?", again two people raised their

hands—one of them a Westerner. I was later told that they were a pastor and his wife. It wasn't surprising, therefore, that they'd raised their hands, as Christians are taught that they are sinners and can only be saved through believing in Jesus. Of course, I do not accept this. If we say we are bad, it is the same as saying we are good, as we've been taught not to think of ourselves as 'good', so calling oneself good must be bad, and conversely, calling oneself bad must be good. This is false modesty!

While in India last year, I sought out and visited a Jain monastery. Jainism began at the same time and in the same area as Buddhism, and is also non-theistic. I had heard something of Jainism, and had read of what the Buddha thought of it, but had never met any Jain monks until then.

I was not surprised, upon entering the monastery, to find the white-robed monks wearing face-masks, as I'd heard that this was one of their customs. One monk spoke English quite well, so I was able to converse with them. I was invited to sit—on the floor, of course—but on a lower level than the Jain monks; I noted the distinction, but didn't object (many Buddhist monks also subject other people to this kind of treatment); I was also asked not to sit too close to them in case I came into physical contact with them, because—one of them said—I was wearing a watch, and the battery that powered it contained life (?).

Saying that I knew something of the Buddha's opinion of Jainism, in order not to be one-sided, I wished to know how Jains thought of the Buddha. They said that they agreed with most of what the Buddha taught, but not with His meat-eating, which they found unacceptable, as they are meticulous vegetarians, avoiding not only things like onions and garlic (as do many Buddhist vegetarians), but even vegetables that grow in the ground and which have to be uprooted, as that might cause the death of worms and insects in the soil. Many Jains—not only monks, but laity, too—also refrain from eating at night, in case any insects get into their food in the dim light. It is a religion of so many restrictions.

Unlike Buddhism, Jainism did not spread beyond India and become an international religion, as Jain monks won't use any kind of transport and walk wherever they want to go. They carry a soft broom with them to sweep the way before them, in case they accidentally tread on any insects and cause their death; they also go barefoot for the same reason (feet being

softer than shoes). And instead of shaving their heads as Buddhist monks do, they pluck out their hair by the roots, though why they do this, I didn't discover.

When I asked what they expected to get from their extreme practices, they seemed taken aback and didn't know what to say. Out of politeness, I didn't pursue this, but it is a thing I ask Buddhists, too: What do you expect to get from your practices, and are your expectations realistic? Do our practices make us morally any better than people who don't do such things, or do they make us proud and feel superior? Does shaving one's head—or plucking one's hair out by the roots—for example, make one a better person? How? It is without moral values, and cannot be considered good or bad; it is simply amoral, and we lose our way if we think of it as good merely because it is something different. The search for goodness can easily lead to conceit and hypocrisy.

While discussing with the Jain monks, a Hindu scholar joined us, and the situation changed. I did not understand very much of the dialogue between Hindus and Jains, but caught a word here and there, and because I know something of Hinduism, could tell that the Hindu was trying to prove his way better than Jainism. He was talking about Maya—a central Hindu idea—maintaining that everything is illusive and unreal. I found myself taking the side of the Jains, and joined in the debate by saying that things are real in context, at the moment, but because they change, ultimately they are unreal. "But can you say pain is unreal if I pinch you?" I said, leaning over and pinching the Hindu's leg.

We must resist the tendency to think ourselves better than others because of our practices, and not elevate ourselves; if others elevate us we must be even more careful, because if they can put us up, they can also put us down. "Be humble, if wisdom you would attain; be humbler still when wisdom you have attained", says The Voice of the Silence. Sit on a high place and you may fall down; sit on the floor and you cannot.

So, if we are not good and not bad, what are we? It helps a lot to ask and answer this question. We are simply people, at a particular stage of evolution, and as such have come a long way in a short time. According to anthropology, humans have existed about five or six million years, which is not very long at all, geologically speaking; we are new comers. Early

humans, however, were more like apes than we of today, but even so, they were our ancestors, and we have good reason to be grateful to them, for without them, we would not be here; if the chain of generations had been broken, humans would have followed the dinosaurs into extinction. How did we survive? How did the chain hold? It is really quite remarkable, and means that, as human beings, just as we are, we are tremendously successful. It is useful to try to understand this.

We have not, as some claim, descended, but on the contrary, have ascended; we should think of ourselves as ascendants rather than as descendants. There never was a state of perfection from which we fell—a Garden of Eden—as the Bible says; we have evolved from primitive beginnings, and will continue to evolve if we can refrain from destroying ourselves and our Spaceship Earth.

It is imperative that we look at ourselves in this way; we need such a perspective because we do wonder why things are as they are, of course. But instead of answering the question: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" it will take us beyond, and help us to look at ourselves not as individuals, but as members of our species, as human beings. We will get a feeling of belonging, and a sense of pride in the resilience and accomplishments of the human race.

Without the panoramic vision that reflecting on our ancestry gives us, our understanding of the present cannot be anything but narrow and murky; we will wonder why misfortune happens to us, and why there is so much pain and suffering. With this vision, however, life unfolds and yields up many insights; it does not appear so chaotic or meaningless; we realize how fortunate we are, and instead of asking why bad things happen to good people, we might ask in amazement why so many good things happen to us. It's not surprising that we should grow old, get sick and die, that we lose things, or that they wear out or get stolen; on the contrary, it's surprising that we live as long as we do, and are so fortunate. We may look at our situation negatively, and complain about it, as if it is our right to be always happy and have good things and never bad things happen to us; or we may look at it realistically, with gratitude; we have a choice. If we choose to look at it negatively and complain, of course we will suffer, but whose fault will that be?

In 1997, I made a trip up Malaysia's East Coast. I had done this many times before, so knew many people in the towns there. At one town, someone came to see me and told me that since we'd last met he'd had a heart attack. "Oh, I'm very sorry about that", I said, "but glad to see you survived". Heart attacks, of course, are momentous events; they are not things we go looking for, and they don't happen every day. But to undergo one, and live to tell of it, should—or could—shock one into waking up to the fragility of life, and give one a new awareness of its importance and value; it should open one's eyes to the wonder and beauty of it, should help one to tread more lightly. I don't know if this happened with my friend, but he said nothing about it, nor about the many good things that had happened—must have happened—since we last met, nor about the insights or flashes of understanding he had experienced. What a waste of a heart attack! Just as we squeeze juice from oranges, so we should try to extract something from our experiences—especially the painful ones. Everyone has insights; they are not as uncommon as we think; we should just be on the alert for them, and value them for what they are: glimpses of enlightenment. Stay tuned to Dharma.

I presume, of course, while writing this, that the people who may read it are relatively affluent, people with the luxury of time necessary to read and ponder on such things; I do not, at this stage of my life, write for suffering people in places like Zaire, Rwanda, Bosnia or Afghanistan—not that I do not care about people in such woeful countries, but because there is hardly any chance of my books reaching them, or of making any sense to them if they did, when life—to them—is simply a matter of survival. I write for lucky people, to remind them that they are so.

What can we possibly have done—you and I and all the other people around us—to have deserved all the wonderful things that we enjoy in such abundance? Have we earned them, in any way? As far as we can recall, we did not invent the TV, radio, telephone, automobile, train, airplane, refrigerator, etc., ad infinitum, yet we use them without thinking much about them, and take them for granted. Someone invented all these things, to be sure, but only a few people, and not all those who use them daily. How does the karma concept account for all this? Have we all done similar

deeds to enjoy similar effects? Or is it not a matter of inheritance? We have not earned, but have inherited all these things from people who lived before us, and in turn, shall pass things on to those who come after us. This is the cumulative effect of civilization; our standard of living is part of the result of being alive at this time—part of the package—and may be considered—if we like—our karma, but we should be grateful, nonetheless.

I am not offering palliatives here, or explanations to encourage people in their self-pity; my purpose is to indicate inner resources that will enable us to face with fortitude whatever life throws at us, without feeling sorry for ourselves, complaining and saying things like: "Why me? Why is this happening to me? I've never done anything wrong! I don't deserve this!" You do not need to have done anything wrong; it is not necessarily the result of something bad you did long ago; it might just be part of the price one has to pay for being alive. Try, therefore, to get your money's worth, because if you get nothing worthwhile out of life after all your suffering, it is really a tragedy! Many people are able to reflect on their lives and say: "Well, without the hard times, I probably would not have learned much". We may—as we often do—bemoan life, or we may celebrate it. It is much better to focus on the positive things of life than the negatives, because not only will we suffer less, but will be able to use it more constructively, and for the benefit of others, too. The world doesn't exist for us, but because of us; every moment, every one of us is engaged in the process of creating the world.

When good things happen to us, we seldom question them and say: "Why is this happening to me? I don't deserve it. I've never done anything good!" We accept it, and even ask for more. We've been brought up to do so; greed is inculcated and encouraged in us.

A few years ago, in Australia, there was a TV commercial by a lottery-syndicate, holding out the attractive bait of millions of dollars in prizes, featuring a bus driver who had just hit the jackpot. A song called "I've Got to Break Free" was playing as he drove his empty bus past people waiting under the hot sun at bus stops, out of the town and into the countryside, as if to say: "I don't give a damn! I'm free now!" Okay, you might not like your job, and winning the jackpot would certainly free you of it, but until you resign, you have a responsibility to do what you agreed to do when you took

the job. This advertisement, therefore, was not just encouraging greed, but extolling irresponsibility.

Surely, one of the marks of civilization is to be civic-minded and consider others. I have just been to apply for a tourist visa for India, and would like to tell of the amazing procedure involved. First, before one's application will even be considered, and after waiting in line for up to two hours, one has to pay RM40 to pay for a telex sent to somewhere in one's country of residence, to ascertain that one is not an 'undesirable'. After some days, when 'clearance' comes through, one may go to apply for the actual visa, at a cost of RM80 for a three months' stay. Later that day, one may collect one's endorsed passport. It's a bit like trying to get into Fort Knox!

Why do they make it so hard to visit India? They are not afraid that one wants to stay there indefinitely, are they? Would the geniuses who came up with this hare-brained scheme like to undergo something similar? It is so inconvenient: three trips for something that could be done there and then (and with computers, it should be possible to do all that needs to be done). Apart from the needless expense (about RM60 if one goes by taxi), it is environmentally-unfriendly, wasting fuel and causing pollution. The authorities of neighboring Nepal are much more practical and sensible, issuing visas upon entry there, without bureaucratic b.s. Indians should be happy to have people visit their country and spend money there; they certainly need it! It's not a highly developed place where everything is convenient, clean, efficient and the people courteous! While Malaysia—for one example—is urging its people to practice austerity and become more efficient during its time of economic hardship, India seems not only insistent on remaining backward, but of becoming moreso! Where are their minds?!

Efficiency begins with putting ourselves into others' places and feeling how they feel. Would we like to be treated how we treat others? Indians—Hindus, at least—claim to believe in Karma and Reincarnation. What kind of karma and reincarnation may they expect if they don't care enough to try to make things easier for others, but insist on complicating things? No wonder India is a mess!

Before he died in 1945, Edgar Cayce, America's most famous psychic—sometimes called The Sleeping Prophet—saw India becoming a nation without friends. Pretty accurate prediction, I would say. Since gaining its independence from Britain in 1947, it has fought three wars with Pakistan, a border war with China, and has had numerous internal conflicts. Cayce also predicted that India would break up. This would also not be surprising.

Recently—11-Dec-97—I came across a short article in Malaysia's New Straits Times entitled: Many new migrants disillusioned Down Under. It said:

"MELBOURNE—A study by the Ethnic Communities Council in Sydney has found that nearly half of all newly arrived migrants believe they were better off in their country of origin.

"Many said they had high expectations as to their probable standard of living in Australia before leaving their countries.

"About 46.2 per cent believed their lifestyle in Australia was worse than in their home country, compared with 42.9 per cent who thought they were better off in Australia and 9.8 per cent who said their standard of living was the same.

"ECC spokeswoman Pam Gracia said no statistics were taken from Malaysians but many migrants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were among those who expressed the highest rate of dissatisfaction.

"The head of ECC, Malaysian-born Dr Tony Pun, was quoted in The Australian newspaper as saying that the inability of many new migrants to find work, combined with a recent Federal Government ruling that immigrants must wait two years before receiving social security, contributed to the dissatisfaction".

This is unbelievable, but maybe that's not the right word! Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis complaining the most, as if their countries were like heaven instead of open toilets?! They are probably professionals, like doctors, who had servants in their own countries to do all their housework for them, but in an egalitarian society like Australia, they have to do such demeaning work as washing the dishes, keeping their toilets clean, and even making their own tea, because no-one has servants there.

Oh dear, poor things! Maybe they should have stayed in their own countries with their servants, in their big houses, encircled by the squalor, stench, noise, and pollution of cities like Bombay, Karachi and Dacca, and all the inefficiency of the systems there. They may have had Mercedes or even Rolls Royces in their own countries, but on what kind of roads? They may have had all kinds of electrical appliances, but what use would they be during the frequent power-cuts? They may have gone shopping in fine clothes, but along the streets among the beggars, mutilants, lepers and syphilitics that abound in their sink-hole cities. They may have eaten in the most expensive restaurants, unaware of the hygiene—or lack of it—in the kitchens or among the staff there. And of course, Australia’s social security system is nothing compared to those of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, I’m sure! High expectations of life in Australia? Did they expect to find the streets paved with gold? Australia did not disappoint them; they disappointed themselves by their unrealistic expectations, obviously thinking only of what they might get there, instead of what they might contribute. Such people would be disappointed and complain anywhere they went. Better stay home and learn to appreciate what they’ve got there before looking for greener grass on the other side of the hill!

If we do good with the idea of getting a result—or of even trying to ward off misfortune—we are laying ourselves open to disappointment. We may come to the conclusion—If we do not get what we expect to get, when we expect to get it, or get what we don’t want—that ‘these teachings are not true. I’ve been doing good, and still this is happening to me!’ We may give up doing good, thinking it’s no use anyway, and that we may as well do whatever we like.

If this is the way we think—if we become dismayed and decide to give up doing good—it is a clear sign of business-mindedness: I’ll do this in order to get that, and if I can’t get that, I won’t do it. This is the danger inherent in doing good. But being good—goodness—is something quite different than doing good. When we allow the goodness in us—and it is there—to operate, we will do good or right just because we have the opportunity and capacity to do it, without thinking of getting anything in return; it is not a business deal, a means to an end, but an end in itself,

something natural, complete in itself and without residue, an expression of our understanding of Dharma. Goodness flowers in us no matter what happens, and in spite of misfortune; it also helps us bear cheerfully and with greater fortitude the pains and problems of life; we will not allow anything to sway us into abandoning it.

Different people respond to difficulties in different ways. Some people complain about the slightest little thing and become depressed when things don't go how they want. Others remain cheerful no matter what happens, taking the misfortunes of life in their stride. Sometimes, quiet and unassuming people display an amazing capacity to deal with things that seemingly strong people are overcome by. We often don't know what we are capable of until we are put to the test.

To see results from our actions, we don't need to look far, don't need to wait months, years or lifetimes. There is no question about actions having reactions; we need not worry that what we are doing will or will not have an effect. Everything has an immediate effect, and with a little awareness and intelligence, we can see it. When we do something good, we get a feeling of satisfaction, knowing that we've done the right thing, and contributed something positive to the world, thereby making it a little better; this is an immediate effect, is it not? We can be at peace with ourselves and forget it; it will not bother us or cause us to lose any sleep over it; we won't lie awake at night thinking: "I've done something good. I'm so sorry and wish I hadn't done it! I hope no-one finds out!" We don't need a good memory for that.

Some people seem able to go through life without a conscience, doing whatever they feel like doing without remorse or regret. Would you like to be like that? An active conscience can be quite uncomfortable, it is true, but it is a sign of spiritual evolution; it helps restrain us from doing things that we are capable of doing. We can all lie, for example—and in fact, often do—but we know it to be wrong, and so try not to. A liar must have a good memory, because if he forgets what he's said and says something different, others will know that he can't be trusted. Telling the truth, however, is otherwise; we may forget all about what we've said, and not worry about it, because we would not contradict ourselves later. I don't claim that I never tell lies—who can claim that?—but if someone says to me: "You said such-

and-such", I might deny it and say, "No, I did not; I could not have said that; you either misheard or misunderstood", because although I don't remember everything I say, I know what I would and would not say.

We may answer the question by saying that it's all a matter of Karma, everything is due to karma. But this is too easy, too convenient, too simplistic. Although it might help us come to grips with our misfortunes, we must—I feel—be very careful with this concept. To say, about our own situation, "It must be my karma", may be useful, but we should be on guard against setting ourselves up as judges and saying about others: "It's their karma", as if we can see and understand all the causes of their circumstances. If we think we know when we don't know—and we really don't know, let's be honest—it prevents further learning, and we come to a halt.

Before I close, I must say that I do not want to leave anyone with the impression that I deny the Law of Karma, for such is not the case; what I am saying is that we should treat the concept with caution, because not everything can be attributed to Karma; there are other forces at work in our lives besides that. As everyone knows, however, there would be no point in planting seeds if one seed sown produced just one seed grown or none at all; there are results from our actions, but sometimes not the ones we expect. And meanwhile, our looking for results prevents us seeing what results are there.

This, though, shouldn't deter one from planting good seeds, as mentioned above. Different seeds grow at different rates: a mung-bean will grow into an edible sprout in a few days, while a coconut will take many years to grow into a fruit-bearing tree. Nor should the harvest be of great concern to us, as it isn't really ours. Only the seed-sowing is ours. Leave the harvest for others, because even if we get it, it will still not be ours, as we will have moved on and changed between the time we sowed the seed and the time of the harvest; we will have become different people. Moreover, we get other people's harvests, do we not?

In 1980, while I was living in the Refugee Camp in the Philippines, the Camp Administration decided to shift people around. Some refugees didn't

want to move, as they had been there some months and had planted gardens, but they had no choice. Before they moved, however, some of them destroyed their gardens, pulling up the vegetables and flowers, cutting down the papaya trees and banana plants, thinking that if they could not have them after they'd planted them, no-one else would! How petty! How short sighted!

Every day, we reap so many harvests of other peoples' sowing; we did not grow all the food we eat, make the clothes we wear, build the houses we live in, etc., etc. All these things—in fact, most of what we have and are—have come from others; they are not our harvests, but others'. What do we reap of our own sowing? Really very little, it seems. If we had to depend upon ourselves for everything we needed, we would be in a very sorry state; you see, we are never alone, but depend upon others, and for this we should be grateful, for it allows us to live as we do; we get others' harvests in great quantity. And what harvests will others get from our planting?

Try, therefore, to see how you fit in and what role you can play in the further development of civilization; use what you have and are. When you criticize or complain, do so constructively, suggesting better alternatives, with the aim of improving things for the whole; complain less about your own situation; try to tahan your personal misfortunes. "Accept the woes of being born". Take joy in being human and alive.

TAKE A TRIP

ONCE IN A WHILE—QUITE OFTEN, IN FACT—I take a ‘round-the-world’ trip. Vicariously, via my address-book, I visit people whose names appear therein. I flip through the pages and am instantly with them. Reviewing what I know about them, I wish them well in every way. I regularly visit people in lands like Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, The Philippines, Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Nepal, Germany, Portugal, Denmark, Norway, Holland, England, the US, and Canada. And each person I visit has his or her own unique story, quite unlike that of anyone else.

Many people I used to write to are/were refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos. When they were in their Camps, waiting for resettlement in other countries, unsure about their situation and future, writing letters was a thing most of them did assiduously. And how sweet their names sounded to them on the Camp P.A. system, when they were called to collect letters from the post office; their ears were finely attuned to such announcements!

Now, mail delivery is no longer a joyful thing for them, when it often brings only bills. They got what they wanted—resettlement in places like Australia, America or Norway—but the happiness they expected to find there has—in most cases —receded from them, like the horizon. Are they any happier now than they were before? Indeed, I met several people in America and other countries who I had earlier known in the Camps, who told me that although they now had things on the material level beyond their previous dreams, they weren’t happy because they had no time, and would like to be back in the Refugee Camps again!

Here is a man who walked across Cambodia from Vietnam to Thailand, facing torture and death at the hands of the Khmer Rouge and the booby traps liberally strewn on jungle trails; frequently having to step over human bones, he felt he was passing through hell (I believe he was!) He has

recovered from the horror of that ordeal, but will never forget what he saw there. Happiness is an illusion, he says.

There is someone who escaped his country by over-crowded boat, but after a few days at sea they had run out of food. One by one, his companions starved to death; unable to face such slow death, others jumped into the sea to drown. Those who survived did so only by eating the flesh of the dead. Filled with revulsion at what he was forced to do, this man has since become a vegetarian; he says he can no longer put meat into his mouth.

I know a couple in San Jose whose boat was wrecked on a small island in the South China Sea, far from the shipping-lanes. Marooned for months until rescued by a fishing boat, they managed to survive by catching and eating sea birds and shellfish. Their deprivation and despair led them to devote themselves to alleviating the sufferings of others whenever possible; they now run a clinic.

Another man helplessly watched his children drown, and lived a nightmare thereafter until I told him he wasn't to blame, and should not carry the burden of their deaths forever. The sea-bed is strewn with the bones of those who left their home land in search of peace and happiness, but never made it.

A lady with two children was eagerly waiting to be reunited with her husband who had gone to the US first; just before she left the Camp, however, she received the news that her husband had been killed in a car smash in Texas. Numb with grief, she went to begin a life of struggle in her new country.

In Chicago is a family who suffered the loss of one of their daughters while in the Camp; unable to get adequate medical treatment, she succumbed to fever and was buried in a plywood coffin that was too small for her, leaving her feet sticking out at the bottom.

All had tales of sorrow and woe, but many hid them and wept alone, feeling, that since others had similar stories, nobody wanted to hear theirs.

But there were also tales of courage and success—so many. Through their hardships and suffering, many people became aware of a spiritual dimension to their lives that they previously did not know was there.

Some years ago, I reached the point of writing about 150 letters per month (an average of 3 per day), and my letters are always individually written, not stereotyped as in a newsletter. Several times, I was asked why I don't write a newsletter instead, but I don't like to receive such impersonal things, so I don't send them. I'm lucky if I get replies to half the letters I write, of course, so after some time I give up writing to people who don't respond; how do I know if they are receiving my letters, or even if they are still alive, if I get no replies? It's a bit like writing to ghosts or Santa Claus! I write now between seventy and a hundred letters monthly.

Whenever I periodically update my address-book, some names are added and others omitted—those who didn't bother to reply to my letters. It's not my fault that we lose contact. Maybe—in the case of the refugees—I am part of their past that they prefer to put behind them and forget as they forge new lives for themselves.

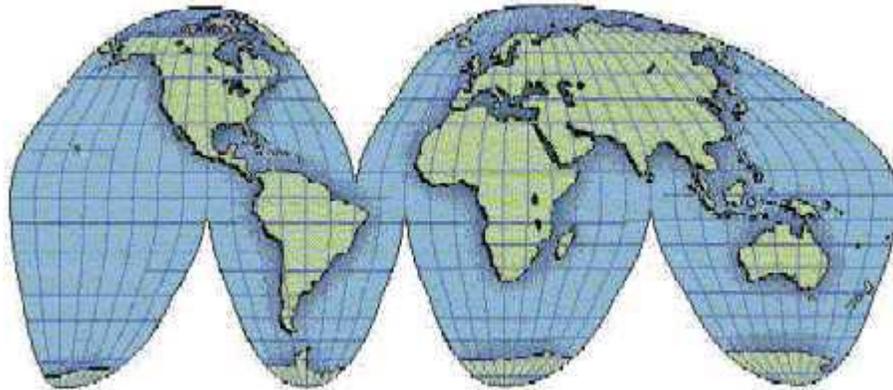
Here is Michael in Germany, who was a monk in Thailand many years ago; he regrets he didn't continue. In England is my sister Glennie; we've become closer since her husband died. Here's my Indian friend, Ramesh, who lives in the US and who faces his troubles with such fortitude. Over in Norway is Hanh, who was felled by a stroke some years ago and has difficulty in writing more than a few words to me, yet she still tries. In Java, there is Vajira, kind and loyal, who has kept in touch with me for the past 20 years. In K.L. is Wongsy, who lends me his ear when I need to let off steam, and who will do anything for me. Goh, Going, Gone is a promising young man from Malacca. Sad Minh, in Atlanta, tells me anything, knowing he'll get a sympathetic response. Tor Hor's letters from Penang are informative and full, but don't come very often; that is so—the latter part—with many people. In a US jail is Barry, who found one of my books in his prison library; though only 22, he writes a good letter and expresses himself well. The Vo family started out empty-handed, but later did so well with their Sydney bakery-business that I asked them what they put in their bread. Perth is the home of Sheila Sharpeyes, a teacher; we correspond as if we've known each other ages, although we've never met; she reads my books thoroughly and spots all the mistakes (hence the nickname I gave her), and encourages me to go on writing when I feel like giving up. In Melbourne is

Tuan, who had many a hard time translating for me, but who came through it okay. And in Turkey is my new friend, Ali, who I've written about elsewhere in this book.

Different names, faces and stories. When I write to anyone, I see their face in my mind's eye, and it is as if I'm talking with them in person; each one is important to me in some way.

Seize the moment, instead of putting it off until another day; sit down and write. You would be surprised at what comes out if you did that; it's not as difficult as you think it is.

Take a trip, whenever you like; you don't need a ticket or passport; no need to pack a bag or make hotel reservations. Just go!



THE END