The Three Jewels II

Extracts from Sangharakshita Complete Works Volume 3

The task before us...

As Buddhism develops in the West, it is unlikely to follow any existing Buddhist pattern, because our needs, our approach, and our background are different from those of any Eastern country. We need to draw upon the essence, the inner spirit, of the Buddha's teaching as preserved in all schools. We need to take the best – not just in an eclectic way, or just intellectually, but drawing upon the teachings deeply, and blending them all into one great stream of spiritual tradition adapted to our needs. This is really the task before us. It won't be easy; it will demand a great deal of effort and spiritual experience on our part. And to do it we will need to bear in mind that the Dharma represents not this doctrine or that teaching, but a great current of spiritual life, in which we can participate, in which we can help others to share, and which bears us on in the direction of Enlightenment.

In this book are gathered not an exhaustive collection, but a basic starter kit, if you like, of Buddhist teachings and practices – enough, certainly, to help one make a start. They are, on the whole, of the very essence of Buddhism, not specific to any one school or culture. And they all have the same intention: to help us towards Enlightenment.

from *The Three Jewels II* p.169

(To hear Bhante giving the original of the above, in April 1968, visit https://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/audio/details?num=02, end of track 9)

Dissatisfaction and going forth

What one brings to the Buddhist centre, at least initially, is a sense of dissatisfaction. This might seem an unlikely attitude for Buddhists to encourage – we are all surely familiar enough with dissatisfaction. Anyone who has ever ordered some product by mail or online will know this feeling, despite the manufacturer's guarantee of full and complete satisfaction. When the thing finally arrives and you unwrap it, somehow it seems less glamorous, less luxurious, flimsier, smaller, than in the photograph. Sometimes it is even the wrong colour, or there's a part missing. Our disappointment may be such that we have no hesitation in sending the offending article, unsatisfactory as it is, back for a refund, perhaps accompanied by a strongly-worded note.

But we have all taken delivery of one article which, when we compare it with the design specifications, is clearly incomplete or botched, and yet we seem more than satisfied with

it. That article is, of course, ourselves. We want everything else in our lives to be properly made, polished and shiny, but we cherish ourselves in our imperfect state. So how can we become dissatisfied? We need to compare ourselves as we are here and now with how we could be in the future. We become dissatisfied when we get a glimpse of a potential which is without any limit and see that by comparison we are at present distinctly unsatisfactory and limited. When we espouse that vision we are in a sense taking the first steps towards sending ourselves back in disgust and demanding a properly functioning human individuality.

Dissatisfaction – if it is not just disgruntlement but a genuine and creative mood of inner revolt – is a positive and powerful impulse. Indeed, such a mood is the starting point. You are dissatisfied, perhaps, with the quality of your relationships, with your work, with your leisure activities – and perhaps, more often than not, you are pretty fed up with yourself as well. You start looking around for a new direction, and you hear, perhaps, about Buddhism, and then about the Buddhist centre, about meditation classes, and you start going along to those classes, and to listen to talks. You may even go on a weekend retreat. And as a result of all this, you start to change.

Such change is quite noticeable. I have seen it taking place many times. One sees people visibly changing almost before one's eyes – and this, one might say, is a miracle: that people can change, not just piecemeal, but from top to bottom […] It is a miracle that continues to occur – often, it seems, against all the odds. People come along quite literally off the street, looking hopeless and dejected, as if they carried all the cares of the world on their shoulders. They start meditating, they become more aware, and in the course of a few weeks, sometimes in the course of a weekend retreat away in the country, you see them beginning to look bright and cheerful. They begin to see something of the Buddha's vision of existence, and they change. One might think that when someone has travelled along the same old rut for decades, it is too late. But that is a great mistake. If you find the right sort of encouragement and the right sort of conditions, you can change at any time of your life.

After this initial positive change takes place, you will perhaps start to feel a deeper dissatisfaction. You may start feeling that you cannot go on living in the same old way. You begin to find your old relationships and old work very restricting. You experience, in short, something of what the Buddha himself experienced when he made the decision to go forth. At that point you might decide to take some action: to move into a residential community for a couple of weeks to see what it's like, for example, or to work in a Buddhist right-livelihood project for a trial period.

The whole process – from initial dissatisfaction to going forth – may only take two or three months, but it is more likely to take several years. It varies a great deal from one person to another. But when the transition from the old society to the new is finally made, you are henceforth part of the new society, and your strength as an individual strengthens that

new society. From then on you live in a situation that is conducive to your development as a human being, one in which the possibility of growth is infinite. And that is a very rare opportunity indeed. As I know from my own experience, one seldom encounters such an opportunity in the Buddhist East, and one has had little hope at all of ever coming across it in the West until recent times, with the establishing of a number of effective spiritual communities. Having found such a context, one is well on the way to becoming a true individual.

from *The Three Jewels II* pp.462–4

The Texture of Reality

Reality is a very big word, but it is not really a Buddhist word. We have *śūnyatā* or emptiness, we have *tathatā* or suchness, and we have *dharmakāya*, the 'truth-body', but there is no true semantic equivalent in traditional Buddhist terminology of the word 'reality'. Reality is not only a big word; it is also an abstract word (which often means a vague word) and on the whole Buddhists have never been fond of abstract terminology. Tibetan Buddhism, for example, takes a very concrete, and even – if one wanted to be paradoxical – materialistic approach to the spiritual life. And Zen Buddhism goes even further: any indulgence in abstractions or vague generalities is met with a piercing shriek or thirty blows or some other such reminder to stay closer to one's own experience. When I use this word 'reality' in speaking about Buddhism, I am therefore using it in a makeshift and provisional way. It isn't to be taken too literally. Certainly, the connotations that attach to it in general Western philosophical and religious usage cannot be said to apply in a Buddhist context. It is for these reasons that – while the word 'reality' may be almost unavoidable for an English-speaking Buddhist – I am introducing the idea of its *texture*. This word is almost palpably concrete. Texture is felt, it is handled, it is experienced directly, by touch. Because we have so many nerve endings in the tips of our fingers, we are able to make very subtle distinctions among an enormous range of different textures. We can distinguish between cotton, silk, and wool, or between granite, slate, and marble. And it is possible to discern far more subtle gradations of texture. Chinese experts on jade used to be able to distinguish between hundreds of kinds and qualities of jade – white, black, red, or green jade, mutton- at jade or dragon-blood jade, or whatever it was – with their eyes closed, simply by feeling the texture of the jade under water.

Reality too, in Buddhism, is something to be felt, touched, even handled – because Buddhism is above all else practical. So, continuing to use the word in a provisional sense, we may say that reality in Buddhism is broadly speaking of two kinds: there is conditioned reality and Unconditioned reality – or more simply, there is the conditioned and the Unconditioned.

from *The Three Jewels II* pp.205–6

Nirvāṇa and the Psychology of Goal-setting

There are all kinds of groups of people in the world – religious groups, political groups, cultural groups, charitable groups, and so on – and each of these groups has its goal, be it power, or wealth, or some other satisfaction, and whether it is for their own good or the good of others. And it would seem that Buddhists likewise have their own particular goal that they call Nirvāṇa. So let us look at what is meant by this idea of a goal to be attained or realized, and then establish to what extent it is applicable to Nirvāṇa. […]

A goal is an objective, something you strive for. […] Any complex of problems we may have can be boiled down to the most basic problem of all, which is unhappiness in one form or another. […] So we try to get away from unhappiness and attain happiness. The way we go about this is to try to ricochet, as it were, from that experience of feeling miserable or discontented into an opposite state or experience of feeling happy; and this usually involves grasping at some object or experience that we believe will give us the happiness we seek.

When we feel unhappy, what we do is set up this goal of happiness, which we strive to achieve. And as we all know, we fail. All our lives through, in one way or another, we are in search of happiness. No one is in search of misery. Everyone is in search of happiness. There's no one who could possibly say they're so happy that they couldn't imagine themselves being a little happier. Most people, if they're honest with themselves, have to admit that their life consists of a fluctuating state of unease and dissatisfaction, punctuated by moments of happiness and joy which make them temporarily forget their discomfort and discontent. And this possibility of being happy becomes everybody's goal – a goal which can never be realized because happiness is by its nature fleeting. We all continue to set up this phantom goal, however, because the alternative – which is simply to be aware – is too challenging for us.

The setting up of goals – which means trying to get away from one's present experience – is really a substitute for awareness, for self-knowledge. Even if we do develop a measure of self-knowledge, we don't tend to maintain it because to do so would be just too threatening. We always end up setting up goals rather than continuing to be aware.
To take a simple example, suppose I have something of a problem with my temper: I get irritated, even angry, rather easily – even a small thing can spark me off – and this bad temper of mine makes life difficult, and perhaps miserable for myself and others. And suppose that I wake up one day and decide that enough is enough, that it's time it came to a stop. So I set up a goal for myself – the goal of being good-tempered. I think, 'I'm undeniably bad-tempered: my goal, however, is to be sweet- tempered and amiable, always returning the soft answer, always ready to turn the other cheek.'

What actually happens, though? One almost invariably fails. The intention – even the degree of self-knowledge – is admirable. But after a while one's resolve falters. In the face

of the same old provocations, one is back again in the same old rut – and probably blaming the same old people and the same old external circumstances for it. So why is this? Anybody who has ever begun to recognize that their problems are, at least to a degree, of their own making will also recognize that this is what happens. But why does it happen? The reason is that we are continuing to tackle the symptoms rather than the disease. If we try to get away from our unhappiness simply by trying to be good-humoured, we are still unaware of the fundamental cause of our being bad-tempered. And if this isn't resolved, if we don't know why we are bad-tempered, if we don't know what is prompting the angry answer or the violent reaction, then we can't possibly hope to become good-tempered.

Whatever our problem, we automatically – almost instinctively – set up a goal of being happy in order to get away from our unhappiness. Even if a little awareness, a little insight, does arise, it is not sustained. We revert automatically to setting up a goal of one kind or another rather than continuing to be aware and trying to understand very deeply why that problem arises. Setting up goals is an automatic reflex to short- circuit the development of awareness and self-knowledge – in short, to get away from ourselves.

How then do we change this? To start with, we need a change of attitude. Rather than trying to escape from ourselves, we need to begin to acknowledge the reality of what we are. We need to understand – and not just intellectually – why we are what we are. If you are suffering, don't just reach out for a chocolate. Recognize the fact that you are suffering and look at it more and more deeply. If you're happy, recognize it, take it in more and more deeply. Instead of running from happiness into guilt, or into some sort of excitable intoxication, try to understand what the true nature of that happiness is, where it really comes from. Again, this isn't just intellectual; it's something that has to go very deep down indeed.

For some people this sort of insight will come in the course of meditation. Meditation isn't just fixing the mind on an object, or revolving a certain idea in the mind. Meditation really involves – among other things – getting down to the bedrock of the mind, illuminating the mind from the bottom upwards, as it were. It is about exposing to oneself one's motives, the deep-seated causes of one's mental states, one's experiences, one's joy and one's suffering, and so on. In this way real growth in awareness will come about.
But where is all this leading? What has all this to do with Nirvāṇa? It may seem that we have strayed rather from our subject, but in fact we have been doing some necessary preparing of the ground. With some things, if one tackles them too directly, one can easily miss the mark. What we can now do is open up some kind of perspective on the way Nirvāṇa is traditionally described – or rather on the effect on us of these traditional descriptions.

Suppose, for example, I have been going through rather a difficult, upsetting period, and am feeling rather miserable. Then one day I pick up a book in which it is stated that Nirvāṇa is the supreme happiness, the supreme bliss. What will be my reaction? The

likelihood is that I will think, 'Good – that's just what I want – bliss, happiness.' I will make Nirvāṇa my goal. And what this means is that effectively I will be making lack of awareness my goal. I will be latching on to Nirvāṇa – labelled as the supreme bliss – because it happens to fit in with my subjective needs and feelings at this particular time. Such a reaction has of course nothing to do with being a Buddhist, but it is the way that a lot of us approach Buddhism, and indeed use Buddhism, in a quite unaware, almost automatic way. Unconsciously we try to use Nirvāṇa to settle problems that can only really be resolved through awareness.

We do not succeed in banishing unhappiness by pretending to ourselves that we are happy, by shoving our misery out of sight. The first step is to acknowledge the reality of our condition: if there is an underlying unhappiness to our lives, we must face up to the fact. It is certainly good to be cheerful and positive, but not at the expense of fooling ourselves. One has only to look at the faces of the people you see in any city to see the 'marks of weakness, marks of woe' [a quote from 'London', one of the *Songs of Experience*] that William Blake saw in London two hundred years ago, and yet few people will admit to their misery even in their own minds.

No progress can be made till we come to terms with our actual experience, till we get to know our unhappiness in all its comings and goings, till we learn to live with it, and study it. What is it, at bottom, that makes us unhappy? What is its source? We will get nowhere by looking for a way out of our misery, by aiming for the goal of happiness, or even Nirvāṇa. It is a mistake to postulate the goal of Nirvāṇa too quickly or too unconsciously. All we can do is try to see more and more clearly and distinctly what it is in ourselves that is making us unhappy. This is the only way that Nirvāṇa will be attained.

In this sense Nirvāṇa cannot be seen as an escape from unhappiness at all. It is by trying too hard to escape from unhappiness that we fail to do so. The real key is awareness, self-knowledge. A paradoxical way of putting it would be to say that the goal of Buddhism consists in being completely and totally aware at all levels of your need to reach a goal. We can also say, going a little further, that Nirvāṇa consists in the full and complete awareness of why you want to reach Nirvāṇa at all. If you understand completely why you want to reach Nirvāṇa, then you've reached Nirvāṇa. We can go further even than this. We can even say that the unaware person is in need of Nirvāṇa, but is unable to get a true idea of it. An aware person, on the other hand, is quite clear about this goal, but doesn't need it. That's really the position.

So there we have the basic drawback to conventional accounts of Nirvāṇa as being this or that. We simply accept or reject this or that aspect of Nirvāṇa in accordance with our own largely unconscious needs. If the underlying – and therefore unconscious – drive of our existence is towards pleasure, then we will find ourselves responding to the idea of Nirvāṇa as the supreme bliss. If on the other hand we are emotionally driven by a fundamental need to know, to understand, to see what is really going on, then almost

automatically we will make our goal a state of complete illumination. And again, if we feel oppressed or constrained by life, if our childhood was one of control and confinement, or if we have a sense that our options in life are restricted by our particular circumstances – by poverty, by being tied down to a job or a family, or looking after elderly relatives – then we will be drawn to the idea of Nirvāṇa as freedom, as emancipation.

In this way there takes place a half-conscious setting up of goals based on our own psychological or social conditioning, instead of a growing understanding of *why* we feel dissatisfied, *why* we feel somehow 'in the dark', or *why* we feel tied down. Nirvāṇa becomes simply a projection of our own mundane needs.

Hence when we consider the subject of Nirvāṇa, the goal of Buddhism, the question we should be asking is not 'What is Nirvāṇa?' but 'Why am I interested in Nirvāṇa? Why am I reading this book rather than another, or rather than, say, watching television?' Is it curiosity, is it duty, is it vanity, is it just to see how Sangharakshita is going to tackle this thorny topic? Or is it something deeper?

Even these questions will not settle the matter. If it is curiosity, why are we curious about Nirvāṇa? If it is duty, towards what or whom do we feel dutiful? If it is vanity, why do we want to preen ourselves in this particular way? What is underneath our interest? If there is something deeper in our motivation, what is it?

This line of questioning might appear unconventional or unorthodox, and in pursuing it we may not learn much about Buddhism or Nirvāṇa in the purely objective, historical sense. But we will learn a great deal about what the ideas of Buddhism represent. If we follow this particular line, constantly trying to penetrate to the depths of our own mind, we may even get a little nearer to the goal of Nirvāṇa itself.

Sometimes we have to reverse our whole attitude. In the case of this great subject of Nirvāṇa, the abstract, ontological approach is of little use on its own. We have to start examining our own relationship to Nirvāṇa in the way we conceive of it. This is much more likely to bring us nearer to a deeper awareness, and thus to Nirvāṇa, than any amount of purely metaphysical or psychological disquisition.

from *The Three Jewels II* pp.224–9

Evolution or Extinction

World problems, by their very nature, are essentially group problems, as they always have been. What is new today is the size of the groups involved and the destructive power available to them. But whatever their size, the problems arising from these groups cannot be solved on the group level. All that can be achieved on the level of the group is a

precarious balance of power between conflicting interests. And that balance, as we know only too well, can be disturbed at any moment.

The only hope for humanity is therefore necessarily a long-term solution, involving more people becoming clearer about how they need to develop as individuals and cooperating in the context of spiritual communities in order to make, in their various ways, a significant impact on the world, or on 'the group'. The alternatives before us are, in my opinion, evolution – that is, the higher evolution of the individual – or extinction. That would be my overall diagnosis of the situation facing us. As for practical ways to effect a remedy, I would prescribe four courses of action for the individual to undertake [… 1. self-development, 2. join a spiritual community, 3. withdraw support from all groups or agencies that discourage, directly or indirectly, the development of the individual, and]

4. Encourage the development of individuality within all the groups to which one unavoidably belongs

It may be that one cannot help having a circle of friends or acquaintances, whether at home or at work, who are not interested in any kind of self-development. One may have to remain very nominally a member of a group. Still, one can stand up for what one believes in, and speak up whenever it is appropriate to do so. It is always possible to act in accordance with one's ideals even when others cannot – or do not appear to – understand what one is doing. The way to disrupt a group is simply to encourage people within it to think for themselves, develop minds of their own. So in the context of the group one can still work to undermine it. Even in the enemy camp, so to speak, one need not surrender one's individuality.

These, then, are the four strategies to get under way in order to begin to make a meaningful impact on world problems. A network of spiritual communities of all kinds, many of whose members would be in contact with one another, could exert a significant degree of influence, such as might – just possibly – shift the centre of gravity in world affairs. Spiritual communities have had a crucial impact in the past, and they may, with sufficient vitality, do so again.

It doesn't matter how humble a level we are operating at, or how undramatic our work may be. The true individual is not so much the king of the jungle as the indefatigable earthworm. If enough earthworms burrow away under the foundations of even the most substantial building, the soil begins to loosen, it starts to crumble away, the foundations subside, and the whole building is liable to crack and collapse. Likewise, however powerful the existing order may seem, it is not invulnerable to the undermining influence of enough individuals working – whether directly or indirectly – in cooperation.

A spiritual community is necessarily small, so the best we can hope for is a multiplicity of spiritual communities, forming a sort of network through personal contact between their

members. A silent, unseen influence is exerted in this way, which we must hope will be able, at some point, to shift the centre of gravity in world affairs from the conflict of groups to the cooperation of communities. If this were achieved, if the influence of the spiritual community were to outweigh that of the group, then humanity as a whole would have passed into a new, higher stage of development, a kind of higher evolution as I like to call it – into what we might even describe as a fifth period of human history.

Such a shift in the governing values of the world is probably all that can save us from extinction as a species in the not very distant future. There are certainly signs of hope, but there is also perhaps little time left. In this situation it becomes the duty of every thinking human being to take stock of his or her position, and the responsibilities that it throws up. We have to appreciate that it is, without exception, the most important issue we shall ever face, either individually or collectively. It is certainly more important than any merely religious question, anything that concerns Buddhism in the sense of a formal or established religion. It concerns both the purpose and the very survival of human life.

from *The Three Jewels II* pp.616–9

The Six 'Baskets' of Bhante's Complete Works

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3 The Three Jewels III (Who is the Buddha? What is the Dharma? +)	*16 Mahayana Myths and Stories*
4 The Bodhisattva Ideal (The Bodhisattva Ideal + Endlessly Fascinating Cry +)	*17 Wisdom Teachings of the Mahayana*
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