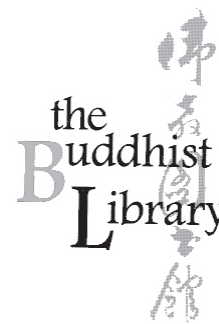


the Path of Joy



Bhante Says

There are 2 topics that are normally taboo in our society. One is sex and the other death. This is something common to most Asian cultures.

But now something strange has happened. As Singapore society becomes more westernised owing to the strong influence of television and the movies, people are no longer so reticent in talking about sex. As a result, death has become an even greater taboo subject than sex. Some people are so afraid of death that, if something connected with death – like a funeral – is shown on TV, they will immediately change the channel.

Yet, according to Buddhism, it's very important to learn about – and properly understand – death. After all, there's nothing more certain in life than death and death is surely nothing more – or less – than the final stage of life.

But if we want to understand what death is, we need to learn a little bit about Buddhist psychology. According to Buddhist teachings, we can say, in a simple way, that death is the separation of mental energy from the body, from the 4 elements – earth, water, fire and wind – of the physical body.

According to Buddhism, when mental energy is separated from the body, it causes another birth, a rebirth. Yet, there's no permanent or unchanging entity or soul that travels from life to life because Buddhism does not recognise a permanent or unchanging soul. So people often wonder – *if there's no soul, what is it that's reborn?*

I shall try to explain this as simply as possible.

Mental energy exists but it's constantly changing. We say that it's in a state of flux like flowing water. You see a river today, tomorrow you see the same river. According to our naked eyes, exactly the same water flows ceaselessly in the river day by day. But, in reality,

what we saw yesterday and what we see today are not the same. The water's different but our naked eyes cannot make out the difference.

Our mental energy is also like that. Thoughts rise and fall constantly. When a thought falls, it's instantly replaced by a new thought. Like the river, the mind consciousness has an unbroken continuity but our thoughts, like the water, are in a constant state of flux.

Before a person dies, he or she produces a last thought. That last thought is the energy which causes or propels a new birth or rebirth. The first thought of the next birth arises as a consequence of the last thought. The Buddha said that the person who died and the baby who's reborn thereafter are *'neither the same nor a different person'*. The only link is that the person who died created the first thought of the newly-born baby. Thus, the new life comes into being through a process of change.

Buddhists have no doubt that this is what happens when a person dies. The only problem is that we cannot prove this process scientifically. At least, not with the current state of technology. The process of rebirth cannot be empirically proved because the mind cannot be screened or scanned in the way that the body can.

Nevertheless, when we think objectively about it, the Buddhist explanation of rebirth, when compared with alternative views, seem more reasonable, flexible and practical. In a way, we can also say it's more reliable.

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What are these alternative views?

The first alternative view is that of the materialists. According to them, nothing can exist without the material body. When the material body ceases on death, mental energy also comes to an end. But many people cannot accept that they just come to an end when they die. Life seems unfair and incomplete. Hence, the existence of religions.

The second alternative view is that of the eternalists. According to them, we have a permanent, unchanging soul which, when we die, goes either to heaven or hell. Thus, depending on our relationship with God, after death, we will go on to experience either eternal happiness or eternal suffering.

But this seems very unfair as no one can be 100% good or bad.



Interview with Ven Bodhi
page 10



Bhante Says

In life, we make mistakes but we also do good things. So it would seem not very fair for anyone to be punished with eternal damnation for his mistakes in life, no matter how bad they were.

On the other hand, we can also say that it's not entirely fair for anyone, no matter how good a person has been, for him or her to go to eternal heaven and enjoy perfect, permanent happiness after death.

So it's not surprising that many people appreciate the Buddhist teachings on rebirth. Take Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Company, for example. He said that of all the teachings, he preferred the Buddhist teaching because it was the fairest.

Work done by scientists like Dr Ian Stevenson also support the rebirth theory. Dr Stevenson researched thousands of cases, especially very young children who could recall their past lives.

One famous case was about a 5 year old boy. He was born in a very remote area in India as the son of a farmer. When he was 2 years old, he started talking about his past lives. His parents thought something was wrong with him so they did not disclose this to others. But soon everyone knew about his case. The child said that he once had different parents. His father was a banker. He explained about his birth place and his school and other things.

Dr Stevenson heard about this case and investigated it. He found a birth mark on the boy which looked like a deep cut. He asked the boy about this. The boy was frightened. The child shivered and became withdrawn. But eventually, he brought Dr Stevenson to a place that he said was his former house. Dr Stevenson met his former parents whom the child could recognise.

The parents confirmed that they had a 6 year old son who was killed by two men. The men cut one side of the boy's neck. Dr Stevenson inspected the court papers in the case against these two men which had been dismissed for lack of evidence. The place where the murder victim was cut was exactly where the boy's birth mark happened to be. If you are interested, you can read Stevenson's book and other books on rebirth in BL.

Some of these cases originated from countries like India and Sri Lanka. But, more significantly, there were cases from Muslim and Christian countries too. Stevenson found truth in these stories. As Christians and Muslims don't believe in rebirth, the cases originating in their countries would seem to be more important than those cases from Buddhist and Hindu countries. Based on such research, we can conclude that the Buddhist teaching on rebirth is more reliable, more logical, perhaps even more scientific.

But, having said that, although rebirth is taught by the Buddha, even if you don't believe in rebirth, it should not affect the relevance or importance of Buddhism as a religion. This is because rebirth is not a cardinal or central Buddhist teaching. The main teachings in Buddhism are the Four Noble Truths, the Three Characteristics of Existence and Dependent Origination. Unlike rebirth, these central teachings are verifiable by experience by everyone in this very life.

Take the Four Noble Truths. The First Noble Truth says that suffering is an intrinsic part of life. The Second Noble Truth states that the cause of suffering is attachment. The Third Noble Truth proclaims that we can achieve freedom from this attachment and be happy. And the way to achieve that freedom and happiness is the Noble Eightfold Path, the Fourth Noble Truth. These are things that we can experience and verify in this very life. Unlike heaven and hell, they are not things that we can only experience in the next life. If we live an ethical life, for example, we can experience the results for ourselves in this very life.

So it's clear that the Buddhist goal of liberation can be achieved without recourse to a belief in rebirth. We don't have to resort to mere beliefs or faith to prop up Buddhism by saying, for example, that a certain teacher taught this, or that a certain book said that, so we have to accept what they taught or said as unquestionable truth.

As the Buddha taught in the famous *Kalama Sutta* –

*'Yes, Kalamas, it is proper that you have doubt,
that you have perplexity,
for a doubt has arisen in a matter which is doubtful.
Now, look you Kalamas,
do not be led by reports,
or tradition, or hearsay.
Be not led by the authority of religious texts,
nor by mere logic or inference,
nor by considering appearances,
nor by the delight in speculative opinions,
nor by seeming possibilities,
nor by the idea: 'This is our teacher'.
But, O Kalamas, when you know for yourselves
that certain things are unwholesome (akusala),
and wrong, and bad,
then give them up ...
And when you know for yourselves
that certain things are wholesome (kusala)
and good,
then accept them and follow them.'*

(Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation)

If you follow this advice to do what is good and wholesome – both for yourself and for others, you will be able to discover for yourself whether the Buddha's message is reliable or not.

Bhante B Dhammaratana
Religious Advisor
Buddhist Library

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UNIQUE TEACHINGS

The world-renowned meditation master, Venerable (Dr) Henepola Gunaratana – author of the long standing best-seller, *Meditation in Plain English*, and recently his own autobiography, *Journey to Mindfulness* – recently gave a highly inspiring impromptu teaching at BL.

We're glad we're able to bring his teaching to you in this issue. Bhante G finds all of the Buddha's teachings 'beautiful' and he loves them all. But one that he did 'highlight' on that particular occasion was the story of the remarkable encounter between Upali and the Buddha. The Buddha's advice to Upali was certainly beautiful but it was also unique. I don't know about you but I certainly have never heard of a religious teacher who, confronted by a man who insists on becoming his disciple, tells the would-be convert to 'go home and think about it'. But that was precisely what the Buddha told Upali to do when Upali wanted to be a Buddhist monk.

This open spirit of Buddhism – one of encouraging people to think things through for themselves and not to rush into hasty decisions – happily survives to this day. His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama, regularly tells westerners not to abandon their own religious traditions and become Buddhists. Instead, he advises them to remain within their own religions and, if they so wish, they can try to incorporate into their lives, and put into practice, the positive qualities that they learn from Buddhism like compassion, wisdom and equanimity.

The converse is also sometimes true. Buddhists too can improve themselves by learning about other religions.

This open spirit of Buddhism – one of encouraging people to think things through for themselves and not to rush into hasty decisions – happily survives to this day

A close friend of mine recently emailed me about a television programme she'd seen the day before. It featured an interview with various students in Singapore attending a local mission school. One interview particularly impressed her. A boy who said he was a Buddhist was asked how he felt about attending his school.

'My parents wanted me to be more open-minded and tolerant. I can learn from other religions to become a good Buddhist' – the boy was reported to have uttered (or words to the same effect).

I'm reminded of an interview we did with the Sri Lankan Buddhist scholar, Professor Asanga Tilakaratne, some months back. Professor Asanga, who specialises in, amongst other contemporary issues, inter-faith dialogue said –

'My own child studied in a Christian school when we were in Oxford 3 years ago. He started drawing Jesus Christ. (That's) fine for me. It's good for him to get that exposure.

On the other hand, I sent him to (Dharma school) to get his Buddhist knowledge. We must let our children know about other religions. In that way, if they also know their own religion, my own

belief is that they'll always come back more strongly in their own tradition'

(POJ Issue 13 January – March 2005)

Indeed, if we're not allowed to explore for ourselves the various philosophies and spiritual teachings available in the world, how on earth would we ever discover the most appropriate spiritual path, if any, for us to practise? (The idea that there's one true faith for all and sundry to follow, a one-size-fits-all kind of universal religion, is, I'm afraid, a myth).

It's a sad fact but true that nothing more than an accident of birth decides, in the overwhelming majority of cases in the world, what religion or spiritual tradition a person follows or practises. This is like buying a television set of a particular brand just because one's parents or peers happen to like that particular model. Most people I know would go to several shops to check out the best and cheapest buy. Yet, when it comes to religion – immensely more important than a television set, I should think – people seem happy not to make an informed choice.

Sometimes, it may even be necessary to leave our usual environment to be able to see things more objectively and clearly. It's like taking a step back to appreciate what a painting is all about. I came across an example of this in a story published in the Bangkok Post not too long ago.

Wiradech Kothny is a young man with an unusual story. As his name implies, he's Thai but was adopted at an early age and brought up in Germany. He has fond memories of life in Munich, especially at Easter time when relatives from various parts of the world congregate under the wings of Grandma who 'took no excuses if you can't make it.' 'I used to look forward to Easter as this was the time when I could meet my cousins, nieces and nephews who lived overseas. It was a happy time for the entire family.'

An energetic 26 year old, Wiradech won the bronze medal in fencing at the Sydney Olympic Games for his native country. In 2004, he received the Sportsman of the Year award in Thailand for his work with tsunami victims in southern Thailand. He's lived in Thailand for 4 years.

When asked what he found to be the negative aspects of Thailand, he said –

'I see people's faith in Buddhism becoming more superficial. Fewer Thais actually practise Buddha's teaching on a regular basis. They believe that making merit by donating money to temples will turn them into good men. Their life revolves around making money and getting degrees to show they are superior ...'

Wiradech once lived among sea gypsies for a few months. He found them 'direct and honourable people' with 'a strong sense of right and wrong'. 'After being with them, I began to realise how selfish, superficial and egocentric our society has become. I wonder where our Buddhist teaching of not judging people by their social status and education has gone?'



In an extreme case, we may even have to put ourselves in others' shoes before we can appreciate their point of view. I recently read about an interesting experiment in a television reality show in the USA (as reported by Reuters). (I must confess that when it comes to reality shows, I usually avoid them like the plague but this one seems different). The show 'places people in a variety of unfamiliar circumstances for 30 days'.

In one episode, a fundamentalist Christian man - said to be pro-war, pro 'us-versus-them' - was placed in the home of a Muslim family for 30 days. 'He dresses as a Muslim, eats as a Muslim, he prays five times a day, he studies the Quran daily, he learns to speak Arabic, he works with an imam, a Muslim cleric, to learn the history of Islam.' The result was described by the show's director, Morgan Spurlock of *Super Size Me* fame, as nothing less than 'miraculous, it's incredible'.

Whenever I come across or read about incidents like this, I never cease to be amazed just how profound, compassionate and relevant the Buddha's 2,500 year old teachings - unique teachings like emptiness and dependent origination that require us to look beyond labels - really are, especially today as the world becomes more and more polarised along religious lines, triggered by the Sept 11 2001 tragedy and similar atrocities elsewhere since.

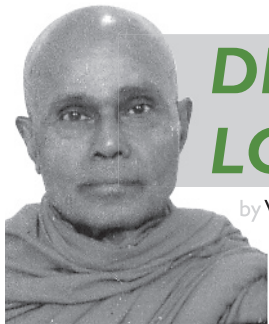
Most notable of all is the advice the Buddha gave to the Kalama people who found themselves besieged by so many religious teachers that they became confused and did not know what or whom to believe. The relevant extract is quoted by our Bhante B Dhammaratana in *Bhante Says* in this issue.

As befits a fully enlightened and compassionate being, the Buddha did not seize the golden opportunity to convert the Kalamas and say - 'Forget about those guys. I'm the one true teacher. Follow me and you'll be fine'.

I can't think of a more comprehensive, more appropriate advice against religious fanaticism or terrorism, can you?

As always, I wish you all pleasant reading.

Chwee Beng
Editor



DEVELOPING METTA OR LOVING FRIENDLINESS

by VENERABLE (DR) HENEPOLA GUNARATANA

I would like to talk about *metta* which I translate as *loving friendliness*.

If you look at the Buddha's teachings, all you see is compassion and wisdom, its central teaching. You never find one single aspect of the Buddha's teaching contradicting this central teaching. As Buddhists, we must make a commitment to follow the central teaching of the Buddha.

Compassion or friendliness is a very innate nature of human beings. Sometimes, people don't even know how much compassion or friendliness they have in their mind because of numerous psychic irritants, problems they encounter every day, until a very traumatic situation occurs. The best example (of this) is the tsunami. People all over the world, irrespective of their religion, ethnic orientation, language, culture, geographic division or political affiliation came forward to express their compassion (for the victims). 75 % of the people of the USA contributed in many ways to tsunami relief. I think that almost all Singaporeans (must) have contributed to tsunami relief in different ways. I was not here but I read in the newspaper, internet and other mass media about the amount of support Singaporeans gave to tsunami victims in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Thailand and other countries where almost 300,000 people were affected. None of them perhaps knew these victims, maybe only a handful knew.

What we should do as Buddhists is to try to emphasise this (compassion) deliberately. Not only for special occasions but all

the time. Through our thoughts, words and deeds.

Loving friendliness is not a concept, nor a thought, philosophy or theory. It's a human expression. We express in our daily encounter with other living beings. In order to express this, we also have some disciplinary principles we call *precepts*.

The first of the Five Precepts is the precept to abstain from killing. This is a way of practising loving friendliness. Abstaining from killing is not enough. We must also must learn to respect living beings. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that Buddhism is the one religion that has formulated loving friendliness as (its) main theme. Almost every Buddhist - whether Theravada or Mahayana - in addition to accepting the Three Refuges as the main requirement to becoming a Buddhist, also observe these precepts, which are not commandments but voluntary principles. We undertake to observe (them) in order to express loving friendliness. In fact, if you investigate the precepts very deeply, all of them have the same principle of loving friendliness.

Abstaining from killing, for example. There are 2 sides. The negative side is to abstain. The positive side is to cultivate loving friendliness.

Similarly, abstaining from stealing has 2 sides. The negative side is to abstain. The positive side is to respect the ownership of the property of others. In order words, we don't want to create stress or disappointment in their minds when they lose something. Sometimes, they can even become very emotional. In addition, we want to avoid making life a little uncomfortable for them. In order to avoid all these, we observe the precept against stealing.

Similarly, sexual misconduct also has 2 aspects. The positive side is respecting the honour and dignity of other people, giving them





security, safety to travel or be alone to do whatever they want without violating their privacy. We do this also with the intention of developing loving friendliness.

Thus, when we look at the overall effect of the observance of the precepts, it's the practice of loving friendliness. Our interaction or behaviour towards each other is guided by this principle – to live and let live.

I've been associating with people of every continent of the world. I've seen that it's because of our friendly attitude towards each other that we don't even force the Dhamma upon others, although (we consider) the Dhamma (as) so lofty and wonderful that it brings real peace. Still, we don't want to violate (an) individual's freedom of choice. We never force anybody to accept the Dhamma against their wish without full understanding and conviction.

There are many beautiful incidents in the life of the Buddha. One of my favourite incidents is the encounter the Buddha had with Upali. I think almost every Buddhist knows this incident but it is not inappropriate or out of place to repeat it again and again. The Buddha said that if you do anything good, even if it's very trivial, you should repeat it again and again because accumulation of good deeds is a source of happiness.

Upali, a Jain follower, went to see the Buddha with the intention of converting the Buddha into the Jain doctrine. Instead, at the end of the conversation, Upali expressed his intention of becoming a follower of the Buddha. Upali was a millionaire, (a) well known (person). The Buddha said – *'A man of your calibre should not jump to conclusion so quickly. You go home and think about it.'*

Upali said – *'Venerable Sir, had I gone to another religious teacher and asked him to accept me as a follower, he would have taken me through the street in a procession and declared to the world that I have become his follower. Now you ask me to go home and think (about it). For this reason, I take refuge in you for a 2nd time. (From now on, I will stop all my support for the Jains'. (Upali took refuge in the Buddha for the first time by just listening to the conversation).*

Then the Buddha said to him – *'Upali, if you stop all your support for your former teachers, how are they going to live? They were all dependent on you all these years. You should continue your support.'*

(Hearing this), Upali said to the Buddha – *'(Before I came here today), I heard that you advise your people to give all their support to you and your monks. Now I hear with my own ears, that you're asking me to give support to your opponents. For this reason, I take refuge in you for the 3rd time'.*

You can see how the Buddha's compassion and wisdom made the person understand the Dhamma in the most practical way.

Sometimes, when we say things like this, people say – *'Well, it's not difficult for him to say things like this because he's a Buddha. We're not Buddhas. We're just ordinary people. We cannot do that kind of practice'.*

But we shouldn't forget the fact that the Buddha did not start doing all these things after gaining enlightenment. It's by doing all these things for countless lifetimes, that he attained enlightenment. By doing all these things as an unenlightened person like you and me, practising and practising until the practice became perfect that he attained enlightenment. Therefore, this is a very inspiring incident in the Buddha's life that he teaches us something that any ordinary person can do.

After attaining enlightenment, the Buddha asked his followers – *'Bhikkhus, I never ask you to do anything that you cannot do. The practice of loving friendliness is something you can do'.*

You have all done it. Even today, I see people doing it, trying to (load things into) the big container. I know you don't gain anything from those victims, you don't even know them. But see how compassionate your heart is. You don't know how much compassion, friendliness, love you have within yourself.

Through the practice of meditation, what we do is to uncover or unfold these hidden, innate, noble qualities and be happy about it. You should be very happy that you are a part of this system. That asks you to find out the truth within yourself. The Buddha's teaching is just this.

When you study philosophy, you study about Socrates. What Socrates did was nothing but playing a role of midwife. A midwife does not create children. All she does is to help a pregnant woman to deliver a baby. The Buddha's function and role was exactly like that. He gave us help, assisted us to uncover the truth within ourselves.

One of my favourite teachings is *Come and See*. Long, long ago, I wrote a book. It means – *Ehi Passiko*. This is the wonderful thing that we learn from the Buddha's teaching, an invitation. When you receive this invitation, what do you do? You do 3 things –

1st, you ask – who sent this invitation?
2nd, you ask – where to go?
3rd, you ask – see what?

Now, who sent this invitation? Some people say – *'The Buddha sent this invitation'*. Friends, the Buddha never sent any invitation to anybody. He was invited by others.

It's the Dhamma that invites you to come and see Dhamma. When we say, *Come*, where to go? We don't see the Dhamma existing in some place. Even in this Library, you don't see the Dhamma. You can see books on the bookshelves. There are letters, sentences, words – they are not the Dhamma. They're used to express Dhamma. Where is that Dhamma? The Dhamma is in us. The invitation is *Come and See this Dhamma. Come inside, get closer.*

Normally, we don't look inside, we look outside. In the Dhamma, there are Four Noble Truths.

The 1st is suffering. Where is suffering? Is it in a book, the Library, a particular place? It's in us. Come and see that. Get close to it.

Where's the cause of suffering? It's in us. Look at it every single moment, every single day.

Where is the end of suffering? Nibbana. Is this somewhere locked in the cupboard, in the Buddha statue? It's also here. When the cause of suffering is totally eliminated, we achieve Nibbana. Nibbana is right here.

And the Path leading to Nibbana? Also in us. Here.

It's this Dhamma that invites us to come and see. What the Buddha did was to give us some hints, guidelines, to dig into this Dhamma that we have within ourselves. That is what he did to Upali. He gave him guidelines for him to uncover his own true nature.

So the compassion and loving friendliness you cannot find in any book, any place, any library, anywhere but only in our hearts and minds. Only when the situation arises, it manifests itself. What we do is we want to find a way to uncover it and live by it every day. And that is what the Buddha did. He gave us ways, directions to manifest, express our own inner, noble qualities. But most of the time instead of finding these inner, noble qualities, we hide them, we ignore them and we allow our negative things to manifest (instead).

Joy





BodhiWalk 2005

17 July 2005
East Coast Park

Thank you for all your support



an interview with

DANIEL YEO

by SUNANDA and CHWEE BENG

Does Buddhism in Singapore need a facelift to meet the challenges of our times? What about so-called Buddhist hymns? Are they acceptable?

To be frank, the first time I heard a Buddhist song played to the tune of a well-known Christmas carol, my hair stood on end. It's said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Maybe so, but what about creativity or originality? And a tune composed as a praise to God in a Buddhist setting!

Still, things change. The 2005 Vesak celebrations, for example, featured a Buddhist musical celebration in Orchard Road, which has been praised as innovative and effective. Has music then become acceptable as a way of packaging the Buddha's message? If so, what kind of music?

To find out, we talk to Daniel Yeo, a pioneer of the Buddhist music scene. Daniel's passion is to spread the Buddha's message of love and compassion, especially among the young, in the one way he knows best – through his music. He recently released an album of original children's songs relating the story of the life of Prince Siddhartha from the time of his birth to the time of his enlightenment under the 'brand name' of 'D'Kidz'.

How did you get involved in Buddhism?

I first got in touch with Buddhism during secondary school days in the Religious Knowledge class. (Later) at Ngee Ann Polytechnic, I was involved with the Buddhist Society's activities. After national service, I helped out with some Buddhist groups.

How did music get into the picture?

In the Poly, I got inspiration from Malaysia to learn more about music, both English and Mandarin. Basically, I picked up a guitar and with the help of some seniors, I learned to strum and pluck and compose some songs.

How do you write your music?

I don't have much of a musical education. I only learned about 2 months of guitar and one month of keyboard. I write both music and lyrics. Basically, I play the guitar and record what I play. Sometimes, I transfer it by playing the piano. I write the notes down in a way that I understand.

What gave you the idea of combining Dharma and music?

In the Poly days, we had a lot of gatherings and activities. It was quite boring for young people to sit down and meditate the whole day. So prior to the Dharma talks, we would gather, have tea parties and sing.

Some people may say that using music is not very appropriate for Buddhist activities.

The notion is that generally we copy from other religions. But I would say that music is universal. No one can claim any monopoly over it. To me, that's not a problem.

I once did promotion work for one of my Mandarin albums. To my surprise, one young person after listening halfway shook his head and left. He could not accept having Buddhist songs sung to a contemporary tune like a pop song. I respect his opinion.

You've raised a different kind of problem – singing the Dharma, so to speak, in a contemporary - pop song - style.

But I'm not referring to things like heavy metal and techno music. To me, these are strictly 'no, no'.

Yes, but, in the recent Vesak celebrations, they even had rap, didn't they?

That is how the young people perceive Buddhism, rap and techno.

But what's wrong with that?

It's just a different generation. The older people may say that Daniel's songs are horrible. How can you do that? (they might say). But I would say that I personally don't like it. But I can't stop people from doing it. At the end of the day, you just have to ask yourself – *What is your motivation in arranging songs in heavy metal or techno?* To me, Buddhist songs should give people a soothing feeling or a sense of life. Techno gives a state of confusion, it literally sends you into a state of trance.

Explain 'techno music'.

Techno has a repetitive (tempo). The words just repeat themselves. Very good for dancing. Who uses soothing music to sell drugs? Nobody. But people do that with techno. So where's the dividing line? Is it a commercial agenda by a commercial party? Do we need to have a change of style just to suit what young people like? Where's the limit? There's no end. That's why I'm against it. One of these days, they will say - *Buy a techno Xin Jing (Heart Sutra) or Metta Sutta (Discourse on Loving Kindness) that comes with a pack of ice (drugs).* Are you going to say 'yes' to that because young people like it? It's very blur, very dangerous. That's why I'm always very clear with my compositions. But I can't go around telling the young people what to do. Who am I? But when asked, I won't advocate it and I will say why I won't advocate it.

What's the Buddhist music scene in Singapore like now?

The most popular group is called *Bodhicitta*. They're basically graduates of Singapore Polytechnic. Their target would be adults. Recently, they ventured into Chinese.

There's another group called *Sunny Rain* from the NTU (National Technological University) Buddhist Society. They're very much focussed on the Mandarin market and also targeting the young.

Then, there are a few small bands. They've still yet to find their synergy point. There's also a girl called Ah Hoi from NTU. She's not bad, quite creative.

Are they doing well? I don't mean in terms of money, but reaching their markets?

To a certain degree, yes. In my opinion, they have quite a good coverage of the teenage market.

Do you think the Buddhist temples should support them and give them a chance to reach out to Buddhists?

You're right. No matter how good the product is, if you don't work





with a big Buddhist group, there's no way the product will move. It's very important that big Buddhist organisations see the need to promote this culture of Buddhist hymns.

How did you start writing Buddhist songs?

I've been writing Chinese Buddhist hymns since national service. While doing guard duty and having nothing else to do, I used to write songs. A friend then suggested to me to compile them into an album. Which I did. In 1993, we came out with a Chinese album called *Kuan*. It did pretty well. It's still popular in Malaysia now.

In 1998, I wrote a few songs for a children's album called *Pass It On*. Awareness Place was still in an infancy stage so Phor Kark See Monastery helped out. The album included both Chinese and English songs loosely based on the Five Precepts. The songs were written by different people, at least 6 of us, from both Singapore and Malaysia.

In 1998, I did another album for young people called *You Qing Ren*. It was the first time I tried writing Cantonese songs. It talked about why Prince Sidhartha left the palace.

Then, I took a few years off to study. When I came back I started to teach children singing at Tai Pei Buddhist Centre. I noticed that after all these years teachings songs to teenagers, I've not succeeded. The acceptance rate is very low and I don't see Buddhist groups singing. The Polytechnic that I was from, a lot of groups still don't sing.

So I was thinking, let's look at it from a macro point of view. I came to the conclusion that we should start at a much younger age. Young kids are basically a plain piece of paper. They listen and they believe (what we tell them). In time, it becomes a culture or habit with them. When they're familiar with Buddhist hymns they don't think it's boring anymore. When they're at upper primary and secondary, they become more ready to accept. So I decided to concentrate on (songs for) kids and let the others handle the teenagers. Since I love kids, I can handle them. So that's why I did this current album – *Come and See*.

How did you gather your singers?

2 of the singers are from Tai Pei Buddhist Centre. Both transferred to Phor Kark See Sunday Class. I took a few from each class. 20 of them stayed. (They did a) wonderful job. I picked out a few who could sing better.

How did you train them?

No formal training. I just taught them how to express certain songs, all the 8 songs in the album. It took 2 years to get them ready.

They had musical training before?

2 of the girls (had). Now they're operationally ready. Any time they can go up on stage and sing. They don't have stage fright.

They sing on major occasions – Buddhist centre anniversaries, fund raising, and the like. We went to several centres like BL, Singapore Buddhist Mission and Buddhist Fellowship to promote our album. Many of their performances were at Tai Pei.

Why D'Kids?

It's a brand name. 'D' stands for Dharma. We spell 'Kids' with a 'z' because we want it to sound cool and funky. We printed very nice tee shirts with a colourful logo. We asked the kids whether they would be prepared to wear the tee shirts to Sunday school. They said – Yes. We're proud to wear them.

The 'i' in 'Kids' is printed in the form of a musical notation. This symbolises that it's a musical product.

The stories are in the odd numbered tracks and the songs are in the even numbered tracks. Whose idea was that?

We consulted the parents. It's the first English story telling album for kids. No one has done that before – story telling style in English for kids. Initially, we wanted to lump the stories with the music but we realise that sometimes, people may just want to skip the stories. So we give them the option. Tracks 1, 3, 5 are the story telling tracks in the form of a conversation between the kids and the Sunday school teacher. The even numbered tracks are the songs.

Tell us something about some of the songs.

The first song is called 'A Child is Born'. (In the song) the kids come for Sunday school and we ask the kids who the Buddha really is. They say – He's a god, he's a man, a supergod. These are actual answers I got from my Sunday class.

Track 10 is called Under the Moonlight. Guess what this song is all about? After Prince Siddhartha witnessed the Four Sights, he renounced the world. But we're mindful that parents may get the wrong idea that after becoming Buddhists, the kids will grow up to become monks and nuns. So we don't use the word 'renunciation'. In the song, we mention that he left the palace to find happiness.

So in every song, there's a learning objective. In this song, the objective is (to teach the fact) that the Buddha loved his family so much that he couldn't bear to see them suffering in samsara so he left the palace to deliver them from suffering. (But) the Buddha did not forsake his family because he came back and taught them. That is not enough. The Buddha did not forget you and me (either). So we teach the kids that the Buddha was not as cold as what other people accused him (of being).

The last song is *Come and See*. After they've learned the story of Prince Siddhartha, we ask the kids – *You are happy now?* The kids say – Yes. Then, (in the song) we tell the kids to share the Dharma with their parents and friends so that these people can also be happy. We want people to learn the Dharma too, to come and see for themselves, not just believe.

So (the album) is more than a (musical) product, it's the content. Our mission is to create a culture of singing Buddhist hymns among the younger generation of Buddhists in Singapore. This is not just a matter of 3, 5, 10 years, but maybe 20 to 30 years. At least, we have kick-started the process now.

Hopefully, in the coming years, there will be more such products so that the kids will have more choices. The Sunday schools will (also) have more choice. They can use (these albums) as teaching aids.

What problems do you face in your work?

Our group, Viriya Productions, is a non-profit organisation. But we are self-sufficient. We don't depend on donations. We need to tell people, if they want their kids to have songs to listen to or be part of this movement, they should buy the original albums and not copy the songs. We want to make money so that we can use the money to generate more albums, even cartoons and MTV (in the future).

Besides finance, what other problems did you face in cutting the album?

Getting good help. It's not easy. Like, for example, the design. We must really thank Charmaine. She did this free of charge. She came up with the concept within 3 days. I engaged professionals, none of them could come with it.

My producer, Kang Kee, came up with the arrangement for the first song, it had a very unplugged feeling. But when I told him I wanted it to have a punch, so people will stand up, raise their hands, feel the Buddha's love and the energy, he came up with the final one which was very powerful.

The other problem was cutting the cost done but having the work done professionally.



an interview with

VEN BODHI

by JAMES CHIANG

Ven Shi Chun Yi, or Ven Bodhi – as she's more commonly known – is no stranger to many of us in BL. Before embarking on her year-long reading retreat earlier this year, she taught subjects such as *History of Buddhist Thought* and *The Indian Background and the Emergence of Buddhism* to students in the Diploma and Postgraduate Diploma courses at BL.

Ven Bodhi is unique (particularly for a Singaporean) in many ways. A Chinese Mahayanist nun and a scholar (graduating with a PhD from Kelaniya University in Sri Lanka). Someone who's not only bi-lingual, but eloquent, in both English and Mandarin. And a valuable source of knowledge borne out of her exposure to, and experience in, the very diverse Theravada (Sri Lankan) and Mahayana (Chinese) Buddhist worlds.

In this interview, Venerable Bodhi shares her views – which she puts forth in her usual light-hearted and infectiously jovial but firm and forthright way – on some highly interesting, sometimes contemporary, issues. Such as her experience in Sri Lanka as a Chinese Mahayana nun, the significance – or otherwise – of the differences between the various Buddhist traditions, particularly the Theravada and Mahayana, the inherent conflict, if any, in her being both a nun and a scholar (which should sometimes threaten to pull her in diametrically opposing directions) and, not least, what her possible future contribution to the Buddhist world would be.

How did you first come into contact with Buddhism.

I came from a Taoist family. My mother was actually a medium. And for that reason, we had to offer flowers at the deity's shrine every 3 days. I was given the honourable task of getting the flowers. Why is this important? Because it was through this lady selling flowers that I got to know Buddhism. She took a liking to me – I was a young kid – and started giving me these Chinese booklets on elementary Buddhism. She was from *The Singapore Buddhist Lodge*. And I just read (them). And I thought, *Hey, so I am not a Buddhist - I'm actually a Taoist*. From there, I started to have this affinity towards Buddhism, instead of just praying to the deities.

After reading for some time, I got to know about BL. But I didn't yet have the chance to come down because I was so young. I was just a secondary school kid and my mom was really strict – she wouldn't let us go anywhere else except to and from school. I secretly made up my mind. I told myself – *When I get to 21 years old, I will take the Three Refuges* – because I knew my mom wouldn't allow that.

Luckily for me, my uncle's girlfriend had a friend who became a nun and she brought us to meet this nun, who eventually became my teacher. So, at the age of 16, I was able to take the refuge under this teacher. I was very happy that I didn't have to wait till 21. My teacher was (also) able to convert my mom and she gave up being a medium and all her deity worship.

So mom and I became Buddhists. My mom has since then become a very strong supporter of my teacher. So much so that when my teacher left her temple to set up another place and I volunteered to stay with her at the age of 18 – I was in Hwa Chong (then) – my mom said *Ok, go ahead. Go stay with that teacher*. She had so much trust in this teacher of mine, Ven Te Yuan.

I saw (that) the Buddhist community at that time and the nuns that I met were all very old, very strict looking. They were also not English

speaking. The only nun that I knew who could speak English was my teacher. (So) I made a vow - *I want to finish my education. Then I will renounce and do something for the Buddhist community in the capacity of a nun*. My mom supported me. I finished Hwa Chong, (later) University. By then, I had been staying with my teacher for 8 years.

How did you come to do your post-graduate studies in Buddhism?

After I graduated, I was hanging around for a while when my teacher threw me a choice. *Do you want to do Buddhist studies in the States or in Sri Lanka?* I was thinking – *Hmm, States and Singapore, more or less the same – the kind of living standard and the people I meet. I wanted to try leading life in a third world country, to test myself and see how I (can) take it.*

Bhante B. Dhammaratana was the one who helped me settle down in Sri Lanka. I didn't know anyone there, except for Professor Chandima. He was very kind. He helped me find a flat, a room next to his.

I went there in 1995. I remember (it) well because it was Valentine's Day, and I had to bid my family and my teacher goodbye. So sad (laughs). So I went over and enrolled in the Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies (Kelaniya). That started my 8 year acquaintance with Sri Lanka and Buddhist studies. I did my post graduate diploma, still as a lay person. In 1996, I was ordained as a *samaneri*. In 1997 I took my higher ordination in Taiwan. I was absent from my studies for one whole year in 1997 till I went back in 1998. I went on with my MA, my MPhil and finally my PhD. So when people ask me how long have I've spent in Sri Lanka, I would tell them 7 years. Yeah, people spend 7 years in Tibet, I spent 7 years in Sri Lanka.

What did you specialise in for your PhD?

I did *Sarvastivadin Abhidharma*, which is kind of neglected. Scholars in the past usually focus on Mahayana sutras or Pali suttas, but *Sarvastivada* is in between – we call it the *Nikaya* period. After the second council, there was a long period of development, about 1000 years, when different schools evolved and developed. And because of this foundation, Mahayana also evolved.

Mahayana is not actually a school per se. It's actually a movement. The different ideas are all grouped together because of a common ideal – the Bodhisattva ideal – as opposed to monastics. As Buddhism developed, the monastics became the knowledgeable people about the Dharma – they have all the time in the world to do Dharma studies. Lay people would support the 4 requisites and just pray, pray...

The monks became more and more closed up in their ivory tower and the lay people started to feel that Buddhism was inadequate as a religion. Monks could not fulfil their religious needs. Mahayana gradually evolved under these conditions, to address the differences between laity and monastics, between conservatives and liberals and between social needs and individual spiritual practice. So, Mahayana was, and still is – I hope – an answer to these differences.

Was your first ordination in Sri Lanka?

No, I came back here, under my teacher Ven Te Yuan. In my time, I had to go all the way to Taiwan because no one else in Singapore did it. It takes a lot of time and logistics to organise such a thing. Now there are 2 in Singapore – one organised by Fu Hai Chan Yuen, another by Phor Kark See.

You can't find (Bhikkuni ordination) anywhere else. Theravadin (monks) don't recognise Bhikkunis as yet. But they are now very open minded, I think, because they recognise Mahayanist nuns as nuns and not just 8 preceptors or 10 preceptors. When we tell them that we've taken all the vows of the Bhikkuni order, they respect us as Bhikkunis and not just as Maechis (Thai white-robed 8 preceptor

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nuns).

When I first went to Sri Lanka, the people didn't even know that I was a nun. The policeman and everyone else would call me *Madam*. I've got a friend, an American nun, ordained in the Vietnamese tradition. One day, she was on a bus and one funny man came over, gave her his business card and said 'Please call me when you are free, we can go for a drink'

I was really shocked. Don't they know we have shaven our head? It should mean something if we shave our head? Maybe they think we are like those hippies who shave our heads for fashion. Especially since she's American, so maybe they think she's hippie enough to do all that kind of thing.

Do you experience this when you are in other Theravadin countries?

In Theravadin countries, when I tell them I'm a Mahayanist nun, the first question is 'Oh, so do you get married?' (laughter) Yes! Yes! Because they have this impression – Japanese monks, they can get married. So I would always have to explain to them that only some lineages in Japanese Buddhism are allowed to have married clergy. All others, like Zen tradition, are strict celibates. In the Mahayana tradition, we are full-fledged monks and nuns. So we don't get married.

In the Mahayana tradition, the older generation will always regard the Theravada tradition as *Xiao Chen*, (Small Vehicle or Hinayanist) and Theravadins look upon Mahayanist as being too liberal - they don't observe the Vinaya (monk's precepts or rules). So there's a lot of work to be done to clear away all this misunderstanding. I think this is one positive way in which I can contribute (to bring about mutual understanding among the various Buddhist traditions).

You were trained in the Theravadin tradition, but you're also immersed in a Mahayanist setting. Are there any major inconsistencies in terms of practice?

I've been thinking about this question. Honestly, I don't see any difference. If you are into spiritual practice, you would be able to transcend sectarian views. To me, since I'm living in this kind of environment as a nun, the difference in tradition, like Theravada, Mahayana etc, is really cultural. Its like the kind of society you are born into, or the kind of family you are born into.

Or maybe my particular Sangha is like that. My teacher is very open-minded. She's always telling us to transcend sectarian differences and to learn the best from each tradition. So for us in our little Sangha, we don't feel any differences. We're equally at ease with Theravadin monks and Mahayanist monks. We also learn from the Vajrayana monks, the Lamas and Rinpoches.

To me, its just different ways of practising the 'Buddha word'. You'll need to be open minded, culturally, to be able to accept different ways of, for example, prostrating and giving offerings. I'm quite open-minded to different views, and I don't insist that the Mahayana view is the right view. In Singapore, we're very lucky, we're exposed to all different traditions.

Let's not forget that the Buddha said – *Whatever you've heard, whatever teaching that has come down to you, when you practise it and it helps you to reduce your defilements and increase your wisdom, that would be the right teaching for you. Conversely, if any famous teacher comes over and teaches you something, you practise that and feel that your defilements are increasing, then you have to check whether you're practising the right thing.* These traditions are just like historical baggage we (should) put down. If you feel happy in the Theravada tradition, meaning the cultural background that Theravada brings along with it, by all means. For me, I'm quite happy straddling these 3 traditions and to get the best out of them

So what do you see as your niche now?

Whatever I know, I will lecture. Probably in BL, if I'm still wanted (laughs).

You're more than wanted. You're needed! (laughs)

Because I think, since I have this good fortune to learn and to be trained, I want to train people that way too. I think the BL crowd is rather receptive. I keep telling the students – there're so many things to be done for Buddhist research and everybody can play a part.

This is how I encourage them to come back for MA and PhD, although they may take a longer time to do it (on a) part time (basis) We need a lot of these earnest Buddhists doing research. Academic stuff is not a very interesting thing to do, so not many people like it. So I really appreciate our little group of students here.

Do you see any conflict between your roles as scholar and nun? Because, as scholar, you're interested in historical accuracy and empirical evidence. You don't accept things just because they're told to you. As nun, especially in the Mahayana tradition, some things (as in the Pure Land tradition) you must be accepted almost as faith.

As Buddhists, we don't place our faith upon the authenticity of the text only. What we need to do, especially for Mahayanist, is to understand the spirit of the text and weigh it against the principle I shared with you just now - if you follow the practise stipulated in the text, you find that your defilements are getting more and more, instead of getting lesser and lesser, then drop this text.

Even if somebody were to prove to us that a particular sutra was not the spoken by the Buddha, its not going to be a problem to me – it's not an issue to any Buddhist in fact. Because we don't put all our faith on the text alone. Historicity is kind of relative.

What do you mean by the Buddha's word? If the Buddha's word means truly from the Buddha's mouth, then some texts in the Pali suttas are also disqualified because they're not said by the Buddha. In the *Majjhima Nikaya*, we have suttas spoken by Sariputta, Ananda, yet they're compiled in the (Sutta) Pitaka itself, recognised as authentic suttas.

If you actually go to Vulture's Peak, it's a very small place. But if you read the Heart Sutra, you read about thousands and thousands of monks and bodhisattvas gathering there. It's actually physically impossible.

When you read Pali suttas, it gives you a very earthly feeling, like as if you're talking to the Buddha face to face, or the Buddha is right in front of you. You're in that time. When you come to Mahayana, its more floating, but very uplifting.

What is your view on the Pure Land Sutras – the emphasis on other power as opposed to mainstream Buddhism, which is really your own effort?

For us, we're lucky people. We know we can rely on ourselves. We have the confidence. For some other people, especially for beginners in Buddhism, they might feel that it is too much to depend on themselves. They don't have that kind of confidence. This is a very good way to help them get into practice.

If we've not misunderstood the Pure Land Sects, its not all sitting down and chanting names only. There is so much preparation you need to do before you can receive Amitabha's grace and be reborn there. It's a two-way traffic. You hear the Buddha's compassionate vow to receive you when you aspire to be good and to be reborn there. To be reborn there to do what? It's not a free-and-easy deity rebirth. You're there for a purpose, for spiritual practice.

Joy

HOW TO FREE YOUR MIND -TARA THE LIBERATOR

by VENERABLE THUBTEN CHODRON

Snow Lion Publications (2005) 217 pages

Reviewed by Chwee Beng

When the author - American-born Tibetan Buddhist nun, Venerable Thubten Chodron, a familiar face to Singapore Buddhists - was first introduced to Tara practice, she found herself attracted to Tara more than to any other deities she'd ever come across. Tara appeared 'friendly and welcoming.'

Ever since then, Tara has helped Venerable Chodron through 'ups and downs in (her) life' so she wrote this book to share the benefits of Tara practice and meditation with others. But who exactly is Tara? Why do people 'pray' to her for assistance, both mundane and spiritual? How can she help them?

These and many more questions are addressed in this book. From the outset, Ven Chodron makes it clear that Tara is not God. 'Tara, like Manjushri, Avalokiteshvvara, Vajrapani, and others is a Buddha. A Buddha is not a creator God. A Buddha does not manage the universe, controlling sentient beings' destiny, rewarding some and punishing others.' This, despite the fact that the Homage to the 21 Taras (the most commonly practised sadhana or meditation practice of Tara) comprises praises to 21 forms of Tara and even has a list of benefits of doing the practice, something that could easily mislead anyone with a theistic background, or inclination, into thinking of Tara in those terms.

How, then, should we regard Tara? The author mentions 3 ways -

Firstly, as a 'historical figure'. A princess called Yeshe Dawa, a long time ago, realised the unsatisfactory nature of existence and desired to be liberated from suffering both for herself and others. Because many Buddhas had already become enlightened as men, Tara chose instead a feminine form.

Secondly, Tara can be taken as 'a manifestation of enlightened qualities'. In order to reach and teach ordinary human beings, Buddhas need to appear in forms that appeal to, and can connect with, us. Tara is just one such form. She symbolises enlightened activity in the same way that Avalokiteshvara (Guan Yin) represents compassion and Manjushri wisdom.

Thirdly, we can see Tara as a 'reflection of our present Buddha-potential in its future fully developed state'. The Buddha taught that all sentient beings, no matter how evil, possess, and never lose, their potential to become enlightened ('Buddha nature' or 'Buddha potential'). So just as Tara was an ordinary person who, through practising renunciation, wisdom and compassion (bodhicitta), became enlightened, so too can we. When we reflect on her enlightened qualities, we're also reflecting on the same qualities that we would possess once we become enlightened.

But no matter which way we regard Tara, one fact must always be borne in mind. The fundamental purpose of doing Tara practice is, as the author puts it - 'not to worship Tara. Tara is a fully enlightened Buddha; she doesn't need our worship or offerings. We don't do these practices for the sake of the enlightened beings, to win their favour or soften their wrath. As a Buddha, Tara is free from ego needs and only experiences infinite bliss. Rather, bowing, making offerings, reciting mantras, and so on generate special feelings within our own mind. We do these practices in order to transform our attitude so that we can develop the same enlightened qualities as Tara'.

Having set the appropriate context, the book then proceeds to

explain the Tara sadhana stanza by stanza, the purposes and benefits of the practice, and the different interpretations of Tara's mantra - *Om Tare Tuttare Ture Soha*. 'Chanting the "Homage" at a brisk speed gives a lot of energy, contemplating its meaning increases our understanding, and visualising the twenty-one Taras deepens our connection to them.'

Finally, there's a bonus - the author's commentary on the poem - '**A Song of Longing for Tara, the Infallible**' by Lama Lobsang Tenpey Gyaltzen.

Invariably, any book that talks about any Dharma practice ends up discussing fundamental Buddhist principles, doctrines and practices. So too does this book. The author explains refuge (in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha), bodhicitta (the wish to attain enlightenment in order to benefit all sentient beings), the eight fears or dangers (pride, ignorance, anger, jealousy, distorted views, miserliness, attachment and doubt), the eight worldly dharmas (gain and loss, honour and dishonour, praise and blame, pleasure and pain), the four seals (impermanence, suffering, no-self and nirvana - sometimes, called the three characteristics of existence, minus nirvana), compassion, emptiness and dependent origination.

On the subject of precepts, she reminds us that even one person keeping them faithfully is important. 'We may think that one individual abiding in precepts doesn't make much change, but just think what the world would be like if Adolph Hitler had kept precepts. Just think what the newspaper headlines would be if everyone kept the first precept not to kill for one day'.

The author also answers nagging FAQs, such as - *If we pray for wealth or long life and Tara grants the wish, would that not be encouraging attachment?* Not necessarily, she says. We could look at it in different ways - Tara, like all Buddhas, helps beings at their own levels so 'if someone seeks wealth or worldly success and that person has created the karma for that, Tara will help.' Furthermore, it depends on why he or she wants wealth or longevity. Is it purely for materialistic or selfish aims? Or could the practitioner want money and long life to be able to practise the Dharma more effectively, that is, for altruistic purposes? Finally, wealth is not necessarily material wealth. There's also spiritual wealth namely, wisdom or spiritual realisations. Tara will certainly help us to attain these qualities.

'When I have done Tara practice to clear obstacles for a beneficial purpose, it's had a good effect' - claims the author. So she invites us to 'try it yourself, and see how doing this recitation and contemplation affects your experience (?)'

There are, of course, many stories of wishes being granted by Tara, even cures for serious medical conditions. Tara did, after all, become enlightened to relieve the suffering of sentient beings. But, whatever may be the position in other religions, Buddhism does not emphasise so-called miracles. Much less are they reasons for becoming followers of the Buddha. (If they were, they would surely count as egocentric and self-serving obstacles to enlightenment). Instead, they're very often treated like 'side-benefits' of practice. The proper purpose of Tara practice rather (as the author takes pains to stress repeatedly) is to accept her as a role model and to emulate her by becoming enlightened ourselves so that we in turn can benefit others in the same way. The 14th century monk, Togmay Sangpo, who wrote the seminal work - '*Thirty Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*' - pointed out succinctly -

HOW TO FREE YOUR MIND



TARA THE LIBERATOR

THUBTEN CHODRON



REVIEW

'If my sickness is of benefit to sentient beings,
May I be sick
If my death would benefit them,
May I die
But if my recovery would help,
May I be cured
Bless me to accept
Whatever happens with joy
And use it as my path.'

It takes tremendous courage and conviction to say – and practise – this sincerely. That's why to our ordinary conceptual, limited vision, what the bodhisattvas try to do may seem fantastic, unrealistic, impossible, even pointless. But not to the author –

'I love those aspirations because they open me to infinite potential. They create so much space in my mind. I don't know if I'll ever be able to fulfil them. But just to have the thought that such a thing could be possible – even to feel that it's possible to have a mental state that wishes for such things – creates joy, enthusiasm, and optimism in my mind. Play with the thought "Sure, I can give my body and life a million times over and be cool with it! I won't get bummed out, paranoid, or shake in my shoes. I'm okay doing this". See if just letting that idea into your mind makes you feel more spacious.'

Venerable Thubten Chodron has written her book *'in a conversational style'*. Her language is clear, simple and lively, and her message comes across easily. She recounts interesting, useful anecdotes that all of us can relate to. And she makes these centuries-old verses more relevant to our modern minds by casting them (where necessary) in a contemporary setting. In explaining, for instance, the stanza that praises Tara for her ability to subdue all problems caused by various traditional negative forces like nagas, asuras, spirits and yamas, she suggests –

'To make the meaning relevant to our culture, we could imagine her destroying street gangs, the Mafia, those dealing in arms, drugs, and nuclear material, Al-Qaeda, those who misuse aid shipments, and anyone who damages sentient beings'.

The author says her book is for 'a general audience', Buddhist or non-Buddhist – anyone who's 'curious about Buddhist deities' or wants to 'free your mind from disturbing emotions such as clinging attachment and anger'.

In particular, it should be read by anyone who's interested, or engaged, in Tara practice. However, the author's caution – that it's necessary to consult a qualified teacher of Tibetan Buddhism before engaging in the practice – should never be forgotten or ignored.

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The whole process – from the time you have the idea to the time you have the album – how long did it take?

It took us one year exactly. Bearing in mind, we had at least 50% of the songs when we started.

You wrote all the songs?

No, no. Only some of the songs were written by me. A social worker friend of mine, Jing Rui, wrote the lyrics to the song, "Siddhartha taking the Middle Way" – *Not to the left, not to the right, balance is the guide, Not too much work, not too much play, balance is the way.* Simple kiddy language. Beautiful song.

Another writer was an SIA pilot, Capt. May. He wrote the song – *The Four Sights*. The idea came to him when he was flying his plane. I thought it would be a difficult song so I purposely gave it to him. It turned out to be the song that many people like, even kids.

For the story telling, another friend, Pow Li, a Kumon teacher, re-wrote the words for me in kiddie language and it's so nice.

A parent who bought the CD told me on Vesak Day that her daughter loved it so much. She bought another 10 CDs to distribute to Buddhist centres in Europe. She said to me that whoever wrote the songs and the stories must have known a lot about child psychology but, sad to say, I don't know much (laughter).

I notice that many a time, we tend to use our adult methods to impose on the poor kids so the poor kids surrender and stop coming to Sunday class. We tend to approach it in a very philosophical, structured way. If you use a fun way, they remember. Then, you reason it out with them later. So this is the whole objective, fun, simple, repetitive.

You know the song – *Naming* – about the naming of Prince Siddhartha.

*Does he have a name?
What shall we call him?
Does he like to cry?
Look at his beautiful eyes*

These are very human questions. Looking at the mouth, nose, eyes of Siddhartha.

What are your future plans?

We have sold our rights to a Buddhist group in Indonesia. We found that they were genuinely interested in spreading the Dharma message and not for selfish interests.

The next step is to go to Malaysia. The Malaysian market is largely Chinese. To do this thing in Mandarin. (It's a) big challenge. Because all these songs are meant for English.

I hope Buddhist groups will invite us to perform at their Sunday classes, Sunday service, and, better still, public talks. But it's very, very tricky. We have to be very careful with this. The culture in Singapore is that they don't allow you to sell their products in their premises.

You have any plans for future albums?

We also want to come up with a second album touching on the life of the Buddha from enlightenment to Parinibbana. Subsequent albums can deal with the Dharma, then the Sangha.

Thank you very much, Daniel

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