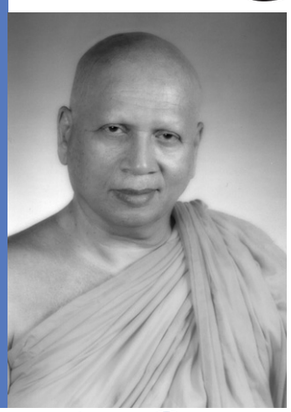
Issue 17 Jan - Mar 2006
MICA (P) 056/10/2005

the Path of Joy

Publisher: Buddhist Reserch Society, 2 & 4 Lorong 24A Geylang Singapore 398526
Printer: Citi Print & Design Pte Ltd, 10 Ubi Crescent, Ubi Techpark #03-34 Singapore 408564



Bhante Says

Hindrances to Spiritual Development

I would like to talk about a discourse or sutra delivered by the Buddha called *The Parable of the Log*. In this sutra, the Buddha taught a simple but important lesson, using a log floating in the River Ganges as an illustration.

In this way, the Buddha explained the various difficulties or barriers to the attainment of enlightenment. Many people say that enlightenment is very difficult to attain. This is, of course, true. Sometimes, we can become victims of these barriers.

The Buddha, as usual, taught in a very simple and natural way. At that time, he was travelling with his monks on a long journey. On the way, they reached the banks of the Ganges River. They stopped and rested.

Then the Buddha saw a log floating on the water. He asked the monks to look at the log. Now, a log floating in a river is nothing remarkable or special. It's a very ordinary sight. Many things can float in a river.

Yet the Buddha was able to use this very simple, very ordinary thing to explain some very important things about the Dharma and our progress towards spiritual development.

The Buddha told his monks – *Monks, if there's no barrier or obstacle, this log will certainly in time reach the ocean. But there can be many obstacles along the way. If this log were to meet any barrier or obstacle, it would surely not complete its journey to the ocean.*

What are these barriers?

(i) This log, owing to the movement of the current, may hit one of the banks of the river. Then, it will get stuck there.

(ii) This log may sink in the middle of the river simply because of its weight. After long hours floating in the water, the log is soaked in water and becomes too heavy.

(iii) Fishermen may have placed fishing nets in certain places to trap fish and the log may get caught there.

(iv) The log may fall into human hands. People may collect things floating in the river or may use the log for their needs.

(v) There may be whirlpools which cause the log to turn round and round and get stuck in the mud.

(vi) The log may rot along the way because it has a long way to go. The Ganges River is a very long river indeed, hundreds and hundreds of miles long.

In a way, we're all like a log. Don't get offended when I say this. You know, a log is a dead thing. Sometimes, we, human beings, do stupid things. We make mistakes, yet we fail to improve ourselves by learning from these mistakes. The Malays have a word - *'kayu'* – which literally means *'wood'*. It's commonly used to refer to people who make stupid mistakes. Football fans used to chant this word at football matches to describe the referee when they don't agree with his decisions.

But, of course, the Buddha was *not* comparing human beings to a log in that sense. Rather, the Buddha was talking about human beings caught in suffering. We're all circling around in this cycle of births and deaths which we call *samsara*. Our karma acts like a current pushing us from one lifetime to another, through many, many lifetimes.

" The Malays have a word - *'kayu'* – which literally means *'wood'*. It's commonly used to refer to people who make stupid mistakes. Football fans used to chant this word at football matches to describe the referee when they don't agree with his decisions."

In the sutra, the ocean that the river is flowing towards is *nibbana*. We have to travel through this cycle of suffering before we can reach the ocean of *nibbana*. Attaining *nibbana* depends on how we practise the Dharma, how we overcome our barriers to enlightenment. There are many barriers preventing us from attaining liberation. If we don't make the effort, we certainly won't make it to liberation, just as the log won't reach the ocean.

What are these barriers in our spiritual journey? Let me explain some of the hindrances that the Buddha spoke about.

Hitting a bank – The Buddha said that if the log hits either of the 2 banks of the river, it will not reach the ocean. What are these 2 banks in our spiritual journey? One is our 5 (or 6, if we include our mind) senses. These senses are the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind.

The other bank is the objects of our 5 (or 6) senses. What are the objects of our senses? Whatever we experience through our senses are their objects. For example, with our eyes, we see things, with our ears, we hear sounds, and so on.

We must bear in mind, however, that, by themselves, the

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senses are not bad. It's only if we don't control our senses that we'll get stuck in *samsara*. Similarly, by their nature, the objects of our senses are not wrong. There is therefore nothing wrong with our eyes or ears, or our seeing or hearing things, or even the things that we see or hear themselves.

Where then can we go wrong?

We go wrong if we don't control our eyes or ears, if we're not mindful, if we give in to attachment or aversion.

When we experience things, we often like them so much that we get attached to them. Or we dislike them and develop aversion. In this way, defilements such as greed and hatred arise in our minds.

So the Buddha compared our senses and the objects of our senses to the 2 banks of the river. There's nothing wrong with the banks of the river in themselves but if the log gets stuck to the banks, it can't move.

Sinking mid-stream – The log absorbs too much water and sinks in the middle of the river. In the same way, we may get stuck in the middle of our spiritual journey if we can't control our defilements, if we become absorbed in them. We may become victims of our greed, hatred, jealousy, ignorance and so on and we won't progress any further.

Caught by human beings – We're all very busy with our work and worldly affairs. That's why the Buddha established the community of monks or *Sangha*. Monks, because of their precepts, are able to stay away from worldly affairs. But I'm not asking you to be monks. That's not necessary. If everyone becomes a monk, nobody will make offerings (*dana)* to us!

There are many ways for lay people to practise the Dharma. They can practise the 3-fold Buddhist practices – ethics *(sila)*, concentration *(samadhi*) and wisdom (*panna),* just as the monks do. But, of course, lay people have more difficulty in practising the Dharma than monks.

And when people get too involved with worldly concerns, they get stuck. That's what actually happens to many people. They always postpone their spiritual practice, saying that they have no time because of their duties and responsibilities. Duties and responsibilities towards career, family, society, country and so on. They even postpone their children's spiritual education saying that the children have no time, they have to study and get good grades. These people seem to think that spiritual education is not important anyway.

Of course, these worldly duties and responsibilities are not bad in themselves. They're actually very important because of the kind of lives that we and our children lead and the modern society we all live in.

But people may go astray if they don't know their limit or capacity. Or if they fail to understand the importance of the spiritual aspect of life and lose sight of the fact that the worldly life is not the whole of life. Life does not begin or end in the office and the school.

But not everyone can understand or appreciate this. Only people who appreciate the Dharma will find or make time for spiritual practice. If we get stuck in our worldly concerns, we won't be able to be free from suffering, no matter how rich or famous we become.

Caught in a whirlpool – Here, the whirlpool is an analogy for worldly desires. When people practise meditation from time to time, for example, certain defilements may arise strongly in their mind, especially, attachment or unhappiness. They're unable to make any progress in their spiritual practice so they feel like giving up. In this way, they get stuck in the mud of defilements. Such thoughts are hindrances. What should the practitioners do then?

They should be very mindful. They should see that this is not right thinking and realise that attachment is rising in their mind. They should say to themselves – '*I'm going to be a victim of doubt, anger or frustration if I'm not mindful. These difficulties are all impermanent. If I'm mindful, I'll be able to overcome them'.*

Rotting on the way – In life, there are many ways in which we may get involved with bad company. We may even fall under the influence of evil people like religious cults, terrorists and fanatics. In this way, we may get involved with wrong practices.

If we associate with wrong company, we will get stuck in suffering. Like a log rotting in the river, life after life, not able to escape this vicious cycle.

We should therefore be very careful when we associate with people. And not only people, but places too. We should only go to places which can help us to progress spiritually. By going to the right places, we have the chance to meet the right people.

Spiritual friends are therefore essential. Once the Buddha's attendant, Venerable Ananda, commented that having a spiritual friend is '*at least half of the spiritual practice'*. The Buddha, on hearing this, immediately corrected him, saying – '*No, Ananda, having a spiritual friend is the whole of spiritual practice'*. So highly did the Buddha rate the value of spiritual friendship.

But who should we consider as our spiritual friends and who not? A well-known text in the Tibetan tradition gives us a useful guide –

When friendship with someone causes greed,
hatred and ignorance to increase
Decreases the activities of listening, reflecting and meditating
And destroys loving kindness and compassion
To give up such a friendship
Is the practice of a bodhisattva

When in reliance on someone your defects wane
And your positive qualities grow like the waxing moon
To cherish such a spiritual friend more than your own body
Is the practice of a bodhisattva

Above all, it's essential to remember that we have to put in consistent effort in order to make progress along the spiritual path, just as we do when we chase our academic grades and our career prospects.

I wish you all success in your spiritual journey.

Bhante B Dhammaratana
Religious Advisor
Buddhist Library

A Ripple Effect

Have you ever wondered why some people seem able to perform good or kind deeds so easily or spontaneously while others find it so difficult?

A report in the Bangkok Post a few months ago sent me wondering along these lines.

June's a 9 year old girl living in Nonthaburi, a town several hours away from Bangkok. Her mother, Dokrak, then a factory worker, suffered a severe attack when she received an injection for the treatment of flu. She went blind. To make matters worse, Dokrak's husband left her, taking with him their 2 sons. The alcoholic later reportedly abused his sons and they ran away. The only one who stood by Dokrak was little June, then aged 3, whom she proudly called her *'heart and eyes'*.

When June was 4, Dokrak, unable to bear the pain any longer, decided to end her life. But, standing in the middle of a flyover, she hesitated. She wondered what would become of her little girl after she was gone. At that crucial moment, June, then aged 4, *'shook (her mum's) hand and asked (her why she) had become so silent'. Dokrak said she was 'utterly tired of living'.*

'Don't give up, Mum. I'm not bored of living. Be patient. I'm with you. I can take care of you,' the kid promised. And she kept her word.

The girl was always at her mother's side, whenever she could, taking care of her, in the hospital or at home. She brought her mother to the hospital regularly for treatment, cutting classes at school several days a week. *'I didn't know how to read then, so I remembered the colour(s) and signs of the buses and places where we were going'*. She assisted her mother *'to cross the street, get on and off the bus and (to handle) procedures at the hospital'*.

At home, June took over the household chores, even learning to cook. She did part-time work – making flower garlands - to earn some money. And, even with a tiny daily allowance, she saved what she could and passed the money back to mum whenever mum needed it.

Yet, she still had a place in her heart for more unfortunate ones. The newspaper report described how June once gave away her packet of soya bean drink to a blind beggar. When pressed for her reason for action, the little girl said - *'He was pitiful, Mum. Blind and poor…I can still see.* As the reporter observed – *'Having less is not an obstacle to generosity.'*

I sent the newspaper report to a friend. She commented that Singaporean kids – used to money and comfort on demand – might think this is just *'a fairy tale'*. Indeed, they might.

Yet, it seems to me, that people like June are the lucky ones, more fortunate perhaps than those to whom they show kindness or, for that matter, even comfortable Singaporean kids.

They're *'lucky'* (though luck really has nothing to do with it) because they find it easy to be kind and compassionate. Even when they're themselves in need of assistance. More than that, they're often able to turn adversity into opportunity. Not for making money or finding fame (although there's nothing essentially wrong with that, it depends on what we want money and fame for). But spontaneously, out of love and compassion, for doing good. Mother Teresa, a universal symbol of love and compassion, encapsulated this idea best when she said –

When I'm hungry, give me someone that I can feed
And when I'm thirsty, give me someone who needs a drink
When I'm cold, give me someone to keep warm
And when I grieve, give me someone to console

The parallel, in the Buddhist context, is, of course, the Bodhisattva. There are many stories related in the Jataka Tales of the previous lives of the Buddha. Accounts of extraordinary feats of selflessness and sacrifice - such as his giving up his eyes, his family, even his life. Stories that illustrate the love and compassion of the future Buddha for his fellow beings.

But, perhaps more importantly, what the Jataka stories also illustrate, whether we take these accounts as true or only as parables, is that these positive characteristics of the Bodhisattva are not *'gifts'* from a loving creator God. Nor do they arise without cause or reason. No, they're created by the mind of the Bodhisattva himself as he travels along the path to enlightenment.

Until that happy day comes when we ourselves can manifest perfection like the Buddha did, we plod along in *samsara*. The lucky ones among us like June find it easy to be kind, gentle and compassionate. Conversely, the unlucky ones will act, or continue to act, like automatons from selfishness, anger, frustration and hatred and cause more, and yet more, misery for themselves and others. People, say, who are mean and tight-fisted even when they have plenty. Or, those like the Thai policeman, who some months ago reportedly shot and killed a fellow motorist simply because the unfortunate guy insulted him.

If ever there's a working illustration of the much misunderstood Buddhist concept of *'karma'*, this must be it. That good begets good and bad begets bad. A good action creates a ripple of beneficial effects not only for others but also for ourselves. We're encouraged to repeat, even elevate, our good actions simply because we can see for ourselves the happiness they produce all round.

And when we commit a bad action, we weave a sticky and pervasive web. A vicious cycle of violence and mistrust which traps us within and makes it even more difficult for us to escape. Blinded by hatred and frustration – like the now familiar terrorists - we're not able to see beyond our need to react or return an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. (Wasn't it Mahatma Gandhi who once quipped that *'an eye for an eye simply makes the whole world blind'?).*

Yet, all it may take is but one small step. A simple but by no means easy attempt to drive against the flow of traffic created by our previous negative habits. But one that hopefully will produce a positive ripple effect for a change.

Another friend who read the newspaper report said that it seemed *'far too good to be true'* and smacked of exaggeration. The story does sound a little too wonderful– that's what probably makes it *'newsworthy'*, I suppose. June's story may or may not be accurate. But the point remains that we all must have, at some point, met people who show a propensity towards generosity, devotion, or general *'good nature'*, mini-Mother Teresas, so to speak. And others who seem consistently

egocentric, quarrelsome or negative in mental outlook.

Coming back to Dokrak and June, things are looking up for them, at last. Dokrak won an 800,000 baht (S$32,000) award from the court after a 6 year legal battle. And she's receiving stem cell treatment for her eyes with encouraging, if limited, results. June, the plucky girl who refused to let her mother die, does rather well in school despite all her problems. With the money, Dokrak is determined to give her daughter a good education. June may yet achieve her dream of becoming a doctor, after all.

With this issue, The Path of Joy enters into its 5th year of existence. POJ was born on 1st January 2002. It's not always been a path of joy producing this newsletter but it's certainly been challenging and rewarding. Our aim has been to have a mini-magazine that's fresh, relevant, interesting, informative, topical and, above all, educational. All this within very tight constraints of limited time and resources. All of us are volunteers, most with stressful, hectic daily schedules.

And we've tried our level best to project the work of our Bhante B Dhammaratana and BL, and the values they stand for – the Dharma, the importance of education, non-sectarianism and such.

A newsletter is an organisation's link to the community-at-large. And so we do sometimes get somewhat unexpected feedback and at rather odd moments.

A Malaysian Buddhist recently told me in Dharamsala, India, that he enjoyed reading POJ which he found informative. He picked it up – not at BL – but at Phor Khak See Monastery. He did not know he was talking to the editor. And a prominent local industrialist read POJ and commented that he had the highest respect and regard for our Bhante.

Still, as Buddhists, we all know – or should know - about impermanence and change. I look forward to the day when a younger, more energetic, hopefully more creative and innovative person can take over the helm of POJ, someone able to provide BL with the much needed hot link to the world of the future.

As always, I wish you pleasant reading.

Chwee Beng
Editor

Article - The Buddhist Attitude To God

by Professor Y Karunadasa

Introduction

It's a well-known fact that Buddhism is a non-theistic religion. Buddhists do not believe in a Creator God. However, the use of the term *'atheistic'* is not proper because this term has nihilistic and materialistic implications.

Nevertheless, most of the ingredients of a *'religion'* are conspicuously missing in Buddhism. To understand Buddhism in its proper context, let us examine the history of the idea of God in pre-Buddhist Indian thought. We can identify 4 stages -

- polytheism (the belief in a plurality of gods).
- henotheism or Kathenotheism (the recognition of one particular god is the most supreme for a given occasion).
- monotheism (the belief in one god as the creator of the world). In the *Svetasvara Upanisad*, it is said that Isvara is *"the Highest God is the ultimate cause (karanam)"*, that is, the ultimate ground of existence.
- pantheism or Monism (the belief in a God-head which is impersonal and which manifests itself in all phenomena.

Buddhist references to the belief in a Creator God

Issara (in the sense of God as the divine creator) is known to the Pali canonical texts as follows -

- There are some recluses and brahmins who propose the theory that the origin of the world is to be traced to creation on the part of Issara, the Creator God (*Dighanikaya* 111 28)
- Man's experience that *"pleasure and pain is due to creation by Issara, the Creator God"* (*Majjhimanikaya*, II, 222, *Anguttaranikaya*, I. 273)

(There are several references to Brahma, the Creator God, who describes himself thus - *"I am Brahma, the Great Brahma, the Supreme One, the Mighty One, the All-Seeing, the Ruler, the Lord of all, the Maker, the Creator, the Chief of all appointing to each his place, the Ancient of days, the Father of all that is and will be"*. – (*Dighanikaya*, II, 263)

The belief in a Creator God is mentioned as one of the three sectarian beliefs, namely, that -

- everything is due to the fiat of a creator god *(sabbam issaranimmana-hetu)*
- everything is due to past karma *(sabbam pubbekata-hetu)*
- everything is due to fortuitous circumstances *(sabbam ahetu-appaccaya) (Anguttaranikaya, Tikanipata)*

The Buddhist criticism based on moral grounds

According to Buddhism, the belief in a Creator God cannot be justified as a proper foundation for the theory and practice of the moral life.

- Although a theistic theory recognises the need to practise a moral life, it fails to justify the efficacy of moral acts *(kiriyavada)* and the role of the individual in the practice of moral life *(viriyavada)*.

["If God designs the life of the entire world- the glory and the misery, the good and the evil acts - man is but an instrument of his will and God (alone is responsible) (Jataka, V, 238)]

- (Then, there's) the argument based on the existence of evil. *"If Brahma is the lord of the whole world and creator of the multitude of beings, then why has he ordained misfortune in the world without making the whole world happy, for what purpose has he made the world full of injustice, deceit, falsehood, and conceit, or the lord of beings is evil in that he ordained injustice when there could have been justice."* (*Jataka*VI,208)]

Also, as a critical response to the revival and proliferation of God cults in India during the 2nd century, the Venerable Nagarjuna, the founder of the Madhyamaka system (of philosophy) wrote

The gods are all eternal scoundrels
Incapable of dissolving the suffering of impermanence.
Those who serve them and venerate them.
May even in this world sink into a sea of sorrow.
We know the gods are false and have no concrete being
Therefore the wise man believes them not

The Buddhist Attitude To God

The fate of the world depends on causes and conditions
Therefore the wise man may not rely on gods
(Mahaprajnaparamitasastra, translated by Etienne Lammot)

The Buddhist criticism based on Jhanic experience.

Jhanic experience refers to the experience when the mind reaches higher levels of concentration and refinement. Buddhism refers to 8 kinds of Jhanic experience. They may appear as similar to mystical experience, but from the Buddhist perspective Jhanic experience cannot be interpreted as a kind of mystical experience, because it is psychologically analysable (just like) any other mundane experience. It's conditioned, brought about by causes and conditions, and therefore it cannot be interpreted as some kind of union with a transcendental reality or absorption with some kind of cosmic soul.

The Buddhist criticism based on the psychological diagnosis of the mainspring of speculative views and ideologies.

From the Buddhist perspective, the belief in a Creator God is a form of eternalism *(Sassatavada)*.

Buddhism maintains that all views relating to the eternal existence of an immortal soul or a Creator God are due to the desire for immortality, the desire to perpetuate one's own individuality into eternity.

Buddhism traces the causality of all speculative views on the nature of the self and on the nature of the universe to what is called *"sakkaya-ditthi"*, that is, the belief in a separate, individualized self. This particular belief is, in turn, due to the *"I-conceit"*, or *"I-notion"* (*asmi-mana*), which arises at a pre-reflective level, purely due to psychological reasons. As long as the belief in a separate, individualised self persists, the way we look at ourselves as well as the world at large will be conditioned by the ego-centric perspective.

The Buddhist attitude to the notion of the God-head as the ultimate reality, or as the ultimate ground of existence.

Sometimes the notion of God is interpreted not as a personal god but as a kind of ultimate reality considered as the ground of existence. It is not personal but impersonal. The best example in this connection is the Upanisadic (Vedantic) teaching relating to Brahman, the cosmic soul, or the ultimate ground of being.

Buddhism does not agree with the conception of an impersonal God-head either.

For Buddhism defines the world as the totality of experience. It has no metaphysical background in the form of a Creator God or in the form of an impersonal God-head. This raises the frequently-asked question -

Can Nibbana be considered as the Buddhist counterpart to what other religions recognize as God or God-head?

This is what Perennial Philosophy or Continuous Tradition hints at. It's based on the view that all religions, in the ultimate analysis, proclaim the same truth. They all recognize a transcendental reality. What corresponds, in Buddhism, to this transcendental reality is Nibbana.

(But) this interpretation cannot be justified in the light of Buddhist teachings. Nibbana does not correspond to the transcendental reality which many religions speak of.As a religion, Buddhism does not believe that cosmological speculations as to the beginning and the final direction of the world are relevant to our understanding of our human predicament and the emancipation from it.

Buddhism and the notion of gods (devas).

Although Buddhism rejects the belief in a Creator God, it recognizes a large number of gods or heavenly beings, who inhabit different planes of existence recognised in Buddhist cosmology. (However), the recognition of these gods does not in any way contradict any of the Buddhist doctrines, because -

- Birth in heaven or paradise is not the final goal of Buddhism.
- Any kind of heavenly existence is within samsara, the cycle of births and deaths.
- These gods are not omniscient..
- They cannot help human beings in the path to liberation from all suffering.
- Petitional prayers have no part to play. Even Brahma (who is considered the creator of the world) is not the creator of the world nor is he omniscient. He is a wayfarer in sansara (like the rest of us). The idea that he is the creator of the world and the idea that he is omniscient is rejected in Buddhism as a delusion on his (Brahma's) part.

Let us now examine the nature of Buddhism as a non-theistic religion.

The nature of Buddhism as a non-theistic religion.

The Buddha did not claim divinity. He is neither an incarnation of God nor a prophet of God. He was born as a human being and through supreme human effort he realized the highest level of moral perfection and highest level of wisdom (Enlightenment). The Buddha is not a Saviour but a Teacher:

"You yourself ought to do what ought to be done. The Buddhas are teachers who show the way". (Tumhehi kiccam atappam; Akkhataro Tathagata)

The Buddhist teaching relating to the theory and practice of moral life.

Buddhist moral teachings should be understood within a non-theistic context. They have no theological foundation, but are entirely based on psychology.

The Buddhist attitude to divine revelation as a sourse of spiritual knowledge.

The Pali word for divine revelation is *Anussava*. According to Buddhism, a religion based on divine revelation is not necessarily false, but is unsatisfactory (*anassasika*). What is based on divine revelation lends itself to 4 different interpretations:

- correctly heard and correctly transmitted - true
- correctly heard and correctly transmitted - false
- incorrectly heard and incorrectly transmitted - true
- incorrectly heard and incorrectly transmitted - false

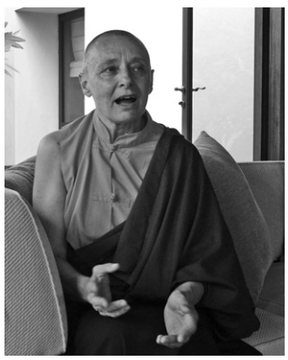
The place assigned to faith in Buddhism.

As Buddhism does not subscribe to a Creator God, it's able to distinguish between 2 kinds of faith. One is called baseless or blind faith (*Amulika saddha*). The other is called rational faith (*Akaravati- saddha*).

Thus, in Buddhism, faith must always be grounded upon wisdom, not the other way around.

Interview with Venerable Tenzin Palmo

by Chwee Beng



Vickie McKenzie's book 'Cave in the Snow' - about Venerable Tenzin Palmo's life, in particular, the 12 years she spent meditating in the Himalayas - caught the world by storm. It made the British-born nun in the Tibetan tradition well-known all over the world.

Much has been written since then about her meditation experience. In this interview, which Venerable Tenzin Palmo was kind enough to grant POJ despite her very hectic commitments, we concentrate on her work for Tibetan Buddhist nuns. She also explains why she so readily accepts some aspects of Buddhism (such as karma, reincarnation and merit-making) which westerners - and others of a similar frame of mind - have so much difficulty with.

Why did you start the nunnery project?

Originally, I started it because when I went to Nepal back in the early 1990s, the lamas of Tashi Jong (the monastery of Venerable Tenzin Palmo's main teacher, Khamtrul Rinpoche) said to me – *Well, we don't have anything for women. You should start a nunnery.*

I then remembered that the 8th Khamtrul Rinpoche had on several occasions said he wanted me to start a nunnery. At that time, I just ignored it. This time, I thought – *it's true there's nothing for women.*

Nowadays, it's a little better than before. Still, the nunneries are so small compared to the monasteries for monks. In our own tradition of Drukpa Kagyu, for example, there really isn't a nunnery where the nuns receive a philosophical education.

So how did you go about it?

I came to Singapore. It was very difficult because I'm not a high lama sitting on a high throne, giving initiations. I'm not even Tibetan. Just a nun and a foreigner! So where do you start? I didn't know where to start. I went with Choegyal Rinpoche to Malaysia. He agreed to introduce me to people. That was the beginning.

Later, it got a lot easier when Vicki McKenzie's book came out. To my surprise, a lot of people read it. They became more interested not just in me but also in the whole question of nunneries.

In those days, my only selling point was that it was a nunnery. People said – *Oh, for the last 20 years, we've been donating to monasteries, you're the first person to mention nuns.*

How far have you gone in the project?

Now, by the end of this August, we'll have 40 nuns. At the moment, we have 18 nuns. Another 24 are coming, young girls. We're in the process of building. We're building for about 100. I don't want it to get too big. 100 is enough, everybody knows each other.

We have built the office block, staff quarters and another block. Now we're finishing the nun's residences. After that, we have to build the study centre, the library, the retreat centre for nuns and the guesthouse.

Where is this?

This is about 2 hours away from Dharamsala, near Tashi Jong.

Where do you get the nuns from?

The nuns are Tibetans, girls from the Himalayan region, such as Ladakh, Spiti and parts of Nepal. A lot of them come from Kinnaur region.

They apply to join?

Yes, they do. They apply, we interview them and send them for medical check-up. We accept girls from 15 to 25. Most of them are schoolgirls, just finished their education. A few of them were already nuns.

Based on what sort of criteria, education?

No, we can't make education a criterion because most of the Tibetan girls escaped from Tibet. They don't have an education. They have language but that's it. Some of them have gone through the local Indian school system, so they're educated to that extent. They don't know Tibetan.

The 1st year is spent teaching Tibetan language, how to read and write. Because even the Tibetan girls, although they have the language, they don't know how to read and write. Even their reading skills are not so good.

If they know Tibetan already, they start learning some of the rituals.

In the 2nd year, they start learning some of the basics of Buddhism. What we have is a 6-year programme of study and practice. After that, the nuns are given the option, whether they want to further their education, go into longer retreat or develop certain skills to help run the nunnery.

They start out with very basic texts like the *Words of My Perfect Teacher* and Gampopa's *Jewelled Ornaments*.

They also start to do *ngondro*, the preliminary practices. Every year, they do a 2-month retreat. The 1st year, they do prostration and *Vajrasattva* practice. The 2nd year, they do mantra recitation and guru yoga. After that, they do *yidam* practice (deity visualisation practice).

After the basic Buddhist education in the 1st year, they start studying Madhyamaka philosophy, logic and so on. They have a very good philosophy teacher.

How long has it been?

Now it's been about 5 years from when we accepted our first nuns and started building. At the end of (2006), the first (intake) of girls would have finished their 6-year education and we'll all go on pilgrimage. Then, they have to decide what they want to do next.

We hope that some of the nuns themselves will be the (future) teachers and we're not always relying on the monks. That some of them will go for 3-year retreats. Also, in Tashi Jong, we have this very special tradition *of togdens* (yogi monks). One of our aspirations for the nunnery is to fulfil the wish of

Khamtrul Rinpoche and restart the tradition of *togdenmas* (yogi nuns).

What about the dropout rate?

We've had some (dropouts). One Ladakhi nun decided that she didn't want to be a nun. and so she became a nurse. Which is fine. She comes and visits the nuns.

(We've had some study dropouts among) Nepali nuns who were excellent nuns. But after 2 years, their teacher said that 2 years were enough and would not allow them to come back. But they still write to us and we maintain contact. We're very sorry to lose them because they're very nice girls.

What about other problems you face? Financing, for example.

Actually, people have been wonderful, supporting us. We don't have multi-millionaires but we've been able to build up from the support of many people. It's been wonderful.

Of course, every year, prices go up in India. Now we hope we shall have enough money to finish all the project, except the temple. I was going around in Taiwan and Korea trying to raise some interest in donating for the building of the temple. But nowadays, it's quite difficult.

How were the Taiwanese? They're reputed for their generosity in supporting Dharma..

Lovely. Very kind. But it takes …'I don't know, maybe, I've just...

It's been a long time.

Yes, I find it hard even to mention money anymore at this point. But I truly believe that if I don't think about it or worry about it, it will come. So I'm not worried. Anyway, most of the facilities which the nuns need are there.

What about other problems?

No, we don't really have many problems. The main problem in the Tibetan tradition was the nun's lack of confidence in themselves unlike the nuns in Taiwan or Korea, where they're very highly educated. (Theirs are societies) where women are getting stronger and stronger.

The Tibetan nuns only have this lower ordination. Therefore, they're not respected within society and play a very inferior role to the monks. The monks in Tashi Jong are really very kind to the nuns and look on them as sisters. But little sisters. If there's a problem in the Tibetan tradition as far as nuns are concerned, that is it. It's hard for them to realise their full potential.

This is what all the nunneries are working on – to give the nuns a sense of their own capabilities.

How do you do that?

By getting them educated, mainly. Help them to realise that they're just as perfectly intelligent as the monks and that all the things that they historically were not allowed to do, they can do. Gradually, they begin to believe in themselves.

I still believe that until they're given equality in the ordination, they'll suffer from discrimination. It's very obvious in those countries where nuns receive the full ordination (the difference it makes). The point is that when they do begin to realise their potential, they give a lot back to society. Not just within the Dharma but also in helping other people. In Taiwan and Singapore, for example. Society is just cutting of its arm in not giving the nuns that role.

But there's nothing in the Dharma that inherently discriminates against women, is there?

No, I mean the Buddha gave them the ordination. It's not as if he didn't. But people say – *But, oh, he hesitated.* If he did hesitate – we don't really know whether he did - we have to realise who was asking him. It was his stepmother. She was a court lady, probably well-advanced in years, used to living in luxury. She came with 500 other court ladies. They were all out on the road. It was a very difficult situation. I'm sure the Buddha hesitated because he thought - *How will they manage?* Also, if the nuns have to compete with the monks for alms, the people would normally give (the alms) to the monks.

The usual reason given is that the nuns' lineage has died out. They have to wait for the next Buddha to come!

We should ask – where in the text does it say this?. I personally feel that if His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other lamas of impeccable conduct from the different lineages say - *Let's just do it* – not only would so many nuns come forward to be ordained by His Holiness but nobody would argue. But they keep on saying – *We need further research*. They've been researching for over 20 years. They won't – any of them – jump. And the nuns won't push because they're subservient to the wishes of the lamas.

It should be appreciated that nuns in general have taken a quantum leap in the last 10 years. Not every nunnery has a study programme. But even those without a programme want one. HH the Dalai Lama is now studying how nuns can become geshes (a Tibetan monastic academic qualification equivalent to a PhD) without becoming bhikshunis. (fully ordained nuns). Why they cannot allow them to become bhikshunis first, I don't know.

But to think that only 10 years ago, this kind of thinking would have been impossible. This is something very positive.

What keeps you going?

I never saw myself as running a nunnery. Basically, (I keep going on) because people are relying on us. Also, my devotion to my lama. This is for him and our tradition and for these young women. My concerns are so small compared to all of that.

Also, I've had a wonderful team. They've worked so hard for nothing other than the pleasure of helping the nunnery, some of them for 5 or 6 years. Of course, we're very small but I think small organisations work better. There's no politics.

Please give the readers a brief background of your tradition.

Within the Kagyu tradition, we hold in common the Indian masters, Tilopa and Naropa. In Tibet, Marpa, Milrepa and Gampopa.

Gampopa had many disciples but 2 of the most important were Dusum Khyenpa (the 1st Karmapa who started the Karma Kagyu lineage) and Phakmo Trupa who had many

disciples. One of them was Tsangpa Gyare who started the Drukpa Kagyu lineage.

Drukpa Kagyu is mostly known for its yogic tradition. Practice has always been a most important part of our tradition although we had many scholars too.

The Karmapa does not appear in our lineage at all. But of course, we have great respect for him and our nuns received the bodhisattva vows from him. He's only an hour away from our nunnery.

After the nunnery, what's your plan?

Hopefully, I can go back into retreat. I remember speaking to HH Dalai Lama about starting a nunnery. He said – *That's very good, give it 1 or 2 years, then go back to retreat.*

I don't know how many years ago that was! (laughs). But my energy is now focussed on seeing that the nuns are set on the road that they can carry on by themselves.

What advice can you give to our readers? The world is now such a dangerous place with terrorists blowing up people all the time.

My feeling is that samsara by its very nature is dangerous. The Buddha never made samsara into a party. What creates terrorism? It's created by the poisons, especially of anger and greed getting out of control.

Since we, as ordinary people cannot handle outer violence – that's in the hands of politicians - we can deal with inner violence and see that from our side, we're not violent. If one's heart is at peace and has love and kindness, it doesn't matter what happens to us on the outside.

To live one's life always afraid to be blown up by a bomb is absurd. If it's your karma to be blown up, you'll be blown up; if it's not, then you won't. In the meantime, you should live your life genuinely in accordance with the Dharma and try to bring happiness and benefit to other beings.

Of course, compassion should always be there for the victims of atrocities. But throughout history, there has always been atrocities. Even Nalanda (the great Buddhist monastic University in India) was destroyed and 20,000 monks killed. This is the nature of the world. Because we've not managed to deal without poisons. We get born again and again and we never learn.

What are your thoughts on Buddhism in the west?

I really don't know because I don't live in the west. I've not been back to Europe. (Laughter).

But it does seem that (Western Buddhism's) a new sprout coming up. In a way, it's quite healthy. It has its own focus which is very lay.

In Asia, people think of temples, ceremonies and rituals. In the west, none of these pertains except in the very small Asian communities. Almost all of western Buddhism (comprises) Dharma centres. Some study, basically (Dharma) practice and lay people.

Now the big question (people ask) is – *How can I use the Dharma to benefit my life?* Plus the interest in psychology, using it in going out to do something for society and the rise of women. Because many of the Dharma teachers nowadays in the west are female.

Certain aspects of Buddhism – reincarnation, karma, merit-making etc – present problems to westerners. You don't have these problems. Why?

I just grew up always believing in rebirth. As a small child, I always believed that we're innately perfect, that we've lost sight of that and we have to come back again and again until we came back to our true nature. I remember asking many teachers – *How do we become perfect?* I remember asking my mother whether she believed in reincarnation and she said she didn't see why not. I don't see why not either.

I think more than karma and rebirth, the problem (westerners) have is merit. Because merit seems very self-seeking. Jesus said that your left hand shouldn't know what your right hand is doing. When you do something good, you shouldn't have any self-regard. You should just do it.

Buddhism takes it from a different angle completely. When you do something good, you should rejoice in that and reflect - *By this meritorious action, may I be happy, and may others be happy.* A lot of western people find that repugnant. They feel guilty about thinking of it. As if that decreases its goodness because it becomes selfish. The ego gets involved. Of course, ultimately, everything you do should be spontaneous. But the idea of encouraging people to goodness by helping them to rejoice in it is, I think, quite skilful means.

One of the reasons why people are depressed in the west – it's just come to me - is that they take responsibility for the bad they do and not for the good. They always think of the things which are wrong with themselves.

In Buddhism you acknowledge and repent what is bad but straight after (that) you think and rejoice in the good. And that creates a balance. When you don't have that balance, then naturally you end up feeling that you're a bad person. This lack of self-worth - or self-hatred - that many westerners suffer from is partly based on that. They feel guilty about acknowledging the good within themselves.

It's worse when you have things like multiplication of merits on certain auspicious days.

Some people go for that, some don't. So be it.

Some lamas emphasise that very much, even quite modern lamas and you can see how some people cringe.

It encourages them to do good, be generous and happy. Especially if you're dedicating the merits to others. You have to acknowledge you've made merit in order to dedicate them. I think if you're dedicating the merits to others, that's a very good motivation.

You can't get rid of the merits. The more you dedicate, the more merit you create.

That's where they get upset! (Laughter). If you think about that, it gets very selfish again.

Like the Dalai Lama says - *The more compassionate you are, the better you feel yourself.* Some people feel – *That's an interesting idea, maybe I should try that.* Other people feel uncomfortable, it seems self-serving. He says - *Yes, it is self-serving.*

Right, the more you do for others, the more you get back. That's perfectly self-serving, but then so what? Some people

feel guilty about anything that makes them feel better.

It's part of the western psychosis. On the one hand, we're the most egotistic people in the world, on the other, we're the most fearful of the ego.

In one teaching, you mentioned that the most frightening thing you experienced when you meditated in the cave was seeing your own mind. Is this something that's normal for meditators?

I think so. Because very early on, we realise that everything we experience, we do so through the mind. We interpret experience through our consciousness. When one starts turning one's attention to that and see the stuff in there, most people get extremely upset. Even the ones who feel okay with themselves, when they see all the rubbish coming up, they start saying - *I thought I was a nice person.*

Our imprisonment and our liberation all depend on the mind.

Thank you so much, Venerable Tenzin Palmo

Congratulations & Happy Wedding to Dr Wong Weng Fai and Ms Soh Lay Guat

The Buddhist Library is indeed very honoured to host the wedding of Dr Wong Weng Fai (President of Buddhist Research Society) and Ms Soh Lay Guat on 5 Nov 2005. Here are some of the happy and solemn moments.

Readers Write

Letter

Dear Sir,

Although I'm not a Buddhist - I'm Roman Catholic but not a particularly fervent one - I do enjoy reading POJ. There are many aspects of Buddhism which I find endearing. POJ allows me to discover more about those qualities which attract me. I must add that I enjoy reading Bhante Says most. It always dwells upon some interesting aspects of Buddhism which I often find meaningful.
The latest POJ is no exception. The topic of rebirth covered in Bhante Says was of particular interest to me. I have to say, however, that I don't believe in rebirth. But I don't feel so strongly as to dismiss it out of hand.

I read the following with interest -

'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.'

Of course, as stated by Bhante, it's not possible to prove the process of rebirth scientifically. But I'm not sure I agree that when we think objectively about it (is this possible?), the Buddhist explanation of rebirth seems more reasonable when compared with alternative views. In particular, what happens in the case of a person who is brain-dead, especially if he lives on for years in a comatose state before finally dying? I assume that he does not have any thoughts (during the coma) so his last thought would have been a long time before his death.

Thank you
Chang Pow Onn

Bhante's reply on page 9

Bhante replies

Dear Mr Chang,

It is extremely difficult to come to a conclusion that the brain is totally dead while a person is in a coma and the heart is working with the help of a machine. What is clear is that in some cases, brain functioning has dropped to a minimum level, yet mental energy still remains so it is extremely difficult to detect.

Doctors do certain checks on these people and try to see the primitive brain reflexes of the patient. If they cannot find primitive brain reflexes, they decide the person is dead. What I can say is that it is not possible for us to say that every patient who is in a coma is brain dead.

This question arises as a result of recent developments in medical technology. So it's not surprising that there's no direct and clear answer in the sutras which were taught 2,500 years ago. We have to ask ourselves one question.

Does it matter whether that the last thought is followed by a comatose state during which the deceased had no thought at all (if that is the case) or that the last thought occurred during the coma just before death (if the person was not totally brain dead)?

The point remains that the deceased's last thought is the energy that causes a new birth or rebirth, as taught by the Buddha.

The Buddhist explanation of rebirth can be considered more reasonable because it is based on experience and supported by research done by people like Dr Ian Stevenson, rather than based purely on faith or reliance on a holy book.

I thank you for your interesting question. It is useful to remember that even science, including medical science, is not at all clear on all the issues that confront human beings from time to time.

Bhante B Dhammaratana
Religious Advisor
Buddhist Library

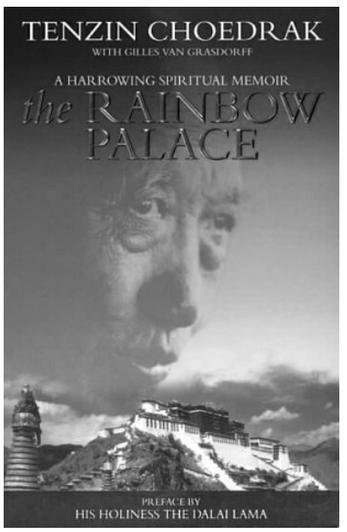
Venue: Open Field next to Aljunied MRT Station Date: 20 November 2005

BL Activities

Buddhist Library Fun Fair 2005

THE RAINBOW PALACE by Tenzin Choedrak

Published by Bantam Books (2000)
Reviewed by Leila



This book is an autobiography of Dr Tenzin Choedrak, the personal physician of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama.

Dr Tenzin Choedrak was born in Yakda in April 1922. He had a very sad childhood. His mother died a month after he was born and in his own words, it was "*a childhood of unpleasant deprivation*". His father remarried a few months after his father's death and Tenzin grew accustomed to the ill treatment his stepmother inflicted on him. The only person who loved him was his grandmother, whom he called, "*Mola*". He carried with him memories of Mola and his late mother throughout his life of hardship. Those memories were like a soothing balm to him whenever he thought of them.

Tenzin recalled vividly the early days when he first went to the monastery of Chothey to study under the tutorship of his uncle. He later studied at Men–Tsee- Khang, the Tibetan institute for studying Tibetan medicine. He gives us some insight on how Tibetan medicine is practised and how rare herbs are collected with great difficulty in the mountains.

In 1944, he became a "*mendzine*" (one who is responsible for the medicine, but not yet a doctor). He became an "*amchi*" (a doctor) eight years later.

On the role of a doctor, Tenzin made these remarks which, I believe, most members of the medical profession and their patients would agree with –

"The doctor should love his work, whether it be for his own benefit or that of others. Another necessary quality is prudence with regard to the diagnosis and his attention to his patients.

Personally, I think it is by kindness that a doctor will have the most influence over the sick person. A person who is grasping and aggressive, who stubbornly refuses to change his habits or attitudes, will not change his behaviour even if you ask him to. He is as if covered with the dust of ignorance. He experiences no compassion. In this life, he battles to obtain personal benefit, and he turns his nose up at others. Such a person cannot correctly study medicine. He cannot become useful, nor can he be resourceful. That is why it is preferable not to give him this knowledge, because he would not respect either the physician's vows or the teachings of his professors ."

He was 30 years old when he passed his examination and obtained first position. He was then inexperienced and he shares with readers his anguish over his new responsibility of having to care for Dalai Lama's sick mother.

In 1956, Tenzin was officially appointed as the personal physician of the Dalai Lama. This was of course a great honour and correspondingly a great responsibility. But in March 1959, his whole world toppled around him when he was captured by the invading Chinese army. He was imprisoned for 21 years.

Although he suffered much during his term of imprisonment, he bore no malice towards his captors. His medical skills were discovered towards the end of his imprisonment. He had to treat a Chinese artillery commander. Though he was still a prisoner, he did not forget his duty as a doctor and the Dharma. He writes -

"One of the required duties of the doctor is the desire to come to the aid of another. Our feeling of concern about the well-being of others – of all others – may also be called compassion. Dispensed impartially, it transcends all barriers and knows no borders. Whether one cares for a friend or an enemy, the doctor must treat all patients exactly the same: they are people who are suffering. Thus he is able to extend his love and kindness to his enemy. When animated by compassion, this sense of responsibility with regard to others, we may truly modify the nature of things and of our actions.

This is how I began to care for patients at Yititok. I had already spent more than sixteen years in the Chinese prisons and I had succeeded in surviving".

Tenzin was released at the end of October1980 and continued to serve the Dalai Lama as his personal physician in exile in Dharamsala, India.

Towards the end of his book, Tenzin emphasises -

"Love and compassion play a primordial role in our existence. And tolerance. We should exert ourselves to lead a life directed by awareness of our actions. Thus whatever happens, we will have nothing to regret."

Although Tenzin experienced tremendous hardship and suffering throughout most of his lifetime and bore the scars of his imprisonment for the rest of his life, his actions transcended any feelings of bitterness or anger he might have had against those who tortured him. He was true to the principles of how a doctor should be and his compassionate nature was recognised even by his captors. He died on 6 April 2001.

The book is a remarkable account of the life of an outstanding human being in extraordinary circumstances . Above all, as His Holiness, the Dalai Lama commented in the Preface - "*Dr Choedrak's story epitomizes the suffering of thousands of Tibetans over the last five decades."*

We welcome contributions which we may edit, if accepted. Write to - The Editor. The Path of Joy. Buddhist Library, No.2 & 4, Lorong 24A Geylang . Singapore 398526. Email-joyeditor@gmail.com Fax: 6741-7689 Phone: 6746-8435 BL's website - www.buddhlib.org.sg
Please include name and contact details. We may publish letters of general interest, subject to editing.

The Offering of Robes and Books

Venue: Buddhist Library main hall
Date: 6 November 2005

BL's Tsunami rebuilding efforts in Sri Lanka - Phase 1 complete

The Buddhist Research Society, together with the Singapore Red Cross Society, handed over the first 50 complete houses to Tsunami survivors on 26 Dec 2005 (Hambantota, Sri Lanka)

Singapore shelter for tsunami victims

By Kurulu Kariyakarawana

President Mahinda Rajapakse commended those who had devoted their time for tsunami revival work and requested all politicians and government officers to work hand in hand to rebuild the country

The President said this addressing a ceremony to donate 50 newly built houses for the tsunami affected people in Hambantota area on Monday.

The first phase of a tsunami housing project of 150 houses under the joint auspices of Singapore Red Cross Society and Singapore Buddhist Research Society was inaugurated by the President.

He said that although we can speak well of the progress in Hambantota district the situation was not satisfactory.

The Singhapura Maithri Gama is a project costing Rs.7.5 billion of which 80% of the funds had been donated by the Singapore Red Cross Society collected from the Singaporean community.

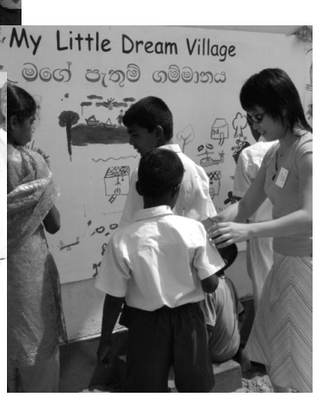
The housing project was a concept of the Adviser of the Singapore Buddhist Research Society and also the Chief Incumbent of Bellanwila Raja Maha Vihara Most Ven. Bellanwila Dharmaratana Thera.

The Ven. Monk, a Buddhist missionary had been living in Singapore for over 35 years.

The balance 100 houses are planned to be completed by end of next year.

Ven. Bellanwila Wimalaratana Thera, President Singapore Buddhist Research Society Prof. Wong Weng Fai, Chief Trustee Buddhist Library Madam Susan Chong and a delegation representing the Singapore Red Cross Society were present at the event.

President Mahinda Rajapakse is presented with the keys to the first tsunami house to be handed over to a chosen recipient. Ven. Bellanwila Dharmaratana Thera, Ven. Bellanwila Wimalaratana Thera and Ministers Felix Perera and Chamal Rajapakse are also in the picture. (Picture by: Pushpakumara Matugama)



A Pilgrimage to Borobudur

Our journey to Borobudur started punctually on an early Tuesday morning at the end August 2005.

En route to Borobudur, we visited Semarang, and met up with our local guide, Din, and our Indonesian hostess, Rona. Together we visited several Chinese temples including Sam Po Kong temple, dedicated to the famous Chinese Admiral, Zheng He. In the evening, we took part in a puja led by Venerable Cattamano and Venerable Nigrodha at Vihara Tanah Putih, followed by a sumptuous dinner hosted by the local Buddhist community. Next day, we continued our journey to Borobudur.

Finally, we arrived at Borobudur on Wednesday early afternoon. Like all who visited Borobudur, we were enchanted by the beauty of this magnificent monument. Despite being situated in a country with the world's largest Muslim population, this Buddhist monument is well conserved and maintained. The site was also pleasantly clean. A clear indication of the respect the locals accord to this ancient monument.

Candi Borobudur (or Borobudur Temple) is a magnificent Buddhist monument situated almost 42 kms north of Yogyakarta. Believed to be built between 750 and 850 AD by an ancient Javanese civilisation, Borobudur temple is no ordinary building. Its architectural symbolisms indicate that it might be a tool for telling the Jataka stories and instilling the profound teaching of the Middle Path by the Buddha to the villagers living around the monument. It was somehow forgotten after the mysterious disappearance of the ancient Central Javanese civilization after 928 AD, and was re-discovered by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles and his men in 1814. After a massive 10-year conservation project during the Suharto government in the 70s to 80s, the monument is re-opened to the public but it is no longer a religious site. Nevertheless, Borobudur temple is still a site revered by many Buddhists.

Braving the hot afternoon sun, we started our climb up Borobudur temple. Due to the constraint of time, we could not walk through all the galleries. Nevertheless, as we ascended, the magical spirit of Buddha's teachings toward absolute freedom from Dukkha could be felt being gently sweeping into our mind. Such was the extraordinary effect this complex architecture could impose on its visitors.

On our way up, we passed by a stupa on our right with the Buddha in dharmacakra mudra inside the stupa. Our local guide told us that luck will befall on men who could put their right hand through one of the holes on the stupa, and touch the right ring finger of the Buddha. Similarly, the ladies will have to touch the heel of the right foot of the Buddha. Like all *kiasu* Singaporeans, we tried our luck. None of us ladies managed to touch the right heel of the Buddha but a number of guys in our group touched the right ring finger of the Buddha inside the stupa. However, one of the ladies in our group won the first prize in the 4-D lottery upon returning from Borobudur! We are still holding our breath for the luck to appear among the guys.

When we reached the summit of Borobudur, we were taken in by the beautiful surrounding of Borobudur. Naturally our time at the summit was also our photo moments. Then it's time to say goodbye to Borobudur. Before we descended the monument, Bhante Nigrodha led us in clockwise direction around the top large stupa three times. While we were walking around the stupa, Bhante also led the chanting of the *Vandana, Ti-Sarana, medley of Buddha Vandana, Dhamma Vandana and Sangha Vandana,* and finished our walk with *Metta Sutta*. Thereafter, we made our way slowly down.

From Borobudur, we visited Candi Mendut after a late lunch. The Buddha statue in Buddhist Library is a replica of the Buddha statue in Candi Mendut. Finally, we settled in a monastery next to Candi Mendut to refresh ourselves before we proceeded to another highlight of our trip –the inaugural performance of a Javanese dance that re-tells the story of the origin of Borobudur. The dance was performed on a stage built with Candi Borobudur as the background. Each of us received an invitation to the dance from the tourist office of Central Java, facilitated by Rona.

The guys were all unusually well dressed for the night. Jeffery, our leader for the night, actually wore a tie although he also wore contrasting cargo pants - unusual fashion sense. Comparatively, we ladies were much more casual. The evening started with a buffet dinner. Once we entered the dining compound, we settled near one of the tents that served dinner. Being a bit away from the rest of the dinning crowd, we acted silly to entertain ourselves while having our dinner. The champion entertainer would have to be Jeffery who entertained us with pole dance, salsa dance, etc, etc. I think we had the best dinner at Borobudur for our trip.

The dance performance was visually spctacular although it would have been perfect if the booklet explaining the dance sequence was also printed in English. Nevertheless, we enjoyed the evening very much. We continued our journey to Yogyakarta and checked into a hotel situated in Jalan Malioboro, the equivalent of our Orchard Road.

The rest of the trip included the visits to Candi Prambanan, a Hindu temple built in 850 AD, 17km east of Yogyakarta, Kraton, the Sultan's palace in Yogyakarta, and attending the Ramayana ballet at Purawisata restaurant.

Of course, no Singaporean would consider a holiday or pilgrimage as perfect without the madcap shopping. Against all expectations, the guys in our group all went ga-ga over the cheap Batik shirts in the shops along Jalan Malioboro and in Beringharjo Market. Most ladies just settled for T-shirts and *buah salak* from the street hawkers along Jalan Malioboro.

Although it was a relatively short 5-day trip, the visit to Borobudur was spiritually enriching. The hospitality of the local Buddhist community is well appreciated. The locals in Yogyakarta were friendly and mild-mannered . Impressed the visit, some of us are asking where we are going next. Myanma? Sri Lanka?