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Bhante Says Transferring Merit and Contemplating Death

I would like to discuss the practice of transferring merit based on a discourse taught by the Buddha.

As you probably know, transference of merit is a practice common to all schools of Buddhism, whether Theravada, Mahayana or Vajrayana. They all have some method of transferring merit to departed loved ones.

But how did the practice start?

During the lifetime of the Buddha, there was a king called King Bimbisara. The Buddha used to live for some time in a temple built by the King.

One night, the King had a dream. He saw some people with a lot of suffering. They had no food and other necessities.

The King was alarmed by his dream and sought clarification from the Buddha.

The Buddha was not a fortune teller. But he explained to the King that this was not something to be feared. These people were the King's relatives in his past lives. Owing to their bad actions, they now had to live in such dire conditions, struggling in the 'hungry ghost' realm.

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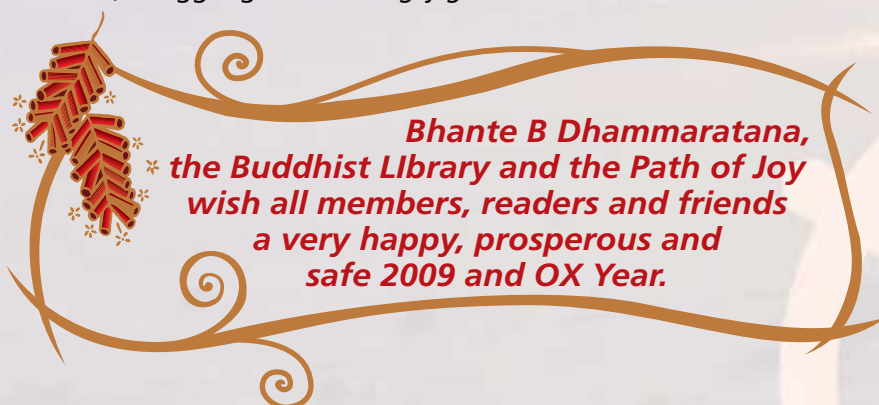
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*Bhante B Dhammaratana,
the Buddhist Library and the Path of Joy
wish all members, readers and friends
a very happy, prosperous and
safe 2009 and OX Year.*

The Buddha suggested that the King perform some meritorious deeds and transfer the merit to his former relatives.

The King did as he was told.

Later, he had another dream. In that dream, he saw that his relatives' condition had improved.

Of course, we don't have to take this story literally in every detail. But it does suggest the possibility of doing kind deeds and transferring the merit to our deceased loved ones.

The Buddha did, however, point out that it's not possible to transfer merit to beings who have been reborn in the human realm.

Nevertheless, when we radiate positive thoughts like compassion and love to our departed ones, it's possible that the energy of our thoughts may reach them. Mental energy can reach any place.

And whether or not this is actually possible, one thing is for sure. Whenever we radiate positive mental energy, we ourselves are the first people who will benefit from doing so.

By undertaking the practice of transferring merit, we also show our gratitude to the deceased. The Buddha said that gratitude is a very rare virtue.

Moreover, gratitude need not emanate from children to their parents (as is the usual case). Parents can also show gratitude to their children.

One elderly lady who visited the Library regularly had a daughter who died from cancer. She requested me to conduct a ceremony to transfer merit to her daughter.

In this modern world, it is quite fashionable to pooh-pooh religious rituals out of hand as being superstitious or unscientific.

But please don't take this practice lightly. There are certain rites and rituals that are not so meaningful but I believe that this one is - if we do it mindfully.

In Singapore, people usually transfer merit during the '*hungry ghost*' period in July and August each year. Having a special period dedicated to the practice is certainly useful. Otherwise, busy as Singaporeans usually are, many of us would probably forget to do the practice every year.

But it's not necessary to wait until the '*hungry ghost*' month to transfer merit to our departed loved ones. In the Theravada tradition (and it's probably the same in the other traditions as well), we are encouraged to transfer merit every time we perform a good deed.

The Buddha also encouraged his followers to contemplate things like old age, sickness and death on a regular basis.

Why? Because familiarity with these aspects of life, unpleasant and fearful as they may be, will enable us to be more receptive to them. Whether we like it or not, all of us are going to grow old, fall sick and die.

Thus, instead of allowing fear, regret, despair or attachment to overcome us when the fateful day arrives, we can go peacefully with a sense of renunciation and equanimity.

Furthermore, if we do nothing until we are sick or about to die, we may be so overwhelmed by pain and worry that we won't be able to develop a positive mental state. And yet it's precisely at the time of death, that a positive frame of mind is so vitally important. For it is our state of mind at the time of death – our last thought moment – that, according to Buddhism, determines our next rebirth.

Just thinking of our own demise can lead to a great deal of fear for most people. The Buddha was, of course, aware of this.

So, in the *Abhinha Paccavekkhitabba Sutta*, he advised his followers to contemplate old age, sickness, death and separation from our loved ones as a regular meditation practice.

Contemplation of old age

With the advance of medical science, people are nowadays living longer than ever before.

Still, we must not forget that, day by day, we are

growing older. Each new day brings us a day closer to our grave, so to speak.

So the Buddha urged his followers to contemplate old age so that they can appreciate impermanence. Being aware that life is fleeting will not make us suicidal or depressed. On the contrary, it will remind us to use this short life wisely and meaningfully and face ageing gracefully.

Contemplating health problems

Everyone gets health problems sooner or later. That does not mean that we should behave like sick people even though we are healthy. On the other hand, we should not take good health for granted.

In Singapore, people work hard and often forget to take a break. But this human body is not a machine, let alone a perfect one. So it's necessary not to abuse it. This is the basis of the Buddha's advice.

And even when we do get sick, it's easier for our health to recover if we are mindful that being sick is part and parcel of being alive.

In this way, we avoid unnecessary worry and fear.

Contemplation of death

Some people believe that if we contemplate death, we won't be able to concentrate on our work, be happy or enjoy our lives. Others feel that it's inauspicious.

If it's possible to wish death away like this, by all means, do that.

But the only outcome, I'm afraid, will be to postpone the problem and make things worse.

Bear in mind that the purpose of this practice is not to make us feel miserable but to help us be happy and calm right down to the very moment we stop breathing.

Having said that, I'm not suggesting that you think about death from morning to night!

Contemplating separation from our loved ones

More than 2,500 years ago, the Buddha realised that being separated from our loved ones forever can be an even more frightening prospect than death itself.

That's probably why he prioritised the practice for us in this way, starting with the easiest to contemplate – old age – to the most difficult to face – separation.

Separation is inevitable. We can live with our beloved

ones but we can't live with them forever. Either they will leave us or we them.

And even though the prospect of losing our dying loved one is unbearable, the best thing we can do for him or her is to ensure that death occurs in a dignified and peaceful manner.

And the worst thing we can do is to harass the deceased with moaning and crying, quarrels and fights. Even worse is to try and convert the dying to our preferred religion.

Finally, if we can develop a degree of renunciation and equanimity towards the ups and downs of life by doing these contemplations, this will help make the ceremony of transference of merit (or any other religious practice we undertake, for that matter) more meaningful and beneficial.

I would like to end by quoting the words of the Buddha.

If you can recite these words regularly, it will be beneficial.

'These things should be often reflected upon by woman and man, by householder and homeless one.'

What are they?

*I am of the nature to age,
I have not gone beyond ageing;*

*I am of the nature to sicken,
I have not gone beyond sickness;*

*I am of the nature to die,
I have not gone beyond dying;*

*All that is mine, beloved and
pleasing, will become otherwise
Will become separated from me'*

Anguttara Nikaya, Vol III, page 71

Bhante B Dhammaratana
Religious Advisor
Buddhist Library



Mind your merit

Some years ago, a meditation master in Thailand told a group of white-clad nuns who had voluntarily raised money for his monastery, *"For your good work, you will be well paid."*

Then, with a smile, he added, *"Whenever you do some work, you get paid, whether you receive money or not."*

The venerable monk was, of course, referring there to the Buddhist concept of merit.

Merit making is a practice common to all Buddhist traditions.

Living and working in Thailand, I witness how popular this practice is all the time.

Ingenious ways have been devised to make the practice interesting and meaningful to the public.

For instance, a donor can donate money in bowls placed in front of Buddha statues in various postures and *mudras* arranged in a row.

How, I wondered, do people choose which bowl to drop the money in? Or is it all done at random?

The first time I witnessed this practice, I was with a Thai friend who performed her *dana* without a moment's hesitation.

"Want to try?"

I pondered, then turned to her.

Realising my predicament, she said, *"It's simple. Which day of the week were you born on? Just put the money in the bowl for that day."*

I couldn't.

Because I didn't know the day on which I was born. An omission that no Thai Buddhist would probably ever be guilty of.

Most lay Thai Buddhists see merit making (*tum boon*) as their principal role in life. Monks provide spiritual guidance and the laity reciprocate by giving donations and food (*dana*).

For a religion in which God is neither a creator nor a saviour, it's understandable that merit making has assumed this fundamental role.

After all, in a theistic religion, the faithful can pray to God for deliverance. Buddhists don't have that luxury. No amount of faith in the Buddha *per se*, let alone blind faith, would do.

To be permanently freed from suffering, Buddhists must practise the Noble Eightfold Path comprising ethics, meditation and wisdom.

Another way of putting it is to say that Buddhists need to develop the 10 Perfections (of Theravada Buddhism) or the 6 Perfections (of Mahayana Buddhism).

Whichever tradition we subscribe to, the Perfections begin with generosity.

And so Buddhists begin their spiritual path by practising generosity.

In this issue, our Bhante B Dhammaratana explains the Buddhist practice of transference of merit.

How did it originate? Is it meaningful or beneficial?

While anyone, Buddhist or otherwise, would readily agree that giving is beneficial, many people, including Buddhists, may not so easily accept that merit can be transferred from one person to another.



How, for instance, can the merit of something I do be transferred to someone else, even if it's a loved one like a mother or a spouse?

I must admit that this issue has not been entirely resolved in my mind.

But, even if it's not possible to transfer merit to another person, that does not mean that the practice is entirely without benefit.

I'm reminded here of something that His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama, said in one of his teachings.

His Holiness has publicly stated on many occasions that, as Buddhists, we should ignore any Buddhist teaching, no matter how venerable, if that belief is inconsistent with a scientifically proved fact.

He gave an example.

In traditional Buddhist cosmology, Mount Sumeru is the centre of the universe, surrounded by 4 continents.

Tibetan Buddhist practices usually include the practice of '*offering the mandala*' to spiritual teachers. The *mandala* is a symbolic representation of the traditional Buddhist universe with Mount Sumeru in the centre.

Obviously, this Buddhist cosmological view is directly

at odds with modern science. Buddhists should therefore reject it.

So, why are Tibetan Buddhists still offering *mandalas*?

His Holiness himself alluded to this point when, with his trademark chuckle, he added – "*But that does not mean you should stop offering me the mandala.*"

In Buddhism, all rituals are merely skillful means. They're the proverbial finger pointing to the moon, not the moon itself.

By offering the *mandala*, Tibetan Buddhist practitioners are merely renouncing everything they have – money, possessions, cherished dreams and pet peeves - as well as transferring all their merit.

Similarly, when we perform the traditional merit-making ceremony and pour water from a small teapot into an overflowing bowl while the relevant Buddhist verses are being chanted, our minds should ideally be imbued with love, compassion and renunciation.

And this can only be good.

As always, I wish you pleasant reading.

Chwee Beng *Editor*

Signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on the launching of the BA (in Buddhist Studies) course between the Buddhist College of Singapore and the Buddhist Library Graduate School on 3 September 2008 at Phor Kark See Monastery.



Books & Robes Offering

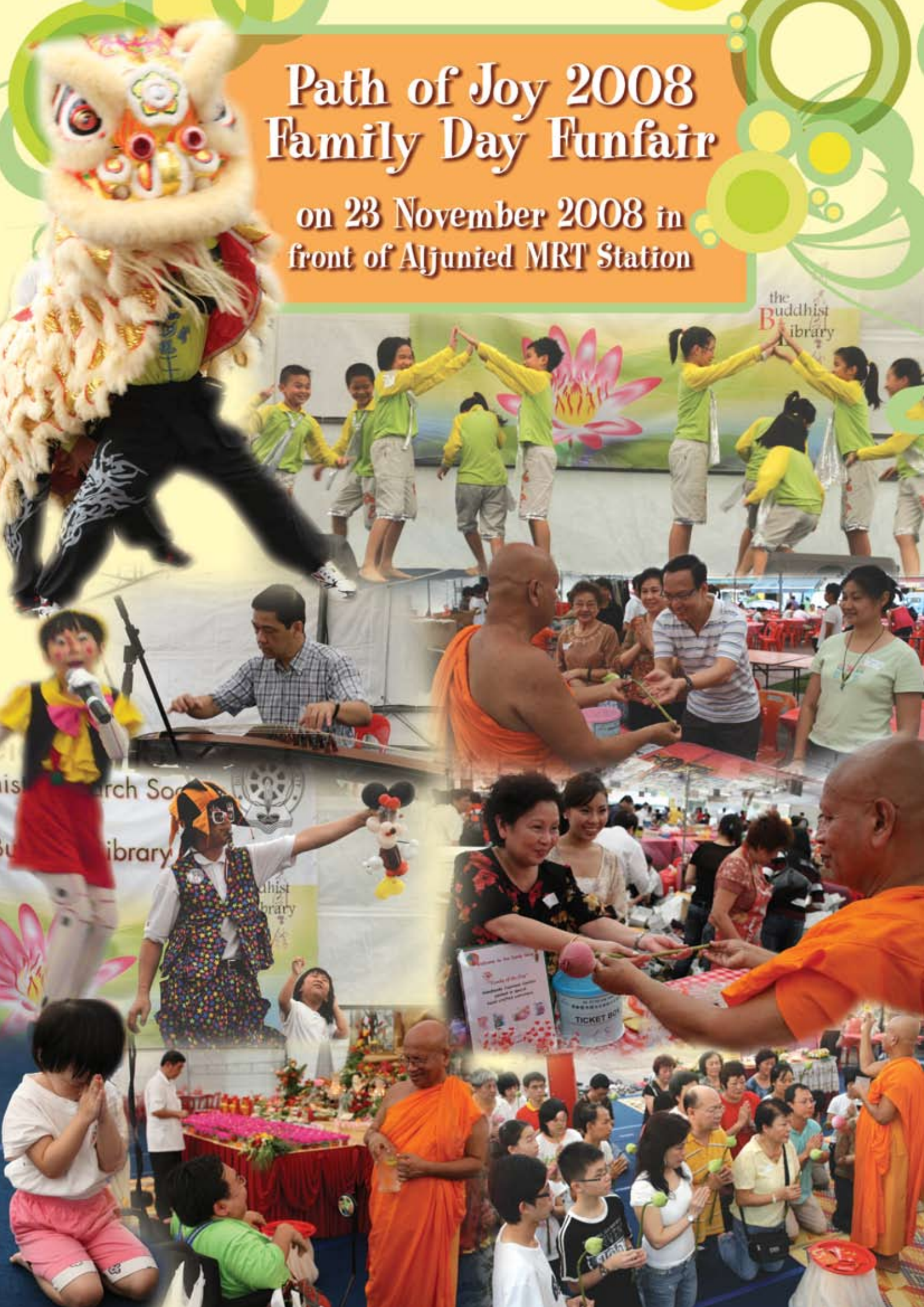
at Buddhist Library
on 19 October 2008



Path of Joy 2008 Family Day Funfair

on 23 November 2008 in
front of Aljunied MRT Station

the
Buddhist
Library



[article]

Extending a Helping Hand to Nuns - A Trip to Sikkhim and Bhutan

by Sunanda

Our group of 22 members visited Sikkhim and Bhutan from 3 October to 12 October 2008, led by Venerable Mun Cheng.

Our main purpose in visiting the 6 nunneries and one monastery was to see with our own eyes how the nuns lived and help them in any way we could.

The offerings we brought from Singapore comprised medicine, stationery, winter clothing, blankets, even moon cakes. We packed them into 85 haversacks.

We also shipped 3 computers and 4 printers from Singapore and bought 5 sewing machines in Bhutan.

We presented all these items to the nuns at the various nunneries.

But let me begin from the beginning.

The trip began with 3 1/2 hours on board an SIA flight from Singapore to Kolkata in India.

After an overnight stay in Kolkata, we took a 1 hour Jet Airways flight to Bagdogra in India.

At Bagdogra, we boarded 6 jeeps and braved the 32 degree heat in a 5 hour overland journey to Sikkhim.

You can imagine how we felt by the time we arrived at the India-Sikkim checkpoint. We were very relieved to be able to get some rest there.

Then it took another 3 hours by jeep before we arrived at Gangtok, the capital of Sikkhim.

In Gangtok, we stayed at the Chumbie Residency, a quaint little hotel nestled on one side of a steep hill.

If we expected great scenery there, we were not disappointed. Mount Kangchenjunga simply took our

breath away.

Before leaving Sikkhim for Bhutan via Jaigon, we visited Rumtek Monastery,

Rumtek! The world renowned monastery of the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa and the holiest site of the Karma Kagyu tradition.

I can't describe this magnificent spiritual complex better than its official website: www.rumtek.org

'The monastery, the largest in Sikkhim, is home to the monks community, the place where they perform the sacred rituals and practices of the Karma Kagyu lineage.'

Many sacred objects are housed within the complex, and one of the most magnificent is the Golden Stupa, which contains the precious relics of His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa. Opposite that building is the shedra, or college, Karma Shri Nalanda Institute for Higher Buddhist Studies. Members of the lay sangha practice in the community lhakhang just outside the walls of the monastery complex.'

All of us, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike, merrily rotated the Dharma wheels lining the way from the foot of the hill to the monastery building, rejoicing in our good fortune.

Leaving Rumtek, we adjourned to the city of Jaigon on the border between India and Bhutan.

Although Hotel Anand where we stayed was touted as the best in the city, I have to say that its facilities were nothing to crow about, lacking even airconditioning.

At 11 am the next morning, we crossed the border into Bhutan, entering via the Phuentsholing checkpoint.

The air was much fresher and traffic lighter than what we had experienced before this.

Between Phuentsholing checkpoint and Thimpu, the capital of Bhutan, we crossed numerous valleys and passed many mountains. The scenic alpine lakes and forests were truly spectacular.

After 8 hours, we entered Thimpu.

Dinner that night at Hotel Singye consisted of simple fried noodles.

After dinner, we prepared the offerings to be distributed to the nuns of the various nunneries on the following days.

The next morning, we took the opportunity to visit the Association for Handicapped Children. The Association trained the children in local arts and crafts and sold the products made by the children at the shop located on the ground floor.

Later we set off on the 3 hour journey to the Nalanda Institute Monastery in Phunakha.

Along the way, we stopped at the roadside market to buy fresh mushrooms, chillies, pumpkins and other vegetables. We had heard so much about the fresh mushrooms of Bhutan and so we bought some mushrooms for our dinner that night.

At Nalanda Institute Monastery, we were greeted by monks and novices lining both sides of the red carpet and blowing trumpets in the traditional Bhutanese style.

20 nuns stayed in the Jachung Karmo Nunnery which formed part of the Monastery. The Nunnery was perched on the summit of a steep cliff near the Monastery.

One of those nuns trekked 3 hours from the Nunnery to the Monastery to meet us.

She told us that, apart from the computers and

printers which would be left behind in the Monastery, the rest of the offerings would be transported to the nunnery on horseback. The nuns would have to rent a horse.

Interestingly, the amount of the horse rental depended on the season. In winter, the amount doubled because the trek during that time was much more dangerous. Fortunately, it was autumn when we were there.

The Nunnery is renowned for its *nyungne* practice.

Nyungne is a fasting and chanting practice. Participants prostrate continuously throughout the practice. They do so to purify themselves from the bad karma that they have accumulated over countless lifetimes and to prepare the groundwork for enlightenment.

What is unique about the practice here is that the nuns here perform only short prostrations, as opposed to long prostrations that are normally undertaken elsewhere, including Singapore.

After a hearty and delicious vegetarian lunch prepared by the monks, we left for the Paljorecholing Retreat Centre, a 2 storey brick building erected in Bhutanese style. Here, the retreatants live in huts with attached kitchens.

We then left for our hotel.

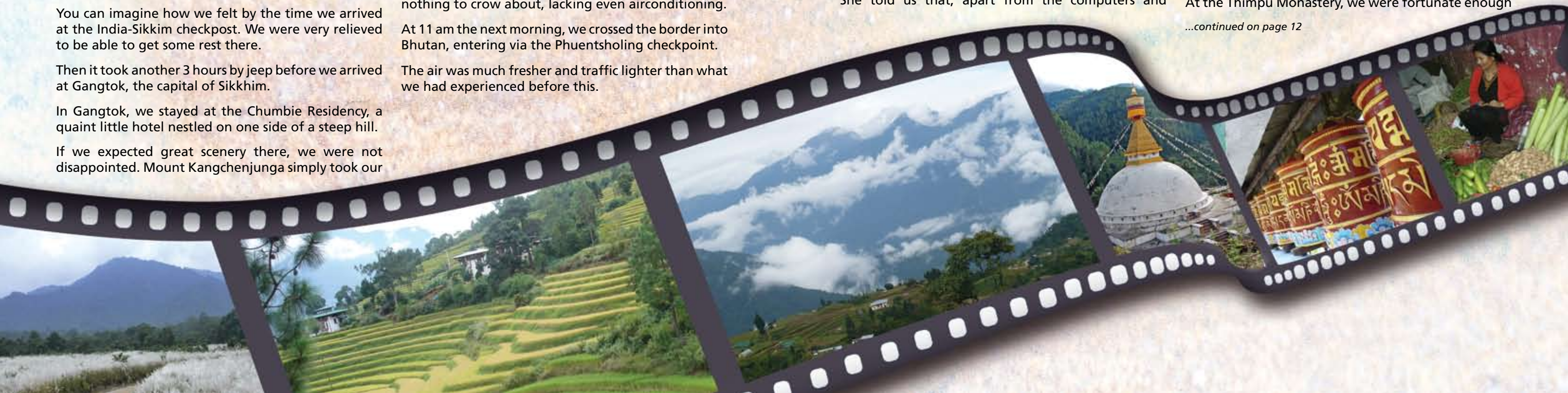
On arrival at our hotel, we handed the fresh mushrooms we had bought in the afternoon to the chef, eagerly anticipating our dinner.

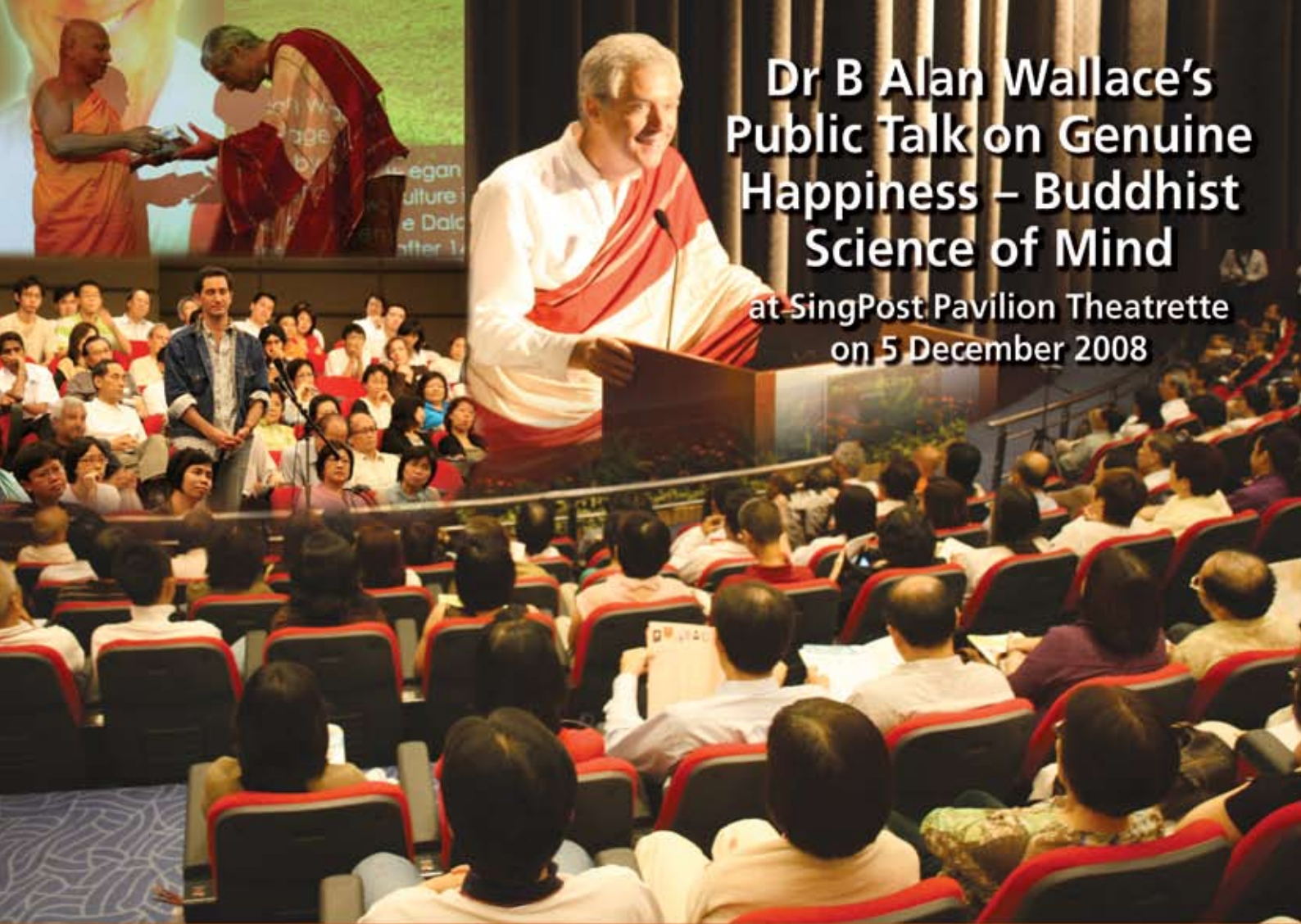
But we were soon disappointed. At dinner time, the chef said that he had to discard the mushrooms because they were infested with insects – our little lesson in impermanence and renunciation.

The next day, we visited 2 other nunneries.

At the Thimpu Monastery, we were fortunate enough

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Dr B Alan Wallace's Public Talk on Genuine Happiness – Buddhist Science of Mind

at SingPost Pavilion Theatre
on 5 December 2008

Meditation Seminar – Balancing The Heart And Mind with Dr B Alan Wallace

at Buddhist Library, Auditorium on 6 – 10 December 2008



A Theravadin in Dharamsala

Receiving teachings from His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama (HHDL) from 25 to 27 September 2008 - Some Reflections

by Shamla S Nathan

I had long aspired to attend teachings by His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama at least once in my life.

And so when I read the notice at the Buddhist Library, I immediately registered.

We arrived in Amritsa late at night on Sunday, 21 September 2008.

Our party of 8 then piled into 3 separate jeeps, luggage securely tied on the roof. We headed off in the early hours of the morning for Dharamsala.

By dawn, we were in McLeod Ganj.

McLeod Ganj was a delight. Crisp 15°C air, brilliant blue skies, majestic backdrop of the Himalayan range of snow-capped peaks.

My room at Hotel Natraj had a wonderful view of a lovely yellow monastery in the distance. None other than Namgyal Monastery, the monastery of HHDL.

At a tiny sidewalk café, I savoured my first cup of Tibetan tea, laced with delicious buttermilk, and chomped on my first momo (vegetable dumplings). Lovely!

24 September

Excitedly, we gathered at 2pm at Namgyal. We were issued our participant passes and briefed on the protocol for the teachings.

25 September

5am Wake-up call.

7.15am Queued for security check. Mobiles and cameras were banned.

8.30am Gathered at the main courtyard and up a flight of stairs to the Main Dharma Hall.

Entering the hall, my eyes eagerly soaked in multiple images of colourful Tibet. The statue of the Buddha, flanked by thangkas of Avalokitesvara, Tara and a host of other Bodhisattvas. The throne of HHDL where he would sit to dispense teachings.

Chanting of the 21 Taras began. We rose and awaited His Holiness' arrival.

The spontaneous, radiant smile on His Holiness' face brought tears to many as he blessed us all. After prostrating, he greeted many of the Sangha members flanking him.

His voice was firm, deep and melodious, with a lovely lilt to it.

His Holiness chose to teach on a text called *The Formal Teachings. Transformation in a Systematic Way in 45 Stanzas*.

As a prelude to the teachings, the Thai sangha present chanted verses in Pali.

As I had never read the chosen text, I was touched and heartened that the opening stanza paid such beautiful homage to the Buddha.

*Your body is created from a billion perfect factors of goodness
Your speech satisfies the yearnings of countless sentient beings
Your mind perceives all objects of knowledge exactly as they are*

I bow my head to you O Chief of the Sakyan Clan

We were guided to reflect on the following.

The billion causes and effects for Prince Siddhartha to become the Buddha. The Buddha's expounding of the Dharma, which caters to various levels of intelligence. *'Those with some dust in the eyes and those with more!'*

Like the Buddha's, our mind too in its intrinsic natural state is pure and luminous.

His Holiness related a case, currently being investigated in Delhi. A clinically dead person, whose body still remains fresh some weeks later.

Although the Buddha has attained Parinibbana, his mind and essence may still be very much present in many manifestations.

Next, His Holiness, expanded on the origin and historical migration of Buddhism and how the 3 schools, Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana, came to be.

In the midst of the great teacher and all gathered, monks dispensed Tibetan tea and freshly baked bread.

Never in my life had I encountered such a charming, heart warming custom, in the midst of teachings!

26 September

Today, under the expert guidance of His Holiness, we explored the 3 levels of aspirations of human beings – the Lower, Middle and Higher Scopes. And the absolute importance of choosing a skilled teacher well.

I reflected on how I was so blessed in having found Bhante B Dhammaratana as my teacher.

Thanks to his good counsel many years ago to *'keep an open mind'*, here I was, present in the midst of the Vajrayana tradition, with no previous background.

His Holiness wished that all of us present could be Higher Scope Aspirants. Motivation is a key factor.

*'If we do not strive in contemplating the defects of the truth of suffering
The genuine aspiration for liberation does not arise in us'*

Only when we know experientially will we be absolutely motivated to strive for the Highest Scope.

*'If we do not contemplate the causal process of the origins of suffering
We will fail to understand how to cut the root of cyclic existence'*

How to contemplate these causes? Concentration and meditation are imperative.

As he was often apt to do, His Holiness broke into a joke.

Whilst chanting, prayer and rituals have their places, meditation should not be side stepped.

'Om Mane Padme Hung', when recited at great speed, often ends up sounding like 'Om Money.'

Then His Holiness mentioned us 'Singaporeans' in his refreshing tongue-in-cheek manner.

Having covered the *Samadhi* factor, His Holiness now delved into the *Sila* and *Panna* aspects of the practice.

*'Generating the mind is the central axle of the supreme vehicle path
It's the foundation and the support of all expansive deeds'*

*'Giving is the wish granting jewel that satisfies the wishes of all beings
It's the best weapon to cut the constricting knots of miserliness'*

*'Recognizing these Truths the heroic Bodhisattvas
Uphold the previous Supreme Mind as the Heart of their practice'*

His Holiness recommended Shantideva's '*A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*'.

He advised us that Chapters 6 & 8 would be relatively easy and warned us that Chapter 9 would be challenging.

...continued from page 9

to be able to witness the Tsechu Festival, one of the biggest festivals in Bhutan.

Monks in traditional Bhutanese costumes danced while lay people, mostly clad in traditional Bhutanese costumes, looked on.

After lunch, we left for Paro.

Here we visited the Uma Paro Hotel renowned as the venue for the wedding celebration of the famous Hong Kong movie stars, Tony Leung and Carina Lau.

On the way to our own hotel, we passed the Tiger's Nest Monastery, a place especially venerated because of its association with Padmasambhava, who is said to have flown to Paro Taktsang (Tiger's Nest) in the form of Dorji Drolo, mounted on a flaming *dakini* tigress in 747 CE.

That night, we slept comfortably in the new Pusen Hotel.

The next morning we left for India and headed home.

It had been an eye-opener for everyone in the group, especially new comers to Buddhism or Tibetan Buddhism.

Although the overland jeep journey was rather tiring for many of us, especially our older friends, we all enjoyed ourselves and considered the experience worthwhile.

I promised myself that should I be able in the future to visit Bhutan again, I would undertake the *nyungne* retreat.

We did a fair bit of shopping during the trip. But the best souvenir that I took back from the trip is an engaging and poignant story involving 2 young novice monks whom we met in Bhutan.

Pasang Dorji is a 10 year old novice monk in the Nalanda Buddhist Institute Monastery.

Before his ordination, he was the younger son in a

Finally, he touched on the Tantric aspect of Vajrayana Buddhism and how it can only be practised after receiving initiation from an experienced teacher.

*'I have entered the great ocean of Tantras
By relying upon leadership of the learned Navigators'*

Soon it was time for the closing ceremony on 27 September 2008.

Guru puja was performed and we were blessed by His Holiness. Holy water and rice were distributed. I sipped mine and carefully 'packed' away my rice. It now sits in an important place at home.

There was also a precept taking and the Bodhisattva vow taking ceremony conducted in Tibetan. Though I did not understand anything, I closed my eyes and fervently prayed.

Blessed again. When our group photograph was taken, I got to be next to His Holiness.

desperately poor family.

The parents took a loan from a wealthy family but could not pay up. So the lenders took away the elder son, Yeshey Wangchuk, as compensation. The 13 year old boy was sent to a nearby village to look after cows. He was not given any food to eat.

One day while walking with the cows, he met Pasang.

After the encounter, Pasang took food from his Monastery regularly to share with his elder brother.

Not long after that, Yeshey told Pasang that he too wanted to be a novice monk.

So Pasang smuggled a robe from the Monastery for Yeshey and shaved his elder brother's head.

And so on that day, one novice monk left the Monastery but 2 came back.

Yeshey quickly immersed himself in the sea of maroon robes and was not noticed for some time.

When the Abbot discovered the truth on his return from an official trip, he was moved by Pasang's compassion and love for his brother and allowed Yeshey to remain.

As for the lenders, they went to the boys' parents to demand the return of their compensation. But when told that Yeshey had become a novice monk, even the lenders agreed to let things be.



[book review]

Buddhism: Tools for Living your Life

Written by Vajragupta

Published by Windhorse Publications Ltd, UK , 2007

Reviewed by Kim Li

The thing that induced me to pick up this book was its cover.

I know one shouldn't judge a book by its cover. But the fact is that the cover invoked such a strong feeling of calmness and serenity in me that it was hard not to give it a second glance. The wooden spoons made me think of nourishment and, in this case, nourishment for the mind.

I'm happy to say that I've thoroughly enjoyed the book.

However, I feel that reading this book through just once does not do it sufficient justice. This is a book which you have to read over and over again in order to be able to digest its contents fully.

What I particularly like about the book is the fact that most chapters start off with a poem. But that's primarily because of my bias. I'm very partial to poems.

But read this for yourself:

*Compassion is far more than emotion.
It is something that springs
Up in the emptiness which is when you yourself are
not there.
So that you do not know anything about it.*

*Nobody, in fact, knows anything about it.
(If they knew it, it would not be compassion);
But they can only smell
The scent of the unseen flower
That blooms in the heart of the void*

What an apt introduction to the chapter: *Compassion – the kind heart of wisdom.*

The author made references to the various schools of Buddhism in the book but has kept the book non-sectarian. Instead of relating particularly to the school of Buddhism that he practises, he has chosen to concentrate more on highlighting certain key concepts of Buddhism and how his experiences with those concepts were like.

It is written in a simple and endearing style. Concepts are also put forth in an easy to understand and relate-to manner.

For instance, when the author talks about the *Four Noble Truths*, he calls them the *Four Reminders*.

He briefly explains the Four Noble Truths and goes on to relate some of the experiences of practitioners in the Buddhist centre where he works. He also relates them to the daily experiences we all face but such that it shows us how we can work at incorporating our practice into our daily lives seamlessly.

The author has also written a few small exercises for the reader to practise. The reader must write down his or her own thoughts and experiences. Gradually, over time, self-experience and meditation, the reader will discover for himself or herself the relevance of the teachings.

The book places a lot of emphasis on meditation, allowing the reader to choose a practice that is most suitable for him or her. For, after all, the Buddha gave 84,000 teachings because we have different learning capabilities and understanding styles.

The author also stressed that it is always better to have a teacher to guide us along and to refer to the book only as a supplement or an introduction.

I also like the fact that the author made a special mention of caring and loving oneself.

In trying to practise Buddhism, I feel that some people might become overly enthusiastic and burn out early. They may tend to be overly compassionate to others but forget to be compassionate to themselves.

The author suggested that one should take care of oneself during practice so that subsequently we will be able to give more fully of our time and effort because we are more at ease. I felt this was a very wonderful middle path advice.

This reminded me of the story of Buddha and Shrona, the musician. Shrona was learning meditation and he was having a hard time because he was putting in too much effort. But when he relaxed, he fell asleep. The Buddha taught him that meditation requires the right tension, neither too loose nor too tight, much like the strings of a musical instrument.





观照功德

许多年前，泰国的一位禅修大师告诉一群主动替寺院筹款的白衣僧尼：“你们将会为所做出的善行，得到报酬。”

然后，微微一笑，他接着说：“凡是做出的善行，将会得到报酬，无论你获得金钱与否。”

当然，这位法师的原意既是佛教所谓的功德。

功德是所有佛教传承的一个共同修行。

我在泰国生活和工作时，发觉这个修行方法非常受欢迎。

当中有许多巧妙方法的设定，让普罗大众觉得功德的修行更有趣、更具意义。

例如：在排列成行的诸佛像面前，各佛像表现不同的姿态与手印，布施者可以将钱摆放在诸佛像前的碗里作供养。

我好奇，布施者是否会刻意选择某些佛像施供？或是随意施供？

我第一次看到的布施行为，是和一位泰籍朋友在一起的时候，她布施时没有一丝的犹豫。

“想试试看吗？”

我踌躇，接着转向她。

发现我在犹豫，她便说：“这很简单。你是在星期几出生？只需要把钱放在相关的碗里就行了。”

我不能。

因为我并不知道自己在星期几出生。对于泰国佛教徒而言，这是不可能发生的错误。

大多数的泰国在家佛教徒把累积功德(tum boon)当成是生命里主要的义务。僧侣提供心灵上的指导，而信徒以捐款和食物供养作为报答。

在佛教的观念里，神并没有创造或救世的能力，难怪功德的累积可以成为佛教徒的根本修行方法。

基本上，在有神论的宗教里，教徒可以通过对神的虔诚祷告而获得救赎。佛教徒却没有这种待遇，即使对佛陀有再深切的信仰也无济于事，更何况是盲目的信奉。

佛教徒要永离苦楚，一定要修习八正道和相关的道德、禅定和智慧。

换句话说，佛教徒必须学习十波罗蜜（南传佛教）或六波罗蜜（大乘佛教）。

无论哪个传承，波罗蜜的修习都是由布施开始。因此，佛教徒以布施作为修行的起步。

在这一期里，本会的达摩拉达那法师将讲解佛教徒所修习的回向功德。

它是怎么开始的？它是否具备什么意义或好处？

虽然佛教徒或非佛教徒都承认布施能够带来好处，但很多人包括佛教徒对功德可以回向仍然感到质疑。

比如说，我能否把所做的某些事的功德回向给别人？甚

至是回向自己所爱的人如母亲或伴侣。

我必须承认，这件事在我脑海里仍然是个迷团。

即使无法把功德回向给别人，这并不代表功德的累积没有益处。

在此，我想提出尊贵的第14世达赖尊者在传法时所说的教诲。

他公然在许多场合表述了身为佛教徒，无论是多么珍贵的佛理，只要是不符合已受科学验证为事实的佛理，佛教徒都应该置之不理。

他举出了一个例子。

在传统的佛教宇宙观中，须弥山是宇宙的中心，四大洲围绕的地方。

藏传佛教的修行一般包括以曼陀罗供奉上师，而曼陀罗象征着须弥山为宇宙中心的传统佛教宇宙观。

显然的，这个佛教宇宙观直接和现代科学对立，因此佛教徒应该否定它。

那么，为什么藏传佛教徒仍然供奉曼陀罗？

说到此，尊者如常发出了经典的风趣笑声暗示：“这不表示你们应该停止供奉曼陀罗给我。”

仪式在佛教只是方便法门。它们是指向月亮方向的手指，而不是月亮本身。

通过供奉曼陀罗，藏传佛教徒主要是学习舍去他们的一切，包括钱财、随身物品、梦想和怨言，他们也作功德的回向。

当我们进行传统的回向功德仪式，将水从一个小茶壶倒入一个盛满的碗里，同时在咏颂相关的经文时，同样的，我们的脑海里也应该充满爱心、慈悲心和出离心。

这无疑将让人获益匪浅。

如常祝大家阅读愉快。

Chwee Beng
编辑



(接自第16页续)

然而，当我们对过世的人生起慈悲和爱心的念头，我们的善念是有可能可以传达到他们身上，因为心智的能量可以通达任何一个地方。

无论这是否属实，有一点是可以肯定的。每当我们生起正面的心念，首先受益的是自己。

通过回向功德的修行，也是我们对过世者的感恩表现。佛陀指出，感恩是难得的美德。再说，表现感恩的心不一定是我们平时认为的孩子对父母的感激，做父母的也可以对孩子生起感激的心。

有一名常常到图书馆来的年长妇女，她有一个女儿不幸罹患癌症逝世。她要求我举办一个仪式，帮她把功德回向给女儿。

在这个新时代，许多人对于宗教仪式嗤之以鼻，习惯性地视之为迷信或不科学的举动。

但千万别轻视这个修行。有些习俗和仪式的确是意义不大，但我相信只要我们严谨修习，这个修行是非常有意义的。

在新加坡，信徒通常会在每一年七月份或八月份的鬼节期间作功德的回向。特设一个时期做回向功德的修习是实际的。否则，忙碌如新加坡人，许多人可能每年都会忘了回向。

但我们不一定要等到鬼节才回向功德给过世的亲友。在南传佛教的教法里（相信其它传承的教法也一样），每当我们做了善事，都应该将功德回向。

佛陀也鼓励信徒时刻作老年、疾病及死亡的观想。

为什么？因为无论这些现象令人感到多么的不快和害怕，当我们对它们感到熟悉后，就比较能够接受它们。无论喜不喜欢，所有人都会衰老、生病及死亡。

因此，当那一天来临时，与其让恐慌、后悔、绝望或执着淹没我们，不如让自己生起出离心和平静心，才能走得安详。

再说，如果我们在生病或即将死亡之前不曾作任何修习，痛苦和忧虑可能会压倒我们，导致无法生起正念。

单是想到死亡，大多数人都会惊慌失措。佛陀当然明白这点。

在Abhinha Paccavekkhitabba Sutta里，佛陀建议信徒作老年、疾病、死亡及恩爱离别的观想，以当作平时的禅修。

老年的观想

由于医学科技的进步，现代人的寿命比以前更长。

我们不可忘了，日复一日，我们逐日衰老。可以这么说吧，每过一日，我们与死亡的距离拉得更近。

因此佛陀要信徒观想老年，体会无常。意识到生命的飞逝并不会导致我们陷入忧郁或生起自杀的念头。相反的，它可以提醒我们善用这个短暂的生命，过一个更有意义的人生，并且优雅地面对老化的必然性。

观想健康问题

每一个人迟早都需要面对生病的问题。这不是要我们在健康的时候，把自己当成病人看待。其实，我们不应该

认为健康是理所当然的事。

在新加坡，许多人只知工作不知休息。但这个人身并非机器，更不是完美的东西。因此，不应该滥用它，这是佛陀教导的基调。

意识到生病是生命当中无可避免的事，即使我们真的生病了，也比较容易可以康复。

如此，我们就能免除不必要的担忧和恐惧。

观想死亡

有些人认为观想死亡将导致无法集中精神工作、无法快乐或享受生活。其它一些人则觉得不吉利。

如果可以通过逃避把死亡骗走，那就随自己的方式去做吧！

但我可以告诉您，延迟面对问题，只会让问题变得更糟。

要知道，这个修行的目的不是要我们感到悲观，而是帮助我们当下就活得开心、活得平静，直到命终。

话虽如此，我不是要你们从早到晚都观想死亡！

观想与所爱的人离别

2500多年前，佛陀认识到与所爱的人永久离别比起死亡本身更令人感到害怕。

这或许就是他为何把修行的次第如此地排列，从最容易观想的老年，到最令人痛苦的离别。

离别是无可避免的事实。天下无不散之筵席，我们不可能永远和所爱的人永远生活在一起。时间一到，不是我们离开他们，就是他们离开我们。

即使面对所爱的人死亡是无法忍受的痛苦，我们能为他们所做最好的事，就是确保他们在具有尊严及安详的状态下死亡。

痛苦呻吟、悲泣、吵架或殴斗对死者最没意义。更差劲的是在临终前，试图影响病人转移到自己所信仰的宗教。

最后，通过这些观想，如果可以对生命中的起伏培养若干的出离心和平静心，这将使功德回向的仪式（或其它宗教的相关修持）更具意义，也更有益。

我想以佛陀的法语作为结论。

如果您可以时常念诵，则获益良多。

■ 男女在家出家众，应常作此观。 ■

何观？

我有老之本性，我未超越老。

我有病之本性，我未超越病。

我有死之本性，我未超越死。

一切我所有，爱与喜者，
将非我所有，将与我别离。

■ 增支部经典，Vol III, page 71 ■

达摩拉达那法师

宗教顾问

佛教图书馆

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法师说

回向功德与 观想死亡

我谨借佛陀的开示，陈述回向功德的修习。

您也许已经知道，无论是南传、大乘或是密乘佛教，回向功德是所有佛教传承共同的基本修行法，各学派都教导某些方法回向功德给已逝的亲友。

这种修行法是如何开始的呢？

佛世时期，有一位国王名叫频婆娑罗王，佛陀曾经在国王所建造的寺院里居住了一段时间。

有一晚，国王做了一个梦。他看到一些人苦不堪言。他们没有食物，也没有其他必需品。

国王因此惊恐，寻求佛陀的开示。

佛陀不是命数家，但他向国王解释，这并非恐怖的事情。这些人是国王过去世的亲属。因为造恶，因此沦落到如此悲凉的环境，在恶鬼道中挣扎求生。

佛陀建议国王行善累积功德，然后将功德回向给过去的亲属。

国王履行了指示。

之后，他又做了另一个梦。梦中，他看到亲属的生活情况已有改善。

当然，我们无须探讨故事的细节，但它却意味着善行所累积的功德是有可能可以回向给已过世的亲属。

然而，佛陀曾透露，功德无法回向给那些已转世到人道的众生。

(第15页续)



达摩拉达那法师，
佛教图书馆与《极乐之程》于此恭祝
各会员，读者及朋友在2009新年
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