

# Samsāra Revalued

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Almost from time immemorial Samsāra—the Hindu-Buddhist name for the mode of ever-changing or becoming, space-time, birth-death existence in which all sentient beings participate—has been devalued by both Hinduism and Buddhism. For the Theravāda Buddhist, indeed, Samsāra is the best possible synonym for all that is fundamentally evil in the universe. Signifying “continued passing on into new existences” it is that quality of existence which calls most insistently for salvation from it. Nor does it matter greatly that at some levels in the thirty-one planes of existence<sup>1</sup>—say the Brahma-lokas of immaterial and almost infinitely long duration—existence is *relatively* more pleasant than in one of the deeper, hotter hells. In the final analysis *all* individuated existence is indelibly marked by the three signs: *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (dis-ease or suffering), and *anattā* (insubstantiality or no-souledness). Life, or existence, is a malady to be remedied; a torment-house of infinite frustration to be escaped.

To be sure, not all Buddhists give the appearance of suffering from an incurable alienation from life, least of all Burmese Buddhists. For just as the average Christian is able to make out fairly well with at least a few minor joys in this vale of tears, so the average Buddhist is able to adapt emotionally to the prospect of a few thousand more existences or so in Samsāra. The majority indeed have no stomach for Nibbāna, immediately and forthwith at least. Nevertheless, the Buddhist pessimism with regard to the worth of Samsāra, and the proposed remedy of complete detachment from samsāric goods and evils, hopes and fears, have pervasively affected Buddhist cultures. Not only is there a certain paradoxical insouciance, so to speak, about the fate of the world—for should it achieve perdition, how greatly different would this be from its present condition? But, more fundamentally and Buddhistically, who can *do* anything about

Samsāra? Samsāra is incurably incurable; the only way to improve upon it is to be individually rid of it.

Yet, unexpectedly, in these latter days Theravāda Buddhism is revaluating Samsāra. Not all thirty-one planes of it equally to be sure, but most particularly the human plane. This is not only in keeping with the obviously greater availability of this latter realm for consideration and possible action, but is in keeping with the unique nature of human-level existence as compared to other existence-levels. For, says Buddhism, only on the human plane can Samsāra be remedied even by escape from it. Yet in somewhat *non*-Buddhist fashion it is today proposed that some improvement may be, and possibly ought to be, wrought in Samsāra itself. But one must hasten to add that such improvement as is now proposed is proposed under cover of the impossibility of such improvement, and thus becomes an intricate exercise in both having and not having the orthodox pleasures of other-worldliness.

We may begin by observing that this process of *sub rosa*, almost unconscious, change of samsāric substance is accompanied by staunch affirmations and reaffirmations of the traditional devaluation of Samsāra. How can such things be? Obviously, the very fervor of the contemporary affirmation of orthodoxy is an indication of the strong pressure under which that orthodoxy labors today in seeking to maintain continuity of its tradition in a changing world; of the magnitude of the change actually taking place in Buddhism; and is witness to a deep and largely subconscious guilt with regard to the progress of that alteration of orthodoxy.

We shall, therefore, not expect to find direct evidences of the positive revaluation of Samsāra in the form of any explicit announcement of change, nor in the glorification of religious modernity, nor even in any hypocritical double-faced presentations of differing orthodoxies to different groups. It is both more simple and subtle than this. *What is occurring is the recommendation of orthodoxy (in all good faith) as unchanging, but with this the unconscious employment of the terms and values of the "opposition,"* i.e. non-Buddhist secularism. For the Buddhist preacher today in Burma speaks approvingly of samsāric involvement as often as of nibbānic detachment; and of the twentieth-century Christian-secular values in Buddhism as eagerly as first-century Buddhist-monastic virtues.

There is, for instance, the immense vogue of the words "science"

and "scientific." Now for the Buddhist East science represents (1) the primary and outstanding accomplishment of Western-Christian intellectual genius, and (2) the twentieth-century technological revolution with all its products. And here is a prime instance of ambivalent cake-eating and cake-having. For superficially, at least, the East discounts and distrusts scientific development *in toto* as evidence of the West's unspiritual, decadently-religious materialism. And it points to the encroachments of Western commercialism and industrialism, to the West's engendering of personal and international strife, as the essence of enshrined greed. Yet on the other hand, and with equal vigor, Buddhist apologetic goes out of its way to prove that Buddhism not only has nothing to fear from the advancement of scientific thought, but is in fact itself the essence of the scientific spirit. Thus:

(1) The Buddha might have devoted himself to science, and could have made all of the modern scientific discoveries some 2,500 years ago had he so desired; but he deliberately turned to the more important realm of the mind, yet in a truly scientific, self-validating manner proceeded to analyze the inner life of man and to set forth as experimentally confirmed truth the way to salvation.

(2) However, when, in the course of discussions concerning salvation, the Buddha *did* make reference to physical matters, his words were infallibly true, and indicate a knowledge of which science has only now become aware. For example: his description of grain-of-dust smallness is clearly anticipatory of the atom; his doctrine of a causally ordered flux comprising all that exists (perpetual change governed by dharmic order) is only now being discovered by physics; the fluxing nature of human consciousness and so-called selfhood, long known to the Buddhist meditator, is only now hailed as a new discovery by Western psychologists; parapsychology, it is held, is confirming the doctrine of rebirth; a doctor affirms that the Buddha described stages of the human foetus as yet imperceptible by microscope; a layman writing to a newspaper asserts that when once men land on the moon they will discover the Buddha's measurement of it was more accurate than any of the guesses astronomers have made.<sup>2</sup> And no less a person than the Honorable U Nu, then premier of Burma, in a speech in New York in 1955, invited ten selected, scientifically-minded individuals who truly wished to prove for themselves the absolute

truth of Buddhist teaching, to be guests of the Burmese government at a meditation center.<sup>3</sup>

How shall we evaluate this? It is, of course, legitimate, from the Buddhist point of view, to suit the truth to the individual and his age; indeed, how can he otherwise apprehend it? Hence the only way to prove the truth of Buddhism to prospective converts in a scientifically indoctrinated age is to demonstrate its *scientific* truth. Yet one gains the impression that many Buddhists themselves would like to be assured on these matters.

Cosmologically, of course, there is considerable room and fluidity for harmonious adjustment, because Buddhism is the inheritor of the Indian religious-philosophical imagination which in fine careless raptures could speak as easily of a billion years as we speak of a fortnight, and speak of ten thousand times ten million universes as readily as we speak of Main Street. Yet inevitably there must still be a major overhaul of ideas even here. There is for instance the matter of Mount Meru,<sup>4</sup> the central earth-mountain, and its spatially related planes of existence. There is also the thought-world of *pat-* (earth, air, water-spirit)<sup>5</sup> worship, so real to the average Burmese Buddhist, so much a part of traditional Buddhist vocabulary. Much of this will disappear with the full advent of science. But, since planes of existence are also integrally tied to meditational states, they can perhaps be symbolized into acceptable contemporary forms. And the infinite framework of ever-changing universes, so fundamental to Buddhist thought in general, renders thought-forms about *particular* universes relatively unimportant in the long run. How flexible literalistic Theravāda Buddhism can be in such matters remains to be seen, however.

There is a second area of sub rosa transformation—the new stress on practical-social values. Of course Nibbāna is still officially the supreme good for all Buddhists. But the words of the critics of Buddhism, including some home-grown communists, to the effect that Buddhism is good *only* for world-denial, are in turn stoutly denied. This comes out in several ways:

- (1) The scriptures are searched for instances of the Buddha's practical prescriptions for the life of the layman and these are hailed as complete blueprints for world peace.
- (2) Buddhism is declared to be democratic in its view of human nature. Buddha is portrayed as an ardent campaigner against caste

in his day, and karma is interpreted to mean the right of each individual to be himself.

(3) Social service and welfare motivations begin to appear in Buddhist writings, and to be incorporated limitedly even in some programs of the Saṅgha (order of monks), who by definition are dedicated solely to Nibbāna-seeking.

(4) There is hope on the part of some that the monks can be more broadly educated than at present, and be made more directly useful to society by a strengthening of their traditional role as teachers of the young.

(5) It has been declared several times that socialism and Buddhism are consonant with each other. In his 1960 1961 term as prime minister, indeed, U Nu sought to achieve a Buddhist socialism and was supported by most members of the Saṅgha. His rationale of the harmony of Buddhism with socialism was stated by him in his 1959-1960 campaign speeches in the following description of the proposed Buddhist-socialist State:

So under the new society people can spare their surplus money to set up a common pool for the establishment of a Socialist State. This is true Dāna (charity). I believe the Socialist Society has these four virtues: (a) Right view with regard to property; (b) the main emphasis can be put on the achievement of Liberation (i.e., Nibbāna); (c) Sīla, Samādhi and Paññā may become dominant principles in daily life; (d) communal charity becomes possible, and the practice of Dāna (alms-giving) leads to Nibbāna.<sup>6</sup>

To be sure, this plan aborted due to many factors. And the socialism of Ne Win's government is quite different in several important respects from U Nu's Buddhist socialism. Yet even Ne Win's socialism, secular though it may be, is being backed by the Saṅgha. A recent statement from a senior monks' conclave indicates the lines along which social, political, nationalistic, and religious interests can be made to support each other harmoniously. Quoting from the newspaper account of one monk's speech:

The Revolutionary Government, he said, stood for the emancipation of the people from the economic strangulation. If the people became prosperous the *Sasana* [i.e., Buddha-teaching] would be well supported. . . .

When the people became prosperous, evils would lessen, and more

and more would take the path of the *Dhamma*, [for] as the saying [has it] *Sila* [morality] can be kept only on a full stomach.

He also pointed out these further benefits of the attempt of the Revolutionary Government to achieve Burmese socialism:

This goal, the Sayadaw stated, envisaged a classless society, freedom from want, economic well-being for the entire people, ending exploitation of man by man.

Our Lord, the Sayadaw stated, had also striven for a classless society, and had preached against inordinate greed in making one's livelihood as one of the ways to the blessed goal of *Nibbāna*.<sup>7</sup>

And with this urging the two hundred monks present unanimously passed a resolution approving the Government's banning of all political parties because they were opposing the march to socialism—including the fragmented Union Party of U Nu, who presently still remains in protective custody.

It should be added that this is the furthest limit of "political" activity encouraged or allowed by the present government for the monks. Ne Win has repeatedly pointed out that:

The Revolutionary council... desires the purity of religion, especially of Buddhism, the religion of the majority of the people of the country, and believes that this task of keeping the Buddha sasana pure should be borne solely by the sanghas.

For this purpose of keeping the Buddha sasana pure, the Revolutionary Council said, the sanghas' sanctity is besmirched by dabbling with the mundane affair of politics.<sup>8</sup>

He further went on to promise the Sangha all possible aid against those who might seek to use it for other than religious purposes. It is of course quite obvious that resurgent nationalism has played, and continues to play, a considerable part in this adaptation of Buddhism to the modern situation. Burmans take great pride in the fact of the large (85 per cent), devout, and traditional Buddhist following in Burma. To be Burman is essentially to be Buddhist; the two can almost be equated—though there has been no persecution of non-Buddhists, by and large, even in these post-British days. Nonetheless the promotion of the welfare of Buddhism is also the promotion of the welfare of Burma, and vice versa, in most Burmese minds.

One more aspect of this adaptation of Buddhism to the contemporary world scene and of its yielding to worldly pressures is to be

found in the reinterpretation of its basic imagery and religious vocabulary. Again, and especially here, it is to be noted that the *fact* of adaptation is flatly denied as the rule. If there seems to be change, it is maintained that the one who believes there *is* change is simply mistaken as to the true and traditional meaning of the Buddhist doctrine and practice. But to the outside observer it seems there has been a considerable shift in emphasis from other-worldly-oriented passivity to this-worldly-oriented activity of a hopefully dynamic sort. Since I have dealt with this at length elsewhere<sup>9</sup> I shall here only briefly list some half-dozen manifestations of this new emphasis:

(1) There is the recent emphasis, for a decade or two now, upon the meditating *layman*. Not only does this raise the layman's religious status, so to speak, making him in part at least a co-traveler on the road to Nibbāna with the monk, but has importantly modified the context and connotation of meditation itself, the central discipline of the Buddhist way of life. Meditation becomes useful *both* for this world and for Nibbāna. For, it is held, by the meditational practice of concentration of mind, one becomes capable of greater dispassionateness, objectivity, and concentration in *everything* that he does—while at the same time only by meditation can Nibbāna itself be reached. Therapeutic byproducts, both mental and physical, are also claimed for meditation.

(2) Karma, which has stood for centuries as the primary Buddhist rationale of one's unfortunate lot and the unhappy status quo, and whose connotative flavor has been that of fatedness, is consistently being interpreted as the capacity to *change* one's future self and destiny, here and now, on the spot, and is praised as promoting self-reliance in general.

(3) The Bodhisattva ideal,<sup>10</sup> so central to Mahāyāna Buddhism, is being given an increasing hearing in Theravāda Buddhism. One is sometimes told that there are many instances of self-sacrifice for others in the Buddhist tradition; that it may be better in this world-age to have many more who will deliberately become public servants rather than pursue the career of a Nibbāna-questing monk; and that there is an increasing disposition on the part of some to make Buddha-vows, i.e., turn away from the narrower ideal of achieving Nibbāna as soon as possible for oneself, to the ideal of countless lives of holy, service-filled endeavor to achieve Buddhahood and its

salvation-bringing power in the end. When I once inquired why this then was not indeed the better way, I was given only a prudential reason: The longer way is open to many more possibilities of failure and retrogression.

(4) Equanimity or detachment, the hall-mark of the Nibbāna-lāver, is often expressly stated to mean, not neutrality or indifference to things worldly, but on the contrary, a disinterestedness which can meaningfully inform the most active sort of life. One is struck here by the fact that traditionally inaccessible Nibbāna and its values are now being brought nearer to the practical world, indeed being quite specifically and definitely related to it. Nor in this same connection can it be viewed as an accident that today much is said about the possibility of achieving nibbānic peace, right here and now in one's daily busy life.

Such then is the general quality of the contemporary Buddhist reevaluation of Saṁsāra. The particular forms that this reevaluation may take in the future, the nature of its practical applications, and the success of such applications, will depend in part upon the course of future political events in Burma. But unless—and it must be admitted that both of these “unlesses” are not beyond possibility—there is a Communist take-over, or a thoroughgoing secularization of the total cultural life under Burmese Socialism, Theravāda Buddhism in Burma will increasingly seek to remake Saṁsāra nearer heart's desire, even though that heart's desire be Buddhistically oriented, and though it be done under the form of the impermanence and utter unworth of that “same” Saṁsāra that is being redone.

## NOTES

1. The thirty-one planes of existence represent four nether planes of subhuman existence: hell, disembodied spirits, animals, Titan-like spirits; the human plane, and some twenty-six superhuman planes in which live gods (devas) i.e. men-become-gods through their good deeds. Life in these is progressively longer as one rises in the scale, and is progressively disembodied. In general it is delightful in nature—though still short of Nibbāna—and not leading to it.

2. See author's *A Thousand Lives Away* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1963), chapter entitled “Theravada Buddhism Encounters Science.”

3. Pamphlet “What is Buddhism?” An address by the Honorable U Nu, former Minister of Burma, delivered under sponsorship of New York University, July 6, 1955.



4. Mount Meru, as the central earth-mountain, is an archetype of all universes, according to Buddhist cosmology. Ringing Meru are seven concentric seas each ringed in turn by a circular mountain chain. In the seventh sea are the earth islands; and beyond the seventh sea is the edge of the universe, marked by a mighty circular iron-mountain range. On the slopes and above Meru is the hierarchy of the twenty-six superhuman planes of existence.

5. Nats are demoted *devas* (from Indian Hinduism), Burmese spirits, ogres, and spirits of departed persons. Their power is over the physical environment of man and they are often prayed to for personal and material success, but never petitioned for salvation in Nibbāna since they too stand in need of such salvation.

6. Quoted, in Winston L. King, *The Hope of Nibbana* (Open Court, 1964), p. 267. (Nibbāna is the Pali form of the more widely-known Sanskrit *Nirvāna*.) Materials in numbered items from Part II of same volume. *Sīla* means ordinary morality; *Samādhi* means the power of mental concentration gained in meditation, necessary to achieve *Piññā* or wisdom, which in turn is necessary for achieving Nibbāna.

7. *The Guardian*, April 5, 1964. *Dhamma* here means, rather narrowly, the Buddha's teaching about the way of salvation. *Sevassā* means senior teacher-monk.

8. *The Guardian*, April 19, 1964.

9. King, *In the Hope of Nibbana*, Part II.

10. The Bodhisattva, or Enlightenment Being, is a future Buddha who by his almost endless lives of meritorious deeds will win Buddhahood and Nibbāna, but who will in the end remain one step short of his own Nibbāna to be reincarnated over and over again in Samsāra for the salvation of others. This is the chosen ideal of the Mahāyāna Buddhism of China and Japan.