

## Dhamma Without Rebirth?

By Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

**The teaching of rebirth is not merely an article of Buddhist faith, an empty dogma, but has tremendous implications for the entire course of Dhamma practice.**

In line with the present-day stress on the need for religious teachings to be personally relevant and directly verifiable, in many Dhamma circles the time-honored Buddhist doctrine of rebirth has come up for stern re-examination. Although only a few contemporary Buddhist thinkers still go so far as to suggest that this doctrine be tossed aside as “unscientific,” another opinion has gained currency which also detracts from the teaching on rebirth. According to this other view, the doctrine of rebirth is a mere “metaphysical” hypothesis that has no essential connections with the heart of the Buddha’s teaching. The Dhamma, it is said, is essentially a pragmatic, existential therapy aimed at helping us to resolve our immediate problem of suffering in the here and now. The means it offers us to accomplish this task include a variety of practical techniques that help us gain inner calm and enhance awareness of the inner workings of our minds. At the heart of these practical techniques is the practice of meditation. Meditation promotes self-awareness and inner understanding but has no need for rituals, articles of faith, and religious doctrines, which are nothing more than crutches for weak minds. The belief system of traditional Buddhism, it is said, is merely part of the cultural baggage of Asia that we inherit along with the essence of the Dhamma. But with our present enlightened understanding, we can extract the precious treasure of the Dhamma from its cultural and religious baggage, and we can then discard the baggage as inappropriate in this age of scientific knowledge and technological progress.

If we suspend our own assumptions and biases for the moment and instead go directly to our sources, we come upon the indisputable fact that the Buddha himself repeatedly taught rebirth and apparently taught it as a basic principle of his teaching. Viewed in their totality, the Buddha’s discourses show us that far from being a mere concession to the mode of thinking prevalent in his time, far from being a mere cultural accretion to the Dhamma, the doctrine of rebirth is intimately related to so many other teachings that to think of removing it is to risk reducing the Dhamma to a pale image of its original formulation. On reflection, we would further find that the teaching of rebirth is not merely an article of Buddhist faith, an empty dogma, but has tremendous implications for the entire course of Dhamma practice.

According to the Pali Nikayas, the most ancient collection of Buddhist texts, the aim of the Buddhist path is liberation from suffering. Superficially, this might seem to mean that the Dhamma is concerned solely with the present life, with helping us to free ourselves from misery, anxiety, and confusion in the here and now. But if we don’t stop with this mere phrase, but look into the deeper meaning of the Buddha’s discourses, we will see that the Buddha makes it abundantly clear that the suffering he is ultimately speaking about is the suffering of bondage to samsara, the round of repeated birth and death. This is the suffering he wants us to fully understand; this is the suffering from which the Dhamma is intended to rescue us.

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**Save this Date: Chinese Lunar New Year Celebration, Saturday, February 4th**

Program includes Lectures by Ven. Jen-chun and Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi,  
Devotional Service, “Great Compassion” Meditation, Special Luncheon

## Dhamma Without Rebirth? *(continued from page 1)*

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To be sure, the Dhamma does have an aspect that is directly visible and can be personally verified here and now. By direct inspection of our own experience we can see that sorrow, anxiety, fear, and grief always arise from our mental defilements – from our greed, aversion, and ignorance. Conversely, we can also see that sorrow, anxiety, fear, and grief can be eliminated through the removal of our mental defilements. The importance of this directly visible side of Dhamma practice shouldn't be underestimated, for it helps to inspire our confidence in the liberating power of the Buddhist path. However, to downplay the doctrine of rebirth and interpret the entire purpose of the Dhamma as release from psychological suffering is to dilute and distort the teaching. By doing so one seriously risks reducing it in the end to little more than an ancient system of psychotherapy.

The Buddha himself has clearly indicated that the root problem of human life is not simply the fact that we are vulnerable to sorrow, grief, and fear here and now, but that we bind ourselves, by our craving and ignorance, to the repeated round of birth, aging, sickness, and death, within which we meet the various types of physical and mental affliction. Thus the deeper problem that underlies bodily and mental suffering is our bondage to birth and death. The Buddha has also shown that the primary danger in the defilements is their causal role in sustaining the round of rebirths. As long as they remain intact within the deep strata of the mind, they drag us through the round of becoming, leading us from death to new birth and from birth to new death. And as we go on from life to life, we shed a flood of tears “greater than the waters of the four oceans.” If we consider these points carefully, we would then see that the practice of Dhamma is not designed merely to provide us with a simple therapy that will enable us to allay our worries and anxieties. It aims, rather, at bringing about a far-reaching inner transformation in the very depths of consciousness – a transformation that will liberate us from the cycle of worldly existence in its entirety.

**A**dmittedly, for most of us our primary motivation for entering the Buddha's path has been a troubling sense of dissatisfaction with the routine course of our ordinary lives rather than a keen perception of the dangers in the round of rebirths. However, if we are to follow the Dhamma through to its end and tap its full potential for conferring peace and higher wisdom, we have to guide our practice beyond the motives that originally spurred us to enter the path. We have to outgrow our original agendas and grow into the program the Buddha has outlined for us in his clear and well-defined teachings. And this means we should be ready to investigate those essential truths disclosed to us by the Buddha, which we can then use to deepen our practice and strengthen our motivation for pursuing the goal of the teaching.

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One of these “essential truths” is the principle of rebirth, with its counterpart, the doctrine of kamma. Though contemplating the presently existent phenomena is the key to the practice of insight meditation, it would be a fundamental mistake to hold that the entire practice of Dhamma consists in simply being mindful of the present moment. The Buddhist path stresses the role of wisdom as the means of liberation, and wisdom includes not only a penetration of the present moment in its vertical depths, but a comprehension of the past and future horizons within which our present existence unfolds. To recognize the principle of rebirth will give us a panoramic standpoint from which we can survey our lives in their broader context and total network of relationships. This will spur us on in our own pursuit of the path and will reveal the profound significance of the goal towards which our practice points, liberation from the cycle of rebirths as the ultimate end of suffering. ☸

*(An earlier version of this essay was published in the BPS Newsletter; Kandy, Sri Lanka, Spring 1987.)*

## NEWS BRIEFS

### Chinese Lunar New Year to be Celebrated on February 4th

On this day we will have a special morning service and New Year luncheon. The rule of "Noble Silence" during lunch will be lifted on this day, so that we can enjoy getting to know one another better.

### One-Day Meditation Retreat Well Received

On December 10th, the monastery hosted its first one-day meditation program. Over forty people registered for the program, but due to the near-blizzard that struck northwest New Jersey the day before, a few people cancelled and the number who actually attended dropped to about thirty-five. Twelve of the attendees took the eight precepts. Tan Quan performed the meritorious deed of preparing lunch for the meditators.

The meditators all appreciated this opportunity to devote an entire day to sitting and walking meditation and expressed the hope that the monastery will host more such all-day meditations as well as longer week-end retreats in the future.

### Bhante to Teach in Taiwan for a Month

From mid-February until mid-March, Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi will be teaching in Taiwan. He will be giving a seminar from February 17th until March 3rd on selected suttas from the *Majjhima Nikaya* at Xiang-guang Si in Chia I, the home monastery of our resident bhikkhunis, Ven. Jian-dao and Ven. Jian-xun. His seminar will be joined by nuns from Miao-yun Si and other monasteries. Bhante will be teaching the "Discourse on Right View" (Sammaditthi Sutta) and the "Simile of the Cloth" (Vatthupama Sutta).

After completing his seminar on March 3rd, he will go to Hsin Chu, where he will give lectures at Fu-yan Buddhist Institute and Fa-yuan Lecture Hall. He will return to Bodhi Monastery on March 14th.

### Thank you, Ven. Guang-jing

This past year, Ven. Guang-jing, a teacher at the Fu-yan Buddhist Institute in Taiwan, a premier institute for Buddhist studies established in 1954 by Master Yin-shun, came to Bodhi Monastery to teach at the summer Dharma Retreat. He arrived at the monastery in the last week of June and stayed on for six months, until December 20th, when he returned to Taiwan.

During his stay, besides the lectures he gave at the Dharma Retreat, he guided the Saturday morning Chinese discussion group, and during Master Jen-chun's absence, gave a six-week series of talks in Chinese on Master Yin-shun's understanding of the Dharma. He also took advantage of his stay at Bodhi Monastery to study Pali and *Majjhima Nikayas* with Bhante, reaching the last chapter of the intermediate Pali textbook on the very afternoon of his departure.

### DHARMA STUDIES:

#### Shifu Teaching History of Indian Buddhism

*Saturdays, 9:50 - 10:40 am (Chinese)*  
Master Jen-chun has been teaching the history of Indian Buddhism, based on Master Yin-shun's work, *Yindu Fojiao Sixiangshi*. These classes have been highly appreciated by those who attend. In addition, Shifu gives regular Dharma lectures on Saturday afternoons from 1:45 to 2:30 pm. We are all quite delighted that at the age of 86, he is still so vigorous and his mind so sharp and clear.

#### Sutta Study with Bhante

*Tuesdays, 7:00 - 8:15 pm (English)*  
*Winter Break: Feb. 14 - Mar. 14, resuming on Mar. 21st.*  
Our systematic study of the *Majjhima Nikaya* is now well into the "Wisdom" section. In the autumn, Bhante led us into a detailed study of the *Sammaditthi Sutta*, the *Discourse on Right View*, and other suttas that teach the basic principles of right understanding. He will complete the first

part of the *Wisdom* section in early February, and then resume on March 21st with a series of suttas connected with the development of insight. Even newcomers are welcome to attend.

### "Exploring the Word of the Buddha" Vol. 1 Now on CD in MP3 Format

While on a trip to China and Taiwan, Mr. Tsuku Lee arranged for the production of a thousand copies of the first volume of our CD, "Exploring the Word of the Buddha," which contains all of Bhante's 48 lectures on the *Majjhima Nikaya* from January 2003 until August 2004. The lectures are intended to facilitate an in-depth study of Bhante's edition of Ven. Nanamoli's translation of the *Majjhima Nikaya*, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*.

We will be ready to accept requests for this CD some time in January. Watch for an announcement. Please do not inquire about it at this time. These lectures, as well as the more current ones, are also uploadable from our website.

### BEGINNING STUDIES:

#### Discussion Sessions for Intro Course Students in January

*Saturdays, 9:30 - 11:00 am, January 7th, 14th, and 21st*  
We have invited the students who participated in the Introductory Course to Buddhism this past fall to join us in continuing their investigation through a series of three informal discussion sessions.

We are also currently planning another introductory course for the spring or summer of this year.

#### Bodhi Youth Program Continues

*Saturdays, 9:50 - 11:00 am, Jan. (date TBD) and Feb. 4th*  
This class for kids ages 9 - 13 years old is taught by William Bertolotti. For more information contact William at 516.314.0306 or by email, [williambertolotti@yahoo.com](mailto:williambertolotti@yahoo.com).

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## NEWS BRIEFS

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### DANA:

#### **Energy-saving Windows Installed**

The project of installing double-pane windows and new doors at Bodhi Monastery has been completed after a final inspection on December 9, 2005. The project was funded by Yin Shun Foundation with the help of the generous donations from the lay community, including many of the 2004 Dharma Retreat participants.

A total of 206 windows and 15 doors replaced the old fixtures installed in the 1960s during the original construction of the premise. Since early November when major work on the three-stage installation was mostly complete, there has been a marked difference in energy saving, which could not have come soon enough as prices of natural gas and heating oil continue to rise.

Thank you to Ven. Hui-yong for managing the project in the past 18 months, from soliciting competitive bids to monitoring the installation, and thank you to Kathy Wu for coordinating the efforts between the Yin Shun Foundation and the contractor.

The next major projects under consideration include repainting the interior of the Buddha Hall and resurfacing the driveways. Your continuous support for all of our undertakings shall be greatly appreciated.

#### **Funds Raised for Katrina Victims**

Friends of Bodhi Monastery raised over \$10,000 this past summer to aid the victims of Hurricane Katrina. The funds were directed to the Tzu Chi Foundation.

#### **Bodhi Food Pantry Update**

**FOOD CONNECTIONS:** The Bodhi Food Pantry now consists of three programs: the U.S.D.A., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Food Program, and the Bodhi Food

Program. Donors to the programs are NORWESCAP, the USDA, area grocers, area vendors, and local citizens. The Pantry is also now part of a United Way sponsored local pantry co-op and Shoprite's "Partnership in Caring" program.

**RECENT DONATIONS:** Andover Township Recreation Dept. recently held their 7th/8th grade dance and asked those who attended to support the Bodhi Food Pantry by bringing in food donations. Long Pond School, also of Andover, donated food as well. Over 90 frozen turkeys and the trimmings were collected and handed out over the holiday season. People Help of Sussex County provided us with 30 turkeys.

**FRIDAY VOLUNTEERS NEEDED:** The Pantry is staffed by local community volunteers and Bodhi Monastery volunteers. We are always in need of more volunteers on Friday mornings to help with food distribution.

**FOOD NEEDED:** The Pantry is now serving an average of 34 individuals/families per week. This is up significantly from about 25 per week at the same time last year. This is largely due to the higher cost of living. If you or your organization would like to donate food, please contact us.

**FREEZER NEEDED:** We are looking for a donation of a small chest-type or upright freezer in either excellent or new condition. Alternatively, if you would like to sponsor the purchase of a freezer, it would be greatly appreciated.

**KNOW SOMEONE IN NEED?** If you or someone you know could use our service, please contact us.

For more information on any of the above, contact Duke DeGroat by e-mail at [duke@thedukeagency.com](mailto:duke@thedukeagency.com) or phone 973.940.0711, or Patricia Devlin by e-mail at [patriciadevlin@yahoo.com](mailto:patriciadevlin@yahoo.com).

## JANUARY/FEBRUARY DHARMA SCHEDULE

### **SATURDAYS:**

9:50 - 10:40 am Study Groups in English & Chinese  
10:50 - 11:10 pm Devotional Service  
11:15 - 12:15 pm Lunch and cleanup  
12:40 - 1:30 pm Dharma Talk (English) by Ven. Bodhi, Ven. Xin-xing, or guest lecturer  
1:45 - 2:30 pm Dharma Talk (Chinese) by Ven. Jen-chun  
2:45 - 4:45 pm Pali class

### **SUNDAYS:**

9:30 - 10:45 am Meditation Group guided by resident monks

### **FIRST SUNDAY OF EACH MONTH:**

9:00 - 9:30 am Beginners instruction in meditation

### **TUESDAYS:\***

7:00 - 8:15 pm Sutta Study Class with Ven. Bodhi

\*Class cancelled Feb. 14 - Mar. 14

### **DAILY:**

4:30 - 5:00 pm Chanting Liturgy  
5:05 - 6:00 pm Sitting meditation