

The Heretic Sage

By Bhikkhu Yogananda

THIS IS A SERIES OF ARTICLES ON VEN. KATUKURUNDE ÑĀÑANANDA THERA. IN NOVEMBER 2009 I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO STAY AT HIS MONASTERY FOR A FEW DAYS AND HAVE SEVERAL LONG CONVERSATIONS WITH HIM. THE ARTICLES ARE BASED ON THE RECORDINGS OF THESE DISCUSSIONS.

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How does a bhikkhu know the ford? Here a bhikkhu goes from time to time to such bhikkhus who have learned much, who are well versed in the tradition, who maintain the Dhamma, the Discipline, and the Codes, and he enquires and asks questions of them thus: 'How is this, venerable sir? What is the meaning of this?' These venerable ones reveal to him what has not been revealed, clarify what is not clear, and remove his doubts about numerous things that give rise to doubt. That is how a bhikkhu knows the ford.

- MAHĀGOPĀLAKA SUTTA (MN 33)

THE HERETIC SAGE (PART I)

Bhante Ñāṇananda is not the monk I thought he would be. He is much more. As I recall my first meeting with him in his small cave kuti, the first word that crosses my mind is “innocent”. For a senior monk who has been in the order for more than 40 years, he is disarmingly simple, unpretentious and friendly. Childlike even. But you would not get that impression from his classics *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought* and *The Magic of the Mind*.

I was introduced to his writings by my friend Ven. Sumana, an English monk. It was Bhante Ñāṇananda’s *Nibbāna – The Mind Stilled* collection that I first read. Later I would go through *The Magic of the Mind*, which I would find both enchanting and baffling at the same time. It would take me even longer to take up *Concept and Reality*. All of them would leave a lasting impression on me, and define the way I interpret the Dhamma. But not before completely misconceiving what he was saying, engage in a lengthy correspondence with him, and finally meet him only to learn that I was miserably wrong on many things all that time. And it would be a meeting I’ll always remember.

I was a staunch ‘Ñāṇavirist’ until that meeting, so for me *Nibbāna – The Mind Stilled* was more or less a commentary on *Notes on Dhamma* by Ven. Ñāṇavira Thera. Sure enough there were some passages here and there that took some effort to beat into submission, but language is a flexible medium and the mind is infinitely creative. On the few occasions when that problem could not be easily shrugged off, I resorted to considering Bhante Ñāṇananda the scholar who needed to bow in front of the experience of Ven. Ñāṇavira.

The first *vassa* in 2009 was a time when my understanding of the Dhamma went through some changes. I noted those thoughts down, and sent some of it to Bhante Ñāṇananda for review. A particularly long letter that ran into more than 50 pages took two months for a reply. Bhante thought it would take an equally long letter to explain the matters, which he was not in a position to write: he had just returned from a two-month stay in the hospital. Instead, he invited me to visit him in his monastery and stay a few days. Which created a few problems, because Ven. Katukurunde Ñāṇananda Thera is an outcast.

His critical analysis of Buddhist texts and the unwillingness to adhere to the commentarial tradition has made Bhante Ñāṇananda a radical and a heretic. He probably knew what he was getting into from the very beginning. In the introduction to *Concept and Reality*, written in 1969, he states:

“It is feared that the novelty of some of our interpretations will draw two types of extreme reaction. On the one hand, it might give rise to a total antipathy towards the critical analysis of doctrinal points as attempted here. On the other, it might engender an unreasonable distrust leading to a sweeping condemnation of the commentaries as a whole. This work has failed in its purpose if its critical scrutiny of the occasional shortcomings in the commentarial literature makes anyone forget his indebtedness to the commentaries for his knowledge of the Dhamma.” [1]

Over the years he would become less apologetic and more straightforward in his assertions, but his criticisms would always remain subtle, his delightful sarcasm barely noticed unless approached with the necessary background knowledge and the attention they deserve. For example, criticising the *Ābhidhammika* atomism and the commentarial *sabhāva* (own-essence) doctrine, he says:

“An insight meditator, too, goes through a similar experience when he contemplates on name-and-form, seeing the four elements as empty and void of essence, which will give him at least an iota of the conviction that this drama of existence is empty and insubstantial. He will realize that, as in the case of the dumb show, he is involved with things that do not really exist. [...] Seeing the reciprocal relationship between name-and-form, he is disinclined to dabble in concepts or gulp down a dose of prescriptions. [...] What is essential here, is the very understanding of essencelessness. If one sits down to draw up lists of concepts and prescribe them, it would only lead to a mental constipation.” [2]

It is in his latest booklet *Nibbana and the Fire Simile* that I found him being the most direct:

“There is a flush of Buddhist literature thriving in the West which attempts to interpret this fire simile in the light of the Vedic myth that the extinguished fire ‘goes into hiding’. Though the Buddha succeeded in convincing the Brahmin interlocutors of the dependently arisen nature of the fire by the reductio-ad-absurdum method, these scholars seem to be impervious to his arguments. What is worse, misinterpretations have even sought refuge in blatant mistranslations of sacred texts.

[...]

The term ‘extinction’ is anathema to the West in general. Perhaps as a euphemism, ‘extinguishment’ might be ‘passable’. But rather than playing

with the ‘fire-simile’ it is better to accept the obvious conclusions, willy nilly.”^[3]

To appreciate the rebelliousness of these passages and many others like it, one needs to understand the context in which they were written. The monastic Sangha in general is quite dogmatic and traditionalist, not entirely welcoming of challenging views. When the Nibbāna sermons were delivered at the Nissarana Vanaya, Bhante Ñāṇananda had the backing of his teacher, the illustrious Elder Ven. Matara Sri Ñāṇārāma Mahathera, who not only allowed him the freedom but invited and encouraged him to express his radical views. Even then he was criticized by many of his colleagues. Those views were a main reason that led to Bhante Ñāṇananda’s departure from the Nissarana Vanaya after the death of Ven. Ñāṇārāma. He left on his own accord, and set up a small monastery in Devalegama: Pothgulgala Aranya. It was there that I first met him in November last year.

It is late in the evening that I arrive, and Bhante Ñāṇananda is out visiting a doctor, something that was becoming more frequent as his asthma was getting worse. After he returns at around 10 pm, I’m taken to his small cave kuti by his student Ven. Damita. I’m surprised to see how frail and almost fragile Bhante Ñāṇananda is. I introduce myself; he slaps his head and laughs, and asks: “How did you manage to escape?”

The next day, after *piṇḍapāta* I went to visit him in his kuti. He warmly welcomes me. I pull out his last reply to my letters in which he provided some points to ponder on, and start asking him for clarifications on each of the points. As I sit there on the floor listening to his thoroughly informative commentary, some of my cherished views get blasted to bits.

Answering a question dealing with the structure of experience, Bhante Ñāṇananda quotes the Hemakamānavapucchā of the Sutta Nipāta (from memory, of course), and uses the simile of the plaintain trunk to illustrate the way knowledge of experience is gained.

“It’s a beautiful sutta, where Hemaka explains the reason why he gained faith in the Buddha.

*‘Ye me pubbe viyākaṃsu
Huraṃ gotama sāsanā,
Iccāsi iti bhavissati*

*Sabbaṃ taṃ itihitthaṃ
Sabbaṃ taṃ takkavaḍḍhanaṃ
Nāhaṃ tattha abhiraṃhi.
Tvañ ca me dhammam akkhāhi tañhā nigghātaṇaṃ muni,
Yaṃ veditvā sato caraṃ tare loke visattikaṃ.’*

‘Those in the past who explained their teachings to me outside Gotama’s dispensation said “so it was and so it will be”. All that is “so and so” talk; all that promoted speculation. I did not delight in them. And you, O Sage, do expound to me the teaching of destruction of craving, knowing which faring mindfully I shall cross over the clinging in the world.’

“Those verses cut to the heart of the problem. They show the value of this *akālika* Dhamma. *Tañhā* is something that is here and now, and it is *tañhakkhaya* that is Nibbāna.

“Now, the simile of the plantain trunk comes in here. At the end, all of this is just a heap of *saṅkhāra*–s – preparations, which the Buddha has equated to a plantain trunk. It is not necessary to roll the sheaths to realize the pithlessness of it; one just needs to take the sword of *paññā* and cut through. From the cross section itself one realizes. Actually that is what is meant by understanding *paṭiccasamuppāda*, not memorizing the 12 links. The Dhamma is *akālika* because of the principle.”

In his letter Bhante has mentioned the importance of understanding the difference between *vi jānāti* and *pa jānāti* when it comes to discussing *viññāṇa*. I ask for an elaboration.

“This is something that tends to get overlooked. There are many words that share the *ñā* root in the texts: *sañjānāti*, *vi jānāti*, *pa jānāti*, *abhijānāti*, *parijānāti*, *ājānāti*. There may be more. It is with a reason that there are these differences between them.

“It is commonly known that the root *ñā* stands for ‘knowledge’. Why is it said ‘*vi jānāti*’ when it could have easily been said ‘*jānāti*’? Most translations just use ‘knows’. But *vi jānāti* means ‘discriminatively knows’. What is the main job of *viññāṇa*? We can clarify from the Mahāvedalla Sutta. There we get the phrases *yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vi jānāti* and *yaṃ vi jānāti taṃ pa jānāti*. ‘What one perceives, that one discriminates’ and ‘what one discriminates, that one knows’.

“From the examples that follow that phrase we can understand the *jānana* level of each. For *sañjānāti*: *Nīlakampi sañjānāti*, *pītakampi sañjānāti*, *lohitakampi sañjānāti*, *odātampi sañjānāti* – using colours. When someone is coming from a distance, all we see is just some blob of colour. When he comes closer we separate him from the others: ‘oh, he is this person, not the other’. When we know deeply, at *pajānāti* level, all is the same, just the four elements, but let’s leave that aside for the moment.”

“What are the examples given for *vijānāti*? There are two; the first is *sukhan’ti pi vijānāti*, *dukkhan’ti pi vijānāti*, *adukkhamasukhan’ti pi vijānāti*. This clearly shows that *vijānana* is unique to living beings, not found in trees and rocks. The first level of *viññāṇa* is in discriminating between different feelings. For instance, in the Mahānidāna Sutta we find the Buddha asking Ven. Ananda Thera whether there would be any self notion where there is no feeling. The answer is ‘no’. That shows that feeling is fundamental. So what is there in feeling? Bifurcation, which is the most fundamental delusion.”

He pauses to say how glad he is that there is no need to use ‘footnotes’ when talking to me. I’m glad I did the homework. If you want to find Bhante Ñāṇananda in his zone, do the necessary preparatory studies, and be willing to put up with copious amounts of Pāli, not all of which would be translated.

But then he asks “Do you remember the other example for *vijānāti*?” I don’t.

“There is a second example for *vijānāti* from the Khajjanīya Sutta:

ambilampi vijānāti, *tittakampi vijānāti*, *kaṭukampi vijānāti*, *madhurakampi vijānāti*, *khārikampi vijānāti*, *akhārikampi vijānāti*, *loṇikampi vijānāti*, *aloṇikampi vijānāti* — different tastes. Do you see any difference between knowing colours and knowing tastes?”

I mumble my ignorance.

“With taste the discrimination is explicit. When we taste something, it takes a while to decide whether its sweet or sour or salty. Some foods we can’t easily categorize by taste, like the *Nelli* fruit. But it is not essential to go that far: what is important is to remember that discriminating between different feeling tones is the main function of *viññāṇa*.

“A unique feature of *paṭiccasamuppāda* is the way one result becomes the cause for another. One pulls the other in. When we take a pair of items in

paṭiccasamuppāda, one member is also a member in the next pair. The very question whether *saññā* and *viññāṇa* are the same or different reeks of absolutism, an attempt to separate them into water-tight compartments. But their connectedness is pointed out in the Sutta with *yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vijānāti, yaṃ vijānāti taṃ pajānāti*. This doesn't mean all three are the same either. The nuances are important.

“The difference between *viññāṇa* and *paññā* is explained as *paññā bhāvetabbā, viññāṇaṃ pariññeyyaṃ: paññā* is to be developed, *viññāṇa* is to be understood. When *paññā* is fulfilled, *viññāṇa* is fully comprehended. As in the magic show: to see through the magic is to miss the show.”

The last sentence is a reference to Bhante Ñāṇananda's short masterpiece *The Magic of the Mind*.

“In the floodlights of *paññā* there is no room for the shadows of *viññāṇa*. The delusion of self love reflects a world, so there's the two: an I and a world. Reflections on the eye, reflections on the ear, reflections on the mind: taking these reflections that fall on the senses as true, the materialists go looking for a world out there. When the Buddha called all of that a mere illusion, he meant all, including concepts. That's why it is said *sabba dhammakkhayaṃ patto vimutto upadhisaṅkhaye*.^[4] Mind and dhammas is the last resort of delusion.”

This is one of the most controversial of Bhante Ñāṇananda's views. *The Magic of the Mind* discusses this topic at length. He has been called an idealist and an illusionist because of it; he rejects both accusations. Being a Ñāṇavirist at the time, this 'illusionist' interpretation was something I too found difficult to accept, especially in light of Ven. Ñāṇavira's explicit and vehement rejection of the notion of *māyā* as a hindu concept shared by the Mahayanists.

“It is *viññāṇa* that discriminates between a sense and an object. The *Ābhidhammikas* are stuck thinking that even when all else falls apart *mano viññāṇa* remains. It is like we separating a flowing river in to parts, naming them, and then putting the parts back together to create a river. I remember something Dr. W.S. Karunaratne said: ‘the grammar of nature does not correspond to the grammar of language’. That's a nice saying. This is beautifully illustrated in the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta. We separate the flux of existence in to parts, with *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*. Those *saṅkhā*s are mere suggestions. They can only nudge us toward a certain direction. We cannot *understand* reality using them.

“Words have a limited capacity. It is okay to use them as long as one realizes their limitations. One who realizes their limitations would not be limited by them. The Poṭṭhapāda Sutta ends with *imā kho Citta lokasamaññā lokaniruttiyo lokavohārā lokapaññattiyo, yāhi Tathāgato voharati, aparāmasaṃ*. We must be so grateful to the ancient bhāṇakas: it would have been such a loss if that last word was forgotten. *Aparāmasaṃ* – not grasping. That’s where the whole secret lies.”

And then he laughs his delightful laugh, as if all that should have been obvious in the first place.

NOTES

1. Ñāṇananda. K. (1997) [1971], *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought*, Buddhist Publication Society, p. VI.
2. Ñāṇananda, Katukurunde, Bhikkhu (2004), *Nibbāna – The Mind Stilled*, Vol.II, Dharma Grantha Mudrana Bharaya, p. 183.
3. Ñāṇananda, Katukurunde, Bhikkhu (2010), *Nibbāna and the Fire Simile*, Dharma Grantha Mudrana Bharaya, p. 26.
4. Sn. 992

THE HERETIC SAGE (PART 2)

There is hardly any teaching that has given rise to more internal disputes among Buddhists than *paṭiccasamuppāda*. My next question is based on a comment by Bhante Ñāṇananda, which considers *paṭiccasamuppāda* as the golden mean between *atthitā* (existence) and *natthitā* (non-existence), replacing them with *samudaya* (arising) and *vaya* (passing away).

“Everyone knows that the middle way is the noble eightfold path. Everyone knows that the first sermon was the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. But if for some reason Āḷarakālāma or Uddaka Rāmaputta were alive, what we would have as the Dhammacakkappavattana would be something short like the Bāhiya Sutta, because they were facing a duality of a different nature.

“The five ascetics were given a teaching based on the ethical middle path, avoiding the two extremes of *kāmasukhallikānuyoga* and *attakilamathānuyoga*. But the middle path of right view is found in the Kaccānagotta Sutta, beautifully used by Ven. Nāgārjuna. When the Theravadins got engrossed with the Abhidhamma they forgot about it. The Mādhyamikas were alert enough to give it the attention it deserved.

“Extremism is found not only in ethics, but also in various kinds of views. The duality of *asti* and *nāsti* has a long history. I don’t have much knowledge in the Vedas, but I remember in Ṛg Veda, in the Nāsādīya Sūkta,^[1] you get the beautiful phrase *nāsadāsīn no sadāsīt tadānīm*. They were speculating about the beginnings: did existence come from non-existence or vice-versa.

“All those kinds of dualities, be it *asti/nāsti* or *sabbaṃ ekattaṃ/sabbaṃ puthuttaṃ* etc. were rejected by the Buddha: *majjhena Tathāgato Dhammaṃ deseti* – he taught the Dhamma *by the middle*. It’s not just the middle path. It’s not a mixture of 50% of each. We usually think that the middle is between two ends. It’s a rejection of both ends and an introduction of a novel standpoint. Again, I remember Dr. W.S. Karunaratne saying how *paṭiccasamuppāda*, both as a philosophy and as a word, was novel to Indian thinking. There were other *vāda*–s such as *Adhiccasamuppāda* and *Issaranimmāna*, but not *paṭiccasamuppāda*, and it is not a *vāda*.

“The ‘parroting’ method of *paṭiccasamuppāda* involves dishing out the 12 terms, and even then, the *paṭiloma* is often forgotten. But the important thing is the principle, embedded in ‘*asmim sati...*’, as seen in many Suttas. There again, I also

made a mistake inadvertently when translating: in early editions of *The Magic of the Mind* I used ‘this/that’ following the standard English translations. That’s completely wrong. It should be ‘this/this’.

“In the formula we must take two elements that make a pair and analyse the conditionality between them. ‘That’ implies something outside the pair, which is misleading. *Paṭiccasamuppāda* is to be seen among the elements in a pair. The trick is in the middle; there’s no point in holding on to the ends. And even that middle needs to be let go of, not grasped.

“When introducing *paṭiccasamuppāda* we first get the principle: *imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti, imassuppādā idaṃ uppajjati...* and then *yadidaṃ* – the wordy *yadidaṃ* clearly shows that what follows is an illustration. And then the well known 12 elements are given. But how is it in the *paṭiloma*? *Avijjaya tu eva* – there’s an emphasis, as if to say: yes, the arising of suffering is a fact, it is the nature of the world, but it doesn’t end there; from the fading away of that same ignorance this suffering could be made to cease. That is why we can’t categorically say that any of these things exist or not. It entirely depends on *upādāna*. It is *upādāna* that decides between existence and non-existence. When there is no *upādāna* you get *anupādā parinibbāna*, right then and there. And that is why the Dhamma is *akālika*.”

The impossibility of making categorical statements about existence was discussed extensively in Bhante Ñāṇananda’s *The Magic of the Mind*, and he reminds me again about the importance of the [Kālakārāma Sutta](#) which provided the basis for that book. He quickly adds that the Buddha’s stand is not something like that of his contemporary sceptic agnostic Sañjaya Bellatṭhiputta, the so-called eel-wiggler; rather, the situation is beyond what could be expressed through the linguistic medium. It can only be known individually: *paccattaṃ veditabbo*.

His interpretation of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, which dramatically deviates from the traditional exegesis, has earned Bhante Ñāṇananda a few vehement critics. He amusedly mentions a recent letter sent by a monk where he was accused of ‘being a disgrace to the Theriya tradition’. This criticism, no doubt coming from a Theravāda dogmatist, is understandable seeing how accommodating Bhante Ñāṇananda is when it comes to teachings traditionally considered Mahāyāna, hence taboo for any self-respecting Theravādin. However, if one delves deeper, one would see that he is only trying to stay as close as possible to early Buddhist teachings.

“I didn’t quote from the Mahāyāna texts in the Nibbāna sermons,” he says, “because there was no need. All that was needed was already found in the Suttas. Teachers like Nāgārjuna brought to light what was already there but was hidden from view. Unfortunately his later followers turned it in to a *vāda*.”

He goes on to quote two of his favourite verses from Ven. Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamādhyamakakārikā (as usual, from memory):

*Śūnyatā sarva-dṛṣṭīnaṃ proktā niḥsaranāṃ jinaiḥ,
yeṣāṃ śūnyatā-dṛṣṭis tān asādhyān babhāṣire* [MK 13.8]

The Victorious Ones have declared that emptiness is the relinquishing of all views. Those who are possessed of the view of emptiness are said to be incorrigible.

*Sarva-dṛṣṭi-prahāṇāya yaḥ saddharmam adeśayat,
anukampam upādāya taṃ namasyāmi gautamaṃ* [MK 26.30]

I reverently bow to Gautama who, out of compassion, has taught the doctrine in order to relinquish all views.

Bhante doesn’t bother translating the verses; the ones provided above are by David Kalupahana.

“When I first read the Kārikā I too was doubting Ven. Nāgārjuna’s sanity” he laughs. “But the work needs to be understood in the context. He was taking a jab at the Sarvāstivādins. To be honest, even the others deserve the rebuke, although they now try to get away by using Sarvāstivāda as an excuse. How skilled Ven. Nāgārjuna must have been, to compose those verses so elegantly and filling them with so much meaning, like the Dhammapada verses. It’s quite amazing. This has been rightly understood by Prof. Kalupahana.”

Prof. David J. Kalupahana is an eminent Sri Lankan scholar who stirred up another controversy when he portrayed Ven. Nāgārjuna as a reformist trying to resurrect early Buddhist teachings. He had been a lecturer during Bhante Ñāṇananda’s university days as a layman at Peradeniya.

“If there is no substance in anything, what is left is emptiness. But many people are afraid of words. Like *śūnyatā*. They want to protect their four.” With

that ‘irreverent’ comment about the four *paramattha dhamma*–s of the Abhidhamma, Bhante Ñāṇananda breaks into amused laughter.

“If one does not approach the commentarial literature with a critical eye, one would be trapped. Unfortunately many are. In fact, I had to remove a few pages from the manuscript of *Concept and Reality* on Ven. Nyanaponika’s request”.

I’m disappointed to hear that, as *Concept and Reality* had already become my favourite commentary on the Buddhist teachings. There are some delightfully understated criticisms of the traditional views in the book, and I wonder what we have lost in the editorial process at the hands of Ven. Nyanaponika Thera, an undoubtedly very learned yet quite conservative scholar. When I express my dismay, Bhante Ñāṇananda adds that now he tends to agree with Ven. Nyanaponika.

“I did it unwillingly, but later on I also thought it may have been too much as it was my first book. Perhaps what is left is quite enough. The message still gets through. Some of that I could restate in the Nibbāna sermons as I had the backing of my teacher.”

This teacher is Ven. Matara Sri Ñāṇārāma Mahathera, then abbot of the Nissarana Vanaya and an illustrious elder of the Sri Lankan forest tradition. I ask Bhante what the response of the Sangha was when those controversial sermons were delivered.

“Apart from a very few, the others didn’t really understand. Some went around criticising, calling me a heretic. Fortunately it didn’t get out of hand thanks to the teacher. But then some others like Ven. Khemānanda were very appreciative.”

Our discussion moves on to Ven. Ñāṇavīra Thera. I wonder what influence this radical monk had on Bhante Ñāṇananda, but I can’t muster enough courage to ask directly. So I just let him speak on his views.

“It is true, Ven. Ñāṇavīra made a start. But I think he went to an extreme in his criticisms, until his followers were dropping even the useful things. And he failed to make the necessary distinctions between *saupādisesa* and *anupādisesa* Nibbāna elements. That led to an idealized view of the noble disciple. And now there is a lineage of ‘Ñāṇavīrists’ who fail to see anything beyond Ven. Ñāṇavīra’s views. They are simply idolizing him.”

I was one of them until I started a correspondence with Bhante Ñāṇananda, so I know the way of thinking.

To end the discussion I pick up the thorniest of issues. I ask: “What is a ‘thing’? Is it completely imaginary, or is it something made by the mind using the ingredients ‘out there’?” A straightforward answer to that rather extremist question would make Bhante Ñāṇananda’s position clear on the gamut of views.

“I’m sure you have read Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya. You must have come across the Phenapindūpama Sutta. In the notes you’ll see Ven. Bodhi explaining that although the lump is illusory, the ingredients aren’t. It is worse when it comes to the magic show. He says that only the magic is not real; the magician’s appurtenances are. This is a distortion of the simile given by the Buddha. We must appreciate the great work done by Ven. Bodhi, but it is unfortunate that he is bound by the commentarial tradition.

“What is considered the ‘truth’ is relative to each individual. Each person gives evidence in the court of reality based on his own level of experience. For example, parents often give false explanations to their little children. But these are true to the kids. When asked, the kid will tell what his parents told him. It’s true for the child, but not for us. In the famous commentarial story about Ven. Tissa Thera we find him seeing a woman as a skeleton, and saying so when asked by her husband. The venerable was closer to the truth.

“When we transcend one level of truth, the new level becomes what is true for us. The previous one is now false. What one experiences may not be what is experienced by the world in general, but that may well be truer. But how do we reach the ultimate truth? This is beautifully explained in the Dhātuvibhanga Sutta: *Taṃ saccam, yaṃ amosadhammaṃ nibbānaṃ*. And from the Dvayatānupāsana Sutta: *amosadhammaṃ nibbānaṃ tad ariyā saccato vidū*. It is Nibbāna that is of non-falsifying nature, where there is no ‘thing’. Nibbāna is the highest truth because there is no other truth to transcend it.

“The Buddha called himself the first chick in this era to break out of the egg of ignorance. All these wonderful things we do such as space travel all happen inside this *saḷāyatana* shell. If *paṭiccasamuppāda* is presented properly, perhaps a few more chicks would be able to break through today.

“Ven. Nāgārjuna was right: at the end, all is empty. We are not willing to accept that existence is a perversion. Existence is suffering precisely because it is a perversion.”

It may not be a categorical answer, and it probably isn't possible to give one. But I will bring this issue up again later.

We have been talking for more than an hour, and it is time for Bhante's meal. I end the discussion, looking forward to another one in the evening.

NOTES

1. Rgveda: sūkta 10.129 (English translation)

THE HERETIC SAGE (PART 3)

In the traditional exegesis, *pancupādānakkhandhā* (five aggregates of clinging) and *nāma-rūpa* (name-and-form) are used interchangeably, implying that these two are the same. As Ven. Ñāṇavīra Thera also pointed out in his *Notes on Dhamma*, this is a dubious interpretation that does not find explicit support in the Suttas. I ask Bhante Ñāṇananda how we should understand the connection between *pancupādānakkhandha* and *nāma-rūpa*.

“It is quite common to hear that these two are the same: that *rūpa-upādānakkhandha* is the same as the *rūpa* in *nama-rūpa*, and the other four aggregates are *nāma*. That is like trying to measure distance in kilograms – a confusion.

“In that beautiful seminar in a moonlit night recorded in the Mahāpunnama Sutta, it is made quite clear that *viññāna* cannot be a part of *nāma*. One venerable asks “*Ko hetu ko paccayo rūpakkhandhassa paññāpanāya?*” and so on — what is the cause for the designation of each aggregate? And the Buddha answers that it is the four great elements that give rise to the designation of an aggregate of form. For *vedanā*, *saññā* and *saṅkhāra*, it is *phassa* – contact. But for *viññāna*, the cause is *nāma-rūpa*.

“We are used to explaining *paṭiccasamuppāda* in the form of the standard 12 links starting from *avijjā*. However, always trying to put *avijjā* at the lead in exegesis led to misinterpretations of certain Suttas. For example, commenting on the Mahānidāna Sutta, Ven. Buddhaghosa Thera brings in the so-called three-life interpretation whereas there is nothing missing from the Sutta itself. As I tried to explain in *The Magic of the Mind*, it is from the preparations that are done in the darkness of ignorance that the duality of *viññāna* and *nāma-rūpa* arise.

“And what is that duality? The same duality seen by the dog on a plank over water.” Bhante Ñāṇananda is referring to a simile he has often used in Dhamma discussions:

“A dog is crossing a plank over a stream. Half way through it looks in to the water and sees another dog there. It wags its tail and the other responds. It snarls and the other reacts. It looks away to ignore, but when it looks again the water dog is still there looking on.

The view of an existing self is also due to such an unwise attention. “I think therefore I am” is the resulting wrong conclusion. Neither narcissistic love nor masochistic hate can solve the problem. Ignoring with a cynical sneer is to evade

the problem. Therefore one has to thrash-down this problem of the elusive self image to the basic confrontation between consciousness and name and form.”

– “Reflect Rightly on the Reflection”, *From Topsy-turvydom to Wisdom*

“*Nāma-rūpa* is a deception. It is unreal. But in the illusion of *viññāna*, wherever you look, it is there. Whatever it may be, whether it’s a sight or a sound or a thought, it is just *vedanā*, *saññā*, *cetanā*, *phassa*, *manasikāra*. But here again there is a common misinterpretation: when listing the *nāma-dhamma*–s, some start from *phassa*, *vedanā*,... They put *phassa* to the front. But *phassa* has to be at the back.”

He says the above in Sinhala, where the word for ‘back’ is ‘*passa*’. The pun is lost in translation. As for putting *phassa* first, it is often seen in the Abhidhamma literature when listing the *cetasika*–s.

“They say so because in *paṭiccasamuppāda*, *phassa* comes before *vedanā*. That doesn’t apply here. In the Suttas, such as the Sammāditṭhi Sutta, the ordering is never in that form. The Buddha and the Arahats were not mistaken; *logically* one can have *phassa* first, but *psychologically* it is *vedanā* that is primary. It is through *vedanā* that one recognizes the four great elements, not through *phassa*. The self notion hinges on *vedanā*. That is why it deserves to be the first.

“So one develops a *saññā* according to *vedanā*, based on which one has *cetanā*, at which point the ‘personality’ is taken for granted. This creates the duality necessary for *phassa*. *Manasikāra* is at the end, somewhat like *ekaggatā*, unifying them all: *manasikāra sambhavā sabbe dhammā* – all things arise from attention.

“With *vedanā*, the self notion ‘awakens’, although here it is more like dreaming. Or like a blind man groping in the dark. The blind man reacts only to the feeling of bumping on to something. That is why Ven. Ananda Thera replied to the Buddha that it is not possible to have any self notion when there is no *vedanā*. *Taṇhā* arises from *vedanā*.

“So where does *pañcupādānakkhandha* come in? *Pañcupādānakkhandhā* is the final result of the constant tussle between *viññāṇa* and *nāma-rūpa*. This is made clear in the Mahāsalāyatanika Sutta. What is gathered from the six *viññāṇa*–s,

at the end, are filtered down to things grasped as “these are my forms, these are my feelings, these are my perceptions, ...

“You might remember how the Buddha explained the designation of *akhandha*, in the Mahāpuṇṇama Sutta: *atītānāgatapaccuppannaṃ ajjhattaṃ vā bahiddhā vā oḷārikaṃ vā sukhumāṃ vā hīnaṃ vā paṇītaṃ vā yaṃ dūre santike vā* (past, future, present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near). That’s the demarcation of the heap.”

One of the main themes of Bhante Ñāṇananda’s classic *The Magic of the Mind* is the illusory nature of *viññāṇa*. Earlier we discussed some of the nuances involved in differentiating between *viññāṇa* and *paññā*, and now the discussion moves on to the relationship between *viññāṇa* and *nāma-rūpa*.

“It’s a pity that many Buddhists still cannot accept that the goal of this practice is the cessation of *viññāṇa*. It is a suffering; the simile for *viññāṇāhāra* is being beaten by a spear 300 times a day. The darkness of *avijjā* creates the background for it. As I pointed out with the similes of the cinema and the magic show, these things can only happen as long as there is darkness. All this is just an illusion, a drama. In fact, the oldest meaning of *saṅkhāra* is found in that context of a stage show.

“The connection between *viññāṇa* and *nāma-rūpa* can be illustrated with a childish simile: it is like a dog chasing its own tail. The modern Rohitassas who try to overcome a world as seen through *viññāṇa* are no different. They chase after what the Buddha dismissed as an illusion. There is nothing to go chasing after here; all that needs to be done is to stay where one is, and to realize that it is merely a shadow. When the darkness of *avijjā* is dispelled, *saṅkhāra*–s are stilled. The game is over.

“*Viññāṇa* and *nāma-rūpa* revolve around each other at an indescribable speed. That’s why it was told to Ven. Sāti that it is wrong to say “*viññāṇaṃ sandhāvati saṃsarati anaññaṃ*” (it is this same *viññāṇa* that runs and wanders, not another). If only the Ābhidhammikas realized that *parivatta* in *lahuparivattaṃ cittaṃ* means ‘revolving’: *viññāṇa paccayā nāmarūpaṃ, nāmarūpa paccayā viññāṇaṃ*.

“The Gāthās in the Sagāthaka Vagga, although often not given enough attention, are very deep. I stopped the Nibbāna series at sermon number 33, but what I

had planned for 34, although never delivered, was based on that beautiful verse from the Nimokkha Sutta:

*Nandībhavaparikkhayā saññāviññāṇasaṅkhatayā,
Vedanānaṃ nirodhā upasamā evaṃ khvāhaṃ āvuso jānāmi
Sattānaṃ nimokkhaṃ pamokkhaṃ vivekaṃ'ti. [SN. 1.2]*

When delight and existence are exhausted
When perception and consciousness are both destroyed
When feelings cease and are appeased – thus, O friend,
Do I know, for them that live
Deliverance, freedom, detachment.

– Translation by Bhante Ñāṇananda: *Samyutta Nikāya – An Anthology*

“In all other religions, *viññāṇa* was taken as a unit, and worse, as the soul. It is taught that even if everything else is impermanent, this isn't. And it is taught as that which reaches *Brahmā*. But the Buddha pointed out that it is a mere illusion. It can't exist on its own.

“That brings us to a nice point. What is the simile used by Ven. Sariputta Thera to illustrate the *aññamaññapaccayatā* (interdependence) of *viññāṇa* and *nāma-rūpa*?”

“The simile of the two bundles of bamboo reeds” I reply.

“Why is that? Couldn't he have chosen something better, some wood with pith – say, two bundles of Sāla wood? See how penetrative they are even in their use of similes. The Pāli for bamboo reed is *tacasāra*. *Taca* means skin or peel, so *tacasāra* means that which has just the skin for its pith. The thing taken by the world as being full of pith is summarily dismissed by Ven. Sariputta Thera. It's not a unit either, but a bundle.

“I'm reminded of something Ven. Ñāṇavīra said: ‘all consciousness is self consciousness.’ That is quite right. Occasionally he came up with brilliant insights like that which shook the establishment. He was one who wasn't afraid to point out these misinterpretations. It is unfortunate that he was rather extremist in other areas.

“The whole notion of the so-called *antarābhava* depends on the belief that *viññāṇa* ‘goes’ on its own. The Buddha's explanation of the wandering

of *viññāṇa* is not like that of the Upanishads where the simile of the leech is used.^[1] According to the Dhamma *viññāṇa* and *nāma-rūpa* are in a state of whirling or turning around.

“The wandering of the mind is not like that of physical things. It’s a circuitous journey of a mind and its object. With the taking up of one object by a mind, a sort of whirling begins; when one end is lost from grasp, the other end is taken up: *itthabāvaññathābhāvaṃ saṃsāraṃ n’ātivattati* – this-ness and otherwise-ness, that’s all there is in *saṃsāra*. Our minds keep wandering away but keep coming back to this *upādinna*. Who likes to let go of it, to die? It always comes back to that which is held dearly. At the last moment, when Māra comes to snatch it away, one does not want to give it up, so there is a contest: the struggle for life. The Buddha asked us to just give it up.

“Think of any kind of existence, and you will see that it depends on grasping. There is no ‘thing’ that exists on its own. Here again, I’m reminded of something Dr. W.S. Karunaratne said: ‘Existence has got to be relative; there is no absolute existence.’ But the world thinks of unitary things existing on their own. They ask, ‘why, even when I don’t look at this thing, doesn’t it continue existing?’ But really there is only a *diṭṭha*, a seen. There is only a *suta*, a heard. But the moment we think of a seen ‘thing’, a heard ‘thing’, we are trapped. We create things with *maññanā*, ideation.

“The problem with ‘things’ is solved in the Bāhiya Sutta: there are only *diṭṭha*, *suta*, *muta*, *viññāta*, nothing else. That is the theme in the Kālakārāma Sutta too. As long as one does *maññanā* about these, one would be deluded.”

Here we seem to have encountered a more thorough answer to my earlier question about the ‘reality of things’, and it is quite clear that Bhante Ñāṇananda has quite a different view from the standard Theravadin interpretation which is closer to naïve realism. It is also opposed to Ven. Ñāṇavīra Thera’s explanations, and readers who are familiar with *Clearing the Path* would notice that Bhante Ñāṇananda’s interpretation is close to *Sister Vajira*’s earlier views. It is easy to see why Bhante is sometimes accused of being *aviññāṇavādin* by those who are less willing to consider the subtleties involved.

“But how is *viññāṇa* made to cease?” Bhante adds, discussing the final goal of Buddhist practice. “*Viññāṇa* has the nature to reflect, and what it reflects is *nāma-rūpa*. One is attached to the reflection because one doesn’t know that it is a reflection. But when the knowledge arises, attachment drops. In many instances

where *paññā* is discussed, we find the words *paṭivedha* and *ativijjha*, meaning ‘penetration’. The view is replaced by a vision.”

Bhante then quotes from his own *Concept and Reality*:

“For the Arahant ... all concepts have become transparent to such a degree in that all-encompassing vision, that their boundaries together with their umbra and penumbra have yielded to the radiance of wisdom. This, then, is the significance of the word *anantaṃ* (endless, infinite). Thus the paradoxically detached gaze of the contemplative sage as he looks through the concepts is one which has no object (*ārammaṇa*) as the point of focus for the worldling to identify it with. It is a gaze that is neither conscious nor non-conscious (*na saññī assa, saññī ca pana assa*), neither attentive nor non-attentive (*na manasikareyya, manasi ca pana kareyya*), neither fixed nor not fixed (*na jhāyati, jhāyati ca pana*) – a gaze that knows no horizon.”

NOTES

1. E.g.: “And just as a leech moving on a blade of grass reaches its end, takes hold of another and draws itself together towards it, so does the self, after throwing off this body, that is to say, after making it unconscious, take hold of another support and draw itself together towards it.” [Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad 4.4.3] – From *The Upanishads – A New Translation* by Swami Nikhilananda

THE HERETIC SAGE (PART 4)

The following is a minimally edited transcript of Bhante Ñāṇananda's comments on the Neyyattha Sutta, which seems to have been the seed out of which the Two Truths doctrine has been developed.

“We come across this in the Aṅguttara Nikāya: *nītattha sutta* and *neyyattha sutta*. *Nīta*, taken as it is, means you are led to it. *Neyya* means you have to be led. So *nīta* means you are already at the meaning; you don't have to reinterpret it. Whatever is supposed to be the *nīta* in the Buddha word, you have to take it 'as such'. Now, it is different when it comes to *neyyattha*: in that case you have to understand it in the context of the Dhamma; you can't take it as it appears.

“It is from this distinction that *sammuti/paramattha* and *samvṛti/paramārtha* (in Buddhist Sanskrit) have been developed. And also this is the reason I think the Nettippakaraṇa and Petakopadesa were composed, as guides to the commentator. Because it is the job of the commentator to explain a sutta, and *how* it should be explained is a problem. There are occasions when the Buddha used *loka samaññā loka nirutti* (worldly conventions, worldly parlance) as they are, according to the context. And on some occasions, especially to monks, he would say something very deep, which you have to take as it is.

“The traditional interpretation, as you get in the commentaries, is very simple: it says *neyyattha* would be such suttas where the ordinary concepts of beings etc. come in, but *nītattha* is where you get *anicca, dukkha, anattā*. That's a very simple definition of it.

“Among the discourses, there are some, like the Bāhiya Sutta, where you don't have to reintroduce anything in to it. But the people will have to introduce something to understand them – that's the whole trouble. A case which came to my attention was that sutta in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the case of Moliyaphagguna, where, step by step, the Buddha had to correct even the question of Moliyaphagguna.^[1] *Ko nu kho bhante phusati?* — it goes like that: 'who, lord, does touch?' [The Buddha replies:] 'I don't say like that. If I did, then you can ask me like that. The correct question should be: *Kim paccayā?*'

“So the *paccaya* terminology is actually the *nītattha*, if I may say so. But you can't talk with *paccaya* always. In fact, I remember some people who tried to avoid the 'I' concept altogether in conversations, using such phrases as 'this *pañcakkhandha*'. But that's only artificial.

“This I may say is a challenge to understand the discourses. Because you always have to ask yourself: what are the *nītattha* suttas and what are the *neyyattha* suttas? Without a criterion to decide, you are in a fix. But if you start on your own, I think you could take instances where the Buddha is talking about the four noble truths, as well as *paticcasamuppāda*.

“This is an instance where we see the difference between the grammar of nature and the grammar of language. You have to give way to the grammar of language if you’re to talk. Because if you are to explain, you have to make compromises with language, as we say ‘it rains’ or ‘*devo vassatu*’. Otherwise there is something lacking. The subject, the object and then the adjectives and adverbs and the sentence structure – these are deciding our thinking. The logicians are bound by it. That is why the Dhamma is *atakkāvacara*. That again is a challenge: what is meant by *atakkāvacara*?

“Logic has to distinguish one from the other. It is again a logical question when they ask: *saññā* and *vedanā* – are they completely different, or are they the same thing? That is the way logic would put it. There’s no half way between. Even that they tried to cover: I’m not very familiar with logic but what is already apparent in the canon is the tetralemma. The question of contradiction comes in: either it has to be this or the other. But there are these grey areas.

“All these problems come up because, first of all, we break reality – the flux of life – in to pieces. We differentiate between a ‘thing’ and its colour: the colour is an adjective; the object is something else. So we create problems for ourselves. But then the Buddha had to convey a message – and in fact I make it a point to say, why the Buddha hesitated to teach was not out of jealousy or any other reason, but the problem was how to present this doctrine in an intelligible way to people. I may say that only the Buddha had that ability. Though it is again an unsolved problem, about the *Pacceka Buddha*–s, it seems, if ever they remain silent, hence called ‘silent’ Buddhas, it is because they could not, unlike the Buddha, bring these two truths in to alignment.

“Already in the Kalakārāma Sutta you see how deep the problem is. But the Buddha could explain it sufficiently for one to start practicing. And once you start practicing, then, as in the Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta, you are walking the Dhamma-way, and you’ll realize by yourself. You go and see. Now, even though the Dhamma says *ehi passika*, we don’t want to go; we want to stay where we are and go through logic to understand the Dhamma. That is the problem with the scholars.

“The Buddha’s Dhamma was an invitation. If you start the practice, the rest you will know by yourself. The map can’t be the same as the journey. No map is complete by itself; it may use colours and signs etc. but it is never complete. So is the Dhamma. Much of it, the Buddha left unexplained. That is probably why the people are now complaining that there is no methodology here and that something is lacking in the Dhamma. But you can’t be spoon-fed.

“It is because the Buddha has given sufficient advice that some could realize even by just listening. They didn’t merely listen: they listened with rapt attention. Like in Ven. Bāhiya’s case, they were not leading idle lives. Their plaything was *jhāna*. So it was easy for the Buddha to make them understand, as they had a sharp receptive apparatus. They only needed *saddhā*. Without *saddhā*, with logic if you’re hoping to understand, you’re gravely mistaken.

“So now, getting down to the type of suttas we have, at a glance, perhaps, Bāhiya sutta is a clear cut case, although those who want something objective, with a substantialist view, would find something lacking there. And also, for instance, when the Buddha answered the accusations of the Brahmins, and when we come to the ten indeterminate points, that perhaps is something like *nītattha*. The Buddha is put to that point where He can’t agree any longer to the convention. Because He used conventional words, people made it an excuse to glean advantage from it. That is the case with Nibbāna: the fire going out.

“If the fire ‘goes out’ some think you should be able to go and locate where it is. Some scholars in the West also follow the same Hindu way where they think when the fire goes out it stays in some ineffable state. When it comes to such points of absurdity the Buddha had to correct them. Otherwise the Buddha would, for all practical purposes, use the convention. Even to Bāhiya He said ‘This is our *pinḍapāta* time’, as if there’s some strict time for *pinḍapāta*. As if His whole life is for *pinḍapāta*. ‘We have to go on *pinḍapāta*, don’t come and question us’! But when it comes to the Dhamma: ‘in the seen, just the seen, in the heard, just the heard.’ When Bāhiya could master and muster sufficient Samādhi he had built up in the past, when he was sufficiently calmed down, then the Buddha gave the real thing.

“There are also other occasions, for instance in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, where you find the verses:

*‘Ahaṃ vadāmīti pi so vadeyya
Mamaṃ vadantīti pi so vadeyya,*

*Loke samaññaṃ kusalo veditvā
Vohāramattena so vohareyyā 'ti.* ' [SN 1.25]

‘That monk still might use such words as “I,”
Still perchance might say: “They call this mine.”
Well aware of common worldly speech,
He would speak conforming to such use.’ (Source)

“So every time the Buddha says ‘I’m going’ and so on, you should not think that He’s contradicted His own *anattā* doctrine.

“*Nītattha* could also be in such cases like in the Alagaddūpama Sutta where the brahmins are reprimanded for false accusations. The Buddha comes out with the statement: *Pubbe c’āhaṃ bhikkhave etarahi ca dukkhañceva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodhaṃ* – that is the best criterion to decide on which side you are. ‘All formerly and now, I merely say that there is suffering’ – there is no *one* suffering, whether it’s a *puggala* or person or individual – all this rot comes in because of not knowing that the Buddha’s message is also part and parcel of language.

“For all practical purposes, the Buddha’s words are enough. But for those who do not practice, but who are armchair critics, there is so much contradiction in the Buddha’s words. Sometimes He says there is *dukkha* only, and sometimes He says you are suffering. This is also the reason why there is such a mess in the interpretations of the *kamma* doctrine also. In *sammādiṭṭhi*, we may say there’s the ‘lower’ *sammādiṭṭhi* and the ‘higher’ *sammādiṭṭhi*.^[2] The *dasa-vatthuka sammādiṭṭhi* is *kammassakatā*. When a person takes *kamma* as his own, he’s bound by it. You are bound by your own grasping. Then it’s a fact that you’re going to these various realms etc.: dependent on *avijjā* there is *sāṅkhāra*. Such people have to be judged by their own standards.

“By the way, I may also say, now that we are on the point: if you’re translating the Dhammapada, it is wrong according to my understanding to translate the *attavagga* as the chapter on *Self*. It should be *oneself*. Otherwise, as Radhakrishnan finds it, you are on the side of *attā*. But it is ‘oneself’: reflexive. If you understand that as self there’s a contradiction between *attāhi attano natthi* and *attāhi attano natho*. But these are just *loke samañña*.

“Similarly in the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta, now and then the Buddha had to come out, especially in the last words of the sutta – they are very powerful: *imā kho citta*

loka samaññā... yāhi tathāgato voharati, aparāmasaṃ (“Citta, these are the world’s designations, the world’s expressions, the world’s ways of speaking, the world’s descriptions, with which the Tathagata expresses himself but without grasping to them.”) I remember reading *The Meaning of Meaning* by Ogden and Richards; there they quoted from the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta. They understood that there’s something very deep in that simile about milk, curd, butter etc. Though they didn’t get everything, they knew the Buddha was nearer the truth about semantics.

“But now we think that where there’s a word there should be something. It’s the *thing* that’s causing all the trouble. There’s just a flux of life, a functioning, but no agent in it. But the language requires both. That is why we have to say ‘it rains’, leaving the room for someone to ask ‘what is this ‘it’?’. The fire goes out: where has it ‘gone’? The Buddha from time to time had to show the absurdity of such questions. In such contexts you come across the *nītattha*.”

NOTES

1. SN 12.12 (excerpt below)
2. “And what is right view? Right view, I tell you, is of two sorts: There is right view with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in the acquisitions; and there is noble right view, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.” [MN117]

Addendum for NOTE I

[...]

“Who, now, Lord, exercises contact?”

“Not a fit question”, said the Exalted One. “I am not saying (someone) exercises contact. If I were saying so, the question would be a fit one. But I am not saying so. And I not saying so, if anyone were to ask this: ‘Conditioned, now, by what, Lord, is contact?’, this were a fit question. And the fit answer there, would be: ‘Conditioned by the sixfold sense-sphere, is contact, conditioned by contact is feeling’.”

[...]

– Translation by Bhante Ñāṇananda: *Samyutta Nikāya – An Anthology*

THE HERETIC SAGE (PART 5)

The final part of the Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta contains an interesting analysis by Ven. Sāriputta Thera which sheds light on the connection between *saḷāyatana* and *pañcupādānakkhandha*. I had carelessly commented on this section by reading the English translation without referring to the Pāḷi, and in his reply to my notes Bhante Ñāṇananda pointed out an important distinction I had failed to make.

Ven. Ñāṇamoli’s translation of the relevant section reads as follows:

“If, friends, internally the eye is intact but no external forms come into its range, and there is no corresponding [conscious] engagement, then there is no manifestation of the corresponding section of consciousness. [MLDB (2009) p. 283]”

‘Corresponding [conscious] engagement’ is Ven. Ñāṇamoli’s rendering of *tajjo samannāhāra*. I had taken this to be identical to *manasikāra* (attention), influenced by Ven. Ñāṇavīra Thera’s writings. In my interview, I ask Bhante Ñāṇananda for an explanation on the difference between the two.

“Earlier we pointed out how, in a discussion that may be categorized *asnītattha*, the Buddha corrected Ven. Moliyaphagga’s questions which implied an agent behind action. He rephrased them with the *paccaya* terminology. Similarly, when we say *manasikāra*, some may tend to think of an agent behind the attention. But Ven. Sāriputta Thera takes a different approach here when explaining the arising of *viññāṇa*.

“He discusses three possibilities:

1. The eye is not ‘broken’ – it is functional. External forms don’t come to the vicinity. And *Tajjo samannāhāra*, whatever that may be, is not present.

Then, there’s no eye consciousness.

“Here, we have to be specific about *viññāṇa*. Again, I’m reminded of something Dr. W.S. Karunaratne said: “There is no ‘*the viññāṇa*’; it is always ‘*a viññāṇa*’. Everything has to be concrete – there is no abstract consciousness.” But people think that consciousness exists on its own, and this has given rise to various theories. Ven. Ñāṇavīra Thera also pointed this out when he said “*paṭiccasamuppāda* is *viññāṇa*”.^[1] I may not agree with everything he said, but here he did reveal an important matter. The reciprocal rela-

relationship between *viññāṇa* and *nāma-rūpa* is the vortex of existence, and it is the heart of *paṭiccasamuppāda*.

2. The eye is not broken, and external forms do come to the vicinity. But *tajjo samannāhāra* is absent. Then, there is no eye-consciousness.
3. The eye is not broken, external forms come to the vicinity, and there is *tajjo samannāhāra*. Then, there is eye-consciousness.

“The word *tajjo* comes from *tat + ja*. *Tat* means ‘that [itself]’. It is the root of such important words as *tādī* and *tammaya*. So *tatja* means ‘arisen out of that itself’. What is *samannāhāra*? You might remember that, in the Cāṅkī Sutta, the Buddha happens to see the Kāpaṭhika Brahmin youth. There we find the word *upasaṃharati* along with *samannāhāra*,^[2] referring to a sort of focusing that may have not been planned – a chance meeting of eye to eye. *Samannāhāra* (*āharati* = brings) refers to a certain ‘bringing together’.

“So *tajjo samannāhāra* points to the fact that this ‘bringing together’ of the necessary factors for the arising of consciousness is inherent to the situation itself. It is unique to the situation, and does not come from within a person or from the outside. It is not exerted by oneself or an external agent: some thought that there is an *ātman* inside who is in charge, while others said that it is a God that injects consciousness into the man. Letting go of all these extremes, Ven. Sāriputta Thera pointed out the crucial role of *tajjo samannāhāra* with his analysis of the three possibilities.”

And then Bhante falls silent, and looks on with a smile.

After a few moments, he asks: “What do you hear?”

There is a bird singing in the distance.

“Did it start singing only now?”

It probably had started earlier (and now that I am listening to the tapes as I transcribe this, I know that it had started many minutes earlier).

“It must have been singing all this while, but only now...” I say.

“Only now...?”

“Only now did the attention went there.”

“There you have *tajjo samannāhāra*! So is it only because of the sound of the bird that you heard it? Didn’t you hear it only after I stopped talking? There could be other reasons too: had there been louder noises, you may not have heard it. So we see that it is circumstantial. That is why we mentioned in our writings: *everything is circumstantial; nothing is substantial.*”

Please allow me to interject here and add that the last sentence would remain something that I’ll always cherish from these interviews. Not only because of the simple profundity of the statement or the nice little practical experiment that led up to it, but also because of the gentle kindness in the way it was uttered.

“The attention that is present in a situation is to be understood as having arisen out of the circumstances. If there is anything of value in the Paṭṭhāna, that would be here, in its analysis of the 24 causes. I can’t say for certain, but it may well be an attempt at systematising the general concept mentioned in this sutta: how a thought is connected to another. Since it is impossible to explain this mechanism by breaking it apart with words, Ven. Sāriputta Thera says it is circumstantial – unique to the situation itself.

“It is because of this nature of the Buddhaddhamma that the later Indian philosophers called it a *saṅghātavāda* – pluralism, or a theory of aggregates, where the causes are not limited to one or two or none. So my silence *paṭicca*, the sound of the bird *paṭicca*, absence of other sounds *paṭicca* etc. there was the arising of a different ear-consciousness.

“It is alright to refer to *tajjo samannāhāra* as *manasikāra* as long as we make it clear that the process is impersonal. We may also bring in the Kiṃ Mūlaka Sutta^[3] here. Unfortunately my explanation of it in *The Magic of the Mind*, in the chapter ‘Essence of Concepts’, was not accepted even by Ven. Nyanaponika. In the sutta we find the statement *manasikāra sambhavā sabbe dhammā* (born of attention are all things). The commentary limits the discussion just to skillful states, which is a very narrow way of looking at it. Be it *sammā* or *micchā*, there the Buddha is pointing out the general principle.

“It is probably because of the importance of the principle discussed that the Buddha brought up the subject without being prompted by anyone. It is as if He declared it because the world would not hear or realize it otherwise. The sutta is a wonderful revelation about what we take as a ‘thing’. It is not something existing on its own in the world but a result of many psychological causes. But when we say that, we are accused of being *viññānavādins* and *suññatavādins*.

“One has to ask: why did the Buddha say ‘*manopubbaṅgamā dhammā, manoseṭṭhā manomayā*’ (Mind precedes all dhammas. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought – Dhp 1)? One has to admit that the Dhamma is *mano-mūlika*. But again, the mind is just one of the senses. What we have here is just a self-created problem. We discussed how existence is a perversion. The arising of dhammas is also the arising of *dukkha*. Not realizing this, some go looking for the truth among ‘things’.

“The search goes on because of delusion, and it is fruitless because they are chasing illusions. Dhammas, things, are all fabricated. They are all relative. They are all results of *maññanā* (ideation). Just as those who were entrenched in self-view saw the Buddha as a nihilist, those who are entrenched in materialism cannot grasp the Buddhist philosophy which puts the mind first.”

Here I ask a recurring question, probably because I still can’t bring myself to accept the already given answers due to my own materialistic tendencies (of those days): what would one see if one looks at the world ‘objectively’ – if such a thing were possible? Perhaps this is another way of asking what one sees in the *arahat-taphala samādhi*.

“*Suññatā*” comes the quick reply.

“Whether people accept it or not, the truth is emptiness. We need not go far: it is already there in the three words *animitta*, *appaṇihita* and *suññata*. One has to go from *nimitta* (sign) to *animitta* (signless), with the help of signs. The culmination of *paṇidhi* (resolve) is *appaṇihita* (undirected). ‘Thingness’ gives way to emptiness.

“Imagine there were a large box here, with a label saying that the contents weigh 1000kg. If I were to ask you to move it, you’d object saying that it is too heavy for one person to handle. Let’s say I somehow coax you to try. When you try to lift, it comes off almost without effort – there’s no bottom to the box! The 1000kg sign was deceiving you. That’s why the realization of the Dhamma is equated to laying down of a burden.

“To realize emptiness, one has to know what one is aiming at. *Yad’anuseti, tad’anumīyati, yad’anumīyati, tena saṅkhaṃ gacchati* (If one has an underlying tendency towards something, then one is measured in accordance with it. If one is measured in accordance with something, then one is reckoned in terms of it. [SN 22.36]). As long as there is *anusaya* there would be measuring, giving rise to

the concept of ‘things’. Elimination of *anusaya* is like the bottom of the box giving way. After that, anyone can lift it.”

NOTES

1. ... any exemplification of *paṭiccasamuppāda* in the sphere of experience can be re-stated in the form of the fundamental exemplification of *paṭiccasamuppāda* in the sphere of experience, which is, as it must be, that beginning with *viññāṇa*. Thus, *viññāṇa* and *paṭiccasamuppāda* are one.
– Ven. Ñāṇavīra Thera, *Notes on Dhamma*, “A Note on Paṭiccasamuppāda”, para. 20
2. *Atha kho kāpaṭhikassa māṇavassa etadahosi: ‘yadā me samaṇo gotamo cakkhunā cakkhum upasaṃharissati, athāhaṃ samaṇaṃ gotamaṃ pañhaṃ pucchissāmi’ ti. Atha kho bhagavā kāpaṭhikassa māṇavassa cetasā cetoparivitakkamaññāya yena kāpaṭhiko māṇavo tena cakkhūni upasaṃhāsi. Atha kho kāpaṭhikassa māṇavassa etadahosi: ‘samannāharati kho maṃ samaṇo gotamo, yannūnāhaṃ samaṇaṃ gotamaṃ pañhaṃ puccheyyanti. [MII p. 169 (PTS)]*

Then the thought occurred to Kāpaṭhika the youth, “When Gotama the contemplative meets my gaze with his, I will ask him a question.” And so the Blessed One, encompassing Kāpaṭhika’s awareness with his awareness, met his gaze. Kāpaṭhika thought, “Gotama the contemplative has turned to me. Suppose I ask him a question.” [MN 95]

3. [...] Rooted in desire (or interest) friends, are all things; born of attention are all things; arising from contact are all things; converging on feelings are all things; headed by concentration are all things; dominated by mindfulness are all things; surmountable by wisdom are all things; yielding deliverance as essence are all things; merging in the Deathless are all things; terminating in Nibbana are all things. [Excerpted from AN 8.83]
– Translation by Bhante Ñāṇananda (*The Magic of the Mind*)

THE HERETIC SAGE (PART 6)

This is part 6 of a series on Ven. Katukurunde Ñāṇananda Thera. Many months have passed since I met Bhante Ñāṇananda for the first time, and had this series of discussions. More recordings remain to be published than have already appeared here. Unfortunately it seems unlikely that I will manage to transcribe them. I would now like to wrap up this series with one memorable discussion we had:

To end our long discussion, I ask from Bhante: “Does this mean that we should not be afraid to call Buddhism a *suññatavāda*?”

“We approach the Buddha’s teaching with our precast pigeonholes: either it has to be idealism, or it must be realism. If one really wants to call this an ‘ism’, they should be calling it ‘let-go-ism’. One picks up only to make use of and let go.

“The entire teaching of the Buddha could be summed up in a single *Pāḷi* word. What do you think it is?”

I wonder if Bhante is referring to *Appamāda*.

“*Yāvadeva*”, comes the unexpected answer. Bhante adds the Sinhala word: “hudek”. In English, it means ‘merely for the sake of’. I am awed by the simple profundity of that statement.

“That one word transcends all those isms. We might as well call this teaching a *yāvadeva-ism*. Each step on the way is merely for the sake of taking the next, and that too is merely for the next. In other words, one has to reverse *paṭiccasamuppāda*. We encounter the word *āhāra* (food, nutriment), for both good and the bad. *Hetu, paccaya, āhāra* all indicate causality. Later tradition tried to make a distinction between *hetu* and *paccaya* but we do not see this in early texts. For example, we find phrases such as ‘*ko hetu, ko paccayo*’. The teaching was given to be made use of, to go to the other shore, not to get entangled in words.”

I ask, almost rhetorically, if this mess was created by taking the prescriptive teachings of the Buddha as descriptive.

“That’s why we said that it is when *pariyatti* (scriptural study) overtook *paṭipatti* (practice) that the decline started. How can one understand the texts without any practice? It would be just a collection of words. We need both: *sāttamaṃ sabyañjanaṃ* (right meaning and right phrasing). If the meaning is wrong, the

phrasing would be wrong, and vice versa. However, if the meaning is right, even if the phrasing is wrong, there is the possibility of making corrections. Otherwise we'll be passing the *piṭaka*, the basket, in the dark.

“I'm reminded of one beautiful line from a story mentioned in the commentaries, which my teacher (Ven. Ñānārāma Mahāthera) used often in his Dhamma talks: *añño esa, āvuso, gatakassa maggo nāma* ^[1] — **This path is different, friend, to one who has travelled by it.**”

NOTES

1. See discussion on *Gantho* in Visuddhimagga, Chapter 3: Kammatṭhānaggahaṇaniddeso, Dasapalibodhavaṇṇanā