

Taking the Buddha Seriously.¹

I am extremely grateful to the organizers for inviting me to speak to you. I am only sorry that a broken ankle has made it impossible for me to travel to Singapore and appear in person. I would have loved to be present and engage in discussion with you. What I am going to say is, alas, sure to be controversial. In my opinion it should not be controversial in the slightest degree; but I am old enough by now to have learnt that my opinion and the opinion of the world in general very rarely coincide. So I hope that my absence will not entirely prevent such a discussion. Indeed, I hope that my words may lead to action. What action, I shall say at the end of this speech.

It is natural, it is only human, that gatherings such as ours tend to be self-congratulatory. They are, after all, a kind of family gathering, and people like to come together with those whom they consider kindred spirits in order to indulge in warm feelings and to have a good time. I am not a killjoy, and I am all for having a good time. But sometimes there are more important things to do. While it is very agreeable for us to spend time telling each other how wonderful we all are, what brings us together is something deeply serious – indeed it could not be more serious, for it concerns the entire basis on which we think, or claim to think, that it is right for us to spend our lives, both as individuals and as members of society. Therefore to use the time when we are together for self-congratulation is not merely a wasted opportunity, but even a kind of betrayal, a betrayal of our values.

One of the commonest expressions in the Pali Canon for what the Buddha invites and urges us all to attain is *yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*, knowing and seeing things as they really are. This is in fact an expression for nirvana, or at least for a crucial aspect of nirvana. Though very few, if any, of us can claim to have achieved knowledge and insight into everything, in accord with reality, that is something that surely Buddhists, if they are sincere, must constantly be trying to do.

Knowing and seeing things as they really are can be expressed in many ways, all of them important. It means always being devoted to the truth. It means intellectual honesty. It means avoiding hypocrisy and all other forms of insincerity.

In some cultural traditions there is an explicit conflict between speaking the truth and speaking agreeably. For example, there is a well-known adage in Sanskrit: one should speak the truth, one should say what is agreeable; but one should not say a disagreeable truth.² As in so many matters, the Buddha disagreed with the mainstream Indian tradition. In the *Abhaya Rāja Kumāra Sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the Buddha says that he says what is true, what is agreeable, and what is beneficial, but he will always say what is beneficial even if it is not agreeable.³ I am going to act on his words.

My title is *Taking the Buddha Seriously*. I think that at first glance any of us would react by saying that surely there can be nothing disagreeable in that. I wish it were so. But the Buddha has also warned us how difficult, and therefore also disagreeable, it is to get rid of our habitual opinions, our habits and prejudices, with which we spend our lives and which save us the trouble of thinking uncomfortable thoughts, thoughts which may even prompt us to do uncomfortable actions. My talk will demonstrate what I mean.

Among the most fundamental of the Buddha's teachings is that every aspect of our makeup and behaviour is on fire with three fires: the fires of passion, hatred and confusion. (Sometimes the first fire is said to be greed, but that makes no difference.) The first two fires are passionate, irrational emotions, whether positive or negative; the third fire is failure of the intellect, and we can equally well label it delusion (not seeing reality as it is), confusion, or just plain stupidity. This third fire makes us believe in an unchanging core to ourselves, which we consider our "soul" or our "real self"; and this delusion is motivated by our violent likes and dislikes, our egoism. I expect everybody here realises

that these three fires are part of the same metaphor as nirvana, which means the going out of a fire; and likewise I expect everyone knows that the only path to true happiness and freedom from suffering is to dampen down those three fires, and that this applies to every sentient being, both individually and collectively.

The path to nirvana consists of morality, meditation and understanding. Morality is the prerequisite for all that should follow, and the moral quality of what we do is defined by the intention behind it. The Pali word for an act which is moral, because it springs from a good intention, is *kusala*. In Sanskrit *kusala* can mean either skilful or healthy, and scholars have debated which is the better English translation in Buddhism. The Buddha chose his words with care, and I think it likely that he intended both implications. But here I have an important point to make. A good moral choice is an intelligent and informed choice. It is not enough simply to mean well: that is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for an act to be *kusala*. An English proverb says: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions", and there is obviously something to it. But I have come to see that the Buddha already knew this. Even if you do not act out of passion or hatred, it may be just as bad if you act out of stupidity. Not long ago I read in the press⁴ that in the USA a five-year-old boy shot and killed his two-year-old sister. His parents had recently given him a revolver for his fifth birthday; it was just like any other revolver except that it was painted in bright colours to look like a child's toy. It turns out that such guns are marketed in the USA under such names as My First Gun, and it is perfectly legal. The parents who gave their son this present had left the gun lying about loaded and evidently had no idea how dangerous it was. Though their intention had nothing wrong with it in terms of emotion, they acted with extreme stupidity. I think we can go further, and say that everyone involved in selling small children real guns is equally stupid – though for them one cannot claim a motive as innocent as giving a child a welcome birthday present.

So far I have said nothing but what should be elementary, perhaps even obvious to every Buddhist. But let me put it all together and see if there are any worthwhile conclusions to be reached. First let me return to the matter which has already created so much controversy among us in recent years: whether there can or should now be Theravāda Buddhist nuns. I think that the time has come to stop tiptoeing around this issue and speak out the truth, however unpalatable it may be to some.

Nearly three years ago I spoke at a conference in Bangkok which tried to tackle the serious problem of why Theravada Buddhism is fast losing popularity in the western world. My paper was called “Comfort or Challenge”, and I made the treatment of women my main, though not my only, theme. Some of you may be fed up with this controversy by now, but it is still alive and urgent. Despite all the blather, I believe that there are only two points worth dwelling on, one factual, the other prescriptive.

The factual question concerns the passage in the *Vinaya Piṭaka* in which the Buddha is persuaded to found the order of nuns, but only with reluctance, and predicts that as a result of this move Buddhism will last only five hundred rather than a thousand years. It is already twenty years since Ute Hüsken published an article in which she clearly demonstrated that this passage contains internal contradictions and cannot therefore be completely authentic.⁵ Since then, things have gone a great deal further. In 2007 a conference was held in Hamburg on “Women’s Role in the Sangha” and the papers were published (all in English) in 2009. The Ven. Anālayo there gave and published a paper which should have settled the matter once and for all. Let me quote him: “[A]ccording to the canonical texts [which Anālayo has quoted], the Buddha had already planned right after his awakening to establish an order of nuns. The texts further indicate that the existence of this order of nuns as one of the four assemblies is an integral and indispensable requirement for the welfare and prosperity of the Dharma, and right from its beginning this order of nuns could count an impressive range of highly

accomplished members.”⁶ He goes on to conclude: “[I]t seems ... safe to conclude that the elements in the canonical accounts that express a negative attitude towards nuns seem to stem from a later textual layer. These stand in direct contrast to the numerous canonical texts that present the Buddha’s attitude toward the order of nuns in a positive light, indicating that he wanted an order of nuns, whose existence should be reckoned as one of the prerequisites for the duration of his teachings.”⁷ (pp.96-7). In other words if you actually read the evidence for what the Buddha said, you will find that he regarded the nuns’ order as not merely desirable but necessary for the survival of his teachings. I shall suggest that, as usual, he was right.

I have just said, “if you actually read the evidence for what the Buddha said”. Please take those words to heart. If Buddhism is in a bad way – and I believe it is in a catastrophically bad way – surely that is because so few people ever take the trouble to familiarise themselves with even a few of the Buddha’s sermons. Sheer ignorance of the basic evidence, the Pali texts, has for centuries allowed Buddhists to hold onto the belief, which for some reason they find comfortable, that the Buddha did not like admitting women into his Order, even though by reading more of what he said they could have understood, just as Anālayo has understood and demonstrated, that the passage in which he is so represented cannot be authentic, but must be a later interpolation by misogynists.

So much for the facts. But logic tells us that a mere fact does not tell us what we have to do: from an “is” we cannot derive an “ought”. Our “ought”s, surely, we must get from the Buddha. The Buddha declared, in his wisdom, that there are three fetters (in Pali: *tīni samyojanāni*) which bind us to *saṃsāra* and are basic obstacles to spiritual progress; and the second of these is adherence to ritualism. In Pali this is called *sīlabbata-parāmāso*. Since ethical value lies in intention alone, reciting words, even such words as the five precepts, is useless and pointless unless one is consciously intending their meaning. By

contrast, the point of ritual lies in doing, not in intending. Therefore ritual can have no moral or spiritual value.

The argument over ordaining women and thus reviving the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* centres on the fact that it is not possible today to ordain women in the way laid down by the *Vinaya*, since that requires that part of the ceremony be performed by nuns who are themselves ordained. But what is ordination but a ritual, the recital of some Pali formulae? Because Buddhism evaluates acts by the intention behind them, which is to say by the individual's conscience, it can spread to human beings anywhere, since each one of us has a conscience. The Buddhism which measures action by ritual and custom can never spread anywhere: it is just like the brahminism which the Buddha set out to criticise, which has never been and never will be adopted by any other society than the one where it started.

If there are women who want to restart a Sangha, why should they be stopped? Should we not thank and congratulate them? What does it matter that the continuity of the ordination ritual has been interrupted? What is that but a ritual? Must we all live in a world of obsessive neurotics?

Should we simply leave the ritualists to splutter away, while we welcome those who follow the Buddha's teaching and principles? Should we not do all we can to nurture the revival of the Theravādin Order of Nuns? Alas, it is not as simple as that. For I have not been flogging a dead horse. I do not know about the law in each Buddhist country, but I do know that in Thailand creating a *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* is illegal. I have publicly argued and devoutly believe that refusing ordination to women is the main thing that makes Theravāda unattractive to the West of today, so that one can claim without exaggeration that this policy is condemning Theravāda Buddhism to a slow suicide. Is that what Thailand wants? Do those who support the *status quo* either know or care what the Buddha preached?

In my talk three years ago I asked why nowadays so few people in the wider world find Theravada Buddhism worthy of their serious consideration; and I gave most of my answer under the headings of sex and violence. I had a lot to say (far more than today) about the treatment of women, and probably implied that that was in my view the worst problem we faced. Alas, today I see that in this I was too optimistic. I failed to foresee what the world has since had to witness and is still going on: Theravada Buddhist monks murdering and inciting others to murder non-Buddhists, including women and children, and systematically destroying their homes and the rest of their property, while the government does nothing to stop them. Is this what we have come to? And should we just turn a blind eye and talk about something more pleasant?

Before I descend into more detail, I need to say something about the excuse which is being made for these crimes: nationalism.

The crimes I am going to talk about, which are committed by those who call themselves proponents of the religion of non-violence (*ahimsā*), are being committed in the name of nationalism. So we need to consider what the Buddha had to say about nationalism. In one sense, nothing. How so?

It is perfectly natural, and indeed right, for people to feel warmly towards their own family, and beyond that towards those for whom they feel an affinity because of shared language, customs and experiences. But there is not a word in the teachings of the Lord Buddha which can justify treating anyone badly simply on the grounds that they differ from us or are in some way a stranger to us. Buddhism, Christianity and Islam are called the universal religions precisely because they are for everyone, equally. The great religious traditions all teach that people should love each other, be kind and compassionate. By this, they mean that one should love *everybody*, not just those whom it is easy to love. Loving someone who is always kind to you is no more than most animals do by instinct. Love becomes an ethical accomplishment only when it is directed towards those whom it is hard to love.⁸ Social and national identity are utterly irrelevant to this, the most fundamental of all ethical requirements.

Now let me remind you of a few facts. The current number of the American Buddhist magazine *Tricycle* carries an article by Maung Zarni on “Buddhist nationalism in Burma”.⁹ It begins: “For those outside Burma, the broadcast images of the Theravada monks of the ‘Saffron Revolution’ of 2007 are still fresh. Backed by the devout Buddhist population, these monks were seen chanting [the *Metta sutta*] on the streets ..., calling for an improvement in public well-being in the face of the growing economic hardships ... [Their] brave protests ... represented a fine example of engaged Buddhism, a version of Buddhist activism that resonates with the age-old Orientalist, decontextualized view of what Buddhists are like: lovable, smiley, hospitable people who lead their lives mindfully and have much to offer the non-Buddhist world in the ways of fostering peace.

“But In the past year the world has been confronted with images of the same robed monks publicly demonstrating against Islamic nations’ distribution of aid to starving Muslim Rohingya, displaced into refugee camps in their own country following Rakhine Buddhist attacks. The rise of genocidal Buddhist racism against the Rohingya, a minority community of nearly one million people in ... Rakhine (also known as Arakan), is an international humanitarian crisis. The military-ruled state has been relentless in its attempts to erase Rohingya ethnic identity, which was officially recognized as a distinct ethnic group in 1954 by the democratic government of Prime Minister U Nu.” Since June 2012 entire villages and city neighbourhoods have been devastated. Waves of killing, arson and rampage have been backed by Burma’s security forces. “The atrocities occurring in the name of Buddhist nationalism in Burma are impossible to reconcile with the ideal of *metta*. Buddhist Rakhine throw young Rohingya children into the flames of their own homes before the eyes of family members. On June 3 [2012], 10 ... Muslim pilgrims were pulled off a bus ... and beaten to death by a mob of more than 100 Buddhist men. The crime occurred in broad daylight and in full view of both the public and local law enforcement officials.” There is much, much more in this article, but I have time only to mention the photograph of how “Several thousand Buddhist monks took to the streets of Mandalay to protest against a world Islamic body’s efforts” to send humanitarian aid to the Rohingya.

Most of us find it hard to react to genocide. Why? Modern research suggests an answer: it is simply too big for our imaginations to cope with. We can feel the horror of one atrocity because we can identify with the victims, but then our sympathy is more or less exhausted. Psychiatrists talk of “psychological numbing”.¹⁰ This applies firstly to survivors, but can also affect the killers, and even third parties. The latter groups also use other psychological mechanisms to cope, notably various forms of denial. The killers may concoct stories of how they were acting in self-defense. Others simply rewrite history and deny the facts. So I ask each one of you to feel how it is to have your house burnt before your eyes and to be forced to watch your children being thrown to burn in the flames, and at least to empathise with *that*. Then keep a hold of your knowledge of reality, and just note with your reason that such crimes have been and are being committed many times over by crowds of Buddhists, some of them led by monks, and condoned by the state. Let me pause a moment to let that sink in.

Buddhists also seem to have a particular problem: the attitude of the Sangha. They have withdrawn from most forms of social life, but they still have a social role: to provide a model for the rest of us. They, if anyone, must maintain moral standards. Of course, very few of them commit murder; and there are individual monks in every country who do speak out against nationalism and racism. But what we are seeing too often, alas, is that monks decline to intervene or even utter an opinion on public affairs, on the pretext that the Sangha does not take part in politics. In Sri Lanka, where there is now a political party only for monks, that excuse has worn pretty thin. But surely it is among the first duties of every monk to combat hatred and violence wherever they are found, and if they turn a blind eye to this duty, whether from laziness, cowardice or ignorance, they are betraying their robes and are unworthy to be respected as “sons of the Buddha”.

Before I pass on to Sri Lanka, I want to suggest a link between these horrors and the lack of a Bhikkhunī Sangha. I am not so naïve as to think that women are on average necessarily more moral than men. Besides, in every

human group there are likely to be individuals who are exceptionally wicked, just as there may be some who are exceptionally good. But I dare to assert that women commit far fewer crimes of violence than men. I also dare to assert that women are mostly far kinder to children than men are. Does anyone think that those who throw children onto a fire to burn to death might be women? At the risk of appearing outrageous, I wonder whether, if those Burmese monks who want to stop food from reaching the starving were all nuns, they would still behave in such a way as to disgrace Buddhism. The nuns might not be heroically compassionate, but at least they would probably not be fiendishly cruel.

The anti-Muslim sentiment in Sri Lanka has not – yet – reached anything like this pitch, and so far appears to have stopped short of murder. But there is a new organization, founded and headed by monks, called the Army of Buddhist Force (*Bodhu Bala Sēnā*): what a perfect Buddhist name! This is anti-Muslim. Its founding has appalled friends of Sri Lanka, and also amazed them, because there is hardly any history of animosity between Sinhalese Buddhists and the Muslim minority (9 or 10 per cent of the population). In the long civil war, though many Muslims understandably tried not to get involved, they tended to support the Sinhalese government, never the Tamil Tigers.

There is plenty of information about the *Bodhu Bala Sēnā* in the media. Their main activity is making life unpleasant for Muslims, particularly Muslim businesses, but they also do riskier things like damaging mosques. It is crystal clear that they have government support. Just watch the films on You Tube of Sinhalese monks making incendiary speeches to incite the crowds while the police and troops stand idly by – presumably to protect the monks!

You might have thought that after a civil war lasting for a whole generation, the government would aim to build a lasting peace through communal harmony by being helpful to some of the displaced and pauperized Tamils. But that of course is an absurdly idealistic idea! Failing that, you might then think that the government would be satisfied with fuelling Tamil resentment

and would not need to create fresh enemies. Think again. What is perhaps most amazing of all is that even cynical governments cannot see far enough ahead to anticipate the backlash: once persecution of the Muslims becomes too blatant, Islamic powers will overwhelm these puny Buddhist states, just as the massive Muslim majority in Bangladesh has been dealing by no means kindly with their own Buddhist minority.

Of all the possible cases I could mention in which Theravāda Buddhists, and particularly their leaders, are betraying the Buddhist value of non-violence, let alone kindness and compassion, why have I picked out just these two cases, both concerning the treatment of Muslims. Because they are not merely disgraceful and idiotic: they are also both recent developments which are on the boil, or coming to the boil, right now. We cannot do anything, not even raise a protest, against all the iniquities for which Theravada Buddhists are responsible; but maybe we can raise a cry which will be heard, and do something to cover our shame. Finally, even if it makes people feel uncomfortable, let me say that those who commit the crimes are of course wicked, but what are we to think of those who can and should condemn them, but remain silent?

What can we do? I would like this Congress to pass a resolution to be published as a newspaper advertisement in Myanmar, in Sri Lanka, in Thailand, and here in Singapore, and in cases where that is legally impossible it should be published where it will come to people's attention. That advertisement should say: "We hereby wish to inform our Islamic brothers and sisters that as Buddhists we are deeply ashamed by the appalling treatment of Muslims now occurring in some Buddhist countries. Islam sets out to be the religion of peace and Buddhism claims to be a religion of non-violence. These are ideals for all mankind, regardless of differences in beliefs and customs. We call upon the leaders of the Buddhist Sangha to condemn all acts of violence and to enforce the monastic Rule by expelling from the Sangha all monks responsible for such acts; and to use their influence with the Buddhist laity to make them gentle and compassionate to all. We also call on governments to enforce their laws against murder, assault, arson, rape and

other acts of violence and incitement to violence, and ensure that the offenders are duly punished, whatever their social status.”

I hope that everyone present will be willing to sign this declaration and to make a financial contribution, however tiny, towards the costs of its publication. I shall contribute 500 pounds sterling.

¹ On 30 September 2010 I gave the keynote address at a conference near Bangkok, organized by the Ven. Sugandho, on “The Dissemination of Theravada Buddhism in the 21st Century”. My speech was called “Comfort or Challenge”, and its last words were: “We have to take the Buddha seriously.” There is some overlap between that speech (which is on the OCBS website, www.ocbs.org) and the present one, and I have even borrowed a few lines from there; but here I have much developed and emphasised some points made in the earlier talk, and omitted others. The two talks may thus be read together.

² *Satyam brūyāt priyam brūyāt. Mā brūyāt satyam apriyam.*

³ MN I, 395.

⁴ *The Week*, 18 May 2013, issue 920, p.17.

⁵ Her original article was in German, but I am aware that nowadays hardly anyone reads German, so I published an English translation of it in the *Journal of the Pali Text Society* in 2000.

⁶ Anālayo: “Women’s Renunciation in early Buddhism”, in Mohr, Thea and Jampa Tsedroen (edd.): *Dignity and Discipline: Reviving Full Ordination for Buddhist Nuns*, Boston, Wisdom Publications, 2010, pp.76-7.

⁷ *Op.cit.* pp.96-7.

⁸ On this see *Visuddhimagga* chapter IX.

⁹ Spring 2013, pp.50-55.

¹⁰ Diamond, Jared: *The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee*, London, Vintage Books, 2002, p.273-4. The whole of chapter 16, on genocide, is most instructive.