

Some Reflections on the *Garava Sutta*

One is never too old to learn. It is only relatively late in my Dharma life that I have become more aware of or have focused on the *Garava Sutta* of the Pali Canon. This is not to say that I did not know of its existence but that it started having a significance for me that it had not had before. What struck me was that the Buddha was giving the hearer a glimpse of the workings of the Buddha-mind. But who was the original hearer? According to tradition, it was Ananda, the Buddha's companion in the last years of his life. But now the 'hearer' is the person who reads or hears this section of the Samyutta Nikaya, whether in Pali or in a translation. Hearing those words myself, and doing my best to absorb them, it occurs to me that we need to reflect deeply on them in order to bring out, as best we can, their full significance. On the surface, they are easy enough to understand. The Buddha says "What if I were to dwell in dependence on this very *dhamma* to which I have fully awakened, honouring and respecting it?" But what is that *dhamma*? It is surely not the sum total of the Buddha's teachings, for it would be absurd to think of him as honouring and respecting something of which he himself was the source. Before saying more about the *dhamma* to which the Buddha had awoken, I want to say something about his honouring and respecting that *dhamma*.

In a preceding section of the Sutta the Buddha declared unequivocally that it is painful to live without honouring and respecting anyone, from which it followed that he himself needed to live in such a manner. To modern, egalitarian, 'politically correct' ears the first part of this statement will seem incredible. Are we not all equal so that there is no question of having to look up to anyone? Moreover, no one is more spiritually developed than anyone else. They are just *differently* developed. In the Buddha's teaching, however, there are steps and stages such as the eight stages, both mundane and transcendental, of the eightfold path, the six paramitas, and so on, and there are individuals who are on these steps or at these stages, so as to form a hierarchy of levels and of practitioners. According to the Buddha it is actually painful not 'to live honouring and respecting' someone, and this, too, will sound incredible to modern ears. They will deny that they feel any such discomfort, protesting that they can live quite happily without honouring and respecting anyone. If they honour or respect anyone at all, it will be the politicians or media celebrities of the day, but this will not be the kind of honour and respect of which the Buddha speaks, any more than the politicians and celebrities in question will be truly worthy of such honour and respect. The word *garava* has a richer connotation than is suggested by the English words used to translate it. It includes such emotions as admiration, wonder, and delight in the fact that there exists, or existed, others superior to

oneself in creative ability or spiritual attainment. It is akin to such terms as *van-dana* or salutation and *puja* or worship, all of which acts are expressive of positive emotion. To live without looking up to anyone represents an impoverishment of one's emotional life and, indeed, an impairment of one's very humanity.

I have never found it difficult to look up. As a boy I looked up to such heroes as Alfred the Great, Robin Hood and Sir Walter Raleigh, as well as to the gods and heroes of Ancient Greece and Scandinavia. Later on, I was to enjoy Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero Worship*, though not all his heroes were mine. In my teen years I discovered the painters, sculptors, and architects of the Italian Renaissance, some of whom seemed to tower above ordinary humanity. I also discovered the great poets and playwrights of my own country, as well as its great prose writers of both sexes. To all of these I looked up with admiration, wonder, and delight, rejoicing that such individuals had lived and worked among us and that the products of their genius were still available to us. It was in my teen years, too, that I extended my horizon beyond Europe to take in the wise men of Asia, and especially the Buddha, whom I came to see not just as a historical figure but as the embodiment of ultimate reality. I came to look up not only to the Buddha and to his Dharma and his enlightened disciples, but also to those religious geniuses who in India, China, and Tibet had helped to bring out the significance of certain aspects of his teaching. Nearer home, I looked up to and still look up to my personal teachers, honouring and respecting them as best I can in my own life and teaching. I look up to Jagdish Kashyap, who taught me Pali and Abhidharma. I look up to Chattrul Sangye Dorje, who gave me the Green Tara initiation. I look up to Kachu Rimpoche, who gave me the Padmasambhava sadhana. I look up to Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche, who initiated me into the sadhanas of Manjughosa, Avalokitesvara, Vajrapani, and Green Tara. I look up to Dudjom Rimpoche, who initiated me into the Vajrasattva sadhana. I look up to Dhardo Rimpoche, who initiated me into the White Tara sadhana and gave me the Bodhisattva precepts. I look up to Dilgo Khyentse Rimpoche, who introduced me to the Yellow Jambhala, to White Tara, and to Kurukulle. To Yogi Chen, too, I look up, who shared with me the treasures of Vajrayana and Ch'an. I look up to all these compassionate teachers, whose influence has entered into my life and has through me entered into the life of the Triratna Buddhist Order. To them do I look up with devotion and endless gratitude.

The fact that I find it easy to look up, especially to my spiritual teachers, does not mean that I am able to do this simply because I am of the devotional rather than of the intellectual type. One's personal type has little to do with it. The capacity to look up to something or someone higher than oneself is inherent in human nature and reaches across religions and cultures. In his or her spiritual life the Buddhist seeks to balance faith and wisdom, meditation and vigour, all with the

help of the central faculty of mindfulness or awareness. This does not mean that on certain important occasions, whether in one's individual life or in the life of a whole community, there may not be a special outpouring of devotion and gratitude towards a certain person or persons. In the Triratna Buddhist Order this may occur in connection with one's private and public preceptors at the time of ordination. I have witnessed it on a much larger scale in the case of the attitude of the new Buddhists of India, who feel an unbounded devotion to Dr Ambedkar, who led them from bondage to freedom, from darkness to light, and from despair to hope. Any attempt to minimise the importance of devotion in the spiritual life, or to limit it to a particular personality type, is a betrayal of the Buddha's teaching and does less than justice to human nature.

In the *Garava Sutta* the Buddha declares that it is painful to live without honouring and respecting anyone. He also says that he cannot see, among the Brahmins and ascetics of his time, anyone who is superior to himself and whom, therefore, he could live honouring and respecting. This too will sound incredible to modern ears, though not necessarily for the same reasons. Some will maintain that the Buddha's statement displays arrogance, while according to others the Buddha could not be superior because it is their own teacher or prophet or saviour who is superior to all others, along with his gospel or revelation. Comparisons between the different religions of the world are inevitable. At the same time the fact that each religion claims not only that it is true but that it is in exclusive possession of the truth makes comparison difficult, even impossible, for there is no common standard of comparison on which all are agreed. Each religion lives in a self-contained world of its own. To describe one religion in the terms of another is to do it an injustice. Religions are mutually incommensurable. Any scholarly or objective comparison of one religion with another by someone standing as it were outside them all cannot but misrepresent them. The same is true of any attempt to describe individual religions in those terms.

Where does this leave the individual Buddhist? In the case of an Eastern Buddhist there is no problem. He or she lives within the self-contained world of their own form of Buddhism. For the Western Buddhist, however, there is a problem. A Western Buddhist can, of course, join a branch of an Eastern Buddhist Sangha, but this may involve an alienation from his or her own culture, with subsequent psychological problems. It may involve trying to be a *Thai* Buddhist or a *Japanese* Buddhist rather than a practitioner of the Dharma, especially if the religion adopted is tainted with what I have called religio-nationalism. What Western Buddhists need is a self-contained Buddhist world of their own that is faithful to the Dharma and at the same time draws for inspiration on the best of Western culture, whether that of Ancient Greece, the Italian Renaissance, or the Romantic movement. I believe that the Triratna Buddhist Order can be

the model for such a self-contained 'Western' Buddhist world, extending as it does from Europe to India, Australasia, and the Americas.

To believe that one is in exclusive possession of the truth can cause one to see others as heretics or unbelievers. It can even lead one to prosecute, torture, and even kill such people in the name of one's god or one's religion. Such an attitude is foreign to the spirit of Buddhism. A true Buddhist of whatever provenance, though firmly believing in the truth of the Dharma, will behave with courtesy and goodwill towards those of another faith. This will not always be easy, for one's natural assertiveness and competitiveness may well smuggle themselves into one's adherence to the Dharma. Thus one hears of Japanese warrior monks doing battle with one another or Sinhalese monks exhorting soldiers to kill Hindu Tamils. Many years ago during my early days in India I often told people in my lectures that Buddhism was a religion of peace and that no blood had ever been shed in its name. Now I would be ashamed to make such a claim, for my words would be belied by what is going on in many parts of the Buddhist world. One cannot but lament that in some quarters Buddhism should have degenerated to such an extent, though it is of course Buddhists who have degenerated, not their religion. *Corruptio optimi pessima*. (The corruption of the best is the worst.) Or, as the poet has it, 'Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds'.

The Buddha certainly believed that he was in possession of the truth, though in his case 'possession' would not have meant what possession means to ordinary, unenlightened mortals. He spoke of his having wondered whether he should dwell depending on that *dhamma* to which he had fully awoken, thus giving us an insight into what I have called the workings of the Buddha-mind. But what is that *dhamma*? If it is not the sum total of the Buddha's verbal teachings, then what is it? We should not assume that because the Buddha has spoken of it, and about his living in accordance with it, that we really do understand what he is talking about. To my mind, the Buddha is speaking about what it is that makes a Buddha a Buddha, whatever that may be. In other words he is implying that we live in a universe of such a nature that, provided certain moral and spiritual conditions have been met, it is possible for a human being to attain Buddhahood. It is probably no accident that although he speaks of that *dhamma* and that his attainment of his Buddhahood was dependent on the fact of its existence, he does not describe or define it. In the course of Buddhist history that *dhamma* has been spoken of in various ways, but to the unenlightened mind it remains a mystery. This is of more than theoretical interest as there are practical consequences. It is not that there is an 'X' by virtue of which the Buddha becomes an Awakened One and lives in dependence on that 'X', honouring and revering it. What the Buddha is doing is giving us an example at the very highest level of how one should live. Like other Buddhists, members of the Triratna Buddhist

Order should 'look up'. We should look up to the Buddha, to our spiritual teachers, and to all those who, in the words of one of the finest poems of the twentieth century, were truly great.

*Born of the sun, they travelled a short while toward the sun
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.*

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