

The Ring and I

Bhikkhu Sujata

I was enthralled. Spellbound by the Ring. It was my obsession, my world. It made me do the unthinkable. I was driven to deceit, yes, even lying to my own mother.

'Mum, I feel sick today. I've got a tummyache. I'd better not go to school.' Ah, mothers. They know. She was too kind to send me to school, and too wise to send me to the doctor. So I'd huddle beneath the sheets and journey back to Middle Earth, adventure with my friends who seemed so real, so alive, so much truer than those pale wraiths in grey that I found at school.

The Lord of the Rings taps deep wellsprings in our consciousness. It's no coincidence that the world of Tolkein, that staid bachelor in tweeds, should have found favor years later with the drugged out free love generation. Despite some unfortunate lapses in 'political correctness' (I once read a hilarious feminist deconstruction of The Lord of the Rings), the spiritual ethos of The Lord of the Rings springs from much the same milieu as the counterculture movements of the sixties, and later the New Age. The generation of European scholars before Tolkein, his immediate peers, had accomplished much in the way of rediscovering the lost spirituality of the pre-Christian pagans. (They also provided the first accurate ground maps in Europe of the complex realm of Eastern religions, although there's little evidence of Eastern influence in Tolkein.) There is no formal religion in Middle Earth. But the overall effect is deeply spiritual, a revering of the sacred immanent in nature, with its holiest figure the white witch Galadriel. Here I see the influence of scholars such as Frazer and Jung, who had conducted in-depth studies on the psychology of myth, and in particular the survival of primitive motifs from very ancient times, both brutal and beautiful, beneath a veneer of Christianity and reason. Tolkein's work was an attempt to re-ground the English consciousness in its own mythic inheritance.

But despite the prevalence of pagan motifs, the deepest ethical concerns remain thoroughly Christian. For Tolkein, the greatest evil is pride. Melkor was the mightiest of the gods, who like Satan desired to overthrow the Creator Himself, only to be cast down and become Morgoth, the foe of the world. Feanor, the greatest craftsman of the elves of old, would lay the earth to waste to recover his precious Silmarils. Atlantis fell due to the mad arrogance of the Kings of Men. Ever and again it is pride that wreaks destruction.

And conversely, humility is the sign of true greatness. Thus Gandalf relinquished his rightful place at the head of the Order of Wizards to Saruman, and wanders disguised as purveyor of party tricks for children. And Aragorn, the true heir to the Kings of old, is content to labor in dubious obscurity as a Ranger for the security of the Northlands. But in the moral world of Middle Earth, there is a proper place for all, a place largely determined, it would seem, by

hereditary lineage. One is entitled to a certain status by birth. It is admirable for the individual to accept a lower status, but the world at large will only be truly at rights when the great ascend to their rightful position. This status should be earned, not through personal ambition (the bane of Boromir), but through self-sacrifice, courage, and Love.

The strong emphasis on racial and hereditary lineages is an intrinsic motif in Tolkein's search for a culture more deep-rooted in time, yet it strikes an uneasy note today, especially as we remember the racial ideology of Tolkein's contemporaries, the Nazis. The Nazis (Nazgul?) were the first to attempt genetic experimentation and engineering, and our conscience today suffers from doubts over the extent to which modern genetic technology benefited from information recovered by the Allies from the death camps. In *The Lord of the Rings* one of Saruman's greatest crimes, as well as destroying the trees, was to breed a new race of orcs, thus perverting the rightful order of creation. Tolkein identifies creation with the good, and asserts that evil cannot create anything by itself, but can only corrupt the true creation. This was a key neo-Platonist idea that became adopted by the early Christian Church, that is, that evil has no existence in itself, but is merely the absence of good, just as darkness is merely the absence of light. Thus it is impossible to improve upon the will of the Creator; one can only preserve the humble aspiration to be worthy of one's gifts.

And so the Ring. Truly the strangest of secret weapons, the most curious of talismans. It produces no bolts of lightning, no spectacular feats of magic or of strength. When Frodo puts on the Ring in Mount Doom, he is unable to defeat even the wretched, starving Gollum in hand to hand combat. All the Ring does is a non-doing – it makes its bearer invisible. It is a perfect unadorned circle, a zero that draws all into its emptiness. Its bearer becomes consumed by fantasies of grandeur, fantasies appropriate to each person's nature. Galadriel sees herself as a universal Queen mighty in goodness. Sam Gamgee sees himself as the gardener of the world, turning all Middle Earth into a bed of flowers. Yet the more one is seduced into such dreams of power, the more one's power is drawn into the abyss of the Ring. One's heart leaches away drop by drop. As pride waxes, wisdom wanes; and when one's will, one's power to choose for right or wrong, is owned by the Ring, one exclaims: 'It is Mine!'

Tolkein's abhorrence of pride mirrors the central Buddhist notion of not-self. Yet they are not the same. While Tolkein sees an essentially good, absolute moral order, with a rightful place for everyone, the Buddhist moral order is thoroughly relativistic. We are neither inherently good nor bad. Each of us has been born countless times as elves, as dwarves, as orcs, as trolls, as wizards, and yes, as hobbits too. Evil is just as real as good, and it is our own choice that determines our moral stature, not our genetic or kammic inheritance.

This relativistic perspective cuts even deeper into the illusion of the self. Tolkein recognizes only the pride that says 'I am better than you.' But the Buddha pointed out that this is just the coarse level of self-attachment. For many it is even more seductive to assume that 'I am worse than you'. Here one still holds the basic delusion of a self, yet paradoxically may fall into a subtle spiritual pride in one's own humility. The Christian traditions at their worst seem to delight in the debasement of the individual, the mortification of the soul, the belief that one is but a worm in the sight of God. The Buddha, on the other hand, said that as long as one is still critical of oneself one cannot see the truth. The belief that 'I am worse' is merely the flip side of the belief that 'I am better'.

But that's not all. Even the escape from the dualism of 'better' and 'worse' does not free one from the most insidious conceit of all: 'I am equal to you'. We cherish the faith that if only we can right all the injustices, end all the 'isms' of sex, race, and species, we can somehow return to our pristine, unspoiled nature, whatever that may be.

Of course, it is not that equality as a social ideal is wrong. On the contrary I do believe that in some respects our society is more enlightened than in the past, and that reducing the various forms of injustice, slavery, and discrimination has been probably the highest achievement of our modern humanity so far. But such achievements must forever remain relative. We can do better than the past, and we must strive to do so; yet we can never truly solve the root problem by social justice alone. The forces that give rise to injustice lie within the human mind, and there they must be defeated.

Most adventure stories revolve around the Quest. The search for riches, for power, for love. But *The Lord of the Rings* is a most unusual quest. The forces of good already have the Ring, that which is most Precious. Their problem is to get rid of it. This can only be done by casting it in the fire where it was made. Among mortals it is only the Ring-bearers, who have fully felt the seductive power of pride and have let it go, who are permitted to pass over to the Western Lands.

Each one of us is a Ring-bearer, bound fast by our pride, our lust for power, our unawareness. To escape the thralldom of the Ring of Power we must return to the source, to the fires of Doom – the fires of greed, of anger, and of delusion. We must cast off all three conceits: the pride of superiority, the pride of inferiority, and the pride of equality. We must firmly and finally resolve: 'It is Not Mine!'