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*Desire, Death, and Goodness: The Conflict of Ultimate Values in Theravāda Buddhism.* By Grace G. Burford. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1991. xii, 213 pp. \$38.95.

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Initial reviews of *Desire, Death, and Goodness* suggested it would prove controversial.<sup>1</sup> Yet, several years after its publication, there appears to have been little substantive discussion of the issues raised by Burford concerning the study of Pāli Canon materials and their relationship to Theravāda Buddhism. This review is an attempt to fill that lacuna by raising those issues again.

Burford argues that Theravāda teachings concerning nibbāna and the path to it are incoherent, and counterproductive to religious practice. They are incoherent in that they have tried to present as compatible two views of nibbāna that are incompatible—that found in the early Aṭṭhakavagga of the Suttanipāta, and that found in the later commentaries—and they are counterproductive to religious practice in that they have made nibbāna virtually inaccessible. Burford further argues that scholars should not use, as has been their practice, Theravāda commentators’ interpretations as standards in translating difficult passages, as there is insufficient textual homogeneity to justify this procedure. Finally, she argues that the Theravāda tradition should return to the pre-Abhidhammic understanding of nibbāna and the path as found in the Aṭṭhakavagga, as it is more religiously beneficial than the classical commentarial view, and that scholarship should return to the pre-Abhidhammic view of nibbāna, as it presents a more “unified and compelling normative value theory”.

The Aṭṭhakavagga sees nibbāna in very this-worldly terms. It is a state of desireless living and dying that is fully instantiated in pure and calm individuals, whose lives can be emulated. The commentaries see nibbāna in metaphysical terms, a desireless escape from living and dying, a transcendent condition beyond birth and death. Theravāda teaching attempts to reconcile the two by placing them in tandem. “Nibbāna-with-support (kamma)” refers to the state of an individual who has attained liberation in life, while “nibbāna-without-support” refers to the state of the enlightened individual after death. Burford refers to this theory as the “separate-but-equal two-part ultimate ideal”. It will not work because these notions are rooted in conflicting sets of values: one that affirms life-in-the-world (nibbāna-with-support), and one that is anti-worldly (nibbāna-without-support). You cannot have two equal ultimates. The fact that nibbāna-without-support cannot be realized until after death undermines the value of the Aṭṭhakavagga notion of nibbāna, removes the possibility that nibbāna can be fully realized in life and thus removes the possibility of role models. Further, by making nibbāna transcendent, unconditioned, uncaused, the path becomes useless and the goal unattainable. There is nothing one can do to attain nibbāna, even if one could act nonkammically, because nibbāna is outside the realm of cause and effect.

The consequence of the separate-but-equal two-part ultimate ideal is to create two unequal paths, one for those who seek to live a better life, and one for those who seek the “real” nibbāna. This hierarchy of goals sets up a hierarchy of

paths and of the people who follow them—thus, the lay vs. monastic distinction and the “two Buddhisms” view of scholars.<sup>2</sup>

A return to the pre-Abhidhammic understanding of nibbāna as found in the Aṭṭhakavagga would provide a return to a coherent normative value system, one that affirms the ultimate value of wise and peaceful living here and now, and to a useful path with role models who may be emulated. This return, Burford argues, is more in tune with the Buddha’s anti-metaphysical stance, and his life as recorded in the early texts, than the post-Abhidhammic position taken in Theravāda Buddhism. Thus, it is a return that both scholars and believer-practitioners should take.

Burford’s analysis of the views on nibbāna found in the Aṭṭhakavagga and the commentaries on it is solid, and her argument that the metaphysical views of the commentaries cannot be simply added on to the worldly views of the Aṭṭhakavagga without rendering Theravāda soteriological theory incoherent is convincing. Also compelling is her contention that there is insufficient homogeneity among early Buddhist texts to justify the use of using later Theravāda interpretations as guides for translating difficult passages or terms. The procedure she suggests, translating terms within the framework of their meaning for that text, is one that I heartily endorse. One of the many positive aspects of Burford’s study is to show the stark contrast between views presented in some earlier texts like the Aṭṭhakavagga and the later commentaries on them.<sup>3</sup>

The limitations of *Desire, Death, and Goodness* arise from the nature of the work as dissertation transformed into book. The major issues raised by Burford come at the conclusion of the work and are not argued in any depth. This is acceptable in a dissertation but more is required in a book. As Burford points out, the view espoused in the Aṭṭhakavagga is unusual even within the early literature for its non-metaphysical position, and it comes from a period in which there was the least consensus. If scholars are to reject the traditional separation between “fact”—holding that a particular view is unusual—and value—advocating that this view be adopted as normative, they must be given a good reason for doing so.<sup>4</sup> The assumption that undergirds her suggestion is that early (Aṭṭhakavagga) means “original”, which in turn equates to “legitimate”. This position has been under attack for several years now, and is undermined by Burford’s own insistence on the multiplicity of pre-Abhidhammic views.<sup>5</sup> We need more here.

The other major issue on which we need to hear more from Burford is the very real dilemma concerning the proper relationship between textual scholarship and religious tradition. The matter is complex and has proven to be a Gordian knot to date. The starkness of the contrast between the views found in earlier texts and the later commentarial interpretations of them, and the lack of consensus between early texts, supports Burford’s contention that we should be wary of reading back into earlier texts classical Theravāda ideas. Her suggestion for re-

form, however, is tantamount to suggesting that both scholars and practitioner-believers ignore subsequent tradition.<sup>6</sup>

It would be naive to assert that scholarship does not play a role in the development of religious traditions. Scholarly focus on texts such as the Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta and the Sigālovāda Sutta has led to renewed interest in the socio-political aspects of Buddhism and “engaged Buddhism”. Burford’s scholarly work could well lead Buddhist reformers to argue for change in the Theravāda understanding of the ultimate goal and the path to it. Certainly, it is legitimate for scholars to seek the meaning/s of a text, to comment on the compatibility of views within a tradition, and so on. And, particularly within the Theravāda tradition, reform has usually meant a return to the text. Scholars cannot simply dispense with the commentarial tradition, however, and I suspect that it may be difficult for believer-practitioners as well. A religious tradition is largely what people have understood it to be, and the role of a commentator is to provide meaningful and systematic interpretation of the textual tradition.<sup>7</sup> When passages, terms, and so on prove inscrutable, it is valuable to know how the tradition has understood them. It also facilitates the process of studying the reasons that some interpretations are accepted while others are not. When reformers return to the text, they produce an alternative commentarial tradition, one that is frequently a conscious refutation of orthodoxy.

What is the scholar’s role in all this? I am uncomfortable with the ease with which Burford suggests that scholars and believer-practitioners return to the view of the Aṭṭhakavagga. While I am comfortable describing, analyzing, and evaluating the variety of positions available in Theravādin thought, and while I realize that value-free scholarship is not possible, as someone who is not a believer-practitioner, I am not at all comfortable with suggesting what Theravāda Buddhists should do. I am equally distressed when such suggestions are made within the context of a scholarly study. I cling to the notion that, while objectivity is impossible, the impossibility of fully attaining any goal does not preclude the value of attempting it. Again, we need to hear more from Burford on how she views the relationship between textual scholarship and religious tradition.

*Desire, Death and Goodness* is a solid, well-written, and interesting study of the early Aṭṭhakavagga view of nibbāna and the path to it, and the subsequent transformation and absorption of this view into orthodox Theravāda thought. It is also provocative, raising issues that textual scholars all too frequently avoid. I look forward to reading Burford’s further thoughts on the issues she has raised.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> James W. Boyd, “Book Reviews” *Journal of Asian Studies* 50 (Nov. ‘91): 881–82; Charles Hallisey, “Recent Work on Buddhist Ethics”, *Religious Studies Re-*

view 18, No.4 (Oct.'92): 276–284.

<sup>2</sup> Hallisey notes that Burford assumes the plausibility of the “two Buddhisms” perspective, which is consciously rejected by the essays in *Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation: A Study in Buddhist Social Ethics*, ed. by Russell F. Sizemore and Donald K. Swearer (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), and suggests that the article by David Little enhances Burford’s comparison of the value–systems of the text and the commentaries (280).

<sup>3</sup> As Hallisey points out, this raises questions as to how such a shift in understanding could have occurred, and how the commentators read the texts (281).

<sup>4</sup> In this regard, Boyd questions the need to hold to the notion that there has to be a *summum bonum*. He asks, “Would it not be possible to approach the Theravāda tradition as a plurality of value orientations. . . And may there not be merit in stressing an irreducible diversity of ultimate values, given the limited perspectival nature of all views that is often claimed in Buddhist texts?” (882).

<sup>5</sup> Hallisey also raises this point in his review (280).

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, according to George Bond, this is precisely what some reformers have done. Bond provides a thorough and interesting review of the various reform movements and their use of texts in *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka: Religious Tradition, Reinterpretation and Response* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Regarding “intended” and “unintended” consequences and the need to take seriously a tradition’s presentation of itself, see Richard Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988).