Reply to F. J. Hoffman

PETER MASEFIELD

Although Hoffman promised the editors of this Journal that his response to my review would ‘focus on the issues, and be stimulating for [its] readers without indulging in personal diatribe,’ I nonetheless detect, reading between the lines, that he does not altogether like me.

This is a pity, for I have no feelings one way or another towards him as a person, just as I do not have anything to say on any work of his other than the book under review, including the doctoral thesis upon which it is supposed to be based. But his book I do not like, because of its lack of concern with matters of factual detail, as well as the talent it exhibits for misquoting, misconstruing and misrepresenting the works of others, which blemishes also permeate his response.

Thus it comes as no surprise to find him saying, in his response, of my failure to address his objection to my ‘conflation of the distinction between nibbāna and parinibbāna’ that:

"The reason for this is not hard to seek. As even his sympathetic critic, Jonathan Harrison, points out in his review (in NUMEN) of Masefield’s Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism, logically speaking, Masefield’s work is unconvincing."

Passing aside the observation that the author of the review (in NUMEN XXXIV 1987 pp. 256-264) was Paul, rather than Jonathan, Harrison, one may nonetheless note the absence of any page reference for the passage concerned. This is just as well, since there exists no passage in which the word ‘unconvincing’ appears.

‘Convincing’ does appear in two places, though neither passage bears any resemblance to Hoffman’s attempted paraphrase in terms of my work being ‘logically speaking, unconvincing’:

"At any event, the passages Masefield examines are anything but ‘unambiguous,’ and it has to be said that his attempts to demonstrate that ‘the Dhamma consisted of sound’ or that paraśa ghaśa might mean ‘the sound from the Beyond’ are suggestive but not convincing ... At the same time, this does not invalidate the rest of Masefield’s findings’" (p. 259f).

"As has been pointed out, Masefield is not always entirely convincing, and often raises more questions than he answers, yet Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism is nevertheless a book which ought to be read and thought about by all those seriously interested in the history of Buddhism, since it says something fresh and stimulating about the Pali Canon on the basis of careful, original research’’ (p. 264).

The reason for my failure to address his above-mentioned objection lay
partly in the fact that I felt it somewhat disingenuous to defend myself in such a brief review, and partly in a lack of philosophical acumen on my part which did not allow me to foresee that “leading scholars of demonstrated philosophical talent and Indological expertise” would conclude that I had somehow “conflated” the two terms nibbāna and parinibbāna simply by my making use of the distinction, recognised by Theravādin orthodoxy since at least the fifth century AD—though still misunderstood by Western philosophers—between the two parinibbānas of (1) the kilesa-parinibbāna (defilement-parinibbāna) attained by an enlightened person during his lifetime; and (2) the khandha-parinibbāna (khandha-parinibbāna) attained at, or after, his death.

Being as I am only “on an isolated fringe of Buddhist Studies,” I had thought it would help the main argument of the paper (which Hoffman fails to address) if I were first to remind my readers that there were uses of the term parinibbāna and its cognates in contexts where the person concerned was neither dead nor dying, and from which it followed that such terms were not always used to denote the post-mortem state of an enlightened individual. To this end, I cited the passage in the Dīghanikāya in which the Buddha chastises the wanderer Nigrodha saying:

“Did this not occur to you, Nigrodha, being as you are intelligent and advanced in years: ‘Himself awoken, the Lord teaches (deseti) Dhamma for the sake of awakening, himself tamed, the Lord teaches (deseti) Dhamma for the sake of taming, himself calmed, the Lord teaches (deseti) Dhamma for the sake of calm, himself crossed over, the Lord teaches (deseti) Dhamma for the sake of crossing over, himself parinibbuta, the Lord teaches (deseti) Dhamma for the sake of parinibbāna’?” (D iii 2)

The passage then continues with Nigrodha confessing his fault:

“With this thus said, Nigrodha the wanderer said this to the Lord, ‘A fault overcame me, Lord, in that I thus spoke so foolishly, so deludedly, so unskilfully, to the Lord. May the Lord pardon that fault of mine, Lord, so that I might refrain from such faults in future’.”

a request with which Buddha complies.

To this Hoffman (109f) objects:

“First, nothing [in the phrase parinibbuto so Bhagava parinibbānaya dhammaṃ deseti (himself parinibbuta, the Lord teaches Dhamma for the sake of parinibbāna)] guarantees the implication ‘that at the time he was neither dead nor dying’. For [parinibbuto so Bhagava parinibbānaya dhammaṃ deseti], which may be translated as ‘Completely enlightened the Blessed One teaches doctrine for enlightenment’ does not mean in context [my italics] that Buddha is somehow alive or teaching. It means that the doctrine is taught in the Buddha’s life. One can mean this and say that he teaches the way by example, just as one can say that Thomas More teaches the importance of conscience even if one