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* PRACTICAL BUDDHISM *

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INTRODUCTION

Everyone has intrinsically three types of nature: animal nature, human nature and divine nature. We adopt one of these natures to satisfy our worldly needs and desires.

When our minds are not guided by religious discipline, our 'animal natures' often dominate. Human beings retain some of the animal nature inherited from their predecessors since the primeval past. Although they may have evolved and changed physically, they still have with them the lower mental processes, habits and patterns of behaviour. Many of these characteristics may not be so obvious when conditions are favourable and the surroundings congenial. However, when situations change, these characteristics flare up like a volcano, as a result of deep-seated emotions and craving.

There is one main characteristic which separates human beings from animals, that is, they have a mind to think and reflect about their existence and the life and phenomena around them. Despite having such a highly developed mind, they are unable to use their minds to the fullest because of delusion. A religion can be used as a means to remove that delusion, subdue the animal nature and cultivate humane qualities consistent with what can justly be regarded as 'human nature'.

A mind expresses its human nature through kindness and compassion, consideration to others, providing services to relieve others of their suffering. When that mind is cultivated beyond humanism and constantly dwells in equanimity and radiates loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy to all beings without distinction, that mind has realised its 'divine nature'.

The divine nature is not cultivated by offering prayers to some supernatural powers, if a person does not spend time cultivating his virtues. From the Buddhist point of view, there is, in fact, no necessity for some external divine inspiration to influence and ennoble the mind. This is something which a person will have to do himself. He ennobles his mind by eliminating negative characteristics such as ignorance, hatred, jealousy, and selfishness, while cultivating positive qualities of friendliness, love and compassion.

Cultivating the mind so that it can be refined to realise its divine nature is a noble task to be undertaken by all. It is our task to use our human nature to remove our animal nature and use religion to cultivate our divine nature. Buddhism takes us one step further in cultivating our virtues. Through the Dhamma, we can transcend our divine nature and achieve one more level, namely, the fourth and most important nature, the 'Enlightened Nature', which is the state of self-awakening and realisation into the nature of life as it really is.

The first step towards transforming ourselves is to understand what Buddhism is: What is it really? What are the aspects in the understanding and practice of Buddhism? What is its doctrinal content? And how can it be adopted and practised in modern society? These are important questions which will be dealt with in this booklet.

WHAT IS BUDDHISM?

Buddhism is based on the Buddha's teaching, the Dhamma, which was given by the Master more than 2,500 years ago. Western writers have tried various ways to classify Buddhism in the categories they know best. Some say it is not a religion, but only a philosophy. Others say that Buddhism is not philosophy, but only a moral code. Despite these interpretations, millions acknowledge it as a religious way of life.

Is Buddhism a Religion?

Before answering this question, let us examine the meaning of this word 'religion'. Some definitions given in the dictionary are: 'Belief in God or way of worship or praying to God; obedience to God; binding man to God; practice of sacred rites; recognition of a higher unseen controlling power; one of the various systems of faith and worship based on such belief; life as lived under the rules of a monastic life.'

In considering these definitions, some aspects are in agreement with the principles of Buddhism, while others are not. We must remember that the word 'religion' is only an English word which has concepts linked to the beliefs of the English people. The Buddha did not speak English and of course he did not describe his teaching by using this term.

Generally, for practical purposes, we can describe Buddhism as a religion. Here, religion is taken to mean a method or way of life which was introduced for man to be righteous and noble, for him to maintain his human dignity and intelligence, and for him to attain final liberation through mental purity. Religion helps man to develop his mental processes and leads him to experience happiness and peace. There should not be any controversy in applying this word to Buddhism if it is understood that 'religion' is used in this context. One should not be involved in hair-splitting arguments as to whether or not an ethical-moral system should be called a 'religion'. If it brings good results without the dependence on mere belief or imagination then it should be accepted.

Is Buddhism a Philosophy?

Philosophy is the search for knowledge, especially for the nature and meaning of existence. It is the 'love' for knowledge, but there is no mention about whether this knowledge would be translated into practical modes of behaviour to guide a person in his daily life. The Buddha's teaching is sublime and deep, surpassing the

thoughts of even the most respected philosophers. But the Dhamma is not mere philosophy because philosophy is empirical by nature. It is a practical method which had been realised by the penetrative and analytical mind of the Buddha who taught the Dhamma for man's daily application.

The Buddha's doctrine of analysis is based on understanding and his own experiences. His approach to the problem of human suffering is essentially empirical and experimental, not speculative and metaphysical. The Dhamma is not founded on mere views or theories which, like many of the views given by different philosophers, contradict one another. A philosopher's contribution is gauged from an intellectual standpoint, and not necessarily whether it contains elements of goodwill and compassion. By contrast, the Buddha's doctrine is not dry philosophy for people to talk about using cold intellect. It is a methodical system for self-development, centred on love, selflessness and compassion.

Buddhism is a philosophy to the extent that it describes the principles underlying the actions and behaviour of men and explains the nature of life. It suggests ways how we can lead a meaningful religious life without falling back on traditional beliefs which are based on the mythologies of primitive times. The Buddha wants us to lead a rational, noble way of life and use our human intelligence for the benefit of all. Hence, the Buddhist way of life is reasonable and practical for all times and in any society and country. It promotes harmony and does not create hostility or disturb the followers of other religions.

Buddhism is the treasure store of wisdom resulting from a most intensive search conducted by a prince imbued with infinite love and deep compassion for suffering humanity. This search was conducted over many of his lives and over an incomprehensible period of time. The good fruits of the practice of Buddhism can be experienced within this life itself as well as hereafter, for such is the nature of the Buddha Dhamma. Since Buddhism addresses itself to the most pervasive problems of humanity and all living beings, namely, suffering, and it prescribes a method by which suffering and greed can be overcome, Buddhism can even more appropriately be regarded as a mental therapy.

Is Buddhism a Way of Life ?

Buddhism is described by Western scholars as a way of life, since the belief in God (which is tied to their concept of religion) is not pivotal in the Buddha's teaching. But describing it as a way of life is insufficient to convey the full scope of the message disseminated by the Buddha.

Buddhism is a rational, liberal and noble method for those who sincerely want to understand the reality of life. It is a righteous way of life for man to do good, be good and lead a happy life without depending on external powers. It is a gradual path of mental

evolution which culminates in supreme wisdom and perfection or liberation. No matter what label is attached to the teachings, the Dhamma remains as the absolute truth which can lead people to perfect peace and bliss.

From the Buddhist viewpoint, a religion is not something that has come down from heaven in order to teach man to fulfil a divine purpose, but a way of life which has developed on earth to satisfy the intellectual and spiritual yearning of mankind. In practising Buddhism as a way of life, one should not depend on faith alone but use one's understanding and experience which have been accumulated through the use of human intelligence.

Practising Buddhists do not worry about changing circumstances which are yet to come. They maintain awareness of their mental state here and now. It is by being mindful of our present mental state and thoughts as they arise that we really come 'alive' during those moments. Otherwise, we are still dreaming of and living in the past or future. The future will look after itself if the present is well-lived. The strong emphasis on awareness and living in the present is also linked to reaping the results of our deeds here and now in this very life. In Buddhism we do not have to wait for our next life to experience good results. It is, therefore, not some kind of an escapist asceticism, but a down-to-earth realism.

THREE ASPECTS TO UNDERSTANDING BUDDHISM

There are many aspects to consider in Buddhism, but a comprehensive treatment of the subject will certainly go beyond the scope of this booklet. For our purpose, let us consider only three aspects in the understanding and realisation of Buddhism, namely, the intellectual, spiritual, and practical aspects.

The Intellectual Aspect

The use of our intellect is important in understanding and practising the Buddha's teaching. Through analysis, we can realise the Truth at a deeper level, gain a proper understanding of our life and the nature of worldly conditions, and by so doing, gain more confidence and faith in the Dhamma.

Buddhism teaches that despite the importance placed on reason in understanding and appreciating the Dhamma, our intellect alone does not lead to mental purification. One cannot become perfect through mere intellect, no matter how well developed it may be. The factual knowledge of the Dhamma by itself does not develop a person's humane qualities if he does not train and purify his mind. Such knowledge should be accompanied by spiritual development, made possible through the practice of Dhamma.

The Spiritual Aspect

Spiritual perfection, an accomplishment which is most difficult but important, can only be gained through insight and realisation which bring about a complete transformation of one's thoughts and actions. Through mental purification, one realises the absolute truth and achieves purity of mind.

Selfish desire will have no place in that bright, dynamic and pure mind which is dedicated to doing what is good, without harbouring ulterior motives. A pure mind will enable a person to lead a noble life and practise important virtues such as honesty, selfless service, kindness, understanding, patience and tolerance.

The Practical Aspect

Buddhism is not a pack of beliefs, some mumbo-jumbo or a fabulous myth told to entertain the anxious mind or a nice fairy tale to satisfy the yearnings of emotion. It is a practical method for personal transformation and spiritual liberation taught by the Master. It is based on his own search and realisation.

Buddhism places heavy emphasis on practice. A person who is knowledgeable in the various doctrines but does not practise them is like one who could recite recipes from a huge cookery-book without trying to prepare a single dish. His hunger cannot be relieved by book knowledge alone.

A practical method to lead a Buddhist way of life is to cultivate the three ennobling qualities of //Dana-Sila-Bhavana//. When the practice of these three stages are well advanced, a person becomes a religious man in the truest sense.

1. //Dana// is charity or sacrificing something for the welfare of others in order to reduce selfish desire or greed.
2. //Sila// is upholding morality through self-discipline by leading a harmless and respectable life and by training the mind or the five senses not to become slaves to sensual pleasures. This kind of discipline trains one's mind and allows oneself and others to live peacefully.
3. //Bhavana// is mental culture for the purpose of cultivating the mind in order to maintain peace and happiness.

In leading mankind to a religious way of life, the Buddha did not impose any religious laws or commandments for people to obey, nor did he introduce a set of punishments for those who violate religious principles. He did not condemn or curse anybody who did not wish to follow his advice. In addition, he did not create fear in people's mind by threatening them with vivid descriptions of hell-fire. Instead, he advised people to practise the Dhamma by realising the value of good

conduct and to give up evil practices after understanding the bad effects of such conduct.

The way of spiritual transformation rests on the three pillars of //Sila-Samadhi-Panna//, that is, morality, mental development and wisdom. Without developing these qualities, one will have difficulties in leading a happy and peaceful life. This booklet will describe in some detail later what constitutes each of the pillars.

At this juncture, it is useful to be reminded that Panna (wisdom or realisation) goes beyond mere knowledge, which could be obtained by reading a book or hearing a talk. Through the practice of morality (Sila) and mental development (Samadhi), one develops a penetrative insight and realisation into the nature of every existing thing in its proper perspective. This wisdom is gained by harnessing the purified mental energy pulsating in the cosmos through meditation. When realisation appears, the trained mind becomes an unshakeable dynamic force that can handle any human problem without anxiety, hatred or worry. That mind, suffused with wisdom and free from illusion or hallucination, is invaluable for understanding and overcoming worldly problems.

DOCTRINAL CONTENT OF BUDDHISM

The best source of information on the Buddhist doctrine and the practice of //Sila-Samadhi-Panna// is the //Tripitaka//, which contains 45 years of the Buddha's sermons and ministry. The //Tripitaka// is divided into the //Sutta, Vinaya and Abhidhamma//. The //Sutta Pitaka// contains the conventional or simple teaching on how to lead a noble life. The //Vinaya Pitaka// contains the disciplinary code for those who have renounced the worldly life to lead a pure, monastic life, while moral psychology and in-depth analysis of the mind and elements is contained in the //Abhidhamma Pitaka//.

The core of Buddhism is contained within the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path, which is also the Fourth Noble Truth taught by the Buddha, can be summarised into the practice of //Sila-Samadhi-Panna// described earlier. In addition, to gain a proper perspective in life, it is also important for us to discuss the doctrines of //kamma// and rebirth in order to realise that we are the masters of our own destiny.

Message of All Buddhas

Before discussing the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, it will be useful for us to state in very few words what the Buddha taught. It is possible for us to summarise the 45 years of the Buddha's ministry and the Truth contained in the //Tripitaka//.

The Buddha's teaching may be summarised in the following words:

Not to do evil,
To do good,
To purify the mind.

Simple as these words may seem, this advice contains the pith of the teaching of all Buddhas. It may be simple enough for a child to understand, but may take many lifetimes to perfect.

The Buddhas or the Enlightened Ones appear in this world from time to time to convey the same message. Buddhas do not have different or conflicting messages because there is but one Truth, and the Buddhas have realised IT. Out of compassion, they teach us to walk along this same path of Righteousness to realise the way to happiness, just like they did. By walking this Path, it is possible for us to realise our potential for awakening and become Buddhas just like them.

This advice teaches us to be perfect in thought and conduct. To begin with, there are five moral principles or precepts for Buddhists to observe in their daily life. The Five Precepts are: abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, telling lies, and taking intoxicating drugs and liquor. These do not encompass all evil deeds, but it is good to try not to violate at least these five moral principles to start with.

The precepts are training rules voluntarily undertaken by the individual to help him lead a harmless life, a life filled with compassion, generosity, contentment, truthfulness and mindfulness. Can a rational, far-sighted person point out anything wrong with living in accordance with these training rules? What would happen to a society if every one of its members goes against these principles?

In his infinite wisdom, the Buddha knew that we cannot be perfect at once. Hence, he starts us off by encouraging us to restrain from committing these five harmful deeds. Once we make progress in laying down a firm moral foundation, we can gradually practise mental purification. Buddhism allows an individual to make progress on the basis of his level of realisation and does not dogmatically impose on him a rigid code of conduct without regard to his potentials, level of development and attitudes.

These five precepts are useful for cultivating humane qualities and virtues such as kindness, honesty and understanding. These are qualities important for maintaining peace and security. The motivation for upholding these precepts is not the fear of punishment, but understanding and compassion. When the Buddha said 'Not to do evil', it was with the welfare of others in mind.

As human beings, it is our duty to perform some service to others by practising generosity, kindness and giving a helping hand to others who need our support to rid themselves of grievances, worries and other problems. By rendering selfless service to others, not only do we bring benefits to others, we reduce our selfishness as

well. We should not perform a good deed with ulterior motives, since our deeds will be marred by the impure intentions.

So the real Buddhist concept of 'Not to do evil' and 'To do good' is not based on punishment and reward, but on the need to reduce our selfish desire and cultivate our mental purity. We do not use fear to force people into complying with these precepts. Using fear instead of understanding will not give rise to the cultivation of sympathetic feelings and can result in people becoming superstitious and dogmatic.

The avoidance of evil and the performance of good are highly commendable, but they are not enough. From experience we know that as long as the greed, anger and illusion which are deeply embedded in the mind are not removed, we are still capable of committing some bad deeds. Hence, there is a need for us to purify the mind. To do this, we will have to constantly watch the mind and remove from it mental impurities. When impure thoughts and motivations are extinguished, the mind is always good and pure, and we will reach the final goal.

The Noble Truths

A clear understanding of the Four Noble Truths is fundamental to the practice of Buddhism. These Truths consist of the realisation of the nature of suffering, the cause of suffering, the freedom from suffering, and the method to bring an end to the suffering and achieve liberation. Without an understanding of these four important truths, we will not realise the nature of human problems and will have to continue experiencing suffering. We struggle to escape from unsatisfactoriness, but without the necessary insight we will not find the way to remove the root cause of our problems. In fact through ignorance we create more problems as a result of our misguided conception of the world.

In only one religion - Buddhism - are the Four Noble Truths explained with such clarity. Through the understanding of these truths, we realise that suffering is nothing more than the unsatisfactoriness regarding our lives and feelings. The causes of unsatisfactoriness are natural and are not created by anybody or any power. In every element and form of energy, friction, clashes, imbalances or changes take place continually, as confirmed by science. All visible objects exist as a result of friction which causes change, and change is the characteristic of life. When this state of flux which we experience physically and mentally at every moment is compounded with human emotion and craving, we experience unsatisfactoriness or suffering.

From the Dhamma we realise that the cause of suffering is not the 'original sin' or due to a curse or influence of any god, devil or ghost, as believed by some religion, but by our own craving for existence and sense pleasures. People experience suffering when they give in to ignorance and try to satisfy their insatiable sense

desires, which can only lead to worries, fear, and disappointments. Therefore, when a person realises the Four Noble Truths, he takes steps to overcome his unhappiness by reducing his craving and aversion, which are the roots of all evil actions.

The Noble Path

After realising the cause of suffering, we can eradicate it by following the method prescribed by the Buddha. This method or path is called the Noble Eightfold Path, which is to be practised by anyone who wishes to experience peace and happiness.

This noble path consists of the following eight factors: Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. A person strengthens his //Sila// or moral discipline by practising Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. //Samadhi// or mental culture is developed through the application of Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. The development of //Sila// and //Samadhi// will give rise to //Panna// or wisdom which comprises Right Understanding and Right Thought. The uniqueness and supremacy in the Buddha's teachings rest in this practical method. When practised, it is possible for a person to purify his mind and undergo spiritual development to become someone perfect and noble.

The Noble Eightfold Path is universal in character and brings good results when applied not only to those who profess Buddhism, but to anyone who puts it into practice. There is no denying that when practising this method we will have from time to time to face difficulties which can be overcome by applying right effort. But if we choose not to follow this path, we are not free from difficulties either. We will have to face other kinds of difficulties, the most serious of all is that the opportunities for doing good and meeting good, spiritual friends becomes markedly reduced. It is so easy for one to go from spiritual light to darkness; it is so difficult to go from darkness to spiritual light.

Nibbana

The Noble Eightfold Path relieves one from suffering and brings happiness and peace in this present and future lives. But this is not all. The practice of this path will ultimately lead one to the attainment of the ultimate bliss of Nibbana. Nibbana is not a mystical concept, but a perfect expression of an Absolute which goes beyond any expression of happiness as defined in a worldly sense.

If we can understand the reality of ourselves, we can easily understand what the Buddha taught. We may go around the world in search of the truth revealed by him, but we will not find it until we search within ourselves using //insight meditation// as taught by the Buddha.

Through insight meditation, we can penetrate into reality and gain complete freedom from birth, decay, worries, miseries and unsatisfactoriness. We attain the peace, happiness and tranquillity known as Nibbana, the fruit obtained by someone who has developed his mind to the apex of purity and perfection.

From the discussion on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, it is clear that the way to liberation is through the practice of the Dhamma and does not involve the intervention or grace of a god or brahma. Therefore, we must not be passive and fatalistic by hoping that someone out there will save us from the rounds of Samsara. If we cultivate ourselves to be wholesome beings, the results will come as a natural course of events. In addition, Buddhists do not believe that a person will have to face the rewards of and punishments for his deeds because of his fate or through the judgment of some divine being. Instead, it is the operation of the natural law of moral causation or kamma that brings happiness or suffering to a person.

Kamma

The kammic law of cause and effect is important in helping us understand the cause of inequalities among mankind. We are all conditioned by our wholesome or unwholesome thoughts, words and actions. Whatever actions we perform intentionally are motivated by wholesome or unwholesome thoughts. Based on these motivations, we create accordingly good or bad kamma. Good kamma bring good results, while bad kamma bring bad results. The results of our good and bad kamma can ripen either within this lifetime or hereafter.

The kammic law is a natural, universal law and is not created by any supreme being. Through the operation of this law, all beings reap the fruits of their deeds which enable some to be born rich, handsome and well-respected, while others are born poor, ugly and of lowly birth. Buddhism does not accept the belief that a god or devil is responsible for the differences among beings. The Buddha says that pleasant and unpleasant feelings are not created by God as reward or punishment, but arise as a natural effect of our own good and bad actions. Everyone has to experience the good and bad effects of his or her actions, regardless of whether he or she believes in kamma or not.

Therefore, unlike what some people believe, man is certainly not an experiment started by a supernatural being and who can be done away with when unwanted. Buddhism regards man as being capable of developing his understanding to free himself from suffering if he is shown how his ignorance can be removed.

Rebirth

According to the Buddha, the present life is not the first nor will it be the last. The life process continues so long as the craving for existence prevails

in the mind, and this craving, in turn, accumulates good and bad kammic forces. Therefore, as long as these conditioning forces and the craving for existence remain, rebirth will continue to occur.

Our existence does not begin with this human life nor does it end with an eternal life in heaven or hell. Our lives have been evolving over countless existences according to quality of our accumulated kamma. This process will continue until a person someday realises the causes of his existence, and through realisation he works towards bringing this process to a complete and irrevocable end. That attainment is the final goal called Nibbana.

Rebirth rather than reincarnation is taught in Buddhism. The difference is that in reincarnation it is believed that a soul undergoes repeated births, while rebirth does not subscribe to the idea of a soul.

How rebirth is possible without a soul as taught in Buddhism is a revolutionary religious idea. All other religions before or after the Buddha strongly upheld the belief in a soul because without it, they could not explain what would happen to life after death. The Buddha has very clearly explained how rebirth can take place without such an entity. According to Buddhism, the belief in a soul is the result of the misconception or misunderstanding of human consciousness. To understand the Buddha's interpretation of rebirth*, one must study Buddhist psychology on the nature of mental faculties and the nature of kammic forces and cosmic energies.

(* For a better understanding of this process, refer to 'Do You Believe In Rebirth' by the author.)

Man is reborn continually in Samsara until he realises the value of rising above all human weaknesses by cultivating a noble mind. When he is ready to accept the responsibilities of life and to develop a penetrative understanding into reality, he begins to move in an upward spiral. A man can save himself through his own efforts, guided by Dhamma. In this context, the Buddha is regarded as a saviour in so far as he has shown the path for man to save himself.

In Buddhism, the destiny of man is, therefore, not placed at the mercy of a supernatural being who acts at his whims to grant salvation, but is determined by the effort made by a person to cultivate wholesome thoughts, words and actions. When a person fully understands his moral responsibilities, he is suddenly raised from a piteous state of helplessness to someone filled with inspiration, responsibility and self-respect.

PRACTICE OF BUDDHISM IN MODERN SOCIETY

After discussing some important doctrines as taught by the Buddha, it will be useful to examine how some of the teachings can be applied in modern society in general and in the Malaysian context in particular.

Culture, Rites and Rituals

Although religious rites, rituals and ceremonies are not favoured by intellectuals, such practices are important for developing and maintaining the devotional aspects of a religion and for creating a sense of inspiration among the masses. For many people, cultivating devotion is the first important step towards the experience of a religion. If there is no devotional and cultural aspect in Buddhism, people who are attracted to rites and ceremonies may be drawn to some other kinds of beliefs which offer these practices, although they are steeped in superstition or blind faith.

It is important for religions to have some harmless and reasonable practices for people to express their devotion and spiritual feelings. Many of the Buddhist ceremonies help to cultivate good habits and positive emotions in the followers so that they become kind, considerate and cultured people. When performed with understanding and earnestness, these practices strengthen one's qualities and avoid an over-intellectualisation of Buddhism which could make it seem rather cold, detached and academic.

An effective way to introduce moral lessons is by using pictures, symbols and images and giving entertaining talks by injecting amusing but instructive anecdotes. This method appeals to many people, especially the young and it can help them understand certain aspects of Buddhism. Certain stage performances depicting historical Buddhist events can help to create a good impression in young minds.

The Buddha's advice regarding traditions and customs was neither to accept nor to reject anything without considering whether such practices are meaningful and useful to all. Less dependence is placed on these methods once a person has learned the Dhamma to lead a meaningful Buddhist life. The Buddha says that whatever methods we use to train the mind, our attitude should be like a man who uses a raft to get across a river. After crossing the river, he does not cling to the raft, but leaves it on the other side to continue his journey. Similarly, cultural practices should be regarded merely as an aid to gain inspiration and not as an end in themselves.

Buddhist cultural practices vary from country to country. When performing these traditional practices, we must be careful enough not to categorise Buddhism as belonging to one of them. For example, we should not think of Chinese Buddhism, Sinhalese Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism, etc. This creates disharmony and misunderstanding. We should also be aware of some so-called Buddhist leaders who try to reinforce their own Buddhist labels by incorporating many forms of charms, divine powers, mystical and supernatural concepts to hoodwink the masses. Such unscrupulous actions are done with a total disregard of what the Buddha has said about such practices.

The Buddhist Concept of Worship

Ignorant critics always condemn the practice of paying homage in front of a Buddha image as idol worshipping. To them, this practice is bad. But they do not realise the significance of paying respects to a Master who has taught mankind how to lead a noble religious life. They do not realise this is the way Buddhists appreciate the Enlightenment, perfections, wisdom, and sacredness of the Buddha and the noble services he rendered to humanity. In failing to understand these reasons, they criticise Buddhists for keeping Buddha images.

Is paying respect to a Buddha image indispensable in Buddhism? The image is not compulsory for a person to lead a Buddhist life, but paying respects before a Buddha image is a meaningful and harmless form of devotional practice. It is difficult to understand why others exploit this issue to condemn a gentle religion. Do Buddhists violate any moral principles or violate the peace and happiness of others when they pay respects to their Master who is symbolised by an image?

The Buddha did not advocate any rites and rituals, but concentrated only on disseminating the Dhamma and pointing out the righteous way of life. He did not even ask his followers to worship him by erecting images. Long after the Buddha passed away, some of his followers erected his images but only as a mark of respect. The image symbolises the perfections of the Buddha - his purity, compassion and wisdom - noble qualities which are highly regarded by all cultured people. In any case, the Buddha image is one of the most beautiful works of art man is capable of. Many unbiased non-Buddhists also keep Buddha images because they appreciate how an image of the Buddha can create a deep sense of calmness in the mind. Gazing at the Buddha image has therapeutic value.

Distorted Images

On the other hand, when we observe how some of the so-called Buddhists practise this religion, it is difficult to argue that they are not idol worshippers because their entire religious activities centre around this form of reverence, as if this is the most important aspect of Buddhism. Acting on ignorance, they have developed mythological beliefs and erected various kinds of images with many faces, hands, eyes and heads, superstitiously thinking that they can achieve their worldly needs by appealing to such images. These images only reflect the limited understanding and confused mental attitude of those who introduce them.

The time has come for people to recognise the real Dhamma, to be less superstitious about such images and to maintain the Buddha image as the focal point of their devotion. If people can do that, the good name of Buddhism can be upheld. We can practise Buddhism while maintaining our traditions, but we should refrain from introducing our own traditions as Buddhism. Because traditional Buddhists continue to practise their old

ethnic rites, people mistake or misinterpret these practises as Buddhism. Certain unscrupulous missionaries take advantage of the situation to ridicule and condemn Buddhism, as a ploy to indoctrinate people and convert them into their religion.

Therefore, those who wish to perform such ceremonies as part of their cultural practices should take care not to confuse them with Buddhism or to carry them out in Buddhist temples. They must take care not to allow such practices to create wrong impressions amongst the public and cause damage to Buddhism.

Confidence and a Religious Life

Religious devotion can be misdirected if proper understanding is not developed. Devotees should guard themselves against being emotionally manipulated by various individuals and groups who try to win converts or to gain some personal benefit. We must develop confidence in the Dhamma which shows the way to cultivate ourselves to the highest level by practising all the good qualities and avoiding human weaknesses.

Buddhism teaches that a truly religious life is one based on moral discipline and mental training and not through mere faith or praying to external powers. A religious man is one who contributes to the peaceful co-existence among beings and practises goodwill, compassion, harmony and understanding. The duty of a religion is to train the human mind to achieve this end and to guide humanity towards spiritual development, a noble attainment sadly lacking among humankind today.

The lack of spiritual development brings about worldly-minded and selfish people who are the cause of many human problems. Some of these people build a religious philosophy around their materialist orientations. By so doing, the religion they practice loses its purity and has only turned into another convenient means for people to justify their materialistic desires. Buddhism teaches that there is one method for worldly, material gain and another for spiritual development. We should not regard material gain as being synonymous with religious development. At the same time, leading a religious lay life does not mean that one should neglect one's occupation and become careless with one's wealth and property. We should not practise our religion in such a way that it disrupts and destroys the potential for material growth. Conversely, a religious person should try to achieve material aims without in any way violating the peace and happiness of others.

Tolerance in Buddhism

The spirit of tolerance in Buddhism is remarkable. It has contributed to the maintenance of a peaceful, healthy religious atmosphere amongst different religious groups and various Buddhist denominations without any bloodshed for the last 2,500 years. This is indeed a

commendable achievement in the history of religions. Buddhism is liberal in that it guides us to lead normal lives without undergoing suffering in the name of religion. As Buddhists we need not become slaves either to sense pleasures or to any supernatural power. But by cultivating human dignity, virtue and intelligence, we can gain true wisdom which will conquer all ignorance.

Buddhism does not encourage people to depend on supernatural or miraculous powers for spiritual development. The belief in miraculous powers and mystical powers in themselves will never give anyone mental purity. Purity in Buddhism is not based on physical phenomenology, but psychological purity.

Some missionaries condemn Buddhists by calling them names such as heathens, pagans and idol worshippers, but Buddhists never condemn the followers of other religions in retaliation. They never claim that the followers of other religions will not get the chance to experience heavenly bliss. In short, while practising their own religion, Buddhists respect the right of other people to practise their own religions. They can agree to disagree with other religionists amicably, without creating conflict and hostility or giving up their own Buddhist concepts. This religion does not condemn other religionists as sinners, but respects the teachings of all the other religious teachers who tried to uplift the moral standards of society.

Buddhism is not a 'lazy man's' religion which teaches that salvation can be gained through prayers alone, nor a 'Yes man's' religion which accommodates all the beliefs and practices upheld by the so-called Buddhists as well as other religionists. Buddhism has its own identity. If the practices of others are not meaningful and justifiable, Buddhists believe that it is their duty to gently point out the Buddhist point of view so that people can reconsider their actions and beliefs. This should not be viewed as criticism.

Concept of God and Sin

According to Buddhism, the belief in the forgiveness of sins by a supernatural being is not justifiable. The effects of certain evil deeds that we have committed can only be overcome by increasing our meritorious deeds and maintaining healthy, pure minds. This cannot be done by merely praying to anybody.

This is a religion for people to practise on the basis of their own convictions and understanding and not out of the fear of eternal hell-fire. The idea of being made to suffer eternally in hell is foreign to Buddhism which teaches that both enjoyments and suffering are temporary and not eternal.

The belief in a creator God is the most important concept to the followers of every religion. To them, there is no life or religion without God. However, Buddhism does not acknowledge the same belief. The concept of God in Buddhism is entirely different from

that in the other religions. Buddhists work for their salvation by leading a noble, religious life and through mental purification without depending on any God. Yet, they do accept the existence of many gods. To Buddhists, gods can help materially but they are not all-powerful and cannot help us to achieve mental purification and final salvation. We must do that ourselves.

Confusion in Modern Buddhism

So far, we have touched on the fundamental teachings of Buddhism, its purpose, concepts, practices, the ultimate goal of life as well as how to overcome human problems. We have also discussed the Buddhist attitude towards various other viewpoints, why intellectuals respect this profound teaching, and how narrow minded people condemn this religion and exploit Buddhist tolerance. Let us now try to examine some of the problems which exist among Buddhists themselves so that we can enhance our understanding and practice of this religion and be worthy disciples of our great teacher.

At the beginning, different schools of Buddhism sprang up in India due to different views held regarding certain aspects of the Buddha's teaching. The followers did not do this for their personal gain or power nor out of any ulterior motive. But today it seems that many different sects of Buddhism are trying to introduce their own form of Buddhism with some motives of their own with the result that they depart from the original message of the Buddha.

The Buddha's message which has been introduced as Buddhism is meant for all mankind and not merely for one particular race or country. If people understand this, there will be no need for them to talk about the different brands of Buddhism because Buddhism means Truth. The Truth is for all and no particular group can pretend to monopolise it.

Different Brands of Buddhism

Since Buddhism does not command people to do away with age-old cultural traditions in order to practise this religion, people have taken advantage of this by adopting many kinds of practices not in conformity with the teaching of the Buddha. In various countries which had accepted Buddhism, the followers have incorporated many of their traditional practices into Buddhism and eventually introduced the Buddha's teaching according to their beliefs and understanding. This has resulted in Sri Lankan Buddhism, Thai Buddhism, Burmese Buddhism, Indian Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, Korean Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism and Western Buddhism. This is in marked contrast to the policy of other religions which demand that existing traditional beliefs must be cast aside after conversion.

While the diversity of Buddhist practices has provided a richness of a wide variety of religious cultures, unfortunately the liberal Buddhist attitude towards

traditional practices has become a stumbling block in the effort to create Buddhist unity. It has also created feelings of superiority among some groups of Buddhists which have led to discrimination amongst the followers of Buddhism in their respective countries. Each group tries to glorify its own form of Buddhism as being far superior to that of others. But these groups do not realise that in doing so, they are exposing their own egoism in the name of Buddhism. They emphasise more on these cultural practices and introduce them as part of Buddhism. They also try to create false confidence in the minds of others by suggesting that the Buddha had revealed those practices secretly to some of his favourite disciples. This assertion cannot be supported because the Buddha had proclaimed that there were no secrets in his teaching and that he had revealed all the important doctrines to all his disciples. In addition, many of those practices that people believe to be the teaching of the Buddha are not found in the original Pali Tripitaka. Some realise that it is only through these practices that they can gain more popularity to achieve their own ends.

Buddhist Concoctions

Some Buddhist groups try to accommodate and practise all kinds of beliefs and traditions to show that they are working for religious harmony amongst the different schools of Buddhism. Such an approach does not really bring harmony because there soon appears yet another sect which claims to have chosen the eclectic approach. If they were to practise Buddhism that way, it is difficult to understand what they would introduce as the basic teachings or the absolute truth of the Master. One must try to follow the guidelines given by the Buddha without mistaking cultural traditions for the Dhamma. Those who try to incorporate all the traditions, beliefs and customs as practised or adopted in different countries are like those who take a mixture of different kinds of medicines such as Western medicine, Indian medicine, Chinese medicine and other native medicine, when they are sick. Instead of getting cured, such a mixture can aggravate the sickness. That is why we must have a particular method to practise Buddhism and it has to be one which can be supported by the original teaching of the Buddha.

Buddhists at the Crossroads

In a country like Malaysia where there exist many Buddhist traditions, Buddhists face difficulties in choosing a method for them to practise. In traditional Buddhist countries, there is a particular method of practising Buddhism according to their culture. But here, some religious masters, preachers and gurus who come from other countries try to introduce Buddhism according to their own beliefs, traditions and customs, and maintain that their practices are more effective and purer than those of others. While appreciating their services, we should like to mention that more misunderstanding and confusion are created among local

people who listen to many of these visiting religious masters. This situation has become a big problem especially among the youths who try to understand the basic teaching of the Buddha. Although there are many Buddhist schools in Malaysia with their traditional beliefs and cultural practices, the best advice that we can give to beginners who have problems choosing which tradition to follow is to study the basic teaching of the Buddha first-hand before they attempt to follow any religious master from a particular school of Buddhism.

The problems faced by the Buddhist community are many. Many elders pay more attention to their traditional practices and are ignorant about the Teaching. Some Western-oriented young people study the intellectual aspects of the Dhamma, sometimes at the neglect of the actual practice as well as the other invaluable aspects of the religion. Many who are born Buddhists remain as free thinkers and are not committed to any religious values. There are very few facilities available in this country where young Buddhists can learn about their religion, even in many Buddhist temples. Temples are maintained only as places of worship or for tourism rather than places where people can learn the Dhamma. Those who had their education in missionary schools have been influenced by the indoctrination of other religionists so that they do not know how to appreciate their own religion. Some carry out cultural practices under the guise of 'Buddhism' and this has contributed to making a mockery of this noble religion in the eyes of those who are not familiar with the true Buddhist culture, history and way of life.

Buddha in Different Names

Some Buddhists try to introduce different Buddhas by using a variety of names. They also single out one particular Buddha as their Buddha whom they claim to be the most powerful and 'true' Buddha. Such claims reflect their poor mentality. They coin various names for the Buddhas according to their limited way of thinking and judge the validity of a Buddha based on their selfish personal needs. The Enlightened Buddhas who appeared on this earth from time to time should not be discriminated in any way whatsoever. All of them gained the same enlightenment, the same perfection and expounded the same doctrine. The appearances of such Buddhas in the world are very rare, but these people with their lively imaginations conjure different names of the Buddha whom they introduce from time to time as real Buddhas. Such proliferation of claims and beliefs has contributed to a great deal of confusion in the Buddhist community. Today, there is even competition within the Buddhist community in commercialising the names and images of the Buddhas.

Publications

Buddhist publications themselves create problems. Numerous books and booklets have been published and distributed as Buddhist literature in many parts of the

world. But very unfortunately, it is hard to say whether many of these publications contain any real teachings of the Buddha. Sometimes they create more superstitious beliefs and confusion. On the other hand, some writers try to show their scholarship by bringing forth various speculative issues as an attempt to show the superiority of their particular school and their own scholarship. Then there are the books written by non-Buddhists who deliberately or through ignorance distort the true teachings by misinterpreting what the Buddha taught. If the readers are unbiased and well-informed, they can easily see through these writings and realise that these are the works of unscrupulous intellectual fools who create more confusion among the public and encourage discrimination within the Buddhist community. On the other hand, if the readers have a shallow knowledge of the basic teachings of the Buddha, they may lose confidence in Buddhism after reading such publications. The problem is some writers have commercialised their publications for their personal gain and have never considered the damage that they create by misleading people in the name of Buddhism.

Under such trying conditions where diverse interpretations of Buddhism prevail, we should return to the true Dhamma taught by the Buddha. To distinguish true Dhamma from other teachings, there is no better way than to use the criteria given by the Buddha himself. Speaking of the test of Dhamma to Maha Pajapati, the Blessed One said:

'These are not Dhamma:

'The teachings and doctrines that conduce to passion, not to dispassion; to bondage, not to detachment; to increase of worldly possessions, not to their decrease; to greed, not to abstinence; to discontent, not to content; to company, not to solitude; to slothfulness, not to energy; to delight in evils, not to delight in good - of such teachings and doctrines you may say firmly: 'These are not Dhamma, This is not the message of the Master'.'

'But these are Dhamma:

'Of whatever teachings and doctrines you can assume yourself that they are the opposite of these things, you may then say firmly; 'These are Dhamma. This is the message of the Master'.'

CONCLUSION

Buddhism originated in India and many Buddhist practices were nurtured according to Indian traditions and environment. Despite its place of origin, the Dhamma or Sublime Teaching that the Buddha expounded is timeless and universal, and is not confined to the Indian sub-continent but is meant for all mankind. He has given all the necessary advice to guide mankind to lead a noble way of life and experience spiritual solace and fulfilment. In his teaching, the Buddha discusses all the existing human problems and the ways to overcome

them so that true peace and happiness can be maintained.

There is an urgent need today for Buddhist leaders, writers and devotees to understand that the essence of the Buddha's Teaching is unalterable and constant. We must learn to forget our differences and develop the important fundamental aspects of Buddhist practices which are common to all schools of Buddhism. Buddhism must transcend all national, racial, and cultural barriers.

We must study the Teaching in its original form and mould our lives accordingly. It is through the practice of Dhamma that the real Buddha can be known. The Buddha has said, 'He who sees the Dhamma sees me.' The Dhamma is not a set of teachings for us to accept and believe in, but to try out and see for ourselves. Our Enlightened Master himself said: 'Ehipassiko', that is, 'Come and See!' If we accept the Dhamma as our refuge and guide, we will need no other authority.

"In the unessential they imagine the essential, in the essential they see the unessential, - they who entertain (such) wrong thoughts never realise the essence."

Dhammapada - 11

THE LAST WORDS OF THE BUDDHA

Then the Blessed One addressed the Venerable Ananda: It may be, Ananda, that to some of you the thought may come: "Here are (we have) the Words of the Teacher who is gone; our Teacher we have with us no more". But Ananda, it should not be considered in this light. What I have taught and laid down, Ananda, as Doctrine (Dhamma) and Discipline (Vinaya), this will, be your teacher when I am gone.

'Just as, Ananda, the bhikkhus now address one another with the word "Friend" (Avuso), they should not do so when I am gone. A senior bhikkhu, Ananda, may address a junior by his name, his family name or with the word "Friend"; a junior bhikkhu should address a senior as "Sir" (Bhante) or "Venerable" (Ayasma).'

Then the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus: 'It may be, Bhikkhus, that there may be doubt or perplexity in the mind of even one bhikkhu about the Buddha, or the Dhamma, or the Sangha, or the Path, or the Practice. Ask Bhikkhus. Do not reproach yourselves afterwards with the thought: "Our Teacher was face to face with us; we could not ask the Blessed One when we were face to face with him".'

When this was said, the bhikkhus remained silent.

A second time and a third time too the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus.....as above.

The bhikkhus remained silent even for the third time.

Then the Blessed One addressed them and said: 'It may be, Bhikkhus, that you put no questions out of reverence for your Teacher. Then, Bhikkhus, let friend speak to friend.'

Even at this, those bhikkhus remained silent.

Then the Venerable Ananda said to the Blessed One: 'It is wonderful, Sir. It is marvellous, Sir. I have this faith, Sir, in the community of bhikkhus here, that not even one of them has any doubt or perplexity about the Buddha, or the Dhamma or the Sangha; or the Path, or the Practice.'

'You speak out of faith, Ananda. But in this matter, Ananda, the Tathagata (i.e. Buddha) knows, and knows for certain, that in this community of bhikkhus there is not even one bhikkhu who has any doubt or perplexity about the Buddha, or the Dhamma, or the Sangha, or the Path, or the Practice. Indeed, Ananda, even the lowest in spiritual attainments among these five hundred bhikkhus is a Stream-entrant (Sotapanna), not liable to fall (into lower states), is assured, and is bound for Enlightenment.'

Then the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus, saying: 'Then, Bhikkhus, I address you now: Transient are conditioned things. Try to accomplish your aim with diligence.'

(From the Mahaparinibbana-sutta of the Digha-nikaya, Sutta No.16)

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