

# A LOOK INTO BUDDHISM

An Interview With

Ven. Dr. H. Saddhatissa Maha Thera.

Venerable Dr. H.Saddhatissa Maha Thera, M.A. Ph.D., Head of the London Buddhist Vihara and President of the British Maha Bodhi Society visited Malaysia recently during his missionary tour of the Far East. During his three day stay at Kuala Lumpur (May 28th – 30th), he was a guest of the Brickfields Buddhist Temple. He delivered a Public Talk at the Brickfields Buddhist Temple on 28th May 1972. Ven. Dr. Saddhatissa Maha Thera is a distinguished scholarly monk who has spent the last fifteen years doing propagation work in London. He is the author of several books including *The Buddha Ways*, and *Buddhist Ethics*. He has also done translations for the Pali Text Society. Ven. Dr. Saddhatissa Maha Thera is much respected in the West for his work as a Dhammaduta monk. The Assistant Editor of *Voice of Buddhism*, Mr. T.C. Lim interviewed the Venerable Dr. Saddhatissa during his recent visit to Kuala Lumpur.

**Q. Venerable Sir, does Buddhism permit its followers to practise family planning?**

A. In Buddhism, there are no such words as ‘family planning’. However, Buddhism does emphasise abstaining from excessive self-indulgence. A Buddhist is encouraged to control his senses; this control of the senses naturally leads to moderation in daily living and moderation in the family. Buddhism has always denounced excessive sensual life. Therefore, if a person tries to control his mind and tries to lead a moderate life, he will naturally be able to regulate the number of children that he is capable of bringing up. In Buddhism, control of the mind is all important. If one can control his mind, he can control his body, his family, his wealth and his actions. Everything is controlled by the mind. Also as explained in Buddhism, a person must know how to regulate and spend his income in his family life and his day to day life. If a person considers and follows these Buddhist principles, he can control his family life.

**Q. Is it permissible for Buddhists to practise abortion?**

A. In Buddhist literature, there is a very famous Sutta called the Karaniya Metta Sutta. In this Sutta, we find the words, “*Bhutta va sambhayesi va*” – those who are born are those who are to be born are regarded as living beings; therefore, it is wrong to destroy such lives. Abortion is a kind of

killing. We cannot support such actions in the light of the Buddhist teachings.

**Q. Are Buddhists allowed to marry more than one wife?**

A. This is a very intricate question. There is no such teaching in Buddhism that says one husband must have only one wife or one husband must have so many wives. Anyway, Buddhism always appreciates good relationships between husband and wife. The husband-wife relationship can be improved if there is only one husband and one wife. If one husband has several wives, he would find great difficulty in maintaining a peaceful family life. Perhaps this situation may lead to quarrels, dissension and other domestic troubles. Therefore, we can say that it would be a much better life if one husband has only one wife.

**Q. Buddhists believe that suffering is inherent in life. However, Buddhists are encouraged to entertain worldly hope for a better life through economic and social development. Is there not a basic inconsistency in these two views?**

A. According to the First Noble Truth, when we speak about suffering, we speak about the true nature of the world. This does not mean that there is no getting away from this nature or suffering. Buddha advised us to try to find the cause of suffering and then to get rid of that suffering in order to attain happiness. Buddha has categorically mentioned that there is worldly happiness both for monks and for lay people. We can find such teachings recorded in various Suttas: to have a life without debt, is a happiness. To lead a faultless life, is a happiness. On the whole, these kinds of worldly happiness are subject to change. Therefore, in a sense, worldly happiness is subject to change. Therefore, in a sense, worldly happiness is regarded as *Dukkha* – unsatisfactoriness in the relative sense. Therefore, we know that in order to attain to Nibbana, we have to get rid of all these worldly things. But for most people, Nibbana is too far away. Buddhism itself is a progressive path; we have to attain to various happiness and prosperity so that we may be able to gradually reach our ultimate goal: ultimate happiness. Buddha advised us to live a happy life in this world. Therefore, he did not denounce economic life. The fact that suffering exists does not mean that there is no escape from this suffering. To live a happy, mundane life, we must try to get rid of mundane suffering. To get rid of mundane suffering, we must improve our social and economic life. In order to attain to supramundane life – a very advanced stage – we must try to get rid of all worldly life and then we can attain to the path and fruition of the path: *sotapanna*, *sakadagami*, *anagami* and *arahant*– these are very far-away stages that very few attain.

In modern times it is very difficult to reach the supramundane stages of spiritual development. Therefore, we must try to get rid of all the mundane suffering by improving our social and economic life.

**Q. How does Buddhism define good and bad?**

A. It is very difficult to give a criterion for good and bad. According to the Kalama Sutta, anything that leads to destruction and unhappiness of a life, we have to take as bad; anything that leads to happiness and prosperity of a life, we have to take as good. This is the criterion that is given in the Kalama Sutta.

**Q. Buddhism teaches that good begets good and bad begets bad. But we have seen many evil doers who are prosperous and many good people who are suffering. How can Buddhism account for this?**

A. Of course, we believe in karma. Those good people who are suffering today may have done bad actions in their previous life. These evil-doers who are prospering today are only reaping the good deeds done in a previous life. In Buddhism, birth and rebirth are nothing but a stream of consciousness.

**Q. Must an evil doer suffer forever for his bad actions?**

A. No, there is no such law in Buddhism that says a person must suffer forever for his evil. Anyone who is bad can become a good person. For example, in order to grow a tree, we have to plant the seed, water and take care of the young shoot as it slowly grows into a big tree. Similarly, we can overcome our difficulties if we work diligently and with effort and proper understanding. These consequences can be changed. A person who is happy but misuses his position will sooner or later bring grief upon himself. According to Buddhism, there is no need to suffer forever.

**Q. Buddhism teaches us to practise tolerance, patience and kindness to everybody; but we have seen that many people tend to take advantage of such qualities. Is there any limit to such practices?**

A. No. If any person tries to take advantage of tolerance, patience and kindness, we must try to change that person. According to Buddhism, if we practise genuine tolerance and patience we should be able to change that person to a certain extent. If our rights, home and country are in danger due to invading enemies, this is not a question of tolerance but a question of defence. However, our actions and motives must be just and pure. They must be free from anger, ill-will, selfishness and craving. For

us to invade others rights of family and home and country, it is wrong, uncivilised and not Buddhistic.

**Q. It has often been said that monks are not contributing anything productive to society. What are your views on this?**

A. There are two types of monks. One group devotes their times to the study and practice of Buddhism and to the well-being of society. They renounce one family in order to help many families. Although they live in monasteries and depend on their devotees, in return they are rendering a great service by uplifting the cultural, educational and moral values in society. These monks are rendering spiritual help and consolation for the unhappy. The other group of monks retire from society and live in a cave or jungle and devote their time to their own salvation. Of course, they may obtain their salvation. If you are referring to this group of monks, you are right in a sense.

**Q. Is meditation compulsory in order to practise Buddhism?**

A. Yes. If we want to attain happiness in this world and in the next. To attain happiness, we must control our mind. In order to control our mind, meditation is very compulsory. In many instances, it is possible to use Buddhist practices as meditation exercises. Practising Sila (morality) is a kind of meditation in that it helps to control our senses and our mind. Dana (generosity) is also a kind of meditation practice. Practising Dana helps to suppress certain defilements in the mind. Defilements such as greed, selfishness, ill-will and delusion can be overcome with the practice of Dana.

**Q. Does Buddhism support a permissive society that imposes no limitation on human behaviour?**

A. In a permissive society, people live like outlaws and yet they desire to be free from social customs and manners. Their style of life is similar to the animal life. They have no limitation to social behaviour. According to Buddhism, if people want to progress, they should abstain from so-called unruly, disorderly, permissive behaviour. In the animal kingdom, animals enjoy sexual life without any moral obligations but as human beings, we have certain obligations towards ourselves and our Society. We should not violate or break the ethical and moral rules. There is no right without duty. The world is run by right and duty. Therefore, Buddhism does not support a permissive society.