

BUDDHISM AND WORSHIP

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I am often asked: Do Buddhists pray? What do they do when they go to the temple? What is the Buddhist attitude to prayer?

I shall attempt to answer these questions. Now, the word prayer in theistic religions i.e. in religions which believe in an omnipotent, all-powerful, omniscient, all-knowing god, who is the creator of the world and the father of all creatures, prayer means, among other things, supplication to him, petitioning him humbly asking him for guidance and protection, for his favour, asking him to bestow upon the supplicator health and happiness, prosperity and the provision of various needs, even the needs of daily life and asking him for forgiveness for sins committed.

It should be stated at the outset that, in as much as the Buddhists do not believe in such a god, they have no prayer in that sense. The Buddhists, on the other hand, believe in the doctrine of Karma which declares that happiness and unhappiness are alike, the results of action, that prosperity and adversity are produced for each individual by his own deeds, words and thoughts, that the law is impersonal, that it has no agent behind, directing it or administering it. Being impersonal, it can show no mercy, nor give forgiveness for trespasses. Evil can only be redeemed by doing good, which will overcome the effects of the evil deed. Sin, in the Buddhist sense, is not the transgression or disobedience of laws arbitrarily laid down by a god to be followed by human beings but the performance of wrong acts of body, speech and mind which soil the character and impede the growth of one's personality.

There is thus in Buddhism no "prayer" in the commonly accepted sense of the word. Human beings are responsible only to themselves for their good and evil, happiness and misery, and to no other. The world is a man-made world; it does not depend for its progress or prosperity on any external agency; it is not constructed by anyone outside it.

What do the Buddhists do when they visit the temple? They do many things. Let us follow a Buddhist devotee on such a visit and then, perhaps, we shall be able to understand the significance of his actions. There is no special day for such a visit; he can go whenever he likes, though, of course, the poya-day especially the day of the full-moon and of the new moon, are particularly favoured, because on these days others are likely to go to the temple too, and most human beings like company. The devotees are clad in white, because

white is the colour of purity, simplicity and humility. He takes with him flowers, the sweeter their fragrance and the brighter their colour the better they are for his purpose; he also carries oil, and incense, sometimes sandalwood powder and camphor. Arrived at the temple he washes his hands and feet, because cleanliness, both of body and mind, is praised always, in all actions. In the temple are several shrines or places where offerings can be made. The main shrine is the "vihara". The word means dwelling place. There is some confusion about the terms used to indicate the various buildings to be found in the temple. It is worthwhile clearing the matter.

Vihara means a dwelling place and the word was originally used to mean the residence of a Buddha. Later it was also used and is quite often used even now to indicate the dwelling place of the monks, e.g., Maha Vihara of Anuradhapura, in this sense, it corresponds to the word monastery. But nowadays the place where the monks live is called a pansala, though the word originally meant an ascetic's hut, or a hermit's cell. The old word for what is now commonly called the Vihara, i.e., the place which contains images of the Buddha, was **pilimage**, or image house, but the word is now hardly ever used. And therein lies something worthy of notice, for to the Buddhist, an image in itself is not an object of worship; it is to him merely a token, a symbol, a representation, which helps him to recall the Buddha. For the purpose of his worship, it is even immaterial whether there is an image or not, but an image or a picture or some sort of symbol, he finds helpful for the concentration of his thoughts. In worshipping an image, therefore, the Buddhist is not an idolater, worshipping merely wood, clay or stone, and the charge of idolatry made against Buddhism is due either to ignorance or to deliberate misrepresentation.

There is another point worthy of attention in the use of the word Vihara for the building which contains representations of the Buddha. As stated earlier, the word means dwelling place, so that the Vihara is to the Buddhist where the Buddha lives, not in the past only but also now. For, the worship of the Buddhist devotee is not to someone who is dead and gone and is no more, but to someone who is alive and present before him. This does not mean that the Buddhist believe that the Buddha, who passed away from earthly life at a place call Kusinara, 2,512 years ago, is, at the moment, alive in some particular place, carrying on the functions of life. But the Buddhist, in paying his homage to the Buddha, likes to recall to his own mind the living presence of the Master, so that his act of worship may be vivid and significant. The Buddha has passed away but His influence persists, pervading the world like a perfume whose fragrance continues even if the material object which produced the fragrance has been taken away. The feeling of the Buddhist devotee that his offerings are to someone, who to him is yet alive, is that the Buddha's teaching is yet alive, and the memory of the radiant personality is evergreen, also explains why it is

that the Buddhists often make offerings of food and drink at the shrine. Such offerings are merely symbolic of the vitality of their faith and devotion; no one believes, not even the most ignorant Buddhist that the Buddha actually partakes of the food and drink. It is their way of expressing in idealistic form their conception of the Buddha as a living influence in their lives.

The offerings of flowers and incense are a bestowal of worship, an act of homage, of adoration, of gratitude, and the offerings themselves have no intrinsic value. They correspond to the offerings of a garland or a bouquet of flowers to someone to whom we wish to show our honour, our respect, our affection, our gratitude. The offering of flowers or incense is followed by the utterance of stanzas which recall to the mind of the devotee the sublime qualities of the Buddha.

The Buddha verily is the Blessed One, who had put an end to all sorrow and suffering, the Perfect One, worthy of homage, who had attained to supreme wisdom and enlightenment, who proclaimed the way of right knowledge and good conduct, who found Happiness and Peace, who realised the truth about the world, who is unrivalled as guide and friend to those that seek His guidance, who is the teacher of gods and men.

It will be noticed that there is no request for favours, no solicitations for protection, but the recollection and rehearsal of the qualities of a great man, who to the Buddhist is the greatest that ever lived.

Other stanzas follow in which the devotee declares that he accepts the Buddha as his Teacher and Guide for as long as his life lasts, and by virtue of the fact may happiness come to him. It is an assertion of his faith in the Buddha, his acceptance of the way of life as laid down by Him. And, here is something very significant. The devotee utters his resolve to win himself the peace of Nibbana which the Buddha had attained through the practice of virtue and the acquisition of wisdom. The devotee recalls to mind that during successive births, for a long period of time the Buddha, then known as Bodhisattva, or aspirant to perfect enlightenment, cultivated those qualities of head and heart that lead beings to perfection to supreme achievement. In the course of his training, the Bodhisattva, or Buddha-to-be, considered no endeavor too difficult, no sacrifice too great. Not in one birth only but in numerous births he had sacrificed his life for the principles he held dear, in the service of others. The way of the Buddha, the devotee recalls, is the way laid down for all those who accept the Buddha as a Teacher and Guide. All men can become Buddhas, if they have the necessary resolve and are willing to follow the paths to Buddhahood. The Buddha did not attain a greatness which others cannot themselves achieve.

The Way of Life proclaimed by the Buddha is called the Dhamma and the devotee recalls to his mind, by means of a stanza, the qualities and salient characteristics of that Teaching. That is something which has been clearly proclaimed with no mystery or esotericism behind it, but open and clear like the open palm of one's hand, that its efficacy is manifest and obvious and capable of proof, that it is eternal and timeless, in that it holds good for all times and for all places, that it invites and challenges enquiry and investigation, that it has nothing to hide or be ashamed of, that it rests not on faith but on conviction, that it is not vague but definite in the goal it lays down, viz., the elimination of unhappiness and the attainment of happiness and peace, that truth and happiness can be achieved only by individual and strenuous effort, not by depending upon someone else, however powerful he may be. And the devotee also recalls to mind for his own encouragement and edification that there are and always have been men and women who have dedicated themselves to the pursuit of the Dhamma, the Way of Righteousness, who thereby are exemplars of the Good Life, well conducted, upright, of blameless behaviour, worthy of honour and respect, worthy of being looked up to and followed. These noble ones are known as the Sangha, the community of dedicated ones, who cleanse this world with the goodness and the sanctity of their lives, avoiding evil, promoting good, filling the universe with thoughts of friendliness, goodwill and peace. The devotee in thus giving gifts to worthy ones practises **dana** or generosity, in remembering these noble ones in piety practices **sila**, good conduct, in filling his mind with elevating thoughts he practices **bhavana** the cultivation of the mind.