

## **BUDDHIST SYMBOLS**

Non-Buddhists often ask whether or not Buddhist worship images. The answer is that the true Buddhists know who and what the Buddha is. They do not worship an image nor pray to it expecting any worldly boons or sensual pleasures while they are living or a pleasurable state of existence, such as heaven, after death. The images before they pay homage are only representations of one to whom they pay respect in gratitude because he, through his own efforts and wisdom, discovered the way to real peace and made it known to all beings. The offerings they make are but symbols of their reverence for the Buddha and are a means of concentrating their minds on the significance of the words they are reciting. Just as people love to see a portrait of one dear to them when separated by death or distance, so do Buddhists love to have before them a representation of their teacher, because this representation enables them to think of his virtues, his love and compassion for all beings and the doctrine he taught.

### **1. THE STATUE OF BUDDHA**

The Buddha image is a symbol of an ideal, the enlightened one. It represents perfect compassion and perfect wisdom.

The Buddha image is not an idol as many non-Buddhists think. While it is placed upon the altar, it also exists in our minds and hearts. Buddhists do not worship the image; in fact, the word “worship” as it is known in the West does not exist in Buddhism. The word “Buddha” means Enlightened One. Buddha was a man, a human being, but he was enlightened; that is to say, he came to understand the truth about life and the world and he lived that truth.

The image is the artistic creation of an artist, representing the highest ideal of the perfect one. The Buddha image is not absolutely necessary in order to have a Buddhist Temple. However, it is nice to have the Buddha image. It is a point of focus. It is a reminder. We obtain inspiration by which we encourage ourselves to attain enlightenment.

There are many different statues of Buddha as well as the Gautama Buddha, the historical Buddha. There are many statues of the ideal Buddha such as the Amitabha Buddha, Vairocana Buddha, Bhesajyaguru and others.

There are many statues of the Bodhisattva such as the Kannon or Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva which is the symbol of compassion and it is often

translated as the “Goddess of Mercy” in the West. Thus, Buddha images are religious and artistic expressions of Man’s ideal and adoration.

## 2. FLOWERS

Flowers are beautiful for decoration. However, flowers in Buddhist temples symbolise the teaching of transiency. The Buddha taught that all things in this world are in constant change, and nothing is permanent. Flowers are beautiful in the morning but fade in the heat of the day. Thus the transiency of the world can be vividly seen in the flowers. The flowers remind us of this constant change of things and life. We are faced with the facts of old age, sickness, and death, regardless of whether we desire them or not.

This is one of the meditations used in the offering of flowers:-

*These flowers I offer in memory of the Buddha, the Supremely Enlightened One. These flowers are now fair in form, glorious in colour, sweet in scent. Yet all will soon have passed away, their fair form withered, the bright hues faded, their scent gone. It is even so with all conditioned things which are subject to change and suffering and are unreal. Realising this, may we attain Nirvana, perfect peace, which is everlasting.*

## 3. INCENSE

Incense is a symbol which signifies the spirit of self-purification and self-dedication. Incense has the potential of producing a sweet fragrance; only when it burns does it diffuse this fragrance. When a person burns incense, there is a thought that, just as this incense burns, it is our joy to diffuse sweet fragrance: “I will dedicate my body for higher purpose, more than just for myself.” A person who is always willing to go more than half way in helping others, who is friendly and amiable, such a person is always liked by others and incense diffuses its fragrances. Incense has different colours and different shapes. Some kinds of incense are powdered; others in the form of sticks or cakes of various shapes. There are also different colours: purple, black, yellow, green and brown. But regardless of the shape or colour when incense burns it transcends its individual shape and colour and becomes one in the smoke. This symbolises the transcending of individual selfishness or ego to become one with all others, to become one with oneness of life.

Incense is used in the same sense as in the offering of flowers. It is offered in the memory of the Buddha. It is another form of meditation.

#### 4. MEDITATION AND BEADS

There are no prayers in Buddhism. The words they recite are meditations and not prayers. They recite to themselves the virtues of the Buddha and his Doctrine so that they may acquire such mental dispositions as are favourable to the attainment of similar qualities in their own minds, in however small a degree. According to Buddhism, the universe is governed by everlasting unchangeable laws of righteousness, not by any Supreme being who can hear and answer prayers. These laws are so perfect that no one, no god or man, can change them by praising them or by crying out against them.

Meditation beads are a symbol of unity and harmony. The strand is composed of beads strung on a string, each bead representing an individual. However, the bead is not isolated and independent but is connected with all others to compose a whole strand of beads. We individuals may seem independent, but we are not independent and isolated individuals. We are related to each other in the association of life which we call Buddha nature or Buddha thought. We are interrelated and interdependent, one cannot exist without the others. Thus, meditation beads symbolise unity of all being and harmony among them.

#### 5. CANDLELIGHT

Candlelight is a symbol of wisdom. In our physical world we see things through a medium of light. If we do not have sun or electric light, this world of ours is so dark that we cannot see anything. In our spiritual and mental world the physical light cannot help us to see. We see only through wisdom. We stumble many times in daily living because we lack wisdom. Wisdom is a light through which we understand truth about life. Wisdom, which is very important in Buddhism, is differentiated from knowledge in Buddhist teaching. Knowledge, or learning, is something acquired from external sources. We can acquire knowledge through reading, listening to lectures, etc., but wisdom one cannot acquire externally; it must be created within a person's own life. Wisdom is obtained only through immediate and direct experience.

#### 6. GONGS

Gongs are used in Buddhist Temples and homes for 3 purposes: to announce the time of a meeting, to mark different phases of services or tempos of chanting; and, as a symbol aiding in meditation – when a beautiful sound is heard, we listen to its resonance through to the soundless sound upon which depends the meditation.

(News Letter, American Buddhist Association)

