

## DAY TO DAY BUDDHIST PRACTICES

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*With the increasing awareness of the Buddha's Teachings all over the world, there is a growing demand from those who have recently come to accept the Dhamma for some meaningful devotions which can be practised daily. Many traditional Buddhist practices which we observe in parts of Asia are largely culture-bound and are quite unacceptable to devotees from other cultures. Ven. Dhammananda discusses a few basic practices which could be considered meaningful for Buddhists all over the world. He stresses that since Buddhism is above all a practical and rational religion one should use one's commonsense in behaving as a Buddhist.*

*Ed.*

Buddhism as a religion or as a righteous way of life is appreciated by intelligent people in many parts of the world. The simple reason for this is that the Buddha, the founder of this religion, was the most enlightened and liberal-minded teacher the world has ever known. The Buddhist way of life is very simple. It is free from blind faith and dogma. Unfortunately many people do not know how to appreciate the gentleness of this religion and to lead a true Buddhist way of life.

Today, in many parts of the world, various beliefs and practices are being carried out by the Buddhist community in the name of this religion. Many of these practices are far from the original teachings of the Buddha and sometimes even contradict them. Many people have in fact neglected and forgotten the correct Buddhist way of life. Many have misconceptions with regard to certain important aspects of this religion.

We must understand the nature of the Buddhist way of life before we try to grasp the deeper aspects of Buddhism. Through this understanding we can achieve a happy and meaningful life.

Some intellectuals use Buddhism only as a basis of discussion on the metaphysical and philosophical aspects of the religion. They view with derision the accepted Buddhist cultural practices and condemn them. This is

not a healthy attitude to adopt. One should first investigate the underlying significance and meaning of such practices instead of passing hasty and uncalled for remarks. One should understand that a religion without depth and one which has not penetrated into one's cultural practices will not last; it will only become a dry philosophy and fade away after a time. Tolerance is the keyword in Buddhist teachings. If one is unable to practice certain cultural practices, one should, at least, tolerate them.

Buddhist practices in various parts of the world often differ from one another through being influenced or integrated with local traditional or other customary practices. Buddhist culture has penetrated into every aspect of the lives of citizens of whole nations. We know that Buddhism is a religion that leads us to a better life in this world and hereafter. It is our duty to explore, study comprehend and put into practice what our forefathers developed as our culture based on our religion. We need the guidance of our religion for our everyday life. On the other hand we need not blindly follow everything that has been handed down to us. Rites and rituals, although accepted as an integral part of religion, do not by themselves comprise religion. Spiritual development is the most important aspect of religion. To attain this spiritual development, we should begin by understanding the teachings of the Buddha, acquire the requisite spiritual inspiration and proceed by cultivating a strong moral background so that we have a firm base to begin the journey to emancipation. Our gratitude and veneration to the Great Teacher, His Teachings and the Sangha must not be forgotten. Thus we revere the three sacred objects, the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, which we commonly term 'The Triple Gem'. Attainment of spiritual development and veneration of the Triple Gem are the means whereby we can lead a righteous way of life leading to peace, happiness and ultimate salvation. This is the aim of every Buddhist. Whilst we aspire to high spiritual development we should not forget or neglect our day-to-day accepted religious observances and practices which remind us of our duty towards our religion. Buddhists often do not know what is expected of them. How does a Buddhist pray or worship? What daily practices should be observed? What does a Buddhist do on special occasions?

Let us examine a few of these aspects of daily Buddhist behaviour.

### **Daily observances**

As Buddhists, it would be most appropriate for us to have either a Buddha

image or a picture of the Buddha in our homes, not as an ornamental showpiece or even as something which has "magic" power to protect us but as an object of admiration and veneration. The serene figure of the Buddha, symbolising loving-kindness, purity and perfection will serve as a source of consolation and inspiration in helping us to overcome whatever difficulties, worries or fear that we usually encounter in our day-to-day activities in a troubled world. Life is full of pitfalls which could be avoided if we remember this Great Teacher and his noble teachings. It would be a most rewarding task if whilst venerating the Buddha, we could meditate even for a short while, by focusing our minds on the great and noble qualities of the Buddha, so that we may follow in his footsteps and perfect ourselves through his inspiration.

### **Make it a daily practice**

As devotees we should make it a daily practice to pay homage to the Enlightened Teacher. Whilst doing so, it will be beneficial if efforts are made to recite some sutras. This is a noble Buddhist practice. Parents should inculcate these worthwhile and time-honoured religious practices amongst their children so that they can realise and appreciate their rich heritage.

Buddhist parents are encouraged to send their children to attend Buddhist Sunday Schools or religious classes so as to train them to be dutiful children, good citizens and to lead respectable lives.

Buddhists are encouraged to perform their religious observances and reminded not to forget or neglect their community obligations especially in their temple activities where religious services are held regularly on Full-moon and New-moon days. A visit to a temple and participating in the religious services would be considered an act of merit. The observance of the eight precepts by devotees during the Full-moon or New-moon days would be a most desirable and meritorious act. Participants in such observances are required to be clad in simple white garments and to remain in the temple for a day devoting their time to religious matters such as meditation, religious discussion, reading of religious books. This is also a golden opportunity to relax the mind and the body.

### **Festivals**

In celebrating family and social festivals, Buddhists are advised not to

conduct themselves in such a way as to violate their noble Buddhist principles, such as the Five Precepts and the noble Eight-fold Path. The Buddhist moral code must be upheld. They should not allow themselves to be intoxicated or be carried away by any base form of amusement, but should conduct such festivities in a dignified manner. In celebrating social events, it is advisable for one not to forget the spiritual aspects of the celebration. A visit to a temple to receive the blessings of the Triple Gem would be quite appropriate for any occasion.

### **Tradition and customs**

The observance of communal traditions and customs need not necessarily be discarded when one becomes a Buddhist or whilst following the teachings of the Buddha. In fact the Buddha advised his followers to respect their own traditions and customs if they are meaningful, significant and harmless. On the other hand if such practices contradict or violate the fundamental Buddhist principles, are harmful to others, or are likely to cause a nuisance, then they should be discarded, however well-intentioned they may be. Even in organising our own religious functions it is our duty to arrange such functions in an accepted dignified manner without causing a nuisance to others. This understanding is very important in the practice of our religion in a multi-racial society.

### **House-warming**

Occupying a new house or moving from one house to another is often followed by some form of celebration or merry-making. There is no objection to such a celebration but here again, apart from the social side of the celebration, it is a Buddhist tradition for the family to invite monks to recite the sacred verses or sutras for blessing and for the peace, prosperity and harmony of the household.

### **Honouring gods and deities**

In many Buddhist households occasional feasts or special festivals are held in honour of various gods in their homes or elsewhere. Whilst there is no specific objection so long as it does not violate basic Buddhist tenets yet a distinction has to be drawn to the fact that festivities of such nature do not help in our spiritual progress but only worldly material gains. These gods should be treated respectfully and remembered. We should not therefore

introduce customary or traditional practices to honour them as Buddhist practices. In accordance with the teachings of the Buddha, the correct way to remember or honour these gods and deities would be by the transference of merits to them by performing meritorious deeds and radiating our loving-kindness to them through meditation.

## **Marriage**

It has been noticed that many Buddhists tend to forget their spiritual obligations in regard to this most important and auspicious occasion of their lives – their marriage. It is customary in Buddhist countries for engaged couples to invite the monks for a blessing service. This could be performed after the wedding which normally takes place in the Registry of Marriages or at the homes of the parties concerned. It is hoped that all Buddhist couples would diligently observe and perform their religious obligations when they get married. Simple offerings of flowers, incense and candles are all that are required for the short blessing service to which the parents of both parties with their relatives and friends could be invited to participate. Such a blessing service, given on the auspicious day, would be a definite spiritual contribution to the success, peace and happiness of the newlyweds. When a couple embarks on marriage in a religious way, they are bound to have greater respect for the institution of marriage and they will turn to religion in times of stress for solace.

## **Blessing of a newborn child**

Parents of a newborn child are advised to bring it soon after its birth to a temple to receive the blessings of the Triple Gem. Offerings of flowers, incense, candles or fruits may be made at the shrine room of the temple and the resident monks invited to recite sutras for the blessing of the child. If so desired, the advice of the monks may also be sought for a suitable Buddhist name to be given to the baby. This is a cultural practice and should not be regarded as a superstition.

## **Sickness**

Sickness is part and parcel of our daily existence in this world, and we should take it in its stride. Nevertheless, in the event of sickness befalling a person, it would be advisable, apart from resorting to modern medical treatment, to also invite monks to perform religious blessing services for the

speedy recovery of the patient. Such blessings when received with a proper frame of mind will exert a considerable spiritual and psychological influence on the patient, thus accelerating his recovery. In particular when the illness happens to be associated with the attitude of the patient's mind, a blessing service by a monk would be most helpful. In instances where the belief is that an illness is being caused by some bad external influence or evil spirits, a religious blessing service would create a good psychological attitude to promote recovery. However, as understanding Buddhists, we should not surrender ourselves to the erroneous beliefs that evil spirits are the cause of our sickness. The Buddha's advice "Whenever you are physically sick, don't allow your mind also to be sick" is indeed very true. In accordance with this advice, we must be guided by our intelligence and common sense to seek proper medical attention for our illness rather than succumb to ill-founded superstition.

## **Funeral**

Man is mortal and death is to be expected. However, very few people can accept the separation or the fear of what happens after death. That is why in most cultures a funeral is considered as a sad and solemn occasion. A Buddhist funeral should also be a solemn occasion.

Contrary to popular beliefs, the noisy, elaborate and sometimes showy or grand funeral processions which cost thousands of dollars and which are often regarded as normal Buddhist practices are not Buddhist practices at all. They are just the perpetuation of age-old customs and traditions handed down from past generations. When viewing such a procession people of other faiths often wonder whether it is a procession celebrating some happy festival or a solemn funeral. Although Buddhism does not object to the perpetuating of such practices, so long as they do not conflict with the teachings of the Buddha, it is felt that wasteful, uneconomical and unnecessary practices which are not beneficial to the departed or the living should be discouraged or discarded. For example, a traditional practice is the burning of joss-paper and symbolic paper houses, designed for the benefit of a deceased person. This is definitely un-Buddhistic but if it helps one psychologically to minimise one's sorrow, it is harmless, but one should not go to extremes or believe it can help the deceased in any way.

The rites attached to a Buddhist funeral should be simple, solemn, dignified and meaningful. In many countries Buddhists monks are invited to the house

of the deceased to chant sutras prior to a funeral. Such services are rendered voluntarily by Buddhist monks. The offering of flowers and the burning of joss-sticks and candles are normal accepted religious practices on such occasions.

On the day of the funeral, the services of Buddhist monks would again be called for to perform the requisite religious service at the home and at the cemetery. It has been the practice to offer all types of cooked food, including roasted pigs and chickens, as symbolic offerings for the deceased. This again is just a traditional practice and it is not encouraged in Buddhism because it involves the killing of innocent animals. The slaughtering of innocent animals to serve as sacrificial offerings to the departed ones is definitely against the teachings of the compassionate Buddha and should be completely eradicated. Simple floral tributes together with the burning of incense and candles would suffice as symbolic offerings.

### **Burial and cremation**

Many Buddhists have asked whether a deceased person should be buried or cremated. Buddhism is flexible on this issue. There is no hard and fast rule, although in some Buddhist countries, cremation is the accepted practice. The choice of one method or another should be left principally to the last wish of the deceased or the next-of-kin.

In the modern concept however, cremation as a hygienic form of disposal of the body, should be encouraged. With the improvement in health standards and the so-called population explosion, usable land is becoming scarce hence it is advisable to resort to cremation and allow the use of valuable land for the living instead of crowding it with innumerable tombstones.

Whether for burial or cremation, it has been observed that certain people put valuable personal belongings of the deceased into the coffin with the hope and belief that the departed one would in some way benefit by it. It is a fallacy to expect that the burial or burning of such belongings would have any merit at all. Instead of putting such things inside a coffin or a crematorium it would be much more practical and sensible to donate the useful personal belongings, such as clothing, shoes and many other things to the poor and needy or to some charitable institution. Any help to the poor and needy is an act of merit which benefits the living and the dead.

## **Disposal of ashes**

The question has often been asked as to what should be done with the ashes of a deceased person who has been cremated. There is no hard and fast rule as to its disposal. It could be kept in an urn and enshrined in a pagoda specially erected in some temple for such a purpose or it could be kept elsewhere at the sole discretion of the next-of-kin. In some cases, after a short religious service, the ashes are strewn into the sea or a river.

## **Honouring the dead**

It has been mentioned elsewhere that floral tributes are an accepted form of paying respects to the memory of a deceased person. However, even in this connection, things could be overdone in that on occasions we see thousands of dollars' worth of wreaths being piled up on a grave, only to be cleared away as rubbish in the next day or two. To prevent such waste, a much more acceptable and desirable practice has been adopted by the more enlightened people of today. The practice is that in the place of wreaths, sweetmeats or joss-papers, the next-of-kin make it known that friends or relatives desirous of honouring the memory of the deceased could make donations to certain established religious or charitable institutions in the name of the departed person. In some instances, a particular institution with which the deceased person had been actively associated during his lifetime, has been named as the beneficiary. This change of attitude is most sensible and welcome. It is strongly recommended that such a practice be adopted by all our enlightened Buddhists.

The honour and respect due to a deceased person should normally in the first place, be given by the immediate family of the deceased. This honour and respect could easily be accorded by the children or the next-of-kin in helping to prepare the body for the casket. Unfortunately in many instances, due apparently to misguided superstition, needless fear or prejudice, this last duty or respect has seldom been carried out by those concerned. Instead undertakers have been employed to cleanse and dress the dead body. This should not be the case. Prejudice and superstition should be removed. Honour and respect must be accorded to the deceased. Many people also do not like to bring the body of a deceased person home if he died elsewhere. This is not a Buddhist practice and there is no harm at all in bringing a body home for the final rites to be performed and for people to pay their last

respects.

### **Memorial services**

Conducting of memorial religious services in temples or at homes is another form of honouring a deceased person. This could be followed by another act of merit by the offering of alms to the monks and to needy people. Memorial services are normally held on the 7th day after the death of a person and again on the 3rd month or the 100th day. Thereafter they may be held on the anniversary of the date of death. For those who can afford it, donations may be made to the poor or to charitable institutions in honour of a deceased person, or religious books may be published in the memory of the deceased for distribution to enlighten the public on the sublime teachings of the Buddha.