

## **SOME BASIC CONCEPTS OF BUDDHISM**

By Ven. Maha Prayuddha Payutto

Some people say Buddhism is not a religion; it is a system of philosophy. Others say it is neither a religion nor philosophy, but only a way of life. Still others say Buddhism is both a religion and a philosophy. Truly, Buddhism can be either a religion or a philosophy, or it may be neither of them. It may even be called a science, a psychology, a way of life, and so on. To apply any of these terms may be either right or wrong according to what we mean by such terms. In other words, it depends on the usage and implication of the term. However, it does not matter what we call Buddhism. It matters only why Buddhism is called so, that is to say, what Buddhism means. To decide what Buddhism is and is not, let us consider some aspects of Buddhism.

Buddhism in essence is truth. Truth means the true nature of things. Things especially include the various facts of life. These facts of phenomena are subject to the law of nature. And by the law of nature is meant the law of cause and effect. This law governs all phenomena, both physical and mental. When this law is discovered, truth is realised, and one sees all things as they really are. Here is Buddhism discovered.

Once one sees things as they really are, one knows how one should treat them or what attitude one should have towards all things. He who knows the law of cause and effect knows how to avoid the undesired effects and to produce the desired ones through his choice of action toward the causes. In other words, he knows how to apply this knowledge of the law to his everyday life. It is the teaching on this applied knowledge that is called the ethics of Buddhism. It is the teaching on how to treat all things wisely and how to choose to act for the good both of oneself and of others. It is intended for those who have not realised truth for themselves. It serves as a course of training towards the realisation of truth.

Any person who discovers the truth and makes it known to the world is called a Buddha, an Enlightened or Awakened one. His position is that of the discoverer and teacher. He cannot realise the truth for anyone else. He can only point out the way to the realisation of truth. Truth is to be realised by everyone for oneself. But a man can follow what his teacher teaches him, that is to say, he must undergo the training himself. This is how a Buddha can help man. But he can in no way save a man. Everyone saves his own self. Once the training course is completed, one gets to the goal. One realises the truth for oneself and thereby becomes a sort of Buddha oneself.

Therefore, in order to realise the truth each person must make an effort for himself. One is responsible for oneself. Throughout the training course or, as it is called, the path, there is no intervention from outside. There is very much for him to do, but all are lessons for training. There is nothing which can be called a commandment. Even a precept is merely a training rule which the trainee takes upon himself by his own choice. The trainees can practise the teaching at various levels according to their maturity. In sum, the course or the path consists of three main parts: morality, concentration and wisdom. Wisdom is the key virtue of Buddhism, because it is only through the knowledge of things as they really are, that one realises the truth, has a perfectly right attitude to life and to the world, and becomes free. One has purified oneself and gained purity.

Freedom and purity are the automatic outcome of perfect wisdom. Because through perfect wisdom, the knowledge of the truth, one knows everything as it really is, and as a result, has no attachment to it. Selfishness is completely overcome. One becomes independent and is not tainted by anything in the world. Now one is free and purified. With the mind clear through purity, the trained one looks upon the suffering beings with compassion. He accordingly tries to help his fellow beings out of sorrow from which he has been freed to attain the state of purity and freedom as he. His attitude to life and to the world is independent, detachment and freedom, while to his fellow beings it is love and boundless compassion. He who has reached freedom reaches the goal. He becomes a perfect man, the man who has reached freedom reaches the goal. He becomes a perfect man, the man who has compassion, wisdom and purity as his main characteristics.

As the goal can be reached only through true knowledge, the Buddhist attitude to the world is the acceptance of truth at every level of the training. A Buddhist must face bravely any fact of life whether desirable or undesirable and try to solve his problems through right concern with its cause; he must never deceive himself. This is his attitude to life and to the world.

To himself he is responsible for his own salvation. He must develop the sense of duty. He must be dutiful and earnest. There is no Being sitting in judgement of his right or wrong. It is the natural law of cause and effect that governs his action. He makes his own destiny. As all beings are facing common problems of life and wandering together through the same cycle of life, they are friends and relatives. Though one cannot realise the truth and gain freedom for another, one can guide and encourage others. The more one has made progress along the Path, the more can one render help to one's fellow beings.

If Buddhism is a religion, it is a religion with no God, no Saviour, no prayer, no priest and no commandment. If it is a system of philosophy, it is the one which teaches no-dependence on reason, but on direct knowledge of life experiences. But now you can decide for yourself what Buddhism is, and what it is not.

Dhammaduta.