

THE PRACTICE OF THE DHAMMA AMONG BUDDHIST FAMILIES AND INDIVIDUALS

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Although many people call themselves Buddhists, a large number of them merely accept it as a tradition. They display a gross lack of knowledge of the dhamma and thus become easy prey to others who try to influence them by introducing various tactics in the name of religion. This is indeed a pity because the Buddha's sublime teachings, if correctly understood and followed, could become the basis for a wholesome life. Contrary to what many believe, the Buddha did not condemn family life. Rather, He clearly showed how one could live the life of a householder in a manner which is both spiritually and materially satisfying. Young Malaysian Buddhists need guidance on how to lead a normal family life as Buddhists within our own Malaysian context.

Ed.

It is indeed heartening to note the growing number of young Malaysians who are becoming aware of their Buddhist roots and who are taking serious steps to study the Dhamma. Modern society is confused and afraid. Modern youths do not know which way they are to turn. Why is this so? Most Malaysian Buddhists are the descendants of immigrants who came from China, Sri Lanka, Thailand and even Burma, anywhere from five hundred to fifty years ago. They have been torn from their traditional roots which were nurtured by the Teachings of the Buddha, torn from the cultural roots which grew around the Buddha-word, and made to accept languages and ways of life which are different from what they had been a part for thousands of years. Most of the immigrants who came to this country were poor and ignorant. They knew little of their own cultures or religion. They only knew one thing: and that was to work hard. They thought that one way for their children to succeed was to send them to English schools. We cannot deny that in some ways this was beneficial. As a result of an English education the children of these immigrants were able to assure themselves of a good materialistic life. But they paid a price. And that price was giving up the traditional ways of their ancestors. They were lured away from their own history, art and culture; they were lured away from their own Buddhist religion to the aggressive religions of the colonial powers. The result was a generation of so-called "English Educated" youths who were, like Yusof in Kassim Ahmad's "A Common Story", more familiar with Beethoven and Bach than the music of their ancestors. They knew about Original Sin and

Heaven and Hell but they have never heard of Dependent Origination or the 31 Planes of Existence. Externally they were oriental, internally they have been completely whitewashed.

With independence and Nationalism, the children of the immigrants cut off their political ties with the lands of their forefathers and gave their total commitment to this country. They assimilated the National Language and took on many thought habits pertaining to the Malaysian nation. But this nation is built on the philosophy of Unity in Diversity. Thoughtful youths who are descendants of the migrants are beginning to realize that they are heirs to rich cultures which go back thousands of years, that if they understood these, their own lives would be enriched and made more meaningful while at the same time they could contribute to the building of a vibrant nation, strong in its past and rich in its future. Like the Americans, they believe that the better they understand their inner cultural and psychological makeup, the more stable they will be.

As a result there has been in recent years a tremendous re-awakening of interest in the Buddha Dhamma, because the Buddha Dhamma has been responsible for so much richness in the cultures of Asia. Young Buddhists are becoming aware that the mishmash of practices which have been practised by their ignorant forebears and which have been ridiculed as “Buddhist” by the missionaries of other religions are no more Buddhist than American spaghetti is Chinese noodles. There may be a connection, but it is so far removed as to be irrelevant.

Young Buddhists are much concerned to know about the Dhamma exactly as the Buddha preached it. They want to practise the Dhamma as it is relevant to Malaysian society today. In this way they know they will maintain their cultural links which grew from a strong Buddhist influence and live noble lives according to the Teachings which have contemporary relevance.

In the past twenty years or so a generation of young people has grown up who, because they understand the Buddha Dhamma in its true essence, could withstand the efforts of the missionaries of other religions to convert them and to further tear them away from thousands of years of culture and thinking. They form to my mind the first generation of truly “Made in Malaysia” Buddhists. They are Buddhists who have no other home than Malaysia, whose cultural and political loyalties are entirely with Malaysia but who are nevertheless proud of their cultural and religious links with some of the greatest civilizations the world has known.

This first generation are mostly young men and women who are becoming parents of the next generation of Buddhists. Our task today is to study how we can best assist them to become good Buddhist parents in the Malaysian context. How can we bring the Dhamma into the Malaysian Buddhist home?

Contrary to what many missionaries of other religions have said about Buddhism, it is neither pessimistic nor life-negating. The Buddha never ridiculed or denounced the family system. To be a good Buddhist does not mean we have to run to the jungle and sit under a tree and meditate with mosquitoes swarming around us. Among the Buddha's closest associates were King Pasenadi and the millionaire Anathapindika who lived lives of the householder. They were immensely rich and powerful but they were not attached to the world. They used their temporal wealth and power for the good of mankind. Theirs is the example we can follow.

The Buddhist path towards salvation is the gradual path, not only in this one lifetime, but over countless lifetimes. Remember, even the Buddha had repeatedly gone from existence to existence in his quest of emancipation. We can do the same.

Ever mindful of the different categories and spiritual advancement of humanity, the Buddha advocated two lifestyles – the Vinaya rules for the spiritually advanced who have turned their backs on the world and become Wayfarers and the rest who are still tied to the responsibilities and cares of the mundane world. It was the second category the Buddha had in mind when He preached the *Sigalovada Sutta* and the *Parabhava Sutta*. Indeed not only in these but in numerous other suttas the Buddha shows us how we can live nobly, gently and with dignity like the proverbial lotus which has its roots in the mud but which rises clear, unpolluted above the water.

The Dhamma is the Universal Truth embodying the Universal Law. Anyone who understands this law and lives by it is a 'good Buddhist'. (Actually there is no such thing as a "Buddhist" – the Buddha himself never used the term. A Buddhist therefore is one who lives by the Dhamma – he can be a Christian, Muslim, Hindu, even an atheist or agnostic, but if he observes the five precepts, he is a "Buddhist").

The responsibilities of a good Buddhist who is a house-holder are listed out in the famous story of Sigalovada. The Buddha's technique here is an example of why Buddhism came to be so readily accepted wherever it went and why Buddhism has always been so tolerant, adapting, never discarding anything that is good. In this story a young man was observed by the Buddha, prostrating himself in the six directions. When the Buddha asked the young man why he was performing the ritual he replied that he did not know its significance but that his late father had told him to do it and as dutiful son he was merely obeying orders. It is noteworthy that there are many 20th Century Sigalavas in Malaysia who practise age old rituals simply because their parents did it! However, the Buddha did not abuse the young man and call him foolish. He instead gave a new meaning to the ritual, thus encouraging the son's filial duties

and at the same time making him behave intelligently. The Buddha then lists the duties of a householder towards holy men, teachers, parents, spouses, children and employees.

In this sutta, the Buddha emphasizes the inter-dependence and mutual responsibilities of members of the nuclear family, the extended family and the social unit.

As time went on and as Buddhism spread and developed cultures in lands as far remote as Japan, China, Tibet, Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka and even for a long time in South-east Asia. His Teachings gave rise to definite cultural patterns regarding family life. These practices were never laid down as rules by the Buddha himself, but they are based on his teachings and were developed out of the existing beliefs and geographical needs of the lands in which they took shape.

In Asian lands generally temple worship is a very common practice and we should perhaps lay emphasis on this practice as the first step towards developing “Family Devotions”. In the *Mangala Sutta* the Buddha includes “associating with the wise” and “opportune hearing of the Dhamma” as among the Highest Blessings. The temple is the place where members of the Sangha, the living custodians of the Buddhaword, reside and it is here that they make the Dhamma heard. So wise parents should make it a habit to bring their children to the temple regularly.

One of the reasons why other religions are so strong is because their leaders make regular visits to their places of worship obligatory for continued membership. Buddhists characteristically would refuse to lay down rules regarding this, but as in the case of Sigala we can adapt the rule and explain the benefits to be derived. And in the case of Malaysian Buddhists the benefits can be quite extra-ordinary: To name only a few:

- (a) The temple can be a social centre for spiritually inclined people. They can renew and strengthen their resolve to improve themselves spiritually;
- (b) By associating with the monks, by observing their sense of calm and peace, we too can learn of the benefits of non-attachment;
- (c) Children can mix with other children whose parents are good Buddhists;
- (d) Young people can meet suitable marriage partners;
- (e) Refresh one’s jaded nerves by temporarily shutting off the noise and competition of the outside world by spending time in the cool and quiet of the temple premises;

(f) Enjoy the simple beauties of flowers, oil lamps, incense, bells and chanting.

After the temple, the home is the next place where a family can gain strength in its unity and this unity can be gained through practising the Dhamma. A family which constantly practises adherence to the five precepts will be a dignified family where harsh speech especially is guarded against. Parents who live by the Dhamma cannot help but bring up their children according to the Dhamma. And what better insurance can we have against the harsh realities of the world than by living according to the Dhamma. “He who lives in the Dhamma, is protected by the Dhamma”.

Earlier I have stated that modern society is confused and afraid. Young people, especially in urban areas live with large numbers of other human beings but they are lonely. Lonely, because they have largely lost the art of communicating with their fellow beings. This loneliness is partly caused by great changes in society that have taken place recently. One of the prices we have paid for our admirable success, economically and materially is the destruction of the extended family and the development of the nuclear family. Young people in cities are faced with many problems, chief among them being inadequate housing. This has forced them to live in very small apartments which do not encourage grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts to live together. Such type of living in nuclear units has contributed largely to the loneliness I mentioned earlier. It has cut off individuals from those who could be most supportive and understanding in times of stress and need.

This phenomenon is tied up with our discarding traditional cultural systems in the name of progress. Confucian principles had for thousands of years inculcated respect for elders among the Chinese. This was further strengthened by the Buddha’s teachings which clearly emphasized the need for the development of strong family bonds and mutual love and respect. When we discarded these we found suddenly that we had nowhere to turn and we became confused and afraid.

If we are going to help fellow Malaysian Buddhists to live a happier life, then I say we must go back to our own roots. This does not mean going back to behaving “exactly” as our ancestors did. This would be both impractical and undesirable. What we need is to study what made culture strong and individuals happy in the past and apply these principles to modern living.

One way of doing this is to return to the family unit and reduce as much as we can the tendency to encourage individuality. Families must be encouraged to DO THINGS TOGETHER. With the temple as a focal point Buddhist families can organize many activities which will encourage the getting together of uncles and aunts, cousins, grandparents, brothers, sisters

and so on. “A family ‘that prays’ together sticks together”. The nuclear family unit should be encouraged to pray together, study the Dhamma together, live their daily lives according to the Dhamma, practising loving-kindness and avoiding harsh speech. A family which lives like this will produce children who will understand and practise metta, karuna, mudita and upekkha, when they grow up. Such Buddhist individuals will neither lack the right companionship or the principles of good citizenship. Society should be built from the nuclear unit to the extended family and then to the community as a whole.

Of late a large number of young Malaysian Buddhists have set up small Buddhist Associations in towns and villages across the nation. They organize religious talks by visiting speakers. In this way individuals and families all over the country are able to listen to the Dhamma. Also larger organizations are publishing books and pamphlets for sale and free distribution. All this bodes well for Buddhism. The aim is not to seek converts but to educate Buddhists on the teachings of the Enlightened One and to help individuals live a noble life with grace and dignity.

