

WHAT BUDDHISTS BELIEVE

By Ven. Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda

Although there are about 3 million Buddhists in this country a very small portion of this number can call themselves true Buddhists. This is because most of the Chinese who constitute a major portion of these 3 millions have incorporated Taoist customs and traditions and/or Confucianism and its principles into their way of life. They are even ignorant of basic Buddhist practices, principles and beliefs. They believe, for example, that the mere process of participating in traditional rituals will purify their minds. This, of course, is not true. As the Buddha once said, "If my mind is impure, how could bathing in the river Bahula make it pure? And if my mind is already pure, why do I need to bathe in the river Bahula?" The river Bahula was supposed to possess the power of washing away all the sins of those who bathed in it.

The reasons for this stage of ignorance among these Buddhists are not far to seek. There is a lack of proper guidance and understanding of the religion, occasioned by an acute shortage of Buddhist monks to teach the religion. There is very little proper Buddhist instruction in schools and learning institutions. Only recently has instruction in Buddhism been introduced in our schools. There is scanty literature on Buddhism available to the public, and whatever is available depends upon the generosity and charitable inclination of devotees who print pamphlets and booklets for free distribution. Such devout religious-minded people are not many these days. The whole atmosphere of spirituality seems to be quiet and still – not vibrant enough for the wide propagation of Buddhist beliefs and practices.

In such a still, stifled atmosphere of ignorance "What Buddhists Believe" comes like a welcome waft of fresh and refreshing breeze in spring – invigorating and indispensable. It disperses and dispels the cobwebs of doubt and disbelief which conceal the true nature and spirit of a religion that is TRUTH itself, and reveals to you what Buddhists truly believe.

The book contains 254 pages and has 96 articles on various aspects of Buddhism dealing with current issues. It is my belief that the answers to many of your questions can be found in it. Published by the Buddhist Missionary Society, it is priced at \$5.00 per copy.

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Ed.

There is much historical evidence to prove that Buddhism was, at one time, one of the main religions in Malaysia up to the 14th century. In the present century, Buddhism came into being by virtue of the Chinese, Sinhalese and Thai immigrants coming to this country.

Although Islam is the state religion of Malaysia today, other religionists are free to practise their respective religions. In this respect, we must be grateful to the Government for the religious tolerance enjoyed by all. We hope and pray that this freedom and religious harmony would prevail in this country so that each and every person will be able to live peacefully and be of some service to the country and nation.

It is estimated that there are about three million Buddhists in Malaysia. Yet, owing to lack of proper organization, guidance and understanding, there is no cohesion or solidarity in the day-to-day practices of this religion. Without proper co-ordinating guidance, diverse practices are prevalent. Many people have taken advantage of this situation and commercialised Buddhist practices for their own material gain. They have introduced all sorts of superstitious practices, misleading the innocent devotees. Such practices have made a mockery of our religion in the eyes of the educated people today. All these are due to a lack of understanding of this Noble religion as taught by the Buddha. It is ironical but true that there are people who profess this religion and who even claim themselves to be so-called leaders and yet they cannot even appreciate the basic principles of this religion. They have not realised what this religion stands for. Ignoring the Noble Teachings of the Master, many baseless beliefs and ill-founded traditions have been blindly incorporated into the practices of this Noble Teachings of the Buddha. Unfortunately, some of those so-called educated people also tried to introduce certain meaningless practices, by taking advantage of human emotions. They do this with an ulterior motive for their personal gain. Many of the practices are alien to the basic Teachings of the Buddha. Instead of doing some service to the Buddhist Community, they create more confusion.

Some people do not even know that there are certain precepts or principles for Buddhists to observe. Many consider their temples as places for the performance of rites and rituals only, without bothering to introduce the Noble Teachings of the Buddha. On the other hand, many devotees also simply satisfy themselves with only such devotional aspects without considering the Teachings of the Buddha.

The malpractices prevalent in the name of Buddhism have created ample opportunities for ardent missionaries of other religious denominations to criticise and belittle this religion, thus drawing away many of our followers into

their faiths. Such malpractices have also caused many of our own Buddhists to be reluctant or ashamed to call themselves Buddhists.

This is a sad state of affairs. This has been brought about by some misguided and selfish religious workers. Sometimes for personal gain or for some illicit motives or due to ignorance, certain ill-intentioned people approach our Monks with financial inducements for charms or talismans. It is unfortunate that some of our Monks, being human, have fallen for the inducements thus lowering themselves as charm peddlers and bringing down the dignity and stature of the Monkhood. Members of the Sangha have a very high responsibility in upholding the spirit, practices and Teachings of the Buddha and in order to maintain the honour and respect that is due to them, they should conduct themselves in a manner that should be above reproach.

When their knowledge of the Buddha and their understanding of the Noble Truth slowly start to deteriorate, they begin to interpret the Dhamma according to their way of thinking. However, it is still not too late to find out the basic Teachings of the Master.

What is the purpose of professing Buddhism if we are unable to practise it in our daily life? We must uphold our religious principles. The Buddha's message of non-violence and peace, of love and compassion, of tolerance and understanding, of truth and wisdom, of respect and regard for all life, of freedom from selfishness, hatred and violence, delivered over 2500 years ago, stands forever as the Truth. It is an eternal message. Unfortunately many of those so-called followers of the Buddha were unworthy descendants of that Great Master. He was a Teacher who was superior, and much ahead of His time. He was a master who taught us what we should do if we want to recover our balance, our harmony, our love and our friendship. We have broken up into different sects, into different communities, into different nations and we fight and destroy one another.

We are in a world torn by strife and hatred. What did the Buddha say to such people? "Overcome anger by non-anger, overcome hatred by love." Can we do it? Are we putting into practice the advice given by Him? If a man does not practise it, he is unworthy to call himself a follower of the Buddha. According to the Buddha those who follow such advice are His real followers. Simply by worshipping or praying to the Buddha, one cannot become a real follower.

We must develop the 'Bodhi' heart of wisdom, a heart of love, a heart of understanding. If we are to so develop ourselves, then we should be contributing our share to make the world a better place for all of us to live in. It is sad that although the Buddha's Teachings are more than capable of

maintaining real peace and happiness, certain Buddhist states are still unable to work together in concert and in harmony. We are responsible for everything. We have to cleanse our hearts, scrutinise our own nature, and determine ourselves to practise and uphold the Buddha's Noble Teachings both in spirit and in the letter. We should make ourselves true Buddhists. Then the world will be a better place to live in.

It is odd and yet true that many people do not know which religion they belong to. There are some who say "I think I am a Buddhist". This shows the extent to which they have neglected the Buddhist way of life. Even other religionists very often ask "Why don't Buddhist parents take the trouble to teach Buddhism to their children?", "Why don't Buddhists try to introduce their religion?" Surely, every Buddhist should be ashamed to hear such remarks.

It is a well-known fact that in many countries, people are prepared to waste their money and their valuable time on meaningless practices in the name of religion. Yet how many Buddhists take the initiative to do some meaningful services, such as establishing schools, hospitals, orphanages and homes for the aged? How many Buddhists are willing to contribute to these social activities that serve the public and permit public resources to be utilised for better purposes?

Many so-called Buddhists would be prepared to spend thousands of dollars on superstitious practices to glorify themselves but are reluctant to donate a few dollars towards Buddhist religious schools, libraries or towards the printing of a Buddhist book to enlighten those ignorant of the Noble Teachings of the Buddha. Buddhism is an excellent religion which has a rational doctrine and a deep philosophy, psychology and morals that should appeal to modern intellectuals throughout the world. But the manner in which many Buddhists practise this religion has not been compatible with the Noble Teachings of the Buddha. Some who profess this religion are not understanding people. They have very conservative ideas. They do not welcome the introduction of modern methods in introducing Buddhism so that it would appeal to the modern mind; nor are they willing to discard certain unnecessary practices which are considered out-moded and even a nuisance. This narrow-mindedness and stubbornness can hinder the progress of Buddhism.

It is true that there is nothing for us to change in the Teachings of the Buddha since He has revealed the Ultimate Truth. But there are many practices that we can change to conform to our modern way of living and our modern system of education. We must understand that many of those customs and traditions practised by Buddhists today were not introduced by the Buddha but were created by the people themselves from time to time, in different countries according to their way of life, traditions, customs, cultures and manners and

should be changed according to the changing needs and conditions of our environment. Buddhism in Malaysia is a mixture of many traditional beliefs and practices.

Chinese, Sinhalese, Thais and Indians follow this religion according to their own traditions and customs. While practising their religion in their own national style and custom, they must also try to realise to what extent their practices are in conformity with the basic Teachings of the Buddha. It is pleasing to note however, that despite the divergent practices, there has never been any serious conflict among these various communities and sects. On the other hand, there is evidence of tolerance and understanding in that on many occasions, the various communal groups got together to perform common religious services and festivals.

It was only a few years ago through the influence of a handful of dedicated monks who have come from overseas and who have devoted their time and labour in propagation work that there has been a distinct awareness amongst our local Buddhists of the need for a proper organisation to look after propagation work and to guide the masses to a better understanding of this religion. Such awareness resulted in the Buddhist Missionary Society coming into being in 1962. This Society has published several hundred thousands of booklets and pamphlets to enlighten the public on the Teachings of the Buddha. One of the most popular publications of the Society is this booklet entitled "WHAT BUDDHISTS BELIEVE". Through this medium, thousands of Buddhists have been able to understand and appreciate the real Teachings of the Buddha and the Buddhist attitude towards various aspects of life. As a result of this awakened understanding, there is a great demand for our publications by the public. Almost every day the society receives requests for this booklet. To meet this demand, we humbly take pleasure in presenting this revised and expanded third edition as part of our efforts to serve the public in promoting a clearer and better understanding and appreciation of the basic tenets and practices of Buddhism. We feel sure that our efforts in this direction will meet with the active support of all right-thinking Buddhists.

OUR AIM IS NOT TO SEEK CONVERTS, but to explain the liberty, simplicity and utility of this pristine religion so that it should not be misjudged, misunderstood or, most importantly, practised wrongly.

This booklet is intended to clarify certain doubts, misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the Buddha's Teaching and is not intended to deal with the deep, philosophical aspects of Buddhism. Whilst there may be some critical analysis in this book regarding certain beliefs and practices prevalent in other religions, we assure our readers that there is no intention whatsoever of

belittling others or to hurt the feelings of the followers of other religions. As Buddhists we respect other religions and we expect others to respect our religion. We are prepared to work in close harmony with others for the peace, harmony, stability and religious life of this country where we live.