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Buddhist Observances and Practices

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by

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Buddhist Observances and Practices

Standpoint

Buddhism is a system of moral, mental and intellectual training proclaimed and laid down by Gotama Buddha. It involves neither an exclusively intellectual or rationalistic way of life nor a way wholly devoted to ritualistic observances, but embraces both the intellectual and emotional aspect of man's life—his head and heart.

Looked at it from this point of view Buddhism is not, as some hasty critics would conclude, a mere philosophical speculation, a doctrine of metaphysical and logical abstractions bereft of practical value or importance. The Buddhist way of life, the Buddhist method of grasping the highest truth, awakening from ignorance to full knowledge, does not depend on mere academic knowledge or purely intellectual development, but on a doctrine which has its practical counterpart, and it is this happy combination of theory and practice (*ratio atque usus*) that leads the follower to

enlightenment and final deliverance.

The Buddha's attitude towards life is not merely intellectual but practical. It is a realisation of that which is good and beneficial. It makes for ethical perfection as well as mental emancipation. This implies a cultivation of good emotions and an abandonment of the bad. The emotional aspect too should be developed though that alone does not lead us to the final goal. Good emotions should always be blended with right understanding. They should go arm in arm.

It is now quite clear that in the interplay of doctrine and discipline (*dhamma-vinaya*) or knowledge and conduct (*vijjā-carana*) the two constitute a single process of growth. As hand washes hand and foot washes foot so does wisdom and wisdom conduct. [1]

Rituals, the observance of set forms or rites have a place in almost all religions. These rituals are more on the emotional side. However, one has to be careful so as not to overdo these observances; for then one tends to become obsessed with emotions. There is the risk of one becoming a victim of maudlin sentimentalism. One should not go to extremes in anything but should follow the middle path so well extolled by the Buddha.

It should always be borne in mind that the Buddha

was not a Creator God, an incarnation of God, a Brahma, or a supernatural being. He was a human being who achieved the highest mental and intellectual attainments open to men. Unaided by any teacher, human or divine, he reached the acme of purity and was perfect in the best qualities of the human nature. He was an embodiment of compassion and wisdom (*karuṇā* and *paññā*) which became the two guiding principles in his dispensation (*sāsana*). Through personal experience he understood the supremacy of man, and attributed all his attainments and achievements to human effort and intelligence. The Buddha never claimed to be a saviour who tried to save 'souls' by means of a revealed religion.

No Mediators

It may also be observed that according to Buddhism wrongdoing is not regarded as a '*sin*,' for that word is foreign to the teaching of the Buddha. There is no such thing as 'breaking the Buddha's laws,' for he was not a law-giver, an arbitrator or potentate who punished the bad and rewarded the good deeds of beings. The doer of the deed is responsible for his own actions; he suffers or enjoys the consequences of deeds, and it is his concern either to do good or to do bad.

Again Buddhist monks are not priests who perform rites or sacrifice. They do not administer and pronounce absolution. A Buddhist monk cannot and does not stand as an intermediary between men and 'supernatural' powers for Buddhism teaches that each individual is solely responsible for his own liberation. Hence there is no need to win the favour of a mediating priest. You yourselves should strive on; the Buddhas only show the path. [2] The path is the same Ancient Path trodden and pointed out by the Enlightened Ones of all ages. The attitude of the Buddha towards his followers is like that of an understanding and compassionate teacher or a physician. Hence there is no praying and petitioning to an external agency for deliverance. This is the Buddhist standpoint.

The Buddha Image

In Buddhism there is what is called Buddha *vandana* or reverencing the Buddha. The Buddha, however, is not in existence to receive the homage of others. Then why pay reverence and obeisance to one who is not in existence? 'Why do Buddhists go before a Buddha Image, a Bodhi tree, a stupa or pagoda or some such object, worship them and pray?', one may ask.

Well, here there is no praying to or worshipping of inanimate objects. Before the image, the Buddhists are only recalling to mind the greatness of their guide and teacher whom the image represents. The highest worship is that paid to the best of men, those great and daring spirits who have, with their wide and penetrating grasp of reality, wiped out ignorance and rooted out defilements from their minds. The men who saw Truth are true helpers, but Buddhists do not pray to them. They only reverence in gratitude and admiration the revellers of truth for having pointed out the path to true happiness and deliverance.

In this act of reverence it is the devotee who gains and benefits. His thoughts, speech and deeds become pure when he thinks of the virtues of the Buddha and concentrates on them, he gains inspiration and moral support to emulate the Master. It is a helpful meditation.

We honour our departed ones. Why do people lay wreaths at a war memorial? Why do they give pride of place on the walls of their homes to pictures of their dear departed parents and other beloved ones? Do they respect the picture or the frame? Certainly not. Their honour and homage is in the name of the dead one. So when a Buddhist approaches a Buddha image which is an object of meditation, and thinks of the teacher in respectful admiration, are we justified in

calling that act of reverence useless idolatry?

It must, however, be mentioned that in the case of developed individuals, symbolic worship is hardly necessary. They could visualise the greatness of the Buddha without the aid of a symbol which is really necessary and even vital in the case of those who are not advanced in mental development.

However, it is not only the emotional type but even high intellectuals and great thinkers who have gained inspiration from a Buddha Image.

Jawaharlal Nehru in his autobiography writes:

“At Anuradhapura (in Ceylon), I liked greatly an old seated statue of the Buddha. A year later, when I was in Dehra Dun Gaol, a friend in Ceylon sent me a picture of this statue, and I kept it on my little table in my cell. It became a precious companion for me, and the strong calm features of the Buddha’s statue soothed and gave me strength and helped me to overcome many a period of depression.” [3]

Count Kayserling in *Travel Diary of a Philosopher* writes: “I know nothing more grand in this world than the figure of the Buddha. It is the perfect embodiment of spirituality in the visible domain.”

Offering of Flowers

It is a common sight in Buddhist lands to see the devotees, both young and old, and even the very babes, offering flowers before an image or some such sacred object, lighting an oil lamp or burning incense in the name of the Buddha.

Children take delight in gathering flowers and arranging them in order, before they offer them in the name of the Buddha. While learning to appreciate the aesthetic aspect of things, they also learn to be generous, to let go, and above all to respect the *Buddha*, the Teacher; the *Dhamma*, the Teaching; and the *Sangha*, the Taught.

Now when a Buddhist offers flowers, or lights a lamp, and ponders over the supreme qualities of the Buddha, he is not praying to anyone; these are not rites, rituals or acts of worship. The flowers that soon fade, and the flames that die down speak to him of the impermanency (*anicca*) of all conditioned things. [4] The image serves him as an object for concentration, for meditation; he gains inspiration and endeavours to emulate the qualities of the Master. Those who do not understand the significance of this simple offering hastily conclude: 'this is idol worship.' Nothing could be more untrue.

Buddhist Marriage Ceremonies

There are no marriage ceremonies in Buddhism as we find in other religions. The Buddhist monks are not priests who solemnise marriages. That being so, they do not take part in marriage ceremonies. In Ceylon, those who attach importance to traditional customs, often invite a layman, generally an elderly relative well versed in ceremonies, to perform the marriage ceremony by reciting devotional versos to evoke the blessings of the 'Triple Gem,' the *Buddha*, the *Dhamma*, the *Sangha*, on the couple to be married.

At some wedding ceremonies a bevy of girls dressed in their national white costume recite together benedictive verses in Pāli, known as the *Jayamaṅgala Gāthā*, which describe some of the outstanding virtues of the Buddha. Often a few days before the actual marriage ceremony, monks are invited to the homes of the bride and the bridegroom for a *dāna* or midday meal. After the offerings, the monks will recite the Suttas, discourses of the Buddha, especially the Maṅgala Sutta, a discourse on the Blessings, and one of them will deliver a abort sermon by way of exhortation, citing examples of happily married lives recorded in the Buddhist texts. Most popular among these examples is the married life of *Nakulapitā* and

Nakulamātā recounted below.

Some Buddhists prefer to visit a temple or monastery immediately after their wedding ceremony to obtain the blessings of the Buddhist monks, who recite the *Parittas* or discourses of protection (see below). The couple also receives a short exhortation dealing with the reciprocal duties of the husband and wife as explained by the Buddha in the Sigāla Sutta, [5] and so forth.

The monks perform all their religious duties with no charge. The laity in turn see to the needs of the monks who really depend on the devout laity for their bare necessities, the fourfold requisites: robes, food, dwelling place and medicine.

Neither wedding ceremonies nor registering of marriages are performed in the Buddhist Vihāras, temples or monasteries, for they are secular activities.

The Story of Nakulapitā & Nakulamātā

Two striking incidents mentioned in the text show how far absolute good faith and pure love between two married couples can go Nakulapitā and

Nakulamātā are a genial couple who lived during the time of the Buddha Gotama. When the Master visited their home, they approached him respectfully, and then Nakulapitā the husband, said: “Lord, I was quite young when I brought home Nakulamātā who was a mere girl. Ever since we were married, Lord, I am not aware of having transgressed against her even in thought, much less in person. Lord, we do wish earnestly to behold each other not only in this very life but also in the life to come.”

Then Nakulamātā, the wife, spoke in just the same way. Thereupon said the Buddha: “If, both wife and husband wish to behold each other both in this very life and the life to come, if both are matched in faith (*saddhā*), in virtue (*sīla*), in generosity (*cāga*) and in wisdom (*paññā*), then do they behold each other in this very life and in the life to come.” [6]

The other incident also is recorded in the Aṅguttara Nikāya. [7] Once Nakulapitā was grievously ill. Then his wife, Nakulamātā, came to his bedside, spoke to him tenderly, and made him understand her many virtues, and that he should not entertain any thoughts of anxiety, worry or doubts on her account. She advised him not to undermine his health by such disturbing thoughts.

When Nakulapitā was thus counselled and consoled

by his loving Nakulamātā, his sickness subsided. Thus saved by her willing hands and loving heart, Nakulapitā, leaning on a staff, visited the Buddha and saluted him. Thereupon the Blessed One, while praising the virtues of Nakulamātā said: “Good man you have greatly gained in having had as your guide and teacher such a wife as Nakulamātā who is so full of compassion toward you and so well-wishing.”

It is said that the couple attained sanctity (the paths) together, and that these two were placed by the Buddha as chief of those that win confidence.

Buddhist Funeral Rites

Among the Buddhists, the funeral rites, as in the case of marriage ceremonies, are simple and not elaborate. When a Buddhist passes away, the close relatives will invite the monks to the house of the departed one or to the cemetery to perform the rites. The congregation will first recite the three Refuges (*tisarāṇa*) and the five Precepts (*pañca sīla*). Next, the close relatives (in the case of a parent, the children, if any) will offer white clothes to the monks. Merit thus accrued is shared with the departed one thus:

“Idaṃ me ñātinam hotu

Sukhitā hontu ñātayo”

Let this (merit) accrue to my relatives
May they be well and happy!

While reciting the Pali verse they will pour water from a jug into an empty cup till it overflows, an act symbolic of the passing of merit to the departed. The monks will then recite together a special verse in Pāli suitable for the occasion:

*“Aniccā vata sañkhārā—uppāda vaya dhammino
Uppajjitvā nirujjhanti—tesaṃ vūpasamo sukho*

Impermanent are all component things,
They arise and cease, that is their nature;
They come into being and pass away,
Release from them is bliss supreme.

This is followed by a short sermon emphasising the impermanency of all conditioned things—how death comes to all, and puts an end to this brief span of life.

On the sixth day after the death, a monk is invited to the house of the deceased after dusk to deliver a sermon. It is customary for the preacher to speak mainly on impermanency and suffering (*anicca and dukkha*), the twin realities of existence, and the nature of this drama of life and death. Relatives and friends attend this sermon.

On the following (seventh) day, several monks are invited for the *dāna*, the midday meal, and the merit thereby accrued is shared with the departed one. Most of these performances are repeated at the end of the third month also.

In a non Buddhist country, in the absence of monks the laity themselves could together recite the two verses and share merit with the departed one.

On Occasions of Death

1. At the Death Bed

There are sciences and knowledge which are helpful to facilitate the comfortable birth of man, but there is no science which helps man to pass out of this existence with the least discomfort. Buddhism, which stresses the importance of thought, regards the last thought of the dying man as most important in that it helps to condition the nature of his next existence. On several occasions, the Buddha, realising that a man was about to die, has spoken such appropriate meaningful words as would help the dying man to get into the correct frame of mind.

Even the very sight of a Buddha, or in the absence of

the Buddhas and Arahats, even a Buddhist monk, or a saint, at times, is a balm to the dying person. The Dhammapada Commentary [8] records the following story:

At Sāvattthī, there lived a miserly Brahmin whose only son was known by the name of Matthakundali. When the boy was sixteen years of age he suddenly fell ill. His mother was eager to consult a doctor; the mean-hearted father, however, would not send for one lest he might lose his wealth. When the boy was tottering on the verge of death, a physician was called in. But he left the place knowing that the illness was beyond remedy.

The father, who had no doubts about his son's imminent death, pondered: "When my son dies all my friends and relatives will throng to see him, and they will cast eyes on the wealth in my household and consequently I shall fall into difficulty." So he carried the dying child and laid him down on the open terrace,

Knowing the sad plight of Matthakundali, the Buddha visited him. The dying child caught a fading glimpse of the Master, radiant and sparkling with boundless love.

It was a spectacle of grandeur which he had never witnessed before. In his rapture he wished to raise his

hands in salutation to the Compassionate One. But this he could not do, for his limbs were benumbed with feebleness. Then, with a heart and mind suffused with awe and reverence, he gazed upon the Master, thus saluting him mentally. The Buddha commented:

“He has done enough,” and retraced his steps to Jetavana monastery. As the Blessed One departed the boy died and was reborn in a celestial deva realm, in a good state of existence.

One of the blessings resulting from the practice of *mettā* or loving kindness is that a man never dies with a confused mind (*asammūḷho kālaṃ karoti*). [9] In view of this importance of the last thought of man, the Buddhist practice has arisen of reciting the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, [10] the well known discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness, by the bedside of the dying man. This would help the dying man to entertain a wholesome thought before he breathes his last. Even if he does not understand the import of the words, being a Buddhist who with *saddhā* or confidence has listened over and over again to the melodious recitation of Pāli *gāthā*, he will in every probability be induced to enter into a wholesome state of mind by the mere enjoyment of that melody. Whosoever helps a dying man to enter into the correct frame of mind therefore is rightfully as his best friend (*kalyāṇa mitta*).

2. Burial and Cremation

The reader would like to know the Buddhist practice regarding the disposal of a dead body. Is it a burial or cremation?

In the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta [11] (the discourse on the passing away of the Buddha wherein are recorded in moving detail all the events that occurred during the last months and days of his life), the Venerable Ānanda, the personal attendant of the Buddha, asks this same question: “How are we to deal, Lord, with the remains of the Tathāgata, the Perfect One? The Buddha’s answer was that the body should be cremated as in the case of a Cakkavatti rāja, a universal monarch.

Apart from this statement of the Buddha no mention is made in the text about the disposal of a dead body. There is no uniform practice. Some prefer to cremate and others to bury the bodily remains of a person. However, in the present era with the growing scarcity of available land space, and the rapid increase of population to alarming proportions, cremation is preferable to burial. From a hygienic point of view, too, a cremation is preferable.

Regarding the disposal of the ashes left from the cremation, here, too, there is no uniform practice. The ashes may be kept in an urn or enshrined in a

monument erected to the memory of the deceased if that is the wish of the dead person or the survivors.

There has been a practice of erecting stupas enshrining the ashes of the departed Buddha and the Arahats. The sight of such can induce a sense of calm by helping one to recall the unblemished lives of these saints. The Buddha himself has mentioned this in the Maha Parinibbāna sutta.

The Value of Paritta (Pirit)

“Recent research in medicine, in experimental psychology and what is still called parapsychology has thrown some light on the nature of mind and its position in the world. During the last forty years, the conviction has steadily grown among medical men that very many causes of disease, organic as well as functional, are directly caused by mental states. The body becomes ill, because the mind controlling it either secretly wants to make it ill, or else because it is in such a state of agitation that it cannot prevent the body from sickening. Whatever its physical nature, resistance to disease is unquestionably correlated with the psychological condition of the patient.” [12] “Mind not only makes sick. It also cures. An optimistic

patient has more chance of getting well than a patient who is worried and unhappy. The recorded instances of faith healing include cases in which even organic diseases were cured almost instantaneously.” [13]

In this connection it is interesting to observe the prevalence, in Buddhist lands, of listening to the recital of the Dhamma for protection and deliverance from evil, and for promoting welfare and well-being. The selected discourses for recital are known as *paritta* suttas. *Paritta* in Pall, *paritrāna* in Sanskrit and *pirit* in Sinhala, mean principally 'protection.' They are used to describe certain suttas or discourses (spoken by the Buddha) that are regarded as affording protection and deliverance from harmful influences. The practice of reciting and listening to the *paritta* suttas began very early in the history of Buddhism. It is certain that their recital produces mental well-being in those who listen to them with intelligence and are confident in the truth of the Buddha's words. Such mental well-being can help those who are ill to recover, and it can also help to induce the mental attitude that brings happiness, and to overcome its opposite. Originally in India those who listened to *paritta* sayings of the Buddha understood what was recited and the effect on them was correspondingly great. The Buddha himself had *pirit* recited for him, and he also requested others to recite *pirit* for his own disciples when they were ill.

This practice is still in vogue in Buddhist lands.

The Buddha and the Arahats can concentrate on the paritta suttas without the aid of another. However, when they are ill it is easier for them to listen to what others recite, and thus focus their minds on the Dhamma that the Sutta contains than think of the Dhamma themselves. There are occasions, as in the case of illness which weakens the mind, when hetero-suggestion has been found to be more effective than auto-suggestion.

According to the Dhamma, the mind is so closely linked with the body that mental state, affect the body's health and well-being. Some doctors even say that there is no such thing as a purely physical disease. Unless, therefore, these bad mental states are caused by previous evil acts (*akusala kamma-vipāka*), and so are unalterable, it is possible so to change them that mental health and physical well-being will follow.

The vibratory sounds produced by *paritta* are soothing to the nerves and produce a state of peace of mind and bring harmony to the system.

How can bad influences springing from evil beings be counteracted by the recitation of paritta suttas? Well, they are the result of evil thinking. They can, therefore be destroyed by the good states of mind caused by listening, intelligently and confidently to

paritta sayings, because of the power of concentration that comes into being through attending wholeheartedly to the truth of the sayings.

Paritta sutta recital is a form of *saccakiriya*, of depending on the truth for protection, justification or attainment. This means complete establishment in the power of truth to gain one's end. The saying: 'The power of truth protects the follower of the truth' (*Dhammo have rakkhati dhammacāri*) is the principle behind these sutta recitals. If it is true that virtue protects the virtuous, then a person who listens to these sayings with complete confidence in the Buddha's words which spring from complete enlightenment, will acquire so virtuous a state of mind that he will conquer any evil influence.

The recital of paritta suttas also results in material blessings through the mental states caused by concentration and confidence in listening intelligently to the recital. According to the Buddha, right effort is a necessary factor in overcoming suffering (*viriyena dukkhaṃ acceti*). [14] Listening to one of these recitals in the proper way can also generate energy for the purpose of doing good, and following the path of wordily progress with diligence.

It is understood that listening to these *paritta suttas* must produce in the intelligent and confident listener

only wholesome states which can cure and prevent illness. There is no better medicine than truth (*Dhamma*) for both mental and physical ills which are the cause of all suffering and misfortune. So the recital of *paritta* suttas may, when they are listened to rightly, bring into being mental conditions of health necessary for material progress, physical welfare and well-being.

The Book of Paritta or The Book of Protection

It is both interesting and refreshing to note that there is hardly a Buddhist home in Ceylon where this Book of *Paritta* or Book of Protection is not found. It is given an important place in the Buddhist home. It is even treated with veneration.

Now what does this book contain? It is a collection of twenty-three suttas or discourses almost all delivered by the Buddha and found scattered in the five collections, *Nikāyas*, which form the Sutta Piṭaka or the “Basket of Discourses.” These suttas found in the Book of Paritta (Protection) are preceded by an enunciation of the Three Refuges (*saraṇagamana*); the Ten Precepts (*dasa sikkhāpadāni*); the questions asked of a novice (*sāmaṇera-pañhā*) also known as the young

one's questions (*kumāra-pañhā*), The most popular among these twenty-three suttas are the Good Omen Discourse (Maṅgala Sutta), the Jewel Discourse (Ratana Sutta) and the Loving kindness or Universal Love Discourse (Mettā Sutta).

Among the discourses of the Paritta Book also included such important suttas as the Dhammacakkapavattana, Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Truth (the first sermon of the Buddha delivered at the Deer Park at Isipatane, Benares); Sacca-vibhaṅga, the Analysis of the (four) Truths, and the bojjhaṅgas, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment. [15]

It is customary for monks when they are invited to the homes of the laity on occasions of domestic importance such as birth days, house-warming, illness and similar events to recite from the Book of Paritta (protection) the popular suttas mentioned above. On special occasions, monks are invited to recite the Paritta Suttas not for short periods but right through the night. At the commencement of this recital, the monks (generally about twelve) who have been invited will recite the three popular suttas mentioned above. Thereafter, a pair of monks will commence reciting the remaining suttas for two hours. They will then retire and will be followed by another pair for another two hours. In this manner the recital will last

till dawn.

While the recital lasts, there will be found a vessel or jar of water placed on a table before the monks. On this table there is also the Book of Paritta written on talipot (ola) leaves, and also a ball of thread which is unloosened and passed on to the monks and the laity who hold the thread while the recital of the three popular suttas goes on. At the close of the recital of the entire book at dawn, the thread is broken into portions and distributed among the laity. The water is also distributed among them. These are meant as symbols of the protective power of the Paritta that was recited. They have their psychological effects.

A question may arise whether recitals from the Book of Paritta will in every case result in the protection sought for. In this connection, the same reply given by the Venerable Nāgasena to King Milinda, why the recital of paritta does not in all cases protect one from death, is worth remembering; Due to three causes paritta may have no effect: kamma hindrances (*kammāvaraṇena*); hindrances from defilements (*kilesāvaraṇena*); a lack of faith (*asaddhanatāya*). [16]

Notes

1. Dīgha Nikāya, Sutta No. 4. [\[Back\]](#)
2. Dhammapada, 276. [\[Back\]](#)
3. *An Autobiography*, John Lane, The Bodley Head, London, p. 271. [\[Back\]](#)
4. For details on Worship, see The [Wheel No. 18](#), *Devotion in Buddhism*. [\[Back\]](#)
5. Dīgha Nikāya, 31: Translated in [The Wheel No. 14](#), *Everyman's Ethics*. [\[Back\]](#)
6. A II 61. [\[Back\]](#)
7. A III 295. [\[Back\]](#)
8. Dhammapadatthakatha, Vol J, p. 25. [\[Back\]](#)
9. Mettānisaṃsa sutta, Aṅguttara Nikāya, V. 342. [\[Back\]](#)
10. Majjhima, sutta 10, Dīgha, sutta. 22; see also [The Wheel No. 12/13](#). [\[Back\]](#)
11. Dīgha Nikāya, sutta 16. see [The Wheel 67/69](#). [\[Back\]](#)
12. For the physical basis of resistance, see *The Nature of Disease* by J. E. R. McDonagh, F. R. C. S. [\[Back\]](#)

3. Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means* (London, 1946), pp-258.259. [\[Back\]](#)
4. Saṃyutta Nikāya I 214. [\[Back\]](#)
5. For an account of the bojjhaṅgas read *The Seven Factors of Enlightenment*, Piyadassi Thera, [The Wheel No. 1. \[Back\]](#)
6. *Milinda Pañhā*. [\[Back\]](#)

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