

BUDDHISM AND DUTIES OF A LAY BUDDHIST

By Ven. Dr K Sri Dhammananda

WHAT ARE YOUR DUTIES?

Buddhism is not a religion of faith; it is a religion based on morality, concentration and wisdom. It commands respect from the world because it allows reasoning for wider knowledge while it dispels blind faith.

Some Buddhists may think that going to the temple and offering flowers at the feet of the image of the Buddha, lighting a few oil lamps and burning some joss-sticks or incense in the temple means that is Buddhism. They may believe that their religious duties have thus been fulfilled. But according to the teachings of the Buddha, one should not be satisfied with such simple acts or imagine that they are sufficient for one to be called a Buddhist.

By proclaiming his noble teachings, the Buddha did not wish to have vast numbers of followers who would simply be venerating a dignified image of him. What he wanted was to see a civilised, cultured and peaceful society of intelligent people striving for the attainment of Nibbana – the cessation of Universal Suffering.

Unfortunately, some of us forget these fundamental principles of our great heritage. It is very sad indeed that we thus fall into the group of those who merely follow rites and rituals. It should be clearly understood and remembered that we pay homage to the Buddha only as a mark of respect and gratitude to our path-finder and teacher, whom we regard as the true “Model of Perfection.” It was he who thought out and preached the way of a noble and happy life here (in this world) and the attainment of eternal happiness in this life as well as hereafter. It was he also who found the way to the final and noble goal of Nibbana, which is the state of complete cessation of suffering – the only eternal form of deliverance.

No matter how much or how often we may worship at the feet of the Buddha, it is not the only way for us to lead a Buddhist way of life. In order to be a true Buddhist, one must follow strictly the basic principles of the Buddha’s teachings. Those who are acquainted with Buddhist literature vouchsafe to the fact that Buddhism maintains many noble principles. For this reason, many non-Buddhists highly praise Buddhism as a Righteous way of life.

Buddhism leads mankind to peace, to the development of good morals, reasoning and logical thinking. Moreover, Buddhist doctrine is the most authoritative source from which the correct answers to all questions that arise in a man’s mind can be obtained. It is the only doctrine in which the realities of the nature of life have been explained in plain and undisguised manner. Without exaggeration it may be asserted that as far as the spiritual upliftment of mankind is concerned, Buddhism remains unchallenged.

In many a discourse, the Buddha teaches how man should lead noble lives. Sutras like Sigalovada, Mangala, Parabhava, Vasala and Vyagghapajja are a few examples.

This booklet is an attempt to bring home to the lay man some ideas about the Buddhist way of life. If they determine to do this they will be setting a good example to the rest of the world, and assisting them to turn away from the moral deterioration that has set in.

BUDDHAHOOD AND BUDDHISM

Buddhism is the religion of the majority of the inhabitants of Asia. There are more than 500,000,000 Buddhists in the world which is nearly one quarter of the world's total population.

Many Buddhists are not aware of all the good teachings of their Master. If one is to follow Buddhism properly and wishes to be called a good Buddhist, one must study the life and teachings of the Buddha.

All the difficult problems of life will be understood more easily if one learns Buddhism. The Buddha's approach to this subject was straight and scientific – hence easy to understand.

The Buddha did not keep his knowledge to himself and order his followers simply to listen to his teachings. He did not promise to take any one to heaven simply because they were his followers. If he had done so it would have been a false promise because no one can take another to heaven or hell. One can gain admission into heaven or avoid hell by one's own actions. An outsider can only help by giving guidance as to the path to follow.

Therefore the Buddha advised his disciples to follow his teachings and his pure examples. He proved to them what he preached was true, for they will be able to actually enjoy the good results of their meritorious deeds. This fact which was proved then holds good even today and will hold good in the future too.

The Buddha practised loving-kindness towards all beings – gods, men, animals and spirits and this is called the Universal Love. If the Buddha wanted to find happiness for himself alone, he could have done so long before the time he actually attained the eternal happiness of Nibbana. He could have attained that with much less difficulty also. What he thought was that entering into that eternal happiness alone while so many were suffering would be like an unkind mother enjoying a delicacy alone while her hungry children were looking on. So, the Buddha, out of compassion for all living beings, plunged himself into the suffering Samsara (cycle of birth and death) and took the longer and more hazardous route to reach the farther shore. He had to live many lives and the number of lives that he spent in his self imposed "training course" is incalculable.

The Buddha's compassion and love towards all living beings was so great that he undertook the sufferings of Samsara without the least hesitation. When we read the Buddhist scriptures, we learn many of these facts. It is only with firm determination, a great deal of energy and high wisdom that one could continue practising good thought, words and deeds for so long. By such diligent practice any one may become a Buddha for it is not the monopoly of a particular person or being.

You could become a Buddha, I could become a Buddha too. Buddhas encourage that spirit in others who would aspire to become Buddhas similarly. Although myriad

Buddhas may come into being there still will be unfortunate beings who have not taken the path to reach the eternal bliss of "Nibbana" because their shroud of ignorance is too strong for them to tear off.

Every one of us has a grain of the Buddha spirit within us. It will not come into full bloom if we forget all about it. We should take the necessary steps to cultivate that spirit until that is brought to perfection and crowned with Buddhahood.

Now, how are we going to make this seed of Buddhahood grow into a big and strong tree and bear the fruit of Buddhahood? Just as other plants need to be well looked after, watered and fertilised with more and more good deeds in this life and the lives hereafter. Then there will be a day that we will succeed gloriously in our efforts.

However, it is not an easy task to become a Buddha. A Buddha is one who possesses the greatest wisdom and loving kindness. He is free from all passions and defilements. He is one who is able to understand fully all the aspects of life's various problems and also matters relating to before and after life. He is able to preach and convince others of the way to find the solution to their problems.

Due to the difficulties of attaining Buddhahood, there is a Buddha in the world but once in a long while. Hence the teachings of one Buddha are invariably forgotten in the world by the time the next Buddha appears. Therefore, it always becomes a mighty task for a Buddha to attain Enlightenment unaided in his efforts. There is none from whom he could receive instruction in the right system of thought that leads to perfect knowledge. It is only after his hard-earned Enlightenment or attainment of perfect knowledge that one becomes known as a Buddha and is able to go forth to proclaim the truth to the world.

People live in the darkness of ignorance by not knowing what is right and what is wrong. They are struggling in the mire of worldly evils. They think that the few fleeting moments of pleasure that they may enjoy in this world are permanent; though in reality, they are impermanent. By not understanding this glaring fact people become engrossed in pleasures of short duration and get themselves entangled in them more and more, becoming enslaved to them and thereby totally blind to reality.

Even when this is explained to them they turn a deaf ear to the truth. In short they become so callous in not knowing what is right that many are emboldened to say : " I do what I think is right." If everybody followed that rule then what would become of the world? In no time virtue would disappear from the world and vice and evil would prevail instead and there would be confusion and untold misery.

It is at the beginning of such a state of affairs that a Buddha is born into the world and he puts it right for the time being. After some time evil predominates and should it go beyond correction, even a Buddha would not appear because an evil world is not prepared to listen to good advice. The evil-ridden world would have to face devastation before a better world could appear.

To be wise among the ignorant, to be strong of heart among the weak-hearted, to be patient among the impatient, to be sober among the passion-intoxicated, to be kind among the haters, are some of the almost unattainable achievements in the world. Yet, there have been such unique personalities as the Buddhas who attained all these and

many more qualities which are beyond description. There will also be Buddhas in time to come and when conditions are suitable with their message of truth.

We should start cultivating good qualities in us from now on, so that we may be reborn into the world when such an all-compassionate and all-awakened Buddha appears. To be reborn in such favourable conditions is not easy and we must exert ourselves from this very moment with a firm determination and all the energy at our command.

For our guidance in the upward journey, we should make use of the knowledge that has been given to us by Gotama Buddha who lived only twenty-five centuries ago and which has come down to us through the several generations of his faithful and devoted disciples. The path shown by the Buddha is quite free from danger and is beneficial to all who tread in it as well as to those who stand by it.

The upward journey in the spiritual life may be regarded by the beginner as difficult but if one makes the first step forward, employing one's energy with the little knowledge one has, then half the difficulty is overcome. We should remember that the top of Mount Everest was not reached with one step but with continued steps, surmounting greater hardships in each one of them. Similarly for the attainment of Nibbana, one has to work hard, step after step until the goal is reached.

No one can hope to reach the goal in one life, however long that life may be. So it is necessary that one should accumulate merits in early life in order to reach final perfection. Great oceans are only drops of water which have collected together. Buddhahood is a great collection of everything that is good. In other words it is the absence of everything evil.

While one is going in the quest of this highest goal, spending more lives over a very long period, there may come to pass a time that one can meet a Buddha face to face. By this time, that person would be full of merits that he had accumulated. And, if he so chooses he could become a disciple of that Buddha and attain Enlightenment as a disciple under him. That would of course be overlooking the great mass of suffering worldlings, but one who desires liberation from the turmoil of Samsara (cycle of birth and death) would have gained the desired goal which is NIBBANA – the eternal Blissful State.

DUTIES OF A LAY BUDDHIST

The Buddhist layman treats human existence as one of great importance – as one which affords him the opportunity to live a righteous life here and now in order that he will be able to cut down the sufferings of Samsara. He knows that this present existence is the result of some good kamma, a moral consciousness pertaining to the realm of sense. He knows that every action here has its relative effect and that – “By kamma the world moves; by kamma men live and by kamma are they bound.”

He therefore, having sought the refuge of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, is sure that under these three refuges, he is secure, free from danger, fear and defilements that lead to evil destiny. With the Lord Buddha as the guiding ideal, the Dhamma as the raft that enables him to cross the ocean of Samsara, and the Sangha as the rice field within which to sow for a rich harvest, he leads a righteous life. He performs all his actions heedfully and paying due regard to the cosmic law of life – Kamma action.

He therefore carefully avoids the ten evil actions of body, speech and mind. He commits no evil through his bodily actions. He abstains from killing, stealing and sexual misconduct. His words are composed and controlled. He does not lie, slander, speak harshly nor engage in frivolous talk. He trains himself thus, knowing well that the fruits of such evil deeds would bring suffering upon himself.

He knows that if he kills, he will have to suffer short life, disease and grief caused by the separation from those he loves, and that he will have to live in constant fear. He knows that if he steals, abject poverty, wretchedness, unfulfilled desires and a low life will be his. He gives up adultery as the burning charcoal pit, for it brings him enemies and bad lives. He gives up lying for it will torment him by abusive speech, subject him to vilification and incredibility. Further, he will not covet. Seeing another's wealth, he would never think, "would this be mine." Covetousness brings non-fulfilment of one's wishes as its kammic result. He will not harbour hate upon anyone, for ill-will "VYAPADA" will make him ugly, bring disease and render him detestable.

Also he will give up false views. And as a pious devotee, he will endeavour to perform good actions here and now by the practice of generosity, morality, meditation, reverence, service, transference of merit and rejoicing in other's merit. He will be engaged in hearing the Doctrine and will make every effort possible to strengthen his views.

As one leading a lay life, he must essentially accrue a lot of merit. The practice of generosity will bring him wealth, whilst morality will bestow upon him birth in noble families and in states of happiness. Meditation will help him to acquire higher knowledge and final emancipation. By the transference of merit, he will be given plenty. Rejoicing in other's meritorious actions will endow him with joy in his future births. Listening to the Dhamma will make him wise, while services will afford him great joy and happiness. Praising others' good actions will relatively bring him prosperity. The strengthening of views will bring happiness and final deliverance.

The general outlook of a Buddhist layman is one above ordinary thoughts. He views all life as transient, unsatisfactory and soulless. He tries to conceive in his daily life how these truths come in to play; how all things of the world are ever changing, how little we can control them, how all our pleasures end in pain and youth in age and lastly how very empty life is. With this triple view of "Anicca", "Dukka" and "Anatta" growing in him, he sees all life as arising and passing away. Also he sees that we are common in flesh, that all mortals are yokes in a single fellowship of joys and pains. Thus surveying life, his heart is filled with sympathetic love "Karuna" for all things that suffer pains of sentient life. And even as a mother at the risk of her life protects her only son, so he suffuses all living beings with thoughts of boundless love and compassion. Inspired by this feeling of infinite love, the Buddhist layman lives the life of service and usefulness to all during his short span of life in this world.

The householder specially refrains from the ten evils as they cut the very roots of man's life, bringing utter ruin even here in this very life. Further, he refrains from committing evil actions through partiality - "Tanha", enmity - "Moha", and instead develops impartiality, loving kindness, fearlessness and wisdom by all his actions.

The success of a layman depends greatly upon his wealth and finances. The Buddha has, therefore pointed out that it is essential for the householder to grow in landed property, in wealth and granary in addition to child and wife, servants and work-people and beasts of burden. These things, the Buddhist layman acquires by right means and for this he follows a righteous form of livelihood, avoiding deceit, treachery, soothsaying, trickery, usury and the five harmful trades such as dealing in arms, living beings, flesh, intoxicants and poison. What ever trade is pursued by him, is conducted so that it does not harm anyone. He makes his living as he gathers honey.

Buddhist economics requires the householder to apportion his earning into four parts to be utilised as follows:

"One portion let him spend and taste the fruits.

His business to conduct let him take two.

And portion four let him reserve and hoard.

So there'll be wherewithal in time of need".

The good householder, therefore devotes one quarter of his earnings to meet his personal needs, two quarters for the conduct of his trade, the fourth quarter he reserves to meet emergencies in time of need. He would guard himself from such activities which may tend to dissipate his hard -earned wealth. In this connection the master advises the householder to keep from activities that drains one's wealth. These are : - addicting oneself to intoxicating liquors, frequenting the streets at unseemly hours, haunting fairs, to become addicted to gambling, association with evil companions and the habit of idleness.

The Buddha says, it is incumbent of the lay follower to duly discharge his obligations toward his parents, teachers, wife and children, friends and companions, servants and work-people and religious teachers. This is called protecting the six quarters. Sons and daughters should realise the fact that it was primarily due to parents that they have attained the present state. They should make it their binding duty to provide them with food, clothes, medicine and all essential comforts and make life easy and comfortable to them so long as they live. The child of means should make it his particular duty to tend his parents in their old age with all due care. They should maintain the lineage and tradition of the family by restoring, if need be, the family honour.

Parents thus ministered by their children, should show them compassion and tenderness of heart by restraining them from vice, exhorting them to virtue, training them in trades and professions of skill, contracting marriage for them in suitable age and by handing over to them their estate and inheritance when the time comes.

Pupils, in beholding their teachers should out of respect and veneration, rise from their seats in salutation. They should wait upon them, show an eagerness to learn and render them personal service. They should attentively follow and receive instructions. Teachers thus ministered to by their pupils should, out of compassion, train them well in all what they know and make them thorough in the varies arts. They should speak well of them among their companions and protect them from danger.

The husband should pay due respect to his wife, he should give the right of home, be faithful to her and treat her with love. She should be invested with due authority and supplied with ornaments. The wife thus ministered to by her husband, should dearly love him and perform her binding duties. She should be hospitable to her relations and

those of her husband, watch over the things that her husband brings and protect his wealth. Besides this, she should acquaint herself with her husband's industry and render him a helping hand.

Further, the householder should minister to his friends and associates generously, with due courtesy and benevolence. He should treat them in the same way as he treats himself and keeps his promises. His friends and associates should in return love him, provide him, his family and property with the necessary protection. They should become a refuge to him in time of danger and not forsake him in trouble.

He should minister to his servants and work-people by assigning to them work depending upon their strength, supply them with food and wages and treat them in sickness. He should also allow them in time to relax and grant leave with pay and allow them time to relax and grant leave with pay and allowances for domestic and social festivals. A good master also shares with them rare and unusual delicacies. The servants and employees, out of faith and respect towards him, should make it a habit to rise before him, commence the day's work assigned to them and rest after their master, having attended to their final duties of the day. They should remain contented and speak in praise of their master.

It is the duty of the householder to treat monks and recluses with due reverence, keep the house open to them for alms and meet their temporal needs. They in return, should restrain him from evil and exhort him to do good, preach the Dhamma to him and urge him to follow the Path of Deliverance and should extend towards them unbounded thoughts of loving kindness.