

DAY-TO-DAY BUDDHIST PRACTICES

By

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Buddhism as a religion or as a righteous way of life, is appreciated by highly intellectual people in many parts of the world. The simple reason for this is that the Buddha, the founder of this religion, was most enlightened and liberal-minded teacher. The Buddhist way of life is very simple. It is free from blind faith and dogmas. Unfortunately many people have not realised how to lead a true Buddhist way of life.

Today, in many parts of the world, and even amongst our own Buddhist community, various beliefs and practices are being carried out in the name of this religion. Many of these practices are far from the original teachings of the Buddha and sometimes are even contradictory. Many people have in fact neglected and forgotten the correct Buddhist way of life. Many are also under a misconception with regard to certain important aspects of this religion. It is with the sole idea of removing this misconception and to enlighten the public that this booklet is being printed.

To understand the Buddhist way of life is to lead a righteous way of life. To appreciate the nature of this life is to achieve a happy and peaceful life.

Certain so-called intellectuals use Buddhism only as a basis for their topic in discussing the metaphysical and philosophical aspects of the religion. They view with derision the accepted Buddhist cultural practices even to the extent of condemning such practices. This is not a correct or healthy attitude to adopt towards religion. A religion without depth and one which has not penetrated into one's cultural practices would not last; it will only become dry philosophy and fade away after a time. Tolerance is the keyword in Buddhist teachings. If one is unable to accept certain cultural practices, one should, at least, tolerate such practices. In the meanwhile, one should investigate the underlying significance and meaning of such practices instead of passing hasty and uncalled remarks.

Buddhist culture has penetrated into every aspect of our life. We know that Buddhism is a religion that leads us to a better life in this world and hereafter. It is our duty to explore, study, comprehend and put into practice what our religion has in store for us. We need the guidance of our religion for our everyday life. Rites and rituals although accepted as an integral part of religion, do not by themselves, comprise religion. Spiritual development is the most important aspect of religion. To attain this spiritual development, we should proceed by cultivating a strong moral background so that we have a firm base, and by understanding the teachings of the Buddha we can acquire the requisite spiritual inspiration. Our gratitude and veneration goes to the Great Teacher, His Teachings and the Sangha must not be forgotten. Thus we have the three sacred objects, the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, which in common Buddhist parlance we term 'The Triple Gem' for us to revere. Attainment of spiritual development and veneration of the Triple Gem are means whereby we can lead a righteous way of life leading to peace, happiness and ultimate salvation. This is the aim of every Buddhist. Whilst we aspire high, we should not forget or neglect our day-to-day accepted religious observance and practices which remind us of our duty towards our religion. It is with a

view to reminding all concerned of their religious obligations that a summarised schedule of occasional observance and practices are being clarified for the benefit of our readers.

Daily Observances

As Buddhists, it would be most appropriate for us to have either a Buddha image or a picture of the Buddha in our homes, not as an ornamental showpiece but as an object of admiration and veneration. The serene figure of the Buddha, symbolising loving-kindness, purity, and perfection, could serve as a source of consolation and inspiration in helping us to overcome whatever difficulties, worries or misunderstanding that we only have to encounter in our day-to-day activities in a troubled world. Life is full of pitfalls. Such pitfalls could be avoided if we remember to put into practice the noble teachings of our Great Teacher. It would be a most rewarding task if, whilst venerating our Lord Buddha, we could meditate for even a short while, by focussing our minds on the great and noble qualities of the Buddha so that we may perfect ourselves through his inspiration.

Make It A Daily Practice

As devotees we should make it a daily practice to pay homage to this Great Teacher. This could be done early in the morning or late in the evening, before retiring. Whilst doing so, it will be beneficial if efforts are made to recite some sutras. This is a noble Buddhist way of life. Parents should inculcate these worth-while and time-honoured religious practices amongst their children so that they can realise and appreciate their rich heritage

Buddhist parents are encouraged to send their children to attend Buddhist Sunday Schools or religious classes so as to train them to be dutiful children and good citizens.

Whilst Buddhists are also encouraged to perform their religious observance in their family shrine, they are reminded not to forget or neglect their community or group obligations towards their temple activities where religious services are held regularly on Full-moon and New-moon days. A visit to a Temple and participating in the religious service would be considered an act of merit. The observance of the eight precepts by devotees during the celebration of the Full-moon or New-moon days would be most desirable and meritorious act. Participants of such observance are required to be clad in simple white garments and to remain in the Temple for a day devoting their time to religious matters such as meditation, religious discussion, reading of religious books and radiating loving-kindness.

Festivals

In celebrating family and social festivals, Buddhist are advised not to conduct themselves in such a way as to violate their Buddhist principles, such as the Five Precepts and the noble Eight-fold Path. Buddhist moral code must be upheld. They should not allow themselves to be intoxicated or be carried away by any base form of amusement, but should conduct such festivities in a dignified manner commensurate with their position as cultured Buddhists. In celebrating social events, it is advisable for one not to forget the spiritual aspects of the celebration. A visit to a Temple to receive the blessings of the Triple Gem would be quite appropriate for any occasion.

Traditions And Customs

The observance of national tradition and customs need not necessarily be discarded when one becomes a Buddhist or whilst following the teachings of the Buddha. In fact the Buddha advised his followers to respect their own traditions and customs if they are meaningful, significant and harmless. On the other hand if such practice contradicts or violate the fundamental Buddhist principles, are harmful to others, or are likely to cause nuisance, then they should be discarded, however well-intentioned they may be. Even in organising our own religious functions it is our duty to arrange such functions in an accepted dignified manner without causing a nuisance to others. This understanding is very important in the practice of our religion in a multi-racial society.

House-warming

Occupying a new house or moving from one house to another is often followed by some form of celebration or merry-making. There is no objection to such a celebration but here again, apart from the social side of the celebration, it is a Buddhist tradition for the family to invite monks to bless for the peace, prosperity and harmony of the household.

Honouring Of Gods And Deities

In many Buddhist households occasional feasts or special festivals are held in honour of various gods and deities enshrined in their homes or elsewhere in temples. Whilst there is no specific objection so long as it does not violate basic Buddhist fundamentals yet a distinction has to be drawn to the fact that festivities of such nature does not help in our spiritual progress except for worldly material gains. They should be kept quite distinct from Buddhism itself. We should not therefore introduce these customary or traditional practices as Buddhist practices. In accordance with the teachings of the Buddha, the correct way to remember and honour these gods and deities would be by the transference of merits to them by performing meritorious deeds and radiating our loving-kindness to them through meditation.

Blessing Of A Newborn Child

Parents of a newborn child are invited to bring the child, one month after its birth, to a Temple to receive the blessings of the Triple Gem. Offerings of flowers, incense, candles or fruits may be made at the shrine room of the Temple and the resident monks invited to recite sutras for the blessing of the child. If so desired, the advice of the monks may also be sought for a suitable Buddhist name to be given to the baby.

Marriage

It has been noticed that many Buddhists tend to forget their spiritual obligations in regards to this most important and auspicious occasion of their lives - their marriage. It is customary, in certain Buddhist countries, for engaged couples to invite the monks for a blessing service either in their homes or at a temple prior to the actual wedding. If so desired, the blessing service could even be performed after the wedding which normally takes place in the Registry of Marriages or at the homes of the parties concerned. It is hoped that all Buddhist couples would diligently observe and perform their religious obligations when they get married. Simple offerings of flowers, incense and candles are all that are required for the simple blessing service to which parents both parties with their relatives and friends could be invited to participate. Such a blessing service, given

on the auspicious day, would be a definite spiritual contribution to the success, pace and happiness of the newly weds.

Sickness

In the unfortunate event of sickness befalling a person, it would be advisable, apart from resorting to normal medical treatment, to invite monks to perform religious blessing service tending towards the speedy recovery of the patient. Such blessings would tend to infuse a considerable spiritual and psychological influence on the patient, thus accelerating his recovery. In particular when the illness happens to be associated with the attitude of the patient's mind, a spiritual blessing service by a monk would be most helpful. In instances where the belief is that an illness is being caused by some bad external influence or evil spirits, a religious blessing service would be a good antidote. However, as understanding Buddhists, we should not surrender ourselves to such erroneous beliefs or imaginations that evil spirits are the cause of our sickness. The Buddha's advise: *"Whenever you are physically sick, don't allow your mind also to be sick"* is indeed very true. In accordance with this advice, we must be guided by our intelligence and common sense to seek proper medical attention for our illness rather than succumb to ill-founded superstition. Nevertheless we must always remember that sickness is part and parcel of our daily existence in this world, and we should take it in its stride.

Funerals

Man is mortal and death is to be expected. However, death, to a human being is a sad and solemn occasion. The funeral that follows should also be a solemn one, appropriate to the occasion. Contrary to popular public beliefs, the noisy elaborate and sometimes showy Chinese funeral processions which cost thousands of dollars and often alluded to as normal Buddhist practice, are not Buddhist practices, at all. They are just the perpetuation of age-old customs and traditions handed down from past generations. People of other faiths do often wonder, when viewing such a procession, as to whether it was a procession celebrating some happy festival or a solemn funeral. Although Buddhism does not object to the perpetuating of such practices, so long as they do not conflict with the teachings of Buddha, it is felt that it is time that any wasteful, uneconomical and unnecessary practices which are not beneficial to the departed should be eliminated. The performance of such elaborate traditional ceremonies or death rituals which sometimes go on for days and weeks, should also be discouraged or discarded. Another tradition practice is the burning of joss-paper and symbolic paper houses, designed for the benefit of a deceased person. This is definitely un-Buddhistic in character and should be eradicated.

The rites attached to a Buddhist funeral should be simple, solemn, dignified and meaningful. Buddhist monks may be invited to the house of the deceased to chant sutras prior to a funeral. Such services are rendered voluntarily by Buddhist monks without any charge. The offering of flowers and the burning of joss-sticks and candles are normal accepted practices.

On the day of the funeral, the services of Buddhist Monks would again be called for to perform the requisite religious service at the home and at the cemetery. It has been the practice of the Chinese to offer all types of cooked food including roasted pig and chicken as symbolic offerings for *the* deceased. This again, is just a traditional practice

not encouraged by Buddhism. Simple floral tributes together with the burning of incense and candles would suffice as symbolic offerings.

The slaughtering of innocent animals to serve as sacrificial offerings to the departed ones is definitely against the teachings of the compassionate Buddha and should be completely eradicated.

Burial And Cremation

Many Buddhists have posed the problem as to whether a deceased person should be buried or cremated. Buddhism is flexible on this issue. There is no hard and fast rule, although in some Buddhist countries, cremation is the accepted practice. The choice of one method or another should be left principally to the “last wish” of the deceased or at the direction of the next-of-kin.

In the modern concept, however, cremation, as a form of hygienic disposal of the body, should be encouraged. With the improvement in health standards and the so-called population explosion, usable land is becoming scarce hence it is advisable to resort to cremation and permit the use of valuable land for the living instead of crowding it with innumerable tombstones.

Whether it is by burial or cremation, it has been observed that certain people have been putting into the coffin or inserting into the crematorium valuable personal belongings of the deceased with the hope and belief that the departed one would in some way, benefit by it.

Apart from the sentiments of the act, it is a fallacy to expect that the burial or burning of such belongings would have any merit at all. It would be preferable, instead of putting such things inside a coffin or crematorium, to donate the useful personal belongings, such as clothing, shoes, etc. to the poor and needy or to some charitable institutions. Any help to the poor and needy is an act of merit.

Disposal Of Ashes

The question has often been asked as to what should be done to the ashes of a deceased person who has been cremated. There is no hard and fast rule as to its disposal. It could be kept in an urn and enshrined in a pagoda specially erected in a temple for such a purpose or it could be kept elsewhere at the sole discretion of the next-of-kin. In some cases, after a short religious service, the ashes are strewn into the sea or river.

Honouring The Dead

It has been mentioned elsewhere that the floral tributes are an accepted form of paying respects to the memory of a deceased person. However, even in this connection, things could be overdone in that on occasions we see thousands of dollars worth of wreaths being piled up on the grave, only to be cleared away as rubbish in the next day or two. To obviate such a waste, a much more acceptable and desirable practice has been adopted by the more enlightened people of today. The practice is that in lieu of wreaths, sweet-

meats or joss-paper, the next-of-kin made it known in the press that friends and relatives desirous of honouring the memory of the deceased could make donations to certain established religious or charitable institutions in the name of the departed person. In some instances, a particular institution where the deceased person had been actively associated with during his lifetime, was named as the beneficiary for donations. This change of attitude is most sensible and welcome. It is strongly recommended that such a practice be adopted by all our enlightened Buddhists.

The honour and respect due to a deceased person, should normally, in the first place, be given to the immediate family of the deceased. This honour and respect could easily be accorded by the children or the next-of-kin in helping to prepare the body for the casket. Unfortunately in many instances, due apparently to misguided superstition, needless fear or prejudice, this last duty or respect was seldom carried out by those concerned. Instead undertakers were employed to cleanse and dress the dead body. This should not be the case. Prejudice and superstition should be removed. Honour and respect must be accorded to the deceased.

Memorial Services

Conducting of memorial religious services in temples or at homes is another form of honouring a deceased person. This could be followed by another act of merit by the offering of alms to the Monks and to needy people. The holding of memorial services is normally made on the 7th day after the death of a person and again on the 3rd month or the 100th day of the occurrence. Thereafter it could be held on the anniversary of the date of death. For those who could not afford it, a more praiseworthy form of merit would be to make donations to religious or charitable institutions in honour of a deceased person, or to publish religious books for distribution to enlighten the public on the sublime teachings of the Buddha.