



Be a
Lamp
upon
yourself

**BE
A
LAMP
UPON
YOURSELF**

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all Sentient Beings.

May each be a Lamp upon Oneself.
May we be Bodhisattvas to each other,
And attain Enlightenment swiftly.

This book is inspired by:

Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh
Venerable Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda
Venerable Thubten Chodron
Venerable S. Dhammika
and many other great Dharma teachers...

Foreword

This third edition of “Be a Lamp Upon Yourself” is an expanded version of the well received first and second editions. The usefulness of the book is in its concise approach to the basic teachings of the Buddha. Building on these strengths, we have come up with this edition. Once again, we hope you will find it useful as an introduction to the vast field of the Buddha’s teachings.

Please pass this book around should you feel you do not need it. As the Buddha taught, the gift of Truth excels all other gifts! May we all know the Dharma and make the Dharma be known.

Yours in the Dharma,
Bro. Shen Shi’an
Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery
Dharma Propagation Department

Are You God?

No.

Are You an Angel?

No.

Are You a Human Being?

No.

Then What are You?

I am "Awake!"

("Buddha"- A Fully Awakened One)

*“Be Islands (Lamps) unto Yourselves,
Be a Refuge unto Yourselves
With no other Refuge,*

*Let the Dharma be your Island,
Let the Dharma be your Refuge,
With no other Refuge.”*

Cakkavatti-Sihananda Sutta:
The Lion’s Roar on the Turning of the Wheel

The Thought of the Buddha Before his Enlightenment:

“Then I thought:
‘Why, being myself subject to
birth, ageing, sickness, death,
sorrow and defilement,
do I seek after what is also
subject to these things?’

Suppose,
being myself
subject to these things,
seeing danger in them,
I seek after the
unborn, unageing, unailing deathless,
sorrowless, undefiled
supreme liberation from bondage-
NIRVANA?’ “

**:The Thought We Should Hold to Motivate Us
Towards Enlightenment**

What's So Wonderful About Buddhism?

Here are some outstanding features of Buddhism.

Perfect Example

The historical Buddha is an embodiment of all the virtues that He preached. He translated all His words into action. He was tireless in His spreading of the Truth and was the perfect model example. At no time did He ever show any human weakness or base passion. His qualities of Morality, Wisdom and Compassion are the most perfect the world has ever known.

You Can Become Perfect

The Buddha represents the highest peak of spiritual cultivation possible. He taught that all could attain true perfection. No other founder of a religion has ever said that its followers too have the same chance to gain the same experience of peace, happiness and salvation as oneself. But the Buddha taught that anyone could attain the same bliss of supreme Enlightenment if one was to practise as He did.

Beyond Religion

If the definition of “religious” is the unquestionable belief and worship in a supreme entity, which the obligation to carry out rites and rituals, then Buddhism is definitely not a religion. It is beyond all conventional definitions of religion - for Buddhism encourages intelligent doubting and believes in the potential supremacy of the individual. Rites and rituals are seen as ceremonies that help guide and inspire us. They are important in that sense, but they do not give us Wisdom and True Happiness. Buddhism is thus called a religion only out of convention.

Universality

As the Buddha's concern is the True Happiness of all beings, His teachings can be practised in society or seclusion, by all of every race and belief. It is totally unbiased and truly universal.

Purification of the Mind

Buddhism is the only religion that encourages not just the ceasing of all evil and the doing of all good- it also teaches the purification of one's Mind, which is the root of all good and evil, the cause of both suffering and True Happiness.

Self-Reliance

When the Buddha was meditating to gain Enlightenment, no gods came to reveal any hidden secrets of spiritual power. No one gave Him any religious laws to teach. He said, *"I never had any teacher or divinity to teach me or tell me how to gain Enlightenment. I achieved supreme Wisdom by my own effort, energy, knowledge and purity."* Likewise, we can

attain this highest goal through perseverance in perfecting ourselves.

Freedom of Thought

From the intellectual and philosophical content of Buddhism rose the freedom of thought and inquiry unparalleled by any other established world religion or philosophy. Though the Buddha urges us to consider His teachings, there is no obligation or compulsion whatsoever to believe or accept any Buddhist doctrine.

Education of the Truth

The Buddha is the greatest teacher of the Truth (reality of all things). Buddhism is the perfect education about us and the Universe we live in. It is the teaching beyond worldly knowledge- of the highest Wisdom that leads to the realisation of True Happiness. It is interesting to note that the first university established in the world is the great Nalanda Buddhist University in India, which flourished from the second to the ninth century. It was open to students all over the world and was the school of many outstanding Buddhist scholars and sages.

Standing Unchallenged

The Buddha was an unequalled teacher. He freely and actively invited both His followers and those of other beliefs to challenge His teachings from every possible angle till there was no room for any kind of doubt. True to His injunctions, His followers have debated about His doctrine and even founded various schools of Buddhism according to their understanding without violence or bloodshed. The Buddha knew that if one really believed that one knows the Truth, one should not be afraid to have it challenged, as the Truth will always win. His replies to numerous questions enriched the Buddhist doctrine into a vast religious field. We are today able to answer any questions about Buddhism, simply by referring to the Buddha's explanations.

No Blind Faith

The Buddha did not promise heavenly bliss or reward to those who called themselves His followers. Nor did He promise salvation to those who had faith in Him. To Him, religion is not a bargain but a noble way of life to gain Enlightenment and salvation for oneself and others. He

did not want followers who believed Him blindly; He wishes us to think and understand for ourselves.

The Buddha urges all to come forth to discover more about Buddhism and not simply believe in it. He advised choosing a proper religion by considering and investigating it in various ways, without accepting anything through emotion or blind faith. This is why Buddhism is sometimes called the religion of analysis. In it is the scientific logical analysis of Mind and matter which modern thinkers appreciate. Even today, Buddhists are encouraged to have the attitude of a healthy skeptic, even towards the Buddhist scriptures!

From Experience and Reason to Faith

Buddhism is the only religion, which was explained to Mankind through the experience, realisation, Wisdom and Enlightenment of its founder (the Buddha) without introducing it as a message by a god. It starts from the root of known experience and not blind faith. Human problems must be understood by one through human experience and solved by developing great humane qualities. One should find the solution through the

purification and development of the human Mind, and not through outsiders. That is why the Buddha never introduced Himself as a supernatural saviour. He did not acknowledge that there is such a saviour. According to Him, we can be our own saviours.

The Whole Truth

The Buddha encourages us to face the facts of life courageously without acting hypocritically and to accept the Truth whatever and wherever it may be. All that He taught were timeless practical truths leading us towards True Happiness.

Scientific

Buddhism never found the need to give new interpretations to its teachings. Newly verified scientific discoveries never contradict the teachings of the Buddha as the method and teachings of Buddhism are scientifically valid. Buddhism's principles can be maintained under any circumstances without changing its basic ideas. The understanding capacity of the value of these religious ideas may diminish and disappear from the human Mind.

And humans may experience the difficulty of practising these principles in a corrupted society. However, the value of the Buddha's teaching will be appreciated by every cultured and understanding person at any time. As complimented by Albert Einstein (Physicist and Mathematician), winner of the Nobel Prize, who is popularly regarded as the most outstanding scientist of the twentieth century,

“The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the natural and the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual and a meaningful unity. Buddhism answers this description... If there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs, it would be Buddhism.”

Supreme Philosophy

As complimented by Lord Bertrand Russell (Mathematician, Philosopher, Author and Social Critic), winner of the Nobel Prize, who is popularly regarded as

the most outstanding philosopher of the twentieth century,

“Of the great religions of history, I prefer Buddhism... Buddhism is a combination of both speculative and scientific philosophy. It advocates the Scientific Method and pursues that to a finality that may be called Rationalistic. In it are to be found answers to such questions of interest as ‘What is Mind and matter? Of them, which is of greater importance? Is the Universe moving towards a goal? What is Man’s position? Is there living that is noble?’ It takes up where science cannot lead because of the limitations of the latter’s instruments. Its conquests are those of the Mind.”

Supreme Psychology

In the course of their work, many psychologists have found, as the pioneering work of Dr. Carl G. Jung (Founder of Analytical Psychology- a pioneer of Modern Psychology) has shown, we are closer to the Buddha. To read a little Buddhism is to realise that the Buddhists knew, more than two thousand five hundred years ago, far more about our modern problems of psychology than they have yet been

given credit for. They studied these problems long ago, and found the answers too. As complimented by Jung,

“As a student of comparative religions, I believe that Buddhism is the most perfect one the world has seen. The philosophy of the theory of evolution and the law of Karma are far superior to any other creed...”

It was neither the history of religion nor the study of philosophy that first drew me to the world of Buddhist thought but my professional interest as a doctor. My task was to treat psychic suffering and it was this that impelled me to become acquainted with the views and methods of that great teacher of humanity (the Buddha), whose principal theme was the chain of suffering, old age, sickness and death.”

No Fear

The Buddha is a major historical figure who promoted the rise of rational faith against the superstitions of religion. He emancipated man from the corrupted authority of priests, and was the first to show the way to freedom from religious hypocrisy and dictatorship. Buddhism is a

religion that uses reason and no element of fear to coerce anyone in any way to believe in it.

Universal Compassion

As the Buddha's Compassion is universal, He sees all creatures great and small, from insects to beasts, as equal ultimately, each with the same rights for happiness as us.

Non-Violence

There is no such thing as a just war in Buddhism. The Buddha taught that, "*The victor breeds hatred and the defeated lives in misery. He who renounces both victory and defeat is happy and peaceful.*" Not only did the Buddha teach non-violence and peace, He was probably the first and only religious teacher who went to the battlefield to prevent the outbreak of a war.

Human Equality

The Buddha was among the first to speak against the caste system on the importance of individual rights and the equality of all human beings despite differences in social

standing, race and religion. He also encouraged the spirit of social co-operation and active participation in society at all levels. According to the Buddha, the only classification of human beings is based on the quality of their moral conduct. The Buddha said:

“Go into all lands and preach this teaching. Tell them that the poor and the lowly, the rich and the high are all one and that all castes unite in this religion as do the rivers in the sea.”

Sexual Equality

The Buddha, seeing the two sexes as ultimately equal in rights, was the first religious teacher who gave women full freedom to participate in the religious life. His move to allow women to enter the Sangha (Order of monks and nuns) was extremely radical in His times.

Democracy

The Buddha was the first to advocate the spirit of consultation and the democratic process. In the Sangha (Order of monks and nuns) community, each member has individual rights to decide on matters of general

concern. When a serious question arose, the issues are put forth before and discussed in a manner similar to today's democratic parliamentary system.

Care for Ecology

The Buddha strongly encouraged care and respect for the ecological environment as He clearly saw the close interdependence between Man and nature.

No Sacrificial Rites

The Buddha disapproved of animal sacrifice as He saw it cruel and unfair for anyone to destroy any living being for one's selfish "benefit."

No Flowery Display of Miracles

To the Buddha, miracles are but manifestations of phenomena not understood by the common people. They are not seen as demonstrations of Enlightenment or Wisdom, as supernatural powers can be mastered by anybody. The supernatural is seen as natural phenomena not understood by the unenlightened. The ability to

perform miracles is seen as a by-product of spiritual development, of minor importance and relevance to the real goal of spiritual development itself. Though the Buddha had full mastery of psychic powers, He used them only out of Compassion and skillful means to teach others. He never used His powers to win followers through blind faith and dependency on miracles. He taught that the highest miracle is the “conversion” of an ignorant person to a wise one.

No Political Abuse

The Buddha was from a warrior caste and was brought into association with kings, princes and ministers. But He never resorted to the influence of political power to introduce His Teaching. Nor did He allow His Teaching to be misused for gaining political power. However, He urged all kings to be morally strong, teaching that a country should not be ruled by Greed but with Compassion and consideration for the people.

No Unforgiveness

There is no concept of “unforgivable sin” in Buddhism. The Buddha said that all deeds are either skillful or

unskillful due to the presence or absence of Wisdom respectively. There is always hope as long as one recognises one's mistakes and changes for the better.

No Stubborn Exclusivity

The Buddha taught that if any religion has the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, it may be regarded as a proper religion. This is because a truly helpful religion must lead to the total eradication of suffering (as in the Four Noble Truths), showing clearly a rational path towards True Happiness (as in the Noble Eightfold Path).

Harmonious Missionary Work

An outstanding example of the qualities and approach of a Buddhist missionary is the great Emperor Asoka, who sent Buddhist missionaries to many parts of the Asian and Western world to introduce the Buddha's message of peace. One of his scripts engraved in stone on the Asoka Pillars, which still stands today in India reads,

“One should not honour only one’s religion and condemn the religion of others, but one should honour others’ religion for this or that reason. In so doing, one helps one’s own religion to grow and renders service to the religions of others too. In acting otherwise, one digs the grave of one’s own religion and also does harm to other religions.”

Holy wars, crusades, inquisitions and religious discrimination do not mar the annals of Buddhist history. Buddhist missionaries have no need or desire to convert those who already have a proper religion to practise. Buddhists are happy to see the progress of other religions so long as they help people to lead a religious way of life according to their faith and enjoy peace, harmony and true understanding. However, the Buddha urged us to share the Truth with those who might be interested in it:

“Go forth, O Bhikkhus (monks), for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of Compassion for the world, for the good, benefit and the happiness of gods and humans... Let not two go by one way. Preach, O Bhikkhus, the Dharma, excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, excellent in the end, both in spirit and in the letter. Proclaim the Holy Life altogether perfect and pure.”

The Worthiest Goal

The attainment of Buddhahood (full Enlightenment), or the achievement of True Happiness for oneself and others is the most difficult, yet most worthwhile thing to do. Because practising Buddhism means following the Noble Eightfold Path (or the Middle Way), Buddhists never have to go into any form of extremism.

Complete Overview of Humankind and Religion

The Buddha explained rationally and in detail on how all other religious beliefs evolved through history with the changes in the thinking of Humankind. He also gave us a comprehensive overview of the effects of religion on Humankind.

Complete Path Towards True Happiness

The Buddha's teachings form a complete colossal inter-linking syllabus, which covers every timeless aspect of life. The ancient collection of Buddhist Scriptures was said

to pile up to “the height of 7 elephants!” The Buddha expounded for 45 years on all that was necessary to eradicate suffering and attain True Happiness. He asked His assembly of thousands of disciples thrice, on whether they had any remaining doubts before His passing into Parinirvana. There were none.

Happiness in This Life

Buddhism is not a wholly otherworldly religion. Though practising Buddhism in this life has positive effects that extend beyond this life, much of the direct practical fruits of our practice can also be seen in this very life.

Everything is Open

According to the Buddha, the Truth is an open thing for all to discover for themselves. When we study the life and teachings of the Buddha, we can see that everything is open to everybody. While there are certain advanced teachings that require specific guidance of experienced teachers, there are no secrets in Buddhism.

Goodwill and Understanding

The Buddha's message of goodwill and understanding to all beings is a universal message. The world today needs this noble message more than ever before in the history of Mankind.

How to Seek the Truth

*A Summary of the Kalama Sutta (The Charter on Free Enquiry),
a guideline to seek the Truth wisely, as taught by the Buddha:*

In the Buddha's time, He once came across the village of the Kalamas. The Kalamas were among the smartest and most intellectual people in India. Together, they went to ask the Buddha, "How do we know what you teach is true? All the other spiritual teachers (there were more than 60 religious beliefs in that time) who came by claim that only what they alone teach is true, that what all others teach is untrue."

To that, the Buddha smiled gently and replied, "

1. Do not simply believe what you hear just because you have heard it for a long time.
2. Do not follow tradition blindly merely because it has been practised in that way for many generations.
3. Do not be quick to listen to rumours.
4. Do not confirm anything just because it agrees with your scriptures.
5. Do not foolishly make assumptions.
6. Do not abruptly draw conclusions by what you see and hear.
7. Do not be fooled by outward appearances.
8. Do not hold on tightly to any view or idea just because you are comfortable with it.
9. Do not accept as fact anything that you yourself find to be logical.
10. Do not be convinced of anything out of respect and reference to your spiritual teachers.

You should go beyond opinion and belief. You can rightly reject anything which when accepted, practised and perfected, leads to more anger (Aversion), more greed (Craving) and more delusion (Ignorance). The knowledge that you are angry, greedy or deluded does not depend on either belief or opinion. Remember that anger, greed

and delusion are things universally condemned. They are not beneficial and are to be avoided.

Conversely, you can accept anything which when accepted and practised leads to unconditional Love, Contentment and Wisdom. These things allow you time and space to develop a happy and peaceful Mind. Therefore, the wise praise unconditional Love, Contentment and Wisdom.

This should be your criteria on what is and what is not the Truth; on what should be and what should not be the spiritual practice.”

Hearing that, the Kalamas were pleased, and with an open heart and mind, having embraced the spirit of free enquiry, listened to, questioned, and wholeheartedly accepted the teachings of the Buddha.

Buddha

Here are some common questions about the Buddha.

What is a Buddha?

The word “Buddha” means “The Awakened (or Enlightened) One.” A Buddha was previously a human being like us, who had reached the highest peak of spiritual cultivation through purification and mastery of the Mind, attaining the highest perfection possible by anyone. Having awakened to reality, He is one who has found True Happiness in realising the true nature of all things. With the attainment of Enlightenment (realisation of the Truth of all things), Wisdom and Compassion is perfected among

other countless positive qualities. Having become a Buddha, one transcends the limitations of a human (and gender) and becomes much greater than a human, gaining ultimate peace and liberation.

Can I Become a Buddha?

The potential of attaining Enlightenment or Buddhahood exists in each and every sentient being (including us). We all possess within ourselves the perfect goodness of Buddha-nature (potential for Buddhahood), which is like the bright full Moon. The path towards Enlightenment is the clearing of the dark clouds of defilements (negative qualities- chiefly Craving, Aversion and Ignorance) that overshadow our Buddha-nature, to let it shine forth. There are already countless Buddhas in existence and there will be countless more as long as there are those earnest in seeking the Truth.

Who is the Buddha?

The Buddha is the greatest character that ever appeared in the history of Humankind- being an embodiment of one perfect in thought, word and deed. He was the wisest

and most loving being that ever graced the Earth, an example of how great we can all become. “The Buddha” refers to the historical Shakyamuni Buddha who was born in Northern India (present day Nepal) more than 2,500 years ago (at about 563 B.C.). He is regarded as the founder of Buddhism for our world. He was a noble Shakyen Prince (Siddhartha Gautama) who had an entire kingdom of riches to inherit, who chose to renounce it at the age of 29 in search of Enlightenment (realisation of the Truth of all things and True Happiness) out of Compassion for all beings. After He attained Enlightenment at 35, He taught the Truth inspiring and tirelessly for 45 years to all who were willing to learn from Him. He passed away into the deep peace of Parinirvana at 80. His life is full of inspiring stories of how He touched people from all walks of life with His Wisdom and Compassion.

What did the Buddha Teach?

The Buddha’s message is a joyous one. He found the precious treasure of Freedom in the Truth and urged us how to follow the way that leads us to this same treasure. Though He tells us that we are in deep darkness, He also teaches us the path that leads us to light. He wishes us to

rise from a life of unreal dreams into a higher life of Wisdom where all love and do not hate. His appeal is universal, because He appeals to reason, and to the universal search for True Happiness in us. He put Truth to the crucial test of personal experience, encouraging everyone to doubt His teachings, believing that great realisations can arise from clearing great doubts. He taught us to be mindful of ourselves and become awake, to seek and to find True Happiness like He did.

How can the Buddha Help Me?

The Buddha is a spiritual genius as He reached the goal of the spiritual quest, Enlightenment by Himself. However, He could see that while we too can attain Enlightenment, we might need a lot of help. Out of Compassion, He devoted the rest of His life to being a guide to all who were willing to learn from Him, teaching all that had to be taught before passing away into everlasting bliss. He proved to be just as ingenious in showing us the path to True Happiness. As long as we keep our hearts and minds open, the Buddha still inspires us through His precious teachings.

Where is the Buddha Now?

The Buddhas are described as having three bodies (Trikaya) or aspects of personality, though they are in Ultimate Reality one in all and all in one:

1. The Truth Body of Buddha
2. The Bliss Body of Buddha
3. The Manifestation Body (Bodies) of Buddha

The Truth Body of Buddha

The Truth Body of a Buddha (Dharmakaya) is the embodiment of the Dharma (Truth itself) that is eternally present everywhere, expressed in the natural laws of the Universe and the workings of these laws. Sometimes we catch a glimpse of this wonderful reality when we are at peace and at one with everything. This body of Truth is in all things though it is beyond shape and form. It is represented by Mahavairocana Buddha, the central and universal Buddha who is preaching the Truth right here and now. He is both one and many at the same time as He manifests in many forms. Our inability to see or hear Him is due to our defilements.

Shakyamuni Buddha taught, “*He who sees the Dharma (the Truth) sees the Buddha; He who sees the Buddha sees the Dharma.*” A Buddha, having realised the Truth, becomes equal to the Truth. Though there are many Buddhas, all Buddhas are one and the same, being no different from one another in the Dharmakaya, which is the oneness of Truth.

The Dharmakaya exists simultaneously with the Sambhogakaya and Nirmanakaya. (See “The Bliss Body of Buddha” and “The Manifestation Body of Buddha”)

With the Moon representing Buddha, the Dharmakaya is like the rays of the Moon that shine at night. These rays of light might not be visible to the eye as they do not illuminate the darkness of space, but they pervade it fully everywhere.

The Bliss Body of Buddha

The Bliss Body of a Buddha (Sambhogakaya) or a Vairocana Buddha is the magnificent blissful reward body of a Buddha. It is the aspect through which each Buddha rejoices in the Truth, in teaching the Truth, and in leading others to

the realisation of the Truth. Because each Buddha had practised through countless ages and had attained perfect Wisdom and Compassion, each has immeasurable Peace, Merit and Happiness, as expressed in the Sambhogakaya. Buddhas usually do not appear in this form as we find it incomprehensible due to our lack of understanding. Instead, they manifest as Nirmanakayas (see “The Manifestation Body of Buddha”).

With the Moon representing Buddha, the Sambhogakaya is like the unclouded full Moon itself shining bright in its total splendour.

The Manifestation Body of Buddha

An example of a Manifestation Body of a Buddha (Nirmanakaya) in our world is the manifested (transformed) body of the historical Shakyamuni Buddha. It is the Buddha expressed in a “human” form. A Buddha can also manifest in many different forms at the same time to teach the Truth to more beings. Having attained perfection, the abilities of a Buddha are far beyond that of an ordinary human. It is out of Compassion, to be an example, and to teach the Truth to all beings, that a Buddha

chooses to appear in a form (instead of the Sambhogakaya-see “The Bliss Body of Buddha”) that we can relate to.

When Shakyamuni Buddha passed away into Parinirvana, only His physical body died. The essence of His Enlightenment still exists in the form of the Dharmakaya (see “The Truth Body of the Buddha”). Today, the remaining relics of Shakyamuni Buddha’s manifested body are enshrined in stupas all over the world.

With the Moon representing Buddha, the Nirmanakaya is like a reflection of the Moon upon a lake. The Moon can be reflected differently in many lakes at the same time.

The Four Noble Truths

The Buddha's teachings are based upon the solid foundation of Truth in the Four Noble Truths which can be known by all. They are not beliefs with unknown basis accepted on mere faith. They start from the centre of our very own undeniable direct human experience.

What are the Four Noble Truths?

The Buddha was only interested in showing us a clear direct path to True Happiness. The Four Noble Truths form the heart of the Buddha's Teachings. They are noble because they are taught by the Noble Ones- those who have direct perception of reality. By understanding them, we become ennobled.

The First Noble Truth

The Truth of Dukkha

Life is Full of Dissatisfactions-

We undergo many dissatisfactory experiences (dukkha) which should be identified:

Birth, Ageing, Sickness, Death,
Departure from who/what we like,
Being with who/what we dislike,
Failing to achieve or be with who/what we want...

The Second Noble Truth

The Truth of the Origin of Dukkha

The Causes of Dissatisfactions-

These unsatisfactory experiences have causes which should be identified:

Craving

(Greed or Wanting),
Aversion (Hatred or Not Wanting) and
Ignorance
(Delusion or Lack of Wisdom)

The Third Noble Truth

The Truth of the End of Dukkha- Nirvana

Life Can be Without Dissatisfactions-

There is a peaceful state where there are no unsatisfactory experiences:

Enlightenment or Nirvana (the extinguishment of Craving, Aversion and Ignorance)

The Fourth Noble Truth

The Truth of the Path Leading to the End of Dukkha

The Way to Life Without Dissatisfactions-

There is a path to lead us to this state of Peace and True Happiness:

The Noble Eightfold Path.

Why is there so much “Suffering” in Buddhism?

The use of the word “suffering” in Buddhism can be misleading. When we hear the Buddha say “Life is suffering,” we wonder what He is saying, as most of us don’t experience extreme misery most of the time.

The actual word used by the Buddha is “dukkha” which means that “things aren’t completely right in our lives- there are many unsatisfactory conditions in our existence; something always seems amiss.” “Suffering” used in Buddhism thus refers to all kinds of dissatisfactions big and small.

What about Happiness?

To live is to experience a greater or lesser degree of dissatisfaction. The Buddha never denied that there is joy and happiness in life. But the nagging problem of

dissatisfaction is always around, while “happiness” is always swiftly fleeting by. This is the only problem in our lives. But it is the BIGGEST problem as it encompasses all problems we face. The Buddha is only drawing our attention to the fact that suffering is an inevitable part of life, that it is a problem that all experience, and wish to avoid, and that it can be overcome with the attainment of Nirvana (True Happiness).

Are the Four Noble Truths Pessimistic?

Some say Buddhism is a pessimistic religion that it keeps talking about suffering. This is definitely untrue. But neither is Buddhism a blindly optimistic religion. It is however, realistic and full of hope as it teaches that True Happiness is achievable through personal endeavour, one being the master of one's life.

Problems and difficulties exist whether we think of them or not. But only with honest recognition of them is solving them possible. The Buddha stated the indisputable truth that life is full of dissatisfactions so that He could teach us the way out of dissatisfactions towards True Happiness!

How are the Four Noble Truths Important?

To realise the Four Noble Truths is the central task of the Buddhist life as they lead to True Happiness. You will discover that the structure of the Four Noble Truths is the most simple, logical, scientific and systematic problem-solving formula possible. As these truths solve the ultimate problem of suffering, they are very important indeed.

How do the Four Noble Truths Work?

The first Truth states our problem of suffering. The second states the cause of the problem. The third states the ideal state without the problem, and the fourth Truth states how this ideal state can be achieved.

What is the Origin of the Four Noble Truths?

The Four Noble Truths were first taught by the Buddha during His first sermon at the Deer Park in Isipatana (of ancient India near today's Benares) after He attained Enlightenment- that was more than 2,500 years ago. The sermon was called the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (The Teaching of the Setting the Wheel of Dharma in

Motion) All the teachings that the Buddha later gave were either further in-depth elaboration of the Four Noble Truths, or teachings that led to them. He used a wide variety of skillful means and methods in teaching them to different people.

The Noble Eightfold Path

What is the Noble Eightfold Path?

The Noble Eightfold Path (the Fourth Noble Truth) is a systematic and complete formula to rid dissatisfaction and attain True Happiness. It contains everything needed for virtuous living, clarity of understanding and the attaining of Wisdom. The Noble Eightfold Path is also known as the Middle Way, which avoids the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification. The 8 factors of the Noble Eightfold Path can be divided into 3 aspects called the Threefold Training:

Moral Conduct:

- Perfect Speech

- Perfect Action
- Perfect Livelihood

Mental Development (Concentration):

- Perfect Effort
- Perfect Mindfulness
- Perfect Meditation

Wisdom:

- Perfect Understanding
- Perfect Thought

Perfect Speech

We should make an effort to notice and comment upon others' good qualities and achievements instead of venting our anger or frustration on them. We can give moral support, consolation in times of grief, and share the Dharma. Speech is a powerful tool to influence others. When used wisely, many will benefit. Perfect Speech includes the avoidance of:

- Lying
- Tale-bearing

- Harsh Speech
- Idle Talk

We should

- Praise when Appropriate
- Criticise only Constructively
- Spread the Truth
- Say Healing Words
- Remain Silent when Necessary

Perfect Action

The practice of Perfect Action involves the respect for the life, property and personal relationships of others. It helps to develop a character that is self-controlled and mindful of the rights of others. Perfect Action include the avoidance of:

- Killing
- Stealing
- Sexual Misconduct

Perfect Action also includes physically acting in ways that benefit others. This includes helping and rescuing others from danger or suffering.

Perfect Livelihood

Perfect Livelihood means earning one's living in a way that is not harmful to others. In the choice of one's occupation, one should show respect for the life and welfare of all beings.

There are five trades that the Buddha considered as unworthy means to make one's living. They should be avoided as they cause suffering and unhappiness to others or create disunity in society. The trades that ought to be avoided are trade in:

- Deadly Weapons
- Animals for Slaughter
- Slavery
- Intoxicants
- Poisons

Perfect Effort

Effort is needed to cultivate Virtue or develop one's Mind, because one is often distracted or tempted to take the easy way out of things. The Buddha teaches that attaining True Happiness and Enlightenment depends upon one's own efforts. Effort is the root of all achievement. Thus, no matter how great the Buddha's achievement may be, or how excellent His Teaching is, one must put the Teaching into practice before one can expect to obtain the desired results. There are 4 types of Perfect Effort that should be practised:

1. Effort to Prevent the Arising of Unwholesome Thoughts (of Craving, Aversion and Ignorance)
2. Effort to Rid Unwholesome Thoughts that have Arisen
3. Effort to Develop Wholesome Thoughts (of Generosity, Loving-kindness and other positive qualities)
4. Effort to Maintain the Wholesome Thoughts that have Arisen (even when they are not appreciated by others)

Perfect Mindfulness

Mindfulness is an essential quality in everyone's daily activities. It is a mental factor that enables us to remember, and keep our awareness and attention on what is beneficial in terms of thought, word and deed. For example, when we awake in the morning, we can determine, "Today I will try not to harm others and will benefit them as much as possible." Mindfulness helps to keep this thought in our Mind all day and makes us aware of whether our daily actions correspond to this motivation. The Mind must be constantly aware of what is happening for neither mishaps nor misgivings to occur.

Perfecting Mindfulness is necessary if one is to progress towards Wisdom and Enlightenment. The Mind must be controlled and protected against distractions. Greed and Anger should be consciously avoided. Attention is given to the Mind because it is through the Mind that everything is comprehended, interpreted and understood. If lasting happiness is to be attained, the undisciplined Mind must first be looked after. To tame the Mind is to tame the world.

Perfect Meditation

Meditation is the gradual process of training the Mind to focus on a single object, and to remain fixed upon that object without wavering. The object of concentration may be a material thing such as a flower or a quality such as Loving-kindness. Even if one was to practice meditation for fifteen minutes a day, one will begin to experience its benefits. The constant practice of meditation helps one to develop a calm and concentrated Mind, and prepares one for the attainment of Wisdom and Enlightenment ultimately.

Perfect Understanding

Perfect Understanding is the seeing of all things as they really are, rather than as they appear to be. In order to see things as they really are, one must observe one's self and situation carefully, examining the meaning of what is observed. It is the true knowledge of all things realised by oneself through practice.

An inquiring and analytical attitude is important in acquiring Perfect Understanding. The Buddha taught us not to rely

upon hearsay, tradition or authority for the Truth but to judge the Truth in the light of our own unbiased and objective experience. The Buddha taught that just as a wise man does not accept any metal that glitters as being gold on the advice of another, but tests its properties for himself, so should one not accept what is heard without testing it by one's own experience.

Nonetheless, in seeking the Truth, one can do well to turn to the Teachings of the Buddha for help. This is the first step towards developing Perfect Understanding. One should listen to and study the Teachings of the Buddha and the explanations of qualified teachers. But listening to the Buddha's Teachings alone is not enough. One must also be attentive and try earnestly to remember and practise them.

The Buddha says developing Perfect Understanding is like a blind man who has his eyesight restored, and whose attitude towards things he used to like and dislike changes because he can now see them accurately.

Perfect Thought

Thoughts influence one's words and actions. If one speaks or acts out of Greed or Anger, then one will speak or act wrongly and suffer consequently. It is necessary to purify one's thoughts if one really wishes to improve one's conduct. Perfect Thought is knowing how to use the knowledge that we have for the benefit of one and all.

Perfect Thought means to avoid Craving and Ill Will, and to cultivate thoughts of Renunciation (giving up Attachment), Loving-kindness and Compassion. Craving should be avoided because it can never be fully satisfied, leading to unwholesome actions. Thoughts of Renunciation remove Craving, while thoughts of Loving-Kindness and Compassion remove Ill-Will.

The Threefold Refuge in The Triple Gem

When we wish to become Buddhists formally, the first step is to go to the Triple Gem (or the Three Jewels)- the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha for refuge. It is an expression of one's faith and determination in walking the Buddha's path. Since the time of the Buddha, taking this Threefold Refuge has identified a person as a Buddhist.

Why Take Refuge?

If we observe the world carefully, we will notice much pain, suffering and frustration experienced by all. We will look for a way to end these distressing conditions just as a traveller caught in a storm seeks shelter. If he finds shelter in a strong and safe building, he will call out to the others struggling in the storm to join him in his refuge. Similarly,

one chooses to become a Buddhist when he understands who the Buddha is and how the Triple Gem can provide him the way to end suffering. Out of Compassion, he also encourage others to take the same refuge.

The Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha are called the Triple Gem because they represent qualities excellent and precious like a gem. Once we recognise these unique qualities after careful consideration, and are confident that the Triple Gem can lead us towards True Happiness and Enlightenment, we take refuge in it. Therefore, it is not out of mere faith, but with an open-minded attitude and inquiring spirit that we begin practising the Buddha's Teaching.

Buddha

The word "Buddha" means the "Fully Enlightened One" or the "Awakened One." It is the title given to those who have attained supreme and perfect Enlightenment. Buddhists acknowledge the Buddha as the embodiment of the highest Morality, deepest Concentration, and perfect Wisdom. The Buddha is also known to His followers as the "Perfected One" because He has eradicated all Craving,

Aversion and Ignorance, having overcome all unwholesome actions, putting an end to all suffering.

The Buddha is the Fully Enlightened One because He has realised the Truth and sees things as they really are. He knows through His perfect Wisdom, what is good and what is not good for everyone. Out of Compassion, He shows us the path leading towards True Happiness.

The Buddha's exemplary Conduct, perfect Wisdom and great Compassion make Him an excellent teacher. Using skillful means, He is able to reach out to all His followers so that they can understand His Teaching.

The Buddha as a Doctor

Refuge is likened to the doctor, medicine and nurse a sick person relies upon to be cured. We are like a sick person as we are afflicted with the illness of having many unsatisfactory situations in life. Seeking a solution, we consult a qualified doctor, the Buddha, who diagnoses the causes of our illnesses, the disturbing attitudes and the confused actions we have done under their influence. Then

He prescribes the medicine of the Dharma, the teachings, on how to gain the realisations leading to Enlightenment.

Dharma

The Buddha taught the Dharma (the teachings of the Truth of all things) solely out of Compassion for all who suffer in the cycle of birth and death. The Dharma is therefore taught without any selfish motives. It is well taught and completely good, by nature pure and bright like a light that destroys the darkness of ignorance. When the Dharma is studied and practised, it brings many benefits both now and in the future.

The Dharma is the Teaching about the nature of life. These primary Teachings of the Buddha are contained in the collection of scriptures called the Tripitaka. These consist of the sermons (Sutta or Sutra Pitaka) taught by the Buddha, the disciplinary rules of the monastic and lay community (Vinaya Pitaka) and the philosophy and psychology of Buddhism (Abhidharma Pitaka).

We get to know about the Dharma by reading the scriptures. We can also learn from the writings and

explanations of qualified teachers. Once we have familiarised ourselves with the Dharma through reading and listening, we have to realise its truth for ourselves by putting it into practice. This means purifying our conduct and cultivating Mental Development until the Teaching becomes part of our own experience.

The Dharma as Medicine

We must practice the Dharma, which is like the medicine the Buddha gave us, to attain Enlightenment. It is not enough just to hear the Dharma. We have to actively apply it in our daily lives and in our relationships with others. This means we try to be mindful and notice when disturbing attitudes arise. Then, we apply the remedies enabling us to perceive the situation clearly. If sick people have medicine but don't take it, they never get cured. Similarly, we may have an elaborate shrine at home and a huge library of Dharma books but if we, for example, do not apply patience when we meet a person who annoys us, we miss an immediate opportunity to practise the Dharma.

Sangha

The Sangha that a Buddhist takes refuge in is the community of noble monks and nuns who lead exemplary lives, who attained insight into the true nature of things. Their lives and achievements show others that it is possible to progress on the path to Enlightenment.

However, the Sangha also generally refers to the fourfold community of monks (bhikkhus), and nuns (bhikkhunis), and excellent male and female lay followers (though “Sangha” is usually used to address monks and nuns who have renounced the lay life to practise and teach the Dharma full time.) Monks and nuns are respected for their good conduct and experience in spiritual practice. They are also respected for their diligence, mindfulness and calmness. Wise and learned, they are able teachers of the Dharma, like trusted friends who inspire us along the path of practice.

The lay followers accept the Four Noble Truths and the other teachings of the Buddha, and seek happiness and Enlightenment as their common goal in life. They also uphold common moral values. Thus a Buddhist can also

look to other members of the lay community for help and advice in times of need.

The Sangha as Nurses

Members of the Sangha are like nurses who help us take the medicine of Dharma. The nurses remind us when we forget which pills to take. If we have difficulty swallowing huge pills, the nurses break them into smaller pieces for us. Similarly, the Sangha helps us practise the Dharma correctly when we are confused. Any fellow practitioner who is more advanced than us can be our spiritual friend who can help us.

The Journey to Enlightenment

To better understand the idea of taking refuge, imagine a traveller who wants to visit a distant city where he has never been. He will need a guide, a path to follow and even travelling companions on the way. A Buddhist working towards attaining True Happiness and Enlightenment is like this traveller. The Buddha is his “guide,” the Dharma his “path” and the Sangha his “travelling companions.”

Taking Refuge

The simplest expression of one's intention of taking the Threefold Refuge in the Triple Gem as refuge is by repeating the following lines thrice:

I go to the Buddha for refuge.

I go to the Dharma for refuge.

I go to the Sangha for refuge.

These lines can be repeated by one alone before an image of the Buddha or repeated line by line after a monk or nun. The formal ceremony is very simple, but it is the commitment that one has in the heart that truly matters. A Buddhist may repeat the Threefold Refuge daily to remind himself that he has made a commitment to attain the goal of True Happiness and Enlightenment through the guidance and inspiration of the Triple Gem.

Benefits of Taking Refuge

Taking the Threefold Refuge is the first step on the path to Enlightenment. Thereafter, through Moral Conduct and Mental Development, self-mastery, Wisdom and

Compassion is achieved. Even if Enlightenment is not achieved in this life, one who takes the Threefold Refuge is more likely to have favourable conditions for encountering the Triple Gem again, aiding the attaining Enlightenment in a future life.

The Five Precepts

The Five Precepts are recommendations given by the Buddha, proposed to be lived by one who wishes to lead a peaceful life while contributing to the happiness of family and society. The Five Precepts are voluntarily observed by lay Buddhists. They are not commandments that have to be strictly abided by. They form the basis of universal morality in the Moral Conduct aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path, which is very important in the beginning of practising the Buddhist path.

Are Precepts Fixed Rules?

Following the precepts blindly without Wisdom and understanding is never encouraged. The Five Precepts should never be stuck by blindly disregarding the circumstances; there are sometimes exceptional occasions

when upholding them might create more suffering for others, proving unwise. At these times, the Five Precepts might have to be bent. (For instance, we might have to tell white lies to protect someone in danger- this is “bending” the Fourth Precept, which is against lying.) Whenever any of the Five Precepts is not upheld, it should only be for the welfare of others and not for selfish gain.

What are the Benefits of Precepts?

The Buddha once told a priest that it is much better to “sacrifice” one’s unwholesome conduct by observing the Five Precepts than killing animals to “sacrifice to the gods.” He taught that observing them not only expresses one’s gratitude for present good fortune, but also increases the opportunity for happiness and good fortune in the future. One who mindfully observes these five training guidelines of wholesome conduct will find peace in everyday life and is unlikely to bring trouble upon oneself or others.

Are the Five Precepts Hard to Observe?

The Five Precepts are never meant to restrict as they protect oneself and others when observed well. Breaking

a precept is not considered an unforgivable sin- it is seen as an unskillful act due to the lack of Wisdom. A lay Buddhist may find the Five Precepts difficult to observe completely and constantly in the beginning, but one should not be disheartened. Even if one is able to observe only one or two precepts successfully, one is already laying the foundation for happiness now and in the future. One may make a daily renewal of one's determination to observe the precepts in order to remind oneself of the ideal way of life one should lead. One should try his very best to achieve this ideal. In doing so, one will discover inner peace and always be at ease with the world. We have to remember that though we are presently imperfect, we can all strive towards perfection.

How do I Take the Five Precepts?

To express one's resolution to observe the Five Precepts, a Buddhist may recite them before a Buddha image or repeat them after a monk or nun. The ceremony for receiving the precepts is usually after the ceremony of going for the Threefold Refuge.

What are some Other Precepts?

All other sets of Buddhist precepts, including the Eight and Ten Precepts (Precepts for Lay Buddhist Training and Retreats), the Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni Precepts (Precepts of Monks and Nuns) and the Bodhisattva Precepts (Precepts to benefit as many as possible)... are further extensions of these Five Precepts.

The First Precept

Respect for Life:
Not to Kill ;To Protect

*I undertake the training rule
to abstain from taking life
(so that I will practise Compassion
by protecting and benefitting all life)*

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I undertake the precept to cultivate Compassion and protect human, animal and plant life (protecting nature). I am determined not to kill or injure, not to let others do so, and not to support any act of physical or mental harm.

The Second Precept

Respect for Personal Property:
Not to Steal ; To be Generous

*I undertake the training rule
to abstain from taking the not given
(so that I will practise Generosity by sharing
or giving my material and spiritual wealth)*

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, injustice, theft and oppression, I undertake the precept to cultivate Loving-kindness for the well-being of people and animals. I will practice Honesty and Generosity by sharing my wealth, time, energy, empathy, encouragement and other resources, especially the gift of Truth with those in need. I am determined not to possess or steal anything (including time- by being late or being irresponsible at work...) that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others and the public and prevent others from profiting from suffering of any living being.

The Third Precept

Respect for Personal Relationships:
Not to Indulge the Senses ; To be Content

*I undertake the training rule
to abstain from misconduct
regarding objects and subjects of sense pleasures,
(especially adultery,
so that I will practice contentment
and channel my energies
towards spiritual development)*

Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I undertake the precept to cultivate responsibility and protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love, responsibility and a long-term commitment. To preserve the happiness of others and myself, I will respect the commitments of others. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.

Aware of the suffering caused by sensual indulgence, I will also not mindlessly indulge my senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and/or thought in the sense pleasures (eg. shows, music, food, sex etc.) such that I am distracted from the path towards self-improvement.

The Fourth Precept

Respect for Truth:
Not to Lie ;To Be Truthful

I undertake the training rule
to abstain from false speech
(and other unwholesome modes of speech,
so that I will communicate positively)

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and inability to listen to others, I undertake the precept to cultivate loving speech and deep listening to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve them of their suffering. I will speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy and hope. I am determined not to spread news, criticise or condemn on that which I do not know for certain. I will refrain from uttering words that can

cause division or discord in family or community. I will make the effort to reconcile and resolve conflicts big and small.

The Fifth Precept

Respect for Mental and Physical Well-being:
Not to Take Intoxicants ; To Be Mindful

I undertake the training rule
to abstain from taking alcohol,
and that which causes intoxication
(so that I will be more healthy and
not break the precepts through loss of mindfulness)

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I undertake the precept to cultivate good physical and mental health, for myself, my family and society by practising mindful eating, drinking and consuming. I will ingest only items that preserve peace, well-being and joy in body and Mind, and the collective body and consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to use alcohol, drugs or any other intoxicant, or to ingest foods or items that contain negative elements, so

as to cultivate greater awareness, attention and clarity of Mind. I am aware that to damage my body or my Mind with these poisons is to let down my family and society. I will work to transform violence, fear, anger and confusion in myself and in society by balancing a physical and mental diet. I understand that a proper diet is crucial for positive self and society transformation and advancement in Mental Development.

(This precept is sometimes interpreted as either total abstinence from intoxicants or as permissible moderate intake, so long as there is no indulgence of the senses or impairment of health or mindfulness. The best safeguard is total abstinence, which best sustains mindfulness in following the first four precepts.)

The Three Universal Characteristics

What are the Three Characteristics?

A universal characteristic is a Truth of the Universe that is connected with all existence despite differences in space and time. It tells us about the true nature of all things. The Buddha taught that all conditioned existence is governed by the Three Universal Characteristics. They are also called the Three Seals of the Law (of the Dharma) as the Buddha taught us that any teaching that abides by these characteristics can be validated as a true teaching. Any teaching that does not bear these three seals and the Four Noble Truths cannot be said to be a teaching of the

Buddha. (4. below is taught as the 3rd characteristic in place of 3. in the Mahayana School of Buddhism; 3. is taught as the 3rd characteristic in the Theravada School.) To attain True Happiness or Enlightenment, these truths must be realised as they help us to touch reality.

1. Anicca- Impermanence (Change)

All compounded things are constantly changing

2. Anatta- Selflessness (Non-self or Impersonality)

All phenomena is without self-nature

3. Dukkha- Dissatisfaction (Suffering)

All unenlightened experience is dissatisfactory

4. Nirvana- Enlightenment (Perfect Stillness)

Enlightenment is experience of True Peace and True Happiness

The Relation of the Characteristics

Whatever is constantly changing (1st characteristic) is without an independent self (2nd characteristic) and causes suffering (3rd characteristic) when we are attached to them. Nirvana (4.) is the state of peace unaffected by 1-3.

Anicca

Anicca describes phenomena from the point of view of time. Everything in the Universe, be it physical (from the smallest cells of our bodies to the biggest stars) or mental (such as the thoughts running through our minds), constantly undergo change, never staying the same for even just two consecutive split-seconds. As everything is a result or effect of changing causes and conditions, everything changes constantly.

The smallest component of the most “solid” thing is only a ball of fluxing energy. The untrained Mind is even much more fickle and prone to change, having no stability of a fixed self-nature. All living and non-living elements are thus subject to decay and destruction. The law of Anicca is neutral and unbiased. It is ungoverned by any higher power—as things decay, as well as become renewed naturally.

Why Should I Realise Anicca?

When one realises that people (their personalities, interests and attitudes) and life situations are unfixed and constantly changing, one will approach each moment of a

relationship with an open Mind, being able to react to each new situation without clinging to outdated conceptions. Relationships can then develop fruitfully.

As success in life depends on one's ability to adapt to changes in situations and to make the most of new arising opportunities, we will be more successful in all our undertakings if this Truth is realised. We will also learn to treasure our health, material well-being and relationships, and live with less attachment, using our valuable present state of well-being to mindfully practise the path towards True Happiness or Enlightenment. It is also because of Anicca that we can transform suffering into True Happiness.

Anatta

Anatta describes phenomena from the point of view of space. Everything in the Universe is compounded or made up of parts, which are in turn made up of smaller and smaller parts. Each of these parts changes constantly—sometimes grossly but mostly subtly (to our senses). There is no single fixed component of anything that is not subject to change. A thing exists only when the parts that

constitute it come together. Thus, there is no fixed unchanging self within anything- this is called impersonality. It also means that everything is interconnected and interdependent upon each other. Nothing exists on its own as a separate self.

If a real or permanent self exists, one should be able to identify it. However, one's body changes unceasingly from second to second from birth to death. The Mind changes even much more rapidly. Thus, we cannot say the body, Mind or any particular combination of the two is one's self. Neither can an independent self exist as both the body and Mind depend on many factors to exist. As the so-called self is just a collection of conditioned and changing physical and mental factors, there is no real or concrete element of self in us.

If the body were the self, it would be able to will or control itself to be strong and healthy. However, it grows tired, hungry and falls sick against its will. Likewise, if the Mind was the self, it could do whatever it wished. But the Mind often runs away from what it knows to be right to the wrong. It becomes disturbed, distracted and excited

against its will. Therefore, neither the body nor Mind can be the self.

Why Should I Realise Anatta?

One who does not realise this truth will tend to be self-centred and egoistic. Not only will one feel constantly threatened by people and situations, one will also feel compelled to protect oneself, one's possessions, and even opinions, at any cost.

Realising this truth, it will be easier to grow, learn, develop, and be generous, kind and compassionate because one no longer need to be constantly self-defensive. One will also deal with everyday situations more effectively, aiding progress towards True Happiness or Enlightenment. As long as we assume we possess a self, the selfish "I-my-mine" attitude dominates our life and brings all kinds of problems.

Dukkha

Nothing in the Universe is capable of giving us complete and lasting satisfaction. This is due to the constant change

of everything (including what we treasure) and the changing cravings of our untrained and conditioned Mind. Even during the most pleasant experience, there is anxiety that the moment will not last long. Seeking lasting happiness in the constantly changing disturbs peace of Mind, causing suffering. It also results in the suffering of repeated rebirths.

Why Should I Realise Dukkha?

Understanding that dissatisfaction is universal and inevitable enables one to face the realities of life with calmness. One will be able to cope with ageing, sickness and death without becoming disheartened or desperate. It also encourages us to find the solution to the problem of dissatisfaction just as the Buddha did, and seek True Happiness or Enlightenment.

Nirvana

Nirvana is the ground of being, the substance of all that is. For example, a wave does not have to “die” in order to become water. Water is the substance of the wave. The wave is already water. We are also likewise. We carry in us

the ground of interbeing (inter-connectedness), Nirvana, the “world” beyond birth and death, permanence and impermanence, self and non-self. Nirvana is the complete silencing of concepts and phenomena- True Peace. Nirvana is the ground of all that is, just as waves do not exist out of water. If you know how to touch the waves, you know how to touch water at the same time. Nirvana does not exist separate of Anicca and Anatta. If you know how to use them to touch reality, you touch Nirvana in the here and the now.

Nirvana is the extinction of all notions. Birth and death are notions. Being and non-being are notions. In our daily lives, we have to deal with these relative realities. But if we touch life more deeply, reality will reveal itself in a different way. When you understand Anicca and Anatta, you are already free of much suffering and in touch with Nirvana. Nirvana is not something you look for in the future. As a Dharma Seal, it is present in every one of the Buddha’s teachings. Nirvana is not the absence of life. Nirvana can be found in this very life. Nirvana means the pacifying, silencing or extinguishment of the fire of suffering. Nirvana teaches that we are already what we want to become within. We don’t have to run after anything

anymore. We only need to return to ourselves and touch our true nature. When we do this, we will have real peace and joy.

Why Should I Realise Nirvana?

Nirvana is the Buddhist “technical” term for Enlightenment- liberation from all suffering or True Happiness! If we want to become truly happy, Nirvana definitely has to be attained.

Karma

“Karma” means action. It refers to the intentional deeds we do with our body, speech and Mind through action, talking and thinking. Karma is the law that every deed done, given the conditions, will bear certain fruits.

How does Karma Work?

All deeds leave imprints or seeds on our consciousness, which ripen into our experiences when the appropriate conditions come together. For example, if we help someone with a kind heart, this action leaves a positive imprint on our mindstream. When conditions are suitable, this imprint will ripen in our receiving of help when we need it.

Karmic seeds continue with us from lifetime to lifetime. However, if we do not create the cause or Karma for something, we will not experience that result. If one does not plant a certain seed, that plant will not grow. The Buddha taught:

*According to the seed that is sown,
So is the fruit you reap.
The doer of good will gather good result,
The doer of evil reaps evil result.
If you plant a good seed well,
Then you will enjoy the good fruits.*

What are the Effects of Karma?

Karma affects our future rebirths and influences what we experience during our lives: how others treat us, our wealth, social status etc. Karma also affects our personality and character: our talents, strong personality traits and habits. The kind of environment we are born into is also influenced by Karma.

*We are according to what we have done.
We will be according to what we do.*

What Kinds of Karma are There?

If an action brings pain and misery in the long term for oneself and others, it is unwholesome or negative Karma. And if it brings happiness, it is wholesome or positive Karma. Actions are not inherently good or bad- they are only so according to their motivations and the consequences they bring. Whatever happiness and fortune we experience in our lives comes from our own positive actions, while our problems result from our own negative actions.

How is Negative Karma Created?

There are ten unwholesome actions which should be avoided if one does not wish to create negative Karma.

1. Killing
2. Stealing
3. Sexual Misconduct
4. Lying
5. Tale-bearing

6. Harsh Speaking
7. Idle Talking
8. Having Craving (Greed)
9. Having Aversion (Anger)
10. Having Wrong Views

How is Positive Karma Created?

There are ten wholesome actions which one ought to strive to do to create positive Karma. The ten wholesome actions also include the avoidance of the ten unwholesome actions.

1. Practising Charity
2. Practising Self-Restraint
3. Practising Meditation
4. Having Reverence
5. Practising Service
6. Transferring of Merit
7. Rejoicing in Others' Merit
8. Hearing the Dharmna
9. Teaching the Dharma
10. Straightening One's Views

Can Karma be Created Together?

Karma can be both collective and individual. Collective Karma is action done together as a group. For example, a platoon of soldiers may kill together. The results of this action can be experienced together as a group, often in future lives. Yet each member of the group thinks, speaks and acts differently, thus also creating individual karma, the results of which he will experience for himself.

Who Controls Karma?

There is no one that decides the “rewards and punishments” for what we do. We create the causes of our actions, and we experience their results. We are responsible for our own experience. The Buddha discovered the law of Karma- He did not create it. (No one created it.) By teaching us the law of Karma, the Buddha shows us how to work within the functioning of cause and effect in order to attain True Happiness and avoid pain.

Is Everything Subject to Karma?

The law of Karma does not apply to “mindless” actions such as walking, sitting or sleeping. Such actions do not produce effects apart from the actions themselves. (However, Karma applies to the intentional thoughts one thinks.) Similarly, accidents are considered neutral Karma because they are unintentional. However, we should always work towards increasing our mindfulness such that accidents do not occur.

Can Karma Change?

Karma is not inflexibly fixed- it does not mean fate or predetermination. Intentional actions at some time or other produce their effects when favouring conditions exist. Though people in their present lives are experiencing the effects of their past actions (Karma), it is possible to change, reduce or increase the effects of these past actions through present actions, which can affect the immediate future and future lives. Understanding the law of Karma helps one realise that we are whatever we make ourselves to be. We are entirely responsible for our destiny.

How do We Know Our Karma?

The Buddha gave us general guidelines about the results of various actions. For example, the Buddha taught us that killing causes a short life and generosity results in wealth. However, only a Buddha's omniscient Mind can understand the complete dynamics of Karma.

There is flexibility in the functioning of actions and their results. While we know that constantly insulting others, for example, brings us an unfortunate rebirth, just exactly what form we will be reborn into varies. If the action was very heavy- for example, with strong anger we repeatedly abused many people and felt gratified that we had hurt their feelings, the result will be more unpleasant than if we casually teased someone and later regretted our insensitivity. The conditions present at the time that karmic seed ripens also influences what specific results it brings.

Is Karma Always Fair?

When we see dishonest people who are wealthy, or cruel people who are powerful, or kind people who die young,

we may doubt the law of Karma. But many of the results we experience in this life are the results of actions in previous lives, and many of the actions we do in this life will only ripen in future lives- this is called long-term Karma. (Short-term Karma is that which show results within a short term of time.) The wealth of dishonest people might be the result of their generosity in past lives. Their current dishonesty is however, leaving karmic seeds for them to experience poverty in future lives. Likewise, the respect and authority given to cruel people is due to positive actions they did in the past. In the present, they are abusing their power, thus creating the cause for future pain. Those who die young are experiencing the result of negative actions such as killing done in past lives. However, their present kindness is planting seeds or imprints on their mindstreams for them to experience happiness in the future.

Will We Surely Experience Negative Karma?

When seeds, even small ones, are planted in the ground, they will eventually sprout- unless they do not have the needed conditions for growth such as water, sunlight and

fertilisers. The ultimate way to uproot karmic imprints or seeds is by meditation on the emptiness of inherent existence. This is the way to purify the disturbing attitudes and the karmic imprints completely. At our level, this may be rather difficult, but we can still stop the harmful imprints from ripening by purifying them. This is like preventing the seed from receiving water, sunshine and fertiliser. Doing much good too can “dilute” the ill effects of negative Karma.

How Can We Purify Negative Karma?

Purification is very important as it prevents future suffering and relieves guilt. By purifying our Minds, we are able to be more peaceful and understand the Dharma better. The four opponent powers used to purify negative imprints or seeds are:

1. Regret
2. Determination Not to Repeat the Action
3. Taking the Threefold Refuge and Generating Compassion towards Others
4. Actual Remedial Practice (Any Positive Action- including

Meditation and Chanting)

The four opponent powers must be done repeatedly. As we have done many negative actions, we cannot expect to counteract all of them at once. The stronger the four opponent powers are, the firmer our determination not to repeat the action and the more powerful the purification will be.

Does Karma Influence Whom We Meet?

Yes- but this does not mean that all relationships are predetermined. We may have certain karmic predispositions to feel close to or to have friction with certain people. But, this does not mean that our relationships with them must continue along the same lines. If we are kind to those who speak ill of us and try to communicate with them, the relationships will change, creating positive Karma that will bring happiness in the future.

We are not karmically bound to others- there are no special people who are the one and only one for us. Since

we had many past lives, we have had contact with every being some time before. Our relationship with any particular person also changes constantly. However, past karmic connections can influence our present relationships. For example, if someone has been our spiritual mentor in a past life, we may be drawn to that person in this lifetime, and when he or she teaches us the Dharma, it may have a very strong effect on us.

If Others Suffer Due to Negative Karma, Can We Help Them?

We know what it is like to feel miserable, and that is exactly how others feel when they are experiencing the results of their own destructive actions. Out of empathy and compassion, we should definitely help. Though others created the causes to experience their difficulties, maybe they also created the causes to receive help from us! We are all alike in wanting happiness and trying to avoid pain. It does not matter whose pain or problem it is- we should try to relieve it. For example, to think, “the poor are poor because of their own past lives? miserliness. I would be interfering with their karma if I tried to help,” is a cruel misconception. We should never rationalise our own

laziness, apathy or smugness by misinterpreting cause and effect. Compassion and universal responsibility are important for our own spiritual development and world peace.

Rebirth & The Six Realms

Rebirth refers to one's Mind taking upon a new body upon death. Our Mind refers to all of our formless emotional and cognitive experiences. While we are alive, the body and Mind are linked, but at death they separate. The body becomes a corpse, and the Mind continues on to take another body. To emphasize the continuity of changing consciousness, we use the word "mindstream" to refer to our Mind. Each person has a separate Mind or mindstream.

When did Rebirth Begin?

Our Mind, that carries over from life to life has no beginning- its continuity is infinite. Each moment of our Mind is a continuation of the previous moment. Who we

are and what we think and feel depends on who we were yesterday. Our present Mind is a continuation of the past Mind. One moment of our Mind was caused by the previous moment of our Mind. This continuity can be traced back to childhood and even to when we were a foetus in our Mother's womb. Even before the time of conception, our mindstream existed in another body.

Using the example of a number line, looking left from position zero, there is no first negative number, and looking right, there is no highest last number- one more can always be added. Likewise, our mindstream has no beginning or end. We all have had countless past rebirths, and our Mind will continue to exist infinitely. By purifying our mindstream, we can make our future existences better and better.

What Causes Rebirth?

Although all sentient beings have the Buddha-nature (the potential to become Buddhas), their Minds are clouded by Ignorance since beginningless time. From Ignorance springs Craving (Greed) and Aversion (Hatred), which cause us to be continually greedy for life and its illusory

pleasures while hating or rejecting death and other displeasures. Each moment of Ignorance was produced from the preceding moment without a beginning. Although Ignorance has no beginning, it can be eradicated through the attainment of Wisdom in Enlightenment.

How Does Rebirth Happen?

The sense consciousnesses that see, hear, smell, taste and feel tactile sensations, and the gross mental consciousness, function actively while we are alive. When one is dying, they cease to function and absorbed into the subtle mental consciousness.

The subtle Mind bears the imprints of the actions we have done (Karma) with all the tendencies, preferences, abilities and characteristics that have been developed and conditioned in this life.

After death, the subtle Mind leaves one body, enters the intermediate state and re-establishes itself in a fertilised egg in another body. After the subtle Mind joins with another body at the moment of conception, the gross sense consciousnesses and the gross mental

consciousnesses reappear, and the person again sees, hears, thinks and so forth.

The subtle Mind which goes from one life to the next, is a constantly changing phenomenon. It is not considered to be a soul or real personality. Thus the individual is reborn and develops a personality conditioned both by the mental characteristics that have been carried over and by the new environment. The personality will change and be modified by conscious effort and conditioning factors like education, parental influence and society. At death, it re-establishes itself in a new fertilised egg.

This process of dying and being reborn will continue until the conditions that cause it, Craving and Ignorance, cease. When they do, instead of being reborn, the Mind attains a state called Nirvana, which is release from all suffering.

How Does the Mind Go from One Body to Another?

Our mindstreams are like radio waves, which is energy transmitted at different frequencies. Radio waves are transmitted, travel through space, are attracted to and

picked up by the receiver with the same tuning and is broadcasted as music. It is similar with the Mind. At death, mental energy travels through space, is attracted to and picked up by the fertilised egg. As the embryo grows, it centres itself in the brain from where it later “broadcasts” itself as the new personality.

Is Being Reborn Good?

The idea of rebirth can be very comforting as it offers chances to amend the mistakes you have made in this life and time to further develop the skills and abilities you have nurtured in this life. If we fail to attain Enlightenment in this life, you will have the opportunity to try again next time. If you have made mistakes in this life, you will be able to learn from your mistakes. Things you were unable to do or achieve in this life may well become possible in the next life.

Ultimately, the aim of the Buddhist is to end the wheel of rebirth -- to be released from the cycle of birth and death, which is repeated suffering. Out of Compassion, one who is released can also help to show others the path to liberation.

Can I Remember My Past Lives?

Our Minds being obscured by Ignorance find it difficult to remember the past. Also, many changes occur in our body and Mind as we die and are reborn, making recollection difficult. Not remembering something does not mean that it does not exist- we sometimes even forget where we parked our car! However, some people can remember their past lives in meditation.

Must I Know My Past Lives?

What is more important is how we live our present life. Knowing what we were like in past lives is useful only if it helps to generate determination to avoid negative actions or to free ourselves from Rebirth. The important thing is to purify our previous negative actions, avoid creating more, and put energy into accumulating positive potential and developing our good qualities.

If we want to know about your past life, we only have to look at the state of our present life. If we want to know about our future lives, we only need to look at what we

are doing right now. This is because we received our present rebirth as a result of our past actions.

A human rebirth is a fortunate one, and we created the cause for it by living ethically in our previous lives. On the other hand, our future rebirths will be determined by what we think, say and do now- and our Mind motivates all these actions. Thus, we can get an idea of the kind of rebirths we will take by looking at our present attitudes and examining whether they are constructive or destructive. We don't need to go to a fortune-teller to ask what will become of us- we can simply consider the imprints we are leaving on our mindstream by our thoughts, words and deeds.

What Decides How I m Reborn?

The most important factor influencing where we will be reborn and what sort of life we shall have is Karma- our intentional physical and mental actions. What we are is determined very much by how we have thought and acted in the past. Likewise, how we think and act now will influence how we will be in the future.

A gentle loving person tends to be reborn in a heaven realm or as a human being who has a predominance of pleasant experiences. The extremely cruel person tends to be reborn in a hell realm or as a human who has a predominance of painful experiences. The person who develops obsessive craving, fierce longings, and burning ambitions that can never be satisfied tends to be reborn as a hungry ghost or as a human being frustrated by longing and wanting. Whatever mental habits are strongly developed in this life will continue in the next life.

Can I Decide Where I'm Reborn?

Yes- that is why one of the steps on the Noble Eightfold Path is Perfect Effort. It depends on our sincerity, how much energy we exert and how strong your habits are. Some people simply go through life under the influence of their past habits, without making an effort to change. Such people will continue to suffer unless they change their negative habits. The longer the negative habits remain, the more difficult they are to change.

The Buddhist understands this and takes advantage of each and every opportunity to break mental habits that have

unpleasant results and to develop mental habits that have pleasant and happy results. Meditation is one of the techniques used to modify the habit patterns of the Mind as to speaking or refraining to speaking, acting or refraining to act in certain ways. The whole of the Buddhist life is a training to purify and free the Mind.

An Example of Rebirth

If being patient and kind was a pronounced part of your character in your last life, such tendencies will re-emerge in the present life. If they are strengthened and developed in the present life, they will re-emerge even stronger and more pronounced in the future life. This is based upon the simple observable fact that long established habits tend to be difficult to break. If you are patient and kind, it tends to happen that you are not so easily ruffled by others, you don't hold grudges, people like you and thus your experiences tend to be happier.

Or you might come into this life with the tendency to be patient and kind due to your mental habits in the past life. If in the present life you neglect to strengthen and develop them, they would gradually weaken and die out and

perhaps be completely absent in the future life. Patience and kindness being weak in this case, there is a possibility that in either this life or the next, a short temper, anger and cruelty could grow and develop, bringing with them all the unpleasant experiences that such attitudes create.

However, if you came into the present life with the tendency to be short-tempered and angry, and realise that such habits only cause you unpleasantness, you can make an effort to replace them with positive emotions. If you eliminate them completely, you become free from the unpleasantness caused by being short tempered and angry. If you are only able to weaken such tendencies, they would re-emerge in the next life where with more effort, they could be eliminated completely freeing you from their unpleasant effects.

Is There Proof of Rebirth?

Not only is there scientific evidence to support the Buddhist belief in rebirth, it is the only after-life theory that has strong supportive evidence. During the last 30 years, parapsychologists have been studying reports of people who have vivid memories of their former lives.

For example, in England, a five year old girl said she could remember her “other Mother and Father” and she talked vividly about what sounded like the events in the life of another person. Parapsychologists were called in and they asked her hundreds of questions to which she gave answers. She spoke of living in a particular village in what appeared to be Spain. She gave the name of the village, the name of the street she lived in, her neighbours’ names and details about her everyday life there. She also tearfully spoke of how she had been struck by a car and died of her injuries two days later. When these details were checked, they were found to be accurate. There was a village in Spain with the name the five year old girl had given. There was a house of the type she had described in the street she had named. What is more, it was found that a twenty-three year old woman living in the house had been killed in a car accident five years before. Now how is it possible for a five year old girl living in England and who had never been to Spain to know all these details? And of course, this is not the only case of this type.

For example, Professor Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia’s Department of Psychology has described dozens of cases of this type in his books. He is an

accredited scientist whose 25 year study of people who remember former lives is very strong evidence for the Buddhist teaching of rebirth.

What Does Rebirth Explain?

Karma and rebirth together explain many “unsolved” mysteries:

- The inequality of Mankind and their experiences (Even twins are different in character.)
- Talents of geniuses and child prodigies
- Spontaneous arising of instinctive likes and dislikes in infants
- Intellectual differences between parents and their children
- Sudden outbursts of emotion and changes in character
- Untimely death and unexpected changes in fortune

Do any Scientists Believe in Rebirth?

Thomas Huxley, who was responsible for having science introduced into the 19th century British school system

and who was the first scientist to defend Darwin's theories, believed that reincarnation was a very plausible idea. In his famous book "Evolution and Ethics and other Essays" he says:

"In the doctrine of 'transmigration,' whatever its origin, Brahmanical and Buddhist speculation found, ready to hand, the means of constructing a plausible vindication of the ways of the Cosmos to human... Yet this plea of justification is not less plausible than others; and none but very hasty thinkers will reject it on the ground of inherent absurdity.

Like the doctrine of evolution itself, that of transmigration has its roots in the world of reality; and it may claim such support as the great argument from analogy is capable of supplying."

Professor Julian Huxley, the distinguished British scientist who was Director General of UNESCO believed that rebirth is in harmony with scientific thinking. He said: "There is nothing against a permanently surviving spirit-individuality being in some way given off at death, as a definite wireless message is given off by a sending apparatus working in a particular way. But it must be remembered that the wireless message only becomes a message again

when it comes in contact with a new, material structure- the receiver. So with our possible spirit (consciousness)- emanation. It... would never think or feel unless again 'embodied' in some way. Our personalities are so based on body that it is really impossible to think of survival which would be in any true sense personal without a body of sorts... I can think of something being given off which would bear the same relation to men and women as a wireless message to the transmitting apparatus; but in that case the dead would, so far as one can see, be nothing but disturbances of different patterns wandering through the universe until... they came back to actuality of consciousness by making contact with something which could work as a receiving apparatus for Mind."

Where Can I be Reborn to?

The Buddha taught that there are six realms of existence (Samsara- this world of prevalent suffering) that we are continually reborn into. These six realms correspond to the six general mindstates that we fall into again and again due to Craving, Aversion and Ignorance. These six worlds are physically existent in our world and other dimensions- some seen and others unseen. They are worlds manifested

through the force of Karma of sentient beings. The six realms are also psychological worlds (mindstates) that we repeatedly get in and out of in this life (or even in one single day). None of these six realms are permanent- not even Heaven or Hell. The moment the Karma for one's existence in that world exhausts, one is reborn accordingly to the residual karmic forces. The first three worlds are called the lower realms- there great suffering is prevalent.

The other three worlds are called the higher realms- there there is generally more happiness, though suffering still exists. None of these worlds is a safe refuge (not even the realm of gods). All Buddhas have broken free of rebirth in the six realms, though they can choose to manifest into them out of Compassion to teach sentient beings the Dharma. The six realms of existence are:

1. Realm of Hell Beings
2. Realm of Hungry Ghosts
3. Realm of Animals
4. Realm of Human Beings
5. Realm of Demi-Gods
6. Realm of Gods

What is the Realm of Hell?

Hell is a horrible dimension of intense constant pain and torment where its beings are subjected to the most excruciating tortures inflicted by vengeful demons and beasts. The fiery heat of the hot hells corresponds to the passionate intensity of hatred and fear while the freezing coldness of the cold hells corresponds to the cold cruelty of hard-heartedness and apathy. Hell consists of sub-planes, each of which “specialises” in particular kind of karmic punishment appropriate to a certain kind of unwholesome action. Beings in Hell either burn with rage or are tortured by anxiety. They do not see that their torturers are manifestations of their own guilty Minds. The duration of life in Hell also feels unbearably long.

Hell in Our World

A World War can be the equivalent of Hell where violence, hatred and fear is everywhere. Being forced to face strong personal phobias such as flying in a plane or entering an unknown place can also be hellish experiences.

Am I a Hell-Being?

The “Human Hell-Being” lives life habitually seeing the world full of dangerous strangers out to get take their advantage- everyone seems to be constantly threatening. Their prime motivation is to eliminate or evade their menaces, and are in a state of open enmity with everyone they encounter. They suffer agonies of insecurity and feel the pain and humiliation of imagined wrongs. Because of how they behave towards others, they bring into being the enemies they imagine. Hell-Beings are dominated by the mental state of Hatred (Aversion), fear and/or even violence. They live in Hell in this world as they make every situation a place of torment for themselves. If one is to die tuned to this mindstate, one is likely to be reborn in Hell.

What is the Realm of Hungry Ghosts?

The dimension of Hungry Ghosts is of phantom-like creatures representing a mix of Craving and Hatred. Tormented by unfulfilled cravings and insatiable demanding of impossible satisfactions, they are beings with have a

terrible emptiness within themselves who cannot see the impossibility of getting something that has already passed away. Their ghost-like state represents their attachment to the past. While being impossibly hungry and thirsty, they cannot eat or drink without causing themselves terrible pain or indigestion. Their long thin throats are so raw and narrow that swallowing produces unbearable burning. Their bloated bellies are also unable to digest nourishment.

Hungry Ghosts in Our World

A “Human Hungry Ghost” is the miser who lives for more and more money at the expense of everything else, falsely believing that it will bring him True Happiness. Another Hungry Ghost is a drug addict who can barely keep himself alive and is only concerned with getting his next dose, whose effects soon fade away, leaving him longing for another. Two neurotically dependent lovers might also be Hungry Ghosts if they keep trying to derive certain qualities from each other, which the other also lacks.

Am I a Hungry Ghost?

Some people are so possessed by neurotic Craving and longing out of inner emptiness that they live only to gather material things or emotional experiences (or assurance) for themselves. Even if they get what they want, it gives them little pleasure. No matter what they possess, they always feel that there is something missing. These people crave for certain experiences to feel real and substantial, distracting themselves momentarily from their repressions and lack of spirituality. Such people are dominated by the mental state of Craving. If one is too tuned to this mindstate, one is likely to be reborn as a Hungry Ghost.

What is the Realm of Animals?

The world of Animals is that of instinctive gratification, of the biological drives of hunger and sexuality. All endeavour is directed to the satisfaction of physical desires and self-preservation. This world is of the ignorant refusal or inability to see beyond the natural needs of the body.

Animals in Our World

A Human can be reborn as a certain animal if his character and habits resemble it. “Human-Animals” also exist in our world- a couch potato who only eats, sleeps and watches television all day might gradually come to resemble a pig and become a “good-for-nothing”- being physically lazy and mindless. A viciously jealous and suspicious person could be miserably small and thin, resembling a poisonous snake in appearance and nature.

Am I an Animal?

The “Human-Animal” is one who wilfully refuses to look at the meaning and purpose of life. His bodily needs for nourishment, sleep and sex might be healthy and he gets satisfaction and enjoyment from them. But their fulfilment becomes an end in itself. For him, life has no other significance. Though he is ignorant in that he fails to see any higher noble destiny, he is not necessarily stupid in the practical sense, but he has no ideals and there is nothing beyond himself which he lives for. He lives without vision or culture when he can choose to cultivate his Mind. Such people are dominated by the mental state of Ignorance.

One who dies tuned to this mindstate is likely to be reborn as an animal.

What is the Realm of Human Beings?

The Human realm is the world of our everyday experience. It contains all the other realms of existence that Humans create for themselves.

Humans in Our World

This is the realm where the individual searches for self. Humans are fundamentally unsure about the nature of many things- including his true identity. But it is in this world that transcendental insight into the true nature of self can be attained. This is the world where the individual can be conscious enough to be aware of his state of dissatisfaction and seek liberation, becoming enlightened, freeing oneself from the wheel of life and death.

Am I a Human?

A truly living Human person is one who realises his special position and treasures it, as it is not easy to be reborn as

a Human. We must not take this life for granted, not realising its significance. The Human realm is the most favourable realm as it contains a mix of pleasure and pain-giving us ample opportunity to realise the true nature of life. Rebirth in the other realms is unsatisfactory as constant pain in the lower realms is demoralising while constant pleasure in the higher realms leads to spiritual complacency. Humans are plagued by all three poisons of Craving, Aversion and Ignorance to different extents. In this precious life, one can either be reborn again into any of the other realms or free oneself from rebirth. Thus, the Human life is very precious, as it is the pivoting point of our being, for better or worse.

What is the Realm of Demi-Gods?

The realm of the Demi-gods (Asuras or Titans) in the lower heavens consists of ferocious ugly jealous male Demi-gods that are in constant battle with the Gods of the realm of Gods for power and happiness. They embody the ego's striving for power. They never win as the Gods themselves had created the Karma to be able to enjoy their position. The female Demi-gods are no less jealous and acquisitive, but they win their wars not by force but

by seduction and enchantment. Demi-gods are god-like in their power and vigour though not at all happy. Others' success, possessions and qualities make them feel enviously belittled. The deep contentment which others gain from their good fortune leads them to struggle vigorously and violently to grab it for themselves.

Demi-Gods in Our World

“Human Demi-Gods” are not uncommon in the worlds of politics, business, organised gangsterism, and many walks of life where many already somewhat relatively well-to-do people continually try to win each other in every aspect of life- be it in career positions, possessions of material wealth or even family. This is often done at drastic costs, even at the expense of close friendships.

Am I a Demi-God?

Demi-Gods are always trying to be cleverer, or stronger, or richer, or more experienced than others. Each watches for others to weaken so that he can seize power for himself. Although always trying to prove their superiority, they are very conscious of hierarchy and tend to form

ordered power structures, allying with others to scheme against others- ultimately for themselves. They are able to relate to others only on the basis of dominance or submission, not as equals, and where they can, they will dominate. Backstabbing and conspiracy is common. A Human is and can be reborn as a Demi-god if he is egoistic and power-crazy. However, he would also need positive Karma to be reborn in a Heaven as it requires much merit. Such a person is however dominated by the mental state of Craving and Aversion as his merit is without Wisdom. One who dies tuned to this mindstate is likely to be reborn as a Demi-God.

What is the Realm of Gods?

The realm of the Gods (“God” here does not refer to an almighty creator) or the higher heavens are different planes of increasingly refined levels of sensual bliss and gratification. Gods are able to enjoy beauty by their own goodness. They are beings with beautiful subtle bodies who delight in music and dance, and exist in extended peak experiences, in which one dissolves into the experience of pleasure, merging with the beloved, temporarily crossing the boundaries of ego. Such

experiences can be cultivated in meditation but are dangerous as they induce spiritual complacency with what is only temporary. After a long time, the gods will fall from their state of bliss. Unless they realise their impermanence and start living the spiritual life, they will be reborn into the lower realms when they had depleted their positive Karma in the heavens.

Gods in Our World

“Human-Gods” such as Kings and Queens in earlier times live a royal life full of wealth and power. They were able to satisfy any desire at their command. In our times, there are the rich, famous and powerful who move about in a sphere of opulence and majesty far above the common man- often somewhat spoilt by extravagance and luxury.

Am I a God?

A God is one who has great power in position. His wishes for any material things are easily granted. Because his position was reached through accumulation of much positive Karma, he can indeed enjoy the well-being he deserves. But he tends to revel in pleasures and forgets

the bigger picture, forgetting that his state is not everlasting, and that there are many other unfortunate beings that he can help. A Human can be reborn as a God if he is very virtuous. Such a person is dominated by Ignorance as he had created much goodness without realisation of Wisdom and the importance of living the spiritual life. One who dies tuned to this mindstate is likely to be reborn as a God.

The Four Immeasurable Minds

Everyone wants to be happy, but happiness cannot be achieved in isolation. The happiness of one depends upon the happiness of all and the happiness of all depends on the happiness of one. This is because all life is interdependent. In order to be happy, one needs to cultivate wholesome attitudes towards others in society and towards all sentient beings.

The best way of cultivating wholesome attitudes towards all sentient beings is through meditation. Among the many topics of meditation taught by the Buddha, there are four specifically concerned with the cultivation of Loving-kindness, Compassion, Appreciative Joy and Equanimity. These four are called the Four Immeasurables because

they are directed to an immeasurable number of sentient beings and because the wholesome Karma produced through practising them is immeasurable. The Four Immeasurables make up “True Love,” which brings joy to ourselves and to the ones we love. If our love does not bring joy to ourselves and to both of us, it is not true love. In True Love, there is also no sense of ourselves being separated from others. These aspects of True Love, like all aspects of the Buddha’s teachings, inter-are or interconnect; that is to say, each aspect contains all the other aspects.

By cultivating the wholesome attitudes of Loving-kindness, Compassion, Appreciative Joy and Equanimity, people can gradually remove ill will, cruelty, jealousy and desire. In this way, they can achieve happiness for themselves and others, now and in the future.

Loving-kindness

Loving-kindness is the wish that all sentient beings, without any exception, be happy. Loving-kindness counters ill will (Aversion). The attitude of Loving-kindness is like the feeling which a mother has for her newborn son. She

wishes that he may enjoy good health, have good friends, be intelligent and successful in all that he attempts. In short, she wishes sincerely that he be happy. One may have the same attitude of Loving-kindness for a particular friend or for others in one's class, community or country.

The extent of Loving-kindness in the instances mentioned above is limited to those for whom one has some attachment or concern. The meditation on Loving-kindness, however, requires one to extend Loving-kindness not only towards those whom one feels close to, but also to others whom one may know only slightly or not know at all. Finally, one's Loving-kindness is extended to all sentient beings in all the realms of existence. Then only does the ordinary wholesome attitude of Loving-kindness found in daily life reach the state of the sublime or the immeasurable.

Compassion

Compassion is the wish for all sentient beings to be free from suffering. It is the intention and capacity to relieve and transform suffering and lighten sorrows while countering cruelty. When a mother, for example, sees her

son seriously ill, she will naturally be moved by Compassion and earnestly wish and act such that he may be free from the suffering of his sickness. In the same way, most people have experienced the feeling of Compassion upon seeing the suffering of a relative, a schoolmate or even a pet. To become a sublime state of mind, Compassion has to reach beyond the limited group of individuals or beings whom one loves or cares for. Compassion has to be extended to all sentient beings in all the realms of existence before it becomes an immeasurable.

Appreciative Joy

Appreciative Joy is the wholesome attitude of rejoicing in the happiness and virtues of all sentient beings. It counters jealousy and makes people less self-centred.

Appreciative Joy may be experienced by a mother's joy at her son's success and happiness in life. In the same way, almost everyone will have at one time or another, experienced the feeling of joy at the good fortune of a friend. These are the commonly experienced forms of Appreciative Joy. When one meditates on Appreciative Joy,

one extends it to all sentient beings and not just to loved ones. Only then does one experiences Appreciative Joy as a sublime state of Mind and as an immeasurable.

Equanimity

Equanimity is the attitude of regarding all sentient beings as equals, irrespective of their present relationship to oneself. While Equanimity counters clinging (Craving) and Aversion, it is not cold or indifferent- it is love that is impartial and without prejudice.

When a grown-up son settles down with his own family, he begins to lead an independent life with responsibilities of his own. Although his mother still has her feelings of Loving-kindness, Compassion and Appreciative Joy towards him, they are now combined with a new feeling of Equanimity. She recognises his new independent and responsible position in life and does not cling to him.

To become a sublime state of mind, however, the attitude of Equanimity has to be extended to all sentient beings. In order to do this, one needs to remember that one's relationships with one's relatives, friends and even enemies,

are the results of previous Karma. Thus one should not cling to relatives and friends while regarding others with indifference or hatred. Moreover, one's relatives and friends in this life may have been one's enemies in a past life and may again become enemies in the future, while one's enemies in this life may well have been one's relatives and friends in the past, and may again become one's relatives and friends in the future.

Dependent Origination

The Buddha often teaches in terms of Dependent Origination. Through the understanding of Dependent Origination, the Buddha attained Enlightenment. He said, “Deep indeed is Dependent Origination. It is by not realising this principle that all have become entangled like a ball of thread, unable to stop suffering and Rebirth.” (Note that Dependent Origination and is only introduced basically here.)

The Law of Dependent Origination

The basis of Dependent Origination is that life and the world is built on sets of relations, in which the arising and cessation of factors depend on some other factors which condition them:

*When this is, that is.
This arising, that arises.
When this is not, that is not.
This ceasing, that ceases.*

“This” + Certain Conditions = “That”

On this principle of interdependence and relativity rests the arising, continuity and cessation of existence. This is called the Law of Dependent Origination. It emphasizes that all phenomena in the Universe are relatively conditioned states and do not arise independently of supportive conditions. A phenomenon arises because combinations of conditions are present to support its arising. And the phenomenon will cease when the conditions and components supporting its arising change and no longer sustain it. The presence of these supportive conditions, in turn depends on other factors for their arising, sustenance, disappearance and possible re-arising. In this sense, all things are empty (have the characteristics of Emptiness) of an independent self-nature. This law also explains how Rebirth occurs.

An Example of Dependent Origination

To illustrate the nature of Dependent Origination of the things around us, consider an oil lamp. The flame of an oil lamp burns dependent upon the air, oil, heat and wick. When all these are present, the flame burns. If one or more of these elements are absent, the flame will cease to burn. Thus, all phenomena arise dependently upon a number of causal factors, and not independently. This is the principle of Dependent Origination.

Dependent Origination and Relativity

The Law of Dependent Origination is a realistic way of understanding the Universe. The fact that everything is nothing more than a set of complex relations is consistent with modern scientific views (such as Einstein's Theory of Relativity and the Quantum Theory). Since everything is conditioned, relative and interdependent, there is nothing in this world which can be regarded as a permanent entity with a permanent identity. Things are what they are, only in relation to other things.

For example, one is not independently or by nature a father- he becomes a father because of his relation to his son. A man who is a father to his son is also a son to his father. His identity is relative and depends upon his relation to another person. Terms like long and short, high and low, father and son etc. are relative and only make sense in relation to other things. Relativity means that because each thing does not exist independently, it does not have an unchanging nature of its own with any inherent meaning.

The world is built on a set of interlinking relations, but normally, we create false pictures of its permanency in our Minds because of our Ignorance and Craving. For example, it is almost natural for us to cling to what we consider as beautiful or desirable, and to reject what is ugly and undesirable. Being subjected to the forces of Craving (Greed) and Aversion (Hatred), we are misled by Ignorance. We do not realise that it is in reality unreal. It is like a ball of fire, which when whirled around rapidly, can for a time, create the illusion of a solid circle of light.

An Interesting Conversation on Dependent Origination

The following is edited from a Dharma talk at National University of Singapore Buddhist Society: (Ven:Venerable Thubten Chodron,Aud:Audience)

Where is the Cracker?

Ven: (Holding a cracker) A cracker appears to be a real cracker as there is some “cracker-ness” about it- it seems to exist “out there,” independent of our Mind. If it really exists like that, then when we analyse and search for just what the cracker is, we should be able to find it. (The cracker is broken and a piece is held up) Is this piece a cracker?

Aud:Yes.

Ven: (Holding up the other piece) Is this a cracker?

Aud:Yes.

Ven: (Crumbles the cracker pieces) What is this now?

Aud: Crumbs- a mess!

Ven: There is no cracker now? What happened to the real cracker we saw before? If it had some cracker-ness quality to it, where is it now? What we have now are the same atoms and molecules as before- but we call it crumbs and not a cracker!

If there were some inherent cracker there, we should have been able to find it either amongst its parts or separate from its parts- but it isn't anywhere. This means there was no inherent cracker to start with.

Aud: The cracker is the collection of atoms and molecules. It is all the parts together!

Ven: But a collection is just a group of parts. If none of the parts by themselves are a cracker, then how can many parts together be an independent cracker with some cracker-ness quality? If you put many non-butterflies, such as grasshoppers together, does that make a butterfly? How can a group of non-crackers or crumbs make a real cracker?

Aud: Then there is no cracker at all? What am I eating?

Ven: What we are searching for is something that is a cracker independent of its parts. That real independent cracker can't be found because it doesn't exist. But a dependently-existent cracker is there! What you are eating is still a cracker!

The cracker exists as a group of atoms and molecules put together in a certain pattern. Our Mind looks at it and conceives it to be a thing and calls it a cracker- it becomes a cracker because all of us together have conceived it in a similar way and agreed, by the force of social convention, to call it a cracker.

That cracker exists dependent on its causes and conditions- the flour, water and baker and so on. It depends on our minds conceiving it to be a thing and labelling it "cracker." Apart from this dependently-existent cracker, there is no other cracker. It is empty of being a cracker inherently and independently with some cracker-ness quality to it. It exists- but not in the same way it appears to us to exist. It appears to be independent when it isn't.

Where is the Self?

Ven: The same is true for our “self” or “I.” Remember a time when you were very angry. How did “I” appear then? It seems very solid- as if there is a real me that someone is insulting. That “I” feels real, as if it were independent, yet still somewhere inside our body and Mind. We get angry in order to defend that “I” that seems so real. If that solid, independent “I” exists as it appears to us, we should be able to find it, either among our body and Mind or separate from them. There is no other place such an “I” could be. Let’s see. Are you your body?

Aud: Yes.

Ven: Which part of your body are you? Are you your arm? Your chest? Your little toe? Your brain? It’s clear that we aren’t any of the parts of our body. Let’s try again. Are you your Mind?

Aud: I must be.

Ven: Which Mind are you? Are you your visual consciousness? Your auditory consciousness? Your mental

consciousness? Are you one particular characteristic? If you were your angry self, you would always be angry!

Aud: “I” am what goes from one life to the next.

Ven: But what goes from one life to the next is constantly changing. Can you point to one moment of your Mind at always has been and always will be you? Are you yesterday’s Mind? Today’s Mind? Tomorrow’s Mind?

Aud: I’m all of them together.

Ven: But that’s a collection of parts, none of which are “I.” To say that is “I” is like saying a group of grasshoppers are a butterfly. Maybe you’re completely separate from your body and Mind. That is, can you take away your body and Mind and you (“I”) still remain independently? If the “I” is separate from the body and Mind, my body and Mind could be here and I could be across the room. Is that possible?

The “I” or self doesn’t exist independently of the body and Mind. It is not the body and it is not the Mind. Neither is it the body and Mind together. In other words, the solid “I” that we felt when we’re angry doesn’t exist at all. This is what is meant by selflessness: there is no ultimately

existent or independent self. That doesn't mean the "I" doesn't exist at all. What we are negating is its independent or inherent existence. There is a conventionally existent "I" that is angry and that "I" does not exist independently.

The "I" depends on causes and conditions: the coming together of the sperm and egg of our parents, our consciousness from a previous life and so on. The "I" also depends on the parts which compose it: our body and Mind. The "I" also depends on concept and label. That is, on the basis of our body and Mind being together, we conceive of a person and label it "I." We exist by being merely labelled on a suitable basis- our body and Mind.

How Understanding Dependent Origination Helps Us

Aud: How does Understanding Dependent Origination and Emptiness help Us?

Ven: When we realise emptiness, we see there is no solid person who is angry. There is No real person whose reputation needs to be defended. There is no independently beautiful person or object that we have to

possess. By realising emptiness, our attachment, anger, jealousy, pride and other disturbing attitudes vanish, because there is no real person that has to be protected, and there is no real object to be grasped.

That doesn't mean we become inert and unambitious like vegetables, thinking, "There's no real me, no real goal. So why do anything?" Realising selflessness (emptiness) gives us tremendous space for action. Rather than our energy being consumed by attachment, anger and ignorance, we are free to use our tremendous Wisdom and Compassion in many ways to benefit others.

Emptiness

Emptiness (Sunyata in Sanskrit), being one of the most profound truths in Buddhism, is often misunderstood. Sunyata is at best, though not ideally translated in English, as Emptiness. Though this might seem vague, it is a very practical truth helpful to us in everyday life. (Note that Emptiness is only introduced basically here.)

Examples of Emptiness

An analogy to explain Sunyata is a river. A river does not truly exist on its own as it consists of many streams of water coming and going, that make up its substance. Each

of these streams is just as unsubstantial, each consisting of smaller and smaller streams within it as substance. There is no substantial or “real” river- there is only the flowing. We say that the river is empty of a real fixed nature- exhibiting Emptiness. Everything in the Universe (all physical and mental phenomena) exhibits characteristics of Emptiness.

Another example is a waterfall. A waterfall seen from a distance appears like a shiny solid sheet in one complete piece. But upon closer inspection, we see clearly that the “piece” is only a continuous flowing stream of water. There is essentially no fixed “waterfall”- there is only water falling.

The Two Sides of Emptiness

Here is a useful maxim to remember the core concept of Sunyata by:

*Sunyata Affirms the Existence of Existence;
Sunyata Negates the Self-nature of Existence.*

This means that Emptiness does NOT deny the existence of each and every thing, but it denies the existence of a fixed unchanging self within or behind each and every thing.

Using a river again as an example, we can say that a river (made up of many small streams) exists dependently or conditionally on the streams- this illustrates the first aspect of the above maxim. Because the river flows on and on (keeps changing), we say that the river does not exist independently or unconditionally (as it has no unchanging identity or self)- this illustrates the second aspect of the maxim.

Emptiness & The Middle Way

The above two aspects of Emptiness should be realised together as they balance to show the Middle Way beyond all extremes.

Realising the first aspect of Emptiness without the second can lead one to be greedy and selfish, falsely believing that all pleasures and material things are “real” and lasting.

Realising the second aspect without the first can lead one to be pessimistic, passive or immoral, falsely believing that nothing is worth striving for as everything is hollow and meaningless.

It is therefore very important to see both these aspects together in order to function with Wisdom in a balanced way in everyday life. One should learn to perceive everything as they are while knowing the true nature of their existence. One who realises Emptiness is able to live positively with great ease and freedom, treasuring everything without attachment.

Emptiness is
NOT Nothingness

Emptiness does NOT mean physical or mental nothingness- it is the law of total openness and infinite possibilities. Emptiness, is like the vast clear sky that allows clouds, birds, planes etc. to come in and go by, allowing infinite phenomena to occur within it. Emptiness is thus infinitely more than everything that the unenlightened can perceive. It is because of Emptiness that everything, including ourselves, can continually change for the better.

Anything can transform into something else when the right combination of causes and conditions is present. Similarly, anyone can become Enlightened if one cultivates spiritually. Emptiness is thus a teaching full of hope.

Emptiness of Mind and Matter

Emptiness applies to all physical entities. Much more subtly, it applies to all mental entities (mindstates).

All physical entities upon closer inspection are only unceasing fluctuations of molecules, of atoms, of electrons, neutrons and protons, of particles, of sub-atomic particles of... energy. All is only infinite manifestations of energy.

All mental entities upon closer inspection are only processes that change subtly all of the time. For example, we know we have thoughts, but how subtly each thought flows to another and another is most unnoticeable to the untrained Mind.

The Magic of Emptiness

Things are entirely what they appear to be,

and behind them... there is “nothing.”

Before us is everything but behind everything is nothing substantial (as all is constant change). But everything here IS indeed here! And the “nothing” that is behind them IS here at the same place and time too!

Everything the same; Everything distinct.

Everything is same in the sense that all are equally empty. However, everything is distinctly different as they manifest in countless forms. “Everything” also refers to all of one’s possessions, family, health, wealth, fame etc.

As in the river analogy (see “Examples of Sunyata”), the river is both here and not here in the same place and time. This applies to everything. The whole wide world that we know is “real yet unreal” at the same time. It is the ultimate “magic trick” that the unenlightened fails to see and be amazed at!

Benefits of Realising Emptiness

Our Ignorance is seeing the illusory as being “too real”- we see the constantly changing as unchanging and become attached to the unsubstantial. Ignorance of not seeing the unreality of the self creates suffering centering around our false sense of self. There is no hint of a fixed self in anything physical or mental. There is no “I, you, my, your...” When self is realised to be empty and unreal, all opposing differences disappear- all are seen just as they are in their naked reality without empty labels, judgements or prejudice.

Being able to apply Emptiness in daily life brings unlimited ease and happiness as one becomes free of the burden of attachment. Realising Emptiness is to attain the Wisdom of selflessness (to see the non-self of everything). The functioning of selflessness is Compassion. Thus, true Wisdom is compassionate and true Compassion is wise- they are interdependently linked. Both perfection of Wisdom and Compassion form the twin peaks of spiritual cultivation or Enlightenment.

As we familiarise ourselves with Emptiness, we gradually open our minds and free ourselves from the bonds of Ignorance that misconceives reality. In time, we will eliminate all Ignorance, anger, attachment, pride, jealousy and other disturbing attitudes from our Mind. By doing so, we cease to create the destructive actions motivated by them. We will thus be freed from all problems. In other words, realising Emptiness brings True Happiness.

As a summary, a practical application of Emptiness in everyday life would be:

*To Treasure Everything (in this moment) as All is Transient;
To be Unattached to Everything (in this moment) as All is Transient.*

Buddhist Rituals & Festivals

Buddhism in practice is more colourful than just learning about the Buddha's life and His teachings. It includes many observances, some of which are common to all Buddhists while others characteristic of a particular culture or country. As we are beings of both reason and emotion, devotional rituals are important in helping us emotionally connect to the Buddha and His teachings. Rituals can bring meaningful solemnity into practice, helping us to focus and attain calmness. They should be done out of sincere faith, not fear, greed or superstition.

Shrine

The shrine found in Buddhist homes or temples is a focal point of Buddhist observances dedicated to the Triple

Gem. The Buddha image in the centre of the shrine represents and reminds us of the Buddha and the ideal of Enlightenment, and its perfect qualities of Wisdom and Compassion among many others. It helps to inspire us as we recall the greatness of the Buddha and His teaching. The shrine may also include other objects such as a volume of Buddhist scriptures to represent the Dharma. Some shrines may include pictures or photographs of Buddhist monks and nuns to represent the Sangha. When a Buddhist stands before a shrine, the objects he sees on it help him to recall the qualities that are found in the Triple Gem. This inspires him to work towards cultivating these qualities in himself.

Bowing

Prostration before an image of the Buddha is not idol-worshipping it is an expression of deep veneration. It acknowledges that the Buddha has attained perfect and supreme Enlightenment. Such an act helps one to overcome egoistic feelings, to become more ready to learn from the Buddha.

Placing Palms Together

Placing one's palms together at chest level is a traditional gesture to express deep reverence to the Triple Gem. When Buddhists greet one another, they hold their palms together like a budding Lotus flower, bow slightly, and say silently, "A Lotus (the symbol of purity in Buddhism) for you, a Buddha to be." This greeting acknowledges the seeds of awakening or Buddhahood within the other person as we wish him well-being and happiness. Placing the palms together also has a focusing and calming effect on the Mind.

Circumambulation

Circumambulation is the act of going round an object of veneration, such as a stupa (a monumental structural which houses holy relics of the Buddha or renowned Sangha masters), a Bodhi tree (the tree the Buddha sat under for shelter when He attained Enlightenment) or a Buddha image for three or more times as a gesture of respect. It is done by walking meditatively in a clockwise direction, keeping one's right towards the object of veneration.

Offerings

Making shrine offerings is an act of devotion which expresses appreciation and veneration to the Triple Gem. Each item of offering has its significance.

Light

The offering of light reminds us of the illuminating brightness of Wisdom which dispels the darkness of Ignorance on the path towards Enlightenment. This urges us to seek the light of ultimate Wisdom.

*Reverencing the Buddha, we offer candles and lamps:
To Him, who is the light, we offer light.
From His great lamp, a lamp we light within us:
The lamp of Bodhi (awakening) shining within our hearts.*

Flowers

The offering of fresh and beautiful flowers which soon becomes withered, scentless and discoloured serves as a reminder of the impermanence of all things, including our

very lives. This urges us to treasure every moment of our life while not becoming attached to it.

Reverencing the Buddha, we offer flowers:

Flowers that today are fresh and sweetly blooming,

Flowers that tomorrow are faded and fallen.

Our bodies too, like flowers, will pass away.

Incense

The offering of fragrant burning incense which fills the air symbolises the virtue and purifying effect of wholesome conduct. This urges us to cease all evil and to cultivate all of the good.

Reverencing the Buddha, we offer incense:

Incense whose fragrance pervades the air.

The fragrance of the perfect life, sweeter than incense,

Spreads in all directions throughout the world.

Water

The offering of water symbolises Purity, Clarity and Calmness. This urges us to cultivate our body, speech and Mind to attain these qualities.

Fruits

Fruits symbolises the fruits of spiritual attainment that lead towards the ultimate fruit of Enlightenment, which is the goal of all Buddhists. This urges us to strive towards Enlightenment for one and all.

Chanting

Chanting (Puja) is a melodious way of reading as one reflects upon the Buddha's teachings. Besides aiding memorisation, chanting in a soothing tune has a calming effect on both the reciter and the hearer. Chanting should be done solemnly with mindfulness and energy. Like meditation, chanting helps one to concentrate and develop a peaceful state of Mind.

Words of the Buddha may also be recited in mindfulness of the Triple Gem in times of fear or disturbance, whether arising from external sources or from oneself, so that such disturbances can be overcome. This is possible as the Triple Gem is free from all kinds of defilements and hindrances such as Craving, Aversion and Ignorance. Chanting can be done in any language. Popular languages

include Pali, Sanskrit (languages used in the Buddha's time) Chinese, Tibetan, Thai, English etc.

Lay Buddhists often chant once in the morning and once in the evening. The purpose of Morning Puja is to remind oneself to be mindful of the chanted teachings throughout the day. The purpose of Evening Puja is to reflect whether one had upheld during the day what one had resolved to in the morning. Though the choice of what is chanted varies from tradition to tradition, some of the general contents include: Going for Refuge, the Five Precepts, Praise to the Triple Gem, Sutras, Mantras, Homage to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Confession of Faults, Rejoicing in Merit and Sharing of Merit.

Mantras

Mantras are short sacred phrases or syllables that symbolise certain teachings or qualities (eg. the six-syllabled mantra "Om Mani Padme Hum," which symbolises Compassion), representing Truth in its various aspects may be recited. Chanting mantras helps to bring the Mind to Peace and Calmness while purifying it. Each specific mantra can help to bring about certain positive

characteristics in the Mind such as Compassion, Wisdom, Courage...

Homage to Buddhas & Bodhisattvas

Homage to the names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (eg. “Namo Amitufo” or Homage to Amitabha Buddha, and “Namo Daci Dabei Guanshiyin Pusa” or Homage to Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva of Great Compassion) can be chanted single-mindedly to recall and invoke in oneself the virtues and qualities they personify. Doing so helps to remind us that we too can attain perfection in various qualities like them.

Vesak Day

Vesak day is the most important event of the year for the Buddhist community. It commemorates the Birth, Enlightenment and Final Nirvana of the Buddha. These three occasions fall on the full moon day of the fifth lunar month. This occasion is observed by millions of Buddhists throughout the world. It is a festival for rejoice and goodwill to all. It is also an occasion for reflection of our own personal spiritual development.

For some Buddhists, the observance of Vesak begins early in the morning when they assemble at temples to observe the Eight Precepts. Others may join the communal observances by going through the ceremony of taking the Threefold Refuge, observing the Five Precepts, making offerings at shrines and chanting. They may also participate in processions and circumambulation, and listen to sermons of the Buddha's Teachings.

In some temples, Buddhists take part in the ceremonial bathing of an image of baby Prince Siddhartha (The Buddha when He was a Prince) placed in a basin of perfumed water strewn with flowers. The perfumed water is scooped with a ladle and poured over the statue. This symbolises the purification of one's unwholesome deeds with wholesome deeds.

Many Buddhists also take vegetarian meals on this day as they recall the teaching of universal Compassion. On this day, temples are colourfully decorated with Buddhist flags and lights, and shrines are filled with flowers, fruits and other offerings.

Upavasatha Days

On Upavasatha or new and full Moon days (the first and fifteenth days of the lunar month), many Buddhists assemble in temples to meditate, make offerings, recite sermons and perform acts of veneration to the Triple Gem. Many also take vegetarian meals on these days as they observe the Eight Precepts.

Ullambana Day

Ullambana is an expression of Buddhists' respect for their ancestors and their Compassion for all beings suffering in the realms of misery. The observance of Ullambana on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month is based on the incident of Maudgalyayana (Mogallana), a disciple of the Buddha, who discovered through his meditative powers that his Mother had been reborn in one of the realms of misery. Distressed, he approached the Buddha for help, who then advised him to make offerings to the Sangha, as the merit of doing so would help relieve the suffering of his Mother, and that of other beings in the realms of misery. Making offerings to relieve the suffering

of departed and other beings in the realms of misery thus became a popular communal observance.

Ullambana is observed by making offerings of necessities to the Order, reciting sermons and performing acts of charity. The merit from these deeds is then shared with all beings.

Light Transference Ceremony

In this ceremony, devotees hold a lit candle after sunset, as they pave around the perimeter of a temple, holy object or monument in walking meditation as they chant mantras or the Buddha's name in praise of Him. The ceremony represents the passing of the light of Wisdom (sharing of the Truth) to every direction of the world to dispel the darkness of Ignorance. On a personal level, it has the significance of lighting up one's inner lamp of Wisdom.

The indefinite passing on of light to countless others without one's own flame dying illustrates that Wisdom can be shared without loss on one's part. The burning of the wick with the melting of the candle reminds us of the impermanence and transience of all conditioned things,

including our own lives. Reflecting so helps us to treasure every moment alive without attachment. Mindfulness is practised in not letting the flame be extinguished. This is symbolic of the constant guarding of the Mind against negative factors detrimental to the spiritual life. In the ceremony, it is most inspiring to see a single flame illuminate a sea of darkness into an ocean of lights that bring brightness to each another.

Three Steps One Bow Ceremony

In this ceremony, devotees usually line up before sunrise to meditatively circumambulate the perimeter of the temple, bowing once every three steps, while chanting mantras or the name of the Buddha in praise of Him. Upon every prostration, the Buddha can be visualised standing upon one's open palms to receive the Buddha. The open palms symbolise lotuses that denote blossoming of purity. (Though the Lotus flower's roots are in the "mud of defilements" it blossoms pure and untainted from it.) Every prostration is thus the paying of respects to the Buddha (or the countless Buddhas and Bodhisattvas). This practice helps to purify the Mind, humble the ego and lessen obstacles along the spiritual path as one repents

past misdeeds and aspires towards spiritual improvement. With mindfulness of one's body, speech and Mind during the practice, concentration and calmness can be attained.

As the ceremony is long, it reminds one of the long and difficult journey towards Enlightenment. But it also serves to remind us that as long as we are determined, all difficulties can be overcome. Perseverance in completing the practice despite its difficulties also helps to strengthen our faith in the Buddha and His Teaching to lead us towards Enlightenment. The break of dawn at the end of the ceremony represents the light of Wisdom dispelling the darkness of Ignorance as one advances on the journey towards Enlightenment.

Meditation

Meditation is mental development or Mind cultivation. Through meditation, one's Mind and one's whole life grows spiritually- as one's consciousness becomes more and more developed. One becomes increasingly aware of oneself, of others, of one's environment and ultimately of reality itself. This increased awareness helps us to deal with everyday life situations with greater calm and insight.

Meditation as experienced and taught by the Buddha has two aspects: Calmness (or Concentration) and Insight (or Wisdom). As the mind becomes more and more calm, and one's consciousness gets more and more clear, one begins to get "flashes" of insight into the true nature of things- giving rise to Wisdom. As Calmness and Insight go

hand in hand, meditation is complete only after one has attained both great Calmness and great Insight.

How Can Meditation Help Me?

By building up good habits of the Mind in meditation, our behaviour in daily life gradually changes. As our anger decreases, we are able to make better decisions and we become less dissatisfied and restless. These results of meditation can be experienced now. But we should always try to have a broader and more encompassing motivation to meditate than just for our own present happiness. We can generate the motivation to meditate in order to make preparation for future lives, or to attain liberation from the cycle of constantly recurring problems, or to reach the state of full Enlightenment for the benefit of all beings.

Is Meditation Important to Me?

It is very beneficial to have a regular meditation practice, even if it is only for a short time each day. It is incorrect to think, "I'm a working person. My day is so busy with

career, family, and social obligations that I can't meditate." If meditation is helpful to us, we should make time for it. Even if we do not meditate, it is important to keep some quiet time for ourselves each day- a time when we can sit and reflect upon what we do and why, or to learn about the Dharma.

It is very important that we learn to like ourselves and to be happy alone. Setting aside some quiet time, preferably in the morning before the start of the day's activities or at the end of the day, is necessary-specially in modern societies where everyone is so busy. We always have time to nourish our bodies; we never skip a meal because we see it is important. Likewise, we should reserve time to nourish our Mind and heart as well, because they too are important. After all, it is our Mind, not our body, that continues in future lives. Practising the Dharma benefits others and ourselves. Since the Dharma describes how to create the causes for True Happiness, and since we all want True Happiness, we should practise the Dharma as much as we can.

Can I Meditate to Get Special Powers?

Yes- but that isn't the ultimate goal of the practice. Some get very excited about having psychic powers. "Everyone will think I'm special and will come to ask me for advice. I'll be well known and respected!" What an egotistical motivation! If we, for example, still get angry and are unable to control what we say, think and do, such powers are useless, becoming distractions to our practice. It's far more beneficial to become a wiser and kinder person.

If one has a kind heart, then developing psychic powers could be beneficial for others. High practitioners never go around advertising their powers. Humble people are more impressive than boastful ones, with their serenity and respect for others shining through. People who have subdued their pride, who have Loving-kindness toward others, and who are developing their Wisdom are those we can trust.

Is Meditation Dangerous?

If we learn to meditate from an experienced teacher who gives instruction in a reliable time-tested method, and if

we follow these instructions correctly, there is no danger at all. Meditation is simply building up good habits of the Mind. This we do in a gradual fashion; it is unwise to try to do an advanced practice without proper instruction when one is a beginner.

Fruits of Attainment

Buddhism exists and aims for the Enlightenment of one and all. Therefore, Buddhahood or Supreme Enlightenment is the ultimate goal of a Buddhist. Simply put, it is the achievement of True Happiness. Very broadly summarised, the levels of spiritual attainment as stages towards Supreme Enlightenment include the following.

Arahanthood

One can aspire to attain Arahanthood (Arahatship), becoming an Arahant (or Arhat). An Arahant is one who has attained the bliss and enlightenment of Nirvana, achieving Freedom from Craving, Aversion and Ignorance

(which cause all suffering), ending the cycle of birth and death for oneself.

Bodhisattvahood

An Arahant can also progress to attain Bodhisattvahood, becoming a Bodhisattva. A Bodhisattva is one who resolves, out of Compassion, to help all other living beings, along with oneself, to progress towards Supreme Enlightenment. Though Bodhisattvas vow not to enter the bliss of Supreme Enlightenment before all others are released from suffering, they realise that only Buddhas, being supremely Enlightened, have the perfect Compassion and Wisdom to best help others. Thus they seek to attain Supreme Enlightenment, but they do not remain in their own blissful state and forget about others. They manifest in various forms to skillfully guide others towards Enlightenment. It is possible to begin the path towards Enlightenment by first having the Bodhisattva ideal instead of the Arahant ideal.

Buddhahood

With the perfection of Bodhisattvahood, one attains Buddhahood, becoming a Buddha. A Buddha is one who has attained Supreme Enlightenment, possessing perfect Wisdom and Compassion.

When a Buddha “passes away,” He leaves His body and enters the perfect timeless bliss of Parinirvana. Out of Compassion, He can re-manifest Himself indefinitely as Bodhisattvas or Buddhas to help others realise Supreme Enlightenment.

Buddhism & Science

A group of over 10,000 earnest intellectuals once requested the Buddha to explain the manner and incidence of life and the Universe. This was followed by a series of daily lectures and demonstrations lasting three months. The Buddha's explanations were given to the complete satisfaction of everyone present.

It is most remarkable that when reduced to basic principles, many statements in the Buddhist scriptures are in line with modern scientific discoveries. Buddhism is scientific in that it combines objective observation, experiment and analysis in the spirit of free inquiry.

Buddhism is beyond Science as it can contribute to modern life by providing the moral and spiritual guide for the individual in

our increasingly technological and materialistic age, showing us the path to True Happiness. As Einstein said, "Religion without Science is blind; Science without Religion is crippled."

You Are Shot!

In reality, the Buddha never wished to spend time on speculative (or metaphysical) issues of the Universe as they have little value for spiritual development towards True Happiness. He only taught them out of Compassion—either to bring out an underlying teaching, or to satisfy the curiosity of those who would otherwise not hear His actual teachings. The Buddha assured us that upon our Enlightenment, all speculative questions will be answered, and that we have no need to ask them now.

The Buddha compared one who keeps asking speculative questions to a man shot by a poisoned arrow, who refuses to remove it till he knows who shot it, how it was shot, from where was it shot?... By the time these were answered, he would be dead. Likewise, we are "shot" by the arrow of impending unpredictable death and constant dissatisfaction, and should never forget our aim of attaining Enlightenment.

Matter

The Buddhist teaching, “Form is Emptiness; Emptiness is Form. Form is not different from Emptiness; Emptiness is not different from Form,” refers to the fact that matter is neither truly solid nor ultimately different from the “emptiness” of energy, as the material can become immaterial with no “solid” core and vice versa. It is the Buddhist version of the famous law $E=mc^2$ (E = energy, m = mass, c = the speed of light). The atomic bomb is an example of how a little matter can be converted into tremendous energy. Likewise, energy can be converted to matter. Though Science has yet to discover how, the Buddha was recorded to have performed such “miraculous” feats. He did so only out of Compassion, to humble the proud, that He knew were already ready to listen to His teachings, only being hindered by pride.

Mind

The Buddha declared that the primary factor and most powerful force of the Universe is the Mind. Scientists today are seeing this Truth- realising that the Mind of a person can create reality in what is perceived. Mind energy is not

yet fully understood by Science. The Buddha however, teaches us in great detail about the dynamics of the Mind. The mastery of the Mind is of the greatest importance as it is the key to True Happiness and liberation.

Relativity

The Buddha, like Einstein, discovered the truth of relativity—that space and time are not absolute but relative, functioning interdependently. Space and time are experienced differently by individuals in different worlds and mindstates. The world experienced in the state of Enlightenment is the vivid awareness of the interpenetration of space and time.

Time

The Buddha defined time as “the measurement of change.” This is scientific as time is linked with the motion of matter (or energy) in space, which creates force. The concept of time is meaningless when there is no change. Time has no beginning or end in Buddhism as all things (except the state of Enlightenment) undergo constant change. There

is only the present central moment of “now” that is meaningful to our existence.

Space

In Buddhism, space is defined as the voidness in between matter which allows motion and interaction. As it extends infinitely in all directions, any point in the Universe can be considered central. Likewise, scientists look into outer space and discover our position in the Universe to be just like any other point in space. There is no special position in the Universe as it is filled homogeneously with other world-systems. There is only the present central place of “here” that is meaningful to our existence.

Atom

As the atom (pre-supposed to be indivisible) is recently proven to be divisible indefinitely, it is therefore not the basic unit of matter. Thus, an atom is not really an atom; it is called so for convenience. Likewise, the Buddha says that when He speaks of the “Universe” (made up of energy and atoms), He does not really mean “Universe” - He calls it so only nominally.

Quantum Physics

Scientists discovered in quantum physics that atoms and subatomic particles do not have definite locations or “meaningful” motion, appearing random and unpredictable. This led them to conclude that the “building blocks of reality” are “imaginary ghosts.” The way an observer chooses to view an experiment determines the part of the observed phenomena to be manifested. The manifested properties are nothing but intersection and interaction of the observer’s Mind with the phenomena. The theory also suggests that reality is not merely constructed by the Mind of the observer, but that there are countless realities constructed by countless Minds- each equally real or equally unreal. They may be very much resemble each other, or be virtually opposite in nature.

Likewise, in Buddhism, it is the Mind that constructs the indeterminate nature of the manifestation of ultimate reality in a particular way. Given particular conditions, the Mind constructs reality in a determinate way, generally in terms of existence or non-existence and more specifically in the form of the six realms of existence or the thirty-one planes of existence.

Interdependence

The constituents of the material and mental Universe interact with one another and are inseparable such that nothing (no single thing) exists individually, each being equally important. The Buddha taught this as the interdependent origination of all phenomena.

Change

The existence of any object is an illusion as the Universe is simply a complex process of unceasing interconnected activities in which nothing moves independently of the others. The Buddha taught this as the constant fluctuation and transient nature of all conditioned things- even to the level of minutest atomic matter.

Microorganisms

The Buddha once held up a cup and remarked that there were 84,000 (a number to denote “many” or “countless” beings in it. No one understood what He meant. Today, we use a microscope and see that He referred to invisible microorganisms.

Evolution of the Universe

The Buddha taught that the Universe undergoes two major periods of change that repeat endlessly- expansion and contraction. This is like the model of the Oscillating Universe, which says that the Universe began with a Big Bang, when all matter explodes and expands, forming galaxies. When the force of expansion is depleted, the Universe closes in on itself through gravity with a Big Crunch, before expanding once more. Thus, it is likely that there have been, and will be, infinite Universes. The evolution of the Universe is a closed cycle- not unlike the water cycle where water evaporates to form clouds before falling as rain and evaporating again. Thus, the existence of water (and all other phenomena) does not require a creator as it is a natural self-contained process.

Universe Structure

According to the Buddha, the Universe exists in tiers, the smallest being the Thousand-fold Minor World System- this describes a galaxy (eg. the Milky Way), which contains millions of stars and planets. The next tier is called a Twice-a-Thousand Middling World System- this describes galactic

clusters (eg. Coma Berenices). The Middling World System consists of up to a hundred or thousand galactic clusters. Next is the Major World System, formed by clusters of Middling World Systems—his describes a Metagalaxy (eg. the Big Dipper that “frames” at least a million galaxies). Though this is the farthest that modern scientific instruments can observe only recently, the Buddha taught this cosmic view long before the invention of the telescope.

Galaxies

The Buddhist scriptures described that there are “worlds shaped like flowers”—this corresponds to billowy intergalactic gas clouds (that contain billions of stars) observed by radio-telescopes. “Some are vast as the ocean, spinning like a turning wheel. Some are slender (eg. galaxies observable in Cetus, Pegasus and Hercules). Some are small. For they have countless forms. (Galaxies have countless shapes.) And they spin in various ways (Galaxies revolve around their nuclei.)... Some worlds are like a glowing wheel (Some galaxies have strong luminosity).”

Quasars

Some world systems (galaxies) are described in the Buddhist scriptures to erupt violently like volcanoes. This corresponds to quasars that actively explode, ejecting incredible amounts of matter from the nuclei of galaxies.

Black Holes

Some cosmic worlds are described in the Buddhist scriptures to be like the “lion’s mouth” which eat everything- this corresponds to Black Holes that devour everything within its gravitational reach.

Planets

The Buddhist scriptures describe that, “many world-systems are full of rock-torn earth- dangerous and destroying.” While this may be true of planets of other star-systems, it is proven for our Solar System- planets such as Mars and Venus. The Earth was also described to have formed out of a mass of heavy thick matter that gradually hardened to solidify- this is agreed by Science.

Evolution

The Buddha's teaching agree with Darwin's theory of Evolution and Natural Selection to a certain extent. It teaches that that all sentient beings, by their instinctive will to survive, continuously evolve either into higher (and more intelligent) life forms or "de-evolve" into lower life forms (through the force of Karma- in a single life or through rebirth). This carries on indefinitely till one attains the highest state of evolution, becoming a Buddha- having fully evolved both mentally and physically.

The Buddha's account of how life arose and developed in our world is startlingly similar to parts of the theory of evolution as proposed by Charles Darwin. In the Aganna Sutta, the Buddha relates the becoming and re-becoming of the Universe over a period of countless millions of years in relation to the evolution of Human Beings, the arising of good and evil in society, and how such a society progressed. The Buddha also taught on how the first life formed on the surface of the water of the Earth, and again, over countless millions of years, evolved from simple to complex organisms. All these processes are without beginning or end, and are set in motion by natural causes.

In the Brahmajala Sutra, it is also recorded on how the previous Universe ended and stabilised, re-evolved and re-stabilised with the appearance of the beings of the different planes of existence.

Energy

Buddhism believes in the indestructibility or preservation of energy. This is in line with the law of conservation of energy, which states that energy can neither be created nor destroyed; it can only be transformed from one form to another. The teaching of rebirth, is an example of the transfer of imperishable Mind or mental energy from one body into another.

Aliens

The Buddha described worlds beyond ours in the vastness of outer space and other dimensions which are inhabited by many other intelligent sentient life forms, many of which are not unlike ours. The possible existence of extra-terrestrial life is highly agreeable among scientists today.

Causality

The Buddha taught that all physical and mental phenomena are brought about by the combination of causes and conditions. The law of Karma (the Buddhist law of cause and effect) is equivalent to the law of causality (causation) in Science. It is the belief that there is a cause for every single thing (effect) that occurs or exists. With the right conditions, every effect can in turn be the cause of another effect. There is no unexplainable, random or supernatural phenomena in Buddhism. The supernatural is only nature yet to be understood by the unenlightened.

Psychology

The Buddha was the first to look in depth into the human psyche and its experience. His teaching is a radical cure for mental dissatisfaction. The West is discovering that modern psychology is but a recent extension of Buddhism. Buddhist meditation undeniably offers the most timeless yet advanced methods for self-healing and psychotherapy.

Psychic Powers

E.S.P. (Extra Sensory Perception), telekinesis and other such phenomena are explained by the Buddha as psychic powers are achievable by anyone who trains to concentrate and focus the Mind (this is “Mind over matter”). As the Mind is the most powerful force in the Universe, mastery of the Mind opens the gates to unlimited power. The Buddha Himself was fully capable of psychic powers as He had mastered His Mind perfectly. However, knowing that psychic powers do not bring True Happiness, His displayed miracles were only “sideshows” to inspire faith, being secondary to His teachings.

Electron

In the words of the famous American physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, *“If we ask, for instance, whether the position of the electron remains the same, we must say ‘no’; if we ask whether the electron’s position changes with time, we must say ‘no’; if we ask whether it is in motion, we must say ‘no.’ The Buddha has given such answers when interrogated as to the conditions of a man’s self after his death...”*

Know This!

The Buddha is Alive!

Some think the Buddha was born in India more than 2,500 years ago and passed away eighty years later. This “human” Buddha is only the earthly appearance of the True Dharmakaya Buddha who exists forever. This True Buddha appears in our world in a Human form soon after the True Teaching (the Dharma) is forgotten by us.

For those who do not understand, the Buddha appears to have died. Supposing you thought that your respected master and teacher had died, would not this belief make you rely on yourself to do good and work for liberation? This is the purpose of the Buddha’s “death.”

For those who know, the Buddha never died. The Buddha is Truth. And the Truth can never die- birth and death have no power over Truth. Even after the human form of the Buddha has passed away, we are still able to see Him. For the Buddha says, "*He who sees the Truth sees me!*" (Thus Said, 91) Furthermore, the Buddha instructs, "*The Teaching and the Discipline which I have given you will be your Teacher.*" (The Discourse on the Great Decease, 2:154)

Even at this very moment, the future Buddha is awaiting for the time for Him to appear in our world after the True Teaching has been forgotten. In other words, there is always a Buddha who will appear to help the world. This Buddha will always be the human form of the one and only True Buddha- the Buddha who is eternal and universal!

The Buddha Can Help You!

The Buddha is all-compassionate. He says, "*Out of Compassion, I survey the whole world with the Buddha-eye.*" (Middle Length Sayings, 1:169) Whenever someone is in need of help or ready to receive the True Teaching, the Buddha appears to him. But very often, we do not know that it is the Buddha who is helping us. The Buddha says,

“Remember, Ananda, when I used to enter a gathering of hundreds of important people, of religious people, of householders, of people of other religions, and the various gods, before I sat down and talked to them, I changed myself to look like them, and spoke like them. When I’ve finished teaching them, they were very joyful. But they did not know who I was even after I’ve vanished away!” (Discourse on the Great Decease, 1:109- paraphrased)

Whenever you are in trouble, all you need to do is look to the Buddha for help. For He said, *“Fear not, as you look upon me, I will release you, just like a person saving an elephant which has sunk in the mud!”* (The Story of Elder Vakkali, Dhammapada Commentary 4:119)

Buddhist Prayer Works!

Just give it a try- Buddhist prayer works! You can communicate with the Buddha directly. The Buddha says, *“When you are in the forest or in empty places. If fear and panic should arise in you, immediately call me to Mind. For if you do so, the fear or panic will be overcome.”* (Discourse on the Banner Top, Kindred Sayings 1:219-paraphrased)

Every teaching of the Buddha is like a prayer that can be used as daily spiritual reminders. For example, the Buddha tells us not to worry about the past or the future—only the present is real and matters. He says, *“Do not think of the past; do not worry about the future. What is past is gone; the future is yet to come. Use your Wisdom and pay attention to the present. Do your work today itself!”* (Discourse on the Bhaddekaratta- summarised)

You Can Save Yourself!

No one can save us— except our own self! This is a wonderful message that the Buddha gives us. The Buddha says, *“By oneself is evil done; by oneself is one made impure. By oneself only is evil stopped; by oneself is one made pure. Purity and impurity depend on oneself. No one can purify another.”* (Dhammapada verse 165)

Furthermore, the Buddha says that we can become our own master, *“One is one’s own master. For who else can be one’s master? If one is well-controlled, one wins a master who is difficult to find.”* (Dhammapada verse 160)

All the while we have been good, says the Buddha- it is because of some Greed, Hatred and Ignorance in our daily life that only temporarily cloud our Mind, *“This Mind of ours is pure, but it is dirtied by outside things.”* (Gradual Sayings 1:10)

In the Buddha’s True Teaching, there are no such things as sin, commandments, judgement, eternal heaven or eternal hell. There is just the pure Buddha Mind for us to attain. *“All beings are able to become Buddhas!”* (Ratna-gotra-vibhaga 1)

Schools of Buddhism

The Buddha, who was a very compassionate and skillful teacher, gave a variety of teachings (generally called the Theravada, Mahayana and the Vajrayana traditions) suitable for people of different interests and inclinations. In fact, it is said that the Buddha gave as much as 84,000 teachings! Not everyone is expected to practise in the same way. Thus, Buddhists welcome the rich diversity of Buddhist traditions which evolved in different cultural settings with different needs. Though the teachings are many, they are often intricately inter-linked- with the common goal of attaining Freedom, Wisdom and Compassion (through Enlightenment) for one and all. The Buddha said:

“As the vast Ocean is of one taste, the taste of salt.

So also, in my Teaching, there is but one taste- the taste of Freedom.”

Harmony of Buddhist Traditions

Although Buddhism is one of the world's oldest religions, there has never been a war fought in its name or over its doctrine. Sectarianism is considered extremely destructive, for to say one tradition is good and another is bad is to criticise the teaching the Buddha gave to a particular group of people.

Although we may find one particular tradition best suited for our personality, it is unwise to identify with it too strongly, “I am a Mahayanist, you are a Theravadin.” It is important to remember that we are all Human Beings who seek True Happiness and want to realise the Truth- we each have to find a method that best suits our disposition.

An Open Mind Towards Buddhist Traditions

We are free to choose the approach that suits us best and with which we feel the most comfortable. However,

it is important to maintain an open mind and respect for other traditions. As our minds develop, we may come to understand elements in other traditions that we failed to comprehend previously. In short, we should practise whatever we find useful to help us live a better life, and we can leave aside without criticising whatever we do not yet understand.

Keeping an open mind to different traditions does not mean mixing everything together randomly. It is better to focus on one technique at a time- if we take a little of this technique and a little from that without understanding, we may end up confused. However, a teaching emphasized in one tradition may enrich our understanding and practice of another. It is also advisable to do the same practices daily. If we do one practice one day and another the next, we will hardly make progress in any of them. However, we can do both practices each day, as long as continuity is maintained steadily.

Who is a True Buddhist?

What makes someone a Buddhist? What distinguishes a Buddhist from a non-Buddhist? Being Buddhist means different things to different people- but what is it really?

Merely Doing Rituals

Is one who *only* takes part in traditional Buddhist rituals and ceremonies, and visits temples to make offerings a True Buddhist?

Such activities can be valuable if done in the right spirit as they can arouse and sustain determination in following the Buddha's path. But what is more important is to purify the Mind. Rites and rituals might have the opposite effect, with the formalities becoming an end in themselves.

Merely Wanting Merit

Is one who *only* accumulates merit for pleasant future experiences a True Buddhist?

Spiritual materialism is just as bad as pure materialism- both are forms of attachment and selfishness. Good should just be done simply because it is good; we should not be attached to the benefits we get from doing good.

Merely Being Moral

Is one who *only* practises morality a True Buddhist?

There is the common misconception that we must perfect our morality before progress on the spiritual path is possible- especially before we meditate. But morality naturally deepens with meditation as one weakens the sense of ego. The practice of morality alone without the realisation of Wisdom cannot bring us Enlightenment. Enlightenment is not a far away goal if we were to live in the moment, from moment to moment, mindfully.

Mere Blind Belief

Is one who distinguishes oneself from other religions, opposes all their teachings and believes that there is absolutely no truth in them a True Buddhist?

All religions have certain elements of truth in them. There is always something we can learn from them though Buddhists believe the Buddha has already taught us all we need to know to practise the path towards Enlightenment and True Happiness.

Mere Faith

Is one who *only* believes that merely having faith in the Buddha will “save” oneself a True Buddhist?

It is wishful thinking that depending on someone else rather than making any personal effort to practise the path towards Enlightenment will bring us happiness. If we sincerely make the effort to practise, the circumstances of our life will naturally improve. We must realise the Truth for ourselves- no one can do it for us. The Buddha realised that all beings have the same Buddha-nature. Since we

have exactly the same nature as the Buddha, we too can realise this nature in the way that He did.

Who is a True Buddhist?

A True Buddhist is someone who, first, believes that the Buddha's Enlightenment is what it was- liberation through the complete realisation of the essential nature of self and all things, ending all suffering and attaining the True Happiness. Secondly, a Buddhist makes it an important goal in this life to attain that experience for oneself, following the path that the Buddha showed us, going to the Triple Gem for refuge. A Buddhist has faith that the Buddha's experience was not a delusion, but that it is the most important and valuable thing that can be experienced by anyone through the diligent practice of the purification of the Mind. The most important part of the path to Enlightenment is meditative mindfulness- that leads to the understanding of self and others, giving rise to perfect Wisdom and Compassion.

Well, are you a True Buddhist?

About Author

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