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Buddhist Maha Vihara,
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How To Practice Buddhism

Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda

Buddhism which had existed in Peninsular Malaysia up to the 14th Century A.D. was influenced by Indian tradition and culture, as evidenced from important archaeological finds in the northern part of the country in what is now the Kedah Province Wellesley region. Among the earliest known artifacts discovered was a Buddha image, a product of India's Gupta age, dating back to the 5th Century AD as well as the 5th Century Buddha-Gupta 'Mahanavika' inscription, now in the Calcutta Museum, a replica of which is at the National Museum, Kuala Lumpur. The country came under Islamic influence during the 15th Century but before the advent of Islam into the country, Siamese or Thai Buddhist influence was prevalent particularly in the northern states.

However, from the early 19th Century up to early 20th Century when development projects began in the Malay States under the rule of the British there was a massive influx of immigrants from neighboring countries. Different ethnic groups who migrated into this country brought with them their own cultures which, in the course of time, have developed rather independently and as a result have assumed a distinctive character of their own. Admittedly, Buddhism as practiced in this country has taken on many forms each depending on whether the adherents are descendants of the original settlers who came from China, Thailand, Burma or Sri Lanka. However, there are also many Malaysians who simply call themselves 'Buddhists' and practice some form of rituals which they learnt from their forefathers in the name of this religion. The original migrants who came to this country were for the most part uneducated adventurers. They came only in search of material wealth and certainly not as Buddhist missionaries. Although they respected education they themselves were not very well versed in the basic teachings of Buddhism nor in its correct practice. What these early immigrants had handed down to their descendants is therefore not a deeply understood form of Buddhism but a few rituals which they themselves had picked up before they left their homelands. In fact, certain practices which their descendants now carry out in this country are no longer practiced even in their motherland today. So it could be said truthfully that a large proportion of Malaysians today are not aware of the significance of what they practice, whether it be Buddhism or some other forms of syncretic traditional and religious rituals which they conscientiously carry on out of respect for their ancestors.

Today we have in our midst Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhists who follow Chinese, Thai, Burmese, Sri Lankan, Tibetan, Japanese and Indian traditions. There are even some who have adopted 'Western Buddhism'. Some of their beliefs and practices have been mixed up through the inclusion of various other beliefs and practices which are quite alien to the spirit of the original Teachings but which have nevertheless been accepted for the sake of tolerance. As a result there has arisen some confusion among concerned Buddhists as to which is the correct method to follow in the practice of Buddhism. Some claim that what they alone preach is right and that everyone else is wrong. It would appear that Buddhists are at the crossroads today and are much in need of guidance to 'Walk the Buddha Way'. Change is a natural phenomenon. The tolerance

in Buddhism has given rise to many traditional practices and we have to accept that fact. The Buddha in fact did not introduce the rituals and ceremonies which we are conducting today, nor did he for that matter encourage people to follow some age-old Indian traditions that were prevalent in India during his time. He was concerned only with preaching the Dharma - the righteous way of life or the facts of life. After his passing away, his followers in different countries and at different times adopted their own local traditions and cultures into the religion as Buddhism grew in popularity and developed in those countries. Naturally, we should not take all these traditional practices as being the Dharma originally taught by the Buddha. What we only need to know is the truth as taught by the Buddha. Through our sustained effort to spread the true teachings, we will help eradicate or at least reduce the misguided rituals that are being carried out now in the name of Buddhism. To do this we must study the original teachings and decide for ourselves as to what is right or wrong.

Significance of The Dharma

The Dharma is a very significant word used by the Buddha in his religious discourses. From the Buddhist point of view 'religion' is a very different concept from that defined by other religious groups. The Dharma is the path or method taught by the Buddha for us to follow in order to maintain our human dignity and intelligence to lead a noble or righteous way of life. We are free to interpret the Dharma according to our own understanding; there are no obligatory rituals which we must practice in order to call ourselves Buddhists. Religion on the other hand implies dependence on an external source for spiritual development, salvation through prayer, strictly defined rituals and so on.

Buddhism teaches us that there are four unfortunate states of existence which result from the way living beings have conducted themselves in their past lives. Those who violate the Dharma or universal law will be reborn in one of those unfortunate states namely, hell, the animal kingdom, the spirit world and the ghost world. Such states are not located in any particular geographical area but exist anywhere in the universe which can be inhabited by living beings. Those who uphold the Dharma will never be reborn in any of these unfortunate states. When we live according to the principles of the Dharma, we are in fact living as 'good Buddhists practicing Buddhism'. It is therefore of the utmost importance that we should know our own circumstances and live in accordance with the Dharma as taught by the Buddha. To be a Buddhist one must have full confidence in the Buddha, Dharma and the Sangha (Triple Gem) and we must also have an understanding of the significance of the Triple Gem. Only then could blessing, protection and guidance be gained. Without such knowledge and understanding, whatever a person does in the name of Buddhism will not bring him the desired results.

We are subject to being born over and over again according to the karma we create. You may want to know what karma is. It can be explained in the simplest language - do good and good will come to you now and hereafter; do bad and bad will come to you now and hereafter, within the cycle of birth and death. The condition of this world is that we must constantly strive for our survival. Because we believe in a false 'ego' or 'self', we tend to harbor within ourselves negative qualities like anger, jealousy, greed and enmity.

We believe that our survival can only be assured if we destroy everyone else whom we perceive as a source of danger to us - thus we believe in the 'survival of the fittest'. We worry and cry unnecessarily for many desired but unattainable things. We also tend to live to enjoy life by lying, swindling or cheating our fellow human beings and by disturbing the peace of others. We thus commit more evil than good deeds. Our belief in a permanent self leads us to seek self protection at the expense of others. That is why we are very prone to do evil deeds. This will result in our continued existence in different forms determined by our respective good or bad deeds. The Dharma as taught by the Buddha guides us to avoid evil deeds and to maintain our fortunate human existence with which we have been blessed. This means our rebirth can take place in any one of the fortunate states such as the realms of human beings or devas. By understanding Universal Law, Natural Phenomena or Dharma, we have to cultivate human values and to harmonise ourselves with other living beings. Living in this way, we will become cultured and caring persons. We also can be assured that after our deaths we will be able to avoid being reborn into any of the unfortunate states.

In Buddhism the ultimate aim is not merely to be born in a place to gain worldly pleasure. As long as we continue to do good, we will be born in happy planes of existence, but even these states are not satisfactory. They are to be regarded as being only temporary; for when the store of good karma we have built up becomes, exhausted we will die and be reborn according to whatever residual karma is left. So good Buddhists are not merely satisfied with worldly life; they strive to purify the mind and develop wisdom (panna). Only in this way will we finally be able to attain Nirvana - where there is no more rebirth, no more karma and no more unsatisfactoriness. By cultivating a spiritual way of life we will be able to see an end to all our physical and mental suffering. This should be our ultimate aim or final goal in life. Today, we are struggling to escape from our suffering. Since we are doing it in a wrong way, very few can understand that it is a losing battle. If we really want to get rid of our suffering forever, then we will have to discover the correct method: the method which the Buddha clearly defined in the Dharma.

Foundations of Buddhism

(Sila, Samadhi, Panna)

The Dharma taught by the Buddha shows us the correct path. This path or method is classified into three stages. They are Sila (Morality), Samadhi (Mental culture or stillness) and Panna (Wisdom). They are the three basic principles or three pillars of Buddhism, which can be developed over many lifetimes with diligence, and which will lead us to ultimate peace. Let us first speak of sila or moral development through discipline. We must learn how to live as harmless and gentle human beings. In simple language we must know how to live without disturbing the peace and goodwill of others. If we are able to do this it will indeed be a great achievement. Discipline, good conduct, precepts and morals are all synonymous with this word 'sila'. This is the foundation on which to start a religious way of life. If a house is built without laying a proper foundation, it will be very unstable. Modern man has learnt the hard way how important

it is to live in `sila'. It means respecting the right of others to exist. If we believe that the world was created solely for our own benefit, then we will take from it whatever we want indiscriminately; without caring about what happens to other living beings and the environment like plants, rivers, the atmosphere and so on. In the end, as a result of major ecological imbalances of nature created by us in our modern way of life, we will be destroying ourselves. A good Buddhist on the other hand has a deep respect and concern for the well being of every other being. This is sila. But sila alone is not enough as we also need to develop Samadhi and Panna which will be explained in the paragraphs that follow.

The Mind

After having cultivated our moral conduct, we have to concentrate on training our mind. Humans are the only living beings in this universe capable of cultivating their minds up to the maximum limit to attain enlightenment or the ultimate wisdom. It is extremely difficult for living beings other than humans to develop their minds up to that level. That is why a person who aspires to become a Buddha must be a human being. Even the devas cannot become Buddhas without first becoming humans. The reason is that they can only passively enjoy their past good Karma - only human beings can actively CREATE new, fresh good Karma and make the effort to totally purify the mind through meditation.

As human beings we have great latent potential in our minds, but such potential is eclipsed by our anger, delusion, ignorance, craving, selfishness and many other mental defilements. We must realize that with the passing of every second we are wasting and misusing our mental energy on unnecessary pursuits. We just do not know how to harness our vast mental energy for a useful and good purpose. The Buddha showed us how to harness that vast storehouse of mental energy and use it for our liberation from misery. In his final birth Sakyamuni sacrificed his life and kingdom and underwent severe suffering until he finally liberated the mind and gained supreme enlightenment. He has assured us that with mental development and purity, we too can follow his footsteps and experience the ultimate happiness.

Do you know the amount of mental energy we are using through our five senses and imagery? So much mental energy is needlessly wasted through our six channels in useless imagination, temptations and frustration. The Buddha has introduced one proven method for us to harness this vast mental energy and it is called `Meditation'. Meditation means harnessing our mental energy through concentration and from there we go on training and taming the mind. It is not possible to cultivate the mind simply by faithfully praying and worshipping any god, or by performing various rituals and ceremonies. We can never hope to gain knowledge, wisdom, purity or enlightenment through performing ritualistic practices or prayers. The Buddha says in the `Sati Patthana Sutta' that meditation is the only path or only method that we can use to gain purity and enlightenment. Here we must not confuse Buddhism and Meditation. Buddhism is the total practice of the Teaching of the Buddha manifested through various popular cultures;

whilst Meditation is the specific method developed to rid the mind of impurities. Once a person has practiced discipline through Sila and achieved control of the body, then the mind is ready to be developed - through Meditation. It is the only way for our FINAL release from this existence. Here the Buddha is talking about concentration for mental training and purity for gaining final salvation. Since our minds are polluted, this method helps us to rid ourselves of our worries, miseries and mental disturbances. You may go here and there worshipping various gods and goddesses with the hope of getting rid of your worries and problems. But unless and until you train your own mind to develop a true understanding of the nature of existence, as well as realizing who you really are, you can never gain real relief from such miseries and worries. Meditation is the way whereby we can attain the four levels of sainthood namely, Sotapanna, Sakadagami, Anagami and Arahant which lead one to experience Nibbanic bliss. Only when we understand the Dharma taught by the Buddha and realize what we are in fact doing in the name of Buddhism, can we differentiate between actions which fail to lead us to real happiness and those which we call 'skilful action', which positively help liberate us from misery and ignorance.

Human Behavior

Another important thing to remember is the understanding of our own character. We should know that the types of behavior which we had developed during our previous births do influence the molding of our habits within this lifetime. That is why we all have different individual characteristics and attitudes. Even children from the same parents each have different mentalities, characteristics, inclinations and behavior. These could be regarded as manifestations of their particular mental habits developed over a series of different lifetimes. Whilst one child may be criminal-minded, the second could be very pious and religious, the third very intelligent, the fourth stupid, the fifth very honest, the sixth very cunning and so on. These are the manifestations of their own mental habits. In our storehouse of consciousness, we too maintain such mental habits as we pass from one life to another. Consciousness is a very dynamic mental faculty. All the five senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching) bring objects from the outside to influence the mind and create mental objects. The other three mental faculties relating to sensation, recollection and good or evil mental habits also constitute consciousness. When we die, our consciousness leaves the body and joins with four elements and cosmic energies, to create another existence. These four elements are : solidity, fluidity, heat and motion. This is how beings appear and reappear again and again. Now, in order to ensure that we have desirable mental attitudes in the future we must make an earnest endeavor to develop good mental attitudes now, in our present life. Once the process of mental purification is begun and carefully nurtured it can be carried on into future lives for further development. So the mental training for gaining mental purity is the second stage necessary for leading a pure religious way of life as a Buddhist. This is called SAMADHI.

Different Characters

Buddhism makes us understand our own character. Hence, if we can understand our own mind and recognize our own weaknesses then we can easily train it. This is the only way to gain peace and happiness. The Buddha taught us how to analyze our mind so that we can understand where our defilements lie and why disturbances arise to pollute the mind. The Buddha was such a practical teacher that he just did not stop there. He went on to the next stage and showed us how to change that mental attitude. If our minds are conditioned to be hot-tempered, selfish, greedy, jealous and cruel the Buddha taught us different methods to train such minds. He said that 'mind is the forerunner of all mental states'. Whatever we do, it all begins in the mind. This reminds us of the well known principle embodied in the preamble to the UNESCO Charter on Human Rights which states: 'Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace can be constructed.' So if we stop evil thoughts from arising in the mind we will be capable of only doing good. This is the way to practice Buddhism. But many people have generally tended to ignore all the important aspects of the Buddha's teaching and have instead concentrated more on the ritualistic aspects, thereby looking for an easy way out of suffering. In Buddhism we cannot gain salvation by simply pleasing or praising the gods without training the mind.

The third and last stage is Panna which means Supreme Wisdom. Wisdom here is not simply academic or scientific knowledge. We can gather vast book knowledge through learning but that in itself does not bring wisdom. Wisdom cannot appear in the mind as long as selfishness, hatred and delusion predominate. It is only when these mental hindrances are completely erased from the mind and replaced with mental development that real wisdom will appear. Wisdom is like brightness. When brightness appears darkness disappears; one displaces the other. Occasionally, the evil forces which are latent in our mind do flare up according to the intensity of our temptation and irritation at any given moment. When anger flares up, we show our ugly face. Hidden evil forces in the mind can thus emerge to change and cloud our mental attitude. Even a man who has lived a religious life for a long period can still get into that horrible state of mind, if the mind has not been trained properly and if the impure states have not been completely uprooted.

This is what the Buddha taught and this is what we have to do in order to lead a Buddhist way of life. First we have to cultivate our moral background, then try to understand the nature of our mind and thereafter train it so that we can try to discover a remedy to cleanse the mental impurities. After eradicating our mental defilements we will be able to cultivate proper understanding. In the end we gain Wisdom and liberation from our physical and mental suffering - the ultimate goal aspired by every good Buddhist.

Religions can be divided into two groups

We can classify all existing religions into two groups: Religions which are based entirely on faith, and religions based on mental purity rather than faith. Those who

emphasize faith more than purity believe that they can gain their final salvation through their ardent faith alone. To them mental purity is not an important aspect. That is why they say that no one can gain salvation by observing morals and precepts without also developing a strong faith in god. Buddhism on the other hand teaches that faith is not the most important aspect but that purity of the mind is. When we have purity in the mind coupled with wisdom, we can never hold wrong ideas as the real truth. Faith alone cannot purify the mind to remove doubts so as to help us understand the truth. People can uphold a wrong belief without analyzing it or without having any sense of reasoning because they are afraid that if they do, they might lose their faith and thus also lose their chance to gain salvation. The Buddha's advice on the other hand is, before accepting any belief as the truth, it is for us to study, investigate, practice and see the results for ourselves in the end. When we come to a conclusion after having made a thorough analytical investigation, we gain confidence in the truth, as we have satisfactorily verified it for ourselves. By realizing the truth ourselves, we naturally gain confidence. This is neither mere faith nor belief but realization. The Buddha's advice is neither to believe nor to reject anything at first hand. As we have human minds to enable us to think soberly, we must therefore give a chance to our minds to think independently and understand things in their correct perspective. We should not think that we just cannot understand. Some people who are very lazy to study a problem in depth, simply do not try to understand things as they really are and so seek the easy way out by just surrendering themselves to what the others say, because they have no self confidence in themselves. A true Buddhist on the other hand has self-respect, knowing fully well that he is responsible for himself, his actions and his salvation. 'No one saves us but ourselves, the Buddha shows us the correct way.'

Three other Simple Methods

(Dana, Sila and Bhavana)

So far we have learned from the preceding paragraphs that to lead a practical Buddhist way of life we must essentially develop Moral Discipline (Sila), Concentration (Samadhi) and Wisdom (Panna). There are three other simple methods to practice Buddhism. They are: Dana, Sila and Bhavana. Dana (generosity) means contributing or sacrificing something for the benefit of others. But this must be done without any ulterior or selfish motive. Then what is the main purpose of giving? The real Buddhist attitude of Dana is not the act of giving in the hope of gaining some reward in return, but to reduce selfishness. We commit enormous mistakes and disturb others owing to our own selfishness. So when we contribute something for the benefit of others we actually reduce our own selfish desires and in its place we develop love, kindness and understanding. That is the way to start a Buddhist way of life for our spiritual development.

The second stage is Sila. As we all know Sila means development of moral conduct which we have already discussed earlier. There are however five important precepts for lay Buddhists to observe with regard to Sila. They are abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, telling lies and taking intoxicating drinks and drugs. When we observe these noble principles, we not only cultivate our religious way of life but also

render a better service to others by allowing them to live peacefully. By leading a pure life according to the noble eightfold path, we become noble ourselves and life becomes more meaningful. Those who are spiritually advanced see no meaning at all in material possessions and worldly powers, so they renounce the mundane world and observe more precepts in order to gain more peace and happiness.

Many people observe their religious commandments or laws in the firm belief that if they violate any such commandments, a god will punish them. Fear of god or fear of punishment therefore acts as a deterrent and is the main reason which makes them observe religious laws. Thus they 'do good' not because they are themselves intrinsically good, acting from a pure mind, but because they suppress evil thoughts out of fear of punishment. The evil thought is merely suppressed without understanding its source; not entirely eradicated, it lies dormant in the mind. It can therefore manifest itself at any time when the mind is not guarded. If anyone says that he does not like to kill just because of fear of punishment from god, then that will only indicate that he has not cultivated his mind to reduce cruelty and hatred and hence has not developed mercy towards others. Such humane qualities would not have existed had it not been for the perpetual fear of punishment from god. He only maintains fear for his own personal safety with a selfish motive. When Buddhists observe the precept 'not to kill' they are not concerned with any fear of punishment but they consider the danger of cruelty and suffering which they create towards others. By considering the danger of the act of killing they will, in this way, refrain from killing. They then give a chance to their minds to cultivate virtues such as kindness, compassion, sympathy and understanding. They also observe all the other Buddhist principles in the same manner. With regard to this act of killing, the Buddha says: 'If you cannot understand why killing others is bad, then consider it in this way: When another person comes and tries to kill you, think of how you would feel at that very moment. How you would try to escape and what sort of physical and mental suffering or anguish you would have to experience? This is more than enough for you to understand why it is bad. If you cannot understand why stealing is bad then think of how you would feel should others come and take away your belongings.' This concept is summarized in the Dharmapada like this:

All tremble at the rod
All fear death
Considering this
One should neither strike Nor cause to kill

This is a practical approach to daily living and should not be regarded as a theory nor even as a commandment coming from an authority or a supreme being, who is both executioner and rewarder. By using our human knowledge we should understand the bad effects of evil deeds. Some people might say that they are forbidden to do certain things just because their religion says so. But that is not the way for a mature person to follow as to what to do and what not. to do. When we uphold all our precepts, we should not think that we are observing them only for our own benefit. When you stop killing and disturbing people, they can expect to live peacefully because you do not create fear in their minds. What a wonderful contribution that would be to others. If you do not rob, lie

and swindle others they can have security, happiness and so live peacefully. If everyone in this country could follow these noble principles of moral conduct, how happy we will all be!

Why Religion is needed?

Human beings by nature are sometimes not reliable and so they do violate principles. That is why a religion is needed to train them. In the past we were scared of natural phenomena like lightning and thunder, wild animals, ghosts and devils. Later we realized that many of our past beliefs in ghosts and devils were unfounded and were merely imaginary. Today we can ignore them. What we need to fear however are ruthless human beings who are out to destroy our peace and happiness. It is difficult to reform humans to make them reliable persons. In a way animals could be regarded as more admirable than people. Although animals have no religion, they follow nature. They are only guided by the instinct for survival and never attack others except in self-defense or for food. They have no deceit.

It is the human mind that must have a religion to think and understand. Man needs moral standards to reduce selfishness and deceit. Man can turn and twist his mind for his own ends and to his personal advantage. To straighten the crookedness of the human mind, religion is necessary. Albert Einstein once said, 'atomic energy has shaken and changed the whole world; but even that powerful atomic energy cannot change man's nature'. It is still as crooked, unreliable and dangerous as it has been from earliest times. But religion can change this mind for a better purpose if people really uphold the religious principles.

Here we must define what is meant by religion. For Buddhists, 'religion' means something very different from the normally accepted meaning of the word. Buddhism as a religion envisages the human being as a devout person working in accord with the Teachings of the Buddha towards achieving his own salvation by doing good and purifying the mind. The teaching of the Buddha does not place any reliance on prayer, supplication and ritual. That is why the Buddha had repeatedly advised us to study the nature of the mind. We can thus understand where our weaknesses lie and only then can we find the suitable solution to get rid of our weaknesses to save ourselves. Buddhism teaches Self-Reliance.

Meditation

The last or third stage is Bhavana or meditation for the development of the mind. Without Bhavana we cannot achieve the aim or the purpose of our life. The purpose of life is to see an end to our suffering. Then, what is meditation? When we develop the mind by eradicating mental impurities we gain purity. We strive with great effort to reach the peak of perfection. The only way to achieve this final goal is for us to practice meditation as taught by the Buddha. Although we have achieved some progress in

modern society and have changed from striving for mere survival to some measure of physical pleasure and comfort, there is however, no real corresponding development in man's mind. People have used their wider knowledge of the physical world only to create more temptation and excitement and they regard such `discoveries' as development. They organize various activities to cater to our physical needs and advertise them to create temptation. In the past, people did not resort to crass commercialism to influence the mind and to create desire. Now, through the media of television, cinemas, erotic dances, lewd magazines and many other such entertainments, excitement is created. Human passions are aroused to such a degree that immoral practices have become rampant. These do not in any way calm the mind and give peace. But this does not mean that we should condemn everything that pleases the senses. We cannot deny that art and culture do please the senses. They do so in such a way that raises the human spirit and encourages reflection and repose. The purpose of cultural activities such as Folk dancing, Singing, the Theatre and many other kinds of arts are to make man ,more aware of his existence; they relax and calm the mind without arousing the base passions. It is accepted that human beings do have emotions. They should be catered for by providing suitable and wholesome entertainment without arousing the wild nature latent in the human mind. In fact if there is nothing to occupy the mind, then that mind can become very violent and intolerant. The saying `An idle mind is the devil's workshop' is indeed very true. Therefore decent cultural practices should be introduced to calm the mind and provide an understanding of the nature of our existence. It is regrettable to note how the modern consumer society has polluted cultural activities and abused the splendor of our ancient cultural practices.

The Consequences of Modern Forms of Entertainments

How many kinds of immoral practices are there in our so-called modern entertainments? When you enter a place where they perform such entertainments, you can see for yourself how the organizers of such entertainments try to influence your mind. Their main purpose of course is to make easy money. They are not in the least worried about the adverse effects such shows would have on human values, religions and culture. That is why some people say it is difficult to practice Buddhism in the midst of our modern society because Buddhism does not condone nor encourage any kind of entertainment. As pointed out earlier, this is not true at all. Buddhism encourages culture and art, but it does discourage any activity which debases human dignity. In the distant past, when we were living as primitive men we had only a few problems. Such problems concerned our obtaining of food and shelter and the survival of the community. Even clothing was worn primarily for protection and not to adorn the body. Today we tend to regard those early people as being unfortunate or uncivilized when we compare their standard of living to that of ours. But in our modern society how many millions of problems are there? Most of them have in fact been created by us. Because of the problems of our own making we have no peace, no sleep, no appetite and have difficulty managing our lives amidst global disturbances everywhere. This is the nature of modern society, but in those early days people led a tranquil life. They had time to relax and enough time to take their food. There was no rat-race then.

It might be argued that it is simplistic to say that primitive man was happy while we are not. But the point we are making is that modern civilization is unnecessarily complicated, creating problems which need not exist at all if we could only learn to reduce our wants and live like our ancestors with few basic needs. Many great men like Gandhi and Albert Schweitzer have proven that even in modern times, the happiest people are those with the fewest needs. According to the Buddha the highest wealth of a man is contentment. Although primitive man had to go out and hunt animals for food, he was however quite contented and satisfied with that way of life, primitive though it might have been. Today we build large and tall buildings to live comfortably but there is no security within. How many iron gates and doors are there all secured and fitted with electronic burglar alarm systems? Why do we need all these extra gadgets? Is this modern development? Those who live in such lofty houses live in perpetual fear because of insecurity. In the past, however people could sleep peacefully even under trees, in caves or anywhere without having such fear and worry. Sure they had problems too - all human existence for that matter is problematic but modern man has increased and complicated these problems a thousand fold, all unnecessarily, and of his own making.

The Buddha Preached According To His Own Experience

The Buddha introduced a righteous way of life for us to follow after having himself experienced the weaknesses and strengths of human mentality. During the early part of his life as a young man he experienced worldly pleasures just like any other human being. He was a prince, a husband, a father and the son of the ruler of a kingdom. He had a beautiful wife and a loving son. He loved them but he had more compassion towards suffering humanity. His kindness was not limited only to his family but extended to every living being. He had the courage to free himself from his emotional attachment towards them in order to discover the solution for human suffering. He had to renounce the worldly life to gain enlightenment. After gaining his supreme wisdom he returned home and revealed to all what he had realized. He told them that if they too would like to share this belief, liberation or salvation, he would teach them the method. He also advised people not to believe what he preached just because he was a great man. He further said that, simply by worshipping and praying to him one would not gain salvation.

How to Follow The Buddha?

The Buddha advised mankind to follow his teachings and to practice diligently what he preached in order to gain salvation. In fact, we cannot call ourselves followers of the Buddha if we merely follow him blindly by just regarding him as a powerful master. What the Buddha expected of us is to live in accordance with the Dharma. Only then can we truly say to all that we do follow the Buddha. The Buddha once said, 'There may be many disciples who stay with me, following me by holding my hand or clinging to my robes thereby thinking that they are close to me. On the other hand there may be some other disciples who are far away from me and who have not even seen me, but if their

minds are pure, even though they are staying far away, they are indeed very close to me. Those who stay with me but exist only with polluted minds, are in fact not at all close to me'. This was the Buddha's attitude. There was a monk who always admired the serenity of the Buddha. One day the Buddha asked the monk what he was looking at. The monk replied that it gave him immense happiness whenever he admired the complexion and features of the Buddha. Then the Buddha asked: 'What do you hope to gain by watching this dirty physical body? The Buddha is not in the physical body. Only one who understands the Dharma taught by me sees the Buddha. The Buddha can only be seen through the Dharma!'. Many people sit before a Buddha image and pray to it, thinking that the Buddha somehow 'lives' in the statue. But the Buddha images that you normally see are merely the outward artistic expression of great qualities of a holy man. Man being intensely religious, made a tangible symbol to worship to express his devotion to his great Master. This gave rise to the development of Art which brought forth the concept of the Buddha and his teaching of the Cosmic Law from the realm of abstraction to gave it material form resulting in the contemplative Buddha image. By looking at such a Buddha image we could only imagine that the Buddha himself might have looked like this. The Buddha personifies Wisdom, Perfection, Sacredness, Compassion and Serenity. The Buddha image is primarily a symbol, something that fills a place with serenity just as the presence of a holy person spiritually illumines a house. There is no doubt that the serene appearance of the Buddha image calms our mind. But the Buddha that you 'see' through knowledge of the Dharma is in fact the real Vision of the Buddha. When you think of how he preached and what he preached, how he breathed tolerance, dignity, gentleness, compassion or kindness towards every living being; and also think of the nature of his enlightenment or supreme wisdom, only then, can you see the Buddha as an embodiment of all such great virtues and wisdom. So without knowledge and practice of the Dharma you cannot really 'see' the Buddha.

Gradual Development of The Buddhist Way of Life

(Traditional, Cultural, Devotional, Intellectual and Spiritual)

There are five methods in the practice of Buddhism. These methods have been introduced and practiced by people in different parts of the world, according to their own way of life, needs and education. They can be categorized into the above mentioned five groups.

Traditions

The traditional aspect of religion was introduced by our ancestors according to their beliefs. Because of ignorance many of their beliefs were based on fear, imagination and suspicion; and verily, had been practiced for their own protection and physical well being. However, we should not dismiss all traditions and customs as simply based on superstitious beliefs. Some traditions and customs are indeed meaningful. They have developed to help members of the community to dispel fear and insecurity, at the same time, to perform activities in an organized manner to maintain humanism. From time

immemorial some of these practices have become incorporated with religious practices. Those who are not familiar with the real teachings of the Buddha might get the wrong impression that the traditional practices are in fact the real Buddhist way of life. Traditions and customs differ from country to country and from time to time among different ethnic groups. Therefore we should not think that our own traditions are far superior to those of others. We must understand that Buddhism is not a static or ready made religious concept with dogma handed down by religious authorities. It is a way of life which had evolved according to prevailing times and circumstances. But the absolute Dharma or truth as taught by the Buddha can never change. We must also learn to differentiate between the Absolute Truth as taught by the Buddha and the Relative Truth which is changeable according to circumstances.

The Buddha's attitude towards traditions and customs is such that one should neither accept nor reject them offhand without first having given them due thought and consideration. His advice is not to follow them if they are found to be useless and harmful to any being even though they might be ancient. On the other hand if they are indeed significant and beneficial to all, then by all means follow them. Some of those traditions are important to generate inspiration and devotion to those performing religious ceremonies especially in a community. Without certain traditional practices, religion itself will be in isolation and personal devotion will weaken. Some people even uphold traditional religious practices and preserve them as their 'heritage' for inspiration to rally round their religion.

Culture

Culture and religion are closely interwoven in any society. Culture is part and parcel of human life. Human values, skill, intelligence and aesthetic beauty can be seen through cultural practices. Culture is the expression of refined and beautified traditions adapted either to influence or to promote fine arts as a means to entertain. Cultural practices inspire the human mind. Human passions can be calmed, gratified and ennobled through cultural practices. The glory of Asia depends a great deal on its culture and in this respect, Buddhist culture has played a prominent role. Culture can also protect and promote a religion. When we introduce religion through our cultural practices, our day-to-day religious activities will be more attractive and we will be able to influence others to follow it as a living religion. We can say that cultural practices that are religious in nature are the stepping stone to understanding the religious way of life. Those who are not religious minded at the beginning will eventually get used to attending and appreciating religious activities. By attending such activities people will gradually get the opportunity to improve their proper religious knowledge and understanding. Otherwise they will tend to shun religion altogether. If people are well-educated and have improved their understanding and are personally noble, it is not very important for them to actively participate in traditional or cultural activities to be religious. Religion can contribute a great deal to enrich culture. It may be true to say that in Asian countries generally, the practice of a religion is clearly linked to cultural activities. Dances, songs, art and drama very largely draw their inspiration from religious subjects. Without culture religious

activities may turn out to be very dry and uninteresting. At the same time, when we practice Buddhism without disturbing other traditions or the followers of other religions, this form of tolerance and peaceful coexistence along with our respectable behavior and gentle attitude can also be regarded as a cultural aspect.

Devotion

The devotional aspect is very important in a religion. Whatever we believe in or practice, without devotion, confidence can only be regarded as academic. Since devotion is related to human emotion, proper religious knowledge is essential. Otherwise, the devotion based on beliefs alone can become blind faith. Devotional activities in a religion naturally calm the mind and create inspiration. When the mind is thus inspired, fear, tension, anger and many other mental disturbances will be subdued, or even eradicated. Then such devotion can be strengthened to further enhance our faith; enabling us to carry out our religious way of life with confidence. Devotional activities fall in the category of SILA which we discussed earlier. The proper practice of SILA paves the way for mind purification and wisdom which are the higher stages in spiritual development. Mere belief and devotion without understanding can lead one to religious fanaticism.

Paying homage to the Buddha, offering of flowers, etc., Sutra chanting, religious recitals, ceremonies, religious performances, singing of devotional songs and similar practices inspire and calm the mind. Devotees can develop their confidence through such practices. Deeply rooted devotion fosters patience to endure any kind of suffering. Devotion strengthens the mind to face difficulties.

Intellect

The intellectual aspect is yet another method to understand and practice the religion. Having gone through traditional, cultural and devotional practices, many people 'graduate' to the intellectual aspect. This would mean that through intense study and diligent practice, they can gain more knowledge and understanding to clarify their doubts on the significance of religious beliefs and practices, the precise meaning and purpose of life, the nature of worldly conditions and their unsatisfactoriness, as well as the phenomena and the universal nature of impermanence. Through study, observation and concentration they will be able to gain a clear vision of reality, an understanding of universal phenomena and confidence in religion. The confidence that they do gain through understanding is unshakeable. But there are many who do not take the trouble to gain a clear understanding of the Buddha's teachings. First we must learn. After having learned, we must practice what we have learned; and finally, only after practicing can we experience the beneficial results. Anyone can practice this method without having to depend on theories, philosophy and traditional beliefs. We also must not depend on personality cults - in other words depending on other persons for our salvation. Granted some people do gain a good knowledge of the Dharma. Verily, if they do not follow the religious principles to cultivate their moral conduct, they are like a spoon which does not

know the taste of soup. Mere book knowledge does not contribute anything for the betterment of their lives. Without mental purity, knowledge alone may in the end become scepticism.

Spiritual

The last method is the spiritual aspect and that is to gain purity, wisdom and eternal bliss. In fact, whatever religious knowledge we gain, whatever we practice in the name of religion, we can never gain perfection or liberation without mental purity. It is true that without eradicating mental impurities, we can do lots of good deed's' but that in itself will not be enough.

We also must try to be morally good, otherwise selfishness; greed, jealousy, anger and egoism can still disturb the mind. Since the untrained mind is a very delicate instrument and always in a vulnerable state, any temptation or irritation can easily influence it to commit evil deeds. Spiritual development can only be gained through proper mental training. That is why meditation is the only proven method for mental purity.

The main purpose of practicing Buddhism is:

- to gain peace and happiness within this life,
- to have a contented and fortunate life hereafter and finally,
- to achieve the ultimate aim of life: everlasting happiness or supreme bliss.

Several methods have been outlined here to tell you how to practice Buddhism. So, if you really want to see the good results and to know what the Buddha taught, try to study and follow the basic teachings taught by the Buddha, without depending on theories or different schools of Buddhism.