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Buddhist Observances and Practices

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by

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Buddhist Observances and Practices

Standpoint

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

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

enlightenment and final deliverance.

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

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

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

It should always be borne in mind that the Buddha

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

No Mediators

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

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

The Buddha Image

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

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

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

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

calling that act of reverence useless idolatry?

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

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

Jawaharlal Nehru in his autobiography writes:

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

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

Offering of Flowers

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

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

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

Notes

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

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