

Why choose Buddhism?

Bhikkhu Dhammavaro

Introduction

In this world, for the spiritual inclined person, there are many religions to choose from, why should one choose Buddhism then? This is a question that has puzzled many people; I would like to offer some logical arguments here for your consideration. I will try to present to you as honestly as possible the teaching of the Buddha so that you can have a correct understanding on Buddhism. I can assure you that even if you don't change your belief, you would still benefit from what Buddhism has to offer, especially the Buddhist view about life. Buddhism is rational, patient, deep in wisdom, only reserved for the wise and fortunate one; so what shall we do then? We need to understand it ourselves before we embrace it.

Although generally regarded as a religion, Buddhism is psychologically a method of cultivating the mind. Its various monastic traditions and its emphasis on ethical training, on the surface it has many characteristics one would term it as religion, but Buddhism is not a theistic religion, since it teaches that the universe is governed by impersonal laws and not by an all powerful creator God; as belief in God is a form of eternalism. Buddhism does not emphasize so much the use of prayers, although a small amount is good, as prayer implies a dependency on an external or supernatural authority, as the Buddha was only a teacher, a guide and not a God. Buddha only points the way, and only through the perfection of morality, concentration, and wisdom that we can completely traverse it. In Buddhist practice devotion is but a way of expressing gratitude to our founding teacher, it is done daily as a means for our spiritual development. For us Buddhist we live our life following the three trainings, ie; abstaining from harming others, cultivating calmness and seeing with wisdom the identity-less nature of all phenomena around us.

How do we define a religion? If it is a belief in a supreme being to whom we pray for salvation, safety, favors or relief from suffering, in that sense Buddhism is not a religion. Samsara in which we are in is indeed suffering; it is a terrible wheel of birth and death putting us through endless cycles of woe. Just by thinking about this will send shudder down our spine. The root of this problem is our craving, and the only solution is the destruction of our craving through persistent training. Therefore Buddhism is not a religion but rather a way of mind training.

Buddhism is a way of life because it emphasizes the livelihood of harmlessness by developing our noble mind. The Buddha advised us not to blindly accept anything in the Buddhist doctrine; we should accept it after careful consideration. Buddha's aim is to show us the way to complete liberation from suffering. Nibbana is to reach the Unconditioned or Uncreated, a state beyond the scope of our ordinary untrained mind.

Nibbana is not death as many have mis-understood, rather Nibbana is a natural condition (*dhatu*) existing throughout. It is the quenching of feverish heat of our mental clinging.

In Buddhism its immediate aim is to strike at the roots of suffering in our everyday life. The Buddha taught his disciple to do it gradually according to the capacity of his students. Each practitioner should devote himself to the training as competently as he could, although the final goal is the same for everyone, but progress along the path depends on the effort of the individual. The Dhamma of the Buddha will lead us to Nibbana, and it will also nourish us along the way. That's why the practitioner is considered a member of the Sangha.

To understand this better we need to look at the Triple Gem closely.

The Triple Gem

The Triple Gem is the three major Buddhist symbols, it is for all who have declared the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha to be their refuge, their reliance, their vehicle, their safe haven, their guide along this spiritual path, and their spiritual food; they have to rely on these three until they reach enlightenment. As Buddhist we have to learn what the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha are, otherwise, we are lost, without guidance, without direction, going about blindly, and will not be able to realize its aims or its benefits, or reap its fruit. "Those who have joyous confidence in the highest, the highest fruit will be theirs" (*AN IV.34*). The highest objects of a Buddhist's reverence and devotion are the Triple Gem and the refuge to them.

Sakyamuni Buddha

The Sakyamuni Buddha was born to a human king Sudhodana and queen Mahamaya in a small Himalayan kingdom of Kapilavastu, like any human, he lived his childhood life, went to school, then got married, and had a son, but his spiritual quest about human existence and sufferings led him to seek for the answer outside his royal garden, upon seeing with his own eyes the immense sufferings mankind endure, he eventually renounced the royal life and wandered about in the countries as a yellow robe mendicant seeking for the answer. After six years of extreme ascetic training which almost killed him, and through his own meditative concentration and contemplation he has realized the four Noble Truths, which is the essence of his teaching, it is about the universal truth of sufferings and the eradication of them. Due to the tremendous compassion the Buddha has shown on mankind that Buddha said to his attendant: "Ananda! It is owing to my being a good friend to the living beings that those who have been subject to birth (and death) are freed from it." (*S. III, 18, XLV, 2*). Then after his realization he set about to teach his realization to the world.

The solution he advocates is to remove our individual negative defilements through our own effort and not relied on a superhuman or external superpower. He has never claimed any connection with a creator God. When thinking of the Buddha we should recall to mind the ten qualities he possess: He indeed is the Blessed One (*Bhagavā*): the Holy One

(*Araham*), fully enlightened by himself (*Sammā sambuddho*), endowed with clear vision (*Vijjā carana*) and virtuous conduct (*Sampanno*), sublime (*Sugato*), the knower of the worlds (*Lokavidu*), the incomparable leader of men to be tamed (*Anuttarro purisa damma sārathi*), the teacher of gods and men (*Satthā deva manussānam*), He is enlightened (*Buddho*).

A Buddha has perfected the ten virtues (*parami*) i.e., generosity (*dana*), morality (*sila*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), discernment (*pañña*), effort (*viriya*), patience (*khanti*), truthfulness (*sacca*), determination (*adhitthana*), loving kindness (*metta*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). These ten perfections a Buddha has to cultivate through many lifetimes over long eon of time.

The sages of the past used the term '*Buddha-ratana*,' comparing the Buddha to a precious jewel. Although there are many different types of precious jewels in the world: there are rubies, sapphires; diamonds, gemstones etc, which are expensive. The jewel of the Buddha is supreme; this jewel brings to the world and its living beings the relief of sufferings which are of immense magnitude, leading them away from sickness, away from danger, away from agony, away from distress, away from various mental agonies, away from birth, away from dying. He shows us the holy life, the life of purity and the way to purify it, the way to freedom and liberation; therefore the Buddha is a priceless jewel!

As a reverence to him we practice homage to an external artifact, the statue of the Buddha or images made to represent him, this has a very long religious history dating back to the Buddha's lifetime, even though different countries which have embraced Buddhism have made Buddha statues resembling their people, this is understandable. We pay our respect to the Buddha statue as those to the real Buddha; and are contrary to some who have no understanding of us and making unfounded claim and false accusation that Buddhists are worshiping the wooden idol, or worshiping the Demon, people who said these are indeed very rude and ignorant.

The Buddha is revered not because he was a personality of such a name, such a race, or such a social statue; he is revered not as a celestial deity, but as the embodiment of his Enlightenment.

It is beneficial to recollect the immense qualities of the Buddha, the Blessed One said: "When a noble disciple contemplates upon the Enlightened One, at that time his mind is not enwrapped in lust, or in hatred, or in delusion. At such a time his mind is rightly directed towards the Perfect One (Tathagata). And with a rightly directed mind the noble disciple gains enthusiasm for the goal, enthusiasm for the Dhamma, gains the delight derived from the Dhamma. In him thus delighted, joy arises; to one who is joyful, body and mind become calm; calmed in body and mind, he feels at ease; and if at ease, the mind finds concentration. Such a one is called a noble disciple who among humanity gone wrong, has attained to what is right; who among a humanity beset by troubles, dwells free of troubles."(*AN VI.10*)

Lust is the five sensual objects which we are bombarded with daily, by cultivating this contemplation, our mind may be purified. Meditation on the quality of the Buddha and visualizing the Buddha, it leads to joy (*piti*), joy again produces calm (*passadhi*), calm leads to elation (*sukha*), and elation leads to concentration (*samadhi*). Therefore devotional meditation on the Buddha helps to attain mental concentration which forms the basis of liberating insight.

The Sakyamuni Buddha taught for 45 years around the Indian subcontinent and finally passed away and entered *Maha-parinibbana* at Kusinara, his life was celebrated with three auspicious days which were his birth, his enlightenment, and his *Mahaparinibbana* which coincide on the same day of the full moon day in May each year. This is known as the day of Wesak.

The Dhamma

Buddha's teachings are called *Sutta*, which means "thread", it is the thread which holds all the picked flowers together, we as Buddhist studying the fragrant Dhamma (flowers) must use this thread frequently, so that we would not be introducing our own thoughts and interpretation into the Blessed One's teaching too liberally.

The Blessed One said to the groups of monks: "The doors to the deathless are opened, let those who will hear abandon wrong beliefs, now shall I turn the wheel of the great Law (*Dhamma*), for this I go to the Kasian City, there shall I beat the drum of deathlessness, in this world where people are groping in the dark (of ignorance)." (*Majjhima Nikaya*)

There are three forms of dhamma: Recorded Dhamma (*pariyatti dhamma*) is the Buddha's teaching in texts. Learning these Dhamma and put it through practice of virtue, concentration, and discernment. Whether the Buddhism will prosper or decline depends on the practice of its followers, not on the recorded scriptures. If we want to attain enlightenment we have to develop our inner quality through Dhamma practice (*patipatti dhamma*). The attainment of the practitioner is the fruit of practice (*pativedha dhamma*) which will lead to Nibbana.

The Dhamma of practice means the Noble Eightfold Path: Right view, Right thinking, Right speech, Right action, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right mindfulness, and Right meditation. The target is our five aggregates. These Eightfold path can be summarized into three: Morality, meditation, and wisdom; and is termed the Middle Way by the Blessed One, the core of his teachings.

The Buddha's teachings have three levels; the development of mindfulness (*Sati*), the cultivation of intuitive discernment (*Pañña*) which is from developing mental concentration (*Samadhi*), and the release from mental defilement (*Vimutti*). These qualities we must develop within ourselves, so as to gain realization, and attain Arahathood.

In the Sutta there is a story of the monk called Vakkali, who is full of devotion and love for the Buddha, and wishes to admire the majestic body of the Buddha days and nights. Then the Blessed One told him: "What shall it profit you to see this impure body? He, who sees the Dhamma, sees me." Shortly before the Blessed One passed away, he said: "If a monk or a nun, a devout man or a devout woman, lives in accordance with the Dhamma, is correct in his life, walks in conformity with the Dhamma, it is he who rightly honors, reverences, venerates, holds sacred and reveres the Perfect One (*Tathagata*) with the worthiest homage."

In his teachings the Blessed One said: "Just as in the great ocean there is but one taste: the taste of salt, so in this doctrine and discipline (*dhamma vinaya*) there is but one taste, the taste of liberation!" This is the priceless quality of his Dhamma.

The Sangha

Many people throughout the world called themselves Buddhists, but very few of them know the meanings. Many of them are Buddhist just by convenience, or through some kind of social acquaintance, not through understanding. We need to understand our religion rationally, not to follow blindly like a parrot, or follow one's own prejudices, or the persuasion of friends, but to follow after the teachings of the Buddha; adhering to the *Dhamma-Vinaya* (doctrine or discipline) as one's paramount guide, without bending to convention or social custom. In Buddhism if we want to know if our practice is right or wrong, good or bad, worthy of respect or not, we should check it against the eight standards set by the Buddha, these are:--

1. If it leads to passion,
2. If it leads to suffering,
3. If it leads to more defilement,
4. If it leads to greater ambition,
5. If it leads to discontent,
6. If it leads to social gathering,
7. If it leads to laziness,
8. If it leads to be a burden on others:

We should follow Buddhism according to what it was originally expounded by the Buddha, not as what is practiced by the masses. If our religious practice coincides with these eight forms of behavior, then it is not considered the doctrine or discipline of Buddha. We should abandon it as soon as it appears.

The monks' responsibility is to guide the lay people. Unless we train and conduct ourselves properly, the Buddhism will decline. Lay men (*upasaka*) and lay women (*upasika*) will stumble upon obstacles and engage themselves in wrong behavior. Monk and novices will become careless, and miss out on the flavor of the Dhamma. There are three aspects of it;

1. Listen or study the scriptures.

We need to follow the original teaching contained in the scriptures, in order to gain the benefits from the texts, we can listen to teaching by the experienced teachers of the ordained sangha members or the well-learned lay persons, then we will appreciate the value of the scriptures and try to practice them.

2. Practice the dhamma.

We need to put what we have heard and understood those Dhamma into practice, the practice of morality, the practice of mental tranquillity and the practice of insight meditation. If we don't practice it, it would be like a spoon in a good soup not able to taste its good flavor. Only through dhamma practice one can hope to gain realization.

3. Attainment

The Sangha has two types: the ordinary sangha and the holy or ariya sangha. The ordinary sangha is anyone who has yet to attain including the ordained sangha. The holy sangha is composed of the four pairs or eight types of ariyas (attained sangha--- *cattāri purisa yugāni attha-purisa-puggalā*): the one Approaching Stream-winners, Stream-winners; the one Approaching Once-returners, Once-returners; the one Approaching Non-returners, Non-returners; the one Approaching Stainless, and finally the Stainless.

(1). Stream-winners: those who have reached the first level of realization towards Nibbana, the most they will be reborn only seven more times among the human or the celestial beings. They have developed enough tranquillity and insight for the Path, and they have awakened their mind of true insight on all mundane and transcendental phenomena. They have cut through three of the fetters (*samyojana*) that keep living beings in samsara.

These fetters are:

- a. *Sakkaya-ditthi*: the view of the body together with its properties, aggregates, and sense organs as self or belongs to self. Stream-winners have totally destroyed this wrong view. They see them simply as physical phenomena arising from kamma.
- b. *Vicikiccha*: doubt and uncertainty about the practices of the holy path.
- c. *Silabbatam-paramasa*: attachment to rites, rituals and ceremonies, thinking that they are good for the holy path.

In *Samyuttha Nikaya*, there is a *Silavanta Sutta* in which a monk asked Sariputta: "What things, friend Sariputta, should be attended to correctly by a monk who is a Stream-winner?" The Venerable Sariputta answers that it is the five aggregates of grasping that should be correctly attended to by a Stream-winner, as impermanent, suffering, and not-self. "We should know that our suffering is deeply rooted with attachment to these five aggregates. For a stream-winner he has closed off completely the four states of deprivation (*apaya*), and will not be reborn in hell, the asuras, or the hungry ghosts, or among the animals.

(2). Once-returners: those who have attained the second level of realization will be reborn once more in the world. Once-returners have cut off the three fetters like the Stream-winners, but have also reduced the amount of desire, anger, and delusion in their mind.

(3). Non-returners: those who have attained to the third level of realization will never again return to the human world. When they die they will be reborn in the *Anagamin* worlds of the Pure Abodes, and will attain Nibbana there. The Non-returners have abandoned all five of the following fetters:

a. *Sakkaya-ditthi*.

b. *Vicikiccha*.

c. *Silabbatam-paramasa*.

d. *Kamaraga*: passion and delight caused by sensual desires and sensual objects.

e. *Vyapada (Patigha)*: irritation and displeasure caused by anger.

(4). Stainless (*Arahants*): those who have attained to the highest level of realization have reached the state of deathlessness, free from all defilements. Their ignorance, craving, and the tendency to accumulate non virtuous deeds have ended. The Arahants have abandoned another five fetters of the holy path. These fetters are:

f. *Ruparaga*: craving for form realm existence.

g. *Aruparaga*: craving for formless realm existence.

h. *Mana*: self pride in conceiving oneself as this or that.

i. *Uddhacca*: restlessness and distraction of the mind, carried away by own thoughts, and too much thoughts on discernment.

j. *Avijja*: ignorance is normally defined as not knowing the four Truths: not knowing suffering, the cause of suffering, its abandoning, and the path to its abandoning. The Blessed One said: "With the arising of cankers (*āsava*) there is the arising of ignorance' (*MN. 9*)." But the Blessed One added: "No first beginning of ignorance can be perceived, Bhikkhus! Before which ignorance was not, and after which it came to be. But it can be perceived that ignorance has its specific condition (*idappaccaya*)." (*AN. X, 61*)

Avijja means also not knowing the way we are, not recognizing our past and thus become engrossed in it; not recognizing our future and falsely dreaming about it; not recognizing the present and live without mindfulness. Therefore the delusion with regard to all these three times is called *avijja*. We are just the product of all physical and mental phenomena.

In the *Majjhima Nikaya* the Blessed One said: "O Bhikkhus! Even this view (Dhamma) Which is so pure and so clear, if you cling to it, if you fondle it, if you are attached to it, then you do not understand, that the teaching is similar to a raft, which is for crossing over and not for getting hold of."

These ten fetters, all Arahants have cut absolutely, freeing themselves from every sort of bond, so that their hearts are brilliant and dazzling, like the moon in a cloudless sky.

The virtues of the Sangha are subtle, deep, and hard to perceive. If we don't understand this, we would not be able to see how beneficial the Sangha is. As we don't know this the Blessed One said we are like a blind person. That is why the Sangha is *Puññakkhettaṃ lokassati*, the field of merit for the world.

When we follow the path fully, it will come to a point when we are relying on ourselves only, which is why the Blessed One said: “The self is its own refuge, for who else could be refuge?”

Sufferings in Life

The Pali word *Dukkha* is rendered as “suffering”, “dissatisfaction”, “stress” or “unsatisfactoriness”; in most cases the former is correct, while at other times the other words may be more appropriate. For this reason I choose to use “suffering”.

In Buddha’s original teaching he stated that birth is suffering, sickness is suffering, old age is suffering, and death is suffering. The Blessed One also said “pleasure is suffering”, why is it so? As all beings seek pleasure, enjoy pleasure, bound up by pleasure, they fail to see that it is transitory, therefore it is unsatisfactory, craving for pleasure is stressful, and therefore is a form of suffering.

We must understand that in the First Noble Truth, even though life is suffering, it does not mean that suffering is inescapable, it is inescapable for the ignorant people, for the holy sangha it is definitely escapable.

The origin of suffering is craving

The Second Noble Truth identifies the cause of our sufferings. It is our clinging to the idea of separate self which is the cause of suffering, our ego is the force of self craving; which causes us to commit non-virtues and leads to future sufferings.

In this world it is impossible not to see suffering, and try to cure suffering by the removal of all the situations of suffering; but it is possible for us to see the cause of these, it lies within us, deep in our consciousness, the craving for pleasure, for gains, and for existence.

The Blessed One said: “The stopping of craving leads to the stopping of grasping, the stopping of grasping leads to the stopping of becoming, the stopping of becoming leads to the stopping of birth; the stopping of birth leads to the stopping of grief, suffering, sorrow, despair, and lamentation. Thus comes to be the stopping of this entire mass of ill.” (*MN. I, 337; SN. II, 1-3*) So it is craving that we must stop.

Liberation through the destruction of craving

The Blessed One said it is because that state of Nibbana is Real, is realizable, that is why he taught the way for beings to practice towards it. This job we have to do it alone, the Buddha merely points the way to it. In Buddhist practice we have to annihilate the self, it is this Self that causes all our life’s problems. A great deal of misunderstanding arises on the annihilation of the self, it is not the annihilation of a life, a person who lives right now, he or she can still go on living happily, the annihilation is to annihilate the delusion in the our mind, then all misunderstanding will dissipate. When the delusion is removed, the realization will dawn on us.

Nibbana is the Unconditioned, Uncreated, Unborn, Un-originated, and the Uncompounded. We cannot use words to describe it adequately, because it is beyond words. It is characterized by supreme bliss and complete freedom from suffering and is different from ordinary existence, so that no real description of it can be given. The Unconditioned can be indicated by stating the opposite; for it is beyond words and thought.

Buddha describes this as a city with wonderful gardens, groves, pleasant climate, a very happy place, but a city devoid of its residents. Since he has trodded this path of finding it, he proclaim to the world unselfishly the way to it.

The Buddha said: “Monks! There is a not-born, a not-become, a not-made, non-compounded. Monks! If that unborn, not-become, not-made, non-compounded were not, there would be apparent no escape from this here that is born, become, made, compounded.” (*Udana, p.80-1*)

The non-conditioned is often explained as the final elimination from our own mind, of greed, hatred and delusion. This also implies the perfection of the other positive qualities of selflessness, loving-kindness, and wisdom. The attainment of the Unconditioned is the complete liberation from suffering.

The Way of Liberation---The Noble Eightfold Path

The eight factors of the path are:

1. Right view, the knowledge of the true nature of existence.
2. Right thinking, thoughts free from sensuality, ill-will and cruelty.
3. Right speech, speech without falsity, divisive talks, harsh words, and idle gossips.
4. Right action, the abstaining of killing, stealing and adultery.
5. Right livelihood, having livelihood that harms no conscious living being.
6. Right effort, the effort to destroy the defilements of the mind and to perform virtuous actions.
7. Right mindfulness, the perfection of attention.
8. Right meditation, the cultivation of calm, collected, and focussed mind.

The word ‘right’ means the rightness of action, speech, and thought. This Noble Eightfold Path is a moral living standard and not a religious compliance, since we want happiness in life then we must live in harmony with all other beings.

We all too often are caught up in external forms, but fail to pay attention to the core of Buddha’s teaching. Although some external forms are necessary, and may vary according to geographical environment and ethnical culture, the essential practice is nonetheless the same, it is contained in the Noble Eightfold Path, or the Middle Way as the Buddha put it. These eight steps are not to be taken as eight separate or consecutive steps, they are actually eight parallel path all fully interrelated.

1. Right view; is seeing that there really is good and evil, there really is suffering, that suffering has a cause, that it can be destroyed, and that there is a way for its destruction. And also seeing things as they really are, or seeing without self deceit or thought pollution. Taking care to guard unwise mental states so that they don't arise, recognizing that virtue, generosity, and meditation really yield results; and the paths and fruitions lead to Nibbana. Right view is an appreciation of the nature of existence, and therefore is regarded as the beginning of the path. Subsequently this appreciation is replaced by a direct and penetrating discernment of the things that come into contact with the consciousness. This right view is the recognition of the three characteristics of all the physical and mental phenomena. They are:

- (1). Impermanence: All phenomena of the universe are constantly changing.
- (2). Suffering: Suffering or dissatisfaction is inherent in life.
- (3). Selflessness: There is no human being or any other sort of being, possesses of a constant, unchanging, eternal soul or self. Every being is consisted of an ever changing physical and mental formation and is the result of kamma. The self is a facade due to the mental consciousness falsely taking the continuity of body and mind as a static entity, but actually they are an ever changing flux. In *Sambodhi Sutta* the Buddha said: "To one, monks, who has perceived impermanence the perception of not-self is established." (*AN. III, 165*)

When we realize that the object we have just noted is simply movement, and we are just seeing, just cognizing, just noticing the appearing and disappearing of phenomena, and realize the impermanence and other characteristics. This is the Right View.

In *Visuddhi magga*, it said: "Because the rise and fall are not attended to, the characteristic of impermanence does not appear, as long as it is hidden by continuity." (*Vis., xxi, Path of Purification. 781*)

Another important aspect of Right view is the recognition of the kammic morality. The doer of moral actions will reap happiness and the evil doer will reap suffering at some time in future. The effects of wholesome and unwholesome actions, or the happiness and suffering that result from them do not mature immediately; there is always a time lag, as the resultant happiness and suffering need the support of conditions for them to be matured. After death when the body disintegrates into the elements, but the conscious being's life-force continues, immediately upon death the rebirth consciousness assumes a new being to carry on this life force; this new being may not be a human being, and may take rebirth in any plane of the thirty-one planes of existence. This new being is a direct successor to the being that has just died. Therefore this new being becomes an uninterrupted continuation of the old being, he or she inherits the balance of merits or demerits accumulated by the old being.

Everything in the universe is changing constantly; every being is slightly different from the moment before; the false identity is due to continuity. The being that is reborn is not the same from the previous one that died; but the continuity tricks the being into

believing the identity of a self. The importance of the practice is the continuing effort in see things as they really are, without self deceit or thought pollution.

This is Right view, beyond our ordinary everyday perception. It results from Right concentration and comes from dealing with sufferings in a positive way. When we try to escape from sufferings by either forgetting about it, running away from it, blaming someone else for it, becoming depressed by it, or feeling sorry about it, we are only creating more sufferings.

2. Right thinking; right thinking is to rid ourselves of whatever qualities we know to be wrong and immoral, able to see the harm in sensual desires in that they bring on suffering and stress. It is freeing the mind from adverse emotional effect, such as sense desires, ill will, and ignorance which hinders wise and unbiased decision. When the calm mind attends to the object noted, it is the practice of Investigation of the Dhamma (*Dhammavicaya*) on the object. The illusory characteristics of phenomena will begin to appear to the vigilant investigating mind. This is Right thinking.

3. Right speech; speaking the truth; not saying anything divisive or spiteful; not saying anything coarse or vulgar, not saying anything useless. Even if we may say something worthwhile, if our listener is not listening then our words would still be useless.

4. Right action; being true to our duties, not acting in ways that would be corrupt or bring harm to ourselves or others.

5. Right livelihood; it is to obtain wealth and living in an honest way, searching for it in a moral way and using it in a moral way. Right speech, Right action and Right livelihood these three constitute the training of morality, their function is to keep the defiled mind under control and to prevent them from reaching adverse degrees. These defilements however cannot be completely eradicated by morality alone, and other paths must be applied to purify the mind completely. The morality of Right speech, Right action and Right livelihood must be perfected before one can take up insight meditation. The arising of insight or wisdom requires the purification of the morality (*Silavisuddhi*). Everytime we note, we perfect the morality of the path also. Purification of the morality is the adherence of the Five precepts (*panca sila*), or the stricter Eight precepts (*atthanga sila*), and the novices' Ten precepts (*dasa sila*), or the fourfold virtue of the ordained sangha, i.e., purity of *Pātimokkha*, restraint of the senses, purity of livelihood, purity in the use of the four requisites of robes, almsfood, lodging and medicine.

6. Right effort; persisting in ridding ourselves of wrong and harmful actions, words, and thoughts; persisting in giving rise to good and useful actions, words, and thoughts. Every time we put our attention to note the appearing, staying and disappearing of our five aggregates of body movement, feeling, perception, kammic formation, and switching of consciousness, we are making an effort of noting the impermanence, suffering and selfless nature. This is the Right effort of the Noble Eightfold Path. This is practical mental training, the training of the mind in order to prevent and overcome defiled mind, and to arouse and cultivate the virtuous mind.

7. Right mindfulness; being mindful and not to act inattentively or forgetfully, making sure to be constantly mindful of the four foundations of mindfulness; mindfulness of the body, feelings, mental states, and the Dhamma. The perfection of them cuts off the defiled mind, and with the purified mind ie; the attainment of meditative jhanas, we can see intuitively and clearly the selfless nature of the five aggregates (*khandas*), which then leads to Enlightenment and ultimately to Nibbana. This is mind training, the development of the faculty of attention. The development of attention, expanded and intensified awareness, and mind can eventually become capable of discerning things as they really are. Right mindfulness is to be aware of the falsity of self, and the problems and suffering in the world. Right mindfulness when applied to our everyday life will bring about a sharpened awareness, knowing the motives of our activities, and this is very important.

8. Right meditation; training the mind focused and resilient no matter what we do or say, no matter what moods that may strike the mind, the mind keeps calm and firm.

Why do we meditate? Meditation is a way of self knowing, self cleansing, self renunciation, and freeing the mind from attaching to the illusory. We have to do our training of observing the code of conduct (Sila) first, this gives rise to a clean life, and it forms the basis for meditation practice. Meditation involves both the body and the mind. In meditation we keep our body still and train our mind so that it becomes peaceful and focused (*samatha and samadhi*), meditation means simply aware of our being, not judging, not thinking, just being simply aware of ourselves.

Through meditation we learn to detach ourselves from our clinging, to realize that ego is coreless, selfless, to free our mind from its defilements and illusions; to realize wisdom and compassion, the ultimate cessation of suffering comes with Nibbana, the complete abandonment of our self-hood. While the Nibbana is the extinction of self, it is nevertheless not mere non existence or annihilation, for the extinction of self is nothing but the extinction of mind's delusion. Nibbana is beyond words and thought; and the only way to know it is through the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Mind training consists of two areas, the tranquility (*Samatha*) meditation and the contemplation (*Vipassana*) meditation. *Samatha* means mental tranquility, when mental purity is attained through *samatha*, it is very sharp and see things as they are clearly, the developed mind then abandons lust and so the mind is free of entanglement. It also has other auxiliary abilities like clairvoyance, remembering past lives etc. In meditation we achieve three things: (1) Our mind becomes pure and luminous; (2) This pure mind is used as a tool for penetrating to the truths of phenomena; (3) It leads to the spiritual paths and attainments.

Our human problems are rooted in ignorance or delusion. Ignorance is the root evil of all. All our greeds, hatreds, conceit and a host of other defilements go hand in hand with our ignorance. The solutions are to be found in the problems themselves, analyse and scrutinize the problems, and we will find the solution to these problems. These problems

can be solved only by giving up illusions and false concepts and bringing our lives into harmony with reality. This can be done only through meditation.

The Blessed One said: “One who has no grasping does not long after things. One who does not long after things is calmed in himself.” (*MN. II, 318*)

The cultivation of higher mind states, up to the *Rupa jhanas* or *Arupa jhanas* meditative absorptions, and these higher mind states serve to unify, purify, and strengthen the mind for the arising of insight. In this ultimate achievement the delusion of self-hood, with its craving and suffering is transcended and severed. The arising of insight or wisdom requires the purification of the morality (*Silavisuddhi*), and mind (*Cittavisuddhi*) as its roots. Purification of the morality leads to purification of mind, purification of mind is the attainment of the four rupa and the four arupa jhanas. Besides, it requires the inhibition of the five hindrances, i.e., sensual desires, ill-will, restlessness, sloth and torpor, and doubts. The insight would not arise if the virtue is not purified and the mental quiescence is not developed.

Vipassana is made up of two words, ‘*vi*’ is a prefix meaning separation, and ‘*passana*’ is to see, to observe; combining the two words means to observe and separate from our wrong view. Contemplative meditation is seeing the phenomena as they are, i.e.; impermanence, unsatisfactory, and selfless, and gaining insights into them so that our attachment and our ignorance to those phenomena around us could be abandoned, and gaining freedom by wisdom. (*AN 2.3.10*)

All phenomena around us are nothing but composite of materials which are made up by the four basic elements, i.e., earth, water, fire, and air. The Blessed One advised his disciples that to effectively destroy our wrong view that the form or body as ‘me’ or ‘I’ or ‘belongs to me’ is to investigate or contemplate thoroughly from outside of us first, then gradually working inwards to our body. Next you investigate from the past, present, and future times, next you go to other categories of attachment. One by one where a practitioner works his/her way to eliminate the wrong view or attachment about these forms, with persistent effort one may one day attain the noble fruit (*phala*), when one is working on those attachment it is considered one is on the path (*magga*).

Applying the Buddha’s dhamma

There are two factors of our spiritual practice which complement each other; they are intellect (*pañña*) and faith (*saddha*). If intellect is too strong, without the devotion of faith, one will just have a mere intellectual understanding of Lord Buddha’s teachings; without the conviction and courage to cross over. Similarly, if the faith is too strong, without the analytical power of intellect, one will just have a blind faith of Lord Buddha’s teachings; without the calm and concentration to cross over.

Human beings in this world are adrift in the ocean of samsara: they are adrift in the flood of sensuality, in the flood of becoming, in the flood of views, and in the flood of ignorance. That’s why faith and intellect must be developed equally.

The Buddha taught us that mindfulness is the only way for the purification of beings. The clear and lucid mind can observe the arising and passing away of all phenomena including our body and mind; they are constantly changing as the world around us does. Unless we observe constantly, we will not see the impermanence of body and mind, and we will not know the Dhamma.

We can chant the Pali verses, read the scriptures, discuss or listen to dhamma teachings, but unless we watch carefully the world around us, we will not know the Dhamma. We need to learn this through our own mind. It is a personal experience which comes about through constant observation of oneself. Meditation helps us to inquire into our own reactions and knows why we want one thing and rejects another, if we don't learn to meditate we would not know the Dhamma. The mind will not have a Right view of impermanence (*anicca*) because our likes and dislikes are constantly blocking our Right view. We will not understand that they are suffering (*dukkha*) either. When the mind is not focused, with a transcending awareness, it creates suffering (*dukkha*). Only a measureless, illumined mind is free from suffering. The body certainly produces *dukkha* such as sickness, old age and death, and in other ways such as its inability to remain still. Seeing this clearly will give us a strong determination to know Dhamma by ourselves.

Wisdom arises within and comes from an understood experience and inner knowledge, listening to Dhamma teaching can bring it about sometimes. Wisdom has nothing to do with age. Wisdom is an inner knowledge based on self experience. We therefore don't need to look for somebody else to confirm this. We know it ourselves with certainty.

Meditation is the most important aspect of our daily practice, the Blessed One said: "Suppose, monks, a large crowd gathers together crying: 'Oh, the fairest girl, a country beauty!' Then, monks, that most beautiful girl, expert in dancing and singing, displays all her charms, and still a large crowd flocks together crying, 'Oh, the fairest girl is dancing, she is singing. Then comes a man fond of his life, not fond of death, in love with pleasure and not with pain, and they say unto him: 'Look here, my man! Here is a bowl brimful of oil. You should carry it between the multitude and the fairest girl. Right on your heels comes a man with uplifted sword. If you were to spill a drop, your head will be chopped off!'"

"Now what do you think, monks? Would that man, not paying serious attention to that bowl of oil, give his mind to things outside and become careless?"

"Surely not, Venerable Sir."

"Well, monks, this is a parable I have made to make clear the meaning (what I have to say). This is the meaning of it: The bowl brimful of oil, monks, is a term for mindfulness relating to the body. Wherefore, monks, thus must you train yourselves: 'Mindfulness relating to the body shall be cultivated by us, shall be made much of, made a vehicle (of expression), established, and made effective. It shall be increased and well applied.'"

“Thus, monks, must you train yourselves.”

There was a test conducted by a doctor Dr. Buddhadasa Bodhinayake (Consultant Psychiatrist, Harley Hospital Essex, UK) and it produced startlingly result; “It has now been proved that high blood pressure and other diseases connected with the heart could easily be cured by Buddhist meditation.” He said that the British Cardiac Society had recently accepted the curative effects of Buddhist meditation. He stated that over 68,000 British patients were now practising Anapanasati meditation. They had found that this meditation treatment did more for them than drugs. He said that all religions had meditation practices, but the Anapanasati (breathing meditation) was exclusive to Buddhism. Unlike other meditation practices, this had an effect on both sides of the brain. Thus it was capable of bringing the marvellous results on patients. He said that 30 minutes of meditation -- 15 minutes in the morning and 15 minutes in the evening gave the patients the body relaxation equal to 6 to 7 hours of sleep.

"It had been scientifically proved through electro-encephalograph (EEG) readings that the Anapanasati meditation was capable of synchronising the working of the two sides of the brain. This reduced the patient's oxygen needs, reduced the heartbeat, blood pressure, and the breathing rate. Fifteen minutes of Anapanasati meditation had the effect of three Aldomat tablets (250 mg) on a high blood pressure patient. Dr. Bodhinayake said that it had also been proved that this meditation could be used to get people out of drug addiction. It also greatly helped brain development, thinking capacity and retentive power. And in the USA a large number of students of Harvard University were practising Anapanasati bhavana for them to get through their exams.

Contemplation on the aggregates

How do we develop the insight then? Insight is developed by meditating on the five aggregates of grasping daily and continuously. We contemplate on the aggregates whenever they arise in order that we may not cling to them. If we fail to do so clings will arise. As we cling to them as permanent, happy and self or belongs to self. Through contemplating them continuously our clings to the aggregates cease, then we are on the path leading to Nibbana.

The mind is so closely linked with the body that mental states affect the body's health and well being, so in order to keep our well being, we need to keep the mind pure. At the beginning, we should contemplate on four Noble Truths: birth, aging, sickness, and death as it affect our body. And then we contemplate them in the four postures of sitting, walking, standing or lying down; the mind that is well trained will gradually deepen into concentration. Then contemplate the body as it is and after it dies, where it will disintegrate into the four elements of earth, water, fire, and air. This applies to our own body as well as the bodies of others.

We contemplate the various parts of the body as: “This is hair.”; “This is body hair.”; “These are nails.”; “These are teeth.”; “This is skin.” etc., going through the thirty two parts of the body systematically. Then finally we can see these things clearly. When we

contemplate in this way repeatedly within and without, visualizing the body newly dead and long dead, with dogs and vultures devouring its flesh, our mind will become calm and eventually gain insight. In the *Maha-satipatthana Sutta* (The Discourse on great frames of reference) the Blessed One taught the contemplation of the body as above. During the ordination of monk, where a preceptor teach the candidate the contemplation of hairs of the head, hairs of the body, nails, teeth, and skin, these are basic theme of meditation. Because we get obsessed with our body, which is wrapped up by a thin layer of skin from head to toe, the skin is what we are appeared to others. And we think of our body as lovable and precious, and long for it, it is because we are deceived by the wrapping skin. If we can see the body analytically, we will see a different picture, when the body is devoid of skin, we would not see it as attractive.

In the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma), the Blessed One teaches us that the body goes through birth, aging, sickness and death, they are suffering. By observing our own body and applying the Dhamma we understand the teaching. Which is why the Dhamma is *Akaliko*: to be seen here and now. *Ehi-passiko*: not delay in time, and *Opanayiko*: inviting one to come and see, and then *Paccattam*: onward leading (to Nibbana), then *Veditabbo viññuhiti*: to be known by the wise, each for himself. This is how we contemplate the body so as to see it as unattractive, and seeing with wisdom the body as composed of various elements and this is clear to us.

Then on contemplating the feeling we have to contemplate body and mental pain as well as body and mental pleasure. Pleasure is more difficult to contemplate than pain because our mind easily goes for it, whereas pain no one likes it. Similarly to physical form, feeling also arises and disappears; it arises with contact, after some length of time it also wanes. Therefore it is of the same nature as form, which is impermanence.

He Blessed One said: “So seeing all these things, the instructed disciple of the *Ariyan* disregards material form, disregards feeling and so on (five aggregates).” (*SN, III, 68*)

Eightfold Noble path is really a self help to salvation and liberation, the Buddhists don't rely on the God for him to redeem their sins and relieve of their sufferings. They rely on their own effort, there is really no such God. If there is, he is also subject to the operation of kamma.

When you know for sure that all five aggregates are impermanent, suffering and not-self, would you still cling to sense objects as permanent, happy, beautiful, or good?

At one time the Blessed One told a group of monks: “Material form, monks, is impermanent. What is impermanent, that is suffering. What is suffering, that is not the self. What is not self, that is not mine, then am I not, this is not my self. As it really comes to be, one should discern it thus by right wisdom” (*S. II, 19*)

The Blessed One explained this to the monks as such: “Why Monks! Do you say *Sankhara*? Because they are composed or collected together (*Abhi-sankharouti*). What is compounded (*sankhata*) and what is the compound that they compose? They compose the

material body (*rupa*) as a compound of form (*rupa*); they compose the feeling as a compound of feeling (*vedana*); they compose the perception as a compound of perception (*sanna*); they compose the activities as a compound of activities (*sankhara*); they compose the consciousness as a compound of consciousness (*vinnanam*). Thus they are composed and collected together as a compound. Therefore, Monks! The term *Sankhara*. ” (*SN III,87*)

The Buddha said: “Conditioned phenomena (*sankhara*) are impermanent, subject to rise and fall. Having arisen they cease, their stilling (of these) is bliss.” The word *sankhara* refers to this body and mind. *Sankharas* are impermanent and unstable, having come into being they disappear, having arisen they pass away, and yet we want them to be permanent. This is foolishness. Just like our breaths, having come in, it goes out; that's its nature, that's how it is. The inhalation and exhalation have to alternate, when we finish inhalation, then we exhale, it is just natural. But we want things to be permanent, but they can't be, it is impossible. Having been born, we get old and sick and then we die, and that is just natural. All *sankharas* are impermanent, the Great Teacher saw that all *sankharas* are impermanent, and so he taught us to let go of our attachment to them.

True happiness is not found in the deceptive sense pleasures world, we come to this world not just to pursue pleasures, as they are false, impermanent, and unworthy of our interest. Although there are enjoyments in the world, but worldly pleasures are short lived, the craving inevitably ends up with disappointment and suffering. Without wisdom, our craving will keep us chasing from one disappointment to another.

In the Dependent Origination of aggregates the Blessed One said: “The stopping of the six doors leads to the stopping of contact; the stopping of contact leads to the stopping of feeling; the stopping of feeling leads to the stopping of craving; the stopping of craving leads to the stopping of grasping, the stopping of grasping leads to the stopping of becoming, the stopping of becoming leads to the stopping of birth; the stopping of birth leads to the stopping of grief, suffering, sorrow, despair, and lamentation. Thus comes to be the stopping of this entire mass of ill.” (*M. I, 337; S. II, 1-3*) When we meet up with the pleasurable, we have to stop the six doors from contacting the agreeable sense objects, these require months and years of mindful observation and practice of abandoning.

People always have hope, planning for this and that, and running everywhere, ambitions drive them crazy. When we take up meditation we hope to become famous meditators, or become meditation teacher, we fail to realize that they are all in the mind, just play of the mind. Mind does not operate independently from the six doors or the body-mind aggregates, we need to learn to be contemplative in order to observe the rising and ceasing of the mind states, and then we would not be hoping for anything. Why is that? Because it is all transient, it is impermanence. It will all come to naught.

Clear insight does not come about by thinking. It comes through persistent practice of meditation and *vipassana*. It needs calm and clear mind away from mundane awareness to actualize this. We have to contemplate on everything that comes into our field of consciousness. If we don't contemplate it will not give rise to true knowledge. Just like

we contemplate on the body, we have to probe deeply into the ways in which our body is, its physical elements, growth cycle, its reactions to stimulation, its care, etc. This is why we need to understand the body thoroughly, this prevent our mind from straying off the path, and keep the mind defilements at bay.

The sensual craving or the desire, lust, and love that provoke our mind in search of new enjoyment based on past sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations. Our perceptions and memories of them bring them back to deceive us as being good, enjoyable, and happy. This is our defiled mental tendencies, we might let go of the minor attachment, but cling tightly to the dear one, so it is not easy to curb our mental defilements. We have to fight hard, or we will lose and suffer longer in samsara. We have to find the Middle Way so we will be able to observe with mindfulness and discernment, and then we will maintain that mind state and keep it with us all the time.

We have to gain mastery over our enemies, that cravings and defilements in our mind, and evaluate our strength, because those defilements and cravings have had the power over us for such a long long time. We have to figure out how to overcome them, root them out, so that our mindfulness and discernment can spot them whenever it arises. This battle will go on until we reach the Stainless. If we lose, we have to think of a new strategy, otherwise, we will keep losing. Our defilements and the five aggregates are the hordes of *Mara*, they come to burn us, keeping us in samsara.

The Blessed One said: “Form is suffering; feeling, perception, thought-formations, and consciousness are all suffering.” If we don’t see them as suffering, we have not even started on the holy path. Our mind get deluded and go in search for pleasure, we still don't know the Truth of suffering. But when we realize there's no real pleasure to be found, the mind settles down and becomes still. We need to see the true nature of these aggregates, they are composed of components and supported by conditions, and they are not us or ours. Starting with the body and work our way towards other aggregates, analyze them into various elements, then it will become crystal clear.

The Nama Rupa and consciousness are interwoven so tightly that we are often unable to separate them, in *SN 47.5.2* the Blessed One said: “by the arising of Nama Rupa comes the arising of mind, by the ceasing of Nama Rupa comes the ceasing of mind.” In *DN 11* the Blessed One said: “But, Bhikkhus, you should not ask your question in this way : where do the four great elements; ie. earth, water, fire, and wind, cease without remainder? Instead, you should put the question thus : where do earth, water, fire, and wind find no footing? Where are long and short, small and great, fair and foul, where the Nama Rupa are totally destroyed? And the answer is: Where consciousness is non manifestative, boundless, all luminous; that’s where earth, water, fire, and wind find no footing. There both the long and short, small and great, fair and foul, there Nama Rupa are wholly destroyed. With the cessation of consciousness this is all destroyed.” Therefore the Blessed One shown us clearly that the world arises dependent on the consciousness, the world does not exist independently of the consciousness.

Liberation is possible in this very life

Prince Siddhartha took up the homeless life and wandered in search of the *Nibbana* which is the total quenching of all *dukkha*, he studied under two famous teachers of India at that time and found nothing higher than *nevasaññanasaññayatana* (the mental state of neither perception nor non perception), a state of mental tranquility with the consciousness switching from being aware to non awareness. They think that is *Nibbana*, but he did not accept that. So he decided to search on his own until he discovered that Nibbana is the coolness of our mental defilements. It is the exhaustion of all the heat produced by our mental defilements.

Nibbana is not the mind, but is something which the mind can experience, as the Blessed One put it, it is a certain *ayatana* our wisdom can experience it. Forms, sounds, smells, flavors, and tactile sensations are material or physical *ayatana* that our body experience. *Akasanancayatana* (the experience of endless space) up to and including *nevasaññanasaññayatana* are mental *ayatana* our mind experience. Therefore Nibbana is a spiritual *ayatana* for our mind to realize.

We cannot create Nibbana because it is beyond all causes and conditions, but we can create the conditions for realizing Nibbana, i.e., all actions which lead to the abandonment of the defilements. Nibbana is termed: the Deathless, Permanence, Peace, Safety, Health, Diseaselessness, Freedom, Emancipation, Shelter, Refuge, Immunity, Island, Highest Benefit, Supreme Joy, the Other Shore, Cool, etc; nevertheless it is the end of suffering, the end of endless samsara.

Helping others

Our mind can be developed slowly and subtly, through the observation of discipline, mind training in meditation and vipassana, then it will accrue merits for us in the consciousness, these are very subtle, more subtle than our gross body. Training our mind to help other people has a profound impact on our mind. When we hear that other people are suffering and in need of some help, if we offer our help, the mind experiences elation and joy, and then happiness and peace, then we can discover the strength of our mind. One who cultivates the mind this way until it is firmly established in the Dhamma, our practice is on the right path.

We all need good friend, friend who is selfless, not just helpful, but to be able to lend a helping hand when we are in danger. Developing our mind to lend a helping hand to those in need is noble, holy, and pure.

Conclusion

Buddhism is certainly not for the ordinary, it is only reserved for those who have the wisdom eyes. Suffering is everywhere but few see it; people die all over the world but few notice that it will come to them. Karma is operating independently without any superpower directing it but few understand it; the body-mind aggregates are so complex that few manage to untangle it. The holy path is so clear and direct but few wish to walk

on it. The worlding tormented by suffering continuously for so long but few wish to get out of it.

Only when our heart is truly touched, having trust and with confidence in the Dhamma, then it opens to us the way of the holy path.

References:

1. Tipitaka
2. Buddhist meditation, by Piyadassi Mahathera.
3. All of us, by Sister Ayya Khema.
4. Here and now, by Sisiter Ayya khema.
5. What is the triple gem? By Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo, translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.
6. Fundamentals of vipassana meditation, by Mahasi Sayadaw.
7. Nibbana for everyone, by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu.

Bhikkhu Dhammavaro

Jetavana Burmese Monastery, Ellen Grove, Queensland, 30/5/2008

dhammavaro@qq.com

dhammavaro@163.com

<https://sites.google.com/site/chinesebuddhists/home> 中华南传佛友协会

<http://groups.google.com/group/learning-buddhism> 学习佛法

<http://ti-sarana.blogspot.com> 皈依三宝

<http://buddha-middle-path.blogspot.com/> 佛陀中道

<http://buddhist-practice.blogspot.com> 修习佛法

<http://dhammavaro.blog.163.com/> 学习南传佛法

<http://user.qzone.qq.com/1745132505/main> 法增法师的空间