A Buddhist Reflects on 10 Questions

by Vijaya Samarawickrama

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Humbly dedicated to
Venerable Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda Thero
My teacher and mentor for fifty years.

FOREWORD

The Buddha referred to his teachings simply as *Dhamma - vinaya* — "the doctrine and discipline" — but for centuries people have tried to categorize the teachings in various ways, trying to fit them into the prevailing moulds of cultural, philosophical, and religious thought. Buddhism is an ethical system — a way of life — that leads to a very specific goal and that possesses some aspects of both religion and philosophy:

Like most philosophies, Buddhism attempts to frame the complexities of human existence in a way that reassures us that there is, in fact, some underlying order to the Universe. In the Four Noble Truths the Buddha crisply summarizes our predicament: there is suffering, it has a cause, it has an end, and there is a way to reach the end. The teachings on *kamma* provide a thorough and logically self-consistent description of the nature of cause-and-effect. And even the Buddhist view of cosmology, which some may at first find farfetched, is a logical extension of the law of *kamma*. According to the *Dhamma*, a deep and unshakable logic pervades the world.

Unlike most philosophical systems, which rely on speculation and the power of reason to arrive at logical truths, Buddhism relies on the direct observation of one's personal experience obtaining in order to gain true understanding and wisdom. Idle speculation has no place in Buddhist practice. Although studying in the classroom, reading books, and engaging in spirited debate can play a vital part in developing a cognitive understanding of basic Buddhist concepts, the heart of Buddhism can never be realized this way. The *Dhamma* is not an abstract system of thought designed to delight the intellect; it is a roadmap to be *used*, one whose essential purpose is to lead the practitioner to the ultimate goal, *nibbana*.

In this connection, the Sasana Abhiwurdhi Wardhana Society is deeply committed to ensure that the ancient Teachings are explained with relevance to contemporary needs and it is practiced with understanding. We are therefore grateful to Mr. Vijaya Samarawickrama for writing this latest booklet, the 11th in his series entitled "A Buddhist Reflects". In it he answers 10 frequently asked questions by newcomers to Buddhism. Through this booklet we hope that his views will reach a much wider audience and that more people will be benefited by it.

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A Buddhist Reflects on Ten Questions

1. What Is Buddhism?

Is Buddhism a Religion?

This may seem like a simple question requiring the simple answer "Yes, it is a religion", like Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. It has followers, a kind of priesthood, elaborate rituals, impressive temples, scriptures, belief in an after life and so on. In one sense then Buddhism is a religion. Religion comes from the Latin word "religio" which means "to bind". It implies that we as human beings are insecure about ourselves in this existence and have therefore to "bind" ourselves to an external power which can provide some kind of protection and "save" us from present or future misfortune. Buddhists do not bind themselves to the Buddha as if he is God, but they do rely on his teachings to help them escape the problems of existence. There is a difference though. Buddhists only use the Teachings and even the Buddha merely as a means to an end, and not as ends in themselves. The aim of Buddhists is not to meet the Buddha in heaven after death. The Buddha used a famous parable of a raft to explain this point. A man sets out on a journey to get to a certain destination, but on the way he comes to great river which he has to cross. He has two options. The first is he could kneel down and pray for the other bank to come to him, which will never happen. The other option is to apply his energy and resourcefulness to cut down some bamboo, make a raft and row himself across. The raft is a means to cross the river, but the

man's destination is elsewhere. Having crossed the river he must continue his journey: there is no need to carry the raft on his head any more. What the Buddha means is that he and his teachings are merely the means to reach final deliverance. We use both to get us part of the way, but the journey is completed by ourselves. We employ skillful means to use the raft but in the end we save ourselves. Gathering the bamboo and making the raft refers to the various devices we have created over the years to practice the Teachings, which we recognize as the "Buddhist Religion". As we progress, we rely less and less on these means and finally we arrive at a stage where we are confident enough to continue the journey alone. So in one sense we are "bound" to this religion called Buddhism but in another sense we are expected to break free and rely on ourselves. There is a Buddhist hymn which expresses this concept very clearly:

"No one saves us but ourselves
No one can and no one may
We ourselves must walk the path
The Buddhas merely show the way"

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, religion is described as "The recognition of a superhuman controlling power, and especially of a personal God, entitled to obedience"

By this definition Buddhism does not qualify as a religion in the accepted sense, because Buddhists certainly do not accept the concept of a Creator God, who is entitled to obedience, and who can reward or punish indiscriminately. The Buddha is seen as a

perfected human being who discovered the secrets of the universe and showed humanity the Path to Perfect Happiness.

On the other hand, the anthropologist William James said, "*Religion consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto*" If we accept this definition then Buddhism can certainly be regarded as a religion because the Buddha taught that there are laws (called the Dharma) which govern the working of the universe and its inhabitants. And, like the Taoists, Buddhists believe that if we truly understand these laws and we harmonize our thoughts, words and deeds with these laws then we can work towards our "supreme good" which is Ultimate Happiness. By so doing we not only ensure our well-being but also that of all other creatures. This leads to correct moral behavior which is a concern of all religions. Buddhists believe that we all are potential Buddhas capable of realizing the highest good within ourselves without the help of any external agency.

What Is Happiness?

It may be helpful to pause for a moment to ask ourselves what we mean by happiness. One of the main problems of modern civilization is that human beings mistake "pleasure" for "happiness". To the vast majority, happiness means satisfying the demands of the senses, of providing ourselves with the means to acquire every kind of physical and material comfort: it's what we call materialism. But it has been proven over and over again during the last

five thousand years that satisfying the physical senses cannot bring lasting happiness. It seems as if to find happiness we must look in the other direction, which is to reduce our dependence on the senses to provide pleasure which gives us a false sense of 'happiness'

In Buddhism perfect happiness is seen as the absence of craving and mental disturbances of any kind. Now to attain perfect happiness which is what everyone wants, one must reverse the direction in which the mass of humanity is going to look for it in modern civilization. Buddhism teaches that we experience unhappiness because we wrongly see an Ego or Permanent Self which in reality does not exist. If we realize this vital truth, then we CAN go in the appropriate direction and find true happiness. True happiness lies in the total eradication of such negative feelings as anger, hatred, fear, worry, restlessness from the mind. The Buddha was once asked to summarize his entire teaching and he said:

"To do good and avoid evil
To purify the mind
This is the Teaching of all the Buddhas"

And this is what Buddhism is. It is not really a religion which one follows out of faith and devotion, and submission to a God, but it is a Way, by practicing which we can gain Perfect Happiness. It is a PATH and this is why Buddhists prefer not to see Buddhism as a religion but as a way of life. It is a way because it shows us in eight steps called the Noble Eightfold Path how we can find happiness

without relying on a God. This noble path depends on our developing the following:

1. *Perfect Understanding* of what it is that we call an "I" and what in reality are the objects which we so desperately grasp at and yet never find satisfaction in.

   Once we see this truth, or even glimpse it, we are ready to follow the next seven steps which are:

2. *Perfect Thought or Intention* to direct our lives. With perfect intention, we view our own actions and those of others in the right perspective. This in turn allows the next six to be followed in the correct manner.

3. *Perfect Speech*

4. *Perfect Action*

5. *Perfect Livelihood*

6. *Perfect Effort*

7. *Perfect Mindfulness*

8. *Perfect Concentration*

These eight steps can be classified under three headings:

PANNA	Wisdom (1, 2)
SILA	Discipline (3, 4, 5)
SAMADHI	Mental Culture (6, 7, 8)

As we can see, there is no place for ritual and reliance on external forces to practice these steps. They are deceptively simple, but they require sustained effort to practice. There is a story of a Chinese emperor who once asked a monk to summarize the teaching of the Buddha and the monk repeated the Buddha's own words (to do good, avoid evil, to purify the mind). The emperor remarked that if that was all, then even a child of three could understand Buddhism. But the monk replied "A child of three might understand, but a man of eighty would find it difficult to PRACTICE". How true this is, especially the last part about purifying the mind.

It is important to stress that while the practice may be difficult, however, the Buddha assures us that it is not beyond human capability. The Pali word for human being is manussa – which means 'that which has a mind which can be developed'. Human beings are capable of reaching the highest state of perfection, which transcends even the achievements of the gods.

Buddhists maintain that no amount of external "doing good or avoiding evil" is effective, without purifying the mind. Basically any monkey can be trained to do good, but unless it *understands* the benefits of doing good, it will turn to its original bad behavior the moment we turn our backs. Of course physical discipline is important, but MENTAL culture is needed to root out the causes of suffering. Physical discipline forms the first step after which we must concentrate on purifying the mind. The physical discipline is largely formalized into ritual actions which Buddhists have evolved over time in various cultural manifestations, and which are seen as part

of the Buddhist religion. But physical discipline is not the final goal. The final goal is intensely arduous self purification of one's mind which means eradicating the three roots of Ignorance, Greed and Ill-Will. After serving its initial purpose, religion, (the raft) with its beliefs and devotional practices are left behind and wisdom and understanding take over. At this stage it is not necessary to <u>believe</u> in the Buddha and his Teachings any more because one <u>knows</u> why the Path is necessary. One can now practice Self Reliance.

2. Who Is The Buddha?

Probably the one thing which baffles non Buddhists the most is how Buddhists can deny the existence of God and yet call themselves religious. It is always unsettling when at interfaith gatherings the followers of different religions are called upon to pray to God and Buddhists maintain a discreet silence. Buddhists are often asked, "If the Buddha is not God, then why do you pray to him?" "Your Buddha is not God, how can he save you?" The more enthusiastic ones are of course quite happy to consign us all to their hell but many are genuinely confused about our stand on this important issue. The confusion arises in part because the vast majority of mankind has been conditioned over many millennia to believe that the human race is a creation of God and nothing can happen unless this deity wills it. However, there is a growing number of people all around the world who are joining the Buddhists to look at existence dispassionately and who have concluded that this universe can operate without a Creator or a manipulator. Such people have an easier task explaining the huge amount of suffering which is inflicted by nature on humans and by humans not only on their fellow creatures but also on innocent animals. They can also explain the blatant inequalities and inexplicable injustices meted out by the strong and powerful against the weak and helpless. However there is a difference between Buddhists and those who flatly reject anything which cannot be demonstrated by science or reasoning alone. Buddhists are firm believers in moral retribution, an after life, and of ultimate happiness,

which are all concerns of religion. So we could say that Buddhists are atheist but not religious.

Non Buddhists are confused when Buddhists claim that the Buddha was a man, and yet make statues of him, erect temples, make offerings and pray. All this needs explanation.

Yes, the Buddha was born as an ordinary human being, subject to the same vicissitudes of decay, disease and death like any one of us. But he did not *remain* a mere human being. He transcended every one of these limitations, he discovered the actual working of the universe, he stripped away centuries of unquestioning dependence on a Creator and he discovered the secret of true happiness. If he had just kept that knowledge to himself, because it benefited him personally, (as he was very nearly tempted to do) he would have faded away into oblivion. But out of compassion, he chose to spend forty five years teaching mankind the secrets he had uncovered and today we revere him as the greatest teacher, one who is higher than any god. Of him it was said, "There was none as godless as the Buddha, but none so godlike". Buddhists today pay him the highest homage because he taught human beings to destroy the shackles of ignorance and fear and to replace it with understanding and serenity.

The Buddha is known as the Awakened One. Here the Awakened One means one who sees-things-as-they-really-are and who does not mistake the unreal for the real. One example of this is the Buddha's unique realization that what one mistakenly perceives as a real self is nothing more than an ever

changing interaction of two processes – one concerning matter and the other mind. Both are constantly in a process of arising and decaying and therefore have no ultimate reality. This discovery of the non-existence of a personality is unprecedented in the history of the human race. The realization of this truth freed him from all the beliefs in gods, predestination, fate, rituals of sin, of reward and punishment which have plagued humanity and held it in slavery for thousands of years.

The Buddha also referred to himself as Tathagatha. It means "One-who-has-realised-his-essential-nature". In our ignorance we human beings constantly search for happiness from outside sources, not realizing that the secret of happiness is within ourselves. The Buddha said, "I declare that the beginning and the end of the world are to be found within this six foot frame". One who has discovered himself has transcended the limitations of both humanity and divinity. Therefore he is neither God or Man. He is the Tathagatha

Then why make statues of him? Although the Buddha is represented in human form, Buddhists see beyond the image to the essential "Buddha-nature" which transcends mundane realities. When they gaze at the Buddha statue and contemplate the nature of the Buddha, Buddhists recite this formula,

"Itipiso Bhagava, arahan, samasambuddho,
vijjacarana sampanno, sugato, lokavidu,
Anuttaro purissa dhamma-sarati,
Satta devamanussanam
Buddho bhagavati

These are nine qualities of the Buddha which make him a unique being, far superior to any God.

Itipiso bhagava: Such indeed is the Lord

Arahan: One who has totally eradicated every mental defilement, a worthy one,

Sammasambuddho: A perfectly enlightened one who can clearly teach the Universal Cosmic Law which he understands in all its complexity

Vijjacarana sampanno: Perfect in knowledge and wisdom

Sugato: One who embarked on a unique journey to discover the true nature of the self and successfully arrived at a perfect understanding of everything that needs to be understood.

Lokavidu: One who sees both the external world and its relationship with innumerable other planes of existence as well as the internal workings of the individual consciousness

Anuttaro Purissa Dhamma Sarati: The incomparable trainer of those who are in need of training. Only the Buddha has the capacity to reach out to individuals, understand their infinitely varied natures and teach in a manner which will effectively remove the defilements which prevent them from perceiving their essential pure states of mind.

Satta deva manussanam: Teacher of gods and men. He is a teacher of gods because in spite of their

seemingly great power, gods have not eradicated the three poisons of Craving, Ill-will and Ignorance from their minds and are therefore subject to the laws of Impermanence just like human beings.

Buddho bhagavati: He is the Lord who is the Buddha

Although these qualities may seem to be claims made by Buddhists on behalf of the Buddha out of their devotion to him, a study of the voluminous scriptures provide ample proof that this is indeed so, and recent events in the history of the world show that only the Buddha's teaching and example can provide lasting and workable solutions to the ills which are plaguing the human race. Only the Buddha teaches us to stop looking outside of our individual selves but to perfect ourselves before we attempt to change the world.

"Even though a man conquers
Ten times ten thousand men in battle
He who conquers but himself
Is the greatest of conquerors"

3. What did the Buddha Teach?

When people first began to write about Buddhism in the west they usually described it as an "Offshoot of Hinduism". This is not correct because while Buddhism and Hinduism share many common concepts and terms like Dharma, Karma, Samsara, Atma and so on, the Buddha used these terms to mean very different things from what they mean in Hinduism. Of course they both grew out of the common ideas which developed in North India over a period of nearly a thousand years but Buddhism is radically different from Hinduism. We could compare Buddhism and Hinduism to a mango tree and a coconut tree. They may both grow in the same soil but they produce completely different fruits.

It is true that before the ascetic Gautama became the fully enlightened Buddha he went to many famous teachers but he did not find satisfactory answers to his questions, nor did he find Perfect Happiness by following their teachings. So he struck off on his own and using the power of his own intellect and spiritual practice he broke through the veils of ignorance which blocked his vision and perceived the Four Noble Truths:

1. Suffering exists both on physical as well as mental levels

2. This suffering arises as a result of craving and grasping which is caused by mistaking an impermanent, constantly changing set of processes for a permanent self or "I". Since everything is changing, craving can never be

satisfied, so life is characterized by an all pervading sense of *dis-* ease.

3. There is a state which is the opposite of the present one, where Ultimate Happiness can be experienced by eradicating craving.

4. There is a practical path by following which every human being can attain that perfect state:

    Perfect Understanding or View
    Perfect Thought or Intention
    Perfect Speech
    Perfect Action
    Perfect Livelihood
    Perfect Effort
    Perfect Mindfulness
    Perfect Concentration

[We have already considered these eight factors earlier]

It was when he gained full knowledge (that these were the four noble truths, that they had to be realized, and that they had been realized) that he became the fully Enlightened Buddha.

The teaching on the Four Noble Truths rests on the Buddha's explanation of the non existence of a soul or a permanent ego. The Buddha is considered the most original thinker the human race has ever had because it was he alone, who, for the first time, denied that the human being is made up of two permanent entities called the body and the soul. In

place of a body the Buddha declared that all that he could discern was Matter which is not essentially real but merely a combination of four constantly changing processes. Venerable Narada explains it like this:

1. Solidity (the factor of expansion). It is due to this factor of expansion that elements occupy space. We are able to see any object (like rocks or water) because they occupy space.

2. Fluidity is the element of cohesion which keeps objects together. Solidity keeps particles apart, but fluidity brings them together and allows them to coalesce.

3. Heat or temperature. It is the element which matures. The vitality of all living thing depends on heat. Cold is also considered as heat at a lower degree relative to our own body heat. At death heat is one of the elements which depart from the body processes.

4. Motion. It is displacement. Like heat it is relative because we only perceive motion in relation to a fixed object.

These fours factors are always present in varying degrees in the whole realm of physical substance, not only in the body but also in so-called objects which we see around us. These four factors do not have any permanent, separate existence of their own and are

always dependent on the other. Also they have not been "created" any First Cause.

These four factors give rise to material objects and they are called MATTER (Rupa)

The other part of one's personality which is mistaken for a divinely created soul by most other religions is to the Buddha also another set of four processes with no ultimate independent reality. The first of these is called feeling or sensations which can be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Feelings arise when contact is made with the eye, nose, ear, mouth, touch and mind. Let us examine how this works with one example – the eye. Now the eye itself is simply a ball of flesh, blood vessels and nerves. When it "sees" an object, that is all that happens, seeing. The eye simply falls on hundreds of objects in a day and moves on. But then something else happens. The eye meets a form and CONSCIOUSNESS arises. When EYE, FORM and CONSCIOUSNESS meet there is CONTACT. When there is CONTACT, it inevitably gives rise to feelings. If the feeling is neutral we pass on, but the feelings can also be pleasant or unpleasant, depending on who is seeing. (for example an American flag can arouse different feelings in President Bush, Osama Bin Laden and in a bushman in the Kalahari desert. Also these feelings can change according to circumstances, like for example if the bushman becomes an American citizen.)

With feeling there is PERCEPTION which is the recognition of objects – (the eye differentiates between a ball and a bat, for example) This is then accompanied by mental formations which includes

volition. When we consciously act upon what we perceive in a certain way, it is volition and it leads to a karmic action – an action which produces karmic results. Finally there is CONSCIOUNESS which contains all the previous factors making four factors in all, namely, feeling, sensation, mental formation, and consciousness. Together they are called MIND (Rupa).

As we can now see, MIND and MATTER are constantly changing and impermanent. Mind and matter together make up the illusion of a person. If we do not see this then we mistake them for a SELF, an "I". When we perceive an "I" then of course MY (i.e. grasping/craving) arises. This is when suffering, which is unfulfilled desire, begins.

It is natural of course to say, "But I *do* exist. I eat, walk, sleep, argue, laugh ...etc." This is partly true. The Buddha taught on two levels: on the mundane level of *Conventional Truth* we do recognize a person. But at the *Transcendental Truth* level we must recognize the non-SELF and work towards realizing it. The more we perceive the transcendental truth the easier it becomes to give up the things of this world, develop contentment and let go of grasping. "Letting go" involves not holding on to objects, as well as to ideas like religious beliefs and so on. This even includes not holding on to the Buddha's teachings as "my religion". (Remember the story of the raft?) We must be prepared to let everything go, carry no baggage. Then we are free like a swan which has no permanent home. It is this quality of non- grasping to objects and views which makes it impossible for there to be a "Buddhist" terrorist or militant.

We can see even from this very simplified explanation of the doctrine of non-soullessness (Anatta) that Buddhism is a unique teaching and that it bears very little resemblance to Hinduism which teaches the existence of Atman (soul) and Anatman (body).

What we should note about these Noble Truths is that to realize them there is no reliance on any external force, no devotion and no ritual. We are asked to dispassionately view the human condition and recognize that it is essentially unsatisfactory. This unsatisfactory state arises when we mistake the unreal for the real, making us run after the wrong ideals. However, the Buddha shows us that every human being can experience calmness, serenity, equanimity, stillness in this very life. There is no need to *believe* that such a state exists or that it can be experienced only after death. It can be *experienced here and now* at varying levels of intensity. This is done by developing the practical steps outlined in the Noble Eightfold Path.

In following this Path we must avoid going to extremes in our behavior. All our actions must be balanced. Moderation is the key to following the Buddha's teaching and we can say that it is the most recognizable feature of Buddhism today. It is Buddhism which can teach mankind that it is quite possible to create a world where people can live without war, exploitation, narrow loyalties to sectarian beliefs. Buddhism does not condone violence to promote peace.

Seven weeks after his Enlightenment the Buddha summarized the entire content of his teaching in his

first sermon. There he declared that spiritual perfection can only be gained if one avoids any kind of extreme behavior and follows the Middle Path. He said that one must not rely on rituals alone to free oneself from suffering. Finally he explained the Four Noble Truths which we examined earlier. For forty five years the Buddha elaborated on these basic themes and when he passed away his teachings were collected and preserved in what we call the Tripitaka.

In order to further understand the Four Noble Truths we must also try to understand the Buddha's Teaching on Dependent Origination, that everything which exists depends on conditions. The Buddha flatly rejected the idea that the world and its inhabitants were created by a single powerful deity in a single moment. He said that even if there was a First Cause then that first cause could not be comprehended by the human intellect. More importantly, such knowledge would have no usefulness for us to escape from the present condition of clinging and unsatisfactoriness. The Buddha declared that since we have no control over the past or the future, our primary concern should be to control the present moment with mindfulness by applying the four great efforts:

1. To prevent unwholesome mental states from arising
2. To eradicate unwholesome mental states already arisen
3. To develop wholesome mental states not yet arisen
4. To maintain wholesome mental states already arisen.

The Buddha declared that everything that comes into being does so as a result of a previous condition: "This being, that is". By the same token when a condition ceases, its result also ceases, as for example when the sun sets, day ends or when there is light darkness disappears. This seemingly simple teaching is the very foundation of the Buddha's doctrine. It explains how suffering arises as a result of several conditions coming together and how these conditions can be eradicated through the development of the mind and the removal of Ignorance, Craving and Ill-will. At the root of our suffering is our Ignorance which is our inability to see things-as-they-really-are. If we apply ourselves diligently then the mind will clearly see that all our problems are imagined, beginning with the recognition of a self where no self exists. This gives rise to wisdom and when wisdom arises our mind is directed towards peace, serenity and Ultimate Happiness arises. In the absence of suffering, there is Happiness.

The Buddha spent forty five years teaching his doctrine and during this time he is said to have imparted 84,000 units of instruction. After he passed away at the age of eighty, these teachings were collected, together with the rules which he laid down to govern the conduct of his disciples. Later on his followers extracted the psychological and the philosophical aspects from these teachings, and called them Abhidhamma or Higher Teachings. Thus we have the three great collections, namely the Vinaya, (rules of conduct) the Suttra (the Discourses) and the Abhidhamma which are called the Tripitaka. Originally, they were recited orally but by about 80

b.c.e. they were written down in Sri Lanka for the first time, using the sinhala script.

This entire Teaching, understood and explained by the Buddha is called the Dharma. It is not a product of a divine inspiration but a diligent spiritual effort to understand the workings of the universe. It requires no belief or blind faith, only investigation and understanding. This Dharma has several characteristics.

Svakkhato bhagavata Dhammo: *Well expounded is the universal law by the Lord.* The Buddha spent forty five years patiently explaining every aspect of the Four Noble Truths and on his death bed he urged everyone present that if there were any doubts about the Teaching, this was the last opportunity they had to clear them. But all remained silent, signifying they had none. For twenty five centuries, these teachings have guided human beings on the Path to Happiness.

Sandithiko: *Capable of being realized by oneself; directly visible.* The Buddha declared that every human being has the capacity to realize the dharma provided that he or she is prepared to make the Right Effort. Every human being is a potential Buddha.

Akaliko: *With immediate fruit.* This teaching has withstood the test of time. It transcends narrow limitations of time and space and does not need to be re-explained or re-interpreted. They are eternal laws which are true for all time. Following these laws brings immediate results, which one can verify for him or herself in this life itself. (At a deeper level it also means that there is no time lapse between

entering the holy life and experiencing its fruit , *magga* and *phala*)

Ehipassiko: It is a doctrine which invites every disciple to *come and see* for him or herself. No faith or belief is required on any aspect of the teaching.

Opanayiko: *Inviting investigation.* Buddhism has no dogma or mystery which has to be accepted on faith. Throughout his long career spanning forty five years, the Buddha was challenged on every aspect of his teaching and he left no room for doubt because he invited his followers to question anything they could not understand until they realized its true meaning.

Paccatam Veditabbo Vinnuhiti: *To be understood by each disciple for himself.* There is no room for mass salvation. Every disciple must walk the path for him or herself. Salvation cannot be provided by another. But it is within the reach of every person who is willing to make the effort. There is no need to rely on an external agency to provide salvation.

4. What is the Sangha?

In Asia, the most obvious aspect of Buddhism is the physical structures like the temples, statues and pagodas which can be seen everywhere from India to Japan. In Buddhist countries certainly images of the Buddha sitting, standing or lying down can be seen at every street corner, gazing serenely at the passers by who stop reverently to offer flowers, lights and incense. But Buddhism is also characterized by the presence of Buddhist monks and nuns in their distinctive robes of saffron, red or grey. Non Buddhists regard them as priests. This is not correct. A priest is a person who acts on behalf of a god and who mediates between the devotees and god. Buddhists do not subscribe to the idea of a god who can be appealed to for any reason or who controls a person's destiny in any way. Buddhists maintain that there is no need for an intermediary to help them out of suffering. Buddhist monks and nuns are people who have reached a level of spiritual maturity to enable them to understand that the physical world can only provide material satisfaction. So they voluntarily turn away from material pursuits and devote their lives to developing their spiritual interests. They give up their jobs, involvements with families, wealth, fame, fortune, power and spend their time studying the teachings of the Buddha and practicing meditation. They give up all worldly pursuits having only four requisites – food, shelter, clothing and medicine which are kept to the basic minimum. Out of compassion, though, they do spend time teaching others and attending to their spiritual needs, but only as fellow human beings. Even the

Dalai Lama has repeatedly stressed that he is not a divine saviour.

The Sangha, meaning 'community', was founded by the Buddha seven weeks after his Enlightenment. After his Enlightenment the Buddha considered sharing his knowledge with others but initially he felt that it would be a futile task because the Dharma was so deep and complex that it required a completely different way of thinking than had been followed in the past. However, he then reflected that there were beings with 'little dust' in their eyes, that is, there were people who were capable of receiving his instructions and benefiting from them. So, he set off and gave his first sermon to a group of five ascetics who had been his companions for six years previously. At the end of the sermon they requested permission to become his followers and he admitted them into his Order, becoming the first members of the Sangha. This community of monks live together in monasteries as friends who mutually help each other in their spiritual practice. Some however, prefer to live solitary lives away from the distractions caused by communal living. Monks are known as Bhikkhus.

The first five monks, having received the Order from the Buddha himself, then passed the lineage to others, and they carried on the tradition, generation after generation in an unbroken chain until the Order has reached us today, to be passed on eventually to the next generation. Five years after instituting the Order of Monks the Buddha set up the Order of Nuns (Bhikkhuni), first ordaining his foster mother and five hundred ladies from his

fathers' court. They too have handed down the lineage which has survived to the present day.

There are many ways in which the Sangha can be viewed. The first is that there are four components namely Bhikkhu, Bhikkhuni, Upasaka (male layperson), Upasika (female layperson). The aim of the Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni is to turn away from the concerns of the materialistic world and to concentrate on spiritual development through intense study, meditation and physical discipline. Their needs are simple and they do not worry about where their next meal comes from. Besides the four basic requisites mentioned earlier they need nothing. They do not work for a living, so who supports them? This is where the second component of the Sangha, the lay people, come in. Lay people are not yet ready for the severe lifestyle prescribed for monks and nuns, so they follow materialistic pursuits. But they support the monks and nuns by providing for their needs and in turn the monks and nuns provide them with spiritual guidance and support. This has created a symbiotic relationship between renunciates and laypeople which has supported Buddhism over the last twenty five centuries.

Monks and nuns however do not speak to the Buddha and they need not be involved in conducting rituals on our behalf. They do conduct religious ceremonies (called pujas) but only as leaders, not as intermediaries. Even a funeral service can be conducted without a monk or nun. This said, however, we cannot disregard the enormous positive psychological effect the presence of the Sangha can have in times of stress. Their calmness, compassion

and ability to say the right things derived from their deep understanding of the Dharma should never be underestimated. For those with the right attitude, even the sight of the robe can have a soothing effect on the mind

By now some of you are wondering how this elevated view of the Sangha matches up with our experience of men and women in robes who smoke, stand around in marketplaces collecting money by selling talismans, telling fortunes and so on. Well, there are different kinds of Sangha: the sincere ones and the opportunists who want an easy life. Unfortunately, the second category seem to be increasing in number of late, but we as lay members can discourage them by refusing to give them donations or going to them for fortune telling. We can even refuse to pay for funeral services because there are monks who will gladly perform them and refuse to accept any kind of payment.

The Buddha differentiated between the Ariya Sangha and the Bhikkhu Sangha. The first are the disciples who had become perfected (as arahants) and the second are those who are earnestly striving to gain that perfection. Of this second category again there are those who retire into the forest, shun all contact with the outside world and live a life of strict discipline. Another group chooses to live in monasteries where they have contact with the people, are supported by them and tend to their spiritual needs.

All members of the Bhikkhu/Bhikkhuni Sangha voluntarily observe a set of monastic rules laid down

by the Buddha. These are called the Vinaya. They are not laws which must be obeyed, but which are treated as useful guidelines to help the aspirant achieve his or her spiritual goals. A person is free to leave the Order at any time and even re-join if he or she feels like it.

To a Buddhist a combination of the three elements – The Buddha, The Dharma and the Sangha together constitute the Noble Triple Gem (triratana) which forms the cornerstone on which the entire structure of organized Buddhism stands. The qualities of the Sangha are recalled every time one recites the following stanza :

Supatipanno Bhagavato savaka sangho
Ujupatipanno Bhagavato savaka sangho
Samici patipanno Bhagavato savaka sangho
Yadidam cattari purisa yugani
Atta purisa puggala
Esa bhagavato savaka sangho
Ahuneyo pahuneyyo
Dhakkineyyo anjali karaneyo
Anuttaro punnakkhettam lokassatti

Of good conduct is the Order of the disciples of the Blessed One
Of upright conduct is the Order of the disciples of the Blessed One
Of wise conduct is the Order of the disciples of the Blessed One
Of dutiful conduct is the Order of the disciples of the Blessed One
This Order of the Disciples of the Blessed One, namely,

These four pairs of persons
Is worthy of offerings
Is worthy of hospitality
Is worthy of gifts
Is worthy of reverential salutation
An incomparable field of merits to the world

While most of the lines in this stanza are obvious in their meaning the two underlined ones need explanation. Four pairs of persons refers to the *Ariya sangha* which we mentioned earlier. These are the disciples, who by earnestly following the Buddha's instructions have set themselves on the path to the attainment of perfection by gradually eradicating all their mental defilements. There are four stages in the final journey: Sotapana, sakadagami, anagami and finally arahant.

(i) Sotapana refers to one who has made it to the first stage, and has become a 'stream enterer', and will be reborn no more than seven times.
(ii) Sakadagami: will only return once
(iii) Anagami: will not return again
(iv) Arahant: One who has completely eradicated all mental defilements and has attained Nirvana.

Each of these four stages has a Path (*magga*) and a Fruit (*phala*), which gives a total of eight or Four Pairs. They are all considered Worthy or Noble (*Ariya*)

An incomparable field of merits. Buddhists believe that when they perform any act of generosity they earn merits--which is a positive state of mind which will bring them karmic rewards. But not all acts of

generosity produce equally strong merits. The spiritual development of the recipient also determines the degree of merit accrued. For example when we feed an animal it is good, but feeding a human being is more worthy because a human being will be able to give more in return. Similarly if we give alms to a monk, we provide him with the strength to develop spiritually and thus help others to grow spiritually as well. By the same token if we make offerings to an arahant, he or she is an even greater "field of merit", or "an incomparable field of merit".

Bearing all these in mind, Buddhist devotees reverentially make offerings, not only of food but the other requisites, namely, shelter, clothing and medicine for the upkeep of the sangha, who have preserved the Teachings of the Buddha over the last twenty five centuries.

5. Is Buddhism Relevant Today?

Before we can answer this question it would perhaps be good to consider whether religion in general has outlived its usefulness as a means to explain the nature of existence and to provide solutions to life's problems. Religion had its beginnings in the evolution of self consciousness in the human being. As our earlier ancestors gradually developed their intelligence they began to see a link between their own physical sufferings and their awareness of unseen forces in nature which they believed could either be helpful or harmful in their effort to survive. They conceived these forces as having human characteristics and emotions, so they sought to either appease the malevolent ones or to please the benevolent through sacrifice and observance of taboos. This is early **animism** where all of nature was worshipped. Over time superior gods were evolved with more responsibilities and eventually the concept of a high god, of one whose purpose was to create the world and its inhabitants appeared. By this time certain specialists took over the task of communicating with these forces and the earliest priesthood emerged. Priests took it upon themselves to provide explanations of natural phenomena, to explain the mysteries of birth and death, of the meaning of "good" and "evil", of sin, of hell and so on. And about ten thousand years ago we see the emergence of the earliest religions whose main purpose was to explain what could not be explained by mere observance of nature. People began to see a link between certain occurrences in nature and their daily lives. They believed that these occurrences could be influenced to have beneficial effects on

human beings. Therefore priests observed the movements of the sun and moon and other planets to ensure bountiful harvests, auspicious births and so on. Priests also began to provide theories on how humans came into being, about life after death and how "moral behavior" could ensure happiness. Natural calamities and personal suffering like disease were blamed on these forces and means were developed to avoid them. We call these efforts to manipulate nature for the benefit of man *sympathetic magic.*

In short, religion evolved to satisfy man's curiosity about the unknown and to ensure his survival. In the absence of scientific knowledge, myth, blind faith and fear reigned supreme. This is perhaps why Voltaire declared, "even if God did not exist it would have been necessary to invent him". Much of what was given by way of explanation found their way into scriptures which came to be regarded as sacred and absolute truth. As science developed and we learned more about the workings of the universe, these concepts came into conflict with modern knowledge – teachings on Creation, of the omnipotence of the creator, of natural disasters, of social institutions for example, came to be seriously questioned and the scriptures, once held to be the absolute word of god, had to be revised and reinterpreted. Modern scholarship has even discovered glaring discrepancies within the same scriptures proving therefore that they can hardly be considered to be of divine origin. However, in spite of its obvious strengths, science is not yet equipped to fully explain the mysteries of human existence. Our former Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir once remarked, "science can

explain the what and the how, but science can never explain the *WHY"*

On the other hand, different systems of thoughts did begin to develop to understand the *why* but these systems avoided supernatural explanations. New thinkers looked at the observable human condition and tried to explain life's mysteries from that perspective. Confucius for example was asked, "Master, teach us to understand heaven", and he is reputed to have replied, "Why do you seek to understand heaven when you do not understand earth? Understand earth, heaven knows how to look after itself." The Buddha also chose to understand the human condition from the point of view of man, rather than look to heaven for an explanation. This approach is very close to the scientific method which can be defined as "*Any system of knowledge that is concerned with the physical world and its phenomena and that entails unbiased observation and systematic experimentation.*" To this definition we must add the principle of the Universality of Change, because this fact must be clearly understood to explain the nature of existence.

We can now bring these two concepts together, (namely that (i) the concern of science is to study observable phenomena rather than speculate about it, and (ii) that everything changes and see how this applies to the Teaching of the Buddha and its relevance to modern times.

The Buddha also observed the human condition dispassionately and came to the undeniable conclusion that our existence is characterized by

unsatisfactoriness, disease, decay, death, which are all symptoms of changeability, impermanence. What we call a person is only an illusion because it consists of a constantly changing interaction of psycho-physical forces. Mistaking this process for something real and enduring gives rise to craving which can never be satisfied and therefore constitutes mental and physical suffering.

The Buddha's teaching is based on the realization of non- reality and change. It is not based on conditions and world views prevalent in India twenty five centuries ago. It is akalika, timeless, a valid observation of the human condition regardless of time or space.

The Buddha teaches us that since everything changes, how we understand his teaching must also be kept abreast of changes in worldly conditions. The Buddha clearly declared in the Kalama Sutra that every aspect of his teaching must be carefully examined by each individual and must be experienced – just as gold is tested by fire, so a teaching must be tested by investigation and experience. The Buddha was not concerned with the past and the future and had no time for speculation. He urged his followers to be ever mindful of the present, because that is the only reality.

The Buddha repeatedly stressed that he only taught four things:

1. That this existence is characterized by suffering

2. Suffering is caused by craving which arises because of a false notion of a self
3. This suffering can be ended in this life itself by seeing-things-as-they-really-are and thereby eradicating craving
4. This perfect state can be attained by following a practical eightfold path.

He emphasized that the world is constantly changing, that knowledge is always expanding and as a result social norms will also change and intelligent human beings must keep abreast of these changes. This is why Buddhism has never been at odds with science which is an agent of change. New discoveries like birth control, organ transplantations, cloning are quite acceptable from a Buddhist point of view, provided that they are morally sound.

That is where the difference lies: science is generally not concerned with moral issues, whereas Buddhism is. While Buddhism accepts the developments of science, it warns that progress in the material world must keep pace with moral development. We cannot blame science for its discoveries, but we should blame the undeveloped minds which use them for the wrong purposes For example, science unleashed a vast potential for harnessing energy by splitting the atom, but it was morally depraved humans who used that knowledge to develop nuclear weapons. By the same token, science may have invented cloning, but unless we are morally advanced we could easily abuse that knowledge.

The Buddha discouraged any idle speculation about the origin of the universe because that knowledge

was irrelevant to extricating oneself permanently from the *present* problems facing mankind – old age, disease, decay and death. Also knowing about our origins will in no way help rid the mind of present defilements like anger, hatred, greed, jealousy, fear, worry and so on. We should not waste precious time speculating on that which cannot be fathomed.

The Buddha used a very graphic example to drive home this point to a monk called Malunkyaputta who demanded to know about the origin of the world. The Buddha told him that he was like a man who had been shot by a poisoned arrow. He refused to have the arrow removed before he had been told about who shot the arrow, the person's caste, his parentage and so on. By the time his assistants found the answer to all these irrelevant questions, he was dead. Similarly our concern is to rid ourselves of present suffering by pulling out the poisoned arrow of mental defilements.

Eradicating the defilements and purifying the mind is the only task ahead of us, everything else is useless. Certainly these concerns make Buddhism very relevant to help us extricate ourselves from the problems facing humanity today.

Another reason why Buddhism is relevant for the world today is because it encourages its followers to strictly follow the middle path of moderation in all things. The insanity of modern consumerism is threatening to deplete our natural resources to such an extent that our descendants will have nothing to live on. Only by taming our senses and learning to live in contentment can we conserve valuable

resources for the future. Also by following this teaching on moderation we can stave off impending environmental disasters like global warming and pollution. Contrary to the belief that the world was created to satisfy man's craving for pleasure, Buddhism teaches that we must share this planet with all the other creatures who inhabit it. The Buddha teaches that we are all related to each other and that our own good can only be achieved by promoting the good of **all** others.

Certainly we live in a dangerous world which is being ripped apart by narrow sectarian loyalties, and the belief that the only way to win a battle is to wipe out the opponent. The Buddha teaches another way

"Hatred does not ceased by hatred
Only by love can one overcome hatred"

"He hit me, he abused me:
In those who harbor such thoughts
Hatred does not cease"

"Victory breeds hatred
The defeated lives in sorrow
The victor lives in fear
The peaceful live happily
Having given up
Both victory and defeat"

"All fear punishment
All fear death
Knowing this, one should
Neither strike nor cause strike"

"Even though a man conquers
Ten times ten thousand men in battle
He who conquers but himself
Is the greatest of all conquerors"

All these teachings are not idealistic. For twenty five centuries Buddhists have refrained from going to war to defend or promote their religion. The Buddha has clearly condemned all forms of violence to humans, animals and even plants. On a personal level Buddhism teaches practical ways to calm the mind. This is so desperately needed in today's urban societies where people undergo stress in so many forms. Buddhism teaches that like the lotus flower we can live in stressful situations and yet remain unpolluted if we learn to control our minds and practice detachment.

"Ah, happily do we live
Unhating, among the hateful.
Amidst men full of hatred
We live without hate"

6. What is Karma And Sin?

One of the most frequently asked questions by newcomers to Buddhism is, What is Karma? They have heard all kinds of weird things about it, mostly from ill informed "experts" on the subject: if you kill a mosquito you will be reborn as a mosquito to be killed in turn or don't kill a cockroach, because it could be your grandmother paying a visit etc. The Buddha's teaching on the working of karma is much more profound than that. We had discussed earlier that Buddhism and Hinduism use the same terms to describe a phenomenon but differ widely in their meanings. Karma is a case in point. In both religions karma means actions which determine the condition of one's life in the future. But after this the teachings diverge.

To begin with, in Hinduism there is a belief in a permanent soul which transmigrates from one life to another, taking on different forms depending on the deeds which were performed in the previous life. The soul does not change. It is the same soul taking different forms in a process called re-incarnation. The aim of Hindu practice is to free the soul which is trapped within the physical body and reunite with God. The final release of the soul from the body is called "Moksha". The Buddha's teaching is entirely different. He teaches that there is no permanent entity but a series of rapidly changing mental factors which arise and fall away. Nothing remains the same for two consecutive moments, so there is no permanent entity called a soul which needs to be released.

The present state is conditioned by the past, and that present moment moves to condition the next moment and so on in a never-ending series of risings and fallings. In this process an illusion of a permanent self is created. For example if we swing a lighted torch rapidly in a circular motion we see a "circle", which in reality is nothing more than a series of points of light. Similarly what we conventionally call a "river" is only millions of molecules of H_2O which can finally be broken down to energy forms. This illusion of an "I" in turn creates contact with the outside world and three types of craving result: *Kama Tanha* (craving for sensual pleasure through the eye, ear, nose, mouth, touch and mind) *Bhava Tanha* (craving for becoming, or desire to live) *Vibhava Tanha* (craving to escape from various unpleasant states). When craving (which results from the inability to recognize that there is no person) arises, the mind directs the body to act in certain ways. Therefore all actions are directed by the mind. But not all actions produce what are called "Karmic" results because karma involves moral responsibility. For example when a blind man walks over some insects and kills them, there is no moral responsibility because there was no intention to kill. This is a neutral action. The mind directed the body to walk but did not direct it to kill, so there is no moral responsibility. We perform many such actions in a day. But they are karmically ineffective.

Karmically effective actions directed by the mind can be divided into two categories. When the mind acts through ignorance, with *Self*-ish intentions, it produces results which are karmically determined. When for example we cling to the false idea of a self

and kill someone to satisfy some form of craving (e.g. for revenge or profit) such an action is called akusala karma. On the other hand, if we perform an action which is guided by wisdom (e.g. seeing no "I", one gives away one's material possessions to reduce craving and to relieve the suffering of others), one performs kusala karma or karmically beneficial actions.

In its most basic form good karma can be accumulated by following the five precepts which are:

Not to harm living beings
Not to take anything not freely given
Not to indulge in sexual behavior which harms oneself and others
Not to utter falsehoods orto indulge in unprofitable chatter
Not to consume any substance which will cause heedlessness and cause one to break the other four restraints.

It is important to note that each of these precepts is to be followed voluntarily because one understands the benefits they bring. There must be no sense of compulsion or fear of punishment. This is the basis of WISDOM, to understand why one refrains from certain actions. Hence they are also termed "ennoblers". They are not laws given by any God but "training rules" which one observes voluntarily because one recognizes their value. Although they are formulated negatively or passively ("I will refrain from..."), one must always remember their positive aspects – Not only will I refrain from harming living beings, but I will actively work for their welfare. Not

only will I refrain from taking anything not belonging to me, but I will protect others' property and develop my generosity and so on.

Akusala karma is defined as unskillful action. It is unskillful because we carry out harmful actions out of ignorance. If we knew better we would not do such harmful actions. This is why punishment is discouraged in Buddhism: we do not hate the wrong doer, but we have compassion for him and try to educate him so that he does not commit the sin again. Buddhism finds no value in retributive punishment (an eye-for-an-eye). Akusala karma is unskillful because such action is based on ignorance and self-ish cravings and they tie us to the endless circle of birth and rebirth – samsara.

On the other hand if we get rid of our ignorance and replace it with the wisdom to recognize things as they really are, then we will realize our foolishness and perform actions which help us to get rid of craving and work towards the attainment of the final bliss of Nirvana. Such wise actions are termed kusala karma, skilful actions.

Is akusala karma the same as sin? No, because there is no concept of sin in Buddhism. Sin implies breaking any rules set down by a divine lawgiver. When we break God's commandments, we incur his wrath and are therefore consigned to hell as punishment. Buddhists do not recognize such an almighty God. Rather Buddhists are taught that they are the creators of their own actions (good and bad) and that these actions lead to their own desirable or undesirable results. These results are the inevitable

consequences of every action. The law of karma is completely impartial – it does not favor anyone. The ideal is when we do good with no expectation of a reward, not even to go to heaven. Good must be done for its own sake. Such altruistic actions make one a noble being. Actions performed with wisdom and the right motives are called kusala karma. When we perform actions with a motive or expectation of a reward, based on a recognition of a self, it is termed punna karma. Punna kamma is good and can lead to favorable rebirths within the samsaric cycle but is not as spiritually beneficial as kusala kamma because kusala kamma helps us to break free from samsara and attain the highest goal of Nirvana where there is no more rebirth.

Our actions can lead us to heaven or hell or even a return to earth as a natural consequence of how our minds were trained to think in any one lifetime. If we lead lives of anger, hatred, jealousy, greed – then we will be reborn in woeful states. If on the other hand we are calm, peaceful, generous, loving we have created the conditions for a happy rebirth – we are the makers of our own heavens or hells.

If Buddhists do not believe in a soul, then what is it that goes from one life to another? And how can the doer of an action in this life reap the rewards or suffer punishment in the next life?

Earlier we discussed how life consists of a never ending series of risings and fallings with the past conditioning the present. So we can say there is not one birth and one death but a never ending series of births and deaths each following the other within a

single life span. We also discussed that every action is preceded by a thought. Our life is therefore a series of thoughts, which are of course impermanent. But because one thought leads to another there is a continuity, giving rise to an illusion of permanence. Throughout our life we develop certain thought habits which dominate our behavior-patterns: to be compassionate, kind, generous or hateful, vengeful, selfish and so on. So every thought is the result of previous thoughts, creating habits. At death these thought habits will produce a single dominant thought which will determine our next life. Remember it is not an unchangeable soul which moves on, but a thought moment which leaves this life, and determines the condition of the next life. Once this thought links to the next thought in the following life, a new series of thoughts is created. There is no break between the last thought moment in this life and the first thought moment in the next. Nothing permanent passes from one life to the next. While the next life is conditioned by the present, and is the *result* of the present, it is not exactly *the* present. So we do not talk of reincarnation, but of Rebecoming. The future life is the same and yet not the same as the present one (*na ca so, na ca anno*). This is like the saying that if we use the flame of one candle to light another, the flame is the same and yet not the same. In the same way, the person who receives the results of karmic thoughts in the next life is the product of this life, yet not the identical person who dies. We say therefore that while there is continuity, there is no identity.

Rebirths in heavens or hells are not permanent. The store of karma which we accumulated in one lifetime

determines how long we will live in the next life. After that store is used up, we will die and be reborn elsewhere depending on other karmic forces from this and other lifetimes which have not yet been used up.

Not all karmic actions bear fruit at a later date. They can be neutralized by the force of other stronger karmas. For example, if a man is generally kind and compassionate, but if he commits a minor offence, the good karmas will offset this misdeed. This is the reason why Buddhists are urged, when they have the opportunity, to do as much good as possible. The more good we do, the less chance there will be for our bad karmic past to catch up with us. If we put a teaspoon of salt in a small cup, the water in it will be very salty. If we put the same teaspoon of salt in a tank of water the salt will have no effect. Similarly if we have developed a large store of good karma by guarding our actions and ensuring the wellbeing of others, whatever minor offences we commit will have no chance to surface in the future. The only exception to this, where there is no chance of a reprieve, is if one is guilty of the four heinous or serious crimes:

To kill one's father
To kill one's mother
To cause injury to a Buddha
To create a schism in the Sangha

It is obvious that very few people fall into this category, so the vast majority of us have great potential to free ourselves from the effects of our bad actions. Some of our misdeeds can follow us life after

life, but if we purify our minds and eradicate our craving, then we are not reborn any more and our bad karma cannot chase us. This is the case of the mass killer Angulimala who slaughtered thousands, but who with the Buddha's help gained purification of the mind. At death he attained Nirvana and was released from having to pay for his misdeeds.

7. What Is Love?

This is probably the most abused word in the English language in modern times. The popular entertainment industry world-wide has given it a very narrow meaning associated closely with sex while consumerism has also exploited this association of love and sex to the hilt, making billions of dollars in profit in the process. Unfortunately it has given modern society the world over a limited understanding of love and it has resulted in an enormous amount of suffering through broken marriages, infidelity, undue concern for physical appearances, undue emphasis on the importance of sex in relationships and so on. This word is used so loosely today that it really does not convey much meaning any more. For example we say, "I love my country, I love my neighbor, I love my dog, I love fried chicken, I love my spouse, I love my god". But do they all mean the same thing? It is important for us to understand this very complex emotion clearly because it can help us not only to find peace within ourselves, but also to help our fellow beings to live happily.

To a large extent the very foundation of Buddhist practice also rests on this emotion but on a far different level. To begin with, the Buddha distinguishes between pema meaning affection associated with craving and metta altruistic love, which is 'a detached and impersonal benevolence raised to the highest possible pitch of intensity' (Sangharakshita, A Survey of Buddhism, p181). To understand what love means we should look at the wheel of life to find out how the two aspects of love

(pema and metta) can arise. The wheel of life describes the causes and results of action and the interrelationships between beings in the form of a wheel. **(please refer to the diagram on the centre spread).**

This wheel consists of three concentric circles surrounding three animals chasing each other in the centre. They are a *rooster, a boar and a snake.*

The boar represents ignorance, the rooster lust, desire and craving, the snake, ill will or frustration. According to the Buddha, all existence is characterized by mental and physical suffering which results from ungratified desires. These desires are caused by ignorance. They are all interrelated, hence we see each animal biting the other's tail. Our ignorance prevents us from seeing things as-they-really-are, that is, we mistake a rapid, ever changing process of mental and physical events to be a real self, an "I". In turn this "I" perceives outside objects as real and reaches out at them, so the "I" becomes "My" and grasping results. But since both the "I" and the "object" are not real, there is a constant sense of unsatisfied desire. This entails suffering, frustration,

ill-will (the snake). Just as fire constantly craves for more fuel, we constantly seek sense gratification, never being satiated.

If we want to end suffering, the Buddha teaches us that we must first understand the true nature of the world and replace ignorance with wisdom which is the ability to see-things-as-they-really-are. When the boar is "killed", the rooster and the snake will both disappear, meaning craving and unsatisfied desire, ill-will will cease. When wisdom arises, suffering will be replaced with its opposite state which is Happiness, Nirvana.

We can see that what we generally understand by the word love is closely associated with craving, grasping and clinging. It arises with concepts of an "I" and "My". This is *Self*-ish love, pema. It can be associated with sexual desire in the way it is exploited by consumerism today, but it also refers to any kind of clinging desire. We are warned that this kind of love is the cause of suffering because it can never be fully satisfied.

If, however, we gain wisdom and develop the right kind of love, it is a powerful force which can transform the world. The kind of love which the Buddha teaches us to experience is altruistic love, or the love which does not recognize a SELF. It is not easy to attain such high levels of understanding, but it is also not an impossible task. We can learn to love universally and unconditionally. Such love does not seek reciprocity. It is something we can develop gradually, in stages.

Most religions teach that happiness can be experienced when one goes to heaven after death. The Buddha declares that happiness can be experienced in this life itself, by developing positive mental states called Brahma Viharas. Brahma means god and Vihara means dwelling – so Brahma Vihara is where god dwells, in Heaven. But heaven is not a place, it is a state of mind. A state of mind suffused with unconditional love is a heavenly state. Such a state of mind benefits oneself and the whole world. This is true love which transcends selfish craving. There are four such states which we can develop gradually, METTA, KARUNA, MUDITA, UPEKKHA. Such states of mind are not the prerogative of the gods alone, but of all human beings.

Metta is generally translated as loving kindness. It also has a connotation of friendliness. It is a state of mind in which we regard ourselves as well as everything that exists on earth with kindliness and a desire for everyone's well-being. Note that we begin with that feeling for ourselves, first! We cannot feel good about world when we feel rotten ourselves. So it is important to be kind to ourselves. We should constantly wish ourselves well by repeating sincerely "May I be well and happy. May I be free from mental suffering, may I be free from physical suffering". It is when we are at peace within ourselves, when we like ourselves, that we can view others positively and affectionately. At the beginning we may find the practice a bit awkward, but with practice it will become natural and we will get used to loving ourselves. But this loving should not be allowed to become selfish and introverted. We should learn to

view ourselves, our strengths as well as our weaknesses in a benign, detached manner, like a king who watches over his subjects, wishing for their welfare.

As we become comfortable with this sense of friendliness with ourselves, we are ready to radiate it towards others. In Buddhism we regard ourselves as related to every other being in existence, because we are all connected within the wheel of life. To stress this point of interrelatedness we also use the image of Indra's Net. Imagine the entire cosmos as a gigantic net, with each knot holding a diamond. Each facet of the diamond radiates its light to the other diamonds which in turn reflect their light and so on until the entire cosmos is filled with radiance. Every diamond reflects a single creature in the universe, radiating love and receiving love until the entire cosmos is suffused with love. What a marvelous image of limitless, unconditional love! The more we lose ourselves and become one with the universe the greater will our happiness be.

When we view the world and its inhabitants we do not impose any restrictions – the Buddha makes it clear that we should bear thoughts of loving kindness, of METTA towards all – long, short, middling, no legged, two legged, four legged, egg born, womb born, moisture born, seen and unseen – our love towards them all should be like the love a mother has for her only child, giving unconditionally, expecting nothing in return.

KARUNA is another beautiful word which is usually translated as compassion. It is a feeling that arises in

us when we witness the suffering of others. But it is not a passive observation. It activates in us the desire to work tirelessly to ease the suffering of others mentally and physically. Karuna is the feeling which activates the Boddhisattva nature in us. A Bodhisattva is described as a being whose "heart trembles at the sight of others' suffering and who cannot rest until every being is relieved of this suffering". The ideal of unbounded compassion, without any expectation of a reward (not even of going to heaven) is given artistic expression through the exquisite figure of the Goddess of Mercy, Kuan Yin. Every Buddhist must aspire to attain perfection through the practice of compassion. Although the western-owned media is largely unaware of it, there are large numbers of Buddhists -- monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen who daily care not only for humans, and animals, but who work tirelessly to repair the damage done to nature. They visit the sick, feed the poor, release captured animals, replant forests, expecting no reward or no recognition. This is love in action.

Mudita is sympathetic joy. It is certainly more difficult to practice than Metta and Karuna because with Mudita we rejoice at others' happiness, even though we may ourselves be deprived of it. We may feel compassion for those who are worse off than us, but it requires a considerably more developed understanding to celebrate the happiness of others. It requires the suppression of egoism, pride and selfishness. But it is not beyond our capacity to practice mudita. It is said that parents are good examples of those who practice this sublime state because parents are genuinely happy when their

children do better than themselves. But to truly destroy selfishness we must be able to feel this way towards our friends and even those who are not well-disposed towards us.

Finally we should practice Upekkha. Upekkha is of course the most difficult state to practice because it requires us to be completely impartial in how we relate to others. Upekkha means maintaining equanimity or a balanced state of mind. It does not imply a cold, uncaring attitude towards others but treating everyone exactly equally, neither liking nor disliking, simply being detached. Our minds should be like the lotus flower, having its roots in the mud, but rising untainted and unsoiled above the dirty water. Only those who truly see the emptiness of the ego and all apparent objects can maintain upekkha. When we practice upekkha we will recognize suffering, we will help relieve that suffering but will not allow ourselves to suffer in the process.

8. What Happens When Buddhists Die?

When human beings reached a stage of their development in the evolution self-consciousness they began to ponder on the nature of their existence. They became aware that they had two components, a physical, material body and a mental, conscious part. They wondered whether life came from somewhere to animate a body and if it continued after death. Because they did not want to die (largely because they had no idea what lay in store for them on the other side) they devised all sorts of rituals to ensure the soul's happiness. You may have noticed that human beings are the only beings who are concerned about how a dead body is handled and disposed of. As far as we know, no animal conducts elaborate rituals to mark the end of a life because humans are the only ones to have developed self-consciousness. It can be said therefore that at least in part religion came about to help people to understand the phenomenon of death and to explain what happens in the next life or even whether there is a next life. It is remarkable that even in the present age where science has advanced to such a high level we know so little about death. Even if science will finally unlock this secret satisfactorily no one will ever be able to explain WHY we die.

The Buddha warns that there are four questions which it will be futile for us to seek to answer. They are

When will we die?
Where will we die?
How will we die?

Where will we be reborn after death?

Religions generally use the fear of death and the after life to make human beings behave according to certain prescribed rules. We are told that if we live according to these rules then we will go to heaven. But if we don't then we go to hell. The trouble here is that there has not been a single authentic case in human history when someone returned after death to say where he or she had gone. Shakespeare describes the afterlife clearly in Hamlet "that undiscovered country from which no traveler returns". This very ignorance is the cause of so much fear and superstition regarding death.

The Buddha teaches us that there is no need to speculate about things which are beyond the capacity of human intelligence to comprehend. He urges us not to worry about the past because it is gone and is beyond our reach. Neither should we worry about the future because it has not yet come. However, we do have control over the present moment, and if we live only in that moment in peace with ourselves and with others then we need not be concerned about the past or the future. If every present moment of our present life is blameless and happy, why do we need to worry about the next life? The past produces the present and the present shapes the future. So we only need to guard our thoughts, words and each present moment. In this way the future will look after itself. This is called mindfulness.

But the Buddha did not teach that there is no continuity after death. He teaches that life is a

continuum extending all the way back before one is born and persisting after death. But there is no permanent soul which migrates from one life to the next. Life is a process – the fetus becomes a child, the child, a youth, the youth a grown up and the grown-up an old person. The child produces the youth and the youth produces a grown up. So, while there is a link between the child and the old man, they are not the same person. This continuously-changing process extends beyond death. The body falls away, but the consciousness continues and its state in the next existence is conditioned by what it did in this life, just as a child who studies hard produces a successful grown up. In the same way, if you do positive actions in this life then you can expect positive results in the future.

Perhaps this is the right time to explain the difference between the Hindu and the Buddhist concept of what happens to a person when he or she dies. Both agree that this life is not the only one a being experiences. And both agree that one's thoughts and actions, which is KARMA, determine what one becomes in a future life. However in Hinduism a permanent soul, called the atman carries on unchanged from one life to another bearing the results of karma performed in this life. This process is called REINCARNATION. In Buddhism however, since there is only MIND and MATTER which are impermanent processes and therefore devoid of any ultimate reality, nothing permanent passes from one life to another. This is the process of REBECOMING or REBIRTH. The child moves on to adulthood and old age in a never ending process of change. This process continues, just like an electric current,

continuously changing. Therefore the person who is born in the next life is the result of what he or she did in the present life, but it is not the SAME person. There is continuity but no identity – Na ca so, na ca anno – the same and yet not the same.

The determining factor in this process is the mind. It is the mind which determines all our actions and only willful, intentional actions are karmically effective.

> Mind is forerunner of all states
> If one acts with an evil mind
> Then evil results will follow
> Just as the wheel of the cart
> Follows the hooves of the ox
>
> [Dhammapada V.I]

Throughout our lifetime we develop mental habits which make up our character. If we mindfully develop healthy mental states then we ensure positive results and a happy birth in the next life. However if we develop mental states which are predominantly hateful, jealous, greedy, vengeful and so on then we can expect to be reborn in woeful states.

This is not to be regarded as punishment for going against divine laws, but simply as the inevitable results of one's mental habits. "As you sow, so you reap". It is action and re-action. So what happens when you die depends on how you conducted yourself when you were alive. In that sense you are the creator of your own fate. There are three major

forces which lead you to perform unskillful actions which result in rebirth in woeful states: Delusion, Craving and Ill will. If you replace these negative states with their opposites, (namely, Wisdom, Non craving,and Non hatred) your actions will be skillful and lead you to desirable states.

In all there are six possible states into which you can be reborn, Sugati or desirable, happy states and Duggati, undesirable unhappy states. There are three happy states – the deva, (heavenly) realms, the human realms and the asura realms while the animal, the hungry ghost and the hell realms are deemed unhappy. Together they constitute the wheel of life.

None of these realms are eternal. Heaven and hell are temporary states. After your store of skillful or unskillful actions have been exhausted, your life span in these realms comes to an end. You die and continue to fare on by being reborn in another realm in a never ending process, round and round in SAMSARA. When you understand that rebirth in any of these states is ultimately impermanent, you realize that life is suffering and you become ready to begin the process to break free from the wheel of life. When you destroy delusion, craving and ill-will by conscientiously following the Buddha's path, you attain the state of Nirvana, which is the opposite of Samsara.

Nirvana is not heaven. It is a state of mind. Because our minds are clouded by ignorance and we cannot understand that there is no permanent personality which we can call an "I" we are constantly seeking to

gratify the senses. This is craving. But since craving can never be satisfied we are constantly being assailed by a nagging sense of non-fulfillment. Non satisfaction of every kind, mental and physical, in its most basic form is suffering.

Nirvana comes from two words "nir" and "vana" which literally means "to blow off". Our desires can be compared to a flame which can never be satisfied. But when the conditions which caused the flame to arise are removed, the flame simply ceases. Similarly when we remove the conditions which give rise to our existence in Samsara, we attain the state of non-grasping and non suffering. We do not "go" to Nirvana, we simply attain another state: when the sun rises, darkness disappears – it does not *go* anywhere. Nirvana can be attained in this very life. Once Nirvana has been attained, we are not reborn after death because there is no more craving.

In short, so long as there is ignorance and craving in our minds we get reborn in various planes of existence within Samsara. But when we attain the wisdom to see things as they really are, the mind reaches a state of perfect calm, peace, serenity and imperturbability.

9. How do Buddhists view Sex and Marriage?

Perhaps the first thing we need to emphasize when discussing this topic is that Buddhism does not share the Judaeo-Christian views on marriage, homosexuality, premarital sex, promiscuity, and so on. This is primarily because Buddhism does not subscribe to the concept of a Creator who has the power to dictate how one conducts oneself on earth. In Buddhism morality comes from an inner understanding of what constitutes a person mentally and physically and how one's actions lead to the development of a noble being – an *ariya puggala.* One is responsible only to oneself. The teachings of the Buddha are to be regarded only as guides to help one extricate oneself from the entanglements of the sensual world: they are merely a raft to help one along the journey to escape from samsara. If this is so then why do Buddhists recite the formula of the five precepts to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, uttering falsehoods and taking intoxicants? To answer this question we must refer to the way in which the precepts are worded:

1. I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking life
2. I undertake the training to abstain from taking anything which is not freely given
3. I undertake the training rule to abstain from sexual misconduct
4. I undertake the training rule to abstain from uttering falsehood
5. I undertake the training rule to abstain from intoxicants which lead to heedlessness

Each precept begins with "I undertake". This means it is entirely voluntary. No one is under any coercion or threat of punishment. Each precept is referred to as a "training rule". The disciple understands that it is a rule to train oneself in morality. It is followed voluntarily with the understanding that it will help one to become a noble human being. There is no fear of punishment but a willingness to practice the precept. We recognize the usefulness of the 'raft' and decide to use it voluntarily.

We will now consider the third precept which is pertinent to our discussion: to voluntarily practice the training rule to abstain from sexual misconduct. In Buddhism sexual activity is not sinful in itself because it is merely a pleasurable function of the body like eating or drinking. Every action performed by the body originates in the mind, so what we must examine is the state of mind to determine whether an action is right or wrong. In the performance of a sexual act the mind becomes subjected to craving for sensual pleasure. Such a craving makes one a slave to the gross physical body. And this is where the danger lies – any form of desire for sensual pleasure increases craving which ties us down to the endless cycle of birth and rebirth in Samsara. So sensual pleasures are ultimately the cause of suffering. When one understands this fact one voluntarily refrains from giving in to the demands of the senses. It is not a sacrifice because sacrifice implies giving up reluctantly. It is renunciation, growing out of these base desires and casting them away because of the realization that they cannot bring real lasting happiness.

The cause of suffering is ignorance, or the inability to see things as they really are. Now in this ignorance we mistake the mental and physical processes which constitute the illusion of an "I" for something real. This gives rise to the senses – feeling, tasting, smelling, hearing and seeing. We seek to satisfy these senses, but because they and what they crave for are both illusory, frustration sets in: this is suffering. If we want to end suffering we make the effort to see that our sense organs have no reality. The clearer we see this the more we understand that they cannot bring happiness, so we "let go" of the pleasure that mistakenly comes from gratifying the senses. Free from slavery to the senses we are at peace within ourselves. Graphically we say that in the wheel of life, the pig, the cock and the snake are destroyed. All forms of sexual craving therefore arise from ignorance. When we-see-things-as-they-really-are, letting go of sexual desire becomes possible. Understanding this we "undertake the training rule to abstain from sexual misconduct". As householders we refrain from sexual *misconduct*, but as we mature spiritually we extend this restraint to all forms of sexual activity.

However, sex in itself is not sinful. Not everyone is ready to renounce the pleasures of the world. Buddhism is a gradual path. Those who choose to become householders and raise a family are free to do so provided that they are prepared to be responsible for their families and to provide for them adequately. Sex within marriage is free from feelings of guilt and selfishness. There is a genuine wish for the welfare of the partner and a willingness to accept the consequences of such a relationship. There is

much selflessness involved in parenthood. However, it is wrong to say that in Buddhism there are no restrictions regarding sexual activity. Sex, like all other pleasures of the senses (eating, drinking, visual stimulation, etc) can strengthen the illusion of the presence of a physical body. Such a belief will lead us to commit undesirable karmic actions which will prolong our journey in samsara. One who truly sees the body for what it is will see that sex can provide pleasure, but not lasting happiness. Restraint in seeking such pleasure will help us attain nirvana.

Buddhism also does not condemn homosexuality as sinful or going against any divine will. Homosexuality, like heterosexuality is a function of the body which is directed by the mind which is clouded by ignorance. Because it is caused by ignorance, it is not sinful, but merely a-kusala, unskillful actions which drag us deeper into the suffering of samsara. There are different levels of wrong doing. The most ignorant are those who seek pleasures through unwholesome behavior like rape, sadism, bestiality and so on. Those who indulge in responsible sexual desire have not yet clearly seen the physical body for what it is. Those who are wise, however, see through the illusion and are not attracted to sensual pleasure. The Buddha compared these three types of human beings to lotuses – those which are at the bottom of the pond, those just below the surface of the water, and those which rise above, pure and untainted. The aim of Buddhist practice is to eventually attain these higher levels of happiness.

10. Why is Buddhism a Tolerant Religion?

Living as we do in the era of globalisation we may tend to think that this is the first time in history that we have experienced cultural and religious diversity in society. This is not true at all, because during the Buddha's time in the 5th Century before Christ Northern India was a veritable melting pot of cultures and religious ideas which gave rise to some of the most innovative and original ideas the world has ever known. What is surprising even today is the remarkable degree of tolerance to new ideas which severely challenged the established order of Indian society at the time. No matter how hard we look we do not read of Indian martyrdoms and beheadings and burnings at stake of people who dared to challenge popular beliefs which had been accepted for centuries. The Buddhist texts, like the *Brahmalajala Suttra*, in the *Digha Nikaya* for example, record that there were as many as sixty two different clearly established religious doctrines which the Buddha refuted. There are numerous other sutras which record how the Buddha and his disciples debated with highly proficient proponents of other religious thoughts, ranging from the eternalist belief in an all powerful Creator God and a permanent soul all the way across to the nihilist concept that life is purely accidental and without significance at all. These debates were lively and controversial but never held in an atmosphere of fear or suppression.

The Buddha went even further to promote a free and open expression of ideas. He encouraged his followers to respect others' beliefs. There are numerous stories to illustrate this. On one occasion,

an extremely rich man came to the Buddha and intimated that he would like to follow the Master, but was not quite sure how to treat his former teacher. The Buddha advised him to continue to support him although his teaching was no longer followed The rich man was astounded to hear this advice, declaring that any other teacher would have disallowed any contact, let alone encourage continued support. On another occasion, the Buddha advised his foster mother and aunt, Maha Prajapati Gotami on how to distinguish a true religion from a false one:

"*Of whatsoever Teachings, thou canst assure thyself thus, that it leads to passion not to dispassion, to bondage, not to freedom, to increase of attachments, not to reduce them, to company, not solitude etc, you may affirm, this is not the true teaching. However if the religion teaches dispassion, freedom, non attachment etc, you may affirm it is true*"

In this we see that the Buddha encourages us to look for positive teachings in every religion and to reject only the parts which are misleading and erroneous.

The Buddha did not condemn other religions outright. His advice was always to accept other religions as far as they concurred with the Four Noble Truths, namely Suffering, the Cause of Suffering, the Cessation of Suffering and the Path which leads to the end of Suffering. In keeping with this Teaching, Buddhists will readily acknowledge that all religions teach correct moral behavior, although they may hold diverging views regarding an

all powerful Creator who controls the destiny of His creatures, the existence of a permanent entity called a soul, eternal reward in heaven or punishment in hell or forgiveness of sins. Buddhists will readily accept the spiritual dimensions of other religions and have no qualms about entering non Buddhist places of worship and even in participating in the rituals themselves.

This injunction to respect other religious beliefs was literally carved in stone two centuries before the Christian era by the great Buddhist emperor Asoka of India. This inscription still stands as proud testimony of the Buddhist ideal of tolerance towards other faiths. In part it reads:

"*On each occasion one should honor another man's sect, for by doing so one increases the influence of one's own sect and benefits that of the other man; while by doing otherwise one diminishes the influence of one's own sect and harms that of the other man. Again, whosoever honors his own sect or disparages that of another man's, wholly out of devotion to his own with the view of showing it in a favorable light, harms his own sect even more seriously. Therefore concord is to be commended, so that men may hear one another's principles and obey them*".

The Buddha sent missionaries to spread the Message within a few weeks of his Enlightenment. He exhorted his disciples to spread the Message with these famous words: "*Go forth, monks and spread the Teachings, excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, excellent in the end, for good of the many,*

for the welfare of the many, for the benefit of gods and men. Let not two go by one way."

Motivated only by a concern for the spiritual welfare of others, these monks went all over Asia from Afghanistan to Japan, from India to Southeast Asia. Wherever they went, they left the cultures of the people they encountered intact. Buddhism enriched the lives of countless millions of peoples, but never destroyed their traditions and ancestral practices. The result is that every Buddhist country enjoys a rich variety of religious and cultural practices. The Buddhism of Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand is unique and varied, yet never is one practice in conflict with another.

Buddhism's ability to accommodate different cultures and to be tolerant of different religious opinions stems from its teachings on the nature of all phenomena. Essentially everything we perceive is unreal, but when we tear away the veil of ignorance and we see things-as-they-really-are, then we realize that all differences between us are non existent. This is illustrated by the parable of the six blind men who each mistook the part of the elephant he touched to be the whole animal. Only when they gained their full sight (gained enlightenment) did they realize that what each imagined was not the truth at all. Similarly, each of us argues that our belief, or our perception alone is correct, but if we develop the humility to understand that we ourselves are limited in our understanding, then we will be able to tolerate the limited understanding of others. As the Japanese Zen Buddhists would say, our religious practices are

merely the finger pointing to the moon: we need not argue about whose finger can point more accurately.

Over the past one hundred years or so, Buddhism in its richly varied manifestations has found many adherents in the west. This raises the question as to whether these varied forms will themselves come into conflict with the diversity of cultures already existing in the west. The problem cannot arise because the Buddha has taught that Change is a necessary condition of existence. Since everything in the world is subject to change, we must be prepared to adapt to new circumstances. As Buddhists come into contact with non-Buddhist cultures, they must be prepared to change their cultural modes of behavior to suit the new environment. This does not mean that we must compromise the Buddha's Teachings.

The Buddha taught that his Teachings can be separated into two levels, the transcendental and the mundane. The transcendental truths as contained in the Four Noble Truths cannot be compromised because they hold good for all time. The mundane aspects of the teachings are related specifically to Indian culture or Asian culture and these can be adapted to suit different times and places. For example one cannot compromise on the practice of the Five Precepts, but we can adapt our ideas concerning dress codes, etiquette, diet, marriage laws, social behavior and so on.

Most important of all, Buddhists must not make a nuisance of themselves to others by flaunting their religious practices. Certain practices which are quite

acceptable in Asian societies like sitting on the floor, removing shoes inside a home separating men from women, may create unnecessary embarrassment in western societies. In any case social behavior and etiquette have very little to do with following the spiritual path taught by the Buddha.

The Buddha taught the Middle Path which is to avoid extremist behavior of any kind. If we use our common sense and ensure that our actions do not cause annoyance and embarrassment to others, we will be practicing Buddhism in the correct way, no matter where we live.

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