

Fundamentals of Buddhism

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**THE GIFT OF TRUTH EXCELS ALL GIFTS.
BY THE MERIT OF THIS VIRTUE,
MAY ALL THE SPONSORS BE WELL AND HAPPY,
AND ATTAIN THE BLISS OF NIRVANA.**

FOREWORD

Buddhism has long been an important part of the cultural heritage of South East Asia. The monuments of Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Borobudur in Indonesia are just two of countless testimonies to the former greatness of Buddhism in this region. In Singapore too Buddhism is an important element in the cultural heritage of the people. The fact that a large section of the Chinese Community as well as the small but influential Srilankan Community acknowledge Buddhism as the primary force shaping their religious ideals and moral values is more than proof of this. Nonetheless, it is certain that if Buddhism is to continue to exercise a positive influence upon present and future generations, it cannot remain content with the achievements of the past. The religious ideals and moral values of Buddhism which have proved so useful to past generations must be transmitted to men and women living in a changing world. In order that this can be accomplished, it is important that the teachings of the Buddha be made available to the largest number of people.

With this objective in mind, the Srilankaramaya Buddhist Temple invited Dr Santina to deliver a series of public lectures. The lectures outlined the fundamentals of Buddhism and were well delivered. As a result, it was decided to produce transcriptions of the lectures and publish them in the form of a book to be made freely available. It is also hoped that the publication will contribute in a small degree to the understanding of the genuine teachings of the Buddha.

Sincerest thanks are extended to all those who lent their invaluable support and contribution to this project and especially to Dr Santina for imparting to us his deep understanding of the Buddha Dharma.

N Sumana Thera
Resident Monk

SRILANKARAMAYA
BUDDHIST TEMPLE
SINGAPORE

VESAK 1984

BUDDHISM: A MODERN PERSPECTIVE

We are going to cover what we might call basic Buddhist teachings over a series of twelve lectures. We are going to cover the life of the Buddha, the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, Karma, rebirth, dependent origination, the three universal characteristics and the five aggregates. But before I begin the series of lectures, I would like to deal today with the notion of Buddhism in perspective. There are many ways in which different people in different cultures view Buddhism and particularly, I think we can contrast the western or modern attitude towards Buddhism with the traditional attitude. The reason why this kind of perspective study is useful is because when we understand how people of different cultures view a certain thing, we can then begin to see some of the limitation or one-sidedness of our own view.

In the west, Buddhism has aroused extensive interest and sympathy. There are many persons of considerable standing in western societies who are either Buddhists or who are sympathetic towards Buddhism. This is most clearly exemplified by the remark made by Albert Einstein in his autobiography, the remark that he was not a religious man, but if he were one, he would be a Buddhist. This is quite surprising, and off-hand we would not expect such a remark to be made by the Father of Modern Science. Yet if we look at contemporary western societies, we will find an astrophysicist who is a Buddhist in France, we will find an outstanding psychologist who is a Buddhist at the University of Rome, and until recently a judge from England who is a

Buddhist. We will look into the reasons for this interest in Buddhism in the west in a moment. But before we do that I would like to compare this situation with the situation that we find in this part of the world.

In Europe generally, the attitude towards Buddhism is that it is very advanced, very rational and very sophisticated. It was therefore quite a shock to me when I came to Singapore and found that a lot of people here view Buddhism as old fashioned, irrational and too much tied up with superstitions. This is one of the two attitudes that work against the appreciation of Buddhism here. The other is that Buddhism is so deep and so abstract that no one can ever understand it. It is a complete turnabout. This is what I mean by perspective, because in the western perspective Buddhism has a certain image, while in the traditional perspective we have another image. This negative image that people have about Buddhism has to be changed before they can really come to appreciate the Buddha's teachings, before they can get a kind of balanced perspective regarding Buddhism.

One of the first things that a westerner appreciates about Buddhism is that it is not culture bound, not bound to any particular society, race or ethnic group. There are certain religions that are culture-bound, Judaism is one example. Buddhism is not. That is why historically we have Indian Buddhists, Thai Buddhists, Chinese Buddhists, Srilankan Buddhists, Burmese Buddhists and so forth, and we are going to have in the near future English Buddhists, American Buddhists, French Buddhists and so forth. This is because Buddhism is not culture-bound. It moves very easily from one culture to

another because the emphasis in Buddhism is on internal practice rather than on external practice. Its emphasis is on the way you develop your mind rather than the way you dress, the kind of food you take, the way you wear your hair and so forth.

The second point that I would like to make regards the pragmatism or the practicality of Buddhism. Instead of taking an interest in metaphysics and academic theories, the Buddha deals with problems *per se* and approaches them in a concrete way. This is again something which is very much in agreement with western ideas about utilitarianism. That is, if something works, use it. It is very much a part of western political, economic and scientific philosophy. This attitude of pragmatism is clearly expressed in the Culama-lunkya Sutra where the Buddha made use of the example of the wounded man. The man wounded by an arrow wishes to know who shoots the arrow, from which direction it comes, whether the arrow head is made of bone or iron, whether the shaft is of this kind of wood or another before he will have the arrow removed. This man is likened to those who would like to know about the origin of the Universe, whether the world is eternal or not, finite or not before they will undertake to practise a religion. Just as the man in the parable will die before he has all the answers he wants regarding the origin and nature of the arrow, such people will die before they will ever have the answers to all their irrelevant questions. This exemplifies what we call the Buddha's practical attitude. It has a lot to say about the whole question of priorities and problem solving. We would not make much progress developing wisdom if we ask the wrong question. It is essentially a question of priority. The first

priority for all of us is the problem of suffering. The Buddha recognized this and said it is of no use for us to speculate whether the world is eternal or not because we all have got an arrow in our chest, the arrow of suffering. We have to ask questions that will lead to the removal of this arrow. One can express this in a very simple way. We can see that in our daily life, we constantly make choices based on priority. If, for instance, we happen to be cooking something on the stove and we decide that while the beans are boiling we will dust the house, and as we dust the house we smell something burning. We have to make the choice, whether to carry on with our dusting or whether to go to turn down the flame on the stove to save the beans. In the same way, if we want to make progress towards wisdom we have to recognize our priorities and this point is made very clearly in the parable of the wounded man.

The third point that I would like to refer to is the Buddha's teaching on the importance of verification through experience. This point is made clearly in His advice to the Kalamas contained in the Kesaputtiya Sutra. The Kalamas were a people very much like us in our modern day when we are exposed to so many different teachings. They went to the Buddha and enquired that as there were so many different teachers and as all of them claimed that their doctrine was true, how were they to know who was telling the truth. The Buddha told them not to accept anything out of authority, not to accept anything because it happens to be written down; not to accept anything out of reverence for their teacher; or out of hearsay; or because it sounds reasonable. But to verify, test what they have heard in

the light of their own experience. When they know for themselves that certain things are harmful then they should abandon them. When they know for themselves that certain things are beneficial, that they lead to happiness and calm, then they should follow them. The Buddha gives this advice that one has to verify what one hears in the light of one's experience. In the context of the Buddha's advice to the Kalamas, I think what the Buddha is saying is to use your own mind as a test tube. You can see for yourself that when greed and anger are present, they lead to suffering, pain and disturbance. And you can see for yourself that when greed and anger are absent from your mind, it leads to calm, to happiness. It is a very simple experiment which we all can do for ourselves. This is a very important point because what the Buddha has taught will only be effective, will only really change our life if we can carry out this kind of experiment in our life, if we can realize the truth of the Buddha's teachings through our own experience and verify it through our own experience. Only then can we really say that we are making progress on the path towards enlightenment.

We can see a striking parallel between the Buddha's own approach and the approach of science to the problem of knowledge. The Buddha stresses the importance of objective observation. Observation is in a sense the key to the Buddha's method of knowledge. It is observation that yields the first of the Four Noble Truths, the truth of suffering. Again at the final stage of the Buddha's path, it is observation that characterizes the realization of the total end of suffering. So at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the Buddha's

path, observation plays an extremely important role. This is similar to the role that objective observation plays in the scientific tradition which teaches that when we observe a problem we must first formulate a general theory followed by a specific hypothesis. We find the same thing happening in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths and here the general theory is that all things have a cause, and the specific hypothesis is that the causes of suffering are craving and ignorance. This truth that the causes of suffering are craving and ignorance can be verified by the experimental method. In the context of the Four Noble Truths, the experimental method is the path. Through the path, the truth of the Second Noble Truth (the truth of the cause of suffering), and the Third Noble Truth (the truth of the cessation of suffering) are verified because through this cultivation of the path one eliminates craving and ignorance. And through the elimination of craving and ignorance one eliminates suffering. This experiment is repeatable just as in science because not only did the Buddha attain the end of suffering, but so too did all those who followed His path.

So if we look closely at the Buddha's approach to the problem of knowledge, we find that His approach is very similar to the scientific approach and this too has aroused a tremendous amount of interest in the west. We can now begin to see why it is that Einstein could make a remark like the one that he did. We will see more clearly why this is not as surprising as it seems initially because I would like to talk about the Buddhist method of analysis and we can begin to see it operating very clearly when we look at the Buddhist approach to experience.

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