

# A BUDDHIST REFLECTS ON SPIRITUALITY



**VIJAYA SAMARAWICKRAMA**

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*Namo Tassa  
Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhasa  
Homage to Him the Blessed One,  
the Holy One and  
the Fully Enlightened One.*

*Sponsored by*  
**CHIAM CHUN LOONG**

May the merits accrued from this  
Dhammadana be upon you and all living  
beings. May all beings be liberated from  
suffering.

Publication of the



## **Sasana Abhiwurdhi Wardhana Society**

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## About The Author



### **VIJAYA SAMARAWICKRAMA**

was born in 1940 in Seremban where he studied at St. Paul's Institution. He started his teaching career in the same school in 1957 after having attended the Malayan Teachers' Training College in Kirby, Liverpool, U.K. Vijaya later obtained a B.A. Hons.

in English and Linguistics from University of Malaya and an M.A. (Drama and Theatre) from the University of Hawaii. He has had a long teaching career in primary and secondary schools as well as in the University of Malaya and Universiti Sains Malaysia. He retired as a senior lecturer from the Institut Teknologi Mara in 1990 after 20 years of teaching there. He is currently a lecturer in Taylor's College.

Vijaya is an active Dhamma speaker and travels widely to give talks and participate in seminars in Malaysia, in schools, colleges and universities. On an average, he gives about 85 talks per year on various aspects of Buddhism. He has also delivered papers at international Buddhist conferences, including the recent Buddha Mahaotsav International Conference in 1998 organised by the Tourist Department of India.

Vijaya was a former Vice President of the Sasana Abhiwurdhi Wardhana Society, the oldest Buddhist organisation in Malaysia. He has edited many of the publications of the Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia authored by our Most Venerable Chief Reverend, Dr K Sri Dhammananda Nayaka Maha Thera.

## FOREWORD

The Sasana Abhiwurdhi Wardhana Society is pleased to present "A Buddhist Reflects on Spirituality". This book is the third in the series of a modest programme embarked by the Society to fulfil a thirst for knowledge and materials on the Buddha-Dhamma.

A Buddhist Reflects on Spirituality is specially chosen to present readers a better understanding of the many practices and rituals in Buddhism on their path towards spirituality.

The Society congratulates the author Mr Vijaya Samarawickrama, a former Vice President of the Society, an acclaimed dramatist and a well-known Dhamma speaker for producing this second booklet.

This publication is issued in conjunction with the Annual Blessing Service 2000 to commemorate the 43<sup>rd</sup> National Day Celebrations of Malaysia.



Sarath W. Surendre

President

Sasana Abhiwurdhi Wardhana Society

August 2000



# A Buddhist Reflects on SPIRITUALITY

by Vijaya Samarawickrama

## What is Spirituality?

We all want to be happy everyday of our lives. Throughout history the human race has sought desperately to find a formula to attain Ultimate Happiness if not in this world, at least in the next. Different people suggested different ways of achieving this, most of them involving the supernatural and these ideas slowly evolved into religions. As a result various religions arose, each providing a unique set of explanations as to how happiness can be gained. But all religions, including buddhism, agree that spirituality is the source of happiness.

Before we can begin to discuss the role played by spirituality in buddhism it may be useful perhaps to consider what we mean by "spirituality". The Oxford Dictionary (4<sup>th</sup> edition) offers this definition: *the element in man regarded as separable from, and animating the body (opp. Flesh); a person from the intellectual or moral or emotional point of view, a disembodied person or incorporeal being, a person's disposition or permanent or temporary mental attitude...*

This very definition only proves how difficult it is to define spirituality!

The concept is so abstract and language is such an inadequate tool that spirituality really cannot be described to our complete satisfaction. There is so much confusion in the world because we cannot completely communicate our ideas through language. This is why Lao Tze emphatically states that the "Tao which can be described is not the Eternal Tao", meaning that such vastly abstract principles have to be comprehended not by language, but through insight which transcends mere words. Words are nothing but symbols to give an idea of the actual thoughts we have in our minds. However, these symbols cannot convey everything we mean. For example, when we say something simple like, "The cat is beautiful", will our listeners know exactly what we mean? Does it convey the same idea to everyone? What does "beautiful" mean? Do "beautiful cat" and "beautiful sunset" carry identical meanings? The same can be said of spirituality .

While we cannot fully explain what spirituality means in words, however, like "beautiful", we all have some general idea of what spirituality means. We know that the Ultimate Happiness that we all crave for is somehow related to spirituality. Basically we

all agree that we have materialistic interests whereby we seek to satisfy our physical needs. But we know that the satisfaction of those needs alone cannot really bring true happiness. We are all aware that we have two sides to our personality, a gross one and a subtle one. We have certain psychological needs which cannot be explained or understood in concrete terms, but we believe that true happiness can only be attained through the satisfaction of these needs, which we term "spiritual". And we know that this happiness can be experienced even if we are deprived of material satisfaction, because spiritual fulfillment goes beyond physical needs.

Perhaps there is so much suffering in modern society today because we tend to separate the material part of us from the spiritual or even ignore the spiritual altogether. We see our religious practice and our materialist pursuits as different, mutually exclusive entities. We try not to allow religion to interfere with our working lives and as a result we tend to suffer greater stress and frustration. We also tend to believe that by giving in to all our physical needs, somehow our inner psychological needs will be fulfilled as well.

In less developed societies, however, the separation between the material and the



spiritual was not so clearly marked. Members of these societies had a deep sense of the religious in everything they did in their daily lives. As a result they were more closely in tune with nature and the cycle of life, giving them a sense of harmony, completeness, and well-being, which is more difficult to obtain in urban life today. Although we may be better fed and enjoy greater physical comforts, we cannot deny that we are less at peace with ourselves than our cousins who live in the jungles. They are happier perhaps because they need fewer material things and are in closer contact with the spiritual world. In buddhism, we see from suttras like the *Sihanada Cakkavatti* and the *Parabhava* that while humanity progresses materially it deteriorates spiritually. We must therefore tread the Middle Path and seek a balance between the two.

This is a problem which has troubled human beings throughout history and in many parts of the world. As far back as three thousand years ago, the ancient Indians were beginning to describe the "self" as something made up of an animate [*atma*] part and an inanimate [*anatma*] part. The body was made up of inanimate materials and was thus no different from an empty earthenware vessel. However, what made

someone alive was the animate part called the *Atman* or the soul. It was believed that this *Atman* was part of the supreme reality of *Brahman*. A person experiences unhappiness because this soul is trapped in the body and seeks to be re-united with the *Brahman* from which it has been separated. To an understanding person this ultimate happiness occurs when the soul is released from the body and it becomes one with *Brahman*. This release is called "MOKSHA" or liberation. But ordinary people are victims of delusions and want the soul to remain permanently united with the body. This preoccupation with the body leads a person to be driven to satisfy the demands of the senses, which of course can never be done. The Buddha declared that the constant craving which can never be satisfied is the cause of suffering.

It was believed even then in ancient India that if one is too concerned with material comfort, and seeks only to give in to the demands of the physical body, it will lead to great unhappiness, because the physical demands of the body can never be satisfied. So the idea developed that one should concentrate on actions that would lead one back to the Ultimate Reality of *Brahman*. Basic methods were developed to help a person reduce his or her material needs and

increase his or her desire to be re-unified with the Ultimate Reality. In other words *spirituality* was emphasized to reduce one's dependence on *materialism* to gain ultimate happiness. This idea caught the imagination of the Indian mind so thoroughly that even today a very large number of Indians willingly give up material comforts and practice a spiritual path by denying the body's physical needs.

The situation was the same in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Increasing materialism provided by the Industrial Revolution did not bring the happiness which people were looking for, proving again that material comfort alone cannot bring happiness. In Europe and places which were influenced by western civilization, there was also this awareness that satisfying one's physical needs alone cannot bring happiness. According to Abraham Maslow, besides satisfying our basic needs for food, shelter and sex we have a hierarchy of needs which have to be satisfied before we can experience happiness. We need to have a sense of security, to be loved, to have self esteem, to enjoy order, beauty and satisfy our curiosity. These needs can largely be satisfied by science and art, but they still cannot bring us ultimate happiness. Beyond all these worldly needs we have an

underlying thirst to know about ourselves and our purpose in existence. Who are we? What are we doing here? Are we needed? These questions cannot be answered by the intellect alone, and this is where religion comes in.

Religion seeks to provide happiness by seeking to harmonize the body and the "spirit". This it tries to do by not only explaining things intellectually but emotionally as well; by bringing head and heart together. One definition of Religion is, "A configuration of doctrine and practice, related to that which a community regard as sacred or fundamental to its way of life" (World Religion Today). But perhaps a more accurate definition comes from William James who wrote that religion, in its broadest sense, "consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto" (quoted in Religions of the World p. 5). Science can provide our material needs, art can satisfy our aesthetic desires but religion is necessary to fulfil our spiritual longings, to work our own harmonious union with the Ultimate, that which is beyond us, *God, Brahman, Tao* – call it what we will .



## Spirituality in Buddhism

We can now go on to the main part of our discussion, namely to examine the role of spirituality in buddhism. Ven Sangharakshita in his book A Survey of Buddhism has stated that “nowadays buddhism has more often to pray for protection from its friends than its enemies” (p37). This is true. In the last century there were many buddhist writers who, in their eagerness to counter the criticism against buddhism by christians went out of their way to show how buddhism was ‘scientific’, how it was not religion, but a ‘way of life’, how the Buddha was only a man. In so doing they almost succeeded in reducing buddhism to a dull, routine practice of a rigid path which sternly denounces faith, devotion, ritual, joy, beauty, in fact anything which raises the human spirit. This of course gave the impression that buddhism is a cold, austere practice which concentrates solely on the First Noble Truth, Dukkha, simply translated as “suffering” although it means much more than that.

Ven Sangharakshita recalls how once in 1965, when he tried to express his joy by cracking a few jokes at a Wesak celebration in London, was met by the confused and embarrassed stares of his listeners, who



obviously thought that it is wrong for buddhists to be happy even at a joyous festival like Wesak. This of course was in stark contrast to his experience in the East where Wesak was an occasion for joy, and fun while at the same time, the people displayed deep devotion and full awareness of the great religious significance of the event. The friends and protectors of buddhism had succeeded in convincing those London buddhists that buddhism was only a 'scientific' way of life introduced by a clever Indian called the Buddha, who claimed that life was nothing more than suffering!

Buddhism of course is nothing of the sort. In our eagerness to explain Dukkha we tend to forget the other parts of the 4 Noble Truths – namely that there does exist a state of perfect, supreme happiness even in this life. The Buddha says we don't have to wait to die before we can experience happiness. It is available here and now. Therefore while the Buddha taught the Dharma or the Four Noble Truths, and the dangers of being too fully immersed in the ways of the world, buddhism the "Religion" (i.e. the 'configuration of Doctrine and Practice, which I referred to earlier) has been a source of great joy to the people who accept it. This joy and peace and happiness of

course grows from the Buddha's teaching on contentment, arising from a Perfect Understanding of the nature of existence. To be happy one has to understand the nature of life and attune his or her life according to that understanding. The Buddha clearly recognized the need for people to reach higher levels through spiritual development. The Buddha denounced a mere intellectual understanding of the nature of existence as the way to attain ultimate happiness:

***"Much though he recites the sacred texts  
but does not act accordingly,  
that heedless man is like a cowherd  
who only counts the cows of others-  
he does not partake  
of the blessings of the holy life."  
(Dhammapada verse 19)***

## Why Buddhists practise Rituals

But understanding of what? All buddhist practice depends on this very important first step on the Noble Eightfold Path. We can see that all religions teach the necessity for ritual, restraint, devotion, and so on in their practice and so does buddhism. But buddhism is different from

other religions in the rationale which motivates these practices. We do not practice buddhism to please or placate a deity: rather we use these same practices which are physically seen to be similar to what other religions practice, but the reasons why we do them are entirely different.

This is because buddhism teaches us to view ourselves and the world around us in a unique way. Perfect Understanding requires us to know clearly what it is that constitutes a personality, what we call the “I” or “Self”. All buddhist teaching rests on the understanding that all phenomena is essentially empty and without reality. The Buddha taught us to see-things-as-they-really-are (*yathabhutham*). When we realize our essential nature the actions that we perform with our body take on a different significance.

The Buddha said that this self which we call an “I” is an illusion created by a mind which cannot penetrate reality – such a mind is suffering from ignorance (*Avijja*). As we practice the Buddha’s path we will begin to replace ignorance with wisdom (*Panna*). With wisdom, we will realize that a person is essentially a set of processes, or behaviours grouped into two classes: Mind (*Nama*) and Matter (*Rupa*). The second group appears

as a solid body but is in reality a series of processes or qualities (solidity, fluidity, heat, and motion) which are forms of energy in various combinations. They are never constant, always moving, always changing, so they have no ultimate reality. The first group (*Nama*) is more subtle, although they are also energies (feelings, perceptions, mental habits, consciousness). They too have no ultimate reality, but are constantly changing, and so rapidly that the normal person cannot perceive the change and mistakes it for something permanent. These energies are neither created at birth nor destroyed at death, but go on relentlessly through what we call samsara. Einstein had a glimpse into this truth which had been declared by the Buddha when he said that energy cannot be created or destroyed, but merely takes different forms. (However, the Buddha went further and discovered Nirvana, in which the energy and its ceaseless activity is permanently stilled, like the flame of a candle being blown off).

Of course all this is very difficult to understand, even intellectually. How much more difficult it is to realize this truth! But we need not lose hope. The Buddha's path can be realized gradually depending on how sincere, and how determined we are on following it. But understanding must be there



in some degree, no matter how small, if we are to practise buddhism correctly.

## Why We Need to Practise Buddhism

Now we can ask, if in the ultimate analysis the Buddha taught that 'there is no reality behind our existence,' why do we do anything at all? Why pray? Why be good? Why be a buddhist? Isn't everything meaningless? Unfortunately it is not so simple. The Buddha teaches that, because of ignorance, we have created the illusion of a "real" self and then we are trapped in the cycle of births and deaths because of this. This ignorance drives us to perform actions, which drag us further along the cycle. This is the suffering we endure in Samsara and if we are prepared to think even a little, we will see that this suffering is all-pervasive, that we cannot escape from it even though we enjoy temporary flashes of pleasure. It is always lurking behind; we are at its mercy. But when we come into contact with the Buddha's Teaching, we are offered a way out to overcome this suffering; we become masters of our own fate. But we have to do something to be free and this answers the questions we asked at the beginning of this paragraph.



We are shown that it is possible to break free from this cycle which is generated by our actions, which are caused by Ignorance. We have to reverse the cycle and proceed, backwards as it were, towards wisdom and realization of the Reality of Emptiness. To do this we must also ACT - that is, we must pray, we must practise morality - we must follow the Noble Eightfold Path. When we have trodden the path successfully, and broken through delusion, we achieve NIRVANA - this is the final peace and salvation. And the treading of this path is what we call PRACTICE of buddhism.

But as we said earlier, one need not feel daunted by the prospect. Yes, it is not easy, but it can be done in stages, gradually. One of the great qualities of the Buddha is *Anuttaro Purissa Damma Sarathi* - "Incomparable trainer of beings who can be tamed". The Buddha knew that people have different capabilities and his path of deliverance encompasses all levels of human beings. The path comprises of developing

***Perfect Understanding,  
Perfect thought,  
Perfect speech,  
Perfect action,***

***Perfect livelihood,  
Perfect effort,  
Perfect mindfulness,  
Perfect concentration,***

It must be understood that the path is not to be seen as a series of steps which one must climb one after another to reach the top. No, rather we must see them as toes on the feet, moving forward at the same time – as we progress, we perform each step better because the toes help each other. (The Pali term for the Noble Eightfold Path is *Ariya Atthangika Magga*- where *anga* means limb).

We can also think of a wheel with eight spokes, or the Swastika with eight arms to help us see that all the parts are connected and depend on each other for us to move forward. (Fig 1)

## Begin with Understanding

So we begin with a little understanding, and as we progress this understanding grows, making it easier to practise the other steps and as we improve so does our understanding! Once we take the first step, the journey becomes progressively easier because we see for

ourselves (*ehipassiko*) that it works and we are encouraged to go further. The path can be divided in another way: SILA (Discipline), SAMADHI (Concentration), and PANNA (Wisdom).

Depending on our individual personalities, it is easier to practise some of these steps than others – generally at the earlier steps we put in more efforts into SILA, that is, we begin by controlling and developing our DISCIPLINE in physical behaviour. We become more mindful of what we do, what we say and how we conduct our daily lives. Of course, we cannot do these without some degree of understanding, which will determine our thoughts as we perform SILA: all the steps are interrelated and they complement each other.

The important thing to remember is that as buddhists we cannot simply be content to be disciplined with regards to our physical actions alone. SILA is not the be-all-and-end-all of buddhist practice, it is merely a stage (although an important one) in our spiritual development.

For an untrained mind, SILA is difficult. This is why many people turn away from religion, preferring rather to do the easy thing and give in to the desires of the flesh. But if we have some understanding, no matter how little, we will begin to see that

pandering to our physical desires will not make us happy in the long run. Understanding will help us to see that there is a long term permanent happiness to be gained if we are prepared to make the necessary sacrifice of restraining the body. We make the first step by aligning ourselves spiritually.

### Intellectual Understanding is not enough

We can agree that the journey on our spiritual path begins with understanding. But understanding is an intellectual exercise and the Buddha warned us (as we saw earlier) against mere Intellectualism. In following the buddhist path we must engage both the Intellect and the Emotion. The head will give us the right Thought and right Attitude towards practising discipline. With understanding, we will practise SILA without resentment, or as if we are being forced to make a sacrifice to please a deity who created us. Rather, with understanding we will begin to enjoy the actions which help to control the body. The body thus controlled, the mind will be easier to control and we will begin to experience greater calm and peace, which gives rise to a sense of happiness.



This happiness is different from the happiness we get by giving in to the demands of the flesh. Understanding gives us the maturity to break free from seeking materialistic pleasures without suffering a sense of deprivation.

This understanding can arise in many ways. We may have a sudden insight to the impermanent nature of materialistic happiness – we may fall sick suddenly, a loved one may die in an accident, we may lose a job, the value of our shares may be wiped out in a stock market crash. This sudden insight could be the starting point in turning to seek a higher, more enduring happiness. Or we may reach this understanding gradually – by observing how people who follow a religious path sincerely seem to have an inner glow of happiness and we may wish to share this with them, or we may read religious literature and become convinced. Once the understanding develops, we embark on the spiritual path, usually by declaring our Faith.

## The Need for Faith and Confidence

What do we mean by Faith? In many religions, faith means a total surrender to a supernatural controlling force and an unquestioning belief in the ability of that



force to effect one's salvation. Buddhist faith involves no such blind surrender to an external power. We use the term SRADDHA, which is difficult to explain, but which generally means a trusting confidence in a teacher and his teaching, based on the appeal this teaching makes to our critical thinking. This confidence arises and then grows as one intelligently and critically examines the Teachers' example and the validity of the Teaching. As one's understanding grows, so does this confidence until eventually the "faith" is replaced by full understanding, after which both the Teacher and his Teaching are not needed anymore. The Buddha compares the reliance on his teachings for salvation to using a raft to cross the river. Once the river has been crossed, we can discard the raft and continue our journey to the top of the mountain which is our final destination. There is no need to carry the raft along for the rest of the journey.

But unlike understanding (which involves the head) in SRADDHA we engage our emotions (the heart). And this brings us to the next part of our discussion, the first steps on the path which lead to buddhist spirituality. Over the centuries, beginning from the time of the Buddha himself, certain rituals have been performed whose main

purpose is the practice of devotion to provide the emotional background which leads to spiritual development.

Here we must refer again to the so called "friends of buddhism", mentioned by Ven Sangharakshita, whose over-enthusiasm for the buddhist cause has done a disservice to the understanding of buddhism. There have been attempts to explain how in his very first sermon, the Buddha warned against reliance on rituals to effect one's salvation. This was taken to mean that ALL rituals are to be discarded and it caused many new initiates to buddhism to have nothing to do with the sacred practices.

## Buddhist Devotional Practices

The buddhist ritual as embodied in the "puja" is a deeply significant, necessary and spiritually beneficial act especially when it is performed with Perfect Understanding. Though we are warned against believing that the ritual by itself can lead us to Nirvana, (the ultimate state of perfect bliss), if we know that it is a preliminary to higher states of spirituality then certainly it is integral to the practice of the path laid down by the Buddha.

The puja falls into the category of Sila (or Discipline) which is the first of the stages along the path, the others being Samadhi (concentration) and Panna (Wisdom). It primarily involves Perfect Speech and Perfect Action. The practice of the puja involves much physical action which brings the body under control, in preparation for the mind to become focused and concentrated. The rituals must never be performed out of habit, but with fresh awareness and consciousness every time they are performed. There are great underlying unities in the way buddhist rituals are performed among the great traditions namely, the Theravada, the Mahayana and the Vajrayana.

Central to the puja is the Buddha image. There is no need to explain here why the charge of “idol worshipping” cannot be leveled against buddhists. Most buddhists know the image itself is only wood, plaster, bronze, stone or more recently fiber glass or plastic. What is more important is what the image represents: it represents the physical appearance of an Indian prince who showed the path to deliverance two and half millennia ago and it encourages us to remember him with gratitude. But just as importantly, it represents the DHARMA – the entire body of the Buddha’s Teaching, which

he left behind to guide us. Recalling the Dharma renews our spirit, our determination to understand it and work out our salvation through it.

On another level, contemplation of the image also reminds us of the noble Eightfold Path which is subdivided into SILA, SAMADHI and PANNA. (Fig 2).

## The Offering

The ritual itself is divided into several parts, beginning with the **Offering** – this is when certain articles are offered by the devotee to the Buddha. At the outset it must be emphasized that when we say ‘articles are offered’ this is not to be taken in the literal sense as if the Buddha is present to receive the offerings. It is a symbolic gesture, going back to ancient India where one never visited someone empty handed. Even today very few people in Asia visit their friends without bringing something to offer – flowers, fruits, sweets, cakes and so on. And it is a religious custom to bring along things like joss sticks, camphor and candles. Devotees may bring all these objects or some of them - there’s no hard and fast rule about what must be brought or even the quantity. They represent a symbolic way of attuning the devotee’s heart to the spiritual



experience, which is about to occur. It must be remembered again that they are in no way intended to be given to the Buddha in a literal sense. The Buddha is in no need of them. However in giving, openly, freely, humbly, with devotion we reduce our preoccupation with the physical body and prepare ourselves for spiritual upliftment. We also develop generosity through giving freely, with no pre-conditions. Therefore, it is not the Buddha that benefits from the offerings, but ourselves.

Is there any particular manner in which the offerings are to be made? None at all. Anyone, man, woman or child can approach the image and make the offering. If there are many devotees, they usually form a line and pass each object from one person to another and the last person makes the offering on behalf of everyone present. The physical beauty of the objects themselves gives a sense of pure esthetic pleasure making the individual calm in body and mentally prepared for the next stage.

## Vandana

The VANDANA, is the salutation. For this, everyone present sits facing the image, either on the floor or on chairs, depending



on what is culturally appropriate. Then they recite the Salutation

***Namo Tassa, Bhagavato Arahatto,  
Samma Sambuddhasa  
(Homage to the Lord, the Worthy One, the  
Perfectly Enlightened One!)***

We do this with the tips of the fingers of both hands in the 'namaskara' gesture – placing the hand together in front of the body with the thumbs and fingertips touching (Fig.3). While we say that we do not *pray* to the Buddha in the sense of asking him for favors or protections, we recognize the Buddha as the one Supreme Being who, with super human effort, discovered the path to Deliverance and showed it to us. The more we know him the more we become aware of his greatness. Even all his closest and greatest disciples – Sariputta, Moggallana, Mahakasyappa and perhaps most of all, Ananda – felt the same reverence, devotion and gratitude towards him. Paying homage at his feet therefore suffuses us with a sense of spiritual well-being. Homage to the Buddha benefits us, not the Buddha.

It expresses our openness to the spiritual inspiration coming from the Buddha. By prostrating ourselves at the Buddha's feet,

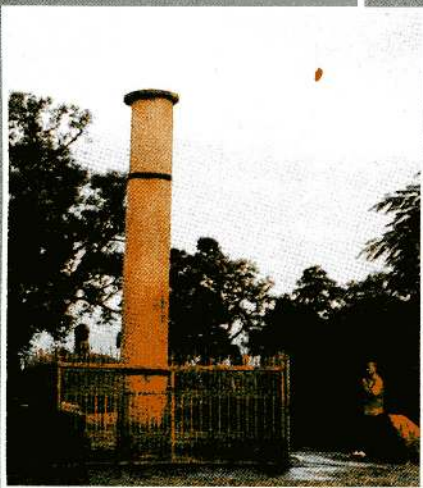
we strengthen ourselves to follow his example and raise ourselves to the level of the divine, just as the Buddha himself had done.

## Going For Refuge

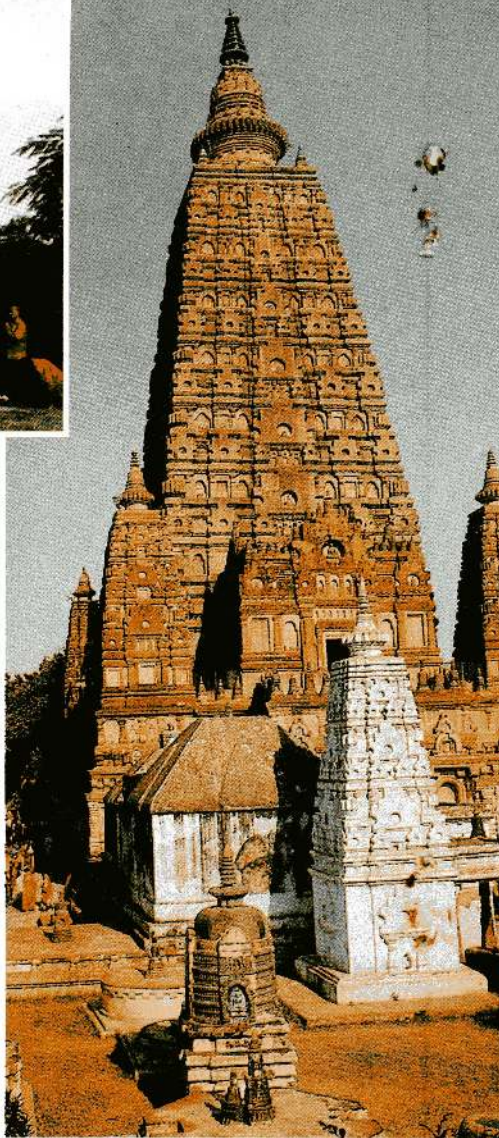
Then we have the SARANAGAMANA – Going for Refuge. Why go for refuge? We all know that refuge means: “Shelter from pursuit of danger or trouble; person or thing that provides it” (Oxford Dictionary). Buddhists and especially Theravadins are often told that they must be self reliant and work out their own salvation. If that is so, why go for refuge? What ‘going for refuge’ here means is that we begin by willingly putting our trust in the Buddha’s Method, (the Dharma and the Path) and having once put ourselves on the right course, then we use self effort and work out our own salvation. Going for Refuge therefore is a preliminary step.

We notice that the dictionary definition had two parts to it : shelter from danger AND person or thing that provides it. Let us examine how this definition can be applied to the Buddhist Going-for-Refuge.

Shelter from Danger: anyone but the most unreflective, complacent, self assured

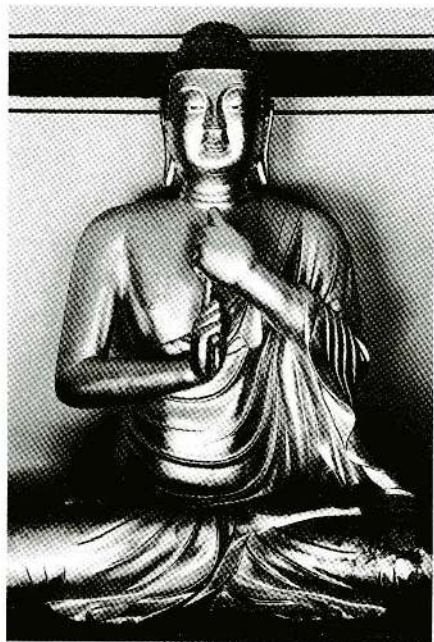


**Fig 4**  
**RUMMENDEI PILLAR**  
**Lumbini - Birthplace of Prince**  
**Siddharta**

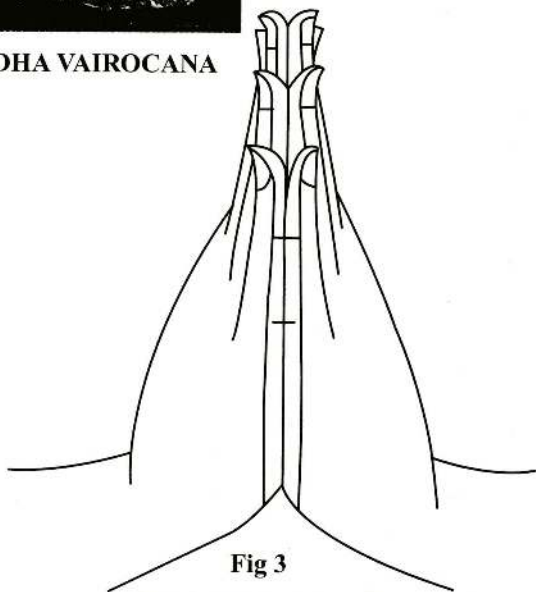


**Fig 5** **Buddhagaya - Where Ascetic Siddha**  
**Attained Enlightenment**



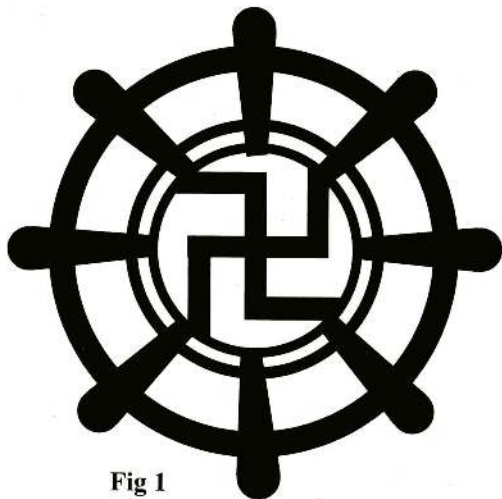


**Fig 8**      **BUDDHA VAIROCANA**

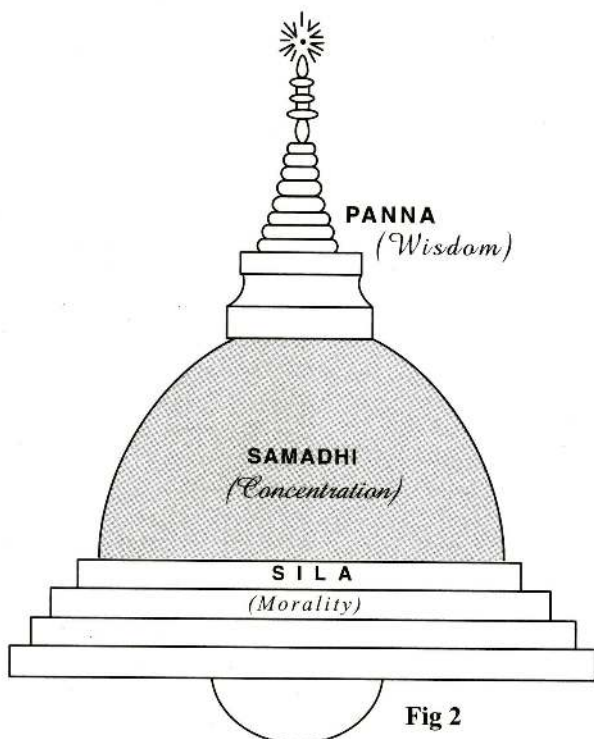


**Fig 3**  
**NAMASKARA MUDRA**





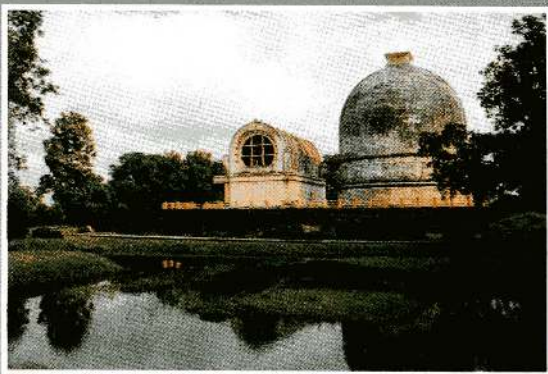
**Fig 1**



**Fig 2**



c Siddharta  
ightenment



**Fig 7 Kusinara - The Lord Buddha passed away.**



**Fig 6 Sarnath - Lord Buddha preached his First Sermon - Dhammacakapavattana Sutta**

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person will admit that our existence is far from perfectly satisfactory, although we momentarily enjoy some fleeting pleasures. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century a large part of humanity experiences a reasonable degree of physical and material comfort, but there is not a single human being alive today who can claim to experience perfect mental happiness. No one is ever free from attachment, worry, fear, restlessness, anger, jealousy, aversion and other mental defilements. They arise from our belief in a false self and they cause us to tumble relentlessly from life to death to rebirth: this is where the danger lies – that we will roll on in *Samsara* endlessly. When we accept this reality, then we have begun to have a glimpse of Perfect Understanding – that the first noble truth, the Existence of Suffering, cannot be denied. When we realize we are in danger, we look for something which will protect us: we seek a refuge.

Person or Thing that provides it . This is when we turn to the Buddha, the first refuge. This Buddha is the historical Gautama who lived 26 centuries ago, whose determination, and strong sense of purpose, whose exemplary life continues to inspire us and give us the confidence that perfection can be attained without divine assistance.

While the historical Gautama is no longer with us in elemental form, he left us the priceless gift of the Dharma – the Teaching which embodies the Truth about how to attain Perfect Happiness by ourselves. The Buddha did not appoint a successor because buddhahood is not bestowed by a higher authority: it has to be attained by each person through self effort. The teaching contains the rationale and the method to attain that state of Spiritual Perfection which each of us has access to. It therefore becomes the Second Refuge.

The third refuge. When the Buddha was enlightened there existed only two refuges - the Buddha and the Dharma. Two months later, the Buddha preached the Dharma and helped five ascetics to attain Spiritual Perfection. They became the first members of the Sangha. When their numbers had increased to sixty, the Buddha entrusted them to spread the newly discovered Truth to humanity. They thus became the custodians of the Dharma, and it is the Sangha community, which even up until today we turn to for help in explaining the teachings and to help us understand how to attain happiness. This is the third refuge. We express our confidence that the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha are the only



competent 'jewels' which can help us on our Spiritual Path by reciting the Formula which was recited even during the time of the Enlightened One Himself.

*Buddham saranam gacchami* – I go to the Buddha for refuge

*Dhammam saranam gacchami* – I go to the Dhamma for refuge

*Sangham saranam gacchami* – I go to the Sangha for refuge

## Panca Sila

Once Going for Refuge is completed, the devotee recites the formula to observe what are generally called the five precepts in English. This translation can be a bit misleading. Let's go back to the Oxford Dictionary where Precepts is defined as "Rule for action or conduct, exhortation, maxim". The "Rule" is not imposed by any outside authority, not even the Buddha. And there is no punishment if the rule is broken, meaning no "sin" is committed. With each precept the devotee says: "I undertake the training rule to refrain from (killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and taking drugs)" There is no compulsion. When the devotee attains enough spiritual maturity to understand that these actions are for his or

her own benefit, then he or she freely imposes these rules on him or herself. The only punishment for infringing them is the karmic reaction which is bound to follow – there is no divinity from whom one can beg for forgiveness and hope to escape from the efforts of an action.

Certainly the observing of the five precepts falls into the category of SILA which is the prerequisite for embarking on the spiritual life. When there is understanding and spiritual maturity and voluntary acceptance of these restrictions on oneself, naturally one does not sense a feeling of suffering, sacrifice, or frustration. (We could compare this with what happens in everyday life: A little boy will be upset if he is asked to give away a toy, because he sees it as a “real” source of happiness, but as he grows older and matures, he recognizes the toy is only a toy, and will give it up with no sense of deprivation).

Perhaps a better term for Precept would be “self imposed training rule”. One undertakes the five training rules without fear of an outside force, and there is joy and pleasure in carrying them out. Even when transgressed, there is no occasion for guilt; one merely recognizes one’s weakness, and determines not to repeat the mistakes, for one’s own benefit.

## The Triple Gem

After observing the five precepts the devotee then reflects mindfully on the various qualities of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. The important word here is “mindfully”. Mere repetition of the words is a waste of time. The entire exercise must never be allowed to degenerate into a mere recital. Every word must be reflected upon. For example there are nine special qualities of the Buddha which must be dwelt upon –

***“Such indeed is the Exalted One, Worthy,  
perfectly Enlightened,  
Endowed with knowledge and conduct,  
well – gone, knower of the world,  
Supreme trainer of persons to be tamed,  
Teacher of gods and men,  
Enlightened and exalted.”***

The qualities of the Dharma are;

***“Well expounded is the Dharma by the  
Exalted one,  
directly visible,  
Immediately effective, calling one  
To come and see, leading onwards  
To be personally realized by the wise”***

and the Sangha,

***“The order of the Exalted One’s  
disciples is of good conduct  
.....of upright conduct, of wise  
conduct,  
worthy of offerings and hospitality, of  
dutiful conduct!  
Worthy of gifts and salutation  
Supreme field of merit for the world.  
.....  
for me there is no other refuge  
the Sangha is my matchless refuge***

## Puja

We began this spiritual exercise by physically making offering at the feet of the Buddha, then we sat down quietly with the body restrained and recited the initial Salutation, followed by the Going –for– Refuge and reflected on the qualities of the Triple Gem. Now with mind further calmed and focussed we reflect on the intentions which accompany the offerings. Pure water, lights, incense, flowers which have already been placed on the altar are then recalled one after another, with the recitation of an appropriate verse. Each verse reminds the



devotee about Impermanence of life and the wisdom of not being attached to the things of the world. For example, when offering flowers the devotee recites,

***“As these flowers fade and wither, so will  
my body be destroyed”***

It may be noticed that the purpose of the entire PUJA is to increase the sense of spirituality, but with the mind fully in control. There is a strong, vibrant devotional feeling, but there are no excessive shows of emotion or physical movement. The overall atmosphere is one of muted gratitude, joy, peace, and inspirational fervour.

### Confession of Faults.

*Kayena vacca cittena  
Pamadena maya katam  
Accayam Kama me Bhante  
Buri-panna tathagatha*

If by deeds, speech or thought  
heedlessly,  
I have done anything wrong  
Forgive me O master !  
O Teacher, Most Wise !

The next part, the confession of faults, has given rise to some confusion. If

there is no god, and if one is ultimately only responsible for one's own actions, why confess? Here confession must not be understood as being made to a Divine Being because one had sinned. Rather one reviews one's action and acknowledges that there has been unskillful action which is detrimental to one's spiritual progress. One faces the fact that a wrong doing has been committed and thereby determines not to repeat the mistakes, because one will be more alert the second time around. It also encourages complete honesty about one's thoughts and actions and eliminates hypocrisy and self denial. Honesty to one's self is very important. When one acknowledges the wrong doing before the image of the Perfect One, the Buddha Himself, then one will hesitate to repeat one's mistakes in thought, word or deed. One certainly does not and cannot ask for forgiveness in the sense of expiation for a sin committed. Once one has squared with oneself after straying from the path, one renews one's spiritual aspiration. Also there is no room for guilt as if some divinity has been angered; there is merely the honest acknowledgement and determination not to repeat the wrong doing.

This is connected with the four efforts to succeed in practice –

***To prevent evil states of mind from arising.***

***To eradicate evil states of mind that have risen.***

***To encourage positive states of mind that are rising.***

***To maintain positive states of mind that have risen***

This in turn is related to training oneself to recognize wrong doing and taking the correct action not to repeat it.

### Transference of Merit.

Then comes the transference of merit. Merit is the positive state of mind one attains when one has performed actions which are spiritually beneficial. Such a mind is free (at least temporarily in one who has not yet become an *arahant*, a perfected being), from the defilements like anger, hatred, greed, jealousy, restlessness, worry, and so on. In this purified state, we can “share merits” and “transfer merits”. When we share merits we invite devas or beings of light (who, because of past good actions are reborn in the celestial realms and can help us in certain ways) to be part of this spiritually elevated state of mind.

On the other hand, when we “transfer merits” we recall departed friends and relatives who may be reborn in certain unhappy realms and wish they can share our happiness. When the beings perceive that we have remembered them with kindness and compassion, they too experience happiness which will relieve them of their suffering.

In this way our sense of spiritual well being benefits not only ourselves but others as well.

## Meditation

Finally, after the physical actions of Offering and the verbal actions of Recitation, we spend a few moments on meditation, where the mind is brought to rest and is maintained in the focussed state, free from any disturbance. This is the highest point of the spiritual exercise of the PUJA.

There can be no denying that if this practice is maintained over a long period of time, the spiritual and even physical benefits will be enormous.

## Going Beyond Rituals

However, buddhists must remember that the entire PUJA, no matter how



earnestly practised, is not an end in itself. In his very first sermon the Buddha had warned against the danger of reliance on rites and rituals to effect one's liberation from suffering. This was because during the Buddha's time, there were people (as doubtless there are today also) who believed that they could attain their final deliverance merely by performing rites and rituals without also developing the mind.

There is an amusing anecdote about how the Buddha observed an ascetic washing himself in the sacred Ganges River. Upon being questioned by the Buddha, the ascetic explained that he was hoping to be purified by immersing himself in the water. To this the Buddha remarked that if that was so, then the fish there must be the most purified of beings, since they never left the river. The Buddha taught that while SILA (discipline, of which the performance of rituals is a part) is a necessary first step, one must proceed to the next step which is SAMADHI, the development of concentration and focussing of the mind. When the mind is controlled by Samadhi, the conditions become right for **Panna** (wisdom) to arise.

The final aim of the spiritual path is the attainment of wisdom, by which one's mind is liberated upon perceiving the

Ultimate Truth and seeing things as they really are. The puja can be done everyday, but it is of course limited by the fact that we can only perform it at specific times and in a particular place. The puja must serve another purpose. The mental attitude that we develop must be maintained throughout the day in everything we do, whether we are at work or play. We must be mindful of our commitment to the buddhist ideal of breaking free from samsara and of following the path which helps us to do this. As we noted at the beginning of this book, the reason why we suffer more than people who live in less developed societies is because we separate our spiritual lives and our material lives. The key to happiness lies in our ability to reestablish the balance between the spiritual and the material.

When embarking on the spiritual path a buddhist must constantly be on guard and never get confused about his or her final Goal. The Buddha has clearly stated that even his Teachings, which were given over the long period of time of forty five years, must be used merely as a means to attain ultimate happiness and not become an end in themselves. We can again recall the parable of the raft. In Zen Buddhism, this is further emphasized when it is said that we must look at the moon and not be taken up

by the finger which merely points to it. The moon represents Nirvana and the finger represents the Teachings.

### Going on a Pilgrimage

While the devotional practices of buddhism help us to maintain a balance between the spiritual and the material, an excellent way of heightening the sense of the spiritual is by going on a pilgrimage. Pilgrimages are seen as important not only by buddhists but by muslims, christians and hindus as well. Even during the Buddha's time his devout followers made it a point to visit the places sanctified by his sacred presence. Of these four are the most important – his birthplace, where he gained his enlightenment, where he preached his first sermon and where he passed away. After he passed away the great emperor Asoka erected exquisitely fashioned pillars to mark the exact spots where these great events had occurred. This inspired later pilgrims, among them the great saints Yuan Chuan, Fa Hsien and I Ching to write records of their visits which continue to inspire us today.

Like them and countless others who came from Japan, Korea, China, Tibet, Indo China, Thailand, Myanmar, Sumatra, Java

and Sri Lanka over twenty five centuries, we too can walk in the footsteps of the Enlightenment Master himself. We can feel his presence in those sacred spots and forget our earthly problems. We become one with the great multitude of human beings who proclaim that the Buddha's Teaching, discovered at Bodhi Gaya and preached for the first time at Varanasi alone holds the perfect formula for attaining lasting peace.

To spend an evening at the foot of the Sacred Bodhi Tree, to meditate on the spot where he preached the first sermon, to gaze at the awe inspiring statue showing him as he passed away - these are precious moments, when intellectualism takes a back seat and devotion takes over.

It is not an experience that can easily be described. It is something which will greatly enhance one's Sraddha (confidence & trust) and strengthen one's determination to follow the Spiritual Path of Buddhism until one finally breaks free from one's terrible bondage to Samsara (Fig 4, 5, 6, 7).

## The Intellectual Approach is not Enough.

Intellectual study of the scriptures represents our thinking about the spiritual



attainments of the Buddha and his disciples. But we cannot stop at thinking alone. The Buddha invites us to have the same experiences as he had had through practice. Because, the Buddha says, if we only study the scriptures but make no attempt to understand them and put them into practice, in however small a manner, we are like the spoon which carries the soup, but never knows its taste. There are three levels at which we must work – Study (Pariyatti), practice (Pattipatti) and finally experience (Pativeda): the first two are merely the finger pointing to the moon which is when the Spiritual attainment becomes complete, and there is no more differentiation between the person Understanding and the Truth Understood.

Perhaps a story will make this point clear. It is said that the great Buddhist philosopher Asanga had an aspiration to meet Maitreya, the next Buddha. He therefore began a meditation practice to help him achieve this aim. After twelve years of intense meditation, Maitreya did not appear. So Asanga, disappointed, gave up the practice and left the monastery. As he was walking out, he saw a man stroking a huge iron pillar with a feather. Asanga asked him what he was doing and the man replied, "Oh, I am stroking this pillar to reduce its

size because I want to make a needle." Asanga told him that it would take a long time for that to happen, to which the man retorted, "and don't you think it will take longer to meet Maitreya?"

Asanga got the message and went back to the monastery where he meditated another six years, still without success. Disheartened, he left the monastery again. This time he saw a sick dog, covered with maggots on the road. He was overcome by compassion and went down to relieve its suffering by plucking out the worms by hand. Then he reflected that if he did this he could inflict discomfort on the worms. So, without any concern for self, he began to lick the wounds to dislodge the worms. Even then he reflected that the worms would die unnecessarily as they would be deprived of their means of sustenance. He cut off a piece of flesh from his thigh and laid the worms there. At that moment there was a tremendous flash and the dog was transformed to Maitreya.

Asanga asked Maitreya why had he taken such a long time to reveal himself, and Maitreya replied "I was there all along, it was you who did not see me. Now to explain what I mean take me on your shoulder and go to the market place". Asanga did as he was told and to his surprise no one in the

crowd noticed anything unusual, except for an old woman who asked, "why are you carrying a sick dog on your shoulders?" (We should note in passing that many buddhist stories are not to be believed literally, but we should clearly understand the moral behind them).

The same concept is echoed by the Chinese philosopher Wang Yang Ming (born 1472) who said, "No one who really has knowledge fails to put it into practice. To know and yet not do is in fact not to know. The sages taught men both knowledge and action, precisely because they wished them to return to their original nature, they did not say it is merely enough to think. Seeing beauty is a matter of knowledge; loving the beautiful is action." (Quoted from Chinese thought from Confucius to Mao Tze Tung. By H.G Creel, London 1954 p226)

The point here is that aspiration and practice must culminate in total experience, when the thinker and the thought become one. When Asanga became Compassion itself, the Maitreya which was within him all along was revealed. Therefore Study, Practice and Experience must be completely harmonized before spiritual perfection can be attained.

All this may sound difficult and daunting for the beginner. It need not be so.

The buddhist spiritual path is a gradual one. We begin in a small way, with trust and devotion and practise the Virtues of Morality, Patience, Effort, Concentration and Wisdom. As we progress, our understanding will grow with it to encourage us to proceed further along the path. What is important is the first step, the initial glimmer of understanding that this IS the right path to spiritual perfection. Buddhist literature abounds in moving stories of very simple folk with neither education nor conventional intelligence who were set on the path and liberated while great thinkers were left struggling in Samsara.

## Knowledge and Practice

This of course does not mean that buddhists deny the importance of a knowledge of the Teachings in order to develop the spiritual life. As we saw earlier, when we clearly see the nature of our existence and the reasons why we perform certain actions as explained by the Buddha, we develop understanding, which makes the entire process of spiritual participation so much more meaningful. There must be a balance of Knowledge and Practice. In Chinese and Japanese art there is a popular



image of the Buddha depicting him grasping his left forefinger with his right hand. This symbolizes the buddhist ideal of developing both Knowledge through the Teaching as well as Practice in developing spirituality (Fig.8).

It is called the Union of Wisdom and Means. Here the Buddha warns us to be on guard against scholasticism, but to regard knowledge as merely a tool to achieve liberation. One must conscientiously put whatever knowledge one gains into practice. A verse in the Dhammapada puts it succinctly :

***“Much though he recites the sacred texts  
But acts not accordingly  
That heedless man is like a cowherd  
Who only counts the cows of others:  
He does not partake of the blessings of  
the holy life” [ Dhammapada verse 19]***

The entire process of spiritual development depends on the harmonization of all different aspects of a human being – the heart and the head, the intellect and the emotion, the mental and the physical, and also thought, word and deed. All these harmonizations lead to the Middle Way which lead to purity and calm, and they synchronize one's inner being with one's surroundings.

## The Ultimate Goal

What is the ultimate goal of following the spiritual path for a buddhist? The Buddha's uniqueness rests on the fact that he discovered this perfect state of happiness and the path to it. No other religion teaches about Nirvana.

What is Nirvana? It is the final goal for those who want to be free from all worldly suffering. Literally, it means "to blow off" and is a complete cessation of all processes which give rise to the illusion of an ego, the source of all suffering. It is the extinction of the illusion that the world is real and that the "I" is a separate entity from everything else around it. This illusion, caused by Ignorance, not knowing things as-they-really-are, makes one grasp at things which cannot be grasped because they are illusionary themselves! When we cannot get what we try to grasp, we suffer. With true Understanding, Wisdom, seeing-things-as-they-really-are, we stop the grasping and experience the ultimate peace. Nirvana is not NOTHING: at best it can be described as NO – THING.

Nirvana can be achieved in this life itself. After one attains Nirvana the body continues to function before death but the mind does not perceive an "I", so there is no

more attachment to it and no more suffering. At death, the body is discarded and the final liberation occurs.

## The Path is not easy.

It must be emphasized that the buddhist path is not an easy one. The Buddha constantly reminded his disciples not to waver even for a single moment from the task of disciplining the body and the mind. And we know very well how both body and mind rebel whenever any attempt is made to control them.

***Easy to do are things,  
That are bad and harmful to oneself,  
But exceedingly hard to do,  
Are things that are good and beneficial.  
[Dhammapada verse 163]***

This is why many prefer to turn to those religions which offer an easy way out by promising salvation through mere prayer and devotion. They may be useful as a first step, but as we noted earlier, we must discard them as we progress and effect our final liberation by our own self-effort.

***“By oneself is evil done;  
By oneself is one defiled.  
By oneself is evil left undone;  
By oneself is one made pure.  
Purity and impurity depend on oneself,  
No one can purify another”  
[Dhammapada verse 165]***

This emphasis on self - reliance has caused many people to turn away from buddhism and seek comfort in religions which promise salvation through intermediaries. In buddhism, there are no priests who appeal to god on our behalf. We are our own masters. Monks and nuns are spiritually advanced people who help us along the path, just like nurses who help us when we are sick: they cannot cure us. However if one begins to perceive, no matter how dimly, that one must work out one's own Liberation, then Perfect Understanding has begun to arise. This will give the necessary initial confidence in the Buddha's explanation of the universe and encourage one to try out his path of deliverance.

As pointed out earlier, the path is a gradual one. From personal experience the Buddha knew that the ultimate goal cannot be attained as soon as one wishes for it. One must work gradually, but with determination, to control the body through



SILA and the mind through SAMADHI. As one progresses one will begin to see for one self that the Buddha's Teaching is indeed True – we call it *Ehipassiko* (seeing for oneself). This increases our Confidence (*Sraddha*) and encourages us to proceed further. As we progress our understanding progresses. As our understanding improves we find the disciplining process becomes easier because our motivation is increased by Perfect Thought. Perfect Thought in turn helps us control our speech, action and livelihood. When these are brought under control gradually, our ability to concentrate the mind becomes easier – Perfect Effort and Mindfulness are enhanced. So the path to spiritual perfection becomes progressively easier to follow. Each step supports the others and finally liberation through PANNA is achieved.

***“Like a thorough bred horse  
touched by the whip,  
Be strenuous,  
By being filled with Spiritual yearning.  
By faith and moral purity,  
By efforts and meditation  
By investigation of the truth  
By being rich in knowledge and virtue  
and by being mindful  
Destroy this unlimited suffering”  
[Dhammapada Verse 144]***

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(The initial typing of the text was done by Low Ken Way)

A detailed map of the area around the Buddhist Maha Vihara in Singapore. The map shows the road network, including the main road leading to the vihara, and various landmarks such as the Stadium Chinese, the Nanyang Theatre, and the Nanyang Commercial Union. A callout box points to the 'BUDDHIST MAHA VIHARA'.

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