

DIVINE CALL AND HUMAN RESPONSE

Devotion in Theravāda Buddhism

BUDDHISM is often described as non-theistic; and in the sense that no personal creator God plays any significant part in the religion, this is certainly true. But it would be wrong to assume that there is in Buddhism no such thing as devotion and ritual. All religions are one in so far as they provide for certain basic human needs: for support, for hope, for belief in some greater purpose and meaning in life. Buddhism is no exception. The dry-as-dust textbooks and commentaries, especially those which concentrate on the finer points of scholastic philosophy and psychology, relentlessly categorizing the endless stages and factors of enlightenment, may give the impression that Buddhism is just a way of life for the eccentric élite. But Buddhism is not a religion for drop-outs and for those who have simply grown tired of the wearisome process of birth and rebirth. Nor are the only religious practices a strict moral code and a narrow-minded search for the intellectual experience called Nirvāna. Even the earliest scriptures and the earliest practices of the old conservative Theravāda tradition abound with joyful hymns which extol the advantages of following the way of life taught by the Blessed One. What follows is an attempt to pull together some of the more common salutations, statements of belief and hymns which, chanted in the original Pāli language, still form the basic structure around which the Theravāda Buddhist, the follower of the ancient, conservative tradition, builds his day.

Go into a Theravādin *Vihāra* or monastery, whether it be one of the handful of relatively recent foundations in Britain or in its more traditional setting, a Sinhalese, Thai or Burmese village, and you will be confronted by the Buddha himself. Images of the Buddha, seated in silent contemplation and surrounded by flowers, lights and other gifts, are the focal points of meditation halls and shrine rooms. It is true that my Buddhist Catechism says quite clearly that the Buddha is not a god but a human being, one Siddhattha Gotama, who 'of his own strength attained perfection, enlightenment and deliverance in this life; the holy and wise proclaimer of the truth and founder of the Buddhist religion'.¹ Nevertheless, the Buddha still lives, even if the theologically sensitive would want to limit his present influence to the continuing strength of his personality, the vigour of his teaching and the vitality of the Buddhist community which carries on his work. For the ordinary Theravāda Buddhist, the Buddha is the enlightened teacher who leads

¹ *A Buddhist Catechism*, Subhadra Bhikshu (Revised Edition, 1970; Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy), p 3.

mankind on their quest of the Eternal. He is certainly not God; and it makes a nonsense to talk about him as if he were a god to whom the faithful make their prayers. Rather, the traditional attitude displayed towards the Buddha is typical of the way the sage or holy man is respected and honoured in India. The Buddha was not the first, nor the last, spiritual leader to be exalted to an almost divine position, way above the ordinary human level, and to be honoured with the status and devotion accorded to those who claim to have had some direct experience of the Ultimate. It is interesting to note that in traditional Hinduism the Buddha has long been regarded as one of the ten incarnations or *avatars* of Vishnu, along with Krishna, Rāma and the rest, and throughout the history of the Mahāyāna, with its proliferating cults and luxuriant mythologies, the Buddha has been given all the trappings and attributes of the Divine: he has supernatural powers, he works miracles, he is the sole Lord and ruler of countless realms, both on earth and in heaven. The sage of the Sākya clan has been divinized despite himself.

But we are already going too far afield. As far as the Theravādins are concerned, the Buddha is an enlightened human being who is worthy of honour because of his achievements and his teaching. He is *not* an omnipotent ruler of the cosmos, nor is he a human incarnation of the eternal creator. Still less is he one of the traditional *devas*, the gods of Hindu mythology whose existence the Buddha never denied but whom he considered as inadequate guides to the true meaning of life. The Buddha himself is an *ati-deva*, a super-god, beyond the gods, a being quite different in kind from anything the world has seen before. He is the Enlightened One; and for this reason alone he is worthy of special honour. Respect for the Buddha is as old as the earliest texts. There we find him approached with due reverence by monks and strangers alike. A questioner will always make the correct salutation and sit down at one side before putting his problem to the Master. Similarly in the shrine room, before the Buddha image, monk and layman begin with a simple acknowledgement and greeting, together with the traditional formula of the three refuges. This is what makes a Buddhist a Buddhist: not a creed but a statement of intent.

Honour to the Blessed One, the Exalted One, the Fully-Englightened One!

To the Buddha I go for refuge.

To the Dhamma I go for refuge.

To the Sangha I go for refuge.

For the second time to the Buddha I go for refuge.

For the second time to the Dhamma I go for refuge.

For the second time to the Sangha I go for refuge.

For the third time to the Buddha I go for refuge.

For the third time to the Dhamma I go for refuge.

For the third time to the Sangha I go for refuge.

Of these Three Jewels, as they are called, it is the first that is the most important. The other two, which refer to the teaching of the Buddha and the community of his disciples, can be considered as in some sense further forms in which the reality of the Buddha appears in the world: extensions of his influence perhaps. But by reminding himself of the central truths of his religion, the Buddhist strengthens his own confidence in the way which the Buddha has laid out for him. A special meditation calls to mind the attributes of the Three Jewels, and often forms the basis of everyday devotion:

Such indeed is that Blessed One, worthy, fully-enlightened, practised in right knowledge and perfect conduct; he who has fared well, that wise knower of the world, the incomparable trainer of men who are to be tamed, the teacher of both gods and men, he the Enlightened and Blessed One.

Well-taught by the Blessed One is that Doctrine, perfectly visible, timeless, and inviting all to come and see, leading on to enlightenment, to be comprehended by those who are wise, each for himself.

Practising perfect conduct is the Community of disciples of the Blessed One; practising upright conduct is the Community of disciples of the Blessed One; practising wise conduct is the Community of disciples of the Blessed One; practising the correct conduct is the Community of disciples of the Blessed One — that is to say, the four pairs of men, the eight different kinds of individuals, who make up the Community of disciples of the Blessed One, worthy of offerings, worthy of hospitality, worthy of gifts, worthy of reverence, the incomparable field of merit for the world.²

But to 'take refuge' in the Buddha does not mean blind, unquestioning obedience. In fact the Buddha denounced such an attitude as a form of ignorance which retarded true purification and growth. In the Sutta on the fruits of being an ascetic,³ in which the Buddha describes in systematic detail the way to enlightenment, he begins by speaking of the determination which the householder should have to follow the Buddha on his way. Such confidence in the Buddha and his teaching, he says elsewhere, is the 'greatest wealth of man in the world'.⁴ But not everyone is liable to get to the end of the way, the Noble Eightfold Path, and achieve Nirvāna. In practice, the higher

² The traditional salutations occur in the canonical literature, e.g. *Digha Nikaya* I, 49 (Pali Text Society [PTS] edition). Unless otherwise indicated all the translations are my own.

³ *Samāññaphala Sutta*, *Digha Nikaya*, II, 47-85.

⁴ *Sutta Nipeta*, 182 (PTS ed.)

stages of the way are not even looked at, let alone achieved, by any but the most extraordinary 'spiritual virtuoso'. Most Buddhists are not those who have 'left home for the homeless life', but ordinary folk for whom the person of the Buddha, his teaching and the whole institution of religion, provides him with what he needs to survive in this life, and — he may well hope and pray — achieve a better rebirth in the next. For them the moral way is obviously of great importance; and a small ceremony is often made of the taking of the Five Precepts, the heart of Buddhist ethical teaching.

Then each undertakes the observance of the Five Precepts:

I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from killing living things.

I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from taking what is not given.

I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from misconduct in sexual matters.

I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from speaking falsely.

I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from intoxicating drugs and drink which are the cause of carelessness.

There are another five precepts which are taken by monks and occasionally by lay-people on special days or in times of retreat. But the layman is more concerned with works of merit than with acts of penance. Gaining merit is the way to a better rebirth, and works of merit abound, from building a pagoda or endowing a *vihāra* to feeding the monks or listening to their preaching. But the acts themselves are valueless if at the same time one is not mindful of the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. The offering of flowers before the Buddha-image may also be an occasion to remember the great truth of the transitoriness of existence.

This great array of flowers, sweet-smelling, colourful,
I offer at the sacred lotus-feet of the Noble Sage.
With all these different flowers
Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha I adore.
Through this merit may there be Release.

But even as this flower will fade,
so does my body move on
to the state of destruction.

To the Blessed One, to the Worthy One,
to the Perfectly Enlightened One,
seated as if emerged from the sublimest ecstasy,
with this flower I make my offering of reverence
again and again.

Even as this reverential offering of flowers
 was a virtuous practice of the Buddhas,
 of the Silent Buddhas, the chief disciples,
 the great disciples and the worthy ones,
 so too do I now follow in their footsteps.

These flowers which are now so colourful,
 sweet-scented, and making the most beautiful of sights,
 will soon become faded,
 foul-smelling and sad to gaze upon.
 But so too are all compounded things —
 they do not last, but are full of pain;
 nothing that exists can endure,
 all that exists is soulless.

May this homage, salutation and reverential offering, through the great
 dignity with which it is practised, lead to the destruction of all desire!
 May we be completely free from all that decays!⁵

Similar are the offerings of lights, incense and food. The Buddhist reminds himself of the transitory nature of existence, and through the merit of his generosity and devotion asks for protection against the evil forces he sees working against him. In Burma, the substance of daily prayer begins with the *Okāsa*, a Pāli word meaning occasion or permission. Written by an unknown Burmese nationalist, it is basically an expansion of the recollection-formula of the Three Jewels. The first part is an act of reverence:

I beg leave! I beg leave! By act, by word and by thought I raise my
 hands in reverence to the forehead and worship, honour, look at and
 humbly pay homage to the three Gems — the Buddha, the Law and
 the Order — one time, two times, three times, O Lord [Buddha]!⁶

The second part is a petition in which he asks to be freed from a long catalogue of woes, plagues, enemies, ills and misfortunes. The five precepts will be taken, and then may be added a recitation of the Buddhist rosary, which consists of a hundred and eight beads, each bead accompanied by a silent meditation on a central theme or concept: the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, or the three marks of existence. As well as performing a certain mnemonic function, the rosary is held to be a powerful means of warding

⁵ Pali text taken from *A Buddhist's Manual*, H. Saddhatissa and Russell Webb (British Mahabodhi Society, London, 1976), p 14.

⁶ Full text given (in English) in Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society* (London, 1970), p 210; and discussed with references to the commentarial literature in Pe Maung Tin, *Buddhist Devotion and Meditation: an Objective Description and Study* (London, 1964), pp 31ff.

off attacks from evil spirits which, in popular Buddhism, are held to be constantly present.

Ancient animistic beliefs are never far below the surface in any Theravādin country, but even canonical Buddhism finds a place for the countless spirits with which the entire Universe is alive. A popular charm used to avert evil and danger is the *Ratana Sutta*, the Discourse on the Jewels, which is contained in the ancient collection of hymns known as the *Sutta Nipāta*. The Buddha had been requested by local people to stop the famine and disease which was afflicting their town of Vesālī. He taught the *Sutta* to his closest follower, Ānanda, who went round the town reciting the verses and sprinkling water from the Buddha's bowl. The evil spirits fled and the people recovered. The first two verses of the *Sutta* begin with an exhortation to the spirits to show loving kindness towards suffering mankind. But the major part is given over to a description of the attributes of the Three Jewels; in all there are three verses devoted to the Buddha, two to the Dhamma and seven to the Sangha. All twelve end with the refrain which is central to all Buddhist belief; 'by this truth, let there be peace!'

Whatever beings are gathered here,
whether of earth or sky,
Let all such beings be content
and let them listen carefully to my words.

Therefore, pay attention to me, all you creatures,
show loving-kindness to the world of men
who day and night bring you offerings;
protect them with all your care. . . .

Whatever treasure there is, in this world or the next,
or whatever precious jewel is to be found in the heavens,
none is equal to the accomplished one;
this exalted Jewel is in the Buddha —
by this truth let there be peace!

The sage of the Sākyas with mind composed attained that state,
passionless, immortal and most excellent,
nothing exists to equal that Law;
this exalted Jewel is in the Law —
by this truth let there be peace! . . .

Those who with steady mind are freed from desires
and, well-established in the teaching of Gotama,
have attained the deathless state,
freely they enjoy the peace of Nirvāna;
this exalted Jewel is in the Community —
by this truth let there be peace!

Just as the city gate fixed in the earth is not shaken
 by the winds which come from the four quarters,
 even so do I declare him to be an exalted one
 who clearly sees the Noble Truths;
 this exalted jewel is in the Community —
 by this truth let there be peace!

Those who thoroughly understand the Noble Truths,
 well-taught by him who is filled with profound wisdom,
 though they may be completely careless
 they will not take rebirth for an eighth time;
 this exalted jewel is in the Community —
 by this truth let there be peace! . . .

The noble one, the knower of what is noble,
 the giver of what is noble, who brings all that is noble,
 he has expounded the noble doctrine;
 this exalted jewel is in the Buddha —
 by this truth let there be peace!

Whatever beings are gathered here,
 whether of earth or sky,
 let us worship the Buddha,
 the accomplished one, honoured by gods and men;
 may there be peace!

Whatever beings are gathered here,
 whether of earth or sky,
 let us worship the Law,
 the accomplished, honoured by gods and men;
 may there be peace!

Whatever beings are gathered here,
 whether of earth or sky,
 let us worship the Community,
 the accomplished, honoured by gods and men;
 May there be peace.⁷

Affectively this *sutta* can be classified as a religious wish or plea, but originally it was intended not so much as prayer but as preaching — to a supernatural audience. There are a good many examples, charms ancient and modern, which seek to gain protection against evil through the deliberate

⁷ *Sutta Nipata*, 222-38 (PTS ed.).

building up within the world of the great Buddhist virtue of *Mettā*, a word which is usually translated as loving-kindness and means active benevolence in its many forms. Probably the best known is the *Karaṇīya-Mettā Sutta*.

This is to be done by one skilful in seeking what is good,
having attained to that tranquil state of calm:
let him be able, upright and conscientious,
of soft speech, gentle and not proud,
contented and easily supported, with few cares,
whose life is no burden to him,
with senses calmed and wise, of unobtrusive habit,
and showing no greed on the daily round for alms.

Let him not do anything unworthy,
for which others who are wise might criticize him.
May all beings be happy and secure!
May they be happy at heart!

Whatever living things there be — weak or strong,
long or great, of medium size, short, small or large,
whether seen or not seen, which live close by or far off,
whether already born or coming to be,
may all things be happy at heart!

Let no one deceive another,
let no one despise another in any place whatever,
let no one out of anger or ill-will,
wish to harm another person.

As a mother at the risk of her own life
would protect her child, her only child,
even so should be cultivated,
a boundless, friendly mind to all creatures. . . .

Whether standing, walking, sitting or lying down
as long as he is full awake and aware
he should devote himself to this mindfulness;
this way of life, they say, is the best in the world.⁸

In the same collection we find the *Mahāmaṅgala Sutta* — the Discourse on Blessings — which is still used to invoke protection against almost any danger. It is often chanted by the monks after they have received a meal from the

⁸ *Ibid.*, 143-52.

faithful. It begins with a prose introduction in the traditional form, giving the occasion on which the Buddha preached the Dhamma. A spirit appears, asks a question and the Buddha replies.

'Thus have I heard: at one time the Buddha was dwelling near Sāvatti in the Jeta-wood in the monastery of Anāthapindika. Then as night was passing into day, a certain spirit illuminated the entire Jeta-wood with the most beautiful light. He came up to the Buddha, made his salutation, and addressed the Buddha with the following verse':

Many gods and men, seeking for the highest welfare,
have pondered upon the blessings of life;
Tell me now what is life's highest blessing.

Not to associate with fools,
but to keep the company of the wise,
and to honour those who are worthy of honour,
this is life's highest blessing.

To live in pleasant surroundings,
to have done good deeds in a former life,
and to set course for the highest ideal,
this is life's highest blessing.

Generosity, doing what is right and true,
helping one's family,
and actions which are beyond blame,
this is life's highest blessing. . . .

Spiritual exercises, the life of chastity,
understanding the Noble Truths,
and the realization of Nirvāna,
this is life's highest blessing.

A mind which is not troubled,
when touched by the things of the world,
but remains sorrowless, stainless and secure,
this is life's highest blessing.

Those who have acted thus
are in every way unconquered.
Everywhere they attain to well-being.
This is life's highest blessing.⁹

⁹ *Ibid.*, 258-69.

These ancient *suttas* with their clear emphasis on the moral life and the meditative way taught by the Buddha are nevertheless the centre of devotional life as well. The pious laity may recite them twice a day, or they may be chanted by a group of monks in common on the occasion of a special ceremony: the blessing of a house, initiation services, the great festivals of the year — or at a time of special danger and national concern. Even radio broadcasts may begin the day with the Three Refuges, the Five Precepts and a recitation of the key *suttas*. Similarly the more formalized accounts of Buddhist teaching and the more important of the Buddha's utterances may form part of daily devotion. One example would be the doctrine of dependent origination (in Pāli, the *Patīcasamuppāda*) giving the twelve links which make up the chain of rebirth. Another would be the last recorded words of the Buddha — 'All compounded things are subject to decay. Work out your own salvation with diligence!'

Those last words are what gives Buddhism its dominant characteristic: the personal quest of Truth. The individual who sets out on the Buddha's way has to realize for himself the Four Noble Truths. But fidelity to the search for Truth and the purity of heart of one who has genuinely 'gone forth from home to the homeless life', is itself a powerful force. The Pāli word *Patthanā*, meaning an earnest wish or desire — and sometimes rather misleadingly translated as prayer — can cover a number of aspirations that through faithfulness and integrity something desired may come to pass. Such a statement is often called the *Act of Truth* and is somewhat equivalent to our saying *Amen* at the end of formal prayer. It is a popular practice, but variations are to be found both in the classical commentators, such as Buddhaghosa who ends his famous compendium on the religious life, the *Visuddhimagga*, with the wish that 'by the merit which has accrued through this book' he may gain the reward he desires, and also in the canonical literature. The most famous text is the *Angulimāla Sutta*.¹⁰ We are introduced to a monk called Angulimāla who had once been a robber. (His name means 'garland of fingers', a reference to one of the more unpleasant practices of his earlier life.) Now he has been admitted to the Community and is making progress on the way. One day he sees a woman in labour; she is suffering terribly. Moved with great compassion, Angulimāla asks the Buddha what can be done. The Buddha tells him to go back and say to the woman, 'since being born into the Noble Life, Sister, I have never knowingly taken the life of any living thing. May this my Act of Truth bring welfare to you and your child'. The child is born safely and all goes well with the two of them.

Today this Act of Truth has come to be employed as a charm to ward off not only the dangers which attend childbirth, but many other dangers and evils as well. The same idea, the power of truth, has been noted in the *Ratana Sutta* above: by the truth contained in the Three Jewels, Buddha, Dhamma

¹⁰ *Majjhima Nikaya*, II, 98-105.

and Sangha, 'may there be peace'. Similarly, letters may end with the wish that the recipient find refuge in the three Jewels. In a more religious context, funerals will end with the expressed hope that the person may attain Nirvana. The opening verses of the non-canonical *Mahā-jayamangala Gāthā* (the Pāli verses of the great blessing of victory) are a good example of this sort of practice:

The great merciful Lord, for the good of all living beings, fulfilled all perfections and reached the supreme enlightenment. By this statement of truth may the blessing of victory be mine!¹¹

The last word of this Act of Truth can be altered so that it is turned into an 'earnest wish' for someone else. Concern and compassion are the qualities normally associated with the later Mahāyāna Buddhism (the Great Vehicle). But this attitude of the world-sympathizing Bodhisattva is by no means absent from the Theravāda, even if the practice of sharing and transference of merit is rarely mentioned in the canonical scriptures. Care for others is an important religious practice, and the Act of Truth reflects this. Merit gained, for instance through almsgiving, can be transferred to others so that they may enjoy a happy and wholesome state of mind as well:

I share the merit of this deed with my parents, friends, and relatives and the spirits and all sentient beings. May the earth bear witness.¹²

What the Act of Truth illustrates is the strong Buddhist belief that a good act, and the good influence that it produces, both within and around the individual who is directly responsible for it, have power to destroy the effects of evil. The pursuit of Truth and the attitude of loving-kindness to all creatures are intimately linked together.

This is the spirit of the Theravāda, the tradition of the elders. It depends neither on the sober and selfish pursuit of Nirvāna, as often depicted, nor on exotic and quite incomprehensible devotions to other worldly pantheons. The selection of practices given here contains only those which are the most popular and obvious. One could give many more, for each country has its own particular favourites and specialities. But for the moment the above must suffice as an account of the mainstream. Buddhism begins and ends with the Four Noble Truths, with the peaceful and calm acceptance of the Truth about the world. There are many ways and many practices, but only one Truth. And for the one who is faithful, patient and persevering, the Truth is bound to prevail.

May all that you desire and wish for
Soon be filled with all success.
May all the aspirations of your mind
Be fulfilled like the full-moon day!¹³

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¹¹ Full Pali text given in *A Buddhist's Manual*, pp 32-34.

¹² Pe Maung Tin, *op. cit.*, p 55.

¹³ *A Buddhist's Manual*, p 49.