

PRAYER AND WORSHIP

By Dr. G.P. Malalasekera

People often ask: “Do Buddhists pray?”, “What do Buddhists do when they go to the temple?” and “What is the Buddhist attitude towards prayer?”

Prayer and worship in fact forms an integral part of many religions. In Buddhism, the word prayer means many things. In theistic religions, that is, religions which believe in an omnipotent, all-powerful God who is the creator of the world and father of all creatures, prayer means mainly supplication to God, petitioning him, humbly asking him for guidance and protection, good health and happiness and even forgiveness for sins committed.

It should be stated at the outset that, in as much as Buddhists do not believe in such a god, they also have no prayer in that sense. Buddhists believe in the law of

kamma which declares that happiness and unhappiness are alike the results of our own actions. Prosperity and adversity are produced for each individual by his own deeds, words and thoughts. The law of kamma is impersonal; it has no agent behind it, directing it or administering it. Being impersonal, it shows no mercy nor forgiveness. Evil can only be redeemed by doing good which will overcome the effects of the evil deed. Sin, in the Buddhist sense, is not the transgression or disobedience of laws arbitrarily laid down by a god to be followed by human beings but the performance of wrong acts of body, speech and mind which soil the character and impede the growth of one's personality.

There is thus in Buddhism no "prayer" in the commonly accepted sense of the word. Human beings are responsible only to themselves for their good and evil, happiness and misery and to no other. The world does not depend upon its progress or prosperity on any external agency and it is not constructed by anyone outside it.

What do Buddhists do when they visit the temple? They do many things. There is no special day to visit a temple though of course the full-moon day and the new-moon day are popular among many Buddhists. On such days, devotees may undertake the Eight Precepts in which case they are normally clad in white, as white is the symbol of simplicity, purity and humility. The devotee may take with him flowers, oil, incense and sometimes sandal wood powder and camphor. At the temple, he

washes his hands and feet because cleanliness of both body and mind is praised by the Buddha. In the temple, there are several shrines or places where offerings can be made. The main shrine is called the *Vihara* which means a dwelling place.

The word *Vihara* was originally used to mean the residence of a Buddha. Later, it was also used to indicate the dwelling place of monks. In this sense, it corresponds to the word monastery. A *Vihara* also contains images of the Buddha, and therein lies something worthy of notice. To the Buddhists, an image in itself is not an object of worship; it is a symbol and representation of the Buddha. The image will help the devotee to recall the great virtues of the Enlightened One. For the purpose of his worship, it is even immaterial whether there is an image or not but he may find it helpful for the concentration of his thoughts. In worshipping an image, the Buddhist is therefore not an idolater praying to wood, clay or stone and this charge of idolatry made against Buddhists is due either to ignorance or deliberate misrepresentation.

There is another point worthy of attention in using the word *Vihara* for the building which contains representations of the Buddha. As stated earlier, the word means a dwelling place; thus, to the Buddhist, the *Vihara* is the place where the Buddha lives, not only in the past, but right now in the present. The worship of the Buddha is not of someone who is dead and gone and no more but to someone who is both alive and present before him. This does not mean that Buddhists believe that the

Buddha, who passed away from earthly life at Kusinara, is at the moment alive in some particular place carrying on the functions of life. But the Buddhist, in paying homage to the Buddha, likes to recall to his own mind the living presence of the Master so that his act of worship is vivid and significant.

The Buddha has passed away but his influence persists, pervading the world like perfume whose fragrance continues to linger on even if the material that produces it is no more. The feeling of the Buddhist is that his offerings are to someone who is still very much alive, in that Buddha-dhamma is yet alive and the memory of the radiant personality is evergreen. This explains why it is that some Buddhists make offerings of food and drink at the shrine. Such offerings are merely symbolic of the vitality of their faith and devotion; no one believes, not even the most ignorant Buddhist, that the Buddha actually partakes of the food or drink. It is the Buddhist way of expressing in idealistic form our conception of the Buddha as a living influence in our daily lives.

The offering of flowers and incense is a bestowal of worship, an act of homage, of adoration and of gratitude though by themselves the offering have no intrinsic value. It is like our offering a garland or a bouquet of flowers to someone to whom we wish to show our honour, our respect, our affection and our gratitude. The offering of flowers and incense is followed by the utterance of stanzas which recall to the mind of the Buddhist the sublime qualities of the Buddha.

As the late Ven. Nanamoli puts it: “The Buddha verily is the Blessed One who had put an end to all sorrow and suffering, the Perfect One, worthy of homage, who had attained supreme wisdom and enlightenment, who had proclaimed the way of right knowledge and good conduct, who found peace and happiness, who realized the truth about the world, who is unrivalled as a guide and friend to those who seek his guidance, who is a teacher of gods and men.”

It would be noticed that there is no request for favours, no solicitation for protection but the recollection and rehearsal of the qualities of a great man who to the Buddhist is the greatest man who ever lived.

Other stanzas follow in which the devotee declares that he accepts the Buddha as his teacher and guide for as long as he may live, and by the virtue of this fact may happiness come to him. It is an assertion of his faith in the Buddha and his acceptance of the way of life as laid down by him. Even more important the devotee utters his resolve to win himself the peace of *Nibbana* which the Buddha had attained through the practice of virtue and the acquisition of wisdom. The devotee recalls to mind that during successive births, for a long period of time, the Buddha (then known as the *Bodhisatta* or the aspirant to perfect enlightenment) cultivated those qualities that lead beings to perfection and supreme enlightenment. In the course of this training, the *Bodhisatta* or Buddha-to-be, considered no endeavour too difficult, no sacrifice too great. Not only in one birth

but in numerous births he had sacrificed his life for the principles he held dear in the service of others.

All men can become Buddhas, if they have the necessary resolve and are willing to follow the path to Buddhahood. The Buddha did not attain a greatness which others cannot themselves achieve. The way of life proclaimed by the Buddha is called Dhamma and the devotee recalls to his mind, by means of a stanza, the qualities and salient characteristics of the teaching. The Buddha Dhamma is thus said to be “clearly proclaimed with no mystery or esotericism behind it but open and clear like the open palm of one’s hand, that its efficacy is manifest and obvious and capable of proof, that it is eternal and timeless, that it holds good for all times and for all places, that it invites and challenges enquiry and investigation, that it has nothing to hide, that it rest not on faith but on conviction, that it is not vague but definite in the goal it lays down, that truth and happiness can be achieved only by individual and strenuous effort and not by depending upon someone else, however powerful he may be.”

The devotee also recalls to mind for his own encouragement and edification that there are, and always have been, those who, dedicating themselves to the full realization of the Dhamma, the path to deliverance, and earnestly striving have reached the goal of their search – the eradication of greed, hatred and delusion. They are thus exemplars of the good life, “of good conduct, upright, blameless in behaviour, worthy of honour and

respect, worthy of being looked up to and followed.” These noble ones are known as the *Sangha* or the community of enlightened disciples who cleanse this world with the goodness and the sanctity of their lives, avoiding evil, promoting good and filling the universe with thoughts of friendliness, goodwill and peace. The devotee in giving alms to those who have left home are practising *dana* or generosity. In remembering these noble ones in piety, the Buddhist practises good conduct (*sila*) and in filling his mind with elevating thoughts, he embarks on an even higher level of practice – meditation or cultivation of the mind (*bhavana*). ■