

Basics of Theravada Buddhism

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**Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma
Sambuddhassa.
Buddha Vandana**

**Buddham Saranam Gachchhami
Dhammam Saranam Gachchhami
Sangham Saranam Gachchhami**

I am writing this article as a devout Buddhist and a very orthodox Dhammic man; immediately after a pilgrimage to BuddhaGaya. I am also writing this with a scientific and rationalistic approach No allegory is used in this article; none is needed. Lord Buddha is the focus of this article, and the entire article revolves around Him. I am striving to present the essence of Dhamma (Dhamma-Dhatu) in my own way. My family has its ancestral roots in Chittagong (Chattagram – in Bengali), Bangladesh and, naturally, follows Theravada Buddhism.

Buddhism, a major world faith, was founded by Lord Buddha in India over two thousand five hundred years ago. It has spread peacefully over much of Asia and has millions of adherents in India, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, China (including Tibet), Taiwan, Mongolia, North and South Korea, Japan, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and also in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. The northern extremity of Buddhism in Asia is the Ivolga Monastery in Siberia, Russia. A major point is in order here. In religion, as in science, whatever can be proved must be accepted as true; conversely, whatever cannot be proved must be discarded as pure speculation. The sublimity of Buddhism lies in the fact that it has a very scientific approach. The universe is in a constant state of flux. When I look up at the night sky, I am looking backwards in time because light has a finite speed however great that speed may be. Moreover, I cannot see the extremities of the universe and logic tells me that the universe cannot have a spatial extremity. Similarly, the universe cannot have a zero-time extremity. Modern science recognises time as the fourth dimension in addition to the three spatial dimensions and also emphasises the variability of everything in the universe with respect to time. Man lives in a space-time framework, that is, within a temporal-spatial structure. Buddhism presents the correct scientific position that the universe has evolved and that it functions according to natural laws.

Too well known to be repeated here, the life of Lord Buddha (563-483 B.C.E.) is a story of the life of one of the greatest human beings who ever lived. His father was King Suddhodana, king of the Sakya kingdom whose capital was at Kapilavatthu and His mother was Queen Mayadevi. At the age of twenty-nine, Prince Siddhattha Gotama left home and after six years of ceaseless striving and meditation attained His Nibbana or Enlightenment at Uruvela, now called

BuddhaGaya.

The word “Dhamma” literally means “Property”. For example, one says that the Dhamma of fire is to burn. This means that the property of fire is to burn. The fire cannot be separated from its capacity to burn. Similarly, the literal meaning of Dhamma of man is the basic property of man from which he cannot be separated. This means the spirituality inherent in man.

The objective of Buddhism is Nibbana. Man's quest for an end to his suffering Dukkha has led him into an exploration of his inner self, its working and its dysfunctional behaviour under certain circumstances. Under such conditions, a radical shift in consciousness, perception and attitude is the only succour for a tormented mind (Chitta). This process, involving the destruction of suffering, is based on the Four Noble Truths (Chattari Ariyasachchani) enunciated by Lord Buddha which are as follows:

Life contains suffering. (Dukkha-Ariyasachcha)

Suffering has a cause, and the cause can be known. (Dukkha Samudaya-Ariyasachcha)

Suffering can be brought to an end. (Dukkha Nirodha-Ariyasachcha)

The path to end suffering has eight parts. (Magga-Ariyasachcha)

Lord Buddha also laid out the Noble Eightfold Path (Ariya Atthangika Magga). The Noble Eightfold Path is given below:

Right view (Samma Ditthi)

Right intention (Samma Sankappa)

Right speech (Samma Vacha)

Right action (Samma Kammanta)

Right livelihood (Samma Ajiva)

Right effort (Samma Vayama)

Right mindfulness (Samma Sati)

Right concentration (Samma Samadhi)

This Path is also known as The Middle Path (Majjhima Patipada) because it is neither too easy nor too difficult. The first five parts of the Path involve maintaining a lifestyle full of virtue (Sila) while the last three pertain to the practice (Patipatti) of meditation. The practice of meditation lies at the heart of the spiritual practice of Dhammic (spiritual) people. To be a Buddhist means to distinguish between Buddhist and non-Buddhist acts, between ignorance and Enlightenment, between Samsara and Nibbana. Pancha Sila is for householders; Attha Sila is for householders practising Brahmachariya, that is celibacy; and Dasa Sila is for monks.

Named Siddhattha which means “one who has accomplished his task”, by His parents when He was born, Lord Buddha claimed that He was a human being, pure and simple. He claimed that whatever He had were human qualities. He always denied that He was divine or that He was divinely-inspired. Yet he was divinity personified. His family name was Gotama. Lord Buddha referred to Himself as the Tathagata (literally, One who has come to Truth, that is, One who has discovered Truth).

Lord Buddha expounded Anatta. The Pali word “Atta” means Soul. In its most fundamental sense, Anatta implies selflessness which has its external manifestation in selfless action in order to benefit others. The wisdom gained by experience (Bhavana-maya Panna) is that Atta is not found even in the deepest meditative experience, that is, during Samadhi. Further, subscription to a belief in Atta results in egoism and attachment towards mundane things. Lord Buddha's first sermon, at Isipatana near Varanasi, is called the Dhammachakkappavattana Sutta and His second sermon (Sutta), delivered five days later, also at Isipatana (modern Sarnath), is called the Anattalakkhana Sutta. Lord Buddha said, in the beginning of the Anattalakkhana Sutta, “Rupam Anatta, Vedana Anatta, Sanna Anatta, Sankhara Anatta, Vinnana Anatta” (Material Form is not the Soul, Sensation is not the Soul, Perception is not the Soul, Pre-disposition is not the Soul, Consciousness is not the Soul.). In the course of yet another sermon, at Sravasti, Lord Buddha said “There is an unborn, unchanging, uncreated, and unconditioned. If there were not, this that which is unborn, unchanging, uncreated, and unconditioned, there could not be any escape from what is born, changing, created, and conditioned. But since there is an unborn, unchanging, uncreated, and unconditioned, there is an escape from what is born, changing, created and conditioned.”. With these words, Lord Buddha pointed His finger towards Nibbana.

According to Lord Buddha, man is his own master. “Atta hi attano natho” are the exact words of Lord Buddha. He also said

“Atmadvipa viharatha, atmasharana ananyasharana” meaning “Dwell making yourself your island (that is refuge), and not anyone else as your refuge”. Man is however unaware of this fact and abdicates his responsibility of controlling his future, even death. This is so because man is, in a deep philosophical sense, deluded, asleep and unaware of his true nature. He normally identifies himself with his body, which was born and hence will die, some day. This gives rise to vices, insecurity and belief in that what is not. Man lives in illusions; the illusion that he will never fall sick, the illusion that no harm will ever befall him. He also believes that he has relatives and friends and, if he clings onto them tightly enough, he will one day, after death, go to the nebulous place called heaven. But it is not true. The lacuna in man's thinking becomes disturbingly clear to him when he finds that he is suffering. When a man suffers, the world seems to collapse around him. Man needs to be awakened and when this awakening process is complete, man will rise from the ashes of the world of the senses that he has just burnt to the world of pure consciousness. Buddhism is a journey where a man starts asleep and ends up awake. In doing so, he sheds aside nothingness to awaken to a single state of Being. The process by which this takes place is meditation.

Lord Buddha's title means one who is awake. He is the messiah who showed the path to eternity. Lord Buddha gave His teaching “for the good of many, for the happiness of many, for showing compassion to the world” (Bahujanahitaya, Bahujanasukhaya, Lokanukampaya). He told man that though he is asleep, the capacity to be awakened is in him and also taught man the path to awakening. But man must walk that path himself, alone. Man must realise that he is always alone, whether it be high atop the mountains, in the company of his relatives or in the morning crowd in the downtown of a metropolitan city. A positive attitude to aloneness can develop in man when he can take a mental sword and cleave a distinction between aloneness and loneliness. Loneliness has a negative connotation in the sense that it implies a craving for company of other human beings, the exact opposite of the self-sufficiency implied by aloneness. The capacity to tread the path to Nibbana is already in man, he just has to use it. In the Dhammachakkavattana Sutta, Lord Buddha said that Nibbana is not subject to grief, defilement (Kilesa), disease, decay (Jara), and death (Marana). In other words, Nibbana is beyond cause and effect, that is, it transcends conditioned phenomena. Lord Buddha also said “Nibbanam Paramam Sukham”. Nibbana is Apatichcha-samuppanna and Asankhata. Nibbana is a positive Absolute and is Nicca. Nibbana means a state of Mutti which means freedom or Vimutti which means absolute freedom. Nibbana also denotes Sacca which means Truth and Santi which means Peace. Nibbana is a state of absolute perfection. Sariputta, the famous disciple of Lord Buddha, described Nibbana as the extinction of desire, hatred and illusion. In mystical language, Nibbana is the experience of standing face-to-face with Reality. Nibbana is sometimes expressed as negative of negative such as the cessation of suffering, of craving, of aversion, etc. This need not result in any confusion. As mathematics proves, negative of negative is always positive. Nibbana is a freeing from the chains of a false sense of individuality. Nibbana is a state of non-duality; a state where the illusion of a false sense of “I” does not exist.

According to Buddhism, everything is relative and impermanent (Anicca) in the empirical, conditioned world. Lord Buddha told Ratthapala “The world is in continuous flux and is impermanent”. In this context, I can correctly say that one cannot step twice into the same river because although I may continue to see the same river externally from a gross point of view, the water molecules I am seeing at a particular location at any moment are different from the water molecules the moment before and the moment after. One thing disappears, conditioning the appearance of the next in a series of cause and effect. Everything is in a state of becoming something else the next moment. A wheel cannot be separated from its movement. There is no static wheel “behind” the wheel in motion. Things change over time. Everything originates dependent on other factors. That is, all things come into existence as the result (Phala) of an interaction of various causes (Hetu). Each entity is Patichcha-samuppanna as well as Patichcha-samuppada. The Law of Dependent Origination is central to Buddhism. For example, anger cannot arise by itself without a cause. The five aggregates, Rupa, Vedana, Sanna, Sankhara and Vinnana, all of which are identified as Anatta (non-Soul) by Lord Buddha in the Anattalakkhana Sutta, are called the Pancha Khandha. Sensations (Vedana) of the physical world of forms (Rupa) are received by the five physical sense organs (Indriya) such as the nose. The mind feels the mental world. The five physical sense organs and the mind are called the six sensory bases. Sensations lead to perceptions (Sanna), which in turn lead through pre-dispositions (Sankhara), to consciousness (Vinnana). For an average man, the summation of all physical and mental processes, processes in constant flux, is perceived empirically as “I”. The empirical “I” is ephemeral and impermanent, and is Sammuti-Satya (conventional truth). The concept of two categories of truth, Sammuti-Sacca and Paramattha-Sacca, is an essential element of Buddhism. Conscious of something, one reacts mentally. The mental reactions are of two types: craving and aversion. Craving (Tanha, Raga) and aversion (Dosa) both lead to suffering; it is self-evident that aversion results in suffering and craving results in suffering because if the object of craving remains out of reach, there is suffering. Thus, ultimately, whatever is impermanent is Dukkha or suffering. Tanha Nirodha, Upadana (clinging) Nirodha.

In response to questioning by devotees in the kingdom of Kosala as to the importance or unimportance of belief, Lord Buddha pointed out the distinction between knowing and believing. Believing always connotes a second-hand approach to Truth; knowing about something through the experience of someone else. Knowing means a first-hand direct knowledge of Truth and the result of this distinction is that the modicum of doubt that always accompanies belief is absent in knowledge (Nana). Freedom of thought is permitted by Lord Buddha to His devotees so that they can discriminate and find Truth. Nibbana cannot be had via someone else's knowledge. A contemporary scholar Kazuaki Tanahashi describes an incident in Japan where a Buddhist monk illustrated to his disciples the power of what might be called "positive emptiness" in the mind. A void in the mind can be filled with spirituality by virtue of positive thinking. A Korean monk, Kyong Ho, echoed this feeling when he advised one to accept the anxieties and difficulties of this life. He also advised people to use their will to bring peace between peoples. This is particularly relevant in the modern world where democracy and egalitarianism are taken for granted. John Blofeld, an ardent Buddhist, has the following advice for the laity "Do not permit the events of your daily life to bind you, but never withdraw yourselves from them". Buddhism also strongly believes in the theory (Pariyatti) of Kamma (as you sow, so shall you reap) and in the concept of rebirth. Lord Buddha said "Monks, I say that volition is action. Having thought, one acts through body, speech and mind." (Chetana 'ham bhikkhave kammam vadami. Chetayitva kammam karoti kayena vachaya manasa.). There are two types of Kamma, Kusala Kamma or good actions and Akusala Kamma or bad actions. Kusala Kamma is Dhammic while Akusala Kamma is Adhammic. The result of both types of Kamma are called Kamma Phala, which correspond to the type of Kamma performed.

He searched, He meditated, He found: this aptly summarises the awakening of Lord Buddha. When a man suffers, it is useless for him to talk of God, or to fast and otherwise to torture his body if his suffering is not reduced by any or all of these. Lord Buddha realised this fact and after His awakening taught the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. Meditation is one form of mental culture (Bhavana). In meditation, what is required of man is to effect a radical shift in consciousness from the finite to the infinite using right concentration. Concentration is called Chittakaggata. The concentrated focus is always on the elimination of suffering. The law of cause and effect is at work here too. If one is deluded, one suffers. If one studies the Four Noble Truths, one sees that man should identify the cause of suffering and systematically go about destroying it using the Noble Eightfold Path. The result of meditation is tremendous. One transcends the boundaries of his body; he senses that the entire universe has become his body. He senses that he has exchanged a weak mind for a strong one. He senses that though he may continue to reside in his mortal body, his consciousness has become irreversibly altered. He feels himself being pervaded by peace. He becomes awakened; Prabuddha. Lord Buddha did not give the Dhamma for strong wills only; His statements are just as applicable to weaker minds provided they have the determination to follow Him. He asked for nothing more than courage and promised eternity.

Vipassana (Passana means to see in an ordinary way; Vipassana means to see in a special way, that is, with Insight) meditation is practised in south Asia and other countries which practice Theravada (meaning, the way of the Elders) Buddhism. Lord Buddha presented the technique of Vipassana meditation in the Mahasatipatthana Sutta / Satipatthana Sutta. The Mahasatipatthana Sutta is found in the Digha Nikaya and the Satipatthana Sutta is found in the Majjhima Nikaya. Knowing about meditation is one thing; knowing meditation is quite another. A man can sit alone, cross-legged, in a quiet room in the full lotus posture or, failing that, in the half-lotus posture and try to enter into Vipassana meditation. One must sit, preferably, in the lotus posture with one's spine erect. There must be no slumping of the back, the head should be straight as if suspended by means of a string. Another analogy adopted is that the head should be straight as if bearing the sky on its top. The Samadhi Mudra consists of the right hand placed on top of the left hand with the tips of the two thumbs touching each other. After one has sat correctly, he must close his eyes and focus on the inhalation and exhalation of his breath (Anapana-sati). Anapana means respiration. There must be no tampering with the natural respiration, a meditator's job is simply to focus his attention on his nostrils and observe the natural flow of breath. Respiration is natural, one has no craving or aversion towards it, it is always in the present (Nicca) and, since one breathes from the moment of one's birth to the moment of one's death, it is in fact a convergence of the past, present and future. Further, it is within the physical framework of the body. Respiration is thus an appropriate object for concentrating the mind, something that is not too easy. The mind does not usually want to stay in the present moment; it resides either in the past or in the future. A little effort is needed to prevent the mind from wandering about. At this stage, there may be strong distractions in the mind that prevent the mind from concentrating. Sometimes these distractions appear to be overwhelming. The effort to focus on respiration should be continued in such cases. The key is never to give up. A learner soon discovers one thing ; meditation is hard work for a beginner. Right Concentration leading to Samadhi, which is a transcendental state, follows. Sometimes, in lifting the mind to Samadhi, hurdles appear in the form of distractions in the mind. These distractions may be latent feelings of anger, craving, sadness, and so on. The remedy, in such cases, is to return back to Anapana-sati and try to lift the mind to Samadhi again. In Vipassana meditation, he must then enter into Vipassana. There are four parts to the practice. Kaya anupassana,

Vedana anupassana, Chitta anupassana, and Dhamma anupassana. anupassana means to see minutely, that is, to scrutinise. Here, Dhamma indicates the contents of the mind (Chetasika). Each of the the four, Kaya (body), Vedana (sensations), Chitta (mind) and Dhamma (mental contents), must be subjected to anupassana. The true nature of all four of these reveal themselves to the meditator and he is able to remove defilement from the innermost recesses of his mind (Anusaya). Awareness and equanimity (Upekkha), together, symbolise Vipassana meditation. Meditation entails making a conscious and free choice to withdraw from the affairs of the mundane world to pursue spiritual ends; one of the objectives being the subsequent re-establishment of contact with the conditioned world as a purer and wiser man. The decision to meditate is itself an act of freedom. We have, in life, the freedom to pursue an ethical way of living. This freedom leads us to Nibbana and thus sets us free.

Meditation is a pursuit of liberation, realisation is the end result. Post-realisation, one feels that one had been going about with his eyes closed and has now suddenly opened them. In the plane of the senses, his external world does not change but his way of psychologically processing his external world undergoes a drastic change. He becomes more peaceful with himself and with others. An awakened man, possessing an Enlightened mind, feels that he is surrounded by peace at all times. It is important to understand that nobody tells him this; he feels it himself. He goes about doing his daily activities, but his way of processing his world has fundamentally altered for the better. He realises that he cannot and need not control all aspects of his external physical world. He realises that he gains more by letting go. He becomes aware of the non-peaceful moments in his life and tries to reduce their frequency and intensity. He opts for shifting his consciousness to his mind and becoming aware of his internal mental processes when waiting, for example, in a traffic jam or while waiting in a queue. He opts for harmony in his mental processes rather than chaos.

Ordinarily, animal instincts bind a man to the world of the senses. Man lacks the initiative to free himself from them. Rather, he reposes his faith on some superhuman power whom he tries to propitiate in the hope that he may be rescued from his troubles. Meditation has been performed by theoreticians and philosophers as well as by rank empiricists. While their emphasis may have been different, it has been universally recognised that they have all contributed to the Dhamma. Also, meditation is now spreading to the West as well. It is said that Buddhism can be taught to people of any cultural background. That is why in spite of not having any tradition of meditation in their religion or culture, the philosophy and techniques of meditation are now spreading to the West from the East.

Because contact of the six sensory bases with the external world do not result in any reactions in a liberated man, he is free. His mind is like a lamp that does not flicker. Non-attachment towards all beings and everything including the concepts of “I” and “Mine” is a characteristic of a liberated mind. The absence of ego in an Enlightened man leads him to adopt an attitude of dispassion and selflessness towards everything in his physical and mental world. He is virtuous. Temptations do not affect him. He is always cheerful, happy and optimistic. He radiates light wherever he goes. He is wise and compassionate (Mahakarunika) and does everything for the good of the world. He has risen above his previous mental conditioning. He has risen above craving and aversion.

Optimism is a virtue and is the natural state of man. Pessimism sometimes arises in him owing to his circumstances. Lord Buddha exuded optimism about humanity when he proclaimed “Suffering can be brought to an end”. A true follower of Lord Buddha has an optimistic attitude towards life and an ability to erase any pessimism that may arise in him.

Buddhism discourages superstitious practices.

Buddhism transformed the life of Emperor Ashoka of India. The greatest Indian Emperor ever, belonging to the Maurya dynasty, and ruling over a territory much larger than the current Republic of India, he did much to spread Buddhism. In his younger days, he was a warrior and conquered many territories. After he conquered Kalinga, or the modern east Indian state of Orissa, he was moved by the suffering of the people. Mentally tormented, he found peace after embracing Buddhism.

Buddhism preaches ultimate tolerance to all faiths. A Buddhist hates none, loves all. Lord Buddha's love for man was like a father's love for his sons. The overarching philosophy of Buddhism encompasses loving-kindness (Metta) for all sentient beings. Buddhists co-exist peacefully with all religions on earth. Buddhism is particularly relevant in the violence-ridden world today. As a Buddhist, I feel that mankind can do much better. Pacifism and non-violence (Ahimsa, Avihimsa) are fundamental tenets of Buddhism. However, this does not mean that a man should not resist aggression. If an evil power engages in aggression, then a man should resist it with all powers at his disposal.

A radical indeterminacy underpins and permeates human existence. Things happen that we do not want; things that we do not want happen. To bravely work out our way through to emancipation, to bring order in place of chaos, to face life with fortitude requires immense Enlightened courage. In this context, Buddhism enables us to reach salvation. That is the *raison d'être* of Buddhism. The essence of Buddhism, as summed up by Lord Buddha Himself, is:

To cease from all error,

To get virtue,

And to purify the heart.