

IS BUDDHISM PRACTICAL TODAY?

(A talk given by K Sri Dhammananda
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If we can understand the true nature of the “Buddha Dhamma,” we need never ask if Buddhism is a practical religion. The word Buddhism can be interpreted in various ways. It is true that in the name of Buddhism there are many beliefs and practices, by people in many parts of the world, depending upon geographical and social conditions and these practices may not be meaningful to some intellectuals and critics of Buddhism because Buddhist practices vary and differ vastly from place to place. This is because many practices were introduced from time to time by followers of the Buddha in order to explain certain difficult aspects of the Teachings and to get the masses to conform to certain modes of behaviour. On a very broad general base, this meant of course that there is no strict uniformity in the general practice of Buddhism all over the world and what may seem meaningful in one cultural context (e.g. the Chinese) may seem meaningless in another, say an Indian or Western context. Many of these practices have their origins in the remote history of a community of people and are relevant to these people only. Buddhism, as a supremely tolerant religion does not contend that there is only one way to practice Buddhism and it does not encourage meaningless traditions. However, the Buddha himself did not encourage people to follow any traditional practices if such a practice was meaningless. On the other hand, if by Buddhism is meant the “Dhamma” which teaches man how to live righteous or noble way of life, then it is practical, at any time in any part of the world. Hence as Buddhists we are not concerned so much with external physical show, as we are in the essence of a deeply spiritual attitude which controls our behaviour as individuals and as a community.

MISCONCEPTIONS

The truth that the Buddha revealed as the “Dhamma” remains forever as Truth. Therefore there is nothing in the noble teachings of the Buddha, which we can call impractical or requiring change to many discourses taught by the Buddha which many people cannot understand properly. So different people tried to explain them in their own way, leading to a wide variety of interpretations. Hence, we should not say that Buddhism is not practical today simply because misconceptions about the Teachings exist. Such misconceptions were created by ignorance and confusion. Our way of life in modern society is such that we are bound to experience some difficulties when we want to observe certain noble religious principles. With our misunderstanding of the Teachings and our inability to make them relevant to the complexity of modern society we are tempted to say that Buddhism is not practical today. The Buddha was aware of these two problems, and He did not demand that we follow Him blindly, simply out of faith. Rather, He encouraged us to question and investigate until we get the correct answer to our questions. He knew that when the truth is realized there will be nothing left for us to doubt. We can then develop our confidence by using our common sense and intelligence and understanding. We can appreciate what the Buddha really taught us as Buddhism only after intelligent investigation and questioning, and not by criticizing without understanding.

REMEDIES TO HUMAN WEAKNESSES

If someone says that the Buddha's Teachings are impractical, that does not mean there is anything wrong with His Teaching. Rather it is possible that something is wrong somewhere in one's mind, in one's way of life. It would appear that one has strayed from the religious way of life – of morality of discipline in order to indulge in worldly pleasures and therefore such a person feels that Buddhist religious principles are not practical. Religious principles are very different from one's uncultured personal habits. Just because these religious principles do not condone undisciplined behaviour, they cannot be described as impractical. If certain demands are not made to control the mind, the senses to produce a noble being, these demands should not be deemed impractical. If you are very sick and a doctor gives you certain very bitter medicines, you cannot assume that the medicine is not effective. The doctor prescribed the medicine according to the nature of your sickness. Similarly, when the Buddha introduced religious principles, He realized that there were different types of people with different mentalities, characteristics, temperaments, ways of thinking and human weaknesses. Therefore, we should regard these principles as medicine, remedies to cope with human weaknesses and frailties. It is not conducive or appealing to the mind when it comes to practising these principles. Why? When you come to practice them, you have to adopt certain discipline and in so doing, you may feel that there is no "fun". Many people feel they must have some "fun" in whatever they are doing – whether it is in the name of religion or something else. Because religion will not provide the kind of sensual pleasures that they are craving for, they prefer to keep away from religion and designate themselves as free-thinkers. This is a lame excuse. Instead of admitting their own weaknesses they put the blame on religion, calling it impractical, out-of-date and irrelevant to modern society.

In my opinion, real free-thinkers are only found in mental asylums. These are the people who do anything and everything whenever they like. They follow their own whims and care nothing for the needs of society. That is the reason why these "free-thinkers" are kept in restricted areas. People who claim to be free-thinkers are in fact running away from reality. They are not prepared to take a firm stand on any issue, choosing to follow anything which seems convenient to them at any particular time. As far as Buddhism is concerned, these people must understand that Buddhism is a way of life, encompassing many disciplines such as devotion and intellectualism. When we bring all these component parts together under one banner, we classify them as Buddhism, one of the great religions of the world.

COME AND SEE

The word "Dhamma" can have so many meanings, such as justice, righteousness, natural phenomena, a noble life, salvation or liberation and other characteristics. Therefore this is a word which we can explain in various ways. The Buddha introduced the "Dhamma" for us to practise but not to believe blindly. The followers of certain religions, other than Buddhism, when asked for the reasons why certain religious practices and beliefs have been carried out by their religious denominations, answer candidly that their practices and beliefs were described in their holy books. They say they had been taught by their religious teachings and their parents to believe without question whatever is found in their holy books and in accordance with traditions.

The Buddha said of His Teaching: “Ehi-Passiko” which means “Come and See”. He never ordered anyone to come and believe, or to come and accept. That is how He introduced His teachings from the very beginning. Come and see, then investigate. Use your common sense and intelligence. Don’t think that you have no thinking power to reason out things. Don’t just accept the words of religious teachers thinking that they are great men, and must therefore be automatically right. It is not advisable to accept any religious principles including those written in holy books, if you cannot appreciate or understand the religious values and meanings behind them. You must use your common sense. The Buddha has given due credit to man’s intelligence and his ability to use that intelligence, to think freely without depending solely on religious teachers or religious books.

IS THERE ANYTHING TO CHANGE?

When you have independently and intelligently decided for yourself whether something is good or bad, whether there is truth in it or not, whether there is reality or not, then only should you accept it. Otherwise, old beliefs will remain as mere beliefs, which you have accepted without proper understanding. Realization - this is the nature of Buddhism and this kind of Buddhism is practical at any time. You cannot change the basic principles of the Buddha according to your worldly needs. Although the Buddha introduced these principles more than 2,500 years ago, can anyone single out anything in the Buddha’s “Dhamma,” which is impractical, or where there is no reality? He advised us to cultivate our morality, by observing certain good principles or virtues. We have to practise this religion by cultivating our moral behaviour. What is morality? We should not define this word very loosely because there are so many laws introduced by man as moral or ethical, but man-made morals or ethics are changeable according to man’s convenience. They are changeable according to the period of time and society. Certain manners and morals are not suitable in certain countries and societies. Different people find different things immoral. But when you examine the moral code introduced by the Buddha you can understand why they remain unchangeable and relevant for all time. They are natural moral laws, universally accepted because they have prescribed through a deep understanding of humanity. If we lead a harmless life, as honest, sincere, kind and understanding persons without disturbing or hurting others, if we cultivate certain virtues such as patience, tolerance, kindness, compassion, understanding, then this is equated with the Buddha’s morality. Is there anything for you to change in this type of morality introduced by the Buddha? He has said, “The Dhamma I have revealed to you will exist forever in this universe. Therefore it is not a new Dhamma, or new teachings. The Dhamma exists now and forever.” The Buddha did not claim to have created these universal laws. He merely understood them in their totality and explained them to humanity as the “Dhamma” as other Buddhas before Him had done. What is Dhamma? “Dhamma” is the universal law or the cosmic law. This universal law exists forever but due to our ignorance, we are unable to understand it and to live in accordance with it. The “Dhamma” exists, religion exists even if through ignorance we deny such an existence. Here in this universe, many things exist which are very useful to mankind, but they have yet to be discovered very little, they have only discovered a tiny part of this universe. The Buddha, however has discovered and realised the existence of natural phenomena, the nature of matter, the nature of the mind, the nature of energy. He explained to us how these things exist, how these things disappear and how these things reappear. This is the nature of the teachings of the Buddha. He revealed to us the nature of the Four Noble Truths.

FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

They are:-

- 'the Noble Truth of Suffering or unsatisfactoriness;
- the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering;
- the Noble Truth of the Cure of Suffering;
- the Noble Truth of the Path which leads to the End of Suffering.

There are many other truths, but the realization of such truths are not comparable to the realization of truths revealed by the Buddha because only through them can we become enlightened. Finally, through a realization of these truths we can see the end of our physical and mental suffering or unsatisfactoriness. This is the aim of Buddhism. Here in this world we can always find suffering and unsatisfactoriness in everything. This unsatisfactoriness is characterized by conflict, separation, physical and mental pain, clashes and disappointment. That is the nature of the First Truth. Can anyone claim there is any living being to whom this truth does not apply? The Second Truth is the cause of suffering and unsatisfactoriness? What is the cause of suffering and unsatisfactoriness? Many religious teachers have not discovered this cause. They thought that the cause is external but the Buddha realised that the cause is not elsewhere but within us. We are responsible. We have created all these causes. The cause is here, within us – our strong attachment, our craving towards worldly pleasures and craving for existence. These are the causes. You cannot find any other cause for all these human sufferings. We do wrong things either for our living or for our sensual gratification. This cannot be denied. Then how can we blame external “causes for our pain and suffering? How can we say Buddhism is not practical when it alone identifies the causes of pain and suffering and suggests a way out of human misery?

WHAT IS RELIGION?

If there is a practical method for human beings to realize the truth about their existence, by gaining knowledge, wisdom and enlightenment, by leading a noble life, and by eradicating suffering, that method is deemed a “religion”. That is the definition given by the Buddha to this word Religion. Therefore religion can be described as a path or method for us to eradicate our suffering. This path is called the Noble Eightfold Path. There are many things for us to do all the time. We are encouraged to do good and avoid evil all the time. That is why the method is called the Noble Path because it raises man to a higher level of existence. First, you must try to gain Right Understanding.

Right Understanding means: understanding the nature of the Four Noble Truths. Whatever you do, whether it is in the name of religion or otherwise, you must first know how to develop right understanding. If that right understanding is not there you cannot reach the final goal. When the Buddha started His mission to tell us how to find out a solution to end suffering. He introduced right understanding. He had never advised anyone to believe first without right understanding. You have a mind to think but you are wasting your mental energy with unnecessary thoughts. If you can conserve your mental energy without wasting it on unnecessary thoughts you can use this energy to serve others, to cultivate yourself, to gain more knowledge, more wisdom and to understand how to overcome many problems which you are facing today. We are generally unsuccessful because we waste so much valuable energy on unnecessary things.

Right Thought means: using your mental energy and diverting it to prevent certain harmful thoughts. You must understand the nature of your mind. Everyone tries to understand the nature of your mind. Everyone tries to understand the nature of the minds of others but few ever try to understand the nature of their own minds. There are so many bad elements in our mind. These bad elements create enormous troubles, mistakes and worries to others and as well as to ourselves. Try to control them, try to suppress them or better still, replace them with wholesome thoughts and only then can you eradicate these defilements. That is the way to think properly, that is the way to utilise your thinking powers to achieve success. When we have learned to control and focus our mental energy, we can even laugh at problems because we have so much strength to overcome them. No one can topple us, no one can irritate or disturb us, because we are very energetic and we have no fear. We develop self-confidence to face any problems, mental or physical. That is why we should conserve our mental energy by using Right Thought to eradicate hatred and cultivate loving-kindness. Cultivate right thoughts to develop detachment, so that we can assess each problem objectively without wasting our precious energy on emotional excesses.

Right Speech. The words we utter sometimes hurt others. We create difficulties by using thoughtless words. Therefore, before we convert our thoughts into words, we must know how to guard our tongue. We must have knowledge and awareness to guard against using words irresponsibly. We must think twice before we utter certain words. We must weigh them as to whether they are bad, harsh or useless words. The wrong use of words will create a very bad impression.

Right Action. We should try, not to be selfish, and think only about our own welfare. We have to think about the welfare of others also. If our actions are wrong, painful, hurting or damaging to others, we must try to avoid them. Our actions must be useful to us as well as others. Some actions are useful to us but not to others, some are useful to others but not to us. The Buddha said, "Be wise". We can help others, but at the same time, we have to look after ourselves mindfully. Don't act foolishly, act wisely." See that our actions bring benefits to all concerned. There should be no violation of the Five moral principles or Precepts introduced by the Buddha.

Right Livelihood. We have to earn a living to sustain our lives. We either work or conduct some business. Whatever we do must be in accordance with our conscience. There are people who do business by swindling, cheating or hurting others. Such people can become rich by adopting such methods but is it a respectable way of life? It is not. In whatever we do, we must be reasonable, decent and just. In whatever methods we adopt for our livelihood, we should avoid that which involves the killing of living beings, trafficking in human beings, the sale of intoxicants, poison, dangerous drugs and lethal weapons.

Right effort. We should use our physical or mental energy wisely. It should be of service to others by way of cultural, spiritual and religious development, we should train our minds to be good, honest, kind and just. We must harness our mental energy to cultivate good thoughts and to avoid all evil.

Right mindfulness. Whatever we do, our minds must always be alert, whenever we talk, our minds must be on guard. We must not allow our minds to be distracted. Whenever we want to do something we must do it mindfully by being completely aware

of what we are doing. In this way, we will be able to do our work efficiently. This mindfulness must be practised on all occasions in our day-to-day lives.

The final step is *Right Concentration or Mental Culture*. Our minds are not properly trained. That is why we make mistakes and we worry. We must train our mind by conserving our mental energy. The mind is very energetic and at the same time almost uncontrollable. By using the same mental energy that we have conserved, we can tame it. Once we have tamed our mind, we will become reliable, understanding, kind, just and fair human beings. However, this is a very difficult process. Very few people have trained their minds properly. That is why the world is so full of unreliable people, who are wicked, crooked and selfish. If man's mind is cultured everyone can live peacefully. The main cause of our human problems is due to man's craving, hatred and ignorance. When these evil forces are eradicated, peace and happiness will prevail. The experience is remarkable.

IS IT NOT PRACTICAL?

This is the Path - The Noble Eightfold Path expounded by the Buddha for man to lead a religious life. It is a practical method not based on mere faith. We can practise method, every step and every item and see the results for ourselves, whether they are right or wrong, whether they are practical or not. That is why the Buddha said Buddhism is timeless. This is a method we have practise at anytime, anywhere, in any society. Look at the way the Buddha expounded this religious way of life. Can any sane man say that it is not practical or useless? When we practice these methods we will find that it is not so easy because we need enormous will-power, that is why some say it is not practical. But remember, it is practical, it is noble. Unfortunately, The world where we live is so corrupted that we cannot practise this noble method peacefully without facing problems. When we try to practise certain virtues there will be many wicked, cunning and selfish people who will try to ridicule us and regard us as fools. To the wicked, religious people are fools and crooked people are clever. The nature of modern society is such that it is difficult for us to lead a noble religious way of life. The Buddha explained the nature of the universe with great clarity. He explained those things which were relevant for us to understand the nature of this existence. He alone taught us a practical and reliable way to overcome the uncertainties of worldly conditions and pain and misery. His Dhamma is eternal.

“Esa Dhammo Sanantano”

This Dhamma is eternal

Buddha

(Dhammapada – 5)