

文 論 學 佛
TOPICS ON BUDDHISM
Buddhism And The Ideal
of Education

by

The Venerable Phra Sumangalo

If some world-catastrophe should wipe away every trace of Buddhist history and literature and there should be left only one page of Buddhist teachings, on which the Eight-Fold Path was outlined, it would inevitably occur to scholars trying to reconstruct an outline of Buddhist teachings that Buddhism was a system of mind-training, which is just another way of saying education. There are several points that distinguish our religion from all other religions and perhaps the most significant of all is our insistence that enlightenment is of the very essence of Lord Buddha's teachings. Now, as soon as that statement is made, there is always someone to cavil that only a small percentage of human beings can attain to true enlightenment, or as it is stated in Pali: *Samma Sambodhi*. This would be a valid objection if we taught that enlightenment is in one form only. But that is not Buddhist teaching. We conceive of relative enlightenment and absolute enlightenment. Any process that adds to knowledge and understanding is of the former species and whatever tends to lead us toward Buddha-knowledge of the true nature of all phenomena is of the latter species.

Let us pretend, for a moment, that the afore mentioned catastrophe has actually happened and that all we have left of Buddhasasana is the Eightfold Path. This pathway would reveal to us, after a bit of study, that Buddhism was not only designed as an educational process but that it was also a well thought-out system. That one word system differentiates Buddhism from all other religions. While it is true that other religions have sets or codes of doctrines, not one has a

system as we understand that word. Perhaps Hinduism, the mother-religion of Buddhism, comes closest to Buddhism as regards system, but even in Hinduism we find that system is more often in the nature of a formalized observance of ritualistic customs and practices than a systematic attempt to understand what life is all about and what planned way of life one must follow in order to go through life with a minimum of unhappiness and a maximum of happiness. If some twenty centuries from now, all trace of our religion should be lost except for the Eightfold Path, scholars would be able, by studying that plan, to determine that Buddhism was not a set of beliefs or a collection of rituals but actually a system leading to relative enlightenment and then on to absolute enlightenment. The relative enlightenment is, of course, strictly educational. As for ritualistic observances and depending on such observances for happiness, it is fundamental to our belief that such dependance is not only not helpful but is actually a hindrance, a fetter and a stumbling-block. The crown-jewel of Buddhist thought is that what really matters is our use of (or failure to use) our minds and what we do with all our potential mind-powers. Certainly this would indicate to any future researcher into Buddhism that the Buddha's teaching is definitely an educational system.

At this point let us stop pretending that the entire Tripitaka is lost. Let us consider the foundational teachings of Buddhism: the Four Noble Truths, the Three Signs, the *Paticca Samupada*, the yogi practice of the eighth point in the Eightfold Path all indicate to us that Buddhasasana is a system of training of body, mind and character and is really what we of the modern world would call an educational system. When we consider that the Tripitaka is the largest body of religious literature in the world's many religions and that it is actually a library rather than a book or set of books, and

when we further consider that except for some story-material (as in the Jatakas), almost all this vast amount of recorded utterances is devoted to reasoning, analysis and logical explanation, we find we can not escape the conclusion that Buddhism is undoubtedly an educational process at a very high level. If we lose the educational ideal in Buddhism then we have lost the very heart and centre of Lord Buddha's teaching. The Buddhist Magna Carta in the Kalama Sutta is too well-known to require repeating here. We all remember that Lord Buddha counselled against blind believing and advised his followers to trust to reasoning and testing rather than to give credulous acceptance to this or that teaching. At all times in all lands where education has reached a high level of development, this ideal of seeking for truth rather than following pre-conceptions or prejudices has been the goal of educators, whether in the time of Plato and Socrates in ancient Greece, or in Egypt of the time of Akhenaton or in India of Lord Buddha's time. Buddhism is free of dogma. There is really nothing to believe in Buddhism. Each of us is free to work out his own deliverance according to his own light and strength of will and determination. If we ignore facts and prefer fancies and imaginings—no one compels us to follow such a course and the suffering that results can be directly traced to one's own folly. Whoever seeks to gain light in his own mind, that is to say, to gain spiritual education, eases his sufferings and finally gets beyond suffering altogether. But there is no magic power to bring about this escape. There is one way and one way only to overcome suffering and that is to educate oneself to know the real cause of suffering and the true nature of all things. Thus one gets free of the darkness of wrong-thinking and all illusion. Surely this is education.

Recently I had the privilege of visiting Nalanda in India. This great institution was purely a Buddhist University and historians are agreed that it

was one of the finest educational centers of all time. Its library was so huge that when the vandals who destroyed the university came to destroy the books and manuscripts, they found it took ninety days and nights of constant burning to destroy this magnificent library. When the almost equally great University of Taxila was destroyed at the same time and six or seven other great Buddhist colleges were all crushed out of existence, it is small wonder that an age of comparative darkness settled on India and the people gave up all search for enlightenment and depended on the many thousands of gods in the Hindu pantheon for deliverance from evil and unhappiness. Education became a forgotten ideal in India and Buddhism died out in the land of its birth, because it is not possible for Buddhism to have any meaning where enlightenment is no longer esteemed. Within the past thirty years we see Buddhist schools once more in India and, as these schools grow, the number of Buddhists in India grows. Once again there is a college at Nalanda. It is small at present but it will grow. Perhaps it may even become as great as the original university of some fifteen centuries ago. Let us earnestly hope that this may be the case, because Buddhism can never return to India unless Buddhist education returns first. (To be continued)

世界素食會

電話：二三〇八六號	結婚壽慶宴會	特約精美禮堂	各種精美素菜	各色精細名點	地址：臺北市武昌街一段二十三號
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