

Devotion in Buddhism

The Buddha repeatedly discouraged any excessive veneration paid to him personally. He knew that an excess of purely emotional devotion can obstruct or disturb the development of a balanced character, and thus may become a serious obstacle to progress on the path to deliverance. The history of religion has since proved him right, as illustrated by the extravagancies of emotional mysticism in East and West.

The suttas relate the story of the monk Vakkali, who full of devotion and love for the Buddha, was ever desirous to behold him bodily. To him the Buddha said: "What shall it profit you to see this impure body? He who sees the Dhamma, sees me."

Shortly before the Buddha passed away, he said: "If a monk or a nun, a devout man or a devout woman, lives in accordance with the Dhamma, is correct in his life, walks in conformity with the Dhamma — it is he who rightly honors, reverences, venerates, holds sacred and reveres the Perfect One (*tathagata*) with the worthiest homage."

A true and deep understanding of the Dhamma, together with a conduct that is in conformity with that understanding — these are vastly superior to any external homage or mere emotional devotion. That is the instruction conveyed by these two teachings of the Master.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the Buddha disparaged a reverential and devotional attitude of mind when it is the natural outflow of a true understanding and a deep admiration of what is great and noble.

It would also be a grievous error to believe that the "seeing of the Dhamma" (spoken of in the first saying) is identical with a mere intellectual appreciation and purely conceptual grasp of the doctrine. Such a one-sided abstract approach to the very concrete message of the Buddha all too often leads to intellectual smugness. In its barrenness it will certainly not be a substitute for the strong and enlivening impulse imparted by a deep-felt devotion to what is known as great, noble and exemplary.

Devotion, being a facet and natural accompaniment of confidence (*saddha*), is a necessary factor in the "balance of faculties" (*indriya-samata*) required for final deliverance.

Confidence, in all its aspects, including the devotional, is needed to resolve any stagnation and other shortcomings resulting from a one-sided development of the intellectual faculties. Such development often tends to turn around in circles endlessly, without being able to effect a breakthrough. Here, devotion, confidence, and faith — all aspects of the Pali term *saddha* — may be able to give quick and effective help.

Though the Buddha refused to be made the object of an emotional "personality cult," he also knew that "respect and homage paid to those who are worthy of it, is a great blessing." The Buddha made this statement in the very first stanza of one of his principal ethical injunctions, the Discourse on Blessings (*Maha-Mangala Sutta* [1]). Mentioning the value of a respectful, reverential attitude together with the blessings "avoiding fools and associating with the wise," the Buddha obviously regarded such an attitude as fundamental for individual and social progress and for the acquisition of any further higher benefits. One who is incapable of a reverential attitude will also be incapable of spiritual progress beyond the narrow limits of his present mental condition. One who is so blind as not to see or recognize anything higher and better than the little mud-pool of his petty self and environment will suffer for a long time from retarded growth. And one who, out of a demonstrative self-assertion, scorns a reverential attitude in himself and in others will remain imprisoned in his self-conceit — a most formidable bar to a true maturity of character and to spiritual growth. It is by recognizing and honoring someone or something higher that one honors and enhances one's own inner potentialities.

When the high heart we magnify,
And the sure vision celebrate,
And worship greatness passing by,
Ourselves are great.

Since respect, reverence, and devotion are partial aspects of the Buddhist concept of confidence, one will now understand why confidence has been called the seed of all other beneficial qualities.

The nobler the object of reverence or devotion, the higher is the blessing bestowed by it. "Those who have joyous confidence in the highest, the highest fruit will be theirs" (AN 4.34).

The supreme objects of a Buddhist's reverence and devotion are his Three Refuges, also called the Three Jewels or Ideals: the Buddha, his Teaching (Dhamma), and the Community of saintly monks and nuns (Sangha). [2] Here, too, the Buddha is revered not as a personality of such a name, nor as a deity, but as the embodiment of Enlightenment.

A text often recurring in the Buddhist scriptures says that a devout lay disciple "has confidence, he believes in the Enlightenment of the Perfect One." This confidence, however, is not the outcome of blind faith based on hearsay, but is derived from the devotee's reasoned conviction based on his own understanding of the Buddha Word which speaks to him clearly with a voice of unmistakable Enlightenment. This derivation of his assurance is emphasized by the fact that, along with confidence, wisdom also is mentioned among the qualities of an ideal lay follower.

We may now ask: Is it not quite natural that feelings of love, gratitude, reverence, and devotion seek expression through the entire personality, through acts of body and speech as well as through our thoughts and unexpressed sentiments? Will one, for instance, hide one's feelings towards parents and other loved ones? Will one not rather express them by loving words and deeds? Will one not cherish their memory in suitable ways, as for instance, by preserving their pictures in one's home, by placing flowers on their graves, by recalling their noble qualities? In such a way, one who has become critical of the devotional aspects of religion may seek to understand the outward acts of homage customary in Buddhist lands when, with reverential gesture, flowers and incense are placed before a Buddha image and devotional texts are recited not as prayers but as meditation. Provided that such practice does not deteriorate into a thoughtless routine, a follower of the Dhamma will derive benefit if he takes up some form of a devotional practice, adapting it to his personal temperament and to the social customs of his environment.

Buddhism however, does not in the least impose upon its followers a *demand* to observe any outward form of devotion or worship. This is entirely left to the choice of individuals whose emotional, devotional, and intellectual needs are bound to differ greatly. No Buddhist should feel himself forced into an iron-cast mould, be it of a devotional or a rationalistic shape. As a follower of the middle way, he should, however, also avoid one-sided judgment of others, and try to appreciate that their individual needs and preferences may differ from his own.

More important and of greater general validity than outward forms of devotion is the basic capacity for respect and reverence discussed at the beginning of this essay, and also the practice of meditations or contemplations of a devotional character. Many benefits accrue from these and hence it was for good reasons that the Enlightened One strongly and repeatedly recommended the meditative recollection of the Buddha (*buddhanussati*), along with other kindred devotional recollections. [3] Here again, the reference is to the embodied ideal; thus the Buddha, as a being freed from all traces of vanity and egotism, could venture to recommend to his disciples a meditation on the Buddha.

What, then, are the benefits of such devotional meditations? Their first benefit is *mental purification*. They have been called by the Buddha "efficacious procedures for purifying a defiled mind" (AN 3.71). "When a noble disciple contemplates upon the Enlightened One, at that time his mind is not enwrapped in lust, nor in hatred, nor in delusion. At such a time his mind is rightly directed: it has got rid of lust, is aloof from it, is freed from it. Lust is here a name for the five sense desires. By cultivating this contemplation, many beings become purified" (AN 6.25).

If, by practicing that devotional meditation, one endeavors to live, as it were, "in the Master's presence" (*sattha sammukhibhuta*), one will feel ashamed to do, speak or think anything unworthy; one will shrink back from evil; and as a positive reaction, one will feel inspired to high endeavor in emulation of the Master's great example.

Images, and not abstract concepts, are the language of the subconscious. If, therefore, the image of the Enlightened One is often created within one's mind as the embodiment of man perfected, it will penetrate deeply into the subconscious, and if sufficiently strong, will act as an automatic brake against evil impulses. In such a way the subconscious, normally so often the hidden enemy in gaining self-mastery, may become a powerful ally of such an endeavor. For that purpose of *educating the subconscious*, it will be helpful to use a Buddha image or picture as an aid in visualization. In that way, concentration of mind may be attained fairly soon. For evoking and deeply absorbing some features of the Buddha's personality, his qualities should be contemplated, for instance in the way described in the *Visuddhimagga*.

The recollection of the Buddha, being productive of joy (*piti*), is an effective way of *invigorating the mind*, of lifting it up from the states of listlessness, tension, fatigue, and frustration, which occur during meditation as well as in ordinary life. The Buddha himself advised: "If (in the strenuous practice of meditation, for instance) in contemplation of the body, bodily agitation, including sense desires, or mental lassitude or distraction should arise, then the meditator should turn his mind to a gladdening, elevating subject" (SN 47.10). And here the teachers of old recommend especially the recollection of the Buddha. When those hindrances to concentration vanish under its influence, the meditator will be able to return to his original meditation subject.

For a beginner especially, attempts at gaining concentration are often frustrated by an uneasy self-consciousness; the meditator, as it were, squints back upon himself. He becomes disturbingly aware of his body with its little discomforts, and of his mind struggling against obstacles which only grow stronger the more he struggles. This may happen when the subject of meditation is one's own physical or mental processes, but it may also occur with other subjects. In such a situation, it will be profitable to follow the advice given earlier and to turn one's attention from one's own personality to the inspiring visualization of the Buddha and the contemplation of his qualities. The joyful interest thus produced may bring about that self-forgetfulness which is such an important factor for gaining concentration. Joy produces calm (*passadhi*), calm leads to ease (*sukha*), and ease to concentration (*samadhi*). Thus devotional meditation can serve as a valuable *aid in attaining mental concentration* which is the basis of liberating insight. This function of devotional meditation cannot be better described than in the words of the Master:

"When a noble disciple contemplates upon the Enlightened One, at that time his mind is not enwrapped in lust, nor in hatred, nor in delusion. At such a time his mind is rightly directed towards the Perfect One (Tathagata). And with a rightly directed mind the noble disciple gains enthusiasm for the goal, enthusiasm for the Dhamma, gains the delight derived from the Dhamma. In him thus delighted, joy arises; to one who is joyful, body and mind become calm; calmed in body and mind, he feels at ease; and if at ease, the mind finds concentration. Such a one is called a noble disciple who among humanity gone wrong, has attained to what is right; who among a humanity beset by troubles, dwells free of troubles."

— AN 6.10

Notes

1. See *Life's Highest Blessings*, Dr. R.L. Soni (Wheel No. 254/256).
2. See *The Three Refuges*, Bhikkhu Ñanamoli (Bodhi Leaves No. A5).
3. See *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, Chapter VII.

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