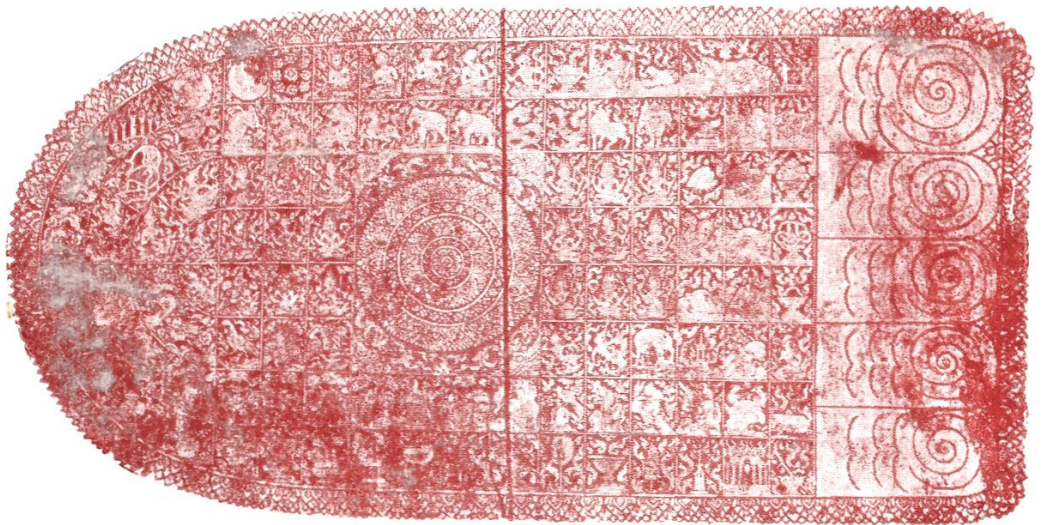


THE RIGHT APPROACH TO DHAMMA



BY BHIKKHU BUDDHADĀSA

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BY VENERABLE BUDDHADĀSA INDAPAÑÑO
OF MOKKHAPALĀRĀMA, JAIYĀ, SOUTHERN SIAM

AN ADDRESS TO

THE EIGHTH WORLD FELLOWSHIP OF BUDDHISTS CONFERENCE

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Northern Siam

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**Fellow Buddhists, both members and non-members
of the WFB, Bhikkhus and lay people.**

I have been invited by the President of the WFB to address this distinguished assembly. What I am about to say to you will be said as a fellow sufferer in birth, old age, sickness and death. Please forgive me, and allow me the opportunity to speak to you frankly. Truth, dedication, and the love of our fellow beings is the true spirit of us Buddhists.

What I am going to say within a short time is the result of my observations over the last 30 years, and I feel that it is the most important aspect of our great efforts, particularly when our world wide activities have reached this stage. Yet we have not paid enough attention to this most important endeavor.

Firstly, in the modern Buddhist world there are many Buddhist societies dedicated to propagating Buddha Dhamma. However, they are more interested in the method of propagation than in the actual teaching itself—which is the heart and core of Buddhism. Nor have they paid enough attention to the practice of that Dhamma. People are preoccupied with ceremony and ritual. This kind of Buddhism, I am afraid, will result in :

1. Less people truly and directly understanding Dhamma through their own efforts and practice. In such a case there will be no one working toward the essence of Dhamma, but pursuing secondary interests instead. Hence, the real meaning of the WFB will become more limited and consequently unable to fulfill the goals to which it should aspire.

2. True Buddhists interested in the practice of Dhamma, will pay less attention and respect to the WFB. Or perhaps they will lose confidence in it. If such is the case, the WFB

will find it difficult to carry on or expand its activities according to its proposed objectives. Its work will be confined to routine tasks and social affairs. Buddhists will necessarily be accused of fun-making, and sight-seeing on international missions. If this is true, most members and committee members will be engaged in their own enjoyment at someone else's expense. Under these circumstances, our organization must perish. Please, therefore, pay particular attention to the true goals a Buddhist should have in mind. We must be wary of a devious approach to Dhamma, and try to improve and re-direct ourselves to the work at hand.

What we need to do is create interest in what is known as the heart of Buddhism; that is, working directly toward the elimination of each individual's defilements. We must work towards extinguishing the suffering of mankind. Once interest has been stimulated people will investigate, consider and seek to understand the essence of Buddhism. Preaching morality for the benefit of society and the state, or interest in Buddhism as a philosophy, or a source of literary enjoyment is less meaningful than self-practice and individual endeavor.

Man's defilements are the direct cause of his suffering. The unpleasantness of life does not emanate from ignorance of social morality, literary appreciation, or intense philosophical interests. Those who are well versed in these academic disciplines are still unable to deliver themselves from the unsatisfactoriness of the human condition. The only way to rid oneself of defilements is through the control and subversion of our sense organs. Once attaining this stage, social morality is no longer a problem, and peace and everlasting happiness will ensue. But this will not occur, I assure you, by treating Buddhism as a philosophic or aesthetic interest. Studying Buddhism through the medium of worldly interests has the inevitable effect of dividing Buddhism according to the differences among various schools of thought and speculation. Hence, Buddhism can become a subject of theoretical interest, mere verbosity, and less practice.

In order for Buddhist organizations, like the WFB, to be able to fulfill its intended purpose, according to the heart of Buddhism, we must first abolish the concepts of “we” and “they”. Once personal and organizational differences and divisions are removed, the concept of “World Fellowship” will become meaningful. The word Dhamma itself means the true nature of things and recognizes no divisions, nationalities, or separation according to creed or faith.

Misinterpretation of the Dhamma usually stems from those who pursue Buddhism from a worldly point of view. Many Western books concerned with kamma and re-birth present unintelligent evaluations of Buddhism and are far from the essence and importance of the teachings. Even those who profess Buddhism often misunderstand the Buddha’s teachings and consequently promote an impracticable approach to Buddhism. To use a concrete example, the Pali word *jāti* can be interpreted as meaning actual birth or the concept of “I” or “I-ness.” If these two meanings are misunderstood or confused, one cannot grasp the true teaching of the Buddha. “Rebirth” in Buddhism has nothing to do with *avatāra* or reincarnation as understood in Hinduism or the *Upanishads*. Most Westerners tend to explain Buddhism from this attitude. “Rebirth” in Buddhism should be comprehended as a repetition and continuation of the “I-ness” concept. Understanding rebirth as an element and phenomena of the present life (continuous belief in “I”, and an attachment to “I”) is indeed more important than the rebirth that follows death.

This becomes quite clear when we examine the Law of Dependent Origination (*Patīccasamuppāda*). Here the word ‘*jāti*’ obviously means egoism. It has nothing to do with physical birth. The twelve elements of Dependent Origination are, in fact, aspects of dukkha as the Buddha pointed out in the Four Noble Truths. The reality of the theory of Dependent Origination does not present itself as an object for far flung philosophical speculation, as seems to be fashionable today.

Rather, its significance should be appreciated and used as an approach to daily practice, i.e., control of the sense organs in order to prevent the occurrence of mental formations through ignorance. Without this constant process there is no dukkha.

Now regarding kamma, people are usually only concerned with good and bad kamma, black and white kamma, and the results that follow. This, in fact, is not an essential teaching of Buddhism, for this explanation of kamma was known and taught by other religions long before the Buddha. What the Buddha added to this theory was a kind of kamma that was neither black nor white. The principal teaching was, instead, the cessation of all kammas. This teaching can be found in the Pali Canon (*Anguttaranikāya Catukkanipāta Kammavagga*). Practicing the Noble Eightfold Path is, in fact, a kind of kamma that is neither black nor white, for it leads to Nibbāna which is the end of all kinds of kamma. This latter kind of kamma is unique to Buddhism, yet most Buddhist authorities persist in ignoring it. It is therefore the responsibility of Buddhist organizations like the WFB, to correct this misconception. If we accept "Dhamma" as the basis and core of Buddhism, we can really grasp the significance of annatā. Once we understand annatā, we are prepared to understand kamma as the force that puts an end to all other kinds of kamma. Therefore, both kamma and annatā are aspects of the same principle. Once there is no self, there is no concept of "I" or "I-ness"; hence, there can be a real world fellowship. There will be no divisions between different creeds such as Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. What the Buddha has discovered and taught us is the way toward the destruction of self. Selflessness is, indeed, the true essence of nature. Once we label Buddhism "ours", it implies a division between "we" and "they". Those who call themselves Buddhists can no longer grasp the real teaching as discovered and defined by Lord Buddha. To them, Buddhism has become a collage of

secondary and inferior additions obscuring the true teachings. This makes Buddhism an instrument encouraging division, and sects, and robs it of its universal quality and application.

The word "Dhamma" may be interpreted in many ways. Each of the various definitions of Dhamma will be examined here. Ultimately, we hope to arrive at the Dhamma, or kind of Dhamma that is most descriptive of the essence of Buddhism.

The definition of *Dhamma* in Pali and *Dharma* in Sanskrit has an all encompassing meaning. It includes all that is both known and unknown to human beings. Hence, it is impossible to accurately translate this term into other languages. In order to convey the meaning of this word in the short time allotted to me, I propose the following definition: Dhamma is 1) nature (*sabhāvadhamma*) 2) the law of nature (*saccadhamma*) 3) man's duty to conform to the law of nature, (*patipattidhamma*) and 4) the results of action performed in accordance with the laws of nature (*Pativedhadhamma* or *vipākadhamma*). This concept of Dhamma is fully explained in the Pali Canon and all the commentaries. Each one of these factors is directly related to nature. So, if we fail to understand Dhamma as related and conforming to nature, we cannot possibly avoid the suffering and unsatisfactoriness that inevitably must follow action opposed or contrary to the law of nature.

The problems and complexities of life, which man considers unsolvable, are the result of man's failure to understand what is referred to as the essence of Buddhism.

Of the four aspects of Dhamma that we have defined, which one of the four amounts to the essence of Buddhism? To answer this question, we must return to the Pali Canon. In the Samyuttanikāya, the Buddha reveals that the knowledge he attained through Enlightenment can be compared to the quantity of leaves in the forest, while what he has taught compares only to the number of leaves held in one hand. From such a metaphor, one deduces that the Buddha discovered

every aspect of Dhamma, but that he taught only the Four Noble Truths. In the Alagaddūpamasutta Majjimanikāya, the Buddha's explanation is more explicit. He emphasizes that the Tathagata's teachings are concerned only with "dukkha" and the cessation of dukkha. In the Cūḷatanhāsamkheyyasutta Majjimanikāya, the Buddha succinctly reduces all his primary teaching to one sentence: *sappe dhammā nalam aphinivesāya* which translates as "Nothing can be taken as self or as belonging to self".

From the above references, we can see that Dhamma, as the essence of Buddhism, means all aspects of nature, both changeable and unchangeable, are not to be regarded as self or belonging to self. If things are accepted as self or belonging to self, it is contrary to the law of nature and suffering will arise, either directly or imperceptibly. Man must therefore conform to the law of nature by acting unselfishly and in harmony with the realization that both self and an attachment to self are contrary to natural law.

Once we all recognize "self" as a delusion, it will, at last, be possible for man to exist in a common world free from the quest of personal advantage. Detachment must be thoroughly understood and put into practice bodily, verbally, and mentally. This concept of detachment does not lend itself to theoretical speculation, philosophical enquiry, or lengthy and unproductive discourse as seems to be in vogue today. Consider the time of the Buddha when his followers delved immediately into the essence of his teachings and became Arahants. They did not linger over complicated philosophical questions or become distracted by psychological or literary reflections. The teachings were at once put into practice and from this spiritual training and inspiration, they reached Enlightenment. There are, in the Tipitaka, psychological references, literary allusions, historical facts, anthropological resources, and philosophical theories. But none of these is the essence of the teaching; they are mere adornments that have become attached

to the main teaching. The core of this teaching can be succinctly stated as dedication to our duties and tasks in a selfless manner.

I maintain that the principal teaching of Buddhism is identical to the main tenets of other religions; for all true religions seek to reduce and minimize man's self importance. Theistic religions teach the faithful to submit themselves to God or be united with God. This obviously coincides with decreasing the significance of self and removing the causes that give rise to belief in egoism. Even those religions that place faith in the permanence of soul or *atman* teach that the real soul or *atman* will ultimately be united with God. In this context, the soul is not the source or cause of selfishness or egotism. Even those atheistic religions that emphasize the principle of personal action teach their followers to regard life as self-sacrifice for the collective benefit of humanity. And those religions, during the Buddha's time, that represented the theory of *annatā* incorrectly, because they did not agree with the Buddha's own principles, still taught their adherents to reject absolute faith in self and the pursuit of selfishness. From the examples offered, it is not difficult to discern that all religions encourage the destruction of personal attachments. Disagreement over minor details, practices and approaches does not obscure the fact that the central teachings generally concur.

The Buddha's teaching that "All things should not be grasped," therefore applies to the principles of all true religions. Members of the World Fellowship should not limit themselves to the confines of one particular religion; for if they do, they are not acting in conformity to the laws of nature, since nature recognizes no boundaries and no divisions. Buddhism is a religion in harmony with nature. Buddhists should therefore expand their world fellowship to include all spheres and interests that are in concord with nature. If we

cannot accomplish this goal, it indicates that we are failing in the primary task of understanding our fellow human beings. We must realize that there are numerous Buddhists whom we have not yet recognized, while they, themselves, have not yet acknowledged the fact that they are Buddhists.

In my opinion, a Buddhist is someone who devotes his life to the control and final destruction of egoism. Various labels and classifications are unimportant. The terms Theravada and Mahāyāna, as a case in point, have no more significance other than assigning people to different herds like cattle. Buddhism knows no differentiation according to sect. While the Buddha was alive, he taught the Discourses (*Dhamma*) and established the Discipline (*Vinaya*). Neither of these two original elements of Buddhism should be misunderstood as encouraging or influencing division. Sects or *Yānas* developed as the result of people emphasizing some parts of *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*, while ignoring or neglecting others. Their divergent approaches were determined by inclination or circumstance rather than the practice of personal detachment. Within the Mahāyāna and Theravada Schools themselves, there are further divisions and differences in which controversy sometimes becomes more acute than between the two major branches of Buddhism. Even the devout and faithful often work towards their own or secular benefit. One who works for or pursues self interest can, in no way, be considered a true Buddhist. On the contrary, those who do not consider themselves Buddhists (or are not recognized as Buddhists by other Buddhists), but strive to develop selflessness, are, by all means, to be regarded as true Buddhists.

Because these true Buddhists have long been ignored or, in most cases, not even considered, an enormous task confronts the WFB. Is it possible that we, who call ourselves Buddhists, are withdrawing and separating ourselves from the majority of true Buddhists? If so, we are working against

the law of nature. To realign our efforts and establish a harmonious relationship between man and natural law (*Dhamma*), we must first extinguish the personal prejudices and greed that are the principal causes of division and self interest. The solution lies not in the exclusiveness of doctrine, but only in the universality of the correct approach to Dhamma.

Translated by Sulek Sivaraksa and Don Sweetbaum

