

CHAPTER 15

THE TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA

What is Buddhism?

“This doctrine is profound, hard to see, difficult to understand, calm, sublime, not within the sphere of logic, subtle, to be understood by the wise.”

—Majjhima Nikāya

Tipiṭaka

 The Buddha has passed away, but the sublime teaching, which he expounded during his long and successful ministry and which he unreservedly bequeathed to humanity, still exists in its pristine purity.

Although the Master has left no written records of his teachings, his disciples preserved them, by committing to memory and transmitting them orally from generation to generation.

Three months after the death of the Buddha, in the eighth year of King Ajātasattu’s reign, 500 pre-eminent arahants concerned with preserving the purity of the doctrine held a convocation at Rājagaha to rehearse it. The Venerable Ānanda Thera, the Buddha’s beloved attendant who had the special privilege and honour of hearing the discourses from the Buddha himself, and the Venerable Upāli Thera were chosen to answer questions about the Dhamma (doctrine) and the Vinaya (discipline) respectively.

This first council compiled and arranged in its present form the Pali Tipiṭaka, which represents the entire body of the Buddha’s teaching.

Two other councils²³³ of arahants were held 100 and 236 years later respectively, again to rehearse the word of the Buddha because attempts were being made to pollute the pure teaching.

About 83 BCE, during the reign of the pious Sinhala King Vatṭagāmani Abhaya,²³⁴ a council of arahants was held, and the Tipiṭaka was, for the first time in the history of Buddhism, committed to writing at Aluvihāra²³⁵ in Sri Lanka.

233. See *Mahāvamsa* translation, pp. 14–50.

234. *Ibid.* pp. 19–50.

Thanks to the indefatigable efforts of those noble and foresighted arahants, there is no room either now or in the future for higher critics or progressive scholars to adulterate the pure teaching.

The voluminous Tipiṭaka, which contains the essence of the Buddha's teaching, is estimated to be about eleven times the size of the Bible.

The word Tipiṭaka (Skt. Tripiṭaka) means "three baskets." They are the basket of discipline (*vinaya piṭaka*), the basket of discourses (*sutta piṭaka*) and the basket of ultimate doctrine (*abhidhamma piṭaka*).

Vinaya Piṭaka

The Vinaya Piṭaka, which is regarded as the sheet anchor of the holy order, deals mainly with the rules and regulations of the order of bhikkhus (monks) and bhikkhunīs (nuns). For nearly twenty years after the enlightenment of the Buddha, no definite rules were laid down for control and discipline of the Sangha (order). Subsequently as occasion arose, the Buddha promulgated rules for the future discipline of the Sangha. Reasons for the promulgation of rules, their various implications, and specific Vinaya ceremonies of the Sangha are fully described in the Vinaya Piṭaka. The history of the gradual development of the sāsana from its very inception, a brief account of the life and ministry of the Buddha, and details of the three councils are some other additional relevant contents of the Vinaya Piṭaka. Indirectly it reveals useful information about ancient history, Indian customs, ancient arts, and sciences. One who reads the Vinaya Piṭaka cannot but be impressed by the democratic constitution of the Sangha, their holding of possessions in common, the exceptionally high moral standard of the bhikkhus, and the unsurpassed administrative abilities of the Buddha, who anticipated even the present parliamentary system. Lord Zetland writes: "And it may come as a surprise to many to learn that in the assemblies of the Buddhists in India two thousand years and more ago are to be found the rudiments of our own parliamentary practice of the present day."²³⁶

The *Vinaya Piṭaka* consists of the following five books:

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| 1. Pārājika Pali | } <i>Vibhaṅga</i> | (Major Offences) |
| 2. Pācittiya Pali | | (Minor Offences) |

235. A hamlet in the interior of Sri Lanka, about twenty-four miles from Kandy.

This sacred rock temple is still a place of pilgrimage to the Buddhists of Sri Lanka. *Buddhaghosuppatti*, a biography of the Great Commentator Buddhaghosa, states that the amount of books written on ola leaves when piled up would exceed the height of six elephants.

236. See *Legacy of India*, Edited by G. T. Garrat, pp, X, XI.

3. Mahāvagga Pali	}	(Greater Section)	
4. Cullavagga Pali		} <i>Khandaka</i>	(Lesser Section)
5. Parivāra Pali			(Epitome of the Vinaya)

Sutta Piṭaka

The Sutta Piṭaka consists chiefly of instructive discourses delivered by the Buddha to both the Sangha and the laity on various occasions. A few discourses, expounded by disciples such as the Venerables Sāriputta, Moggallāna, and Ānanda, are incorporated and are accorded as much veneration as the word of the Buddha himself, since they were approved by him. Most of the sermons were intended mainly for the benefit of bhikkhus, and they deal with the holy life and with the exposition of the doctrine. There are several other discourses which deal with both the material and the moral progress of his lay followers. The Sigālovāda Sutta,²³⁷ for instance, deals mainly with the duties of a layman. There are also a few interesting talks given to children.

This Piṭaka may be compared to a book of prescriptions, since the discourses were expounded on diverse occasions to suit the temperaments of various persons. There may be seemingly contradictory statements, but they should not be misconstrued as they were uttered by the Buddha to suit a particular purpose; for instance, to the self-same question he would maintain silence, when the inquirer was merely foolishly inquisitive, or give a detailed reply when he knew the inquirer to be an earnest seeker after the truth.

The Sutta Piṭaka consists of the following five Nikāyas (collections):

1. Dīgha Nikāya (Collection of Long Discourses)
2. Majjhima Nikāya (Collection of Middle-length Discourses)
3. Saṃyutta Nikāya (Collection of Kindred Sayings)
4. Aṅguttara Nikāya (Collection of Gradual Sayings)
5. Khuddaka Nikāya (Smaller Collection)

This fifth is subdivided into fifteen books:

1. Khuddakapāṭha (Shorter Texts)
2. Dhammapada (The Way of Truth)
3. Udāna (Inspired Utterances)
4. Itivuttaka (“Thus said” Discourses)

237. Commenting on this sutta, Mrs. Rhys Davids says “Happy would have been the village or the clan on the banks of the Ganges where the people were full of the kindly spirit of fellow-feeling and the noble spirit of justice, which breathe through these naive and simple sayings.” See *Dialogues of the Buddha* part 111. p. 168.

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| 5. Sutta Nipāta | (Collected Discourses) |
| 6. Vimāna Vatthu | (Stories of Celestial Mansions) |
| 7. Peta Vatthu | (Stories of Departed Ones) |
| 8. Theragāthā | (Verses of the Elder Monks) |
| 9. Therīgāthā | (Verses of the Elder Nuns) |
| 10. Jātaka | (Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta) |
| 11. Niddesa | (Expositions) |
| 12. Paṭisambhidāmagga | (Path of Analytical Knowledge) |
| 13. Apadāna | (Lives of Arahants) |
| 14. Buddhavaṃsa | (History of the Buddha) |
| 15. Cariyā Piṭaka | (Modes of Conduct) |

Abhidhamma Piṭaka

The Abhidhamma Piṭaka is the most important and most interesting of the three containing as it does the profound philosophy of the Buddha's teaching in contrast to the simpler discourses in the Sutta Piṭaka.

Abhidhamma, the higher doctrine of the Buddha, expounds the quintessence of his profound teachings.²³⁸

According to some scholars Abhidhamma is not a teaching of the Buddha, but is a later elaboration of scholastic monks. Tradition, however, attributes the nucleus of the Abhidhamma to the Buddha himself. The *mātikā* or Matrices of the Abhidhamma, such as *kusalā dhammā* (wholesome states), *akusalā dhammā* (unwholesome states), and *abyākata dhammā* (indeterminate states), etc., which have been elaborated in six of the books,²³⁹ were expounded by the Buddha. To the Venerable Sāriputta is assigned the honour of having explained all these topics in detail.

Whoever the great author or authors may have been, it has to be admitted that the Abhidhamma must be the product of an intellectual genius comparable only to the Buddha. This is evident from the intricate and subtle *paṭṭāna-pakaraṇa* which describes in detail the various causal relations.

To the wise truth-seekers, Abhidhamma is an indispensable guide and an intellectual treat. Here is found food for thought to original thinkers and to earnest students who wish to develop wisdom and lead

238. See *The Manual of Abhidhamma* by the author. A new edition is published with commentary in *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, Bhikkhu Bodhi Ed, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy.

239. One of the books, *Kathāvattu* (*Points of Controversy*), is excluded here. Its authorship is attributed to Venerable Moggaliputta Tissa who presided at the Third council in the time of King Asoka.

an ideal Buddhist life. Abhidhamma is not a subject of fleeting interest designed for the superficial reader.

Modern psychology, limited as it is, comes within the scope of Abhidhamma inasmuch as it deals with mind, thoughts, thought-processes, and mental properties; but it does not admit of a psyche or a soul. It teaches a psychology without a psyche.

If one were to read the Abhidhamma as a modern textbook on psychology, one would be disappointed. No attempt has here been made to solve all the problems that confront a modern psychologist.

Consciousness (*citta*) is defined. Thoughts are analysed and classified chiefly from an ethical standpoint. All mental properties (*cetasika*) are enumerated. The composition of each type of consciousness is set forth in detail. How thoughts arise is minutely described. *Bhavaṅga* and *javana* thought-moments, which are explained only in the Abhidhamma, and which have no parallel in modern psychology, are of special interest to research students in psychology. Irrelevant problems that interest students and scholars, but have no relation to one's Deliverance, are deliberately set aside.

Matter is summarily discussed, but it has not been described for physicists. Fundamental units of matter, material properties, source of matter, relationship of mind and matter are explained. Abhidhamma does not attempt to give a systematised knowledge of mind and matter. It investigates these two composite factors of the so-called being, to help the understanding of things as they truly are. A philosophy has been developed on those lines. Based on that philosophy, an ethical system has been evolved to realise the ultimate goal, Nibbāna.

As Mrs. Rhys Davids rightly says:

“Abhidhamma deals with (i) what we find within us, around us; and of (ii) what we aspire to find.”

While the Sutta Piṭaka contains the conventional teaching (*voḥāra desanā*), the Abhidhamma Piṭaka contains the ultimate teaching (*parāmaṭṭha desanā*).

It is generally admitted by most exponents of the Dhamma that a knowledge of the Abhidhamma is essential to comprehend fully the teachings of the Buddha, as it presents the key that opens the door of reality.

The Abhidhamma Piṭaka is composed of the following seven works:

1. Dhammasaṅgaṇī (Classification of Dhamma)
2. Vibhaṅga (Book of Analysis)
3. Dhātukathā (Discourse on Elements)
4. Puggala Paññatti (The Book on Individuals)

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| 5. Kathāvatthu | (Points of Controversy) |
| 6. Yamaka | (The Book of Pairs) |
| 7. Paṭṭhāna | (The Book of Causal Relations) |

Is Buddhism a Philosophy?

The sublime Dhamma, enshrined in these sacred texts, deals with truths and facts that can be tested and verified by personal experience and is not concerned with theories and speculations, which may be accepted as profound truths today and thrown overboard tomorrow. The Buddha did not expound revolutionary philosophical theories, nor did he attempt to create a new material science. In plain terms he explained both what is within and what is without, so far as it concerns emancipation from the ills of life, and revealed the unique path of deliverance.

Furthermore, the Buddha did not teach all that he knew. On one occasion while the Buddha was staying in a forest, he took a handful of leaves and said: "O bhikkhus, what I have taught you is comparable to the leaves in my hand, and what I have not taught you, to the leaves in the forest."²⁴⁰ He taught what he deemed was absolutely essential for one's purification, and was characteristically silent on questions irrelevant to his noble mission. Incidentally, he forestalled many a modern scientist and philosopher.

Heraclitus (500 BCE) believed that everything flows (*pante rhei*) and that the universe is a constant becoming. He taught that nothing ever is; everything is becoming. It was he who made the famous statement that a person cannot step into the same stream twice. Pythagoras (532 BCE) taught, among other things, the theory of transmigration of souls. Descartes (1596–1650) declared the necessity of examining all phenomena at the bar of reasonable doubt. Spinoza (1632–1677) while admitting the existence of a permanent reality, asserted that all existence is transitory. In his opinion sorrow was to be conquered by finding an object of knowledge which is not transient, not ephemeral, but is immutable, permanent, everlasting. Berkeley (1685–1776) thought that the so-called atom was a metaphysical fiction. Hume (1711–1776) analysed the mind and concluded that consciousness consists of fleeting mental states. In the view of Hegel (1770–1831) "the entire phenomenon is a becoming." Schopenhauer (1788–1860) in his *World as Will and Idea* has presented the truth of suffering and its cause in Western garb. Henri Bergson (1859–1941) advocated the doctrine of change, and emphasised the value

240. Saṃyutta Nikāya vol. 5, pp. 437–438, *Kindred Sayings*, part 5, p. 370.

of intuition. William James (1842–1910) referred to a stream of consciousness and denied the existence of a soul.

The Buddha expounded these truths of transience (*anicca*), sorrow (*dukkha*), and soullessness (*anattā*) more than 2500 years ago.

The moral and philosophical teachings of the Buddha are to be studied, to be practised, and above all to be realised by one's own intuitive wisdom. As such the Dhamma is compared to a raft which enables one to cross the ocean of life.²⁴¹

Buddhism, therefore, cannot strictly be called a philosophy because it is not merely "the love of, inducing the search after, wisdom."²⁴² Nor is Buddhism "a hypothetical interpretation of the unknown (as in metaphysics), or of the inexactly known (as in ethics or political philosophy)."²⁴³

If by philosophy is meant "an inquiry not so much after certain particular facts as after the fundamental character of this world in which we find ourselves, and of the kind of life which such a world it behoves us to live,"²⁴⁴ Buddhism may approximate to a philosophy, but it is very much more comprehensive.²⁴⁵

Philosophy deals mainly with knowledge and is not concerned with practice; whereas Buddhism lays special emphasis on practice and realisation.

Is Buddhism a Religion?

Prof. Rhys Davids writes:

"What is meant by religion? The word, as is well-known, is not found in languages not related to our own, and its derivation is uncertain. Cicero, in one passage, derived it from *re* and *lego*, and held that its real meaning was the repetition of prayers and incantations. Another interpretation derives the word from *re* and *logo*, and makes its original sense that of attachment, of a continual binding (that is, no doubt to the gods). A third derivation connects the word with *lex*, and explains it as a law-abiding, scrupulously conscientious frame of mind."²⁴⁶

241. Majjhima Nikāya, No. 22

242. Webster's Dictionary

243. William Durrant, *The History of Philosophy*, p. 2.

244. Webb, *History of Philosophy*, p. 2.

245. "A philosophy in the sense of an epistemological system which furnishes a complete reply to the question of the *what*, of the *what is life?*—this it is not." (Dr. Dahlke, *Buddhism and Its Place in the Mental Life of Mankind*, p. 25.)

246. Rhys Davids, *Buddhism*, p. 1.

Buddhism is not strictly a religion in the sense in which that word is commonly understood, for it is not “a system of faith and worship,” owing any allegiance to a supernatural God.

Buddhism does not demand blind faith from its adherents. Hence mere belief is dethroned and for it is substituted “confidence based on knowledge.” It is possible for a Buddhist to entertain occasional doubts until he attains the first stage of sainthood (*sotāpatti*) when all doubts about the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Sangha are completely resolved. One becomes a genuine follower of the Buddha only after attaining this stage.²⁴⁷

The confidence of a follower of the Buddha is like that of a patient in respect of a noted physician, or of a student regarding his teacher. Although a Buddhist seeks refuge in the Buddha as his incomparable guide and teacher who indicates the path of purity, he makes no servile surrender.

A Buddhist does not think that he can gain purity merely by seeking refuge in the Buddha or by mere faith in him. It is not within the power even of a Buddha to wash away the impurities of others. Strictly speaking, one can neither purify nor defile another. The Buddha, as teacher, may be instrumental, but we ourselves are responsible for our purification.

In the Dhammapada (v. 145) the Buddha says,

“By oneself alone is evil done:
by oneself is one defiled.
By oneself alone is evil avoided:
by oneself alone is one purified.
Purity and impurity depend on oneself:
No one can purify another.”

A Buddhist is not a slave to a book or to any individual. Nor does he sacrifice his freedom of thought by becoming a follower of the Buddha. He is at full liberty to exercise his own free will and develop his knowledge even to the extent of attaining buddhahood himself, for all are potential Buddhas. Naturally Buddhists quote the Buddha as their authority, but the Buddha himself discarded all authority.

Immediate realisation is the sole criterion of truth in Buddhism. Its keynote is rational understanding (*sammā ditṭhi*). The Buddha advises seekers of truth not to accept anything merely on the authority of another but to exercise their own reasoning and judge for themselves whether a thing is right or wrong.

247. An ordinary adherent may be genuine enough as a follower, but he is not a sharer by realisation of the Buddha-Dhamma.

On one occasion the citizens of Kesaputta, known as Kālāmas, approached the Buddha and said that many ascetics and brahmins who came to preach to them used to exalt their own doctrines and denounce those of others, and that they were at a loss to understand which of those worthies were right.

“Yes, O Kālāmas, it is right for you to doubt, it is right for you to waver. In a doubtful matter, wavering has arisen,”²⁴⁸ remarked the Buddha and gave them the following advice which applies with equal force to modern rationalists as it did to those sceptic brahmins of yore.

“Come, O Kālāmas, Do not accept anything on mere hearsay (i.e., thinking that thus have we heard it from a long time). Do not accept anything by mere tradition (i.e., thinking that it has thus been handed down through many generations). Do not accept anything on account of rumours (i.e., by believing what others say without any investigation). Do not accept anything just because it accords with your scriptures. Do not accept anything by mere supposition. Do not accept anything by mere inference. Do not accept anything by merely considering the appearances. Do not accept anything merely because it agrees with your preconceived notions. Do not accept anything merely because it seems acceptable (i.e., should be accepted). Do not accept anything thinking that the ascetic is respected by us (and therefore it is right to accept his word.)

“But when you know for yourselves—these things are immoral, these things are blameworthy, these things are censured by the wise, these things, when performed and undertaken, conduce to ruin and sorrow—then indeed do you reject them.

“When you know for yourselves—these things are moral, these things are blameless, these things are praised by the wise, these things, when performed and undertaken, conduce to well-being and happiness—then do you live and act accordingly.”²⁴⁹

These wise sayings of the Buddha, uttered some 2500 years ago, still retain their original force and freshness even in this enlightened twentieth century.

With a homely illustration *Jñānasāra-samuccaya* repeats the same counsel in different words.

248. The bracketed explanatory parts of the foregoing translation are in accordance with the interpretations of the commentary and sub-commentary. The Pāli text of this important passage is as follows: “*Etha tumhe Kālāmā. Mā anussavena, mā paramparāya, mā itikirāya, mā piṭakasampadānena, mā takkahetu, mā naya-hetu, mā ākārāparivattakkena, mā ditthinijjhānakkhantiyā, mā bhabbarūpatāya, mā samaṇo no garū ti.*”

249. *Aṅguttara Nikāya* vol. i, p. 189; *Kindred Sayings*, part i, pp. 171, 172.

*“Tāpāc chedāc ca nikasat svarnam iva panditaih
Parikshya blikshavo grāhyam madvaco na tu gauravāt.”*

“As the wise test gold by burning, cutting and rubbing it
(on a piece of touchstone),
so are you to accept my words after examining them
and not merely out of regard for me.”

The Buddha exhorted his disciples to seek the truth, and not to heed mere persuasion even by superior authority.

Now, though it be admitted that there is no blind faith in Buddhism, one might question whether there is no worshipping of Buddha images and such-like idolatry amongst Buddhists.

Buddhists do not worship an image expecting worldly or spiritual favours, but pay their homage to what it represents. A Buddhist goes before an image and offers flowers and incense not to the image but to the Buddha. He does so as a mark of gratitude, reflecting on the virtues of the Buddha and pondering on the transience of flowers. An understanding Buddhist designedly makes himself feel that he is in the noble presence of the Buddha, and thereby gains inspiration to emulate him.

Referring to images, the great philosopher Count Kaiserling writes, “I know nothing more grand in this world than the figure of the Buddha. It is the perfect embodiment of spirituality in the visible domain.”²⁵⁰

Then again Buddhists do not worship the bodhi tree, but consider it a symbol of enlightenment, and so, worthy of reverence.

Though such external forms of homage are prevalent amongst Buddhists, the Buddha is not worshipped as a God.

These external objects of homage are not absolutely necessary, but they are useful and they help one to concentrate one’s attention. An intellectual could dispense with them as he could easily focus his attention on the Buddha, and thus visualise him.

For our own good, and out of gratitude, we pay such homage, but what the Buddha expects from his disciples is not obeisance but the actual observance of his teaching.

Just before the Buddha passed away, many disciples came to pay their respects to him. One bhikkhu, however, remained in his cell absorbed in meditation. This matter was reported to the Buddha who summoned him and, on enquiring the reason for his absence, was told: “Lord, I knew that Your Reverence would pass away three months hence, and I thought the best way of honouring the Teacher was by attaining arantship even before the decease of Your Reverence.”

250. *Travel Diary of a Philosopher.*

The Buddha extolled the praiseworthy conduct of that loyal and dutiful bhikkhu, saying: "Excellent, excellent! He who loves me should emulate this bhikkhu. He honours me best who practises my teaching best."²⁵¹

On another occasion the Buddha remarked, "he who sees the Dhamma sees me."²⁵²

Furthermore, it must be mentioned that there are no petitionary or intercessory prayers in Buddhism. However much one may pray to the Buddha one cannot be saved. The Buddha does not and cannot grant worldly favours to those who pray to him. A Buddhist should not pray to be saved, but should rely on himself and strive with diligence to win his freedom and gain purity. Advising his disciples not to depend on others but to depend on oneself and to be self-reliant, the Buddha says:

Tumhehi kiccaṃ ātappaṃ akkhātāro tathāgatā.

"Striving should be done by yourselves.

"The Tathāgatas are teachers."

Dhp v. 276

The Buddha not only speaks of the futility of prayers²⁵³ but also disparages a slave mentality. Instead of prayers the Buddha emphasises the importance of meditation that promotes self-discipline, self-control, self-purification and self-enlightenment. It serves as a tonic both to the mind and heart. Meditation is the essence of Buddhism.

In Buddhism there is not, as in most other religions, an almighty god to be obeyed and feared. Buddhism denies the existence of a supernatural power, conceived as an almighty being or a causeless force. There are no divine revelations nor divine messengers or prophets. A Buddhist is therefore not subservient to any higher supernatural power which controls his destinies and which arbitrarily rewards and punishes. Since Buddhists do not believe in revelations of a divine being, Buddhism does not claim the monopoly of truth and does not condemn any other religion. "Intolerance is the greatest enemy of religion." With his characteristic tolerance, the Buddha advised his disciples not to get angry, discontented, or displeased even when others spoke ill of him, or

251. See *Buddhist Legends*, vol. 3. pp. 249, 250.

252. *Saṃyutta Nikāya* vol. 3. p. 129.

253. Comp. "Prayer is an activity in which I frankly confess I am not an adept." Canon B. H. Streeter in *Modern Churchman*—Sept. 1924, p. 347.

"I do not understand how men continue to pray unless they are convinced there is a listening ear." (Rev. C. Beard, *Reformation*, p. 419.)

Sir Radhakrishnan states, "Prayers take the character of private communications, selfish bargaining with God. It seeks for objects of earthly ambitions and inflames the sense of self. Meditation on the other hand is self-change."

of his teaching, or of his order. "If you do so," the Buddha said, "you will not only bring yourselves into danger of spiritual loss, but you will not be able to judge whether what they say is correct or not correct"—a most enlightened sentiment. Denouncing unfair criticism of other faiths, the Buddha states: "It is as a man who looks up and spits at heaven—the spittle does not soil the heaven, but it comes back and defiles his own person."²⁵⁴

Buddhism expounds no dogmas that one must blindly believe, no creeds that one must accept on good faith without reasoning, no superstitious rites and ceremonies to be observed for formal entry into the fold, no meaningless sacrifices and penances for one's purification.

Buddhism cannot, therefore, be strictly called a religion, because it is neither a system of faith and worship, nor "the outward act or form by which men indicate their recognition of the existence of a god or gods having power over their own destiny to whom obedience, service, and honour are due."²⁵⁵

Karl Marx said: "Religion is the soul of soulless conditions, the heart of a heartless world, the opium of the people." Buddhism is not such a religion, for all Buddhist nations grew up in the cradle of Buddhism and their present cultural advancement is clearly due mainly to the benign influence of the teachings of the Buddha.

However, if, by religion, is meant "a teaching which takes a view of life that is more than superficial, a teaching which looks into life and not merely at it, a teaching which furnishes men with a guide to conduct that is in accord with this in-look, a teaching which enables those who give it heed to face life with fortitude and death with serenity,"²⁵⁶ or a system of deliverance from the ills of life, then certainly Buddhism is a religion of religions.²⁵⁷

Is Buddhism an Ethical System?

Buddhism contains an excellent moral code, including one for the monks and another for the laity, but it is much more than an ordinary moral teaching.

Morality (*sīla*) is only the preliminary stage and is a means to an end, but not an end in itself. Though absolutely essential, it alone does not

254. See Sri Radhakrishnan, *Gautama the Buddha*.

255. *Webster's Dictionary*.

256. Ex-bhikkhu Silacāra. See *Sri Lanka Daily News—Vesak Number* May 1939.

257. Dr. Dahlke, in arguing what Buddhism is, writes, "With this, sentence of condemnation is passed upon Buddhism as a religion. Religion, in the ordinary sense as that which points beyond this life to one essentially different, it cannot be." *Buddhism and its Place in the Mental Life of Mankind*, p. 27.

lead to one's deliverance or perfect purity. It is only the first stage on the path of purity. Beyond morality is wisdom (*paññā*). The base of Buddhism is morality, and wisdom is its apex. As the pair of wings of a bird are these two complementary virtues. Wisdom is like unto man's eyes; morality is like unto his feet. One of the appellatives of the Buddha is *vijjācaraṇa sampanna*—endowed with wisdom and conduct.

Of the four noble truths that form the foundation of Buddhism, the first three represent the philosophy of the Buddha's teaching; the fourth the ethics of Buddhism based on that philosophy.

Morality in Buddhism is not founded on any doubtful divine revelation, nor is it the ingenious invention of an exceptional mind, but it is a rational and practical code based on verifiable facts and individual experience. In the opinion of Prof. Max Müller, the Buddhist moral code is one of the most perfect which the world has ever known.

Prof. Rhys Davids says: "Buddhist or no Buddhist, I have examined every one of the great religious systems of the world; and in none of those have I found anything to surpass in beauty and comprehensiveness the Noble Eightfold Path of the Buddha. I am content to shape my life according to that path."

It is interesting to note that according to Buddhism there are deeds which are ethically good and bad, deeds which are neither good nor bad, and deeds which tend to the ceasing of all deeds. Good deeds are essential for one's emancipation, but when once the ultimate goal of the holy life is attained, one transcends both good and evil.

The Buddha says: "Righteous things (*dhamma*) you have to give up: how much more the unrighteous things (*adhamma*)."²⁵⁸

The deed which is associated with attachment (*lobha*), ill will (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*) is evil. That deed which is associated with non-attachment (*alobha*), goodwill (*adosa*), and wisdom (*paññā*), is good.

The deeds of an arahant, a stainless one, possess no ethical value as he has gone beyond both good and evil. This does not mean that he is passive. He is active, but his activity is selfless and is directed to help others to tread the path he has trodden himself. His deeds, ordinarily accepted as good, lack creative power as regards himself. Unlike the actions of a worldling his actions do not react on himself as a kammic effect.

His actions, in Pali, are called *kiriya* (functional). Purest gold cannot further be purified.

258. Majjhima Nikāya, Sutta No. 22.

The mental states of the four types of supramundane path consciousness, namely, *soṭāpatti* (stream-winner), *sakadāgāmi* (once-returner), *anāgāmi* (non-returner) and *arahantta* (worthy), though wholesome (*kusala*), do not tend to accumulate fresh kamma, but, on the contrary, tend to the gradual cessation of the individual flux of becoming, and therewith to the gradual cessation of good and evil deeds. In these types of supramundane consciousness the wisdom factor (*paññā*), which tends to destroy the roots of kamma, is predominant; while in the mundane types of consciousness volition (*cetanā*) which produces kammic activities is predominant.

What is the criterion of morality according to Buddhism?

The answer is found in the admonition given by the Buddha to young *sāmaṇera Rāhula*.

“If there is a deed, Rāhula, you wish to do, reflect thus: ‘Is this deed conducive to my harm, or to others’ harm, or to that of both?’ Then is this a bad deed entailing suffering. From such a deed you must resist.

“If there is a deed you wish to do, reflect thus: ‘Is this deed not conducive to my harm, nor to others’ harm, nor to that of both?’ Then is this a good deed entailing happiness. Such a deed you must do again and again.”²⁵⁹

In assessing morality a Buddhist takes into consideration the interests both of himself and others—animals not excluded.

In the *Mettā Sutta*²⁶⁰ the Buddha exhorts:

“As the mother protects her only child
even at the risk of her own life;
even so let one cultivate boundless thoughts
of loving kindness towards all being.”²⁶¹

The *Dhammapada* states:

“All fear punishment, to all life is dear.
Comparing others with oneself,
let one neither hurt nor kill.” (v. 129)

To understand the exceptionally high standard of morality the Buddha expects from his ideal followers, one must carefully read the *Dhammapada*, *Sigālovāda Sutta*, *Vyagghapajja Sutta*, *Mangala Sutta*, *Mettā Sutta*, *Parābhava Sutta*, *Vasala Sutta*, *Dhammika Sutta*, etc.

As a moral teaching it excels all other ethical systems, but morality is only the beginning and not the end of Buddhism.

259. *Rāhulovāda Sutta* (MN 61)

260. See page 409 below.

261. *Sutta Nipāta*

In one sense Buddhism is not a philosophy, in another sense it is the philosophy of philosophies.

In one sense Buddhism is not a religion, in another sense it is the religion of religions.

What Buddhism is

Buddhism is neither a metaphysical path nor a ritualistic path.

It is neither sceptical nor dogmatic.

It is neither eternalism nor nihilism.

It is neither self-mortification nor self-indulgence.

It is neither pessimism nor optimism but realism.

It is neither absolutely this-worldly nor other-worldly.

It is not extravert but introvert.

It is not theocentric but homo-centric.

It is a unique path of enlightenment.

The original Pali term for Buddhism is *Dhamma*, which, literally, means that which upholds or sustains (him who acts in conformity with its principles and thus prevents him from falling into woeful states). There is no proper English equivalent that exactly conveys the meaning of the Pali term.

The Dhamma is that which really is. It is the doctrine of reality. It is a means of deliverance from suffering and deliverance itself. Whether the Buddhas arise or not the Dhamma exists from all eternity. It is a Buddha that realises this Dhamma, which ever lies hidden from the ignorant eyes of men, till he, an enlightened one, comes and compassionately reveals it to the world.

“Whether the Tathāgatas appear or not, O bhikkhus, it remains a fact, an established principle, a natural law that all conditioned things are transient (*anicca*), sorrowful (*dukkha*) and that everything is soulless (*anattā*). This fact the Tathāgata realises, understands and when he has realised and understood it, announces, teaches, proclaims, establishes, discloses, analyses, and makes it clear, that all conditioned things are transient, sorrowful, and that everything is soulless.”²⁶²

In the Alagaddūpama Sutta (MN 22) the Buddha says: “One thing only does the Buddha teach, namely, suffering and the cessation of suffering.”

This is the doctrine of reality.

262. Aṅguttara Nikāya Part 1, p. 286.

The Udāna states: “Just as, O bhikkhus, the mighty ocean is of one flavour, the flavour of salt, even so, O bhikkhus, this Dhamma is of one flavour, the flavour of deliverance (*vimutti*).”²⁶³

This is the means of deliverance.

This sublime Dhamma is not something apart from oneself. It is purely dependent on oneself and is to be realised by oneself. As such the Buddha exhorts:²⁶⁴

Attadīpā viharatha attapaṭisaṛaṇā.

Abide with oneself as an island,
with oneself as a refuge.

Dhammadīpā viharatha, dhammapaṭisaṛaṇā,
n’āñña paṭisaṛaṇā

Abide with the Dhamma as an island,
with the Dhamma as a refuge.
Seek not for external refuge.



263. p. 67

264. Parinibbāna Sutta; see Chapter 14 above.