

Theravāda Buddhism: its Teaching and Meditation

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Introduction

The Pāli word ‘Theravāda’ etymologically is consisted of two words; “Thera” and “vāda”. The former means “elderly monks or stable” and the latter means “words or speech”. So Theravāda literally means the teachings of the Elders. Buddhist scholars believe that Theravāda Buddhism almost keeps intact the original teachings of the Buddha.

According with the Buddha words in Aparihāniya Sutta, there are policies; (1) Monks should not preach the Dhamma which the Buddha has never preached (Apaññattaṃ na paññāpessanti), (2) Monks should not dismiss the Dhamma which the Buddha preached (Paññattaṃ na samucchindissanti), and (3) As the Buddha preached, monk will practice (Yathā paññattesu sikkhāpadesu samādhāya vattissanti). These are policies of the Buddha on his teachings.

Theravāda Buddhism

The Sangha had held the six Sangha councils in accordance with these principles. Regarding its crucial doctrine, the Thera monks well protected the teachings of the Buddha. It is preserved in the Tipiṭaka, namely, Vinaya Piṭaka (The Basket of Disciplines), Suttanta Piṭaka (The Basket of Discourses) and Abhidhammā Piṭaka (The Basket of Higher Teachings).

In the Theravāda teaching, we can see that all living beings suffering due to their craving, hatred, and delusion. And Nibbāna is the end of all sufferings. The way to reach Nibbāna is the Noble Eightfold Path consisting of the three trainings (Sikkhās), namely; 1. Sīla Sikkhā – training of morality; right speech, right action and right livelihood. 2. Samādhī Sikkhā – training of concentration; right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. 3. Pññā Sikkhā – training of wisdom; right view and right thought.

So all the teachings of the Buddha in Theravāda Buddhism can be summed up in the following verse; “To refrain from all evils, to do what is good, and to purify the mind. This is the teachings of all the Buddha.

The Teachings of the Buddha

The teachings of the Buddha are divided into three Piṭakas; Vinaya Piṭaka, Suttanta Piṭaka and Abhidhammā Piṭaka. Vinaya Piṭaka contains disciplinary rules for Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunīs. It is made up of the five books such as (1) Pārājika – Major Offences, (2) Pācittiya – Minor Offences, (3) Mahāvagga – Greater Section, (4) Cūlavagga – Shorter Section, and (5) Parivāra – Epitome of Vinaya.

The Suttanta Piṭaka is a collection of the discourses preached by the Buddha. A few discourses are delivered by disciples such as Venerable Sāriputta, Venerable Mahāmoggallāna, Venerable Ānanda, etc. The Suttanta Piṭaka is divided into five collections known as Nikāyas. They are; (1) Dīgha Nikāya – Collection of Long Discourses, (2) Majjhima Nikāya – Collection of Middle length Discourses, (3) Saṃyutta Nikāya – Collection of connected discourses, (4) Aṅguttara Nikāya – Collection of Discourse with Serial Numbers of Facts, and (5) Khuddaka Nikāya – Collection of Minor Discourses.

The Abhidhammā Piṭaka is the detailed analysis of (1) consciousness – citta, (2) the concomitant factors – cetasika, (3) matter – rūpa, and (4) Nibbāna. It comprises 7 books, namely; (1) Dhammasaṅgahī – Classification of Dhamma, (2) Vibhaṅga – Analysis of Dhamma, (3) Dhātukathā – Speech of Elements, (4) Puggalapaññatti – Designation of Individuals, (5) Kathāvatthu – Points of Controversy, (6) Yamaka – Analysis of Pairs, and (7) Paṭṭhāna – Causal Relations. So all the Buddha's teaching have the taste of liberation and leading to Nibbāna.

The Maṅgala Sutta

In the teachings of Buddha, Maṅgala Sutta is well-known. The Buddha preached Maṅgala Sutta at the Jetavana Monastery donated by Anāthapiṇḍika to a certain deity. It is recorded in the Khuddakapāṭha of Khuddaka Nikāya. The Pāli word 'Maṅgala' means good, auspicious, lucky, blessing, etc.

In Buddhism, it is a well-known Sutta because it is included not only religious aspect but also social, economic and political aspects, etc. The thirty-eight blessings in this Sutta are useful for the young and the old, for parents and children, for teachers and pupils, and so forth. They can guide to the way from fundamental attainment to the realization of Nibbāna.

For instance, the first blessing tells thus, “not to associate with the fool”. Here, the fool is a person who thinks, speaks and commits evil deeds in order to destroy his benefits and others. So if one associates with that kind of person, one will be influenced by his evils.

The second blessing is ‘to associate with the wise’. The wise is a person who thinks, speaks and performs in a good way in order to gain the benefits and prosperity for oneself and others. The association will bring him no harm, and give happiness and prosperity. The blessings described at the end of the Sutta are close to the holy life. In fact, the blessings can be practiced in daily life.

In short, we can study positive guidelines for our lives in Maṅgala Sutta because each and every blessings can makes us successful and prosperity. And we can make progress in material and spiritual qualities up to the Nibbāna.

The essential principles for Nibbāna

In the teachings of Buddha, morality (Sīla) is the observance of physical and verbal actions. It is said in the Visuddhimagga; “A wise man, after establishing well in virtue, develops consciousness and understanding”. Morality (Sīla) serves as a firm foundation towards the attainment of insight knowledge which can lead to Nibbāna. In the Theravāda Buddhism, morality is for (1) lay men, (2) novices (Sāmaṇera), (3) Monks (Bhikkhus) and Nuns (Bhikkhunī). An average lay man usually observes the five precepts or eight precepts and cultivates the ten meritorious deeds. A novice has to observe the ten precepts, adding to 75 rules of training (Sekhiya). A Theravāda Buddhist monk has to observe 227 disciplinary rules (Pātimokkha). A Bhikkhunī has to observe 311 rules.

There are three kinds of trainings for reaching the final goal of Nibbāna. They are; training of morality, training of concentration and training of wisdom. Of them, morality is like feet of go advanced states of Noble Dhamma. Morality is very essential especially for a meditator because without morality one cannot attain concentration and wisdom. In Buddhism, keeping morality is to keep our mind pure. It helps Buddhists to adjust themselves to live happily and peacefully in society.

Morality therefore is absolutely necessary to build a peaceful society. It is also the essential principles in Buddhism for reaching the final goal of Nibbāna.

The Noble Eightfold Path

To reaching the final goal of Nibbāna, the Noble Eightfold Path is very essential. The Noble Eightfold Path is consist of the following eight factors; (1) Right Understanding (Sammā dīṭṭhi) which is explained as having the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. (2) Right Thought (Sammā Saṅkappa) that serves a double purpose of eliminating evil thoughts and developing pure thoughts.

(3) Right Speech (Sammā Vācā) that is the abstaining from lying, slandering, harsh speech, and vain talk but talking with the true words. (4) Right Action (Sammā Kammanta) which is the abstaining from all unwholesome deeds such as killing, stealing and unlawful sexual intercourse etc., and doing all wholesome actions, ect. (5) Right Livelihood (Sammā Ājīva) that means to pursue a proper lifestyle, to stay away from evil thoughts, not to commit acts of killing, stealing, etc.

(6) Right Effort (Sammā Vāyāma) which is the effort of avoiding or overcoming unwholesome deeds, and of developing and maintaining wholesome deeds. (7) Right Mindfulness (Sammā Sati) that mentions the mindfulness and awareness in contemplating the four foundations body, feeling, consciousness and dhammas and (8) Right Concentration (Sammā Samādhi), the concentration of mind associated with wholesome (Kusala) consciousness, which eventually may reach the Absorptions etc.

The Four Noble Truths

For having the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths, the Four Noble Truths were made known in very first sermon delivered about seven weeks after the Buddha's Enlightenment. They constitute the essence of the Dhamma. They are as follows:

(1) The Noble Truths of Suffering (Dukkhasaccā). Dukkha includes physical and mental sufferings: birth, old age, illness, death, association with the dislike ones, separating from the beloved ones and not to get desirable things. Thus, Dukkha contains the whole of existence, in every aspect of our lives.

(2) The Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering (Samudayasaccā). It is craving (taṇhā). We are attached to ideas, concepts and belief. Craving is linked to ignorance: "not knowing things as they really are".

(3) The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering (Nirodhasaccā). It is Nibbāna, the state of cessation of suffering or the state of extinction of all cravings.

(4) The Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of Suffering (Maggasaccā). It is the Noble Eightfold Path which is the way of life consisting of eight factors: right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

All the Buddha's teachings are based on these Four Noble Truths. So they are the essence of Buddhism. They even exist in the world whether the Buddha appear or not. They are called Noble because they were discovered by the great Noble Being or Enlightened One (the Buddha). They should be developed in order to dry off the ocean of Saṃsāra and attain the Nibbāna.

The Noble One who realize the Four Noble Truths

When the meditator first sees Nibbāna on Ariyā level, he is called the Magga-Puggala at that moment. Then there follows the experience of Ariyāphala (fruit) consciousness. From that time, he is called the Phala-Puggala. These Phala Puggalas can clearly be pointed out as noble ones. There are the four noble truths: the Noble Truth of Suffering, the Noble Truth of Cause of suffering, the Noble Truth of Cessation of suffering and the Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of suffering.

By realizing the Noble Truth of suffering, eradicating the Noble Truth of the Cause of suffering, developing the Noble Truth of the Path leading to Cessation of suffering and attaining the Noble Truth of the Cessation of suffering with the full attainment of insight knowledge, one becomes a noble one.

The Sangha and the spread of Buddhism

Sangha is not the name of individual, but the title of noble groups. According to Vimatininodanī Sub-commentary and other commentaries, monks are called "Sangha" because they are strived or united by the same right view and morality. Here, the Sangha has the same right view by which the noble persons are escaped from the round of saṃsāra and made the end of suffering.

The community of the Sangha was originally established by the Buddha in the 588 BC. The Sangha fulfills the noble duties of preserving the Buddha's teaching and providing spiritual support for the lay-community. The beginning of Sangha was the group of five monks who listened to the first sermon of the Buddha. After the group of five monks, Yassa and his four companions were ordained. There were sixty Arahants. When the first sixty noble disciples

were gathered, the Buddha addressed them to go forth and preach the Dhamma for the benefit and happiness of beings. The Buddha had also gone forth for missionary. From that time onwards, the orders of monks have increased. They have been spreading the beautiful message of the Buddha. They are working for the welfare of beings.

In brief, it is very clear that the Sangha carried on the teachings of the Buddha successively. And Buddhism is spreading due to the Sangha who practices and shares the Dhamma knowledge for the welfare of the Buddhists and non-Buddhists as well.

Vipassanā Meditation for us

Meditation is a practical way of training and purifying the mind. In Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna sutta, the Buddha expounded seven benefits of meditation as follows;

Purification of beings: Beings are defiled because of lust, hatred, delusion and other defilements. With the help of meditation, we can defeat our defilements in order to purify our mind.

Overcoming sorrow and lamentation: The nature of human life is full of sorrow and lamentation. To overcome them, we need to aware of them and realize that they cannot persist long in mind, then decrease and disappear.

Disappearance of pain and grief: Whatever pain or grief arises, by practicing meditation, we know that, “it is not I, not of mine or myself” but just the feeling of pain or grief.

Reaching to the Noble Path: By practicing meditation, one can reach to the Noble Path.

Realization of Nibbāna: That means after taking Nibbāna as an object, one’s mind will be totally purified. That moment is called Enlightenment moment or the realization of Nibbāna.

Therefore, Vipassanā can help us to see the things as they truly are. It can help us to purify ourselves, to overcome sorrow and lamentation, to disappear pain and grief, to reach the noble path and to realize Nibbāna as the Buddha taught. Vipassanā meditation can be practiced in any posture, anytime and anywhere. And its objects have in every moment. So it is needed anytime for meditator who wants to realize the true nature of things and absolute peace (Nibbāna).

Vipassanā Meditation and modern society

Modern science and technology are amazingly developing due to the competitive efforts of people in each country. Most of people are spending their time and money on

several works. Although they try to work hard to fulfill their hopes, they can never get satisfaction whatever they have.

In modern society, people have too much stresses. Their minds are overwhelmed by greed (logha), hatred (dosa), ignorance (moha), etc. So they do evil deeds such as killing beings, stealing others' properties, coming sexual misconduct and so on. They are facing mental suffering and burning with the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion. Scientists cannot find the way to cure their mental sickness although they have invented medicine to cure physical suffering. Finally, Buddhist meditation is found as a remedy for their mental sufferings.

Indeed, meditation is the best way to train and make calm down the mind. It is the way to see things as they really are. It can lead to see the real nature of physical and mental phenomena such as impermanence, suffering and non-self. It is, in fact, a kind of scientific and reasonable method of analysis of one's body and mind. Samatha meditation can reduce mental defilements to some extent, whereas Vipassanā meditation can totally eradicate all mental defilements.

The most importance of Vipassanā meditation is to keep mindfulness moment by moment in any postures. By practicing Vipassanā meditation, one can find the way to peaceful life in society as well as absolute peace (Nibbāna).

So meditation can help people to be free from all mental suffering and to live happily and peacefully in the modern society.

Conclusion

In modern world, the times of people are full of competitions, stresses and evil actions. Some people steal other's properties; some kill innocent people. Murders and rapists occur everywhere. Wars often break out between countries. The whole world is now burning with the fire of defilements (Kilesā). They are facing with the mental sufferings such as worry, lamentation, pain, grief, despair, etc. Scientists have invented the medicine to cure physical diseases. Nevertheless, there is no remedy that can totally cure mental diseases of people. Therefore, dangerous problems are arising in the world more than ever before. In this situation, they find that meditation is able to cure their mental sufferings. There are two types of meditation; Samatha and Vipassanā. Samatha can reduce mental defilements to some extent. Vipassanā can totally eradicate all mental defilements. By the power of meditations, one can reduce greed, hatred and delusion that are roots of mental sufferings and problems of the

world. So by practicing meditations only one's mind is tranquil, peaceful. One can cure mental sufferings totally. Therefore, man now needs meditation more than ever.

May all living beings be peaceful with meditation!

Reference

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