

Presentation about Buddhist Customs

Sri Lankan Buddhist culture is influenced mainly by the preaching of the Lord Buddha. He showed the pathway to Nibbana, i.e. release from the cycle of becoming or going through the samsara. According to his teachings attainment of Nibbana is a slow process which you go through many lives. Positive qualities or wholesome acts, facilitates to achieve Nibbana and unwholesome acts will obstruct and will lead to more suffering. Likewise, Buddha has showed the pathway to accomplish a wholesome life for the lay people as well as for his disciples.

Buddha in his preaching or in his suttas has explained the wholesome acts which leads to have a happy comfortable life and eventually achieving Nibbana and the downside or the consequences of unwholesome acts.

Accordingly, respecting the elders, practicing generosity, right livelihood are wholesome acts which lead to Nibbana, and at the same time are expected to offer semi-temporal rewards of comfort and happiness here and in the heavenly worlds in future lives.

This is the basis for the development of customs of Sri Lankan Buddhist. The customs can be divided into two categories; customs in daily life and customs at special occasions.

Customs in daily life

When a child leave the house to go to school or to work, they kneel down in front of the parents and bring their hands together to respect them. The parents in return give their blessings to have a safe and happy day.

If a parent or a teacher or any elderly person comes to a place where a Buddhist lay person is seated, that person will stand up immediately as a sign of respect.

Another custom of the lay Buddhist people is maintaining a special place in their homes, where they have a statue of the Lord Buddha. They do daily offerings and undertake the refuge of the three jewels which are Buddha Dhamma and Sangha. This is a reminder to maintain Buddhist practices.

In Sri Lanka, every full moon day is a public holiday. This day is dedicated to religious activities. Some may practice meditation, some listen to dhamma sermons, and some go to the temple and do offerings in the name of the Lord Buddha.

Another routine Buddhist custom is offering alms to Buddhist monks residing at their local temple at a regular basis.

Customs at special occasions

The following customs are carried out from the conception of a baby.

When a mother conceives to have a baby, she goes to the temple and gives offerings in the name of the Buddha. This brings about merits which are transferred to celestial beings so that they will protect the mother and the child. Furthermore, before the delivery date, expecting parents will either invite Buddhist monks to the house or will visit the temple where monks will chant a special sutta for the mother and child to be protected.

Introduction of solid food for an infant is done at an auspicious time and first offerings are made to Buddha and get the blessings. The reading of the alphabet for the first time is done after offering to Lord Buddha and undertaking the refuge of the three jewels i.e. Buddha Dharma and Sangha.

On special occasions like birthdays, or before getting married, the casket which contains the relics of the Lord Buddha representing the Buddha and the Buddhist monks are invited to the house and are offered alms which include meal, *ata pirikara* (eight basic requirements of a Buddhist monk and to the chief monk), and any other requisites for the other monks such as books bed linen towels etc. More than eight monks are invited in these occasions.

Buddhists carry out various other religious activities when they pass through a troublesome period such as illness or family problems.

They are called *bodhi puja*; i.e. veneration of the Bodhi tree. Buddhists believe that powerful Buddhist deities or celestial beings inhabit the *bhodhi* trees that receive worship in the purely Buddhist sense. By doing *bodhi puja* these celestial beings will protect them from any disasters.

The rituals include lighting oil lamps around the bodhi tree, offering of flowers, milk rice, fruits, beetle leaves, medicinal oils, camphor, coins and bathing the tree with scented water. After offering these, the performers will go around the bodhi tree three to seven times reciting appropriate stanzas.

Chanting *pirith* is another popular ceremony among the Buddhist. As the term itself implies, it means protection. Ceremonial recital of *pirith* is regarded as capable of warding off all forms of evil and danger including disease, the evil influence of the planets, and evil spirits. In addition to the curative and positive aspect, *pirith* is also chanted for attainment of general success. These *pirith* ceremonies can vary from being simple to highly elaborate. This depends on the occasion and the status of the sponsor. Most elaborate ceremonies last one whole night. The simplest form of *pirith* is held for 3 times; morning, night and the following morning. Chanting will last for about 2 to 3 hours.

Pirith ceremonies are also carried out in special occasions like the inauguration of a new venture, moving to a new house, birthdays, before getting married as well as in sickness. In

sickness, Buddhist monks will go to the hospital to chant pirith for hospitalised patients or to the place where the patient is.

Funerals are the other major religious occasion.

For the diseased, death is the beginning of the transition to a new mode of existence with the round of rebirth. When death occurs, all the karmic forces that the dead person accumulated during the lifetimes become activated and determine the next birth. For the living, death is a powerful reminder of Buddha's teaching on impermanence. It is believed that religious ceremonies help the diseased person to have a better form of existence.

The religious ceremony is done prior to the cremation or the burial of the body. Monks are assembled either at the deceased's house or at the burial place. One of the most important parts of this ceremony is offering of cloth on behalf of the dead which is called mataka vastra puja. The proceedings begin with the administration of the five precepts to the assembled crowd by one of the monks. This is followed by the recitation of the stanza in pali which translates into "all formations are impermanent, subject to rise and fall. Having arisen they cease, their subsiding is bliss".

Then the white cloth, mataka wasta, is offered.

After offering it, the close relatives of the deceased sit together on a mat and pour water from a large jug with a spout into a cup placed within a plate until the cup overflows. While the water is being poured, the monks chant in pali which translates to:

"Just as the water fallen from high ground flows to a lower level
Even so what is given from here accrues to the departed
Just as the full flowing rivers fill the ocean
Even so what is given from here accrues to the departed"

In other words, pouring of water symbolise the inheritance of the merit transferred by the living to the dead so that they may find relief from any unhappy realm wherein they might have been born.

Another funeral rite is mataka bana, preaching for the benefit of the dead. The usual practice is to invite a monk to the house of the deceased on the seventh day after the death to preach a sermon. At the end of the sermon, monks will recite the stanzas to transfer the merits to the dead. This follows the alms giving either next morning or lunch time.

Then 3 months after passing away, the relatives will hold an almsgiving to transfer the merits to the dead and then annually after that. These almsgivings will be combined with dharma sermon or pirith chanting .

