



Minnesota Buddhist

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Happy is The Birth of Buddhas

Buddha means the Enlightened One. Today, there are no Buddhas in the world. There were Buddhas in the past and also there will be Buddhas in the future. Buddhas are rare beings, very rare. Once, referring to the four rare things in the world, the Buddha himself said, "Rare is the birth as a human being. Hard is the life of mortals. Hard is the hearing of the Sublime Dhamma. Rare is the appearance of a Buddha." They are born in the world after a long, immeasurable and incalculable length, many eons.

The Buddha of our era, Sakyamuni Gautama, was born in India as a prince on the full moon day of the month of Vesak (May) 2628 years ago. Since he was born as a human being like any other, he was neither a God (creator) nor a messenger of any other supernatural power.

When he was a young prince, he started to practice mindfulness and to develop his mind. As a consequence of that contemplativeness he was able to understand the fleeting nature of sensual pleasures, the insatiable nature of life as well as the impermanency of the world. At the prime age of 29, he renounced the worldly life and became an ascetic. Since then he went from place to place seeking the truth. He met various distinguished teachers of the day and learnt from them. But unfortunately he was not satisfied with their teachings. Afterwards, he practiced severe austerities for six year which also ended in vain. Finally, he made up his mind and recalling the early days of his life understood the significance of practicing mindfulness of breathing as a means of controlling and tranquilizing the mind. One fine day, after having his lunch and crossing the river Neranjara at Gaya, he sat under a shady tree on the bank of the river and started to practice mindfulness of breathing. As he was contemplating in breath as in

breath and out breath his mind became pure, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfections, malleable, wieldy, steady and attained imperturbability. Then he directed his mind to recollect his past lives. And in this manner he gained different types of knowledge and perfect insight and eventually became the Buddha in the world. The truth he realized that day is known as the Dhamma, or his teachings. This teaching of the Buddha could be condensed into 37 factors which again categorized into the three principles and also to a key word "Mindfulness" respectively. They are 37 factors of Enlightenment; the four noble truths, the three characteristics of existence, the Dependent origination and mindfulness (The four foundations of mindfulness). This is the Unique Path for the actualization of Nibbana.

The Buddha taught the Dhamma for 45 years wandering on highways and byways tirelessly, addressing the people from all walks of life in India. And after this unparalleled service to mankind, on the full moon day of Vesak (the month of May), he passed away into Parinibbana.

We, Buddhists, all over the world commemorate the Buddha's birth day on this great day; the full moon day of May. May is the most significant month for the Buddhists and the full moon day of May is the utmost significant day for the Buddhists; the day that no beings are slaughtered or harassed; the day thousands of beings are released from fetters, fed and patted so as to live happily and peacefully. But this shouldn't be the only day to behave humanely. We all should practice this humane behavior during our whole lifetime.

May all beings be well, happy, and peaceful!

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Buddha and His Teachings

Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama, who later came to be called The Buddha; the Enlightened or the Awakened One. Siddhartha Gautama was born in India during the sixth century before Christian era. There were two religious traditions during this period in India: 1. Brahmana or the orthodox religious tradition and 2. The recluse or Sramana tradition, which was unorthodox. The society was dominated by Brahmana priests. Indian society during this period was divided into four functional groups: Brahmana (Priestly class), Ksatriya (Warriors), Vaisya (Merchants) and Sudra (Menials). There were many Sramana groups propagating their teachings.

Siddhartha Gautama was born into a royal family in the northern part of India. He was brought up on the lap of luxuries. He received education under Brahmana teachers and married when he was very young. His father built three weather-proof palaces for him. Yet he did not enjoy any of these because he was struck by human suffering. Then he decided to give up everything and become a homeless wanderer. Already two religious traditions were well established in India. In his early years as a recluse he was experimenting and decided to follow well accepted practice of self-mortification in order to realize the truth. Self-mortification was a practice followed by recluses in India during the sixth century with the hope of getting out of this Samsaric existence. Specially, it was followed by Jainas to destroy the karmic bondage accumulated during previous existences.

After six years of intensive practice of self-mortification, Siddhartha Gautam realized that it was a useless practice. He understood that the liberation must be achieved internally. Also, he understood that one cannot achieve anything by torturing the body. The application of mental treatment was the only means of achieving liberation. We read in the Dhammapada that 'What is the use of your matted hair, what is the use of your bark robe, your mind is like a jungle.' Our mind is constantly contaminated by adventitious defilements. Therefore, we should have a means of purifying our minds. On this firm understanding Siddhartha Gautama found the practice of meditation and applied it for purging and cleansing the mind of defilements. Thus he practiced both the Tranquility and Insight methods of meditation and became the Enlightened One.

In his first sermon addressed to his former colleagues of five ascetics he emphatically mentioned that there are

two extremes that should be avoided by monks, that is to say, the extreme of indulgence in sensual pleasures and the extreme of self-mortification. In this respect Buddha follows the middle way or path. Middle way is not an extreme like the other two. In his first sermon Buddha expounded the Four Noble Truths; the Noble Truth of Suffering or Unsatisfactoriness, the Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering, the Noble Truth of Cessation of Suffering and the Noble Truth of the Path Leading to Cessation of Suffering. By realizing these truths one can become enlightened and get out of this *Samsaric* existence.

After the first sermon the Buddha established the Order of Sangha by granting ordination. This was one of the greatest events in the history of Buddhism. For the propagation and continuation of the Buddha's vision and mission it was extremely necessary to have followers. From the beginning Buddhism has been a way of wisdom which emphasizes emancipation through knowledge. The basic aim of Buddhism is to get rid of ignorance and craving of mind. This enables us to stop our repeated existence in the Samsara.

In the early Vedic teaching we find that death was a problem. So the early Aryans thought of a state of deathlessness (Amrta). This is what is called immortality. In order to become immortal one has to perform sacrifices. But the Buddha said that we have the problem in birth not in death. As we are born we suffer and die. If we can stop birth we can stop death too. This was very well explained by the Buddha in his teaching of Dependent Origination. Buddha said that as we are born we are subject to decay, death and so forth.

Freedom of Thinking and Investigation

Buddhism is not a dogmatic religion. There is room for criticism, investigation and free thinking in Buddhism. Buddha did not tell anybody to accept his teaching dogmatically. In the Kalama sutra we come across that the Buddha has emphasized the importance of thinking and investigation. The basic principle of this discourse is that one should not accept a religious teaching and come to conclusions regarding the truth because of, mere tradition, hearsay; by the authority of religious scriptures, by the authority of the teacher, by one's suitability and expertness. Buddha clearly said that even his Dhamma and teaching should be investigated and examined. When we apply reflection and investigation we know which the right way is and which the wrong way. To follow and not to follow is up to us. Blind faith is discarded by the Buddha as people do not have capacity to discern. Instead the Buddha praised the

intelligent faith which is based on reflection and investigation.

Buddhist Theory of Knowledge

Buddha did not come to any conclusion regarding the truth on the basis of what is heard from teachers and what is learned from religious scriptures. In the Savgāra Sutra of the Majjhima Nikaya, Buddhist theory of knowledge is very well explained in lucid terms. In this sutra knowledge acquired through mere hearing is discarded as not valid due to the fact that the experience is not involved. And also logic and reasoning, which was accepted in Upanishad philosophy as a valid means of knowledge, is set aside by the Buddha as it led us to wrong conclusions regarding the truth. For Buddha the valid means of knowledge is perception. In this respect Buddhism is experientialism. One has to experience the reality. Nagarjuna, one of the greatest Buddhist philosophers in India, emphatically said that 'Dhamma is letter less, therefore it cannot be heard and preached (*anaṅṅarasya dharmasya srutih kā desanā ca kā*). According to Buddhism we see the truth by ourselves. What Buddha did was to show us the way, and guide us in the right path. In this sense Buddha is not a savior.

Middle Way and Its Validity

Middle way is the path which is exclusive to Buddhism. Buddha saw two extreme philosophical views in India during his time. One is the extreme of eternalism. This emphasized an eternal entity which transmigrates from one existence to another. The other extreme is annihilationism. This theory emphasized total non-existence after death. Buddha did not want to commit to any of these theories. For Buddha the middle way is Dependent Origination (*Paticcasamuppada*).

Importance of Analysis in Realization of the Truth

Regarding the realization of the truth method of analysis is extremely important. The truth is divided into two, conventional and ultimate. Ultimate truth is the real nature of phenomena. By our normal eyes the ultimate truth cannot be seen. We see things as they appear to us. What we see is the totality. Totality is the outer appearance of things and it is not the real truth. Buddhism teaches us to penetrate into phenomena to see the real nature of things. This we do in an analytical way. When we analyze phenomena into parts we do not see what we saw before. We see only component parts. Therefore, we come to a conclusion that what we see in our eyes is not the reality. Take for example beauty.

What is beauty? Beauty is the totality of many factors. When we separate these factors we do not see beauty any more. This is the truth of phenomena which helps us to realize the ultimate truth.

Relevance of Buddhism to the Modern World

Buddhist ethics is very important to the modern world as we can find solutions for many problems of our day to day life. As social beings we live in societies by interacting with others in our neighborhood. When a human being is separated from others in the society the ethics has no validity or function. Therefore, Buddhist ethics should be studied in relation to others in society. The foundation of Buddhist ethics is Loving kindness and Compassion (*Metta and Karuna*). If we truly have loving kindness and compassion we cannot harm, kill or destroy anybody or anything. Another important factor is that we should accept the existence of others in society. This lays the foundation for Buddhist ethics. Not only Buddhist ethics is concerned with human beings and animals but also the environment.

Buddha advised people not to kill or harm anybody having likened them unto oneself. This is the self-analogous theory of Buddhist ethics. And also Buddha taught us a very good lesson of applying reflection and investigation when we are going to execute bodily, verbal or mental actions. There are three steps of an action: 1. Before executing the action, 2. While executing the action and 3. After executing the action. By applying reflection and investigation one really sees the harmful outcome to the doer and the society. Consequently, the person can wisely refrain from doing what he planned to do. While doing the action with this reflection one can stop the planned action. After doing the action one can restraint from future bad actions.

Problem of Discrimination

Buddhism is against any kind of discrimination. Discrimination violates social justice. Gender discrimination, caste and class discrimination were some of the problems Buddha had to address in his day. In patriarchal societies usually female gender is not given the same status. This is a kind of discrimination. For example in Indian society female was considered as low. Therefore, women did not enjoy equal rights in par with men. They had no opportunity to learn, to practice religion and so forth. Buddha said that there are women superior to men. They are intelligent and capable of achieving highest perfection too.

According Buddhism all human beings are born equal and, therefore, have equal opportunities. In the

Sigalovada Sutra of the Digha Nikaya, Buddha mentioned that one should not violate social justice due to affection, hatred, fear, and delusion.

*'Chanda dosa bhaya moha yo dhammam ativattati
Nihiyati tassa yaso kalapakkhe'va candima'*

Buddha used the word, Dhamma, in this context. Dhamma is justice. There is nothing above justice according to Buddhism.

Buddhism and World Peace

Since non-violence is the foundation of Buddhist ethics it is appropriate to say that Buddhism is against any destruction. Buddhism firmly advocates that the harmonious living is the best way. Conflicts should be resolved amicably. War and conflicts are the big problems for world peace. Buddha emphatically stated in the Dhammapada that hatred begets hatred; hatred can be pacified by loving kindness. Diplomacy based on loving kindness can solve the problem of war.

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Our Dhamma School

The Dhamma School is the center of distribution for Buddhist teachings. By sending our children to a Dhamma School we are helping them to learn Buddhism, shape their lives and become useful members of society.

March 6, 2005, the day we inaugurated Minnesota Buddhist Vihara Dhamma School, reminded me of my childhood. When I was a child my mother illustrated the importance of learning Dhamma by sending me and my siblings to Sunday Dhamma school at Mutiyanganaya temple.

What they taught at Sunday Dhamma School laid the foundation of my life and helped later to shape my philosophy of living. Among many other things, we learned the joy of giving, importance of detachment to get rid of suffering, controlling the mind, living with minimum needs, and importance of living a simple happy and healthy life with others. Thanks to my parents and teachers at Mutiyangana Dhamma School for their

efforts in making me a useful person to the society and also shaping my life according to Buddhist teachings.

In this world everything is measured in monetary terms. Amount of money you have determines what you can buy. What you can show the others illustrates your power. Power puts the superiority feeling that you are above others. Although, in reality there is no man superior, money is imaginary and power is imaginary.

Thousands of miles away from Sri Lanka, where we were born and brought up, and living in a different culture we can now appreciate how valuable those lessons we learned were. Now is the time to pass on these valuable cultural and religious insights to the next generation. Help them learn right from wrong. It is our obligation to provide the children with the necessary ingredients to have a fruitful life full of love, care, respect and peace. We hope that they will become leaders of tomorrow and transmit those values to generations to come.

The Minnesota Buddhist Vihara Dhamma School will provide another way of relieving the suffering of people in the region. This Dhamma School will be one of our gifts from the land we were born to the land we choose to live and the people who are living with us. I am sure this will contribute immensely to the humanity. Let millions of children benefit from this great opportunity. Let's take care of this institution. May the school prosper and flourish.

I wish great success to the Minnesota Buddhist Vihara Dhamma School.

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Journal of Ven. Witiyala Seewalie

November 25, 2003: Venerable Witiyala Seewalie accepts Dr. Susantha Herath's invitation to build a Sri Lankan Buddhist Temple in Minnesota and continues discussion.

March 12, 2004: Ven. Seewalie visits Minnesota and meets several Sri Lankan families.

March 30, 2004: Minnesota Buddhist Vihara Inc. is registered.

May 14, 2004: Ven. Seewalie visits Minnesota again and attends Vesak Celebration, 2004.

October 28, 2004: Ven. Seewalie informs his move to Minnesota at the end of Vassan period at Los Angles Dharma Vijaya Vihara and gets blessings from Ven. Walpola Piyananda Nayaka thero, Ahanagama Dhammarama Nayaka thero, and other bikkus in the US.

November 25, 2004: Ven. Seewalie moves to Minnesota permanently and starts religious services staying at Vietnam temple in Blaine.

December 26, 2004: Organizes Tsunami Relief activities and attends news/tv conferences and solicited donations.

January 15, 2005: Publish Minnesota Buddhist Vihara annual events calendar

March 06, 2005: Starts the Dhamma School and other regular religious services

April 17, 2005: Celebrates Sri Lankan New Year

Some Major Extra Services

January – February 2005: Tsunami relief activities for Sri Lanka: Help to rebuild two houses and a Buddhist temple in Matara. Donate a tractor and agricultural equipment to a family in Potuwila,. Provide school supplies to a school in Trikunamalaya.

April 2005: Donate 300 books to Mental Development and Research Center Library, Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

April 2005: Distribute Buddhist publications received from Taiwan to universities, schools, public libraries, and to the general public in Minnesota.

June 2005: Contribute to build a Buddhist shrine at the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka.

MBV's Special Appreciation

- Ven Thich Pho Tuan, Ven Chau Anuwattho and all others at The Vietnamese Buddhist Temple in Blain, MN, for providing the base for all our activities including the Dhamma School, hosting Ven. Seewalie and Ven N. Visvakirti and helping Sri Lankan community
- Tsunami helpers, especially, Vietnamese community for their generosity and compassion
- Ven Nansaro Moeng Sang and all others at Cambodian Temple in Hampton for their support in Tsunami relief activities and helping Sri Lankan Community
- The Wickramarachchi family of Los Angles, CA for donating the five-foot statue of Buddha
- The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, Taiwan for donating Dhamma books
- The Herath Foundation for Dhamma school text books and other services
- All other devotees for their support and dedication

Thank You!

A Request

We, the Sri Lankan Buddhists in Minnesota, do not have a temple of our own to perform religious activities according to our culture. It has been one of our long felt needs. The time has ripen for us to organize ourselves to have a Buddhist temple here under the patronage of Venerable Witiyala Seewali who is now doing an immense service to Sri Lankan as well as other communities while being hosted by the Vietnamese temple at Blaine. Please give your whole hearted consent to Ven. Seewalie to initiate a Buddhist Vihara of our own in Minnesota.

- *A Sri Lankan Buddhist in Minnesota*



Lighting of the traditional Oil Lamp at the Sri Lankan New Year Celebrations.



Students worshipping Buddha and chanting Gatha at the beginning of Dhamma school lessons.



Ven. Seewalie and Ven. Visvakirti conducting a meditation session for the devotees.



Gathering of devotees participating in a meditation session.

From Dhammapada

All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows him, as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the carriage.

All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows him, like a shadow that never leaves him.