

# Basic Buddhist Practices

In Buddhism, the most important thing is to apply the teaching of the Buddha in our daily lives. Learning numerous sutras, vinayas or sastras without practising them will make our sufferings deeper. We can only understand what the Buddha really means in His teaching through practice, i.e., the Dharma is not within the words of the Buddha's teaching literally; however, the Truth will be expounded when we live in accordance with the teaching. The Buddha's teaching is similar to the finger pointing to the moon, the Truth. Following the direction of the finger, i.e., practising the Dharma, one can see the moon or realise the Truth.

To become a Buddhist, we should take “*Namo*” (refuge) in the Three Jewels. The set of the Five Precepts for lay Buddhists is the basic moral code that helps us to stay under the protection of the Three Jewels. Sometimes, because of ignorance or lack of effort and courage, we may violate some precepts. Making repentance is therefore necessary. We will examine these three facets of Buddhists' practice, namely, Taking *Namo* in the Three Jewels, Vowing to keep the Five Precepts, and Making Repentance, which contribute a solid foundation for us on the Path to liberate ourselves from the life cycle (samsara).

## A. Taking *Namo* in Three Jewels

To live without a belief is similar to walking in darkness without a torch. This world is almost full of sadness and sorrows. Every day, most of the information we obtain from televisions, radios, newspapers, etc. relate to unhappy events such as earthquake, hurricane, tropical cyclone, flood, drought, economic crisis, war, demonstration, bankruptcy, car accidents, cancer, virus, etc. The existence of sufferings is the first truth the Buddha highlighted more than 25 centuries ago; however, sufferings still remain today although He discovered and showed the world the Path to end sufferings. Why?

Going in darkness! Yes, we are going in darkness, but happily we have a torch: the Dharma, the Buddha's teaching. The problem is:

*"You should light the torch yourselves to go!*

*Take the Dharma as the torch!"*

### 1. Definition

“*Namo*” is a Sanskrit term often translated as to take refuge. Literally, *Namo* has many meanings including to go back, to lean on, to respect and to worship.

Taking Namó in the Three Jewels has two main facets: worshipping and taking refuge.

The Three Jewels in Buddhism are: the Buddha, the Dharma (Buddha's teachings) and the Sangha (community of Buddhist monks and nuns).

## **2. Taking Namó in Three Jewels**

Why do we take Namó in the Three Jewels? Let us consider the following. We are living in the world with many unhappy things such as sickness, old age, death, etc. We all want to have happy lives but cannot find a way to relieve ourselves of sufferings. Due to ignorance, we have been running after sensory pleasures, perceiving as permanent what actually is changing, and accepting what is non-self as our self (atman). Today, we know that the Buddha has found the truths: All sufferings have their causes; and there is the Path that leads to the cessation of sufferings. The Buddha Himself has followed and lived consistently with the Path. In learning the history of the Sakya-Muni Buddha, we know that the Buddha had gone through many difficulties in the search for the Path. He had to leave His kingdom and family, and spend six years in learning centres. He practised severe austerity and was once on the verge of death. All that the Buddha had done is to find a path for the liberation of living beings from sufferings. When the Path was found, the Buddha went to most areas in North of India to spread the Path for 45 years. Therefore, we naturally express our respect and worship to the Buddha with all our heart. We feel that the Buddha is a cooling breeze in a summer noon, or a tree shade that protects us from the scorching sunshine. Eventually, we want to take refuge in the Buddha: We are taking Namó in the Buddha. This taking Namó action is our mental heart, our Bodhi Citta, which should be originated from no base (Diamond Sutra). However, if we do not feel that we need to take Namó in the Buddha, it is due to our bad karma and our ignorance. In that case, making repentance, learning the Buddha's life, practising His teachings, prostrating in front of Buddha statues, praying Buddha's names, taking pilgrimage to the Buddha places and monasteries, etc. are efficient ways that help our Bodhi Citta to raise.

Through the Buddha's history and Buddhist stories, we also learn that by following the Buddha's teachings, millions of people have transcended to nirvana, a realm free of sufferings, even in their life times. By living in the Buddha's teachings, we will have right understanding of all physical or mental things. We will realise the emptiness of the phenomenal world and then release ourselves from all sufferings (Heart Sutra). For lay Buddhists, the first step in practising the Buddha's teachings is to adhere to the Five Precepts. Living consistently with the precepts is actually to take refuge in the Buddha's shadow. By taking the precepts

with higher sublime levels, we are closer to the Buddha and to our Buddha nature. To live with lower precepts' level, or even worse, to violate vowed precepts is to cross the boundary of the protected zone into suffering areas. The Buddha's teaching is the guiding torch. It is actually the Dharma body of the Buddha; in the teaching, we see the Buddha. The vowed precepts are our lighting candle, our Dharma body, which has the same nature as that of the Buddha's; it also has the liberation taste. Through the precepts, we see our Buddha nature. Hence depending on our precept level, our Buddha nature appears brighter or dimmer. We respect and worship the Dharma body even when it may need to sacrifice our human bodies to protect the Dharma one. We take Namó in the Dharma.

It is important to note that taking Namó in the Buddha, at least at some basic levels such as paying respect to the Buddha, before learning and practising the Buddha's teachings, is essentially necessary. Otherwise, we never truly understand the teachings.

The Sangha, a community of venerable monks and nuns, has been practising and spreading the Dharma. Today we have a precious opportunity to know the Buddha and His teachings thanks to generations of Sangha. We see the Buddha and the Dharma in the Sangha. They are live models for us on the Path. We respect and take refuge in the Sangha: we are taking Namó in the Sangha.

### **3. Three Jewels in Buddhists' Daily Lives**

Once we have taken Namó in the Three Jewels, we should conduct our daily activities accordingly. We should keep in control our thoughts, speeches and actions at any time, even in sleeps. We should learn the Buddha's stories as well as His virtuous vows. Before carrying out any activity, we should clearly know what we are going to do. We should check what or how the Buddha did or would do when He was in a situation like we today; we should ask ourselves whether the activity is consistent with the Dharma. If we cannot recall a similar situation in the Buddha's life, or the relevant teaching of the Buddha, we should examine our mind to know the motivation of the activity.

Every living being has a Buddha nature, which is the origin of the Four Immeasurables: loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and non-attachment. A thought, speech or action consistent with our Buddha nature should originate from our heart and go through our mind, i.e. it should be a product of love and understanding. Our Buddha nature is clear like the light of a full moon. However due to the cloud layers of ignorance, illusion and prejudices, we cannot see the moon, our true nature. Practising meditation, e.g., following the in-and-out breathing or contemplating on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, will help

us blow away these cloud layers. Practising the Four Immeasurables will sow wholesome seeds in our mental field, the alaya. Slowly, our alaya will become pure and clean:

*"Body: the bodhi tree.*

*Mind: the brilliant mirror.*

*Cleaning: the daily need.*

*No dust there should be."*

If our alaya has many bad seeds due to our activities in the past, it is then not an easy task to recognise our Buddha nature. The bad karma will prevent us from practising the Buddha's teaching, from taking Namó in the Three Jewels. In that situation, recalling an image of the Buddha that we saw somewhere in a book or a shrine, prostrating in front of Buddha statues, praying Buddhas' Names, etc. will help us sow more good seeds in our alaya. Foremost, making repentance in front of the Three Jewels and keeping in contact with Dharma friends are the best ways to neutralise our bad karma.

One day, when the mental field has only wholesome seeds, it will transcend to the supreme wisdom, the mirror-wisdom (adarsa-jnana):

*"Bodhi tree: no existence!*

*Brilliant mirror: just illusion!*

*All is emptiness.*

*Where dust then should be?"*

Then in that state we will see that:

Body: the bodhi tree.

Mind: the brilliant mirror.

They are the Fullness.

Dust, mind: all the same!

## **4. Taking Namó Ceremony**

Is it sufficient to practise the Buddha's teaching in daily life without attending a Taking Namó ceremony? Yes, however, people often forget easily what they had decided or promised, except those with high significance. The image of the serene Sangha in the respectful Buddha shrine during the ceremony in which we loudly read our vow to take Namó in the Three Jewels will be deeply imprinted in our mental field. This very image will be easily recalled in our daily life even when we

are in a dream. It reminds us to follow the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha in our thoughts, speeches and actions. In the ceremony, a Bhikkhu or Bhikkhuni will represent the Three Jewels to witness our vowing. We then are given a Dharma name: the wanderer has now officially walked on the Way, the path of loving kindness and compassion.

During the time of the Buddha, the following procedure was used during a Taking Namō ceremony. First, a person shows their respect and worship in the Three Jewels by kneeling in front of the Buddha or one of His disciples. The person then pronounces the following threefold formula known as the "Three Refuges" (ti-sarana):

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|---|---|
| • <i>Buddham saranam gacchami</i><br><i>Dhammam saranam gacchami</i><br><i>Sangham saranam gacchami</i>                               | • <i>I go for refuge in the Buddha</i><br><i>I go for refuge in the Dharma</i><br><i>I go for refuge in the Sangha</i>  |
| • <i>Dutiyampi Buddham saranam gacchami</i><br><i>Dutiyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami</i><br><i>Dutiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami</i> | • <i>For the second time,</i><br><i>I go for refuge in the Buddha</i><br><i>For the second time,</i><br><i>I go for refuge in the Dharma</i><br><i>For the second time,</i><br><i>I go for refuge in the Sangha</i> |
| • <i>Tatiyampi Buddham saranam gacchami</i><br><i>Tatiyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami</i><br><i>Tatiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami</i> | • <i>For the third time,</i><br><i>I go for refuge in the Buddha,</i><br><i>For the third time,</i><br><i>I go for refuge in the Dharma</i><br><i>For the third time,</i><br><i>I go for refuge in the Sangha</i>   |

## 5. Conclusion

As a person going in darkness, we now have a golden opportunity to take Namō in the Three Jewels, the Buddha, the perfectly enlightened one; the Dharma, the Path of liberation from ambition, anger and ignorance; and the Sangha, the virtuous community practising and spreading the Dharma. Actually, the Three Jewels all are manifestations of the Universal Buddha; the Buddha exists in the Dharma and the Sangha. Ultimately, the Buddha exists everywhere and at any time (Tathagata). By sincerely taking Namō in the Three Jewels, we will see the Buddha in every grain of rice we are eating, in the shirt keeping us warm, in the poor, the rich, animals, insects, trees, plants, mountains, rivers, etc. We will then respect every thing even the weakest or the tiniest.