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# BUDDHIST PRAYER

BY

Prof. Pe Maung Tin

Published By

U BA SEIN

Burma Christian Literature Society,  
143, St. John's Rd. Rangoon

Published For

The Study Centre On Buddhism  
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Buddhism according to the Theravada School is a way of salvation without a Saviour. If we would attain Nibbana we ourselves must tread the Path; the Buddha only shows the Way. We must work out our own salvation. We ourselves are responsible for our own actions; and by our actions we make our character. We are all self-made!

"By self is evil done,  
By self is one defiled;  
By self is evil not done,  
By self is one purified.  
Both defilement and purity depend on oneself;  
No one is purified by another." (*Dhammapada*)

And the texts tell us that we are heirs of our own deeds, bearers of our own deeds, that we spring from our deeds and that through our deeds alone must we change our character so that we may win deliverance from suffering. The Ven. Narada Mahathera writes in *the Light of the Dhamma* Vol. I, No. IV: "For there is no Almighty Being who rules His subjects and rewards and punishes them accordingly. Buddhists, on the contrary, understand that sorrow and happiness one experiences are the natural outcome of one's own good and bad actions. A Buddhist, who is fully convinced of the doctrine of Kamma does not pray to another to be saved but confidently relies on himself for his salvation." Kamma means action, deed.

"According to Buddhism, the universe is governed by everlasting, unchangeable laws of righteousness, not by any god or any Supreme Being who can hear and answer prayers.....Understanding that neither a god nor ceremonies can help or save him, the true Buddhist finds no place for prayer; he feels compelled to rely on his own efforts and and thus gains self-confidence" - writes the Mahathera U Thittila, lecturer at the University of Rangoon in *the Path of the Buddha*.

It is precisely because they are so conscious of the power of Kamma that Buddhist laymen and women do meritorious deeds first and then pray, not necessarily to God, for whatever they want, just as a man having earned money for a piece of work done were to go to the shops to buy what he wanted. We give a few examples from the Inscriptions of Pagan, where all sorts of prayers are found, selfish prayers and self-less prayers, altruistic prayers and imprecatory

prayers. Theravada Buddhism having been introduced into Pagan in the eleventh century, the people of Pagan in their zeal for the pure religion made works of merit such as pagodas and monasteries, by virtue of which they expected to enjoy certain results mentioned in their prayers. It is instructive to note the different things or results prayed for. Thus in the famous Myazedi Inscription, Raja Kumar having dedicated a pagoda with three villages to his father, King Kyanzittha prays: "May this deed of mine be the means of my obtaining omniscient Knowledge". Thubarit, a minister, shows intense love for his king, when he prays that as a result of his good deed in building a cave and a monastery and so on, he desires to be reborn in the meantime before he reaches Nibbana together with his king. As a result of doing various works of merit such as a pagoda, a cave, Sawminlat prays for the peace of Nibbana.

The most interesting prayers are by women. The last Queen Saw, heart-broken by the death of her son prays for rebirth as a Spirit: "Forasmuch as I have done this work of merit, and now my mother, father and all my relatives are dead, and I alone am left, I pray that it may last throughout the 5000 years of the religion. When I die and pass from hence, as a result of this work of merit, may I become a heavenly spirit worshipping night and morning inseparably the Lord's tooth-relic."

Listen to the selfless prayer of the Lady of Amana: "I wish to abandon a body oppressed by countless miseries. I long to reach the noble bliss of Nibbana, the end of all misery. So I have resigned my dear and precious gold, silver and other treasures and built a monastery; and I have offered all my paddy fields, gardens and slaves excepting none for the happiness of the monks, pupils of the Lord who dwell therein, pure in piety and seeking the three graces of piety, meditation and wisdom. May the merit of our good deed go to the King, ruler of us all and lord of land and water. By virtue of the good deed may he live long, seeking the increase and happiness of all who live in all the realms and upholding this good deed. May the queens also and all the ladies-in-waiting share it. May they look at one another with eyes of love, without one speck of anger or cloying. May all kings, princes, ministers and people who are living now and will come in the future also get it, take part in it. May the King of death and all creatures also get it. May those who desire worldly prosperity get it. May those who prefer to do good deeds, do them. For myself I pray that I may never be covetous, insatiate, wrathful, bullying, ignorant, dull, stingy,

mean, unfaithful, frivolous, forgetful nor inconsiderate. But I would wander in the round of births full of these graces—modest in my wants, easily satisfied, mild of temper, pitiful, wise, conscious of causes, generous, large-handed, faithful, earnest, unforgetful and considerate—and may I win the noble law of deliverance in the very presence of the Lord Mittarya."

Now listen to the prayer of a vain and selfish woman, the Lady of Minwaing: "Meantime before I reach Nibbana, by virtue of this great work of merit I have done, when I am born a man may I be more royally happy and prosperous than all other men. Or when I am born a spirit, may I be full of colour and dazzling brightness, more noble and triumphant than any other spirit. More especially I would have a long life, freedom from disease, a lovely complexion, a pleasant voice, and a beautiful figure. I would be the loved and honoured darling of every man and spirit. Gold, silver, rubies, pearls, corals and other lifeless treasure, and elephants, horses, and other living treasure—may I have lots of them. By virtue of my power and glory I would be triumphant, with pomp and retinue, with fame and splendour. Wherever I am born, may I be fulfilled with the noble graces of charity, piety, faith, wisdom and so on and not know one speck of misery; and after I have tasted and enjoyed the happiness of men and the happiness of the spirits, when the noble law of deliverance called the Fruit of Sanctity blossoms, may I at the last attain the peaceful bliss of Nibbana."

We give one more example, this time from the well-known Jataka story of Wethandaya in Burmese. Two sisters, daughters of a king made offerings of sandalwood perfume and a breast-ornament respectively to the Buddha Vipassi. The elder sister prayed thus: "Because of the good deed I have done in offering this sandalwood perfume to thee, Lord of glory, may I, in time to come, become the mother of a Buddha like thee, teacher of the three kinds of men." And the younger sister prayed thus: "Because of the good deed I have done in offering this breast-ornament to thee, Lord of glory, in the meantime before I reach Nibbana, may this breast-ornament always rest on my body." And the Buddha expressed approval of the sisters' prayers.

A prayer may be met by a counter-prayer. In *the Rajadhirit Ayedawbon* we read that Bawlawkyandaw who bore a grudge against the King, his father, went to the Shwemawdaw Pagoda, took off the bracelets, rings and ornaments he was wearing and offered them praying: "When I pass away from

the life I wish to be the son of a king of a separate country and fight my father in battle". When the King came to hear of this, he ascended the Shwemawdaw Pagoda and having offered his diadem prayed thus: "When Bawlawkyandaw becomes a prince of a separate country and fight me in battle, may I fight him with an elephant and win."

Thus the desired result to be obtained by prayer may be good for oneself and others or bad for others. It is good when one prays for Buddhahood and so on or when one shares the merit of one's good deed with others. It is bad when one desires to obtain an advantage over another as in a counter-prayer or when one utters curses on others for doing injury to one's work of merit as in an inscription of Pagan. Here is a typical curse of Pagan: "Whoso among my relatives, monks or laymen, robs or violates one slave, one acre among the slaves and fields which I have offered, may his glory not be great as a man, nor his life long. The King's wrath be upon him. Danger of fire, danger of water, danger of the axe of lightning, danger of elephant, horse, and leopard, tiger, man-ape befall him. May he suffer terrible disease, which doctors try to cure but cannot. May he die a sudden death. Dead also, may he be cooked in the great hell Avici. May he not behold any of the coming Buddhas"

The desired result may also be obtained through an earnest prayer or wish expressed after a solemn protestation of truth called an Act of Truth. Truth plays an important role in Buddhism. The Four Noble Truths discovered by the Buddha form the bedrock of his religion. It is said that truth is more excellent than all the flavours on earth and that recluses and Brahmans who stand on Truth cross over to the other bank of birth and death. The power of an Act of Truth may be illustrated by the Jataka story of a country woman who bore a child by the King. When she presented the child to the King at the court, the King denied that he was the father of the child, even though she showed him the ring that he had given her. In despair she said that she had no refuge other than Truth and threw the child into the air with the solemn protestation that if it was the King's child it would stay aloft, if not it would fall to the ground and die. And the child stayed aloft seated cross-legged.

The *Majjhima Nikaya* tells the story of the conversion of the bandit Angulimala. One day the Reverend Angulimala was pained by the sight of a woman in difficult and protracted labour. He told the Buddha, who told him to go back to the woman and say: "From my birth onwards, sister, I

am not aware that, knowingly, I have ever taken the life of a living thing; may this my Act of Truth bring welfare to you and your child unborn". When Angulimala pointed out that he could not say so without telling a deliberate lie, for he had knowingly taken many a life, the Buddha told him to say instead: "From my birth into the Noble Order onwards, sister, I am not aware...child unborn". When he went back and said this Act of Truth, all went well with mother and child.

The *Ratana Sutta*, which is recited during the performance of the Paritta ceremony to ward off danger and sickness is a declaration of Truth about the Three Gems, with the refrain: "By this Truth let there be prosperity."

A popular Burmese verse says that a young man and a young woman go to the glittering pagoda on the hill-top to plight their troth to be united in wedlock. The plighting of troth here should not be construed to mean an Act of Truth which employs a different verb. The meaning simply is that the young people being deeply in love make a vow to be faithful to each other and pray that they may be united in wedlock. Lovers also go to the pagoda when the course of their love does not run smooth. In Natshinnaung's Poems, a girl in distress complains to the Pagoda that her lover has not loved her as before or that he is in love with another girl or that he has wronged her before they are married. Maddened by the refusal of his lady-love to respond to his message of love, a man goes to the Pagoda and prays that the Lord of the Pagoda may soothe his heart by using his influence so that she may turn towards him with thoughts of love. In fact the Shwezigon is described as being renowned among men and spirits as the Pagoda that grants whatever is prayed for by those who are tormented by worry, cooling their hearts. And there are many pagodas that are called Hsutaungbyi or prayer-fulfilling Pagodas. The Rev. Kyiganshingyi in his Myittaza writes a model prayer for a layman to a Hsutaungbyi Pagoda: "By virtue of the good deed I have done in offering thee this food and cool water and this bunch of flowers may I get all the things I have prayed for. May I be unparalleled in length of life, beauty, happiness, strength, readiness of wit, pomp, and fame. May I in all my existences be able to learn in an instant without special study the Pitakas and the Vedas and the 18 arts and sciences so that I may be able readily to instruct all men as though pointing out the full moon in the sky. And may men and spirits in the Three planes of existence love me as dearly as a mother loves her son." A further reference to prayers

being dictated by monks is given below—

Prayer can urge us to take the necessary steps for the attainment of the desired object.

U Ba Htu, a retired member of the Burma Judicial Service recalls in *the Light of Dhamma*, Vol. IV No. 1, how he and his friends while they were students at the Rangoon Government High School fifty years ago used to go to the Shwedagon Pagoda: "There we lit our candles, offered our flowers and respectfully worshipped at the Pagoda. You may be tempted at this point to ask what else we did! Of course, having done these meritorious deeds with the best of youthful volitions we did pray and very fervently too, to pass our examinations. We did not stop there. At school we implemented those prayers by earnest efforts over our lessons and when the time came, we took our examinations with courage and confidence with the result that we passed our examinations without much difficulty". No doubt it was their earnest efforts over their lessons that enabled them to pass their examinations, but it is interesting to note that their efforts were preceded by their prayers, which put them in the right frame of mind to do their studies. As the late U Shwe Zan Aung, translator of two books in the Translation Series of the Pali Text Society, London, writes in *the Journal of Burma Research Society*, Vol. VII Part II: "A strong driving force of desire urges us from within and a genuine prayer prompted by such a feeling will help us to form a definite goal. Such a prayer, if repeated in earnest, will aid us in the concentration of our thought on the object prayed for. The concentration of our mind re-acts on our will which grows with growth and is strengthened with strength. With our developed will-power, we would build up, or reform, our character so as to reach the end in view. Prayer as an expression of desire is answered, when that desire is realised."

The story of Sumedha as told in the Jataka book is another illustration of the urging power of prayer. The ascetic Sumedha prayed a prayer at the feet of Buddha Dipankara that he might become a Buddha himself; and that prayer sustained him in his long and arduous career as a Bodhisatta fulfilling the Ten Perfections until after many births he was qualified to be born as Gotama the Buddha. The Ten Perfections are liberality, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, resolution, goodwill, forbearance, truthfulness and equanimity.

When Shin Thilawuntha's poem on the Perfections was published, Shin Ratathara made a comment that the Perfections alone would not get the desired effect, and that one

must pray before practising the Perfections. Shin Thilawuntha took that comment to heart, and composed his poem on Prayer.

An altruistic prayer begins at home with the members of the family praying for one another's welfare and extends its scope gradually until it develops into an all-embracing formula of Metta or lovingkindness; "May all beings be without enmity, without ill-will, without harm, well. May all living things, all creatures, all persons, all those who are included in the term individuality be without enmity, without ill-will, without harm, well." In the *Kyigan Shingyi Myittasa*, a mother prays for the speedy return of her son from a distant village and she prays that all may be well with him and that his journey may be pleasant.

A collective prayer is made as occasion arises, as when the Buddhist community of Rangoon offered prayers at the Shwedagon Pagoda for the recovery of the ailing Queen Victoria of Great Britain. That gave rise to an interesting correspondence in the papers, in which a non-Buddhist who thought that Buddhists never prayed learnt that he was wrong. It was reported in the papers that on Sunday 21st February, 1960 U Nu, Premier-elect of Burma led a party of over 2,000 members and prayed at the Shwedagon Pagoda for the prosperity and safety of the Union of Burma.

A Buddhist like all human beings will pray for recovery from illness. And his relatives and friends will join him in his prayers. Prayers are often supplemented by astrological devices to avert the evil influences of unlucky stars, and the appropriation of spirits, aided by a verbal suggestion of faith in the ability of the healer to effect a cure.

The Buddhist Common Prayer is as follows: "I beg leave! I beg leave! In order that any offence I may have committed either by deed or by mouth or by thought may be made void; I raise my clasped hands to the forehead and crouch down humbly to worship, adore, and revere the Three Gems the Buddha, the Law and the Clergy once, twice, three times. As the result of this act of reverence may I be freed at all times from the 4 planes of woe, the 3 scourges, the 8 local faults, the 5 enemies, the 4 corruptions, the 5 ruinations and quickly attain the Path, the Fruition and the Noble Law of Nibbana, Lord."

It may be noted that the prayer comes after the act of reverence.

The Ashin Zanakabhiwuntha makes some illuminating comments on it in his book *Ratanagonyi*, in Burmese.

The first comment is about the offences: "We should consider whether one's offences may be made void by this act of reverence. Ordinary offences against one's teacher, parents, grandparents and so on and the Three Gems may be made void by a sincere act of reverence, born of remorse and done in whole-hearted humility, to the person offended against or if he is no more, to his grave, or if that is not possible, to the Lord and his clergy. But very grave offences and offences such as lifetaking and theft cannot be made void by a mere asking for pardon and an act of reverence. But by not allowing such demeritorious acts to arise through remorse and by striving only for meritorious acts, some of the demeritorious acts may not get an opportunity to give results, and may be made void."

The second comment deals with the formula of prayer:

"There are many forms of the 'I beg leave' worship in Burma today. Because they have not come down as written records we cannot say which is right, and which is wrong. This particular form seems to have come into vogue from the writings of the teachers of old made to meet the wishes of the many. We make annotations because almost all true Buddhists know it, every time they worship or take the Precepts, not because we ourselves are satisfied. In the days of the Buddha, when one approached to worship the Lord or the clergy, one would sit at a respectable distance with hands raised to the forehead and say what one had to say. A new convert would say 'I go to the Buddha, the Law and the Clergy for refuge. From this day forth regard me as a lay disciple who takes refuge in the Three Gems' and would depart respectfully without reciting any 'I beg leave' formula of worship. But nowadays when people say the 'I beg leave' formula of worship in showing reverence to their teacher, parents and grandparents and others on the big days of the water festival, Lent and so on, they do not know how to use the right thing in the right place."

The third comment is about the question whether prayer is answered or not: "In the Jataka Stories after offering something to the Noble Ones such as Individual Buddhas and the saints, the donor prays for something he wants, such as a distinguished birth in the round of births, knowledge of the Four Truths as known by the Noble Ones. And the Individual Buddhas and the Saints who receive the offerings give a blessing (literally give a boon) saying 'May it be fulfilled as desired.' And that prayer for something desired r

after something has been offered can give result in a suitable existence. But note that the result is obtained not because of the blessing given but because of the donor's meritorious deed.

"Nowadays people worship by reciting the 'I beg leave' formula and pray that they may be freed from the 4 planes of woe, the 3 scourges and so on and quickly attain the Path, the Fruition and Nibbana. And the monk who gives the blessings adds something extra such as long life, beauty of complexion. Will one get everything that is prayed for, every blessing that is given? Certainly not. Only by avoiding evil deeds, so that one may be worthy of one's prayer (so that one may be freed from the 4 planes of woe, and so on) and by strenuously doing the meditation exercises (in order that Nibbana may be attained quickly) or by fulfilling the Perfections after hard work will one get the result commensurate with one's prayer. If one were to get everything that is prayed for, every blessing that is given, those respectable donors of pagodas, and donors of monasteries who have made hundreds and thousands of prayers not only in their past existences but also in the present existence ought to be exceedingly beautiful and rich, millionaires of gold in this present existence according to their prayers and also get the Path, Fruition and Nibbana (quickly) today or tomorrow, so to speak. But alas! such is not the case. Therefore, be sure to note that to do solid work oneself will yield results rather than to depend on one's half-hearted prayers or any blessing given verbally by the monk. But so as not to go against the majority do pray according to the traditional 'I beg leave' formula and say 'Yes Sir' to the blessing given by the monk."

The last comment gives the definition of prayer and continues to discuss its result:

"Prayer means asking for a desired result either by dwelling upon it by thought or expressing it by word. The desired result can be obtained when one does a good deed and prays. But one will have to do a good deed commensurate with one's prayer. One will have to fulfill the Perfections for a period of 4 incalculables and 100,000 worlds, if one wants Buddhahood, for a period of one incalculable and 100,000 worlds, if one wants to be a Chief Disciple like Ashin Sariputra; for a period of 100,000 worlds, if one wants to be a great disciple like Ashin Mahakassapa and Ashin Ananda or a distinguished woman saint like Stepmother Gotami, Sister Khema, Sister Uppalavanna. If a man, who does not want a particular state of birth but wants Nibbana quickly

in the ordinary way, makes strenuous effort, it is possible for him to get it even in this present life, or during the dispensation of the Buddha. He is sure to get it during the time of the Lord Arimetteyya. The right way to pray is for one to ask in one's own way for what one wants. Nowadays because, when one does a meritorious deed, monks dictate the prayers with the pouring of water, it is difficult for a prayer dictated by the monk to agree with the wishes of the donor. And a prayer repeated mechanically after the monk for some unexpected result is difficult to realize. At an initiation ceremony in Lower Burma as a rather well-known chief monk was pouring water to pray that a certain donor of charity alone might get all the results and virtues obtained by the Chief Disciples and Great Disciples, a well-informed donor asked 'Can your donor, Sir, get all the results which even really great saints can only get severally?' The Chief monk blushed with displeasure. Moreover at the Pagoda in some towns, as at the Shwedagon platform when water, flowers and so on are offered, the donors give money to the water-carrier to say the prayers. All such things are improper. In the past when the Buddhas-to-be did meritorious deeds they prayed for what they desired, pouring water where water was available, and not pouring water where there was no water. They did not make a long ceremony of it as people do nowadays with 'Reverend Sir, we and so on.' Therefore since praying in one's own way for a desired thing is in accordance with tradition, the present method of saying one's prayer as dictated by a monk should be resolutely avoided."

In the comments given above we have translated the Burmese word *Hsupay* as "give a blessing", which fits the context better than the literal meaning, "give a boon". The same word is used in the sense of giving a blessing in all acts of reverence towards one's parents, grandparents, relatives, elders, teachers and monks when the person revered gives blessings to the person doing reverence. Thus a son in doing reverence to his parents would say "Remembering all the gracious acts you have done in feeding, instructing, caring for and looking after me, I do reverence to you with this cool water (or bread, flower or candle). Because of this meritorious act of reverence, may any offence I may have done be made void and may I live in health and prosperity, body and mind!" And the parents would give blessings thus: "Because of this meritorious act of reverence, our son, may your prayer be fulfilled; may you have intelligence and wisdom so that you may be a son of good family able to preserve your parents' lineage".

The literal meaning of giving a boon is used as when in Jataka literature, Porithada desiring to honour King Thuthathoma for his preaching of four stanzas gave boons or when the King of Spirits out of love for his queen gave her ten boons.

There is a giving of merit when one shares it with others as in the prayer of the Lady of Amana quoted above. When those who hear the prayer in which merit is being shared give approval saying: "Well done! An act of merit has been accomplished", they get the merit equally with the donor. When one says, "Well done" in a perfunctory manner one gets only a small amount of merit. If one shows jealousy over a good deed done by another, one gets demerit.

Buddhists may say their prayers to themselves when they are certain of the desired result as in an Act of Truth, which however is seldom performed nowadays. Set in an holy atmosphere, the Pagoda is the most appropriate place for inducing the right volitions for a prayer. And when a Buddhist crouches down to a Pagoda to worship or pray, whether it be the glittering shrine on the hilltop or his private shrine at his house, he does so really to the Buddha represented by the Pagoda. An act of reverence to the Buddha, involving concentration on the significance and truth of the words uttered in worship or prayer, does not go unrewarded, although the Buddha being in Nibbana cannot acknowledge it.

A philosopher like the Reverend U Thittila, who as quoted above, finds no place for prayer in Buddhism considers an offering of flowers as an occasion, not for praying, but for meditating on the truth that all things are subject to change and suffering and are unreal thus:-

"These flowers I offer in memory of the Buddha, the Holy One, the Supremely Enlightened one. These flowers are now fair in form, glorious in colour, sweet in scent. Yet all will soon have passed away, their fair form withered, their bright hues faded, their scent gone. It is even so with all conditioned things which are subject to change and suffering and are unreal. Realizing this, may we attain Nibbana, perfect peace, which is real and everlasting."

(*Path of the Buddha*)

But an ordinary man or woman makes an offering of flowers and prays thus: "By offering these flowers, which are sweet in scent, fair in form, may I in all my existences obtain wide knowledge and may I be endowed with the beauty and fragrance of virtuous qualities"

(*Ratanagonyi*)

Although Theravada Buddhism does not admit the concept of a Saviour, it retains the concept of a Bodhisatta, that is, a being who is undergoing a long and severe training to become a Buddha. In Mahayana Buddhism we find the Bodhisatta praying for the salvation of all beings. King Alaungsithu of Pagan prays the prayer of a Bodhisatta in his Shwegugyi Pali Inscription :—

“ By this my gift, whatever boon I seek,  
It is the best of boons to profit all ;  
By this abundant merit I desire  
Here nor hereafter no angelic pomp  
Of Brahmas, Suras, Maras ; nor the state  
And splendour of a monarch ; nay, not even  
To be the pupil of the Conqueror.  
But I would build a causeway sheer athwart  
The river of Samsara, and all folk  
Would speed across thereby until they reach  
The Blessed City.”

*Pe Maung Tin*

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