

BUDDHIST PRAYER.

The English word prayer was derived, through Old French *preier*, from Latin *precari*—to pray, which was from Latin *prex*, *precis*—a request, a word connected with Sanscrit root *pracch*—to ask. The corresponding word for prayer in Pali is *Patthanā* from root *patth*—to ask. The Burmese word is *Chu-ton*: (lit. asking for a favour), *ton*: being from an Ariyan root *dhan*—to ask.

Thus prayer means a request. A request implies a wish for what is asked, and for a wish to be effective, it further implies a belief in the existence of some power which can answer such a request. Hence savages and semi-civilised races offer invocatory prayers to their spirits in one form or other. Christians, Mahomedans, Hindus and others address their prayers to their respective gods.

Buddhists also pray. The Buddha exhorted his disciples: “Bhikkhus! Pray for Bliss. Having prayed, make gifts, observe moral precepts and develop culture.”¹ But their prayers have been a puzzle to Europeans and Americans who cannot think of a prayer without a personal God to hear and grant it. For instance Professor Huxley thought that Buddhism, recognising no God, sanctions no prayers.² Again, when the Buddhist community of Rangoon offered prayers at the Shwe Dagon Pagoda for the recovery of our late inestimable Queen-Empress Victoria from her last illness before death, Professor Tilbe of the American Baptist College gratuitously took them to task by asking a series of questions, in the *Rangoon Gazette*, respecting the right of Buddhists to pray, the legitimacy and utility of their prayers, etc. But the gravity of the occasion called forth from all sides adverse criticisms which soon hushed the learned Professor into silence.

Who answers the prayers in Buddhism? It is recorded in the commentary on the *Cariya-pitaka* that Phussati, a queen of Sikra, before her death prayed to her husband for ten favours in the next existence. It must not, however, be understood that the King of gods granted her prayer.

This will be better understood from the following story of utilitarian prayers in the commentary on the *Dhammapada*.—There was a famine in Benares when even the wealthiest was affected. The millionaire Menḍa and his family, however, gave up their last meal to an Arahant to whom they all prayed as follows:—Menḍa prayed that all his granaries might be full for the benefit of the public. His wife also prayed that she might be in a position to help all the poor with meals. Their son prayed that his bag of Rs. 1,000/- might be inexhaustible after distribution among the needy, while the daughter-in-law prayed that her supply of a basket of seed might be similarly inexhaustible. Lastly, their slave prayed that his labours in the field might increase sevenfold. The Arahant answered: ‘May you very quickly accomplish what you wish or pray for! Let all your good aspirations be fulfilled, even as the full moon!’ Their wishes were realised. But it is clear

¹ *The Cariya-pitaka.*

² *Ethics and Evolution.*

that it was not the Arahant who actually granted their prayers. His supplementary prayer merely acted as an exhortation to the well meaning and public spirited family in furtherance of their laudable object of helping the poor.

In Buddhism impersonal Karma or character is substituted for the personal God of Christianity. Karma is ultimately reducible to the will (*cetanā*) which is a power. The belief in a power may be used by Christians as an argument for the existence of God. But Buddhist prayers are not prompted by the vague fear of such a Being who, if not appeased by supplications, will visit his own children with harm, nor are they based on the conception equally vague that such a Being, if pleased, will bestow favours merely for the asking. Thunder as an angry weapon hurled from Olympus is a thing of the past. And Buddhists pray no more to please a personal God than they do to avert his anger.

Then are Buddhist prayers illegitimate? An act is illegitimate only when it does not conform to established laws. A Buddhist prayer does not clash with the fundamental principles of Buddhism. It works in harmony with the law of Karma, since, we shall see, it aids in the formation of character.

The utility of Buddhist prayers in the abstract is best set forth in the commentary on the *Sutta-saṅgaha* as well as in the commentary on the *Majjhima Nikāya* as follows:—

“The destiny of one who possesses faith, virtue, learning, liberality and wisdom, but does not pray is uncertain; the destiny of one who prays, but does not possess the above mentioned five qualities is also not certain; the destiny of one who prays as well as possesses them is certain. True. In the same way as it is not certain whether a stick thrown upward into the sky will fall by the head or tail or will fall flat, even so it is not certain where one will be reborn. Therefore, in performing a meritorious act it is proper to pray for a definite object.”

Psychologically, Buddhist prayers resolve themselves into two main classes:—

- Main Classes of Buddhist Prayers.**
- (a) *Tañhā-patthanā*—prayer as an outburst of a coarser desire;
 - (b) *Sammāchanda-patthanā*—prayer as an expression of a right inclination.

Each of these classes is again either egoistic or altruistic. That is, a man may pray for himself or others with a baser or nobler desire. Egoistic prayers are termed *atta-sineha-patthanā* (prayer due to love of self) or *atta-sampatti-patthanā* (prayer for self-aggrandisement).

The most general form of prayer said by Burman Buddhists usually at the commencement of any act of worship is as follows:—

‘I beg leave! I beg leave to adore the Triple Gem—the Buddha, the Law and the Church—three times by act, word and thought.

By this act of worship—

May I be free from existence in the four miserable planes!

May I be free from the three scourges of mankind!

May I be free from the eight local faults!
 May I be free from the five enemies!
 May I be free from the eight perils!
 May I be free from the ten punishments!
 May I be free from the ninety-six diseases that flesh is heir to!
 And last of all may I attain Nibbāna!'

It will be noticed that the last prayer for Nibbāna, though couched in egoistic form, is really altruistic.

Egoistic prayers are, strictly speaking, opposed to the spirit of Buddhism, but countenanced in view of the human frailty, since it is not easy to attain Nibbāna in one life. It is clear that Buddhism also recognises deprecatory prayers. Invocatory and imprecatory prayers, though mentioned in Buddhist books, are not specially sanctioned.

A definition of prayer, which does not take Buddhist prayers into account will be too narrow. Our definition should be wide so as to include prayers not of any single nation but of the whole of mankind, whatever may be the religion of each race.

Prayer may, then, be defined as *an outward expression of the inward feeling of an intense desire for a benefit*, just as a sigh is an effervescence of sorrow.

The universal necessity of prayers follows from the above definition; for, every feeling has its natural language and desire is a feeling. It must express itself somehow. And prayer, among others, is a form of language in which the desire for one's good is best expressed. It is necessary to give a free vent to one's feelings. A strong burning desire which must be allowed to expend itself seeks the line of least resistance and breaks out into a prayer through the mouth which acts as a safety valve. Nothing can be worse than the mechanical restraint put upon its natural manifestation. Dr. Carpenter writes:—"It is a doctrine now generally received among practical men that paroxysms of violent emotional excitement are much more likely to subside when they are allowed 'to work themselves off' freely without any attempt at mechanical restraint."¹ In this sense then, prayer is a necessity to afford relief by preventing an explosion of a pent-up force inside.

The mental force of desire working within a human breast is as real as the physical forces inside the bowels of the earth to cause an outburst in either case. We may, therefore, compare prayers to volcanic eruptions with the natural escape of the gaseous forces. The phenomenon is as natural as the flash of lightning which is but a discharge of atmospheric electricity.

A force is a power which acts. Though under unfavourable conditions its effect may be counteracted or neutralised by an opposing force or forces. Professor Tyndall wrote as far back as 1872: "It is not my habit of mind to think otherwise than solemnly of the feeling which prompts prayer. It is a power which I should

¹ *Mental Physiology*, p. 328.

like to see guided and not extinguished—devoted to practicable objects instead of wasted upon air. In some form or other, not yet evident, it may, as alleged, be necessary to man's highest culture."¹

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 mould and 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. But a wish is not accomplished by miraculously altering the course of nature. Everything happens according to inexorable and inflexible laws. That prayer is governed by the law of Karma may be inferred from the view that the Christian God helps only those who help themselves. Prayer as a form of energy does not reduce us to utter helplessness but rather inculcates a very high lesson of self-reliance. It rests with us whether we would utilise this available energy or dissipate it. The achievement of one's object depends not upon an external agency but upon his own Karma. Karma may be favoured by environments. Still it is left to us to adapt ourselves to environments or not. Should a man wish for wealth, property, possession, fame or power, he must work for them; should he wish for health, he must observe hygienic measures and sanitary rules. A lame man will never be able to move his paralysed limb, however much he may will. So if a man wishes to get a thing without fulfilling the necessary and adequate conditions for the accomplishment of that wish, his prayers, though repeated many a time, will never be answered. But suppose a man does a work of merit without saying any definite prayer. From the uniformity of Nature, from the law of Karma, the same desert should accrue to him as though it had been asked for. Is prayer, therefore, altogether a superfluity? My answer is in the negative. Prayer, like the helm by which a ship is steered towards its destination, acts as a guiding power in our destiny, as already referred to in a Buddhist quotation above.

Prayer occupies the same position as hope (Pali *Āsā*) in the life of an individual. One hopes to get what he prays for.

Place of Prayer to the individual, the Church and the State.

The world rests on hope. A person without hope is lost to humanity for ever.

Hope is linked with faith in the future and faith is the life-blood of any religion of which the Church, or the Order as we Buddhists call it, is the noble representative. In this connection we may mention that every Buddhist religious writer prays for the future of the religion through the success of his work. Buddhaghosa's prayer—May the religion last long and may the people have respect for it!—may be instanced as one of the prayers that have been realised.

We have seen that prayer is also associated with faith in a higher power. A sense of allegiance to such a power means loyalty which is a valuable asset in a state.

¹ *Prayer as a Form of Physical Energy.*

In hypnotism we have a very strong argument for the utility of prayers.

Every individual seeks his own good and prays for it, his egoistic prayers acting as auto-suggestions. Too much stress cannot be laid on the value of such suggestions in influencing the conduct of the individual to whom they are repeatedly made. But as in hypnosis, the success of the suggestion depends upon the individual Karma or character.

But a man may pray for others, as observed in the foregoing pages, not necessarily as an intercessor between man and God. An altruistic prayer begins with a small circle of family, the family affection being responsible for the prayer of the husband for the well-being of the wife or *vice versa*, and the parental love, for the good wishes of the parents towards their children. Next, we extend our prayers to our near relatives. This family circle is gradually widened so as to include first friends, next tribe, then race, then nation and lastly the whole world including our enemies. A prayer by Nanda for the *tree* of riches which satisfied the wants of the whole country is recorded in the commentary on the *Añguttara*. The following Buddhist love formula for all conceivable forms of creatures is a comprehensive altruistic prayer:—

May all creatures, all living things, all beings, all persons, all individuals, all females, all males, all Ariyans, all non-Ariyans, all gods, all mankind, all fallen angels be free from enmity, from care and from oppression!

May they all carry themselves happily!

May they all be freed from distress and adversity!

May they all not fall away from their respectively acquired prosperity!

May they all help themselves under the law of Karma!

The noble prayers instituted by the Metropolitan of India for the second Anniversary of the War included one even for our enemies.

But the accomplishment of the altruistic wish depends also upon the Karma or character of the person or persons for whom we pray. A parent naturally wishes for the welfare of their children. Some, however, misbehave themselves, despite the parental advice, and suffer the consequences of their misdeeds, notwithstanding the earnest prayers of the parent to the contrary. A teacher, too, wishes every pupil to learn and yet only a few become learned. The influence of parents, teachers and friends, nevertheless, form a very useful factor in the moulding of character. A man born in a wicked family is not likely to improve his character, his moral depravities, if any innate, being favoured by the atmosphere in which he moves and has his being. But association with good, pious and wise people will lead to improvement of his morals. Character, reformed under the influence of prayers, is of incalculable value to the Church.

Morally good people form good citizens and only good citizens have a sense of duty to the state. Their collective prayer for the common good of the state will result in acts of patriotism without which no state can ever thrive or flourish.

We have seen that such a guiding power and principle as prayers enables an individual to set before him an ideal towards the realisation of which he aspires. Without right aspiration a man cannot expect to succeed in his walk of life. A person who acts with a deliberate aim is more likely to hit his mark than one who acts at random. Ambition which rouses industry is necessary to get on in life. When a man wishes for success in life, there is always a certain amount of expectancy and expectant attention may be followed by assurance which is a valuable factor.

No human being is exempt from sickness. Every one is subject to diseases. And there is no one who will not pray for his own recovery from illness. His dear and near relatives as well as his friends also join him in his prayers. In order to appreciate the therapeutic value of these prayers, we have to consider a class of phenomena called faith-cures, Christian science cures, magnetic healing, hypnotic therapeutics, Buddhist *Paritta* ceremony, Burmese mental cures, healing of diseases by astrological devices to avert the evil influences of unlucky stars, by expiation of spirits, etc. Now in all these different forms of healing, various devices have been adopted according to the particular beliefs entertained by the people among whom it is practised. But there is one underlying principle of suggestion. The suggestion of cure is made first by the reputation of the healer; secondly by his earnest wish to effect a cure; thirdly by the strong faith engendered in the mind of the patient, the particular device adopted in each case helping to concentrate the mind of both the healer and the healed on the one object of cure, beside serving as a side-aid to suggestion. A prayer for recovery from illness may, therefore, be regarded as a verbal suggestion as well as a device in healing. A case is recorded in the *Timsa Nipāta* of the cure of a very loathsome disease of Prince Sothisena by the prayer of his wife Sambūla. She was suspected by her husband of infidelity on account of his affliction. And relying on her chastity she made an asseveration and prayed: 'If I be chaste as ever, may my husband be free from his disease and affliction!' It will be noticed that the chastity and faithfulness were made a condition of the fulfilment of her prayer.

Mankind pray in times of distress. For instance, they pray for safety in times of peril by seas or other straits. Thus shipwrecked sailors are recored in Buddhist scriptures as having invoked the assistance of their respective guardian spirits or gods to save them from the imminent danger of drowning. These sudden and spontaneous expressions of desire to avert the impending evils are sometimes accompanied by vows to do something in future in return for the safety. There is a story going round Burma that a jungleman crossing the Rangoon river in a small canoe was caught in a gale. He prayed that he might be safely landed and accompanied his prayer with a vow that he would gild the Shwedagon Pagoda with a packet of gold leaves. But as soon as he reached the bank safely he forgot all his promise and the votive

Prayer in Every-day
Affairs of Life.

Prayer in the Healing of
Sickness and Disease.

Prayer in Times of
Distress.

offering undertaken was never made. In any case, a deprecatory prayer in times of distress gives one hope and hope in turn gives him strength.

When Vesali was visited by such national calamities as famine, pestilence and war by demons the whole country headed by its King invited the Lord Buddha over from Sāvatti to perform the *Paritta* ceremony in order to ward off the evils which were successfully combated by the united prayers of the inhabitants led by Ānanda. The substance of the *Ratana sutta* recited on this occasion as well as on other similar occasions is as follows:—‘There is no jewel so excellent as the Buddha, the Law and the Order. By affirming this truth, may the people recover health and happiness!’ The present great European War, more than anything else, illustrates the value and utility of collective national prayers. Every true Britisher prays for one thing, namely the successful prosecution of the war to a victorious end. What is the result? Their united prayer has succeeded in miraculously raising an army of millions within the shortest possible time, by calling forth lavish contribution in men, money and materials from all parts of the British Empire. It has resulted in the transformation of traditional voluntarism into an unheard-of conscription. Thus, prayers have worked wonders.

Every nation on the face of the earth has its national ideals for its own advancement. These national ideals are the natural outcome of a nation’s wish for the accomplishment of certain national objects in view. All patriotic members of a nation have at heart the interests of the nation as a whole. If they, as one man, silently or openly pray and work for the welfare of the nation, they are sure to attain their ideals. Japan is a noble exmple. The whole nation’s prayer for a place among the great nations of the world has been answered in less than half a century.

In the foregoing pages we have referred to the united prayer of Britishers which has created Kitchener’s army. We all have prayed for the brilliant success of the Allied arms. All true British subjects have prayed for the allied victory over the Huns. In this place I shall show how our prayers affect the Empire. The recent war gift raised in Burma appealed to the generous hearts of Burmans. But the present war loan, which is quite a new thing for them, must be addressed to their heads. If the manifold advantages of the loan be put fairly and squarely before the Burman public, even the meanest subject in the state should and would participate in it. Then the smallest investor would not like to lose his money, however little his sum might be. He would, therefore, pray for the stability of the British benign rule. And as the the stability of the present *regime* depends upon the victory of the Allied nations over the Central Powers, he would also pray for the success of the Allied arms. The prayer for the stability of the British Government is the prayer for the safety of the province of Burma, which is the valuable asset of the British Empire worth securing. At present there is a lack of co-operation among the law-abiding classes who are, therefore, at a disadvantage when they are opposed to the bands of dacoits, etc. Loyal citizens would now

Prayer in Times of
National Danger.

Prayers in Relation to
National Ideals.

War Loan and Collective
Prayer.

band themselves on the side of law and order against the organisations of the lawless and the wicked. Thus while the war loan is of immense advantage to the individual because it inculcates thrift on his part and is good for the Empire because it supplies one of the sinews of the war, the collective prayer of investors, big and small, for the stability of the British Government would be of immediate benefit to Burma in the form of ensured safety and security from internal disorders.

The world cannot progress materially or spiritually without ideals. The material advancement of the world has been due to inventions which depend upon scientific ideas. Social progress has been due to socialistic movements. The recent Russian peaceful revolution is an advance towards democratic ideals. The American intervention is the maintenance of such ideals. The entire world ranged on the side of civilisation against barbarities and brutalities is but one united prayer of the Allied nations for the right against the wrong, for the triumph of right over might. It is a fervent prayer for freedom and justice. We have no doubt that this universal prayer will be answered within this year. Coming to the spiritual advancement of the world, we may instance the well known prayer of Sumedha for Buddhahood, for the good of humanity and for the progress of the world. It is recorded in Buddhist scriptures that he could attain Nibbana as a disciple during the time of Dipankara, if he liked. But he was determined to be a Supreme Buddha himself in order to save the world. So he prayed for Buddhahood at the feet of Dipankara. This prayer was neither the first nor the last of the Embryo Buddha's. His first open prayer is said to have been the outcome of his silent longings cherished for seven incalculable world-cycles. During this immense period of time he had been gradually building up his Karma or character, qualifying himself, step by step, for something better, something higher. But he had then not set before him the ideal very clearly. Led by the irresistible force of his character, his ardent desire found an outlet in open prayers for the ideal, now well defined, for thirteen more incalculable world-cycles, till his expectancy was turned into an assurance by Dipankara. Be it understood that Dipankara did not grant the prayer. He with unflinching foresight merely predicted the moral certainty of Sumedha becoming a future Buddha like himself, four incalculable world-cycles and a lakh thence. Now with an assurance of success Sumedha began to work with unflinching ardour, increased fervour and right earnestness for the accomplishment of his lofty aim. The dominant idea of Buddhahood born of right aspiration influenced his character throughout. Had he relaxed his unremitting zeal in practising the Ten Perfections after Dipankara's prophecy, he would not have achieved his object, he would not have attained his ideal. But the ideal served to keep him straight on his path with unswerved faith and with unflinching perseverance. In order words, the ideal became an impelling force towards the fulfilment of those Ten Perfections. So his prayer was answered. One-third of the world is now under the sway of Buddhism which is still gaining ground in the West and in the New World. Who can say that the peaceful conquest of Buddhism, which abhors bloodshed, will not make its

way into every occidental home and hearth which has lost its husbands, brothers and sons in the present world's conflict or conflagration?

SHWE ZAN AUNG.

Copyright© 1998 - Myanmar Book Centre & Book Promotion & Service Ltd.

Copyright© 1998 - Myanmar Book Centre & Book Promotion & Service Ltd, Bangkok, Thailand.