

The Buddha Image

Those of you who come here frequently will notice something different in the room. Our beautiful new Buddha image is a gift from Adeesha's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ekanayake, who shipped it to us from Sri Lanka. The quality of generosity is praised in all Buddhist traditions, and we're all very fortunate to be recipients of this act of generosity. Not only is the Buddha image itself a significant element in Buddhist practice (which we'll talk about momentarily), but also this *particular* image represents a link between this group and the country of Sri Lanka, one of the most ancient homes of Buddhism. Also, most of us do not have the benefit of coming from Buddhist homes. Some of us, like myself, come from homes that are actually somewhat hostile to Buddhism. So I find this gesture from the parents of a fellow Buddhist to be especially welcome and encouraging.

Inspired by this wonderful gift, I'd like to say a few words tonight about the significance of the Buddha image and, more generally, about the role of devotion in our practice.

Thanks to the arrival of the statue, I pre-empted Adeesha's talk on the Noble Eightfold Path, which he will give next week. I'm going to have to anticipate him by addressing one of the qualities of the Path, Right Effort, or at least a part of it. In describing one who practices Right Effort, the Buddha says (SN 45.8):

He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds and exerts his intent for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen.

He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds and exerts his intent for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, and culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen.

In other words, part of the Path is the intentional cultivation of positive states of mind. This, ultimately, is the main benefit of devotional practices, so let's keep this theme in mind as we discuss the practices in more detail.

The focal point of many devotional practices is the Buddha image. Since many of the Abrahamic religions are very anti-image, the Buddha image makes some westerners a bit uncomfortable, so I think it's especially important that we are clear about its significance. Broadly, there are two ways that the image can be viewed.

First, and most obviously, the image represents the founder of our tradition, the source of the teachings through which we hope to overcome suffering. Just recollecting the fact that the Buddha lived 2500 years ago and is still venerated today is encouraging. It reminds us that we are not alone, but a part of a very old tradition that has been of benefit to millions.

Second, the Buddha image is a reminder of what is possible for us. We see the image of a man and we can recall that the Buddha was human, just like us. He attained enlightenment not through divine intervention or secret rituals, but through the combination of ethical discipline and meditative practice that he has described in his teachings. We also see serenity: a calm and alert mental state that we hope to emulate, both on the cushion and off.

There are a number of traditional devotional practices in Buddhism, and I'll briefly mention some of the more common ones that are practiced by most Buddhists.

Prostrations

These are performed differently by members of different traditions, but most Buddhists do these in some forms. The Tibetan prostration is what you've seen Chris do: the full-length, stretched-out-on-the-floor thing. In the Theravada tradition, we favor what is sometimes called a "five-point" prostration, meaning that the knees, forearms, and forehead touch the ground. While it isn't exactly a prostration, you will also see many Buddhists place their hands in a position known as "anjali" and give a short bow from the waist, which is also a sign of respect and can be convenient in situations where full prostrations might be awkward or distracting.

The people who feel a little funny in the presence of a Buddha image may completely lose it when they see people *bowing* to the image. So why do we do this? It's more than a formality. It represents a surrender of the ego, the imaginary "self" that gets us into so much trouble. By bowing, we acknowledge that there is a source of wisdom greater than ourselves. There is a famous Zen story:

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868-1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen.

Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring.

The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!"

"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

We can think of the prostration as a symbolic emptying of the cup.

Offerings

It is customary to make offerings before images of the Buddha. Again, the details differ by tradition, but generally include things such as flowers, candles, incense, food, and water. As I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, generosity is a very important quality. The illusion of self has a corollary: the illusion of "mine." When we practice generosity, we weaken this illusion. Of course, the Buddha is dead, and the statue is a chunk of fiberglass. Neither has any use for candles, &c. This isn't about a recipient, but about cultivating a spirit of generosity in our own minds.

Another thing you'll notice about the offerings is that most of them exhibit impermanence in some obvious way. The flowers fade; the candles and incense burn away. These obviously impermanent things can remind us of the impermanence that is a feature of all phenomena.

Chanting

This isn't strictly related to the Buddha image, but in keeping with the general theme of devotional practices, I'll briefly address devotional chanting. Some of our chants, for example the "itipiso" with which we opened the service and the "namo tassa" that I chanted before I began speaking, serve, like the Buddha image, to remind us of the qualities of the Buddha. This, in turn, helps us to develop beneficial mind states such as gratitude, joy, and energy.

Other chants sound suspiciously like prayers. They may express our wish that all beings be happy. Like the offerings, these are not about a recipient. As much as we might wish to, our ability to benefit all beings is very limited. Nor is it about asking some supernatural force to do something. These aspirations are for the cultivation of *metta* in our own minds. This, in itself, is one of the best things we can do toward *actually* helping other beings.

These various practices, taken together, supply us with a set of tools for the practice the Right Effort through developing states of mind that are beneficial to ourselves and to others. It may be tempting to dismiss such practices as cultural trappings, but if practiced with a clear understanding, they can be a valuable complement to meditation.