
UNIT 3 INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHISM

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

Buddhism is not what we call a ‘top-down religion’, one in which a deity reveals religious and spiritual truths to humanity. It is a ‘bottom-up religion’ created by humans as an attempt to express spiritual concepts. Buddhism does not deny the existence of gods or of other worlds, and indeed the devotional practices of many Buddhist traditions involve the veneration and invocation of special beings. Buddhism is a non-theistic religion, and unlike other world religions, Buddhism is not a doctrine of revelation. The Buddha did not claim to be the bearer of a message from high. He made it clear that whatever he taught, he had discovered for himself through his own efforts.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Buddhism originated as an alternative tradition to the excessive importance given to rituals and sacrifices in Vedic tradition. It was also a reaction to the gross neglect of the social problems of the time, as well as a revolt against the hegemony of the Brahmins in the society.

The main causes for the emergence of Buddhism are:

Social: A Brahmin centered, caste based, hierarchical set up was prevalent in the society. The authority to interpret the scriptures was vested with the Brahmin. Temples, which were the centres of social life, were controlled by them. Laws of pollution were strictly imposed upon the people of the lower caste. Tribes and Dravidians were out of the caste structure.

Economic: Agriculture and cattle rearing were the main source of wealth and livelihood for the people. Brahmins found out ways and means to exploit the lower sections in the society. Kings were made to perform *yagas*, *yajnas*, and *digvijayas* through which the Brahmins benefited a lot. The ordinary people had to contribute a major portion of their income to the kings, Brahmins, and temples.

Religious: Mode of worship, rituals, and religious ceremonies were interpreted by the Brahmins to suit their interest. The *Vedas*, *Aranyakas*, *Mimamsas* and *Upanishads* were written to perpetuate the hegemony of the Brahmins. Metaphysical speculations were at their zenith, which was the prerogative of the educated class. Exploitation by the higher castes and the suffering of the ordinary people continued unabated.

It was a time of two extremes: the *Vedic*, *Upanisadic* belief in the Absolute supported by sacrifices, rituals (*yajnas*) and the materialistic philosophy of the *Charvaka*. Buddha avoided and negated the extremes, and at the same time integrated the positive elements of these two systems. He negated the existence of the soul and the Absolute, but he accepted the belief in the law of karma and the possibility of attaining liberation. His main concern was the welfare of the ordinary people. Though Buddha himself wrote nothing, the early writings were in the *Pali* and *Sanskrit* languages. Buddhist scripture is known as *Tripitaka* (Sanskrit) or *Tipitaka* (Pali), Three Baskets or Three Traditions. They are *vinaya* (Disciple), *Sutta* (Discourse), and *Abhidhamma* (Doctrinal Elaboration). Buddha was not interested in speculative or theoretical analysis of phenomena, but he was concerned about finding out practical solutions to problems in life. The influence of the early Upanishads is clear in the teachings of Buddha. Compassion and love were the predominant characteristics of Buddha. Charity was the basis of the Buddhist religion. Buddhist spirituality has four stages *ahimsa* (not harming), *maitre* (loving kindness), *dana* (giving), and *karuna* (compassion).

3.2 LIFE OF BUDDHA

Gautama or Siddhartha (566-486 B.C), who later came to be known as the Buddha or 'The Enlightened One', was born into a wealthy *Kshatriya* family, in Lumbini, at the foothills of Nepal. Gautama's father Shudhodana, a Kshatriya of the Sakya clan, was the king of Kapilavastu (present day Nepal), and his mother was *Mahamaya*. She had a dream, while on her way to her parents' home, that a white elephant entered her womb, and later Gautama was born at Lumbini. A white elephant is an important symbol for Buddhists even today. On the fifth day of the child's birth, 108 Brahmins were invited for the naming ceremony, and he was given the name Siddhartha (Siddha- achieved, *artha*-goal; one who achieved his goal). Many predicted that Siddhartha would become either a great king or a great sage. On the seventh day his mother died, and his father married his mother's sister, named Mahaprajapati Gautami. She brought up Siddhartha with love and affection. Gradually, he was called after his step-mother, '*Gautamiputra*' (son of Gautami) or '*Gautama*' (*go*-cow/bull, *tema*-the best; the best cow or bull). The child was delicately nurtured and brought up in palatial luxury. At the age of sixteen, Siddhartha married his cousin, Yasodhara.

At the age of twenty nine, while he was travelling out of the palace, he had four encounters which left a lasting impact on him. He saw an old decrepit man, a sick man, a corpse in a funeral procession, and a peaceful and serene ascetic wandering alone. The first three sights disturbed him, whereas the fourth one gave him hope and peace. After a son, named Rahula (meaning rope or fetter) was born to him, one night he left home and wandered around for many years. He studied yoga and meditation from two hermits - Udraka Ramaputhra and Alara Kalama. For some time he practised severe asceticism, but soon

realized that it did not help him. Finally, he sat down at the bottom of the *Bodhi* tree. At the age of 35, during meditation under the *Bodhi* tree (the tree of wisdom), on the bank of the river *Neranjara* at *Bodh-Gaya* (near Gaya in modern Bihar), Gotama (Gautama) attained Enlightenment. In the beginning, he was reluctant to share his experiences with any one for fear of being misunderstood. Gradually, he changed his mind and delivered his first sermon to a group of five ascetics (who were old colleagues) in the Deer Park at Lsipatana, near Varanasi. After this, he taught all kinds of people till the end of his life, irrespective of their caste, religion, or status in society. After preaching and teaching for many years, Buddha attained *Nirvana* at the age of eighty at Kushinagara in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Buddha was the only religious founder who did not make any super natural claim. He was simple and humane. Whatever he achieved could be attained by any human person. Every person has the inner potency to become an enlightened one, through constant meditation and a disciplined life. He founded the religion of Buddhism after he attained true wisdom under the Bodhi tree at *Bodhgaya*. In his first public address at the Sarnath Deer Park in Benares, Buddha spoke of the four noble truths, which are, (i) the world is full of suffering (ii) suffering is caused by desire (iii) suffering can be removed (iv) in order to remove suffering one has to overcome desire.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) What was the main reason for the establishment of Buddhism?
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- 2) Provide a brief life history of Buddha. What was his main reason for leaving the palace?
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- 3) How did Gautama became Buddha?
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3.3 FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The Buddha was least interested in metaphysical discourses or dogmas. He was concerned about ethical living, applicable to all sections of people - kings, princes, Brahmans, people of low caste, masters, servants, monks, ordinary people, etc. He taught about the nobility of a religion. The four Noble Truths

are the essence of the Buddha's teachings, which he explained in his first sermon to his old colleagues at Isipattana. These noble truths are explained in detail later, in other early Buddhist scriptures.

1. *Dukkha*: there is 'Suffering' in the world.
2. *Samudaya*: the arising or origin of 'Suffering'.
3. *Nirodha*: the cessation of 'Suffering'.
4. *Magga*: there is a path leading to the end of 'Suffering'.

The First Noble Truth: *Dukkha*

The term *Dukkha*, usually translated as 'suffering', does not communicate the full implication of the word as used in the Buddhist scriptures. Because of the misleading and unsatisfactory translation of the term, many people consider Buddhism as pessimistic. But in fact, Buddhism objectively regards a world of reality (*yathabhutam*), and suggests ways and means to attain peace, happiness, and tranquility. The word *dukkha* has a deeper meaning like 'imperfection', 'impermanence', and 'emptiness', in addition to the ordinary meanings of suffering, pain, sorrow, misery, etc. Though the Buddha presented *dukkha* as one of the four noble truths, he did not negate happiness in life. He accepted both material and spiritual happiness. Three factors are important with regard to life and enjoyment of sense pleasures; they are attraction or attachment, dissatisfaction, and freedom or liberation. Desire is the cause of suffering; desire leads to the means for satisfaction; and satisfaction leads to pleasure or pain, and disappointment. The cycle of birth and death is a necessary outcome of desire. The concept of *dukkha* can be understood from three aspects:

1. *dukkha* as ordinary suffering (*dukkha-dukkha*): birth, sickness, old age, death, separation from the beloved, grief, distress, etc.,
2. *dukkha* as produced by change (*viparinama-dukkha*): vicissitudes in life, a happy or a pleasant feeling that will change sooner or later and then produces pain, suffering or unhappiness.
3. *dukkha* as conditioned states (*samkhara-dukkha*): A being or an individual has five aggregates of attachments.

The five aggregates are the following: a) The aggregates of matter (*rupakkhandha*) are the first aggregate. The four basic elements of the universe, their derivatives, the sense organs and their corresponding objects in the external world are included in the aggregate matter. b) The second one is the aggregate of sensations (*vedanakkhandha*) and is six in number. The sensation we obtain through our senses and mind are included in this category. In Buddhism, unlike in other traditions, the mind is considered as a sense faculty or organ and not as spirit. c) The third one is aggregate of perceptions (*sannakkhandha*) and is six in number in relation to the six internal faculties. d) The fourth one is the aggregate of mental formations (*sankharakkhandha*) which include all volitional activities, both good and bad. e) The fifth is the aggregate of consciousness (*vinnanakkhandha*), based on the six internal faculties and their corresponding objects in the world. Consciousness is not spirit in Buddhist philosophy. These five aggregates together constitute the being; there is no other realist behind these aggregates to experience *dukkha*. Though the first noble truth is *dukkha*, statues of the Buddha always present a serene, calm, compassionate, and smiling face.

The Second Noble Truth, *Samudaya*: The Arising Of *Dukkha*

The oft repeated explanation of the second noble truth is: 'It is 'thirst' which produces re-existence and re-becoming, and which is bound with passionate greed. It finds fresh delight, now here and now there, namely, 1. Thirst for sense-pleasures, 2. Thirst for existence and becoming and 3. Thirst for non-existence. The 'thirst', desire, or craving manifested in different forms in human life give rise to suffering and continuity of life. But desire, though the immediate and all-pervading cause, cannot be considered as the first cause, because everything is relative and inter-dependent. 'Thirst' (*tanha*) depends on sensation, and sensation depends on contact for its origination; hence it is a circle that goes on and on, which is known as 'dependent origination' (*paticca-sammuppaada*). Most of the economic, political, social, and ethnic problems are rooted in the interest of a person or a group or a nation.

The Theory of *Karma*

Thirst as a cause for re-existence, and re-becoming is closely connected with the theory of *Karma* and rebirth. Four factors are involved in the existence and continuity of being. They are, i) ordinary material food, ii) contact of the sense organs with the external world, iii) consciousness, and iv) mental volition or will. Mental volition is *karma*; it is the root cause of existence. Mental volition (*centan*) is the desire to love, to re-exist, to continue, to become more and more. This comes under one of the five aggregates which are called mental formations. Both, the case of the arising of *dukkha* as well as the destruction of *dukkha*, are within us. Whatever has the nature of arising within *dukkha* has the nature of cessation within.

There is a basic difference between the *kamma* (Pali) and *karma* (Sanskrit) as generally understood in Buddhist tradition. The theory of *karma* in Buddhist philosophy means 'volitional action'; it means neither the action nor the result of the action. Volitional acts can be good or bad. Thirst, volition, or *karma* produces either good or bad effects; the result of these actions is to continue in the good or bad direction within the cycle of continuity (*samsara*). The result of the action will continue to manifest in the life after death. But an *Arhant* is free from impurities and defilements, thus he/she has no rebirth.

Volition, thirst, or the desire to exist, to continue, to be reborn is a tremendous force in each living being. A human person is a combination of the five aggregates, which is a combination of physical and mental energies. These energies arise, decay, and die in a person each moment. These energies once produced will continue in a series, even after death. Buddhists do not believe in a permanent substance like a soul, which takes a new life after death. But the volitional actions give rise to energy which will give rise to another act, and so it goes on and on. As long as there is the 'thirst' to exist, the cycle of continuity (*samsara*) continues.

The Third Noble Truth: *Nirodha*, 'The Cessation of *Dukkha*'

There is emancipation or liberation from suffering, which is known as the third noble truth (*dukkhanirodha ariyasacca*.) Liberation is popularly known as *Nirvana* (in Pali- *Nibbana*). *Nirvana* is the total 'extinction of thirst'. How can we understand *Nirvana*? *Nirvana* is the absolute, supra-mundane experience; hence language is not sufficient to explain it. Like the *neti, neti* approach in *Advaita Vedanta*, *Nirvana* is also explained in negative terms like, *Tanhakkhaya*

or extinction of thirst, *Asamkhata* or uncompounded or unconditioned, *Viraga* or absence of desire, *Nirodha* or cessation, *Nibbana* or blowing out or extinction.

The cessation of continuity and becoming is *Nibbana*. Extinction of the ‘thirst’ does not mean self-annihilation, because there is no self in Buddhism. *Nibbana* is the annihilation of the false idea of the self; it is the annihilation of ignorance (*avijja*). *Nibbana* is not a negative experience but is the ‘absolute truth’, which is beyond duality and relativity. Truth is that nothing is permanent; everything is dependent on the other. The realization of this is ‘to see things as they are’ (*yathabhatam*). Once the wisdom dawns, the continuity of *samsara* is broken and the mental formulations are no more capable of producing any more illusions. *Nirvana* can be attained during one’s life time itself, one need not die. *Nirvana* is the highest state of experience one can attain; it is ‘happiness without sensation’.

The Fourth Noble Truth: *Magga* - The Path

This is also known as the ‘middle path’ because it avoids the extremes - happiness through sense pleasures and happiness through severe asceticism. The entire teaching of Buddha can be summarized into the eight fold noble path. They are the following: a) right understanding, b) right attitude of mind, c) right speech, d) right action, e) right conduct, f) right effort, g) right attention, and h) right meditation. The eight divisions will help a person to grow in ethical conduct (*sila*), mental discipline (*samadhi*), and wisdom (*panna*). Ethical conduct consists of right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Similarly right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration form mental discipline. Compassion (*karuna*) and wisdom are the two essential factors for a person to be perfect. Wisdom is the quality of the mind or intellect, while compassion is the quality of the heart. An integrated development of the two aspects will enable a person to understand things as they are. Understanding, in Buddhism, is of two kinds. They are, grasping a thing based on the given data, which is called ‘knowing accordingly’ (*anubodha*), and seeing a thing in its true nature, which is called penetration (*patvedha*). Everyone who follows these can be liberated from the bondage of matter and suffering.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) Write a short note on the four noble truths.

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- 2) What is theory of *Karma*?

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3) How one can attain *Nirvana*?

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3.4 THE DOCTRINE OF SOUL (*NON-ANATTA*)

Most of the religions pre-suppose the existence of a soul. Buddhism is unique in denying the existence of a soul or *atman*. The ideal of ego or self is with the aim of self protection and self preservation. These are basically selfish desires. The concept of *anatta* is closely connected with the doctrine of the five aggregates and dependent origination. The concept of self can be analyzed as a combination of the five aggregates. There is nothing permanent; everything is conditioned, dependant, and relative.

Buddhism originated at a time when there were two predominant trends in the intellectual milieu of India, i.e., the powerful and popular spiritualistic thinking, and materialistic thinking. The former accepted the authority of the Vedas while the latter rejected it. Almost all religious accepted the existence of a soul, whereas materialism strongly rejected the existence of a soul. Buddhism did not follow any of the prevalent trends but followed the middle path. Buddhism was an exception, in denying the existence of a soul, but at the same time it rejected the materialistic philosophy. The idea of an ego or a self in any religion is with the aim of self- protection and self-preservation. Self protection necessitates the existence of God, and self preservation necessitates the existence of self. These two are basically selfish desires. The concept of *anatta* is closely connected with the doctrine of the five aggregates and dependent origination. The concept of self can be analyzed as a combination of the five aggregates. There is nothing permanent; everything is conditioned in dependence and relativity.

According to the doctrine of the conditioned, and according to the analysis of being as five aggregates, the idea of an abiding, immortal substance in man or outside (whether it is called *atman*, 'I', soul, self, or ego) is considered a mere false belief, a mental projection. This is the Buddhist doctrine of *Anatta*, no-soul or no-self. Nowhere in his teachings, did Buddha mention the existence of a soul. In *Dhammapada* Ch. XX verses 5, 6, and 7 negate the existence of soul in clear terms. "All conditioned things are impermanent. All conditioned things are *dukkha*. All *dhammas* are without self." The basic factors of a human person cannot account for the existence of a soul. The physical material is impermanent, whatever is impermanent is the cause of suffering, and whatever is suffering is non-self. Similarly, sensations, mental formations, and consciousness cannot constitute the self because all these are transient.

3.5 THE CONCEPT OF GOD

The concept of Buddhism refutes the idea of a God who throws the sinners into everlasting torments. In fact, the Buddhists believe in the existence of an enlightened being, who vows to save all sentient beings from their sufferings. The concept of enlightenment is principally concerned with developing a method to escape from the illusions of the materialistic world. Generally, we use the term 'God' to designate a supreme power, who is the creator of the entire

universe and the chief law-giver for humans. The God or Almighty is considered to be concerned with the welfare of His creations and the '*moksha*' or salvation for those who follow His dictates. Different religions and sects follow this God differently by different names, but as far as Buddhism is concerned, it has a different perception for Him.

Almost all the sects of Buddhism do not believe in the myth of God. Indeed some of the early Indian Mahayana philosophers denounced God-worship in terms which are even stronger than those expressed in the *Theravada* literature. Some later Mahayana schools, which flourished outside India, ascribed some degree of divinity to a transcendent Buddha, considering living Buddhas to be a manifestation of the *Adi Buddha*. But even then it cannot be said that the Buddha was converted into a Divinity comparable to the God of the monotheistic religions. In the *Brahmajala Sutta* and the *Aggaa Sutta* texts, the Buddha refutes the claims of *Maha Brahma* (the main God) and shows Him to be subject to karmic law (i.e. cosmic law). Even long-lived *Maha Brahma* will be eliminated in each cycle of inevitable world dissolution and re-evolution. In the *Khevadda Sutta*, *Maha Brahma* is forced to admit to an inquiring monk that he is unable to answer a question that is posed to him, and advises the monk to consult the Buddha. This clearly shows that *Brahma* acknowledges the superiority of the Buddha. The Buddha is viewed as some kind of a god figure. In the *Theravada* tradition, the Buddha is regarded as a supremely enlightened human teacher who has come to his last birth in the *samsara* (the Buddhist cycle of existence). But, Mahayana traditions, which tend to think in terms of a transcendental Buddha, do not directly make a claim for Buddha as God. Thus the Buddha cannot be considered as playing a God-like role in Buddhism. Rather, Buddha is concerned as an enlightened father of humanity.

3.6 SECTS OF BUDDHISM

Mahayana: *Mahayana* Buddhism developed its own canon of scripture, using much that was included in the *Theravada* canon, but adding other *Mahayana Sutras* which contain the bases of their peculiar beliefs. Among these the best known and most widely used are the famous Lotus Gospel and the *Sukhavati-Vyu-ha* which are the scriptures especially of the pure land sects. The path followed by the Gautama is thus the *Mahayana* - 'the great vehicle' or vehicle of the *Bodhisttva* (*bodhisattva-yana*). The *Mahayana* movement claims to have been founded by the Buddha himself, though at first confined to a select group of hearers. Many of the leading teachers of the new doctrines were born in south India, studied there, and afterwards went to the North; one of the earliest and most important being *Nagarjuna* and other major *sutras* circumstantially connected with the south.

During the life-time of the Blessed One (Buddha), he was already highly venerated and his aid was invoked by his disciples in their spiritual struggles. A simple cult developed about the relics of the Blessed One very early. His body was burned, and the ashes and bones distributed among the disciples. Shrines were built to house those relics, some of them very elaborate and expensive; for example, the very impressive one that has his head. Images of the Buddha representing him in meditation under the *Bodhi* tree became common. At first they were conceived of simply, as subjectively helpful. Veneration of the relic had the effect of calming the heart. Later arose the belief that such a reverential act was good in itself and would result in securing merit. Pilgrimages

made to sacred spots associated with him would likewise benefit one and would result in *karma*.

Given the characteristic Hindu background, it was natural that for all practical purposes Gautama should soon become a god, though not theoretically called so. Given likewise the characteristic Hindu speculative philosophical interest, attempts to explain the relation of the Buddha to the ultimate reality of the universe naturally began to be made, almost from the start. According to the *Mahayana*, reality is beyond the rational intellect or beyond the four categories of understanding. And they say that the world is real and relative, and the absolute reality only appears as the manifold universe. Plural is not real. The *Mahayana* concept of liberation is not merely for one, but is meant for all. The ideal *Bodhisattva* defers his own salvation in order to work for the salvation of others. And they also hold that *nirvana* is not a negative state of cessation of misery, but is positive bliss.

Hinayana: The *Hinayana* or lesser vehicle has been more moderate in its doctrine of the person of the Buddha. He is theoretically neither a god nor a supernatural being. His worship or veneration is helpful, but not essential, to the achievement of the salvation goal. This is to be reached by something like the process Gautama taught, namely, meditation on the four noble truths and the keeping of the Dharma; in short, becoming a monk, for one could not carry out all the requirements and live an active life in the day-to-day world. Thus the number to whom salvation lay open was comparatively small. It was this fact which caused the followers of the *Mahayana* school to call the older school the 'little vehicle'. Not many could ride at a time. *Mahayana*, on the other hand, made salvation universally possible for achievement.

The goal of the *Hinayana* was to become an *Arhat*, that is, to arrive at *Nirvana* in the present life; an ideal of salvation of the self, with no reference to the welfare of others, and thus an egoistic ideal. That of *Mahayana* was of a more altruistic sort. It was to become a Buddha; and theoretically, at least, anyone might aspire to reach Buddha-hood. To be sure, he would not reach it in one single lifetime, but there was elaborated a definite series of steps, ten in all, through which one must pass before arriving at the goal. One who had taken the vow of future Buddha-hood was called a *Bodhisattva*, and he need not be a monk. Here was a clear-cut difference from the *Hinayana* School - a layman might aspire for the highest goal. But the most notable difference was the fact that in becoming a *Bodhisattva*, one became (after passing a certain stage) a great 'cosmic helper' or saviour, dedicated to the saving of mankind. Men came to rely on the help of such 'great beings' in their search for freedom.

Along with this idea came a change in the conception of the Buddha. Gautama became but one in a great line of *Buddhas*, behind whom stood the eternal Buddha - the *Dharmakaya* - a conception similar to the old Hindu Brahma manifest in Vishnu or Siva. There were five principal *Buddhas*, of whom Gautama was one. One Buddha, *Maitreya*, was yet to come.

To these *Buddhas* is accorded worship, as also to the *Bodhisattvas*, or great beings who are known to be especially helpful. To them prayer is made; upon them centre love, loyalty, and devotion. One among the (Buddhas), *Amitabha*, came to be in an unusual degree the object of faith and devotion, and to him prayers were made. His powerful name was repeated countless times, for so

meritorious was he that there was a strange potency in its mere repetition. According to them, you must be a light unto yourself (*atmadipo bhava*) and they also say that liberation is meant for a person and by oneself. The *Arhat*-hood is attained through a difficult path of self help and *Nirvana* is extinction of all misery.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) What you mean by the doctrine of Non-Soul (*Anatta*)?

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- 2) Elaborate the concept of God in Buddhism.

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- 3) Write a short note on the two sects of Buddhism.

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3.7 LET US SUM UP

The unit describes the emergence of Buddhism as a tradition alternative to the existing ritualistic tradition. The sects within Buddhism interpreted various basic tenets of Buddha's teaching and got developed as religious sects.

3.8 KEY WORDS

vinaya : disciple, *sutta* : discourse, *ahimsa* : not harming, *maitre* : loving kindness, *dana* : giving, *karuna* : compassion, *dukkha* : suffering, *paticca-sammupaada* : dependent originating, *nirvana* : liberation, *viraga* : absence of desire, *avijja* : ignorance

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