

CHAPTER FIVE

MEDITATION ON THE BUDDHA

REFLECTION ON THE QUALITIES OF THE BUDDHA

MEDITATION ON THE Buddha or reflective meditation on the qualities of the Buddha is another supportive meditation. We have already talked about metta meditation. As this is a short retreat, I can only introduce you to the meditation techniques and ask you to meditate for a short period. This type of reflective meditation is called in Pali: *Buddha-nussati*, which is recollecting the qualities of the Buddha.

BUDDHA-NUSSATI

Anussati is a combined word; *anu* — "again or repeatedly" and *sati* "mindfulness"; we try to be mindful again or to reflect. We often see quite a few people using their rosaries and reciting *araham* over and over again when they are meditating on the qualities of the Buddha, without even having time to contemplate. You have no time to reflect if you just keep repeating *araham*, *araham* very quickly. What has happened is that the *araham* has become a mantra, which it should not be. *Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa* is not a mantra. It is something for us to reflect on and be inspired by. The Buddha is a very important person. Here, we know only too well that the dhamma, which

he has taught, has never been personalised. However, His personality is very important, because it proves that the highest achievement is within human reach. He was born a human being. He suffered as we suffer. If he did not eat, he felt hungry. If he walked too long, he felt tired. However, since he worked hard he became enlightened on his own and has become the symbol of human purification, human effort and human wisdom — the highest achievement in the universe. We are going to focus on that.

Buddha-nussati is, as described earlier, a reflective meditation. We are supposed to reflect and not chant. When we chant *Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa*, it is to remind ourselves. When we chant as a group, this is just to make the group uniform. When we chant it is too fast, it does not allow us time to reflect. What you have to do is to spend time to study what *arahato* is and what *samma sambuddho* is, and to make an effort to reflect on it. This is what is meant by reflection meditation, *anussati*.

It is necessary for everyone to study about the Buddha through books, discussion or listening to dhamma talks. One can then start reflecting. The two books about the nine qualities I would recommend in English are *The Buddha, My Refuge* by Ajahn Khantipalo and *The Nine Qualities of the Buddha* by Venerable B. Ananda Maitreya. Reading them will make your meditation easier. Read and choose the quality(ies), which you are going to contemplate. Reflect on that regularly. You will understand each quality better if you put it in the context of the daily life of an ordinary human beings, to which the Buddha once belonged before he developed these qualities.

In Burma, some people just count the rosary and even become superstitious about this exercise. Among the Theravadins, Burmese use more rosary than any other Buddhists. They will use the rosary on their birthdays or just specific days like, for example Sundays, with a specific number of counting, and for the rest of the week will get up to whatever misdeeds they choose. They certainly give that impression. What people tend to do in Burma, or any other Buddhist country for that matter, nowadays, is to use chanting mainly as mantras.

In the Shan State, the Union of Burma where I come from, some Tai-yai people even tattoo themselves with the words *Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa*. It is not meant for tattoo but for reflection. I cannot help comparing such thing with a forced tattooing of the old soldiers from the General Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalist Army. The soldiers were abandoned by their general who was defeated by Mao Zedong and fled to Taiwan in 1949. They were later inducted into the People's Liberation Army and were sent to the Korean war. As they were captured, the Nationalists infiltrated the camps and persuaded them not to go back to China when the war ended. When they refused, they were reportedly tattooed by force proclaiming "*Destroy the communist bandits*". The doctrine of anti-communism was not something they seemed to have understood but the proclamation of the anti-communism was tattooed. That served no purpose.

You should instead recite the stanza slowly and reflect on it. That is the correct way of practice.

What we normally understand as the qualities of the Buddha are described in the following stanza in many discourses of early Buddhism: *Itipi so bhagava araham, samma-sambuddho, vijja-carana sampano, sugato, lokavidu, anuttaro purisa dhamma sarathi, sattha deva-manussanam, buddho, bhagava*. There are altogether nine important qualities of the Buddha. In Pali, the nine are (1) *araham*, (2) *samma-sambuddho*, (3) *vijjacarana-sampanno*, (4) *sugato*, (5) *lokavidu*, (6) *anuttaro-purisa-dhammasarathi*, (7) *sattha-deva-manussanam*, (8) *buddho* and (9) *bhagava*. In some places, it is said that the qualities of the Buddha are infinite and that one can go on and on endlessly reflecting the qualities. However, all those infinite qualities are included in these nine. As the practice goes on and you become more aware of your emotional shortcomings day by day because you see those qualities in the Buddha and not in yourself; but surprisingly this awareness of your own shortcoming does not depress you; instead it will increase in you the faith in the Buddha. You can now become increasingly more flexible with the definitions of each quality of the Buddha because you can relate to the presence of those qualities in the Buddha through their absence in yourself. In other words, the definitions of each quality become your own, coming from your own heart, and no longer the ones you have learnt from a book or a talk. Once you start to realise their true meaning in your own context, they become more lively and meaningful. Let us now discuss in brief the nine qualities in the Pali stanza.

i. **ARAHAM**

Araham (also arahant) has several meanings. First, it means that the Buddha had eradicated all the defilements. Defilement in plain language means bad thoughts, bad reactions like anger, anxiety, hatred, frustration, stress,

depression, ignorance, jealousy, gossip, attachment, dogmatism and so on; the Buddha had got rid of all these. No defilement means no frustration, anxiety and depression, and any other unwholesome thoughts.

Here is how you can relate your daily life experiences to the qualities of the Buddha. When you discover attachment in yourself, you reflect, "*Oh, I have attachment but the Buddha had no attachment.*" When you are disappointed, reflect on the fact that the Buddha had no disappointment. A day hardly goes by without us experiencing stress and frustration in day to day life. At work, you often feel agitated. Do not try to justify your agitation. Instead, recall that the Buddha never felt agitated even in the most difficult circumstances. There were times when the Buddha can not even convince his pupils. The monks sometime ignore him. There were occasions where listeners just walk out unconvinced of what was being said by the Lord Buddha, see for instance, the first sutta in the Majjhima-nikaya. Look at also, for example, the case of Upaka and Radha. It is a great relief and support for us to remember that the Buddha also had to face such situations but was not hindered by these obstacles in his mission to help people to get out of suffering. The Buddha was never emotionally disappointed nor frustrated. This is the way to reflect on the qualities of the Buddha. The Buddha inspires us with his qualities. Because he had got rid of all defilement, he is *araham*.

The second meaning of *Araham* is one who has no secrets; and the Buddha had no secrets; he had nothing to hide. He was totally open to everybody. There is a story of four men who were sitting together and talking. After a while,

one got up and left. As soon as that happened, the remaining three started gossiping about him, how useless he sometime was. They were talking behind his back because they wanted to hide what they were saying from him. Not long after that, another one got up and left. The remaining two started talking about him saying he was stupid. Then when the time came for the remaining two to part, they suddenly realised that they had been gossiping about the other two friends who had left earlier. So they pointed at each other and simultaneously said, *"When I leave don't gossip about me!"*

We all have many secrets, but the Buddha, because of the purity in his life, had none. He was morally pure — pure in his deeds, pure in his verbal actions and pure in his thoughts. Even towards those who plotted against him like Devadatta, he did not desire for revenge. If a person has any desire for revenge against another person, and is being asked whether he forgives the other person who hurts him, and he answers "Yes", just to appear magnanimous, then he is just hiding his emotions. He is not true to himself. When we come across people or situations like this, we should reflect on the Buddha's quality of being an arahant, a person who has surpassed the need for secrecy. A totally open society: that is what the Buddha wanted to see. Not just democratic, but also being totally open and transparent. An arahant does not mind surrendering his privacy to the community. This will help the members of the community to be open and become close to each other. However, in our case you can see that we are very resistant to doing so.

While repeating the word *araham*, you go on reflecting at the same time comparing the quality the Buddha has and you

do not have. You may or may not use the rosary. The rosary is only an instrument to help you concentrate. There is no superstition attached to it. We see some people choosing wood according to an astrologer's calculation. To make a rosary with that calculation, they feel, will help produce a miracle. They have really missed the point of reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha.

ii. **SAMMA-SAMBUDDHO**

This means to discover and understand fully, the Four Noble Truths, without any aid from a teacher. The Four Noble Truths that we have read about, heard about, thought about — we still have difficulty in understanding them fully. What is *dukkha*? What is *samma sati*? What is *samma samadhi*? What is *samma ajiva*? People still ask about these things and we are still struggling to explain them. I am still not completely clear either. When I think about the teachers who have taught me these things time and again, and despite of this, I am still not sure about some of them, I am in awe of the intelligence and wisdom of the Buddha. I reflect on how the Buddha discovered all of these by himself, alone and without the help of any teacher. He was truly an Enlightened One. He realised the Four Noble Truths through direct experience. He is the best example of any self-enlightened and self-transformed person.

iii. **VIJJA -CARANA-SAMPANO**

Vijja-carana-sampano is knowledge and conduct, or theory and practice; the Buddha is endowed with both. He says as he acts and he does what he says. In this world, there are times when kings and leaders announce or say certain things in public and before long disclaim them or fail to keep

their words and break promises. When you see things like this, you realise how great is the quality of *Vijja-carana-sampano* the Buddha possesses, and how valuable are all his qualities. Some people know the theory but do not practise it. They are like people who just study a map without venturing on the journey. Some people go on journeys all the time without reading the map, so they get lost. As for the Buddha, he knows the map, knows the route and has made the journey. He was wholly trustworthy. This is why the Buddha invited people to study critically what he said, and not to believe it blindly. That is why Buddhism makes it not a case of believing but, indeed, of seeing for oneself.

iv. **SUGATO**

Sugato is a great speaker, who is adept in the art of choosing the right words, saying them at the right time, and in such a way as will benefit the listener. The Buddha was a master of that. We sometimes say things with good intention but because of the wrong choice of words, our intention may be misunderstood. Sometimes people say nice things like, "Very good, excellent, wonderful", but their sincerity is in doubt. Whenever we see the word and act not matching one another, we can reflect on the *Sugato* quality of the Buddha at home, at work or wherever we are.

Another meaning of *Sugato* is that the Buddha walks the best path to reach his goal — the path leading to freedom from suffering (*dukkha*). When he meditates and a pain arises, he observes the pain without increasing *dukkha*, whereas the majority of people personalise pain or suffering and misperceive it through attachment and pride (*mana*). The

Buddha avoided this path of misconstruing things and followed the right path. He had chosen to deal with things in the right way that freed him from suffering. Most of the time, we choose to walk just the opposite path that adds more to our suffering. The Buddha, being a *Sugata*, walked the path of freedom and freed himself from mental suffering.

v. **LOKAVIDU**

Lokavidu is the person who knows about the world. What do we mean by *loka*? As I have explained in my previous talks there are six worlds; the seeing world, the hearing world, the smelling world, the tasting world, the touching world and the thinking world. There are no other worlds than these six. The Buddha understands how they arise and cease. He knows how clashes and harmony happen in these worlds. He knows why people can be trapped in them or be free from them. That is why he is called *Lokavidu*. You are in harmony with the world only when you know about it and you can then live accordingly accepting it as it is. An unenlightened being always fights with the world, unable to accept it for what it is.

vi. **ANUTTARO PURISA DHAMMA-SARATHI**

Anuttaro purisa dhamma-sarathi means that the Buddha is the best teacher who can bring the wayward back into the fold. The Buddha can make people understand with either just one sentence or a whole series of talks, like the time he gave his first sermon to the five ascetics, which took five whole days. We should reflect on this quality of the Buddha whenever we experience problems in teaching or explaining things to children. How capable the Buddha is in these things!

There are plenty of examples to illustrate this quality. There was a man who belonged to a very low class and worked as a road-sweeper. The Buddha on one of his alms rounds came across him and was able to explain to him the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha was also able to explain these four Noble Truths to Venerable Sariputta, a brilliant, intellectual monk, who was the son of a rich Brahmin, well educated and previously from a different religion. Apart from the Buddha he became the most respected one for his wisdom during the Buddha's time. The Buddha also understood how to counsel Prince Nanda, his half brother. On the day of his marriage, Prince Nanda was taken to the monastery where he started to pine for his newly wed bride. The Buddha showed him heavenly girls. Nanda then came to desire these much prettier maidens so he started meditating seriously believing this would help him win the hand of one of these girls. Meditation eventually led him to discover the Dhamma, which made him lose his desire for such things.

Another example was a man by the name of Vangisa who was the cleverest in his class and would compete with others whenever he had the chance to see who was cleverer. He had not once come across a person who could beat him. One day, he met one of the Buddha's disciples and started talking to him. He then asked a question to which the monk answered, *"If you wish to know the answer, you have to become a monk."* Therefore, he decided to become a monk with the intention of leaving monkhood once he learned the answer, and not because he wished to achieve Nibbana. In the end, because of the way the Buddha taught him the Dhamma,

he reached the state of an arahant and never returned to a lay life.

The Buddha brought to his senses even Angulimala, the vicious serial murderer who was about to kill his own mother who would have been his one thousandth victim. These cases showed how effectively the Buddha could teach the Dhamma to people of different make-ups and intellectual status, and how incomparable were his skills as a teacher.

Once when the Buddha was on his alms round, he came across five hundred workers queuing for rice which their rich landlord was distributing as it was harvest time. The Buddha joined the queue. It came eventually to his turn. The landlord recognised Buddha Gotama who was not one of his workers. He told the Buddha off, "*Why don't you work like the rest and earn your food? Why do you beg for your food? You have healthy limbs.*" The Buddha was not angered by this, but replied that he also worked. The landlord retorted and said that he had never seen Him work. Nevertheless, he knew that monks never lied and so asked the Buddha for an explanation. The Buddha replied, "*Yes, I also do cultivation work. Saddha or confidence is my seed, my practice is the rain, my wisdom is the hoe, thus I work.*" The Buddha explained the Noble Eight Fold Path to the landlord in the terms he understood so well that he immediately gave away his land and property, and entered the monkhood, eventually attaining arahantship. In this way, the Buddha was able to teach the Dhamma with clarity in all sorts of circumstances. That is why he has the quality of *Anuttaro purisa dhamma-sarathi* — the matchless teacher in training people's minds.

vii. **SATTA DEVA-MANUSSANAM**

Satta deva-manussanam — the teacher and leader of devas and men. Let alone knowing more than the Buddha or even knowing as much as the Buddha did, we struggle to understand even a tiny bit of what he has said in his sermons and this is in spite of having many learned monks teaching us. When we were young, we studied hard because we wanted to pass our exams, not because we wanted to reach nibbana. We did not understand things well. It was like children being taught through rote learning "*okasa, okasa, okasa*". We just learnt them by heart and recited them. We are not as clever as the Buddha was. Hence, because of his infinite and unsurpassed wisdom, he was the *Satta deva manussanam*. There were many who became the Buddha's followers. Even after he passed away, there are many like us who regard the Buddha as their teacher and leader. We do so voluntarily, not because of we or our forefathers have been conquered or forced to follow him. He did not ask to be our teacher. It is of our own choosing and of our own free will that we become his followers

.

viii. **BUDDHO**

Buddho is the person who knows the Four Noble Truths. This is similar to *Samma sambuddho*, which emphasises the fact that the Buddha discovered the Four Noble Truths by himself. *Buddho* just emphasises the fact that he knows it well. He was the Awakened One, who had awakened from ignorance and delusion.

ix. **BHAGAVA**

Bhagava is the person endowed with special powers. The merits the Buddha had accumulated are much more than others and this is also why he was called *Bhagava*. The merits are acts of sharing, ethical morality, patience, renunciation, wisdom, diligence, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness and equanimity. He perfected these to the most difficult and advanced level. He shared not only material things in his past lives but also his limbs and life.

The commentaries may explain *Bhagava* in a more superstitious way. The term, *Bhagavaha* has many meanings.

**TECHNIQUE OF MEDITATION ON THE QUALITIES OF
THE BUDDHA (BUDDHA-NUSSATI)**

Now we shall meditate on the qualities of the Buddha. As we all know, *Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa* means *I pay my homage to the Buddha who has the two qualities of arahato and samma-sambuddho*.

Arahato is the same as *Araham*. It is important to observe our defilement or (negative feelings or thoughts) and to accept that we still have them. When we feel disturbed, we reflect on how the Buddha was free from mental distress and all defilement. Because we are not arahant we may suffer from stress and depression, unlike the Buddha. As we reflect the qualities of *Araham* and *Samma-sambuddho*, we try to visualise the Buddha on these qualities. Whether we are monks or lay people, we still feel worried when we have to leave our homes even for a few days, the Buddha gave up

everything and left his family, wealth and kingdom. He became free from all attachment. This is how we meditate on his quality of *Arahato*. Sometimes we have second thoughts when throwing away our old clothes. In some monasteries, we find all kinds of old stuffs in places like kitchens, none of which is of any use. It is ideal to sit and reflect on the quality of *Arahato* in such a place. Just think of how the Buddha was devoid of *lobha* (greed) and craving. We should try to expand our understanding of how the Buddha was free from all defilement and reflect on the quality of *Arahato*.

People get angry. Countries wage war and threaten against each other. The Buddha was free from such anger. Sometimes when we are criticised, we get upset. There was once a beautiful, young lady, whose parents wanted the Buddha for her husband. The Buddha refused, saying that he had renounced the world and had no desire for anything. He went on to describe her body as full of disgusting matter, so the young lady felt very insulted and became very angry. Later she married a king and became a queen. Bearing a grudge against the Buddha, she organised a mob and one morning, as the Buddha and Ananda were walking into the city on their alms round, the mob started to shout at them, *"You are liars. You are not truly saints. You are not really enlightened."* Venerable Ananda felt very upset. He was reacting to the taunts of the mob. He said, *"Lord, let us go away to another place."* *"Why Ananda?"* Ananda was asked. *"These people are insulting us, Sir,"* he reasoned it to the Buddha. The Buddha replied, *"What will you do if the people in that place started behaving like this, Ananda?"* *"We'll move to another place, Sir,"* said Venerable Ananda. *"What if the same thing happens over there, Ananda?"* *"We'll move again, Sir."* Venerable Ananda wanted to keep moving because he was repelled by

the criticism. However, the Buddha was very calm and did not react to the criticism.

When someone says something, which upsets you, just remind yourself, *"Oh, I'm just an ordinary man. That is why I get upset. But the Buddha is an arahant — an extraordinary man."* The Buddha also told Venerable Ananda, *"Ananda, we cannot run away from criticism. People's criticism cannot last longer than seven days. Likewise their praise also doesn't last more than seven days."* The Buddha was viewing the situation in perspective, not allowing one incident to hijack everything. That was because he had eradicated all elements of anger from his mind. Indeed, he has uprooted from his mind all the negative emotions.

Besides, when we come across any good quality in ourselves, we should also remind ourselves that compared to the Buddha's good qualities, ours are nothing. We should take inspiration from the Buddha's qualities and reflect on them.

Samma Sambuddho. This is the ability of the Buddha to discover on his own the Four Noble Truths. Not only does he understand them, but he understands them perfectly and fully.

The question has been asked whether the Buddha as the Ascetic Gotama had come to understand the Truth of Suffering even before gaining enlightenment. As Prince Sidhartha, he saw a sick man just once and he realised immediately that sickness was a prevailing element of suffering. He saw a dead man and immediately accepted the presence of suffering in life and was constantly aware of death. As for us, in spite of having attended so many funerals,

we tend to forget these things after a few days. Maybe, it is only emotionally moving for us while we are attending the funeral. As soon as we are back home, we forget it. The very first time Prince Siddhattha saw the sick man, he accepted suffering. However, he did not *yet* accept it as the ultimate truth at that stage. In other words, he had not realised the whole four truths together and in their entirety.

In some religions, suffering is regarded as the wish and deed of God. This implies that this suffering is not the ultimate truth. These sufferings and impermanence are seen as just a delusion (*maya*) according to Hinduism, as they believe that there is a permanent and unchangeable object underlining them. That is why the type of suffering and impermanence they believe in is not considered as the ultimate. According to Buddhism, suffering is an ultimate truth. As we all know, there are four ultimate truths. When the Ascetic Gotama became Buddha; he became completely sure of them. There is nothing behind this suffering. Suffering is not a delusion. It is an ultimate reality. If you study Buddhism, you will come to realise how we are faced with these four truths in everyday life. We see *suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering* and *the path, which leads to the cessation of suffering*. This was what the Buddha discovered without anyone's help and why the Buddha was called *Samma sambuddha* (The Fully-Self Enlightened).