

Bodhi Leaf Publication No. 9

How to Teach Buddhism to Children

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BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

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**Buddhist Publication Society
Kandy • Sri Lanka**

Bodhi Leaves No. 9

First Edition 1961

Second Edition 1975

Third Printing 1984

BPS Online Edition © (2011)

Digital Transcription Source: BPS Transcription Project

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How to Teach Buddhism to children

The Problem

The problem means in particular: How can Buddhist parents best teach their own children Buddhism? Since they will seldom have the opportunity to teach it to other children, let alone the children of non-Buddhist parents. As I do not wish to theorise, I shall speak only from practical experience with my own children, and so of Western children in general. It is moreover particularly the Western child which is exposed to a Christian or materialistic environment, and hence is in need of a carefully considered Buddhist education. In a Buddhist country, steeped in its centuries-old Buddhist tradition, the position of a Buddhist child is (or should be) far easier. In such a favourable environment a good and effective Buddhist educational system may have developed. But even if it had it would be a great mistake for us, as Westerners, to copy it without due consideration.

We live in entirely different conditions and so cannot take such an important problem as Buddhist

education too lightly. Our Great Teacher, the Buddha himself, has taught us to see for ourselves, to examine and draw our own conclusions, and not to believe blindly in others. Just as everyone must work out his own salvation so must we evolve a Buddhist educational system suitable for Western conditions. Naturally any advice or suggestions which other countries can give will be thankfully accepted. We hope to receive many such proposals and to hear of other people's experiences.

Imitation

The educational programme depends very much on the age of the child, or children. The good example of the parents is the most important part of any education and if the parents live in accordance with the Dhamma this will be the surest guide to the children, whatever their age. Children develop the faculty of observation to a high degree and imitation is with them an important factor. We should not neglect this fact. Everything depends on how much the parents themselves succeed in realising the Dhamma in their everyday life, in making Buddhism a living thing, and not just something to talk about.

Externals Help

Together with imitation, externals play an important role during childhood. No Buddhist household should therefore be without a Buddha-rūpa (image), or at least a picture of the Enlightened One. It is a good idea to let each child have a small Buddha-rūpa of its own before which it can offer regularly flowers, incense and light (the "lights" are, in India little coconut oil lamps, sometimes in coloured paper shades, sometimes candles). But it is vital that we see to it that the child does not come to worship the image itself, but that it pays devotion to the Buddha as the greatest teacher of mankind. For although we must not develop any system of rites, we must not neglect the fact that a simple ceremony such as this brings Buddhism closer to the hearts of children. To adult Buddhists rites are more a fetter than a help, in so far as they are apt to make us think that we have achieved something merely by the performing of them. The philosophical aspects of Buddhism, although essential for adults, are generally too deep for children to grasp. But as externals help our children towards the Buddhist way of life we may make use of some simple ceremony. Children love the spectacular, and the regular offering of flowers, incense and lights, helps to develop such good habits as veneration and respect.

The Use of Festivals

Children always enjoy festivals, and since non-Buddhist children have so many, Buddhist children may be allowed their Uposatha-day once or twice every month. This day should be made quite different from an ordinary day, different even from an ordinary Sunday. As it is not always possible in Western countries to keep the new or full-moon day itself, parents may choose the Sunday nearest to it and make that day a festival. Workaday life must stop on this Uposatha-day, and everyone should be intent on observing the sīlas. Parents should teach their children the Dhamma or influence them in that way. Now how can this best be done?

As already pointed out, this depends very much on the age of the children. In this article I will speak of children aged about ten years, as my two boys are now this age. Parents with younger children may simplify what follows, and those with older children can expound the Dhamma a little more deeply. A lot depends on the children's abilities and their perceptive faculties. (A translation of the Dhammapada and such little collections as Bhikkhu Sīlācāra's Lotus Blossoms will prove inspiring sources from which to study).

From time to time the father can read one of the Buddhist legends or a story from the Jātakas, the tales of rebirth. There is no reason why these beautiful tales

should be neglected so long as the moral of the story be stressed and the amoralities carefully explained away. Since children have to learn so much about Greek mythology in school and the cruel fighting between the Greek gods and other gods, why should we avoid telling our children the Jātakas? These stories will introduce them into the Indian way of thinking and the concepts of kamma and rebirth will find a natural place in their minds. And since an understanding of kamma and rebirth requires a minimum of intellectual reasoning, the ideas can be taught even to children. In fact the whole teaching of the Buddha could be taught to children if only we could present it in the right way. To abstain from teaching our children Buddhism is a great mistake, and it is incongruous that some Buddhists put much stress on such a thing as vegetarianism, while neglecting to give their own children a Buddhist upbringing.

Buddhist Education a Duty

In any other religion the education of children in that belief is quite self-evident and takes a predominant place. So why should it be otherwise with Buddhism? It may be answered that Buddhism is more of a philosophy than a religion. But is not Buddhism also a

way of living? And it is just this way of living which we have to impart to our children. If the position of Buddhism in the modern world is not so good as it was in former times, this is due to the fact that we have neglected the education of our children. What I should especially like to stress in this article is that a Buddhist education in Western countries is possible, and since it can be done it must be done. I am fully aware that we are far from the establishment of a Buddhist educational system, but a start has to be made, and this article is a contribution to the problem, which is already being discussed in many Buddhist communities.

But there is another reason why we should try to make Buddhist education a reality. In Oriental countries a Buddhist enters monkhood, the Sangha, not only to “work out his own salvation” but also “for the continuance of the Dhamma.” But as in most of the Western countries, there are no regular Buddhist missions from the East, we lay-Buddhists of the West must give our share towards upholding the Dhamma here. To teach our children Buddhism is part of that duty. It would be unfair to hold Eastern countries responsible for not giving us Buddhist education. It would mean waiting until such missions were not only established in all Western countries but had learned the western languages thoroughly and

understood the problems peculiar to Westerners. Until this time we must help ourselves as best as we can in the most efficient way that we can.

Buddhist History

In addition to the Jātakas already mentioned, we should tell our children about the life of the people during the time of the Buddha, their social structure, the historical background of early Buddhism, the history of Buddhism in general, and how the “Wheel of the Dhamma” rolled over the whole of India and beyond.

Explaining the Dhamma

The children’s mind will gradually grow into the spirit of Dhamma, while developing an understanding of the basic doctrines of Buddhism. The parents can then read some easy Suttas to the children, e. g., those concerning the basic five sīlas and what a lay-Buddhist ought to do and ought not to do, more particularly the discourses of the Aṅguttara, the “layman’s Nikāya.” This is all within the grasp of children, In addition, some easy stanzas from the Dhammapada may be read:

“All tremble before punishments, all fear death.

Comparing others with oneself, kill not;
neither cause to kill.” (Dhp 129)

“To refrain from all evil,
to cultivate the good,
To purify one’s thoughts
—this is the Teaching of the Buddhas.” (Dhp 183)

Buddhism is not as complicated as some of us are apt to think, and furthermore we are right to presume that a child of Buddhist parents had kammic tendencies which caused it to be born as a child of such parents, and so there is every reason why it should be given a Buddhist education.

Learning by Heart

As children learn things easily by heart we can give them the five sīlas and the Triple Refuge to learn, perhaps even in Pali. It is a good idea for the children to learn some of the stanzas of the Dhammapada in their mother-tongue, such for example, as:

“He abused me, beat me, overpowered me,
robbed me—
in those who harbour such thoughts
hatred will never cease” (Dhp 3 and the two
following stanzas).

“This is an old rule—not just a rule of today—
they blame him who sits silent. They blame him
who speaks much,
they even blame him who speaks little.”

“There is none in the world who escapes blame.”
(Dhp 227, also Dhp 228). Dhp 129 (already
quoted), and the four following stanzas.

The more a child learns by heart from the Pali Canon the more it will profit from this knowledge when it can understand the deeper meaning. This does not mean that a child should learn sentences which it does not understand at all, but the knowing of such simple things as the above will stand it in good stead as it grows up.

Uposatha-Day

Upasatha-days are the days par excellence for the children to recite the stanzas they have learnt, and for the parents to explain the Teaching of the Buddha. But we must be careful not to over-exert the children, especially on such occasions as this, for the capability of children to pay attention for any length of time is very limited. The Uposatha-day should be on the contrary a festival to which they eagerly look forward. We should therefore take them for a walk, or even an

excursion, and not hesitate to play with them. While walking happily through fields and woods we may teach them to observe nature and see life as it really is. When Prince Siddhattha drove out of his palace garden he saw an old man, a sick person, a corpse, and on the last occasion a monk. In a similar manner we should take the children out from the safe and narrow confines of our household, out into the troubled world.

Buddhist children should not be brought up in a world corresponding to the walled palace-garden in which Gotama grew up. Such excursions into nature will give ample opportunity for our children to see what life is really like. They will see that nature is “red in tooth and claw,” each animal fighting and eating the weaker. They will see too how hard the living conditions of most people are. Children are generally not aware what it means to be old, sick or dying. We should give them, little by little, a proper understanding of these things. We should teach them at the same time to practise Metta and Compassion towards our fellow-sufferers. Smaller children are often cruel to animals because they do not realise what they are doing. Here everything depends on the parents noticing such things early enough and making the children understand what they are doing. Buddhist parents should be very careful that their

children avoid all cruelty to animals. The Buddhist child should always respect an animal as a living-being and not merely as a source of food. On our excursions into the countryside we should have many opportunities to show children how to be sympathetic and full of loving kindness towards both man and animal, and this not only by words, but what is more essential, by deeds.

Like a good scout our child should be taught to help an old woman to carry a basket or to push a hand-cart. He or she should save an ant that has fallen into a puddle, or carry some fish to the deep water which are dying in a far too small pond where they have been left by high water. There are so many opportunities where even a child can show that it is practising Buddhism in following the example of its parents. It is of the utmost importance for Buddhists always to bear in mind that knowledge is not enough. Only knowledge and conduct can assure us of the fruit of Nibbāna.

Buddhism—the Religion of Compassion

Buddhism is moreover the religion of compassion, and we should never forget to present it to our children as such. The Buddha taught the Dhamma out of

compassion for the world. Just as the All-Compassionate One made *karuṇā* a central part of his Teaching, so we should not neglect this fact by making discussion the main part: If we only succeed in teaching our children *mettā* (friendliness, active interest in others), *karuṇā* (compassion) and *mudita* (sympathy) we shall have succeeded in doing what we can best do. *Upekkhā* (equanimity) is also important, but rather difficult for children to grasp.

The Buddha as Our Model

We should not make the path for our children too difficult, for this will discourage them. Everything depends on the psychological sensitivity of the parents. They themselves must know how far they can go. The Buddha always knew just how to address people—he spoke to the ordinary person in a different way than to the philosopher, and we can learn much from his example. He was the greatest psychologist as well as the greatest philosopher. How could it be otherwise with a Fully-Enlightened One? Therefore we who wish to teach Buddhism must first learn it thoroughly ourselves. This is of course an indispensable condition which is so evident that I had nearly forgotten to mention it.

Study Your Children's Character

The Buddha taught the Dhamma to kings and beggars, to landowners and peasants, to warriors and merchants, to free men and slaves to philosophers and courtesans. He knew thoroughly the sociological structure and the problems of his country as well as the character of every different type of person. In the same way we should try to study the character of our own children in order that we may teach them the Dhamma in the most effective way. Being reborn in our family they are under our trusteeship as it were. Although they are separate independent beings we are responsible for them. They were not given under our trusteeship by some divine power but have put themselves under our trusteeship. They are reborn in our family because of our similarities to them. This makes it easier for us to understand their characters, an indispensability in the teaching of Buddhism. Therefore it should not be too difficult for the parents to make their children acquainted with the Teaching of the Buddha and this fact should encourage all Buddhist parents. If the parents cannot teach their children Buddhism, who else can succeed in this most important task? For, as already pointed out, there is no better gift we can give our children than this gift of Dhamma. As the Buddha himself said: "*Sabbadānaṃ Dhammadānaṃ jināti,*" "The gift of the Dhamma excels

all other gifts" (Dhp 354).

Immunity against Christianity and Materialism

In order to keep the minds of our children open to the light of the Dhamma we must pay careful attention that they are not drawn into the nets of materialism or into the belief in an omnipotent God. Since European Buddhist children are growing up in an environment of the two extremes, materialism and Christian faith, we must explain to them the difference between Buddhism and Christianity in particular, and Buddhism and any other kind of philosophy in general. We must point out the singularity of the Teaching of the Buddha as the middle way between the two extremes, and so make our children immune to outside influences. As Christianity and materialism are the two main influences in the West we should point out the fallacies of materialism and acquaint the children with the basic teaching of Christianity. This would include a knowledge of the Christian churches, Christian rites and ceremonies, choral singing and so on. Otherwise, as the children grow up, and especially during the romantic period of puberty, such things may make a greater and more dangerous impression on them. It is therefore better that they should already

be acquainted with these things than that they should discover them by their own initiative. Musically inclined children should be introduced very early to worldly singing so that they may not be fascinated too much later on by hearing choral singing and church music. In this and many other ways we have to consider the psychological environment of school children. In Germany for instance, Christmas plays a very important part in family life, even among non-Christian families. Buddhist children will naturally ask: "Why haven't we such a nice festival?" Actually Christmas is more of a family festival (the ancient German Yule), celebrating the shortest day of the year and the beginning of the sun's ascendancy. Originally the festival of Yule had nothing to do with Christianity, and it is in this way that it is still celebrated by many Germans, and thus it should be explained to our Buddhist children.

Self-Responsibility

Self-responsibility is a focal point of Buddhism and we must stress its importance over and over again, for the unbiased mind of the child will understand it. Every evening when other children are praying to "God," Buddhist children should spend a little time in meditation and in reflecting over the things they have

done that day. If they find they have not thought, spoken and acted in conformity with the Teaching they should see how to avoid this mistake another time. If they find they cannot get rid of some bad thought or action, then their parents should help them so that they can go to sleep with the resolution to do better on the morrow. In the morning they can begin the new day by reflecting again over their resolution. In this way the children will be able to develop the powers of their own mind, purifying them by the cultivation of "good" or skilful thoughts, words and deeds. So, even at an early age, they will grow beyond the Christian dogma of purification by the grace of an all-forgiving God or through one of his priests. The law of kamma will show the children more clearly than anything else that every thought, word and deed carries within itself both the seed and the fruit and the only thing we can do to rectify "wrong" or unskilful conduct is to do better in future while trying to avoid that which we have done wrong in the past. Complete self-responsibility is the mark of the mature mind, and when our children develop this quality in themselves it will prove their surest and safest guide through life and will prove a natural bulwark against faith-religions on the one hand and the shallow philosophy or materialism on the other.

There are many other things which have to be

considered by Buddhist parents in relation to their children. At meal times, for example, when Christian children thank a Creator God for their food, Buddhist children can reflect on the fact that there are many people who have not so much and such good food as they have. They should never be allowed to be critical of their food: their "tastes" should never be mentioned so that prejudices are not stimulated. Lay people should eat what is on the table in the same way as Bhikkhus eat whatever is put in their bowl, merely to nourish the body. But as children grow they must not have any dietetic restrictions in essential foodstuffs.

In this article I have been able only to give a small outline of Buddhist education. Actually each section needs an article to itself. I hope I have succeeded in showing Buddhist parents the dangers of educational indifference towards their children. If so, I shall not hear again the inexcusable opinion of some Buddhist parents: "Our child can choose its religion later on, just as we did: we have no right to influence it." "Later on?" After the influences of Christianity and materialism have worked on the child unopposed, it may, when it grows up, no longer have a free intellectual choice! How can we expect the child to find the Way by itself? Buddhas are awake to the Dhamma without external help; but all other people need guidance and instruction. This is why the

Buddha said to his disciples: “Go ye, O bhikkhus, and wander forth for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, in compassion for the world, for the good, for the gain, for the welfare of gods and men. Proclaim, O bhikkhus, the glorious Doctrine, preach ye a life of holiness, perfect and pure.” (Vinaya Mahāvagga). We are fully aware that laymen are no bhikkhus, but since there are so seldom any bhikkhus in the West, laymen can play their part in proclaiming the Dhamma. Buddhist parents have not merely the right to influence their children in the Buddhist way of thinking, but it is their duty so to do, and that thoroughly and thoughtfully. The best gift for the world is the gift of the Dhamma. What Buddhist parents would take the responsibility for depriving their own children of this gift?

Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti!

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