



WALPOLA RAHULA  
**what the  
Buddha taught**



BY : R.M.U. Rajapaksha

## **What the Buddha Taught A book Review**

***T***he book *What the Buddha Taught* was written by theravadian venerable *Bhikku Ven. Walpola Rahula.*

*Ven. Walpola Rahula* there was born in 1907 at Walpola, studied at the *Vidyalandara Pirivena* and at the *University of Ceylon.*

*His books Bhikshuvakage Urumaya (Heritage of the Bhikkhu), and What Buddha Taught are well received by their readers. The main subject/ theme is Buddhism and the publisher is an international publisher. All the details are related to Buddhist perspectives or views. Many Buddhist literary books only focus on Buddha's life stories related to Jathaka stories. Other books are based on explaining Pali and Abhimamma, but when one reads this book, one can have deep realization of both Buddha's life/ thoughts and understanding related to the sutta and dhammapada.*

*The book starts with a pali quote of "Sabbadanam dhammadanam jinati " The gift of Truth excels all other gifts' with the pure intention of imparting dhamma. This book covers both simple and advanced concepts which means it covers all the basic areas of Buddhist philosophy and elaborates difficult dhamma in simple terms, but it depends on the reader's knowledge as well. The person who has little knowledge about dhamma can have a comprehensive knowledge through this book and the person who has higher prior knowledge in dhamma can improve his knowledge to a even higher level using this book as many matters related to abidharma are explained in simple terms. One can also improve meditation using tranquility and inside meditation samatha/ vipassana by understanding a person's characteristics and inner thoughts. We can get a deep understanding about what Buddha really taught after reading this book.*

*The book contains eight chapters, plus appendices comprising of ten texts. In the very first chapters there are an illustration and a clear explanation about Buddhist concepts about the mind. Between two and five paragraphs there is a description of dharma related to four noble truth. All the most complex extracts have been collected into a chapter, using comprehensible explanation method and it makes it easy for the reader to understand the difficult dhamma. It is easy to understand dukka and magga with those examples and key points brought out clearly. According to the author The Four Noble Truths are 1, Dukkha, 2. Samudaya, the arising or origin of dukkha, 3. Nirodha, the cessation of dukkha, 4. Magga, the way leading to the cessation of dukkha. There is step by step explanation about each one presented as*

*chapters. Dukkha-dukkha, Viparinama-dukkha, Sankhara-dukkha elaborate the given four noble truth with suitable sutta and jathaka stories. To explain four noble truth, examples are taken from "Dhammacakkappavatlana-sutta 'Setting in motion the Wheel of Truth', Mahadukkhakkhandha-sutta, and Mabatanhasamkhaya-sutta. There are citations used from Dhammapada as well to explain the Four Noble Truths.*

*The relationship between Kamma and chethana is also highlighted in the book, “—Cetana ham bhikkhave kammam vadami. Cetayitva kammam karoti kayena vaca manasa” That means the thinking patterns, inner thoughts cause kamma. There are three doors through which bad intention can enter: the physical body, words, and the mind. First, we think and then we act or react according to our thoughts. There must be these above things to complete understanding about this dhamma attention (manasikara), freewill (chanda), deenergy (viriya), termination (adhimokkha), confidence (saddha), concentration (samadhi), wisdom (pahha), as well as an understanding about desire (raga), repugnance or hate (patigha) , thanha, dhvesha, moha, (keles). These are involved in changing the attitudes and chiththa of those Raga, dhvesha , moha and wchikichca (doubtiness) which can do major harm to human mindset and lead to the accumulation of the worst kamma. The development of the three insights; dukka sacca-ñāṇa, kicca-ñāṇa, kata-ñāṇa can overcome kilesa. The Author has remarkable content organization skills. The fact is made obvious by the way he explains the Four Noble Truths and elaborate them. It is an admirable instance of combining dhamma knowledge with organizational skills. The reader can successfully understand the eight noble path at the end of the chapter beginning with Four Noble Truths.*

When I read chapter six I was able to notice it is based on controversies and realized the uniqueness of Buddhist concepts. The concept of *anaathma* explains that there is no permanent self or soul, no one is permanent, the body is an illusion, no one is eternal; we all die and nothing is eternal, one day this earth will also be destroyed and reset itself step by step again. It will take unimaginably a long time for the

living to emerge once again on the earth. This chapter is very interesting because this chapter is ideal for people of other religions who study western counseling psychology and social sciences because there are many unique ideas that are really on par with modern world psychology and science. The author has great analyzing skills as he selects the best examples from *Jathaka* stories ie; “Rahula's Challenge” is the most exemplary story and that determines the key points of the chapter topic.

Chapter seven discusses meditation, mindfulness along with related misconceptions. This is a very deep explanation done elaborately. Meditation is a practical activity based on the mind and physical body. So it is very difficult to give guidance through a book as to how to develop meditation and maintain and manage inner thoughts, but through this book, “What Buddha Taught” Venerable Walpola Rahula has done a deep and comprehensive explanation about basic and deep points of meditation with mindfulness. The way he combines mindfulness practice and meditation thoroughly motivates us to meditate, follow up the *dhamma* and find the truth. We can realize the main ideas of mindfulness meditation starting with *metthanasana sutta* that helps us to be aware of our thoughts and bodily sensations in a way that helps us cope better with our emotions and challenges. “*Bhāveti kusale dhamme* = developing/ cultivating wholesome thoughts, *Asevati vaḍḍhetti* = living with the association of them and developig them, *Etāyāti bhāvanā* = is called Bhavana.

The author provides a deep analysis of all major mediation schools of Buddhism such as Vipassana insight meditation, *samatha* bhavana mediation and walking mediation. There is a very clear describing of smatha and vipassna meditation. Through this illustration the reader can decide the most suitable meditation for himself or herself. May be reader can practice both and finally he/she can decide the best way to continue the mindfulness with suitable mediation methods out of *maranussathi* meditation, *upasamaussa* mediation, *chathu bavaththana* , *budhdanussathi*, and *dhammanussathi*. If the reader has knowledge about Buddhist characters Raga/ dhvesha/ Moha/

shaddha/ Budhdhi/ Vithakka, then he/she can have a clear understanding about themselves with self-reflection, self analyzing and he/she can adapt a suitable meditation method and follow it. These meditation methods are very exemplary meditation methods common to the world and it will help one to avoid lots of common issues, such as drugs, prostitution, world war, family issues, educational and career issues.

If I am to elaborate my views on the application of meditation in our day today life practically as presented in the book, I will declare that we all are different and unique, we have different mind sets according to our culture and environment. For example there are teachers, students, doctors, housewives, farmers, actors, lawyers, Buddhist monks, psychologists, news reporters, prisoners in rehabilitation centers, and men and women in different occupations and different life stages; childhood, adolescence, teenage and adulthood. So according to self-understanding we can select a proper mediation method to practice. Raga characters can practice Marananussathi mediation, dwesha character can practice samatha mediataion (using methanisansa sutta ), moha character can follow Dhammanussathi mediation to clear the path, shaddha character can practice budhanussathi meditation, bhudhdhi vithakka characters also can practice vipassana meditation methods with dhamussathi, budhanussathi and several types of meditation to clarify their doubts. If they have doubts about the dhamma, through a mediatative mind they can find answers to our own doubts like arahat monk Saripuththa. This is how we can apply mediation practically in life. Following this basic steps one can develop the meditation steps (kamatahan) and find the basic roots of nibbana.

If I am to express my views on the Buddhist counseling and treatment planning techniques used in this book I can elaborate the topics on page number 119. That is the advice to sigala (Domestic and Social Relations, *sigalovada-sutta*), page 108, the foundation of mindfulness (The Presence of Mindfulness) (*satipatthana-sutta*), page 106 The parable of the piece of cloth (*vatthiipama-sutta*), page 103, getting rid

of all cares and troubles (*sabbasava-sutta*) and page 97 universal love by *methaninsanasa sutta*. Through these suttas and jathaka stories author has developed explanations by taking examples of Insight Therapy in sutta. This therapy helps clients to identify how past events, feelings, actions, mindset, decisions influence the current mindset. It helped the reader to identify his past and the current results according to his mind set. Buddha used this therapy for monks to identify their past and the current results according to questions asked. Another one is "INTROSPECTION" Clients are encouraged to examine their own beliefs, feelings and thoughts to find out who they are. Story telling is also another therapy. Buddha told about the bodhisatwa's past life as a story elaborating these kinds of examples. The author was able to use Buddhist counseling treatment planning methods in the book effectively. This book can Improve our shadha qualities just because when we have doubts related to basics of Buddhism we can clarify them using the book, "what Buddha though book ". This book has made a major contribution to develop knowledge to *budhanussathi* and *dhamanussuthi*. The output of the book and content are very clear and well organized. Pali words, *dhammapadha* and explanations are understandable because of the appendices, abbreviations and bibliography attached. I do not have any negative comments of the book's content but if the publisher was able to add some colorful pictures along with black and white pictures, some background pictures related the given sutta, the appearance of the book woud have been more beautiful and effective.

So finally I would like to end this review with a quote by the Buddha that Venerabal Walpola Rahula has mentioned in this book (page 136) The Last Word of Buddha. "Then the Blessed One addressed the Venerable Ananda: 'It may be, Ananda, that to some of you the thought may come: "Here are (we have) the Words of the Teacher who is gone; our Teacher we have with us no more. But Ananda, it should not be considered in this light. What I have taught and laid down, Ananda, as Doctrine (Dhamma) and Discipline (Vinaya), this will be your teacher when I am gone. - *Sabba paha passa akaranan-*

*kusalassa upasampadha- sachitta pariy odhapana- ethan budhdhanu sannasan.* Everything is impermanent, avoid all evil, always improve *dhamma* knowledge and cultivate the good /Kusal. Purify your heart , That is the eternal teaching of Buddhas.” So I would like to recommend this book to all the Buddhist people, western as well as oriental, Buddhist counseling students and the non- Buddhist people who like to study the universal truth and philosophies , because Buddhism is not only a religion but also a philosophy. So you do not need to be a Buddhist to read this book and get the general ideas in it. Modern society opens new experiences while understanding and exploring secular concepts. So in Buddhism Lord Buddha also said never accept any religion because it was verbally said, written in the books or for personal benefits, social class, popularity and family origins. Always Ask questions, analyze clarify, observe and always believe in a religion only if you can use it for both worldly and spiritual well being. I am glad to say this book will help you to discover the truth of life. This is not only a book, but this is also an encyclopedia for those who wish to practice and realize the eternal truth.

## Reference

Walpola, Rahula. (1959). What the Buddha Taught. One world publication Oxford.

Walpola Rahula Thero (1907–1997) was a Sri Lankan Buddhist monk, scholar and writer. In 1964, he became the Professor of History and Religions at Northwestern University, thus becoming the first bhikkhu to hold a professorial chair in the Western world.