**Definitions of Culture:**

1. It is a way of life of a group of people – the behaviours, beliefs, values and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.
2. Culture reveals to ourselves and others what we are. It gives expression to our nature in our manner of living and of thinking, in art, religion, ethical aspirations, and knowledge.

**Buddhist Culture Proper:**

1. For over twenty-five centuries, Buddhist ideas and ideals have guided and influenced the lives and thoughts of countless human beings in many parts of the world. As lay Buddhists, our own experiences and discoveries in life are not enough to give a true perspective on life. To bring ourselves closer to the ideal of a well-balanced man or woman, we need to acquire, at least in outline, what is called a cultural grounding in the Buddha-Dhamma.
2. A cultured man has grown, for culture comes from a word meaning "to grow." In Buddhism the Arahant is the perfect embodiment of culture. He has grown to the apex, to the highest possible limit of human evolution. He has emptied himself of all selfishness - greed, hatred, and delusion - and embodies flawless purity and selfless compassionate service. Things of the world do not tempt him, for he is free from the bondage of selfishness and passions. He makes no compromises for the sake of power, individual or collective.
3. In this world some are born great while others have greatness thrust on them. But in the Buddha-Dhamma one becomes great only to the extent that one has progressed in ethical discipline and mental culture, and thereby freed the mind of self and all that it implies. True greatness, then, is proportional to one's success in unfolding the perfection dormant in human nature.
4. In Dhammapada (204), Buddha pointed out that “Nibbāna is the highest happiness *(nibbānam paramam sukham)*.” In Udāna Pali (KN), he explained that “happiness is in the mind which is released from worldly bondage
5. We should therefore think of culture in this way:

a) Beginning with the regular observance of the Five Precepts, positively and negatively, we gradually reduce our greed and hatred.

b) Simultaneously, we develop good habits of kindness and compassion, honesty and truthfulness, chastity and heedfulness.

c) Wholesome habits are the basis of good character, without which no culture is possible. Then, little by little, we become great and cultured Buddhists. Such a person is rightly trained in body, speech, and mind. A disciplined, well-bred, refined, humane human being is able to live in peace and harmony with oneself and others. This indeed is Dhamma.

1. In order to grow we also have to be active and energetic, diligent in wholesome conduct. There is no place for laziness and lethargy in Buddhism. We must be diligent in cultivating all aspects of the Dhamma in ourselves at all times. If we develop as good individuals, we automatically become cultured members of our society, mindful both of rights and duties.

Buddhism addresses itself only to the individual thinking person. It has nothing to do with mass movements, for "masses" are just collections of individual men and women. Any true social development must therefore begin with the transformation of each individual person.

1. A true lay Buddhist will aim at personal progress in worldly matters only on the foundation of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Progress by way of *adhamma –* unrighteousness – will inevitably bring in its trail disaster, pain and suffering to individual, community and nation. Such a misguided policy implies disbelief in kamma and its effects.

Reject kamma and one is rootless. Rejection is the result of blinding greed for quick material gain and sensual pleasures, conjoined with delusion about the true nature and destiny of man and life. It also signifies acceptance of the philosophy of expediency - that one should "get the most that one can" out of this single fleeting life on earth guided largely by one's instincts, subject to the laws of society, which the affluent and powerful often circumvent with impunity.

Such a short-sighted and mistaken view ultimately leads to individual and social tensions, to restlessness and conflict, and to the spread of indiscipline, lawlessness, and crime.

1. Buddhism distinguishes between emotions that are constructive, such as *metta* and *karuna,* and those that are destructive: anger and jealousy, for instance. It encourages the cultivation of the former to eliminate the latter. Human beings can both think and feel.

When the Buddha taught the Dhamma, sometimes he appealed to reason, sometimes to the emotions, and sometimes to the imagination, using means of instruction such as fables, stories, and poetry. Buddhist culture, too, manifests in other forms than that of a fine character, such as in the field of literature - the Jatakas, the Theragatha and Therigatha, for examples - philosophy, art, architecture, and sculpture.

1. Art is basically a medium of human communication. It can help in the education of the emotions and is one of the civilizing agencies of humankind. The work of the artist, whether painter, dramatist, sculptor, or writer, is worthy of study because it has a certain expressiveness that both reveals and stimulates fresh insights.

The artist sees new meanings in objects and experiences that ordinarily escape the rest of us, and thus he creates new values and insights in life. Rightly viewed as the expression of the good life, and as an aid to living it - and not for mere enjoyment and appreciation - art can therefore ennoble us. For example, the tranquillity and peace that one sees in the Samadhi statue of the Buddha elevates the mind, stimulates confidence, and induces reverence for the Dhamma. In all Buddhist lands, the images of the Buddha and the Bodhisatta have become the typical form of artistic expression.

1. Buddhist culture is perennial and so is as fresh today as it was in the Buddha's time 2500 years ago. It is also self-sufficient, self-consistent, and self-sustaining. Based as it is on eternal verities, verifiable by individual experience, it is never obsolete, and animates the progress that seems to kill it, nor does its content change with context.
2. The impact of Buddhism on world culture was truly significant. In it, there is no intellectual error, based as it is on reason and on the bedrock of personal experience. It is free from moral blindness, for its ethics is truly lofty, guided by a rational basis for such an ethic, namely, personal evolution in terms of one's own kamma. It engendered no social perversity - hate and intolerance were for none, limitless loving-kindness and compassion were for all.

The doors to deliverance were open to anyone who wished to enter them. It thrilling message of reason, universal benevolence, flaming righteousness, social justice, hope, and deliverance in this very existence by one's own exertion - all had a fertilizing and liberating influence on thought and action wherever Buddhism spread.

1. To the thinking person, Buddhism offered a rational, practical, and balanced way of deliverance from all life's sorrows, and the certainty of the perfectibility of man, here and now solely by one's own effort.

To the humanist it gave an all-embracing compassionate vision, inspiring ameliorative action as a pre-condition for the realization of the highest spiritual attainments.

1. Even to have a general idea of its achievements, in the manifold ways it has expressed itself in society, is an education in the art of living. Buddhism gives perspective to the whole of life. Nothing in life is seen as more important than it really is. A cultured Buddhist can tell the good from the bad, the right from the wrong and the true from the false. He can weigh the evidence skilfully, and his Buddhist cultural background makes his judgment a wise one.
2. Buddhism is a religion of self-help, self-reliant – without relying on an agent or god. The entire teaching is absolutely free from the notion of a permanent creator god, thus a non-theistic religion that places emphasis on the mind and mental phenomena.

“Mind precedes things; mind dominates them; mind creates them.” (Dhammapada 1)

All human beings have the potential, exerting with self-effort, to reach for the highest goal in realizing the truth – Nibbāna. It is an ever-going practice in investigating reality. It encourages freedom of inquiry and investigation with an open mind and boldness for a broader sense of spiritual learning and development.

In Alagaddūpama sutta (MN22), Dhamma is likened to a raft as a mean to an end and not for grasping. However, one must be well trained and matured before abandoning the raft. It is by being tolerant and compassionate, that is, to share room on the raft with others instead of arguing or condemning others of their differences

**Religious Festivals and Days of Significance**

The following key religious festivals and significant cultural and religious days are celebrated:

1. **Uposatha** are days marked by full and new moons, and they are observed with intensive practice.

Monks rededicate themselves to meditation and study. Faults are confessed, and the ancient monastic rules are recited.

Laypeople usually bring offerings to the temple where they may also mediate and listen to dhamma talks.

1. **Vesak Day** is on the full moon of May. It commemorates the birth, Enlightenment, and passing away of the Buddha.
2. **The Rain Retreat** (*vassa*) is approximately from the full moon of July to the full moon of October.

During this period, Theravada monks and nuns devote more time to meditation and study and do not travel for long from their monastery.

1. **The Kathina Ceremony** is held after the Rain retreat, during which the laity gather to make formal offerings of robes and other requisites to the Sangha.

**Worship in Buddhism**

1. Worship is generally defined as reverence offered to a divine being; a form of religious practice with its creed and ritual.

In Buddhism, worship is an expression of respect and gratitude to the Triple Gem. It is an act of veneration offered to that which is worthy, not a prayer or gesture of submission to a divine being. Although Buddha images are used in worship, idolatry is not encouraged in Buddhism. Buddha images are treated as sacred objects as they symbolize higher values and ideals.

1. The Buddhist concept of worship is more of a spiritual practice rather than a mere exercise in faith and devotion. Buddhists show respect to the Buddha by bowing down or prostrating or making a gesture of obeisance before a Buddha image. It is an act of piety, an expression of humble respect and deep sense of gratitude for the great teacher who has given so much to the world. Similarly, such respect is also expressed toward the sangha (for their robes) for their courage and sacrificial motive (of renunciation) towards worldly comfort.
2. While in the act of worship, reflecting on the Buddha’s virtues of universal compassion, perfect purity and boundless wisdom inspires our hearts to make an effort to lead a life according to those spiritual qualities and remind us to aspire for higher spiritual attainments. Most importantly, the highest form of worship is to translate his teachings into our daily lives practice.

In Dhammapada (165), “Purity and impurity depend on oneself. No one from outside can purify another.”

**Rites and Rituals in Buddhism**

1. **Buddha Image**

a) A Buddhist goes before the image, pays respect not to the statue but to the Buddha as the fully enlightened being and reflects on his perfections and virtues.

b) It acts as a visual aid, a symbolic representation of his great qualities and as an object of concentration to gain peace of mind.

1. **Buddha Lockets, Amulets, Talismans etc**

a) It is neither part of Buddha’s teaching nor recommendation. This is an old and ancient practice that is intended for protection and blessing. It has psychological support to those who lack of self-confidence and clear understanding of kamma.

b) Like the Buddha image, it serves as reminder of the Buddha and his virtues. Thus wearing miniature replicas of Buddha image around the neck would give them a sense of security and auspicious feeling. It also induces people to practice the dhamma or lead a righteous life.

1. **Chanting**

a) In Theravada Buddhism, chanting is known as protection *(paritta)*. It provides protection in every way by the blessing invoked on the truth of the Triple Gem and the Dhamma. These protection chants are not mystical composition *(mantras)* of mysterious combination of words and sounds nor magical formulas or talisman or exorcism.

b) What are sometimes referred to as Buddhist prayers, recited in ceremony or worship, are not prayers at all. Buddhists do not pray. Each time we recite or chant those passages, we reflect on the noble message of the Buddha so that we may be inspired to put it into our daily practice.

c) According to the Pāli canon, the Buddha also chanted the paritta and advised his disciples to do likewise such as Ratana sutta, Mettā sutta, Bohjjanga sutta etc.

d) Chanting is a very useful devotional practice that can lead to the development of strong faith. The proper attitude to develop during chanting is to try to understand the meaning of what is being chanted and then reflect on the meaning.

e) According to Milinda Pańha, the inefficacy of chanting may be due to kamma hindrances (*kammavarana* – weighty kamma), hindrances from defilements (*kilesavarana* - unwholesome defiling thoughts) and lack of faith in the Triple Gem (*asaddhanataya*).

f) The Buddha mentioned that for chanting to be effective, five wholesome factors should be developed:

(1) Truth – establish oneself in the power of truth to fulfil one’s wish. It is known as the “act of truth”. It is common to find at the end of protective verses “By the power of the truth of these words, may you be well and happy.”

(2) Virtue – refers to one’s moral conduct, keeping the five precepts (*pańca síla*) and other higher precepts or vows.

(3) Loving kindness – during chanting, one radiates loving kindness to all living beings including those hostile and indifferent to us. In this way, our chanting becomes a powerful force that benefits all sentient beings.

(4) Sound – it is important especially in a group chanting. The sonorous and melodious recitation is very soothing to hear and brings inner calm.

(5) Faith – develop faith that is rooted in understanding. The highest faith is the belief and confidence in taking refuges in the Triple Gem, observing the precepts, practicing the Noble Eightfold Path, practicing meditation, believing in kamma and rebirth, and the realization of Nibbāna as the way out of suffering.

Blind faith (*amúlikā saddhā*) has no place in Buddhism and is not encouraged. In the Kālāma sutta, the type of faith that the Buddha expects from his disciples is a non-committed open-mindedness, a willingness to try out his teachings. When he finds the teachings useful and true, his faith gets more established – a rational faith (ākāravatí saddhā) which the Buddha encourages.

1. **Buddhist Flag**

a) To reflect a universal symbol of Buddhist faith and to symbolize the unity of the Buddhists.

b) The five colours represent the rays of aura that emanated from the Buddha’s body when he attained Enlightenment:

(1) Blue (níla) – Loving kindness, peace and universal compassion

(2) Yellow (pita) – The Middle Path that is absence of form and emptiness

(3) Red (lohita) – Achievement, wisdom, virtue, fortune and dignity

(4) White (odāta) – Purity and emancipation.

(5) Orange (mańjettha) – The essence of Buddhism which is full of wisdom, strength and dignity.

The combination (pabhassvara) – the universality of the Truth of the Dhamma

Horizontal – The entire world’s races living in harmony

Vertical – Eternal world peace

1. **Offerings**

a) Incense is a symbolic of ethics and morality.

b) Flower is a symbolic of wisdom.

c) Water symbolizes coolness and reminds us to use our speech to bring calmness to each situation, and to cleanse the impurities of our hearts and minds.

d) Fruit is a symbolic of the results of our virtuous deeds.