

AN OUTLINE OF BUDDHISM

A GREAT VARIETY of forms of religious practice are associated with the word ‘Buddhism’. However, they all take Siddhattha Gotama, who lived and taught in northern India some 2,500 years ago, as their source or inspiration. It was he who in historical times became known as ‘the Buddha’— that is ‘the Awakened One’, one who has attained great wisdom through their own efforts. The Buddha did not write anything down, but left a remarkable legacy in the form of a teaching (the Dhamma) that was at first orally transmitted by the religious Order (the Saṅgha) that he founded and personally guided for forty-five years.

This Order has survived the centuries, preserving the wisdom of the Buddha in lifestyle as well as in words. To this day, these three elements: the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha are known and respected by all Buddhists as ‘The Three Refuges’ or ‘The Triple Gem’. They have also come to symbolize Wisdom, Truth and Virtue-qualities that we can develop in ourselves.

After the Buddha’s time, his teaching was carried from India throughout Asia, and even further. As it spread, it was affected by its encounters with local cultures, and several ‘schools’ of Buddhism eventually emerged. Broadly speaking, there are three such schools: Theravāda (‘The teaching of the elders’), which still thrives in Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand; Mahayāna (‘The great vehicle’), which embraces the various traditions within China, Korea, and Japan; and Vajrayāna (‘The diamond vehicle’), which is associated primarily with Tibet. Teachers from all schools have made their way to the West. Some preserve their lineages as found in the country of origin, while others have adopted less traditional approaches.

The approach and the quotations used below are from the Theravāda tradition.

THE BUDDHIST PATH

THE BUDDHA TAUGHT a path of spiritual awakening, a way of ‘practice’ that we can use in our daily lives. This ‘Path of Practice’ can be divided into three mutually supportive aspects—Virtue, Meditation and Wisdom.

“Where there is uprightness, wisdom is there, and where there is wisdom, uprightness is there. To the upright there is wisdom, to the wise there is uprightness, and wisdom and goodness are declared to be the best things in the world.”

Virtue

You can make a formal commitment to the Buddha’s Path of Practice by requesting the Three Refuges and Five Precepts from a monk or nun at a Buddhist monastery, or by taking them by yourself at home. Taking the Refuges implies a commitment to live under principles of Wisdom, Truth and Virtue, using the teachings and example of the Buddha. The Five Precepts are training rules to follow in daily life:

1. To refrain from killing living creatures;
2. To refrain from taking what is not given;
3. To refrain from sexual misconduct;
4. To refrain from harsh and false speech;
5. To refrain from taking intoxicating liquor and drugs.

Someone living in this way develops the self-discipline and sensitivity necessary to cultivate meditation, the second aspect of the Path.

Meditation

Meditation, broadly speaking, is the repeated focussing of attention upon an image, a word or a theme in order to calm the mind and consider the meaning of that image or word. In the Buddhist practice of insight meditation, this focussing of attention also has another purpose—to more fully understand the nature of the mind. This can be done by using the meditation object as a still reference point to help in revealing the attitudes that are otherwise buried beneath the mind’s surface activity.

The Buddha encouraged his disciples to use their own bodies and minds as objects of meditation. A common object, for example, is the sensation associated with the breath during the process of normal breathing. If one sits still, closes the eyes and focuses on the breath, in due time clarity and calm will arise. In this state of mind, tensions, expectations and habitual moods can be more clearly discerned, and through the practice of gentle but penetrative enquiry, resolved.

The Buddha taught that it was possible to maintain meditation in the course of daily activity as well as while sitting still in one place. One can focus attention on the movement of the body, the physical feelings that arise, or the thoughts and moods that flow through the mind. This mobile attentiveness he called ‘mindfulness’.

The Buddha explained that through mindfulness one realises an attention that is serene. Although it is centred on the body and mind, it is dispassionate and not bound up with any particular physical or mental experience. This detachment is a foretaste of what Buddhists call Nibbāna (or Nirvana)—a state of peace and happiness independent of circumstances. Nibbāna is a ‘natural’ state: that is, it is not something we have to add to our true nature, it is the way the mind is when it is free from pressure and confused habits. Just as waking up dispels the dream state naturally, the mind that has become clear through mindfulness is no longer overshadowed by obsessive thoughts, doubts and worries.

However, although mindfulness is the basic tool to use, we generally need some pointers as to how to establish the right objectivity about ourselves and how to assess what mindfulness reveals. This is the function of the wisdom-teachings of the Buddha.

Wisdom

The most generally used wisdom-teachings of the Buddha are not statements about God or Ultimate Truth. The Buddha felt that such statements could lead to disagreement, controversy and even violence. Instead, Buddhist wisdom describes what we can all notice about life without having to adopt a belief.

The teachings are to be tested against one’s experience. Different people may find different ways of expressing Truth; what really counts is the validity of the experience and whether it leads to a wiser and more compassionate way of living.

The teachings then serve as tools to clear the mind of misunderstanding. When the mind is clear, Ultimate Truth, in whatever way one finds to express it, becomes apparent.

The Four Noble Truths

In order to help people realize that the normal understanding of life is inadequate, the Buddha talked about ‘*dukkha*’ (roughly translated as dissatisfaction or unsatisfactoriness). He often summarised his teaching as the Truth about ‘*dukkha*’, its origin, its ending, and the path to its ending. These core teachings, to be measured against one’s experience and used for guidance, are known as the Four Noble Truths.

The First Noble Truth: *There is ‘dukkha’*

Life as we normally know it must always have a proportion of disagreeable experiences—sickness, pain and distress are obvious examples. Even in relatively affluent societies people suffer from anxiety, stress or a loss of purpose; or they feel incapable of dealing with life’s challenges. Moreover, agreeable experiences are limited and transient: for instance ‘*dukkha*’ can be brought on by the loss of a loved one, or being badly let down by a friend. What also becomes apparent is that these feelings cannot be relieved for long by our usual responses, such as seeking pleasure, greater success or a different relationship. This is because ‘*dukkha*’ stems from an inner need. You could call it a longing of the heart—for understanding, peace and harmony. Because it’s an inner or spiritual need, no matter how we try to alleviate such feelings by adding something pleasant to our life, it never quite succeeds. As long as we are motivated to seek fulfilment in what is transient and vulnerable—and it doesn’t take much introspection to recognise how vulnerable our bodies and feelings are—we will always suffer disappointment and a sense of loss.

“Being associated with what you don’t like is dukkha, being separated from what you like is dukkha, not getting what you want is dukkha. In brief, the compulsive habits of body and mind are dukkha.”

The Second Noble Truth: *There is an origin to ‘dukkha’*

The Buddha’s experience was that this wrong motivation was in essence the origin of dissatisfaction. How is this? By always seeking fulfilment in what is transient, we miss out on what life could be offering if we were more attentive and spiritually attuned. Not using (through not knowing) our spiritual potential, we are motivated by feelings and moods. However, when mindfulness reveals that this is a habit rather than our true nature, we realise that we can change it.

The Third Noble Truth: *Dukkha can stop.*

Once we’ve understood the Second Truth, the Third follows on, if we’re capable of ‘letting go’ of our conscious and unconscious self-centred habits. When we’re no longer defensive or aggressive, whenever we respond to life without prejudice or fixed views, the mind rests in an inner harmony. The habits and viewpoints that make life appear hostile or inadequate are checked.

The Fourth Noble Truth: *There is a Way to stop dukkha.*

This involves the practical guidelines to bringing a spiritual focus to bear on life as we are living it. We can’t ‘let go’ until we’re made capable of that through cultivation of our spiritual nature. Then, just as someone clutching onto a sinking raft will naturally head for the shore when they realise it’s sinking, are shown how to swim and which direction to take, so the mind will naturally incline towards Nibbāna when it has wisdom.

The ‘Way’ is defined as the Noble Eightfold Path. The ‘wheel’ symbol that is often used in Buddhist iconography is a depiction of this Eightfold Path in which each factor supports and is supported by all the others. Buddhist practice consists of cultivating these factors of: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

The ‘Right-ness’ of them is that they entail living in accordance with virtue, meditation and wisdom, rather than from any self-centred position. Such a Way is therefore ‘Right’ for others as well as oneself.

“He who has understanding and great wisdom does not think of harming himself or another, nor of harming both alike. He rather thinks of his own welfare, of that of others, of that of both, and of the welfare of the whole world.”

FOLLOWING THE PATH

WHEN ASKED to explain why his disciples always looked cheerful, the Buddha commented:

“They have no regret over the past, nor do they brood over the future. They live in the present; therefore they are radiant.”

Someone who has fully cultivated this Way finds serenity and patience in themselves in times of difficulty, and the wish to share good fortune when things go well. They live a life free from guilt, and, rather than having violent mood swings, the mind and heart stay steady and buoyant through the circumstances of life.

These are the fruits; but like most fruit, they have to be cultivated slowly and persistently with good-heartedness. For this reason, the guidance, or simply the companionship, of like-minded people is almost indispensable. The Refuge of Sangha is a reflection on this. Most generally, ‘Sangha’ refers to all spiritual companions, but this spiritual companionship is highlighted by the religious order of alms-mendicants who live under a detailed code of conduct that unambiguously presents the values of the Buddhist path.

Buddhist monks and nuns are not preachers—being specifically prohibited from teaching unless asked to do so—they are spiritual companions, and their relationship with the general Buddhist public is one of mutual support. The religious are prohibited from growing food or having money; they have to keep in touch with society and be worthy of support. Buddhist monasteries are not escape-hatches, but places where others can stay, receive teachings and—most important—feel that their act of service and support is appreciated. In this way, the monks and nuns provide more than companionship and guidance—they also present the opportunity for others to gain confidence and self-respect.

“Do not think lightly of goodness, saying, ‘Nothing will help me improve.’ A pitcher is filled with water by a steady stream of drops; likewise, the wise person improves and achieves well-being a little at a time.”

Spirituality has to be a matter for personal concern and responsibility. Truth cannot arise through indoctrination. However, when such a complete and consistent Way as that of the Buddha is available, it is worthy of investigation.