

An Outline of Buddhism

Introduction

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 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 he left a remarkable legacy in the form of a teaching (the Dhamma) that was at first orally transmitted by the religious Order (the Sangha) 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 Sangha, 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: Theravada ('The Teaching of the Elders'), which still thrives in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia; Mahayana ('The Great Vehicle'), which embraces the various traditions within China, Korea and Japan; and Vajrayana ('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 Theravada.

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 according to principles of Wisdom, Truth and Virtue, using the teachings and example of the Buddha.

The Five Precepts

The Five Precepts are training rules to follow in daily life:

- To refrain from killing living creatures
- To refrain from taking what is not given
- To refrain from sexual misconduct
- To refrain from false speech
- 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, as the term is used in common parlance, is the repeated focusing 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 focusing 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 with careful attention, 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 is called '**mindfulness**'.

The Buddha explained that through mindfulness one realizes 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 '**Nibbana**' (or Nirvana) – a state of peace and happiness independent of circumstances. Nibbana 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 over-shadowed 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

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. They 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.’

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, **Truth**, in whatever way one finds to express it, becomes apparent.

The Four Noble Truths

In order for us to understand that our normal understanding of life is inadequate, the Buddha talked about *dukkha*, that is, suffering, stress, or unsatisfactoriness. He often summarized his teachings 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 fulfillment in what is transient and vulnerable – and it doesn't take much introspection to recognize how vulnerable our bodies and feelings are – we will always suffer disappointment and a sense of loss.

'Being associated with what you do not 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 OF DUKKHA. The Buddha's experience was that this wrong motivation was in essence the origin of this stressful state. How is this? By always seeking fulfillment 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 realize that we can change it.

THE THIRD NOBLE TRUTH

DUKKHA CAN CEASE. Once we've understood how *dukkha* arises, its ceasing follows on – if we can let go of our attachments to the world and to our ideas of how things should be.

Then the mind isn't attached to purely personal perspectives, and we become free from prejudice and fixed views. Conflict decreases, friendliness prevails, and the mind dwells in harmony. Right action proceeds from there.

THE FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH

THERE IS A WAY TO STOP DUKKHA. This involves the practical guidelines for bringing a spiritual focus to bear on life as we are living it. We can't let go until we become capable of that through cultivation of our spiritual nature. But if there is proper cultivation, the mind will naturally incline towards Nibbana. All that is needed is the wisdom to know that there is a way, and the means to accomplish that way.

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:

Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

The 'Rightness' of these 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.

'Whoever has understanding and great wisdom does not think of harming themselves or another, nor of harming both alike. Rather they think of their own welfare, of that of others, of that of both, and of the welfare of the whole world.'

'Do not rely upon what you have heard proclaimed, or upon custom, or upon rumour, or upon scripture, or through inference or established principles, or by clever reasoning or favouring a pet theory.

Do not be convinced by someone else's apparent intelligence, nor out of respect for a teacher.

When you yourself know what is wrong, foolish and unworthy, and what leads to harm and discontent – abandon it.

And when you yourself know what is right – develop it.'



Monasteries

A list of Theravada monasteries and associated centres founded by western disciples of Ajahn Chah can be found at forestsangha.org

Further reading

A wide selection of Dhamma books are available online at