

## THE WISDOM OF THE BUDDHA

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February 4, 2001

What is Buddhism? Buddhism is not a belief system or an abstract philosophy. It is a way of life, with teachings on how to behave and qualities to cultivate. Its methodology is meditation, something we practice rather than study. By following the Buddhist path, we aim to awaken to our true nature, the enlightened qualities of a Buddha.

Buddhism spans 25 centuries, over thirty Asian countries and in 22 languages. As we can imagine, with almost no communication and difficult transportation through the mountains, it developed in various ways.—South and southeast Asia—emphasis on community spirit and order in life; Eastern Asia—doctrinal guidance in the conduct of life; Western countries—considered a religion or philosophy.

There is a distinction between the essence of a religion and the superficial, ceremonial, or ritual level. In India, China, Japan, or wherever, the religious aspect of Buddhism is the same, but the cultural heritage is different in each country. Each country incorporates its own culture into the essence of the Buddhist teachings.

Today we won't go into the development of Buddhism, but will concentrate on the actual teaching of the Buddha. In the discussion period, you may ask questions and we can discuss temples, monks, practice, spirits, whatever.

Jim Sanderson has talked on comparison of teachings and practice.

“Buddha” means “enlightened one”. A Buddha is not a God, a Savior. Buddha is a title, not a proper name.

A Buddha is distinguished from other beings by his deep and great pity, love, mercy and compassion for all beings. A Buddha is noted for his thorough and unblemished purity. His bodily actions, his speech, his thoughts and his very soul are pure—there is not the slightest impurity in him. There may have been infinite Buddhas—we do not know.

The man we call “The Buddha”, Siddhartha Gautama, was born about 500 BC, the son of a king or high official. His father wanted him to rule after him, so he provided every luxury possible to keep his son happy and at home. However, Siddhartha Gautama became bored and curious about life outside the palace walls. He took several trips outside—saw an old person, a sick one, a corpse. Troubled, he realized that everyone was subject to age, sickness and death. On his final visit, he met a wandering holy man, poor and in rags, but radiant with inner peace. Siddhartha fled the palace, to live a spiritual life. He learned all he could and practiced extreme asceticism. Not satisfied, he learned deep meditation and attained enlightenment and entered Nirvana.

For the rest of his life, he was teaching, guiding, creating a set of practical guidelines for living in harmony and working toward freedom from suffering.

There is no doubt that the historical Buddha was a great teacher. Numerous stories about him illustrate his teaching principles and practices. Even today, we find that his methods are applicable in many situations.

1. He always stressed to his disciples that they should speak in the local dialect. This was a radical departure from ancient Indian customs where the upper class language of the Brahmins was used.
2. He used the Question and Answer method with both his disciples and a general audience. This way he could choose topics and levels of learning to direct his teachings.
3. With a new audience, he studied in advance so he could choose a subject suited to the occasion and agreeable to the people attending.
4. He used similes, parables and fables, often drawn from experiences of everyday life and interspersed them with pithy verses in order to make his arguments effective.
5. He observed a sequence in the details of composing a theme, giving fundamental tenets, then gradually moving on to difficult ones.
6. He avoided irrelevant matters.
7. He stressed to his disciples that they should use words of compassion and should not make caustic remarks.

The Buddha taught three principal aspects of existence. They were:

1. Dukkha—stress, unsatisfactoriness, anguish
2. Anicca—impermanence; transience of all things
3. Anatta—non-substantiality or non-essentiality of reality; no permanent “soul”

No experience, no state of mind, no physical object lasts.

Trying to hold onto an experience, a state of mind, or an object leads to dukkha.

The key to life is the acknowledgement that the physical world is impermanent and ever-changing. Therefore, all things, including the self, are not worth craving.

There is no part of the changing world that we can point to and say “This is me” or “This is God.” This is in direct contrast to Hindu beliefs in an eternal, blissful self. Hence, Buddhism was originally considered “heresy” against India’s Hindu religion.

Buddha taught that life is a cycle of suffering which can only be transcended by enlightened beings able to free themselves from earthly ties. Enlightenment may be reached only by accepting the four Noble Truths.

They are:

1. Dukkha—the existence of suffering (dissatisfaction, anguish) Happiness is transient. It occurs, then disappears. Suffering, however, is present all the time, though when we are happy we might not notice it, (i.e., we get what we wish for, are happy with it for a time, then are dissatisfied and want something more or better). We are born, get sick, get old, eventually die. It might be unpleasant, but this is realistic and not pessimistic view of existence.
2. The causes of suffering—usually we blame external causes for our suffering, but, if we look inside ourselves, we discover that we are full of desires. We are dissatisfied with what we get, as well as what we don't get. Even at higher levels, "I want to be good" or "I want world peace", or "I want to help alleviate poverty"—these ideas cause suffering when we can't live up to them or obtain them. This brings us to...
3. The cessation of the Causes of Suffering. When we realize that Nirvana or Enlightenment exists and that we can aspire to it.
4. The fourth principle is the means whereby the first principle is recognized and realized, the second principle is known and understood, and the third principle is obtained. The fourth is the Path that Leads to the Cessation of the Causes of Suffering. It is a set of guidelines for living in a way that will help liberate us from being driven by our desires and create the causes for us to eventually attain Nirvana. This is the Noble Eightfold Path which gives us practical ways to lessen desire and suffering.

The Eightfold Path is the high moral code of life. It is the path progressing toward enlightenment. The steps on the path are:

1. Right view/understanding—When we understand that life is permeated with dissatisfaction and accept that there is a way out, we understand that we are responsible for our own destiny, that only we can change the way we are. We cannot change circumstances or people, but we can change our reactions to them.
2. Right thought—We must change our habits of thinking of ourselves. We must start to think altruistically and to consider others. We want to practice Buddhism in order to benefit other beings and our environment, not just to make ourselves happy or powerful. We must renounce desires and think of goodwill to others.
3. Right speech—We must be conscious and aware of what we are saying. We must abstain from false speech (lying) and cultivate truthful speech. We must abstain from slanderous speech and cultivate speech that promotes friendship and harmony. We must abstain from harsh speech (insulting, sarcastic, etc.) and cultivate courteous, friendly speech. We must abstain from idle chatter, including radio and television, and cultivate speech that is important and valuable.
4. Right action—the five precepts:

- a. Not killing or suicide, crushing insects. All beings have the right to find happiness.
  - b. Not taking that which is not given, or stealing. This also includes fraud and deception.
  - c. Not misusing the senses, that is, overeating, appropriate sexual behavior, adultery.
  - d. Not lying—covered by Right Speech.
  - e. Not misusing intoxicants. Not abstention, but not to dull the mind, or for escape or to cause bad behavior.
5. Right livelihood—Make a living in an ethical way. Take no job that causes harm. This is important because we spend a lot of time at work and inevitably are influenced by what we do.
  6. Right effort—Take the middle way, not too hard or too little. We must direct our energy toward a wholesome state of mind. Develop positive thoughts.
  7. Right mindedness (attentiveness)—This is integral to meditation and to attainment of serenity and insight. It entails watching our thoughts without becoming involved with them. Concentrate on how a thought has disturbed us rather than staying disturbed.
  8. Right concentration—This cannot happen without all the previous steps. Develop a single-mindedness. Stay focused on the subject chosen to meditate on. This is not attained all at once, but developed in stages. Tranquil or insightful meditation requires pure moral discipline, spiritual guidance, and being in a quiet place conducive to meditation.

The Middle Way, also the path progressing toward enlightenment, ideally avoids both extreme austerity and extreme sensuality. Some Buddhists believe it is to be taken in successive stages, while others say the pillars or limbs are interdependent.

Nirvana is not heaven. It is a state of enlightenment that can be experienced here and now. It is not a heaven, not a place. It is an unconditional state of liberation from suffering.

Karma is often called the law of cause and effect. This means that every action that we take creates a cause that will, at some point, have an effect. If we do something bad, we will experience negative results. If we do something good, we will experience positive results. Karma is not a bank account of credits and debits. Buddha implied that it worked on subtle levels and there is no knowing when a particular action will ripen. Indeed, to counter any tendency to store up karmic credits to gain short-term benefit, the Buddhist texts indicate that most actions in our present life will not bear fruit until a future life.

Rebirth is not to be confused with reincarnation, the view that there is a soul or essence that commutes from body to body down through the eons. Buddhism rejects that view. It does admit, however, a causal connection between one life and another. For example, the flame of a dying candle ignites a new candle, then peters out. The new candle is alight,

but is it a new flame? It is neither the same nor a different flame. There has simply been a transfer of energy from one object to another.

A being is a combination of physical and mental forces or energies. Death is a total non-functioning of the physical body. Other forces and energies continue.

An individual's material existence is determined by a spiritual balance of all his/her good and bad actions. The course of existence between this life and the next can be changed by behavior. For the well-behaved, each rebirth marks a step up the ladder. Buddhists aim for a "better" existence by rebirth--perpetual rebirths in pursuit of perfection.

Meditation is not a matter of trying to achieve ecstasy, spiritual bliss, or tranquility. Nor is it attempting to become a better person. It is simply the creation of a space in which we are able to expose and undo our neurotic games, our self-deception, our hidden hopes and fears.

"There are many different philosophies, but what is of basic importance is compassion, love for others, concern for others' suffering, and reduction of selfishness. I feel that compassionate thought is the most precious thing there is. It is something that only we human beings can develop. And if we have a good heart, a warm heart, warm feelings, we will be happy and satisfied ourselves, and our friends will experience a friendly and peaceful atmosphere as well. This can be experienced nation to nation, country to country, continent to continent."

- The Dalai Lama