

CHAPTER 17

The Teachings of Buddhism

The message of Buddha is known as the *Dharma*, which literally means “the law.” It is also the name Buddhists give to their religion. Exactly what Buddha said is a

matter of some controversy, since there are a vast number of scriptures claiming to be the word of the Buddha. However, his first teachings, the *Four Noble Truths* and *The Eightfold Path*, are the basis for all the other 84,000 teachings of Buddha. Buddhism later split into several different branches, which elaborated and developed different aspects of Buddha’s teaching. Buddha himself recognized that it was important for each person to recognize the limitations of his own faith and to respect the faith of others:

A man has a faith. If he says, “This is my faith,” so far he maintains truth. But by that he cannot proceed to the absolute conclusion: “This alone is Truth, and everything else is false.”



Karma

All Far Eastern religions recognize that moral law exists in the universe. In Hinduism and Buddhism this is called *Karma*, a Sanskrit term meaning “action.” Any action — bodily, verbal or mental — is karma. Good actions create good karma, and bad actions create bad karma. This karma affects a person’s future. Our present state creates the future, but our past has already created the present. Thus, present afflictions are regarded by Buddhists as the settlement of outstanding debts for bad actions committed either in this life or in a previous life.

Buddhists believe in reincarnation, a doctrine from Hinduism affirming that after death, a person is reborn as another person for the purpose of pursuing greater enlightenment and liberation from ignorance and bad desires. The goal of human life is nirvana. This perfect state is characterized by freedom from uncontrolled desire. Since this cannot or has not been achieved in a single life, people are reincarnated. Buddhists and Hindus believe that we have had many previous lives. Their life task is to be liberated from the endless cycle of rebirth called *samsara* by entering nirvana.

Thus, who you are in this lifetime is a result of your karma from previous lives.

The first two verses of the favorite Buddhist text, the *Dhammapada*, summarize the essence of karma and outline the path of perfection:

If a man speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows him as the wheel of the cart follows the beast that draws the cart.

If a man speaks or acts with a pure mind, joy follows him as his own shadow.

In his *Introduction to Buddhism*, Tibetan Buddhist spiritual guide Geshe Kelsang Gyatso vividly describes the impact of our actions on our path of life:

Every action we perform leaves an imprint on our mind, and each imprint eventually gives rise to its own effect. Our mind is like a field, and performing actions is like sowing seeds in that field. Virtuous actions sow seeds of future happiness and non-virtuous actions sow seeds of future suffering. These seeds remain dormant in our mind until the conditions for them to ripen occur, and then they produce their effect.

It is pointless and a futile distraction to blame others for our problems since:

By oneself the evil is done, and it is oneself who suffers; by oneself the evil is not done, and by oneself one becomes pure. The pure and the impure come from oneself: No man can purify another.

— Dhammapada 165

The problem is, as the Buddha points out:

It is easy to do what is wrong, to do what is bad for oneself; but very difficult to do what is right, to do what is good for oneself.

— Dhammapada 163

When talking to ordinary people, Buddha laid great stress on karma, the fear of a bad rebirth, and the hope for a good rebirth. He told people how to prepare for a better rebirth by living a moral and responsible life. Pleasures derived from transient material goods should be avoided, and unselfish kindness should be bestowed upon all. Bad karma has a twofold effect — you will be miserable in this life as you lose friends or suffer from guilt, and you will be reborn in some miserable condition. The Buddhist scriptures contain frightening pictures of the sufferings of hell and life as a miserable ghost. Good karma leads to peace, calm, untroubled sleep, loving friends and good health in this life, and a good rebirth after death — perhaps a sojourn in one of the heavens where life is like paradise.

Although the Buddha's teaching can be very hard to understand, people were attracted to him because of his simple and practical teaching methods. For example:

Remember there are six main ways of wasting time and money. Drinking, wandering the streets late at night, going to fairs and festivals, gambling, mixing with a bad crowd and being lazy.

There are six reasons why drinking is bad. It wastes money, it leads to quarrels and fights, makes you ill, gives you a bad reputation, leads you to do immoral things you would regret and weakens the brain.

There are six reasons why roaming the streets late at night is bad. You are most likely to be mugged, your family is at home without your protection, your property is more likely to be burgled, you will be suspected of crimes by the police, rumors about you will be believed and you will be exposed to all sorts of trouble.

Going to fairs and festivals means you will spend your time thinking about music, instruments, dancing and all the other entertainments and forget the important things.

Gambling is bad because if you lose, you lose money; if you win, you make enemies, nobody trusts you, friends despise you and no one will want to be married to you.

Mixing with a bad crowd means your friends are hooligans, drunkards, drug addicts, cheats and criminals and you are bound to be led astray by them.

Being idle is bad because you waste your life getting nothing achieved, no money earned. The idle person can always find an excuse for not working: "it's too hot," "it's too cold," "it's too early," "it's too late," "I'm too hungry," "I'm too full."

Although the moral teachings of Buddhism look more or less the same as those of other faiths, their source or reasoning is different. Buddhism's moral teachings are not derived from commandments from a divine being who requires obedience. Rather, they are guidelines for making spiritual progress and achieving perfection. Therefore, Buddhists try to focus on discovering how moral rules can be applied in a suitable way considering each situation's circumstances. For example, obedience to the principle of telling the truth may on occasion be broken, if the lie is determined to be the most loving and helpful thing to do. Buddhism reminds us to focus on the deepest intentions of our heart when considering a moral decision. Gyatso writes that, "Whether an action is good, bad, or neutral depends principally upon the intention that motivates it. Good actions come from good intentions, bad actions from bad intentions, and neutral actions from neutral intentions."

Whether keeping strictly to moral guidelines or not, the important thing for Buddhists is motivation — whether a person's action springs from selfish or unselfish motives. Spiritual progress is dependent more upon why an action is chosen, not the action in itself. However, because it is easy to be confused about one's real motives for actions, meditation and mental training are required for the mind to be purified.

The Deer Park Sermon

In his first sermon after attaining enlightenment, Buddha revealed to his former colleagues what he had discovered. This is generally regarded as the core of his teaching. However, it has to be remembered that this sermon was given to five ascetic religious specialists who were prepared to understand and receive what he said. As mentioned above, when the Buddha spoke to ordinary people, his teaching was much simpler and down to earth.

In the Deer Park Sermon Buddha compared himself to a doctor whose work consisted of four stages:

1. diagnosing the illness
2. identifying the cause of the illness
3. finding the cure for the illness
4. prescribing the medicine

Buddha told the ascetics that he had found by experience that a pleasure-seeking life and a life of extreme self-mortification were both harmful. The way of life that leads to the most profound insight, peace and enlightenment is a moderate one, the Middle Path. Following this path enabled him to see clearly the Four Noble Truths.



The Four Noble Truths

The first truth

The first truth is that there is something fundamentally wrong with life as most beings experience it. Life is *dukkha*, usually translated as suffering.

Three forms of suffering are distinguished:

Plain, ordinary suffering is what we see in the examples listed above. The more thoughtful and sensitive a person, the more he becomes aware of the suffering that seems to underlie everything, from the natural brutality of animals' preying on each other to the horror of humans' exploitation of other humans.

This is the Noble Truth of Suffering: Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering, association with what is loathed is suffering, separation from the loved is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering.

— Samyutta Nikaya

The second kind of suffering comes from the impermanence of life. Even beautiful things decay, loved ones die, and sometimes we change so that something that was once a source of pleasure is now boring. This is why even people who outwardly seem to have everything may still be unhappy.

The third form of suffering is more subtle. It is the sense that life is always frustrating, dissatisfying, disharmonious and incomplete. Life has become dislocated in the same way that a bone that has slipped out of its socket causes every movement to be painful. Buddha believed that when a person finally recognizes that all life is *dukkha*, he will want to be released from it.

The second truth

The second truth is that suffering is caused by *tanha*, our craving or selfish desire. We want, want, want — without end. These desires themselves spring from ignorance. The reason why we have such desires is that we are deluded. We think that we will find happiness from external sources.

Buddha identified six main delusions. They are:

1. **Ignorance** — not understanding the nature of cyclic existence and the law of cause and effect.
2. **Greed** — craving the satisfaction of our senses by attaching ourselves to objects and people that we consider beautiful.
3. **Anger** — said to be the greatest barrier to enlightenment because it destroys personal and world peace.
4. **Pride** — feeling superior to others.
5. **Doubt** — questioning belief in cyclic existence and karma so that it becomes an obstacle to enlightenment.
6. **Delusion** — holding on strongly to beliefs that bring suffering to oneself and others.

This is the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering: It is craving which produces renewal of being, accompanied by relish and greed, seeking its delight now here, now there; in other words craving for sensual experience, craving for eternal life, craving for oblivion.

— S.N.

The third truth

Having identified the cause of our suffering, we can eliminate it and end our own suffering.

Buddha's message encourages us to eliminate craving and ignorance. He attained enlightenment and thus we can too. We can do this by giving

This is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering: It is the remainderless fading and ceasing, the giving up, relinquishing, letting go and rejecting of that same craving.

— S.N.

up, relinquishing, letting go and rejecting craving and delusions. Lasting happiness is not possible until we are liberated from slavery to desire. We are sad because we long for things we do not have, and thus we become the slaves of these things. The Buddhist name for the state in which all craving, ignorance and suffering have been eliminated is *nirvana*. The word literally means “blown out.”

It is often said that nirvana cannot be described but only experienced; to talk about it is like talking to a blind man about colors. Through observation of Buddha’s life, however, we can affirm that a person who has attained such a state is still alive, happy, peaceful and energetic. He is never apathetic or bored, always knows the right thing to do, still feels all the pains and pleasures of other human beings but remains impervious to their sway.

The fourth truth: the Eightfold Path

The fourth truth is the practical one, the method by which we can attack craving and ignorance and stop suffering by describing the way of the Middle Path or the *Noble Eightfold Path*. This path leads from selfishness to altruism through discipline and moral training.

The way of life can be summed up as higher training in three areas:

- moral discipline
- concentration
- wisdom

This is the Noble Truth of the Way Leading to the Cessation of Suffering: It is the Noble Eightfold Path which consists of right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

— S.N.

Moral discipline is the determination to abandon any wrong action and to pacify the cravings that preoccupy our minds. This makes it easier to concentrate and attain tranquility. When our minds are peaceful, we can overcome ignorance.

1. Right view

Since suffering originates from a mistaken philosophy of life, liberation begins with the highest or most balanced outlook on life. It means accepting Buddha’s analysis of human existence and the four noble truths outlined above.

Without accepting this analysis, a person would not bother with the rest of the path.

2. Right intention

We need to have a positive and noble attitude to life, seeing one’s goal in life as enlightenment and unselfish love for all beings. In Buddhist ethics, actions are judged by intention.

3. Right speech

Our speech is a reflection of character and also a means of changing it. Speech provides a common way of either harming or helping others. Wrong speech includes lies, gossip, harsh words and time-wasting chatter. In fact, there are far more opportunities to hurt people through words than actual physical blows. “Right speech” includes helpful advice, teaching, words of consolation, and so on. The Buddha often stressed the value of silence when no useful speech could be made.



4. Right action

The general direction in which our actions should change is toward selflessness and compassion. This is clarified by the *Five Precepts*, the moral code to which all Buddhists should adhere.

- ✘ The first is to abstain from killing, not just humans but any sentient being. This is the reason that most Buddhists are vegetarians.
- ✘ The second is not to take what is not given, because this violates the community of which one is a part.
- ✘ The third is to abstain from sexual misconduct. Buddha regarded sexual desire as the most powerful and difficult to control. Hence, the Buddhist attitude to women: “Is she old? Regard her as your mother. Is she honorable? Regard her as your sister. Is she of small account? Regard her as your younger sister. Is she a child? Treat her reverently and with politeness.”
- ✘ The fourth is to abstain from false speech. A Buddhist is committed to the truth. Lying deceives oneself and others and causes suffering.
- ✘ The fifth is to abstain from alcohol and drugs. A Buddhist tries to develop mental, moral and physical self-control, and drugs and alcohol have the opposite effect.

Besides providing rules about what not to do, Buddhism encourages positive virtues — contentment with a simple life, detachment from material concerns, love and compassion for all beings, and tolerance.

5. Right livelihood

Buddha laid down guidelines for people to work without causing harm to others. A person’s occupation should not make it impossible for him to observe the moral code. For this reason, Buddha advised against work connected with slavery, prostitution, making weapons, and dealing with intoxicants such as drugs and alcohol. People should seek occupations through which they can serve others.

6. Right effort

Spiritual growth starts with being aware of the good and bad aspects of one’s personality. To follow the path, a person must make an effort to prevent new evil from entering the mind, remove all the evil that is there, and nurture the good already within one’s mind.

7. Right mindfulness

“All we are is the result of what we have thought.” For this reason, control of the mind is very important. Thoughts and distractions should not enter the mind in an uncontrolled and random way. That is why Buddhists try to cultivate calm and awareness, especially of one’s own body, sensations, feelings, and thoughts, with the view to having more knowledge and control over them.

8. Right concentration

This is formal meditation, the practice of techniques designed to lead the mind to a state in which it can perceive the truth and attain wisdom.

What is meditation?

Usually we find it difficult to control our mind. It seems as if our mind is like a balloon in the wind — blown here and there by external circumstances. If

things go well, our mind is happy, but if they go badly, it immediately becomes unhappy. For example, if we get what we want, such as a new possession or a new partner, we become excited and cling to them tightly; but since we cannot have everything we want, and since we will inevitably be separated from friends and possessions we currently enjoy, this mental stickiness, or attachment, serves only to cause us pain. On the other hand, if we do not get what we want, or if we lose something that we like, we become despondent or irritated.

Such fluctuations of mood are because we are too closely involved in the external situation. We are like a child making a sand castle who is excited when it is first made, but who becomes upset when it is destroyed by the incoming tide. By training in meditation we create an inner space and clarity that enables us to control our mind regardless of the external circumstances. Gradually we develop mental equilibrium, a balanced mind that is happy all the time, rather than an unbalanced mind that oscillates between the extremes of excitement and despondency.

If we train in meditation systematically, eventually we will be able to eradicate from our mind the delusions that are the cause of all our problems and suffering.

In this way we will experience a permanent inner peace, known as “liberation” or nirvana. Then day or night in life after life we will experience only peace and happiness.

— Geshe Kelsang Gyatso



By meditating, Buddhists believe they can become aware of an inner source of peace. But according to Buddhism, a person cannot limit his life to meditation alone. This path doesn't embrace the whole world, and therefore it is not universal. Truth requires action. It is through meditation that one can understand what kind

of action is needed. So for a true Buddhist, there is no meditation without action, and no action without meditation.

A simple breathing exercise

Close your eyes. When you are still and comfortable, focus your attention on your breath as it enters and leaves your nostrils. Concentrate on the tip of your nose. Feel the coolness as you breathe in and the warmth as you breathe out. If any thoughts come into your head, let them go without following them, like soap bubbles melting in the air. Bring your attention back to your quiet and regular breathing.