

BUDDHISM FOR BEGINNERS

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Chapter One

THE ESSENCE OF BUDDHISM

What is the essence of the Buddha's teachings?

Simply speaking, it is to avoid harming others and to help them as much as possible. Another way of expressing this is the oft-quoted verse:

Abandon negative action;
Create perfect virtue;
Subdue your own mind.
This is the teaching of the Buddha.

By abandoning negative actions, such as hurting others, and destructive motivations, such as anger, attachment, and closed-mindedness, we stop harming ourselves and others. By creating perfect virtue, we develop beneficial attitudes, such as equanimity, love, compassion, and joy, and act constructively. By subduing our minds and understanding reality, we leave behind all false projections, thus making ourselves calm and peaceful.

We can also speak of the essence of the Buddha's teachings as they are explained in the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and its causes, and the path to that cessation. When Buddha spoke about suffering, he meant that we have unsatisfactory experiences. Even the happiness we have does not last forever, and that situation is unsatisfactory. The causes of our problems lie not in the external environment and those inhabiting it, but in our own mind. The disturbing attitudes and negative emotions, such as clinging attachment, anger, and ignorance are the real source of our unhappiness. Since these are based on misconceptions about the nature of reality, they can be removed from our mindstream. We then abide in the blissful state of nirvana, which is the absence of all unsatisfactory experiences and their causes. A path exists to realize reality and increase our good qualities. The Buddha described this path, and we have the ability to actualize it.

The path is often described by the Three Higher Trainings: Ethical Discipline, Meditative Stabilization, and Wisdom. First, we must become a good human being who functions well in society and lives harmoniously with others. The Higher Training of Ethical Discipline enables us to do this. Because our actions and speech are now calmer, we can proceed to tame the

mind by developing single-pointed concentration or the Higher Training of Meditative Stabilization. This leads us to cut the root of suffering, the ignorance grasping at inherent existence, and for this we develop the Higher Training in Wisdom, so that we can perceive reality as it is.

The Three Higher Trainings can be subdivided into the Noble Eight-fold Path. Ethical Discipline includes: 1) right speech: true, kind, and appropriate speech; 2) right activity: actions which do not harm others; and 3) right livelihood: obtaining our subsistence food, clothing, and so forth—by non-harmful and honest means. The Higher Training of Meditative Stabilization includes: 4) right effort: effort to counteract the disturbing attitudes and negative emotions by meditating on the path; 5) right mindfulness: counteracting laxity and excitement in our meditation; and 6) right samadhi: the mind that can remain fixed one-pointedly upon virtuous objects. The Higher Training of Wisdom includes: 7) right view: the wisdom realizing emptiness, and 8) right thought: the mind that can explain the path clearly to others and is motivated by the wish for them to be free from suffering.

The essence of the Buddhist path is also contained in the three principal aspects of the path: the determination to be free, the altruistic intention (bodhicitta), and the wisdom realizing reality. Initially, we must have the determination to be free from the confusion of our problems and their causes. Then, seeing that other people also have problems, with love and compassion we will develop an altruistic intention to become a Buddha so that we will be capable of helping others most effectively. To do this, we must develop the wisdom that understands the true nature of ourselves and other phenomena and thus eliminates all false projections.

What is the goal of the Buddhist path?

The Buddhist path leads us to discover a state of lasting happiness for both ourselves and others by freeing ourselves from cyclic existence, the cycle of constantly recurring problems that we experience at present. We are born and die under the influence of ignorance, disturbing attitudes, and contaminated actions (karma). Although all of us want to be happy, and we try hard to get the things that will make us happy, no one is totally satisfied with his or her life. And although we all want to be free from difficulties, problems come our way without our even trying. People may have many good things going for them in their lives, but when we talk with them for more than five minutes, they start telling us their problems. Those of us who are in this situation, who are not yet Buddhas, are called "sentient beings."

The root cause of cyclic existence is ignorance: we do not understand who we are, how we exist or how other phenomena exist. Unaware of our own ignorance, we project fantasized ways of existing onto ourselves and others, thinking that everyone and everything has some inherent nature and exists independently, in and of itself. This gives rise to attachment, an attitude that exaggerates the good qualities of people and things or superimposes good qualities that are not there and then clings to those people or things, thinking they will bring us real happiness. When things do not work out as we expected or wished they would, or when something interferes with our happiness, we become angry. These three basic disturbing attitudes—ignorance, attachment, and anger—give rise to a host of other ones, such as jealousy, pride, and resentment. These attitudes then motivate us to act, speak, or think. Such actions leave imprints on our mindstreams, and these imprints then influence what we will experience in the future.

We are liberated from the cycle of rebirth by generating the wisdom realizing emptiness or selflessness. This wisdom is a profound realization of the lack of a solid, independent essence in ourselves, others, and everything that exists. It eliminates all ignorance, wrong conceptions, disturbing attitudes, and negative emotions, thus putting a stop to all misinformed or contaminated actions. The state of being liberated is called nirvana or liberation. All beings have the potential to attain liberation, a state of lasting happiness.

What are the Three Jewels? How do we relate to them? What does it mean to take refuge in the Three Jewels?

The Three Jewels are the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. A Buddha is one who has purified all the defilements of the mind—the disturbing attitudes, negative emotions and their seeds, the imprints of the actions motivated by them, and the stains of these disturbing attitudes and negative emotions. A Buddha has also developed all good qualities, such as impartial love and compassion, profound wisdom, and skillful means of guiding others. The Dharma is the preventive measures that keep us from problems and suffering. This includes the teachings of the Buddha and the beneficial mental states that practicing the teachings leads to. The Sangha are those beings who have direct nonconceptual understanding of reality. Sangha can also refer to the community of ordained people who practice Buddha's teachings, but this sangha is the conventional representation of the Sangha Jewel, and is not the one we take refuge in.

Our relationship to the Three Jewels is analogous to a sick person who seeks help from a doctor, medicine, and nurses. We suffer from various unsatisfactory circumstances in our lives. The Buddha is like a doctor who correctly diagnoses the cause of our problems and prescribes the appropriate medicine. The Dharma is our real refuge, the medicine that cures our problems and their causes. By helping us along the path, the Sangha is like the nurse who assists us in taking the medicine.

Taking refuge means relying wholeheartedly on the Three Jewels to inspire and guide us toward a constructive and beneficial direction in our lives. Taking refuge does not mean passively hiding under the protection of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Rather, it is an active process of moving in the direction that they show us and thus improving the quality of our life.

When people take refuge, they clarify to themselves what direction they are taking in life, who is guiding them, and who their companions are on the path. This eliminates the indecision and confusion arising from uncertainty about their spiritual path. Some people window-shop for spirituality: Monday they use crystals, Tuesday they do channeling, Wednesday they do Hindu meditation, Thursday they do Hatha Yoga, Friday they have holistic healing, Saturday they do Buddhist meditation, and Sunday they use Tarot cards. They learn a lot about many things, but their attachment, anger, and closed-mindedness don't change much. Taking refuge is making a clear decision about what our principal path is. Nevertheless, it is possible to practice the Buddha's teachings and to benefit from them without taking refuge or becoming a Buddhist.

Must we be a Buddhist to practice what the Buddha taught?

No. The Buddha gave a wide variety of instructions, and if some of them help us live to better, to solve our problems and become kinder, then we are free to practice them. There is no need to call ourselves Buddhists. The purpose of the Buddha's teachings is to benefit us, and if putting some of them into practice helps us live more peacefully with ourselves and others, that is what's important.