

A Brief Insight To Buddhism

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About Buddha

Buddha was born in the fifth century and his teachings spread from India across to Asia. Once Buddha died his teachings became interpreted in different ways.

Before we can understand what Buddhism is, we have to understand about the Buddha called Shakyamuni and his basic teachings and philosophy. Then we need to understand how different traditions came about.

Shakyamuni was born in about 500 BC, in Northern India. His parents asked a wise man called Asita to bless their child and he pronounced that he would become either a great religious teacher or a world leader.

Shakyamuni father decided to create a pleasure palace that his son would never want to leave. Shakyamuni was brought up in luxurious surroundings and had every wish fulfilled. After a time Shakyamuni lifestyle began to bore him and he became curious about life outside the palace.

Shakyamuni father would only let his son visit the local village four times a year. The servants would have to make sure that anything unpleasant or ugly was removed. On one of these trips to the village the servants had missed three things. One was an old man the second a sick person and the third a corpse. Shakyamuni found the sights deeply troubling and on his return to the palace he asked if these things would happen to everybody including himself.

Once he heard that everyone was subject to age, sickness and death, Shakyamuni realized the pointlessness of his current life and went into despair.

When he went to the village again he saw a wandering holy man who was poverty stricken and wearing rags although the holy man was radiant with inner peace. Shakyamuni decided on his return to the palace he wanted to live a spiritual life. Then one night when everyone in the palace was asleep he fled.

He cut off his hair and started to wear rags. He found a well-known religious teacher and asked him to teach him about religion. Once he had learned all he could, he moved on. He now needed another teacher to teach him about asceticism and finally he joined a group of five other asceticism yogis.

One day when he was meditating down by the river, he realized he had learned many spiritual disciplines but they had not given him the answers he wanted. A young woman who was tending her cows nearby came across and offered him a bowl of milk and rice. He realized as he was speaking to this young woman the food was strengthening his body. He then realized that extreme asceticism was no more the answer than was his earlier life of self-indulgence.

His friends from the group of asceticism left him in disgust when they found out that he had eaten. So he left on a new journey.

One day Shakyamuni was sitting under a Bodhi tree and he decided not to move until he had found enlightenment. He went into a deep meditation and finally realised his demons of desire and ignorance. He saw the dawn break through new eyes.

Shakyamuni had become enlightened and entered Nirvana the liberation from the cyclic existence. Realizing that everybody was still trapped in the cyclic existence (birth, death and rebirth) Buddha has he had now become known, spent the rest of his time on earth teaching and helping those who followed him.

He created a practical guide for living. A life of harmony and working towards freedom from suffering. He died around the age of 48 from food poisoning. His last words were “impermanent are all created things strive on with awareness”

The workings of Buddha

When someone is interested in the Buddhist way of life and wants to know more.

The main question is.

What is Buddhism about?

The answer is not as obvious however. Even experienced Buddhists continue to contemplate this question. One reason there is no simple answer is that a true knowledge of Buddhism comes only from practical experience. This means making some commitments, meditating, reading Buddhist texts and finding a teacher or a spiritual friend who can guide you through your questions and doubts. The support of a friend who practices Buddhism is also invaluable.

It is good to start simply and try not to run before you can walk. This is clear from a popular saying of the Dalai Lama “**if you can manage to be nice to others this is enough**”. Yet as we all know from our own experience, even this apparently simple practice is difficult if we are tired or angry. Therefore, we can see that Buddhism is a way of life and a state of mind, not merely an intellectual exercise or a label with which we can identify.

There are four Noble Truths in Buddhist

The Existence of Suffering

The Pali word dukkha is usually translated as “suffering” but it has a much broader meaning. Ranging from “dissatisfaction” to “anguish” we all know that suffering exists and have experienced various degrees of it, but what Buddha means in the first Noble Truth is that suffering permeates our existence, affecting both our minds and bodies. This may seem a little strange and we might ask about happiness, but if we look closely at what makes us happy, we notice these things are subject to change.

Example

If we are on holiday in the sun and we dive into a pool to get cool, the sensations are at first pleasurable but after a while we are cool enough and we need to get out. If we stayed in the pool, we will start to suffer from the cold, tiredness and so on. Therefore, happiness occurs then disappears often quite quickly. Dissatisfaction or suffering however is present all the time, though when we are happy we might not notice it for a while. This is because as Siddhartha observed we are born, get sick, get old and eventually die we cannot escape any of these facts they are integral to life.

If you reflect on this, although we may at first find it unpleasant, we soon see that this is a realistic and not a pessimistic view of our existence. This makes us want to investigate the second Noble Truth “the causes of suffering”.

The cause of suffering

Usually we blame circumstances for our suffering. But if we look inside ourselves we discover that we are full of desire.

We have all said to ourselves, if only I have this thing, I would be happy. However, even if we get our hearts desire what happens? It only makes us happy for a while. We take it for granted or we get bored with it and no longer want it and start to desire something else, if only I had that thing and so on. We also notice that we are often as dissatisfied with what we do get as with what we do not. We are all familiar with the gross manifestations of success. We want to become rich and famous and adored like the latest film star.

In reality, we are overdrawn at the bank, well known only amongst our friends and sometimes loved by the boy or girl next door.

The subtle levels are less obvious. I want to be good and I want to help alleviate Third World poverty. These seem like good ideas but they are still desires and cause us suffering when we cant live up to them. This brings us to the “third Noble Truth” the cessation of the causes of suffering.

The cessation and the causes of suffering

The traditional Buddhist term for the cessation of suffering is “**Nirvana**”.

You may have heard the word Nirvana before or you could be confused about what it means. Nirvana is impossible to explain if you have not experienced it.

Try to imagine you are describing to someone what snow is like, knowing they have never seen it before. More useful is to say what it is not, particularly as misperceptions are common. The one thing that it is not is a Buddhist heaven. Nirvana is not a place; it is an unconditioned state of liberation from suffering.

Another common mistake is to think Nirvana is nothing, annihilation or that it is eternal. It is far beyond either of these extremes. The fact that Nirvana exists and that Buddha attained this state is an inspiration to try to free us from this world of desires and suffering, repeated lifetime after lifetime. This leads us to the “fourth Noble Truth”. The path that leads to the cessation of the causes of suffering.

The Path that leads to cessation of the causes of suffering

This is the fourth, and is a set of guidelines for living in a way that will help liberate us from 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 Conclusion of the four Noble Truths

Buddha likened the Four Noble Truths to medicine for a sick person. Firstly, we need to know that we are sick; this is the realization that we are suffering. Secondly, we need to identify the diseases making us ill; these are the causes of our suffering. Thirdly, we need to believe we can get well, this is realizing the truth of Nirvana, and fourthly we need a course of medicine to set us on the path to freedom from suffering.

Auctioning Buddhism

Buddhism is something to practice, to do, not just the usual religious consolations. We can see this from the last Noble Truth, which is a set of guidelines for action. We must make an effort. Salvation lies in our own hands but we have to work towards it. Buddha dedicates his life to helping others, not simply rest content in Nirvana. So thinking of others and seeing that their needs are just as important as our own is an important part of the Buddhist path.

When the Buddha decided to help other beings because they were suffering, he did not lose the qualities of enlightenment characterized by Nirvana. How he lived, his life was an example to others. Buddha was compassionate and wise but these qualities were inner peace. The Dalai Lama says, "if you have inner peace, the external problems do not affect your deep sense of peace and tranquillity". In that state of mind you can deal with situations with calmness and reason, whilst keeping your inner happiness. We can find this peace in our lives by meditation and following the Buddha's guidelines.

Buddha's message is timeless and universal unconditioned by age, culture or any other factors. It says that for all those with the precious gift of life there is an opportunity to awaken to our Buddha nature.

A classic Buddhist text tells us that it often takes many lifetimes to reach this state of awareness but it also says that it is possible in this life, because our essential nature is potential Buddhahood. In addition, in this way there is nothing to attain, merely to awaken to this potential in the present moment. Our Buddha nature lies dormant within us and all we need to do is discover our true self by waking up to our Buddha nature.

All Buddha's have two important principles.

All must help others.

You should not harm others

Both teachings are based on Thought, Love and Compassion

The Noble Eightfold

If you go back to the Four Noble Truths, you will remember we spoke about the eightfold. These paths come under three categories **Wisdom, Morality and Meditation**. However all these things need to be cultivated together. Wisdom, Morality and Meditation enrich and reinforce each other, the sum of them is greater than the individual parts. Wisdom includes **right view or understanding** and **right thought**. Morality includes **right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort**, and **meditation** includes **right mindfulness** and **right concentration**.

Right View or Understanding

“Right View” is the forerunner of the entire path, the guide for all the other factors. When we understand that life can be full of disappointment and accept there is a way out, we then come to realize that the most useful way to spend your time is in following spiritual instructions, like Buddha’s, on how to find liberation. However, we need an experiential understanding, not just an intellectual, theoretical appreciation. If we test Buddha’s teachings on suffering and dissatisfaction thoroughly in our own lives and see them to be true, we become confident that what he taught to escape from suffering will work. Merely taking the teachings on trust is just another form of ignorance or blind faith. This is why “right view” belongs to wisdom. It also incorporates the understanding that we are responsible for our own destiny that only we can change the way we are. We cannot change circumstances or people; you can change your reactions to them. Right view is the foundation of the spiritual path.

Staying on the Path

Without “right view”, we can easily get distracted from the path and get lost along the way. Our views and beliefs are fundamental in determining our attitudes and actions, even though we may have only a vague conceptual idea of what these are. Our views shape our perceptions and establish our values, creating a framework through which we interpret the world and the meaning of our existence. In a way our views condition our actions and inform our choices and efforts to actualise our ideals. They help us decide what to do.

Buddha taught that there are two distinct classes of views

If we hold a “wrong view”, even vaguely, it can lead us to actions that will result in suffering.

Whilst holding “right views” will steer us towards “right action” and thereby to freedom from suffering.

Mundane “right view” by itself will only lead to less suffering within cyclic existence. It does not lead to awakening which is the ultimate purpose of practicing the Buddha’s way. Therefore, there is another level, which is known as “**superior right view**”, which realizes the Four Noble Truths. This leads you to true liberation. As we saw at the beginning of the Noble eightfold Path, the different points are not to be seen in a linear progression and we work with both levels of “right view” at the same time. Though ultimately we are seeking liberation from cyclic existence we also need to make a start so that we can develop “right view”, which helps us find happiness and avoid suffering in the here and now.

Right Thought or Intention

“If your intention is wrong, even though you concentrate on emptiness, you will not get a good result because you’ve been misled. You haven’t wisely reflected on things, you let anything go, you’re just turning away out of aversion”.

Usually our thoughts are ego - centred and reflect on how best to serve “me”. This selfish attitude can be quite subtle and apply to why we are practicing Buddhism. We want to save only ourselves, or we want to be noticed by others as a great spiritual person, even a guru.

Therefore, “**right thought**” includes proper motivation for following Buddha’s way. Right thought is about changing this habitual and self-centred way of thinking. Then we can start to consider others and think more altruistically. We want to practice Buddhism in order to be of benefit to other beings and our environment, not just to make us happy or powerful. At the start, we will of course naturally tend to think somewhat selfishly but we can practice changing our motivation.

Buddha explains that “right thought” has three aspects, renunciation, goodwill, and harmlessness. These counter their opposites of desire, ill will, and harmfulness, which arise from a mind that is suffering in ignorance and that has not understood the nature and causes of suffering. These three areas are beneficial and help us to develop wisdom and eventually lead us to Nirvana. The opposites lead to harm and suffering oneself and others and keep us trapped.

Renunciation Goodwill and Harmlessness

An understanding of the “Four Noble Truths” is important to nurture “right view” and this is the case with “right thought”. When you realize our life is steeped in suffering our mind turns to renunciation, the abandoning of desire and attachment. If we extend this to encompass all other beings, we realize they too have lives pervaded by suffering and wish to find happiness.

This causes thoughts of goodwill to arise, the wish that they find happiness. Reflecting on how all beings suffer inclines us to thoughts of harmlessness, wishing them to be free from suffering.

Buddha said that whatever subject we reflect upon frequently becomes the natural inclination of the mind. By substituting “right thought” when negative thoughts arise, you can train your mind. This can help to enhanced meditation. We can meditate on the suffering inherent in desire to lead your mind toward renunciation. The meditation on loving kindness is the best remedy for ill will and the most effective antidote for harmfulness in meditation on compassion. This helps keep your cultivation of “right thought” firmly grounded in practice so that it is not simply an exercise. By actively cultivating our motivation to practice for the benefit of all beings, we learn to think less selfishly and more openly. Many formal Buddhist meditation practices begin with developing our motivation to do the meditation for the benefit of all beings and end with dedicating any merit we have generated from doing the practice for the benefit of all beings. In this way, we can develop “right thought” every time we meditate.

Whatever subject you reflect upon frequently becomes your natural inclination.

Right Speech

If you know about anything that is hurtful and untrue, do not say it.

If you know anything that is helpful and untrue, do not say it.

If you know anything that is hurtful and true, do not say it.

If you know about anything that is helpful and true find the right time.

As with the other steps on the Noble Eightfold Path that come under morality, “**right speech**” is about being conscious and aware of what you are saying and doing. Morality is not about being judgmental or making us feel unnecessarily guilty. It is all about learning to assess ourselves honestly and being humble when we see how we are not perfect, rather than feeling depressed or inadequate. Right speech includes everything you say. We might think perhaps that speech is not as important as action, but speech and its development, the written word, can have a big impact leading to either good or bad consequences. Our modern age has a tremendous capacity and range of verbal expressions, so it is more important than ever that we practice “right speech”.

Right Speech has four Elements

The first:

Is abstaining from false speech or lying and cultivating truth speech.

Always being truthful helps accord with reality and dispels illusion.

The second:

Is abstaining from slanderous speech and cultivating speech that promotes friendship and harmony. This rises from and helps develop loving kindness.

The Third:

Is abstaining from harsh speech, shouting, insulting or being sarcastic, and cultivating courteous, friendly speech. This relies on patience and tolerance.

The Fourth:

Is abstaining from idle chatter including television, radio, newspapers and cultivating speech that is important and valuable.

Lies are Lies

We try not to tell lies, although this is difficult in a society where advertising has turned falsehood into an art form. Often we tell lies to make ourselves appear clever or bolder than we really are. These are lies even though we call them exaggeration or omitting the less attractive parts of our story. Sometimes we tell lies to protect the feelings of others, and this is tricky. If you are conscious of what you are doing, if your motivation is to avoid hurting someone, and if you have thoroughly considered the consequences, then telling lies may be justified.

Telling the truth is always the best course of action. We also try not to use harsh words, shout at others, or upset them. This includes slander, and telling stories behind people's backs and swearing or using speech in a way you are attacking others. It is best to avoid retaliation if someone shouts at us. Do not shout back in anger because we feel hurt. Idle gossip or foolish speech is time wasting and unproductive which can lead to hurting others. Of course, we talk about people we know in general conversation, but we can try to find good things to say about others, or just be quiet if someone is criticizing another person. We all know the game of Chinese Whispers, when a sentence is passed from person-to-person and ends up being nothing like the original. Idle gossip is like this but can be much more damaging than a parlour game.

Right Action

“Right action can be done under any circumstances by anyone at anytime. Be it in the household or at work or in a monastic situation.”

Right action is about consciously reacting in a way that does not hurt others.

Some lay Buddhists like to observe five precepts as their commitment to the Buddhist path; monks and nuns observe many more. We do not have to follow these precepts rigidly but being guided by the principles behind them is conducive to “right action”. The five precepts are, not killing, not taking that which is not given, not misusing the senses, not lying (covered by right speech), and not misusing intoxicants.

Not killing seems easy, but if you extend this to all beings we see that it can be difficult. There are many insects you crush simply by walking. By walking mindfully you can avoid many more than, if you walk carelessly “oh it's only an insect”. You might think it is only an insect. However, Buddha said all beings have Buddha nature and like you, have the right to try and find happiness. Abstention from taking life includes suicide, and even if someone feels desperate, this precious human rebirth cannot be taken for granted.

We can remind such a person that the feelings behind the wish to take ones own life will change. Torturing and harming other beings are included as secondary actions in not killing. Meditation on kindness and compassion to all beings reinforces this precept. Stealing or taking that which is not given, also seems easy. But how many of us have been tempted to keep the extra change given in error by a shopkeeper? On the other hand, have found a scarf or umbrella on the bus and kept it rather than handing it in? Abstention from taking what is not given can include fraud and deception.

Being happy with what you have.

By not stealing is reinforced by always being mindful of our actions and we can cultivate honesty and respect for the possessions of others. Being satisfied with what we already have and not continuously craving new things. We can also practice generosity and give a little of our money and possessions to those in need.

Not harming the senses is difficult in the modern world, which encourages sensual over indulgence. This includes not overeating, not overindulging in beautiful sights and sounds and appropriate sexual behaviour. Moderation in sex often means you appreciate and respect your partner more, not taking him or her for granted. Appropriate sexual behaviour also means not committing adultery or hurting another person through sex. Practicing sexual fidelity because you love your partner is ultimately more rewarding than promiscuity, which usually causes harm. We can contemplate the fact that monks and nuns practice celibacy.

Some people interpret not misusing intoxicants as abstention, which keeps it simple. However, moderate social use of intoxicants for relaxation rather than intoxication suits some people better. The main reason that Buddha taught abstention from drink and drugs was because they dull the mind, and we tend to use them for escapism. Perhaps the most important reason to refrain from intoxicants or to keep our intake moderate is to prevent bad behaviour that damages others, causing suffering and later leads to regret of ourselves.

Right Livelihood

“Treading the path of awakening can embrace a range of purposes”. At times, we may concentrate on the specifics of material existence; creating a livelihood that is in accord with your deepest values and aspirations. At times, we may retreat disentangling ourselves from social and psychological pressures in order to reconsider our life in a quiet and supportive setting. At times we may engage with the world: responding empathetically and creatively to the anguish of others.”

“Right livelihood” has become much more difficult since the time of the Buddha. It has always been the Indian principle of ahimsa, or harmlessness, which means making a living in an ethical way. Unfortunately, modern society is more interested in profit margins than ethics; so many jobs do not fulfil the principle of harmlessness. Insurance companies, for example, spend much time trying to invalidate people’s claims to avoid paying out, which always causes suffering since people assume they are covered. Monks and Nuns traditionally do not work for money. Monastics never actually touch or handle money at all. They live in dependence on alms provided by their lay supporters, who in turn give spiritual guidance by the monastic. Nuns and monks devote their time to spiritual practice and are therefore worthy of support. In this way, they can say they practice the pinnacle of “right livelihood”.

Choosing a Career Path

Most of us need to work, some of the time at least! We can try to choose a career that helps people, like being a doctor, nurse, or social worker. As the quotation says, “this is responding to the suffering and anguish of others and is of great benefit”. However, these jobs can be very demanding and so do not suit all dispositions. We can at least avoid certain jobs, such as being an arms dealer, or working in industries that pollute the environment or us (such as the tobacco industry). Buddha indicated that any job that brings harm needs to be avoided. Many jobs seem harmless enough, like being a clerk or a secretary, but you need to look at what the company you work for trades in and avoid companies that cause harm to people, animals or the environment.

We might wonder why our job is so important in your Buddhist practice. However, we spend a lot of time at work, and inevitably, we can be influenced by what we do. Therefore, it might cause us some discomfort in meditation if we reflect that what we do is damaging to others.

Buddha taught that our wealth should be acquired according to certain standards. Our work must be legal, non-violent, and honest and not cause harm to others. We can use these principles to assess our current job and help us decide which career or type of work we would like to do. Making large amounts of money is not the only criteria for work. Even though modern society has elevated material well being above social conscience, we can never be happy if our job causes suffering or is unethical. Overworking is unhealthy and holidays and meditation retreats if we choose, are important too.

Right Effort

“Proper effort is not the effort to make something particular happen. It is the effort to be aware and awake in each moment, the effort to overcome laziness and defilements the effort to make each activity of our day meditation.”

“Right effort” includes the Buddhist way of not trying too hard or too little. If we put all our energy into striving for awareness, we are likely to become too tired to do it at all or be disappointed when you do not succeed quickly. If we do not try hard enough then nothing much will happen and you have merely wasted your time.

“Right effort” involves energy, which is neutral but manifests in either positive or negative forms. We can see that aggression and desire are encouraged by energy, as are generosity and mindfulness. Therefore, we should try to ensure our energy is directed to wholesome states of mind. On its own good energy will lead only to less suffering, not towards enlightenment. Therefore, we cultivate “right effort” along side “right view”, “right intention” and so forth in order to awaken our true nature. Buddha stressed the importance of “right effort”, the need for diligence, exertion, and perseverance. Buddha showed us that there is a path to liberation but that the rest is up to us. Enlightenment is hard to attain and therefore putting the path into practice requires much work. No one else can do it for us, not our teacher or guru not even Buddha. Your destiny is your own responsibility.

Four Great Endeavours

The Buddhist text describes four aspects of “right effort” called the “**Four Great Endeavours**”.

The first is preventing unwholesome states of mind from arising, is overcoming defiled states of mind. We looked at earlier, sensual desire, ill will, dullness, worry, and doubt these are the five hindrances. The first two are strongest but they all hinder concentration, preventing our mind from becoming calm and clear. The best way to prevent any of them from arising is to practice mindfulness. Despite our best efforts, some negative states of mind will still arise.

The second aspect abandoning unwholesome states of mind already arisen requires a different effort involving five techniques. The first is substituting a positive thought analogous to the negative thought, so if we feel ill will towards someone we can turn our mind towards loving-kindness. The second is cultivating shame. The third is redirecting our attention elsewhere, and the fourth, its opposite is confronting the negative thought. The fifth should only be used when the others fail; this is suppressing the negative thought.

The third aspect of “right effort” is developing positive states of mind not yet arisen. To assist us are “seven enlightenment factors”. Mindfulness, investigation of phenomena energy rapture, tranquillity, concentration and equanimity. These are cultivated in turn and each preceding factor helps the next one. For example: As energy increases rapture and pleasurable interest naturally develops. The final aspect is maintaining wholesome states of mind once they have arisen. Stabilizing and strengthening the “seven enlightenment factors” achieve this. When they are strong, they help mature your positive thoughts, ultimately leading to liberation.

Right Mindfulness

Mindfulness is integral to meditation and facilitates the attainment of both serenity or calm and insight. You can train your mind to remain in the present; simply noting whatever arises as it arises with no judgment or interpretation. There is not really an incorrect mindfulness only its opposite, mindlessness, which is unfortunately how we spend our lives.

There is a classic analogy where the mind without mindfulness is compared to a pumpkin and the mind established in mindfulness like a stone. A pumpkin placed on water will float, blown in any direction according to the wind and the currents, whilst a stone sinks directly to the bottom and stays there without deviation. Mindfulness grounds the mind firmly in the present preventing it floating off into nostalgic memories hopes and fears.

Four Foundations of Mindfulness

There are traditionally four “foundations of mindfulness”, mindfulness of the body of feeling of thinking and of the object of thought.

What does this mean in our daily lives?

“Mindfulness of the body” is being aware of me as a whole of its different parts, of breathing walking, eating and so on. Often we all take our body for granted, so actually becoming aware of it can be quite exciting.

“Mindfulness of feeling” is one we are all aware of when the feelings are pleasurable or painful but we tend to get lost in the feeling rather than being mindful of it as a feeling. If we say to our

self “this is the painful feeling of having banged my ankle” the awareness of the sensation can help lessen the pain, being mindful rather than reacting.

“Mindfulness of thinking” is the basis of all meditation. It entails watching your thoughts without becoming involved with them. If we concentrate on how a thought has disturbed us instead of staying disturbed, we are practicing mindfulness of thinking similarly; naming your thoughts objectifies them and so helps to let go of them.

Right Concentration

“Right concentration is found in the meditative absorptions. These are mentioned by the Buddha in discourse after discourse as the way and means but not as the goal”.

Without all the other previous steps of the “noble eightfold path”, “right concentration” cannot arise. In the same way that we need “right view” at the beginning to get you on the path, we need all the other steps to help develop “right concentration”.

One of two methods, calm or tranquil abiding meditation, and insight meditation use “right concentration”. They both require the same preliminary practices. These include pure moral discipline, spiritual guidance from a properly qualified teacher and living (or at least practicing) in a quiet place conducive to meditation. “Right concentration” develops single pointedness of mind. This means we learn to stay focused on the subject we have chosen in meditation. When we can do this, even if is just for a few moments; we are not caught up in the usual ego thinking of “I want this and I don’t like that” and so on. However, “right concentration” works in stages, it is not achieve all at once.

Meditative Absorptions

This practice can lead into states of meditative absorption, which are blissful. Buddha warned that the purpose of meditation is not just to bliss out in these states of mind, but also to use them to attain enlightenment. “Right concentration” includes meditating with proper motivation, which is the wish to awaken.

The stages of meditative absorption are separated into eight levels of greater depth; purity and subtlety then its predecessors mark each. They can only be attained progressively, the development of the next level being dependent on mastery of the former. They all share two fundamental qualities: Unbroken attention on the object of concentration and the resulting tranquillity of the mind.

Although “right concentration” lies at the end of the “noble eightfold path”, it does not accomplish the ultimate goal of awakening alone. We also need the penetrating insight of wisdom to liberate us from suffering. So “right concentration” leads us back to “right view” at a higher level because we realize that the best subject to meditate on is your misperception of yourself and all phenomena believing them to exist independently and concretely.

Meditating on the emptiness of our own inherent existence that we exist in dependence on cause, conditions and circumstances lessen our ego attachment. This is the development of wisdom the remedy for ignorance, which is the base for all the other mental affections. From this, we see that the different factors of the “noble eightfold path” are interdependent and work at different levels. Therefore, whether you are a beginner or a more experienced Buddhist, there is much we can use from the “noble eightfold path” on our spiritual journey.

Six Perfections

The six perfections are as below. Buddha taught them in this order with easier practices leading on to the harder ones. In addition, the previous practice helps form the basis for the next one. For example, it is hard to practice morality if we are connecting to our possessions and the best antidote to attachment is generosity.

Morality
Patience
Joyful Effort
Enthusiastic Perseverance
Concentration or Single Pointed Ness of Mind
Wisdom

There are three kinds of Generosity

Giving material help to those who lack material necessities.
Giving protection to those in fear and giving pure sincerity.
Giving teaching to those who request it.

Giving material help includes giving to charity, beggars, and friends in need and to famine or disaster victims. Some of these people or organizations are easier to give to than others. You may feel like helping a friend or giving to a particular charity only. But if we really think about it, all needy people require assistance, whether we like them or believe in their causes or not. This does not mean you should give away all your possessions to everyone who needs them! However, thinking about those who lack the things we have with kindness rather than scorn or blame helps you develop generosity. Then we can give skilfully any material assistance we are able to offer. Also, remember giving advice in a sincere way is a great practice of generosity.

Pure Motivation

This leads to motivation for giving. If we practice generosity to make ourselves look good, we are not showing pure giving. Alternatively, if we throw a few coins at a beggar with disgust in our eyes this is also not pure giving. We must give from our hearts as well as our pockets for the act of giving to be complete.

We can also be mindful of what we give. Gifts of alcohol, tobacco, or drugs though they may give some temporary relief, might in the long run be injurious. Similarly, killing one animal to feed another, like giving a live fish to a seagull, is also inappropriate. Considering what we give is as important as how we give it.

There are many opportunities to give protection to those in fear of the modern world. It is unfortunately quite common for people to be robbed or assaulted; doing what we can to help these individuals is real generosity. Similarly, there are charities to help torture victims, street children, and maltreated animals. Supporting organizations can help provide much relief to people or animals that need it. We might think giving Dalai Lama teachings is well beyond our capability particularly if we have only recently encountered Buddhism. In some ways, this is correct, but the essence of what Buddha taught is simply kindness and compassion towards others, and - if we are asked to say something - we can all mention these qualities. The Dalai Lama would say, "My religion is kindness"

Morality

Practicing morality is mindfully refraining from any negative actions.

Traditionally these are classified as the Ten Non-virtues

There are Four Non-virtues of speech.

Telling Lies - Slandering Others – Gossiping - Harsh words and swearing.

There are three non-virtues of body.

Killing – Stealing - Sexual misconduct.

There are three of mind craving.

Attachment - Wishing harm on others - Holding wrong views.

By sincerely trying to avoid negative behaviour our mind becomes calm and clear, so you feel happy. We have all experienced how angry and troubled we feel if we have harmed someone, even if you feel justified or satisfied and happy when you have actually helped someone even in

a small way. Morality includes cultivating good qualities too, not just avoiding negative behaviour. Therefore, we try to develop love, kindness, and compassion for others as well as not harming them. This is quite easy to do for our friends and family but if we think about how everybody wants to be happy and wants to avoid suffering equally, then we can try to expand our goodwill towards all beings. Buddha taught that morality is the foundation of a single pointed mind. We can see this from the literal translation of “shila” (morality) this means cool and peaceful. When our mind is free from negative emotions it becomes tranquil and focused a positive mind state, love and compassion arise naturally.

Morality Cultivating

Practicing morality is not always easy! Therefore, we can try to remember to engender morality in your meditation sessions. However we must also try to practice morality in every day life too, otherwise it remains theoretical. It is important to remember Buddha’s middle way. We have probably all met people who despite their best intentions seem overly pious and rigid. Therefore, we must be careful not to reduce morality to a set of inflexible rules regardless of circumstances. It is somewhat unlikely that we can practice pure morality in all things at the beginning of our practice. So keep a perspective on morality by understanding that some actions have more serious consequences than others.

It is important not to repress our negative emotions. If we feel angry towards someone, you can refrain from expressing it to that person. Instead find a sympathetic friend, and tell him or her about it. This will allow us to exorcise the negative feelings in a non-harmful way.

Patience

Practicing patience gives you a great inner strength and courage to face difficult situations. Which in turn will help you to discover the real cause of the problems and not simply react by blaming temporary circumstance. If we are patient, we are less likely to get upset quickly when things do not go our own way and less likely to act badly towards others. Traditionally patience comes in three types

The patience of forgiveness.
The patience of accepting suffering.
The patience of being able to behave virtuously.

The nature of the world is inherently unsatisfactory so troublesome situations will definitely arise. So when someone gets angry with us or abuses us we also naturally tend to be angry and abusive towards that person. This merely aggravates the situation. If we practice patience instead of mindlessly reacting, we realize the person is suffering and out of control. However, we do not have to behave in the same way. If we stay calm, eventually the person's anger will lessen and the situation can be resolved calmly.

Accepting Suffering

The patience of accepting suffering is of great use in our lives, because suffering will inevitably arise due to the unsatisfactory nature of our existence. Normally when we suffer, face problems and difficulties we think of them as bad. If we accept the situation with patience and remind ourselves that even this too will pass, then we lessen the experience of suffering. The Japanese poet Issa accepted the presence of fleas and lice as part of his daily life. However, he transformed his irritation through cultivating patience to the point where he treated them as friends.

Patience can help to transform how you think about your problems. If we regard them as teachers, providing us with the opportunity to learn we are less distressed when they arise. We cannot prevent problems this is nature of life, but transforming how we think about them helps us deal with them more successfully.

Joyful Effort

Following the path of Buddha is rewarding although it is not always easy and changing old habitual patterns and learning new ways of being is an on-going process. There is little point in giving up when the going gets tough, as these are moments of greatest opportunity. Therefore, this is where joyful effort or enthusiastic perseverance comes in.

Joyful effort incorporates your attitude towards your spiritual practice. If your attitude is only to follow a set of rules rigidly and blindly then you are probably quite miserable! If however, you remind yourself thoroughly of the great benefit to others and ourselves, from practicing what Buddha has taught helps you cultivate Joyful effort. Now you can approach the Buddhist path with great joy at having found such a wonderful way of life. Joyful efforts include determination to keep practicing even when you are depressed or facing problems. It encourages you to keep trying and helps you maintain your resolve when you feel weak. Joyful effort is also the best antidote to laziness not just when you are meditating but in all activities of your daily life.

The three Aspects of Joyful Effort

The first is to understand the great value of practicing a spiritual path and developing confidence. If we come to Buddhism feeling helpless and inadequate then our attitude is to be passive, we think that meditation and Buddhist practice will take care of us and we do not have to do anything other than sit on a meditation cushion. Therefore, we develop "joyful effort" by reminding ourselves often of the great virtues. This gives us the strength to follow Buddha's ways.

The second is maintaining “joyful effort” despite all the setbacks we encounter. Buddhist practice is a continual process, not something we do once a day or a few times a week. Therefore, we must have great determination not to give up. We can resolve not to lose strength and maintain “joyful efforts” by meditating.

The third aspect of “joyful effort” is the encouragement to follow our practice. In practical terms this means not giving up watching our breath after five minutes and staying patient in the traffic jam until it clears. We can remind ourselves of our innate Buddha nature that will one day shine through all our delusions.

Concentration or Single Pointed Mind

The last two perfections come under wisdom because without concentration we cannot penetrate deeply into an object of meditation and thereby realize its true nature. Without developing virtuous qualities of mind and eliminating deluded states of mind. This calms the mind and improves our concentration. When our mind is calm, we can focus our attention on an object. Once we are able to analyse the nature of the object, we can realize the truth of how it actually exists. We can meditate on a physical object such as a statue of Buddha, or a non-physical object such as the luminosity of our own mind. The latter refers to the mind freed from thoughts, emotions, and ego preoccupations.

When you begin, your mind will frequently wander away from the object and you will need to keep bringing your attention back. You can practice mindfulness of breathing until the mind calms down. The other main distraction is dullness when the mind becomes tired and sleepy. You can lift the mind by reflecting on the excellent qualities of Buddha.

Three Stages of Single Pointed Mind

The first of the six prerequisites are the base upon which we develop single pointed mind. These are living in a safe quiet environment conducive to meditation and close to your spiritual guide. Controlling desire by meditating on impermanence and the unsatisfactory nature of your life; being contented with our life not craving for what we don't have renouncing meaningless activities maintaining morality and avoiding discursive thought when our mind drifts.

The second is the actual practice of single pointed mind, which has three points, meditating in the correct posture, using an object of meditation to develop concentration, which can be a physical object or a subject you contemplate mentally. Developing concentration by avoiding wandering thoughts from an over stimulated mind and mental dullness from a sleepy or tired mind.

The third is the result of practicing single pointed of mind as two major benefits. These are alertness and suppleness of mind and pacification of mental obstacles, which lead to stability and clarity of mind.

Wisdom

In these famous words from the heart sutra. Buddha teaches that the essence of perfection of wisdom from emptiness is not essentially different. At first glance, this might seem contradictory and difficult to understand.

What does it actually mean?

We experience forms or objects as solid entities. You have read that emptiness means they exist in dependence on their constituent parts, causes and conditions. Emptiness is also empty it cannot exist by itself and dependent on causes and conditions, such as someone realizing its true nature. There is no solid ground to stand. Yet it is our tendency to try to hold on to things as solid entities, solid beliefs. These are simply objects and your perception of these forms, which differ subtly from person to person. It is not a question of your perception being better than there's, or your being right and there's wrong. They both exist differently, simply because each of us is unique. No two people have had exactly the same experiences and reactions to them.

This is where the problems of our world begin and end. If you do not take your own perception of reality too seriously and allow people to have theirs then there are fewer rigid viewpoints and fewer arguments.

The Hardest to Realize

This is the last of the six perfections and the hardest to realize without generosity, morality, joyful effort, patience and single pointed mind we are unable to practice the perfection of wisdom fully. However, wisdom must also inform the other five perfections. Otherwise, self-identity arises.

For example: With an act of generosity I am being generous which only leads to the accumulation of merit. When wisdom informs an act of generosity there is no sense of "I", giving the act is a spontaneous gesture arising from compassion. When we give or practice morality and so - on in a way that leads us towards enlightenment. This is why we are practicing Buddhism to be free of the suffering of cyclic existence. Traditionally the simile used to illustrate this point likens this twofold approach to the two wings of a bird.

Now we have practiced the first five perfections. Once you understand your self- identity you can develop wisdom. By practising wisdom you let go of self-identity. This is the uniting of method or skilful means with wisdom and when these two things work together in harmony, we can fly towards enlightenment.

Before you prepare for meditation, it is a good idea to start with a prayer to encourage the right frame of mind. At the end of your meditation, you should always thank your guide.

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