



Buddhism

SESSION 1

| *What are the basic beliefs of Buddhism?*

Introduction

Buddhism is one of the world's major religions, with its roots in Indian theology and spirituality.

The origins of Buddhism date back to the life of Siddhartha Gautama, a high-caste Indian born into a royal family in 563 BCE. Legend has it, his overprotective family sought to shelter him from the bitter, painful side of life, but through his own voyage of discovery he came to certain fundamental truths about the world and how the world operates. Leaving his family behind and renouncing his possessions, he sought to find liberation from worldly cares through a life of strict asceticism, that is, thorough self-denial.

Gradually coming to realize that the ascetic life could provide no satisfying answers to the persistent questions of life, he slowly came to an awareness that the key to living in the world involves balance, harmony, and refocusing one's attention away from the material side of life. The life of strict self-denial was as unproductive as the life of luxury.

Finally, through the process of long periods of intense meditation, Siddhartha reached a point of inner consciousness and awareness, where he grasped the truths about suffering and liberation, which lead to true peace. At that moment, he became the Buddha, which means "Enlightened One."

Much of Siddhartha's thought was in reaction to what he perceived as an overly rigid Hindu theology and what he considered to be an inflexible understanding of *dharma* and the idea of *karma*. In Hindu thought, *dharma* is your duty in life, a duty determined by your



Buddha means "Enlightened One."

caste, your goals in life, your place in society, your age, and your gender. This is fixed at birth and is largely unchangeable for the rest of your life. Karma is the accumulated weight of all your deeds, good and bad, a weight that determines what your existence will be over time. The Hindu idea of the transmigration of souls means that your soul will be reborn time and time again, and all the actions and activities of your current physical life build up positive or negative karma, to carry over to the next physical life.

Truths about the World

For Siddhartha, your *dharma* is not fixed at birth but grows and develops over time. This basic insight led him to his understanding of the Four Noble Truths.

The First Noble Truth

The first of the Noble Truths makes a simple claim, that human life is characterized by suffering. This can be clearly seen through simply observing the world and watching sad, inescapable facts, such as illness, decay, and death. To be human is to fall prey to all these things over time.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

1. Life is suffering.
2. Suffering is caused by attachment.
3. Suffering can be overcome by achieving nirvana.
4. Nirvana can be achieved by following the Eight-fold Path.

Even worse, though, is the inescapable fact that nothing lasts forever. Everything we have or want is only temporary and fleeting, including, unfortunately, our own lives and the lives of our loved ones. This sad reality is terribly distressing and causes people to do all sorts of things in order to hold on to the illusion that things will remain permanent and reliable over time.

Life is suffering—be very cautious about what this says—it does not make the claim that human life is pain. It says it is suffering. The difference is critical. Pain is merely a physical response to harmful stimuli. Pain is just a response to something that happens. We can experience many painful things without great amounts of suffering.

Suffering, on the other hand, is a personal response to things that cause pain. And the amount of suffering various individuals go through varies widely. What could barely affect one person might bring untold amounts of personal anguish to another. Siddhartha's basic insight is this—many painful things occur in the world, and they do so nonstop. It is our personal response to these things that causes suffering in our own hearts.

The Second Noble Truth

What is the cause of this anguish? Quite simply, suffering is caused by attachment. What does this mean? It means that our personal desire is to have something we can hold on to, permanently. Because we and all of life are transitory, impermanent, and illusory, we cling to things in order to create the illusion of permanence.

Siddhartha borrows the Hindu idea of the world as *samsara*, that is, the never-ending cycle of rebirths through the transmigration of souls. At heart, Siddhartha claims

that attachment to the world leads to an ongoing cycle of rebirth in *samsara*, a process he calls dependent origination. As long as we desire things and attach ourselves to them, we will continue to build up karma, and it is this accumulated weight of our deeds over time that traps us in *samsara* and condemns us to a constant round of rebirths, with no end in sight.

Suffering is caused by attachment—again, be attentive to what this says. We as individuals are unwilling or unable to accept the fact that all things must come to an end, so we clutch at whatever will give us the illusion of solidness. This, unfortunately, includes the good as well as the evil things in life. No one can deny that human love is a positive thing. But even our loves lead us to suffering. We turn the objects of our love into just that—objects, things we can grasp on to.

Hatred is another form of attachment. At first, it seems that hatred is a form of repulsion—that is, if you hate something, then you reject it. But hatred is much more dominating than that—it is the reality that something outside you has determined your response. Instead of living your life, hatred molds you into something different.

The Third Noble Truth

Fortunately, the third Noble Truth brings good news. Even though attachment to the world leads to suffering and the never-ending cycle of dependent origination, it can be escaped. How is this possible? Suffering can be overcome through the process of letting go and accepting. To be liberated from *samsara* and achieve nirvana, you must let go of clinging, hatred, and the ignorance of self-centeredness and embrace imperfection, impermanence, and interconnectedness.

Letting go involves avoiding the extremes of luxury and self-denial. To fall into one side or the other is to trap yourself in your own self-interests and desires. A life of letting go is living the Middle Way, characterized by balance, harmony, self-awareness, and the ability to allow things to unfold at their own speed.

The Fourth Noble Truth

This all sounds very well, but how is this possible? What is the practical means whereby to let go of attachment caused by craving? The Middle Way can be found

by following the Eightfold Path, a set of attitudes and activities that lead to the extinction of suffering. The Eightfold Path is the path to freedom.

The Eightfold Path

The Eightfold Path is a way of moderation through the difficult painful progress of our lives, designed to allow us to live thoughtful, intentional lives, avoiding the twin pitfalls of self-indulgence on one hand and self-denial on the other.

Wisdom

For Siddhartha, the combination of critical discernment and focused desire is the key to true wisdom. Wisdom requires the courage and energy to examine yourself in mind and heart.

Right view—To begin the process of liberation, you must first come to a correct understanding of the Four Noble Truths. This is a bare-minimum requirement, because each of us must grapple with confusion every day of our lives. Right view occurs when you break through the veil of confusion to see the true nature of things.

Siddhartha stressed the importance of intellectual rigor and critical thinking. Right view is a form of personal discernment that allows the individual to see past quick, easy answers, to look deep within to spot and fix internal confusion.

THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH

Wisdom

- a. Right view
- b. Right aspiration

Morality

- a. Right speech
- b. Right actions
- c. Right livelihood

Meditation

- a. Right effort
- b. Right mindfulness
- c. Right concentration



Neither extreme of poverty nor wealth will lead to enlightenment. Poverty is not an ideal, since voluntary poverty means shirking your duty to provide for those who depend upon you.

Right aspiration—Intellectual understanding is not enough—to truly break free of samsara, the endless cycle of rebirth, you must focus your will and desires as well. Right aspiration is the focused desire to free yourself from attachment, ignorance, and hatefulness.

Morality

Thinking is not enough. To truly come to liberation, you must change the way you live your life as well.

Right speech—Speech is a form of human action that goes to your heart as an individual. We each demonstrate what we are like through our speech and show the world whether we are honest or dishonest, sincere or insincere, genuine or phony. Language is a public demonstration of your character, so exercising right speech shows you have control over your character.

To live your life based on good character, it is necessary to be forthright and honest and to abstain from gossip and lying. Gossip and lying are a form of self-centeredness. Those who engage in such activities show a blatant disregard for others and prove through their actions that only their own well-being matters.

Right actions—In much the same way, actions demonstrate your character, in an even more forceful manner. Words can lie, and it is possible for any of us to be so skillfully insincere that we can fool everyone. But our actions can never lie. Anyone can see what we are like by watching our choices in life and seeing how we interact with others.

To live a life of good character, you must control your actions to live a life shaped by moderation and restraint.

Actions designed to harm or manipulate others are a form of self-centeredness. Again, those who engage in such activities show a blatant disregard for others and prove through their actions that only their own well-being matters.

Right livelihood—In the same way, your choice of careers and lifestyle demonstrates your character by showing the world what you think is important in terms of personal priorities. To live a life of good character, you must choose a life path in such a way that you make your living doing something that builds up others and avoid harming or defrauding them.

Neither extreme of poverty or wealth will lead to enlightenment. Poverty is not an ideal, since voluntary poverty means shirking your duty to provide for those who depend upon you. Furthermore, with poverty comes economic insecurity, which could lead to suffering. And in truth, there is nothing wrong with the accumulation of wealth, as long as it is gained fairly and honestly and as long as your possessions don't continue to trap you in samsara.

Meditation

This is a deep form of personal retraining and introspection, which allows you to reflect on the realities of existence that might be hidden from you in an everyday state of consciousness. The concentrated focus that meditation gives is necessary in order to center yourself as an individual.

Right effort—It is important that you specifically set yourself to the task of cultivating the excellences of your mind. These excellences are part of your deepest heart. Simply knowing things is not enough—simply acting a certain way is not enough—any real change in heart and life can come only through an intentional time of personal self-examination.

Right mindfulness—This requires a harmony of outer and inner attention. Even though the thrust of Buddhist thought is to come to an understanding of the outer connection of all things and all people, it is important to keep in mind that there is an inner component to this as well. You as an individual must focus on your own development, so that your inner character can change in order to allow you to connect to the outer world.

Right concentration—This inner focus requires you to meditate. This is a must. Meditation is a necessary, daily

tool for personal enlightenment, and you must intentionally set time aside for this very purpose. Meditation is not an escape from the world; instead, it is a specific opportunity for introspection and self-awareness, leading you to understand the truth about impermanence, imperfection, and attachment.

Truths about Our Duty

For Buddhists, beliefs mean nothing unless they are lived out in the real world. That being the case, beliefs must always show themselves through the living of a moral life.

The moral life can never be reduced to a wooden code, because all codes can do is regulate your actions while leaving your character and dispositions untouched. Instead, true morality in the real world must be based on a set of overarching principles that guide your life and actions. Furthermore, rigid ethical codes are a form of absolutism, which only goes to show how desperately we seek to create the illusion of permanence.

At the same time, Buddhists do not fall into a relativistic, “anything goes” attitude to morality, since this, too, is just another form of absolutism. Instead, the rightness or wrongness of any activity depends on the degree to which it contributes to liberation or enslavement in samsara.

Morality, then, is highly dependent on the context. Something that might be totally unacceptable under one set of circumstances (for instance, lying in order to further your own interests) might be perfectly legitimate under other conditions (lying in order to protect the well-being of another). What makes the difference is whether or not your action in the context leads you or others to liberation.

MORALITY

- Avoid killing or harming any living thing.
- Avoid stealing.
- Avoid sexual irresponsibility.
- Avoid lying or any other hurtful speech.
- Avoid alcohol or drugs, which cloud clarity of consciousness.

VIRTUES

- Generosity
- Self-discipline
- Patience
- Energy
- Truthfulness
- Determination
- Loving kindness
- Equanimity

Furthermore, the thrust of Buddhist ethical principles is to understand and act on the connection of all things. Lying, killing, stealing, sexual immorality, and substance abuse are all forms of self-centeredness. When

we engage in these activities, we put our own interests above those of others. Looking toward the connection of all things and focusing on the well-being of others would lead us to avoid these actions.

Even more than that, we need to cultivate virtue, which allows us to become a completely new person.

Once we come to an understanding of human suffering and the impermanence of all things, we can become people characterized by compassion and loving kindness. Even our enemies are the objects of our concern when we come to understand that they are trapped in the endless cycle of samsara just as thoroughly as each of us is. At heart, rules and laws are empty without a deep heart of compassionate virtue.

About the Writer

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