

I. Introduction to Buddhism

Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha

The word Buddha is a Sanskrit word which means “The Awakened One”, one who is awakened to Reality, who understands true nature of the mind, the world, and all sentient beings. Other common epithets of the Buddha are: Tathagata (Thus Come One¹), or Bhagavat (World-Honored One).

The Buddha lived approximately 3000 years ago (some say 2500). He was an Indian prince named *Siddhārtha*, who gave up his throne in order to search for the Truth, to find a way to bring relief to the sufferings of humanity. After many years of diligent practice, he reached Supreme Enlightenment while sitting under a bodhi tree. He then exclaimed, “Wonder of wonders! All sentient beings are inherently complete and perfect! But they do not realize it because of their delusions and cravings.” Thereupon He was known as *Śākyamuni* (or *Gautama*) Buddha, and embarked on an endless, compassionate journey to teach living beings how to see Reality, how to gain true wisdom, how to free themselves, and how to achieve true peace and joy. His teaching is known as the *Dharma*. The Buddha taught for 49 years until he entered nirvana at the age of 80.

Many disciples of the Buddha, following the Buddha’s example, renounced the home life to devote their lives to the practice of Enlightenment, to the gaining of wisdom that can transcend suffering, and to teach other sentient beings the same. They formed the ordained community of Buddhist monks and nuns known as the *Sangha*. Sangha means “harmony” or “harmonious assembly”. The Sangha is responsible for practicing, achieving, preserving, and propagating the Buddha Dharma. Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are called the Triple Jewel.

Buddhist Ideal

Buddhists believe that everyone can become a Buddha. Being a Buddha means being Awakened, free from delusions and sufferings, and perfect in wisdom and compassion.

To be Awakened means to see Reality as it is, not as we think it is. To see Reality is to gain true wisdom and this wisdom will free us. We are not trapped by external conditions, but by our misperceptions and prejudices. Whatever we do, our actions create reactions that come back to affect us. Because of this, we are responsible for our own actions. Also because of this, we are responsible for our own salvation. And exactly because of this, each one of us is capable of achieving Perfection. We just need to know how. The Dharma teaches us how. There are many ways of practice, many “Dharma gates” to achieve Enlightenment, and they all fall into these general categories: performing good deeds, meditation, and studying the Dharma.

Zen Buddhism

There are many Schools of Buddhism. They differ not in the final objective of reaching Buddhahood, but in their emphasis on different methods of practice.

¹ Tathagata means “acting in accordance with Truth”. It also means “neither coming nor going.”

A particularly important and influential school is Zen (also called Chan/Ch'an in Chinese²). Zen's origin goes back to the Buddha. One day, an assembly gathered to hear the Buddha's Dharma talk. However, on that day, instead of speaking, the Buddha simply held up a flower and gazed at the assembly. No one understood the meaning except for one of Buddha's disciples, *Mahākāśyapa*, who broke into a smile. Thereupon the Buddha said, "I have the supreme teaching, inexpressible by words and speech, the true Eye of the Dharma, the profound Mind of Nirvana, the Reality transcending all forms; which I now pass on to Mahākāśyapa." Thus was the first transmission of the "mind-seal", and Mahākāśyapa became known as the first Patriarch of Zen.

The Zen lineage continued in India until the time when the 28th Patriarch, Bodhidharma, sailed to China and passed on the teaching. Bodhidharma became known as the first Patriarch of Chinese Zen. Thereafter Zen flourished in China, especially after the great Sixth Patriarch, Hui-Neng. Throughout the ages there were many enlightened masters, as well as notable Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese masters. Today, all forms of Chan or Zen practice trace their root to Bodhidharma and Hui-Neng.

What is Zen? Practically, we may say that it is a state of mind, a mind of calmness, stability, and clarity; a mind free of delusions and confusions; a mind in accord with true Reality. It is not a dull mind, but one full of infinite potentials. Such a mind is the source of wisdom; it is a state of true liberation and joy. To achieve the Zen state of mind, proper meditation practice is very important. Meditation helps us to focus, calm down, become aware, and begin to see things as they are. A properly trained mind is one ready for Awakening.

Principle of Causality

The Principle of Causality is a basic teaching in Buddhism; it describes a fundamental aspect of nature. It states that every phenomenon comes into being due to various causes and conditions. When the right cause and conditions come together, the right result or phenomenon arises. However, when the conditions fall apart, things fall apart. This is the way of all life.

Science, in fact, is based on causality. Things do not happen by accident but are related by causes. The task of the scientist is to discover the correct causal relationships. Buddhist causality, however, is wider in scope. It deals with both mental and physical phenomena.

The scripture says, "*To know what you've done in the past, observe what is **happening** to you in this life. To know what will happen in the future, observe what you are **doing** in this life.*" (欲知過去因，今生受者是。欲知未來果，今生作者是。) This verse contains the key to understanding our fate. As with all phenomena, our fate also follows the Principle of Causality.

Whatever happens to us in this life is due to previous cause and conditions, due to actions we ourselves have performed. Whenever we perform certain actions, we create *karma*, which means our actions have some effects on the rest of the world. When the effects are beneficial, it is called good karma; when the effects are harmful, it is called bad karma. Actions lead to reactions. When we benefit others, we generate good karma and will receive blessings in the future. When we hurt others, we generate bad karma and will be hurt in the future. This is a natural law, the Law of Causality stated in the simplest way (its actual workings are much more complicated.)

² From 9th century A.D. onward, Chinese Chan Buddhism spread to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. It is called Zen in Japanese. In the 20th century, several Japanese masters came to America to teach Zen, and therefore most Westerners know Zen but not its original name Chan.

II. The Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths are: Suffering, the Causes of Suffering, the Cessation of Suffering or Nirvana, and the Path to the Cessation of Suffering (e.g. the Eightfold Path). We must first recognize suffering. Then we need to find out the causes of our suffering. Only then do we have a chance to end our suffering. The cessation of suffering is liberation, it is true and lasting bliss, it is nirvana. And it can be achieved.

First Noble Truth: Suffering

When we observe the world, and everything surrounding us, we can see that everything comes from a certain set of causal conditions. We also see that everything is impermanent. For example, a tree needs seed, earth, water, air, and sunshine to grow. Because the causal conditions are always changing, the resulting phenomena must always be changing. When the causal conditions fall apart, things fall apart. Everything invariably dissolves away, or passes into another form. Nothing in nature is fixed; everything is always in a flux. This “everything” includes people, property, money, fame, power, love, family, enemy, pleasure, pain, life, and the cosmos. All things come and go.

Even though impermanence is all around us, we often choose to ignore it. Instead, we think, or we wish, that things would stay the same. Friends would always be there. Wealth and fame would stay around. We would live for a long time. We cling to the past or the future, and ignore reality. Therefore we are unprepared when changes hit us. Consequently, we suffer.

Buddha observed that suffering is a universal human condition. There are eight kinds of suffering common to all people: birth, aging, illness, death, separation from the ones we love, being with people we dislike, desiring things we cannot have, and mental irritation. All people have or will experience the eight kinds of suffering during each lifetime, whether they are men or women, Eastern or Western, wealthy or not. This is a true observation. This is the first of the Four Noble Truths that Buddha discovered: that there is *dukkha*, which means suffering, dissatisfaction in life, or that something has gone wrong.

There is a strong relationship between impermanence and suffering. If we are not conscious of the impermanence of all things, then we will cling to fantasies, wish for impossible things, and suffer. Recognizing suffering is the first step to ending suffering.

Second Noble Truth: Cause of Suffering

The Second Noble Truth explains the cause of suffering. The various kinds of causes have a common name: *kleśa*, often translated as defilements, vexations, or afflictions. There are two classes of *kleśa*: The first are erroneous views, and the second are erroneous behaviors. Erroneous views are those due to delusion, or misperception of reality. They include the perception of an ego-identity, dualistic views, and disbelief in Causality. Erroneous behaviors are those patterns of behavior developed from the above delusions. These include greed (craving), anger, ignorance, arrogance, doubt, jealousy, etc.

When *kleśa* arises, suffering follows. When *kleśa* is extinguished, suffering ceases. Therefore, it is important to understand the cause of suffering in order to eliminate suffering. If we are ignorant of the cause, we will behave foolishly, and hurt ourselves as well as others. It is very important for us to think deeply about the relationship between the various kinds of causes and their consequences

in order to convince ourselves of the veracity of the Second Noble Truth.

Third Noble Truth: Extinction of Suffering

The Third Noble Truth says that there is a state of being wherein all suffering has ceased. It is called nirvana. Suffering comes from the various kleśhas: erroneous views, greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt. In order to end suffering, its causes must be eradicated. Therefore nirvana is also a state free of kleśhas, these impurities of the mind. Being free from all delusions, defilements, and suffering is nirvana.

Nirvana can also be described in the following ways:

Extinction: Cessation of all suffering, and all causes of suffering.

Transcendence: Transcending the mundane existence; being free of reincarnation.

Tranquility: absolute serenity, unperturbed by anything.

Unborn, Deathless: No more rebirths.

Liberation, Bliss: Forever liberated from all misery, state of ultimate bliss.

To achieve nirvana is to attain a supreme state of mind, from a mind of defilement to one of purity, from duality to the absolute, from conditioned to the unconditioned, from a mundane being to the Holy One, to be forever freed from all suffering and abide in bliss.

Fourth Noble Truth: The Path

The last of the Four Noble Truths is the Path: the path to cessation of suffering, the way to nirvana. The Buddha Dharma is meant to be put into actual practice and not just be a theoretical study. So understanding how to traverse the Path is very important. The Noble Eightfold Path will take us from samsara to liberation, making nirvana a reality, not a speculation.

The Noble Eightfold Path (八正道，或八聖道) is not the only Path. There are also the Twelfold Causal Chain and the Six Paramitas, all very important practices that lead to nirvana and Buddhahood. However, among these methods, the Eightfold Path is the most fundamental of all.

The word “noble” can also be translated as “holy”, “of the Sages”, “righteous”, etc. It is a Path by which we can purify ourselves of the Three Poisons and reach nirvana.

The Noble Eightfold Path comprises of the following: Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Samadhi. Together they can be viewed as sequential steps in our practice, but each step also stands on its own as an important aspect of a well-rounded practice.

Summary

We have briefly explained the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths also follow the Principle of Causality: the first Truth, Suffering, is the consequence of delusion. The second Truth, Causes of Suffering, explains the causes that lead to suffering. They are the **cause** and **consequence** of mundane existence. The third Truth, Nirvana, is the consequence of enlightenment. And the fourth Truth, the Path, is the cause leading to nirvana. They are the **cause** and **consequence** of noble, liberated existence. By following the Eightfold Path, everyone can achieve liberation.