

Buddhism as a path to enlightenment



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Buddhism is not about God or Gods, it does not supply a theory about what may happen in the afterlife, nor does it express views about creation; it is based in the world of daily living. Most religions have deep theoretical foundations they are built upon, and most people within such religions have faith that the theory is true. Buddhism does not address theories; it does not agree or disagree with any religion, but rather acknowledges religion as a means to live in a positive manner. Buddhism is about enlightening the person, regaining the compassion and wisdom inside, thus resulting in freedom from suffering. Buddhism is about living a life of peaceful serenity. Originating in a region near India over two-thousand years ago, Buddhism is becoming a religion that is revered and practiced worldwide.

Buddhist spirituality is viewed as something from within, an innate goodness in all humans that has been lost can now be found through practice and meditation. Buddhists must motivate themselves, and rely on their own efforts, not those of a charismatic leader. If followers of the Buddha began to revere the man, they would become distracted from their task impeding spiritual progress. Mark W. Muesse, a professor of religious studies, reveals, “ Buddhist spirituality promotes a form of life that provides an antidote to the stresses of modern living. As a counterpoint to the haste and hurry, the noise and confusion of this world, Buddhism prescribes a life of quietness and tranquility, a life of contemplation and gentle awareness.” (Muesse, 2002). Buddhists may have come from a variety of religions; for example, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, and Atheism. To find true wisdom and compassion is to see the world as it really is, and live life without being the center of the whole. To be successful, Buddhism teaches a person to actively

practice, and work to channel the mindset of self-centeredness into one of compassion. Buddhism originated in India around the sixth or fourth centuries BCE, and is based on the teachings of also referred to as the Buddha. (Muesse, 2002).

Siddhartha's journey to find truth, spirituality, and learn how to solve the problems of suffering, led him to extensive meditations. Over a period of about seven years, he endured exhaustion and starvation while experimenting with various meditations searching for enlightenment, but made no progress. On the verge of death due to fatigue, he finally rested, had a nutritious meal, and then decided to meditate again until he found the answer to suffering. As the sky began to lighten following day, he too felt illuminated, happy, and relieved; after seven years of searching, Siddhartha reached the state of enlightenment. He then realized that in order to become enlightened, he must keep himself healthy so his mind would be fit. He set forth to teach others, regardless of caste, his enlightenment, the method of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Siddhartha traveled from city to city teaching the importance of not losing one's self by allowing passions to consume, but rather exist without indulging in selfish cravings, leaving one free to be happy. (Simpkins & Simpkins, 2000). (Armstrong, 2001).

The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism and the Eightfold Path are the starting points for all Buddhist variations. This doctrine is Buddha's (Siddhartha's) "diagnosis and prescription for treating human suffering and finding true happiness." (Simpkins & Simpkins, 2000).

Noble Truth one: Life Is Suffering. Birth is suffering, illness is suffering, aging is suffering, and death is suffering. When a person looks at life realistically, it is full of fleeting happiness followed by inevitable sorrow, the years go by faster, and faster, it is a no-exit path to death. Even when things seem to be at their best, it is not completely satisfying. People have come to want more and more from life and that is the core of the problem, egocentric desire. This is Buddha's diagnosis. (Simpkins & Simpkins, 2000).

Noble Truth two: The Root of Suffering. Egocentric desires are the root of suffering; the selfish grasping after pleasures and evasion of pain. Self-centered yearnings can never truly be fulfilled, leaving behind feelings of irritation, frustration, and even anger. Anger is one of the main reasons for causing distress to others; it also will cause suffering within. People constantly engage in actions that cause anguish, either directly or indirectly. (Simpkins & Simpkins, 2000).

Noble Truth three: You Can End Suffering. Knowing that going beyond suffering is possible through internal transformation is the point of this truth. Suffering and the causes of suffering are dependant on a person's state of mind, therefore, by changing the way one perceives the world mentally, also changes the amount of suffering incurred. (Simpkins & Simpkins, 2000).

Noble Truth four: The Eightfold Path. This is the prescription, a means to find freedom from suffering. People can end their suffering and dilemmas by controlling the body and mind in a positive manner to help others instead of doing them harm, and by creating mental wisdom. Once this renewal is

complete, a person can enjoy the state of Nirvana, free of problems. This is the path leading to the mental transformation, and cessation of suffering.

The Eightfold Path is a guide meant to help people work out their difficulties, become liberated from suffering, and come across happiness. “ Right Views” is the first step on this path to discover happiness. Once a person understands what is wrong and becomes familiarized with the transformation process, gaining the knowledge of what will need to be accomplished in order to achieve success, they will be pointed in the right direction. “ Right Intention” is the second step. A person has to feel this is really what they want to do, and be willing to maintain this commitment along their journey. Dedication to this endeavor is necessary to become successful. The third step is “ Right Speech”, meaning a person needs to listen to what is said, how it was said, and why it was said. Curbing the use of negative intonations, and derogatory remarks will contribute to the positivity inside instead of nourishing the negativity inside. Awareness and self-examination can help a person communicate in a more positive, harmonious way. “ Right Conduct” is the fourth step, encouraging a person to be aware of their motives, as well as their conduct. Upon self-observation, a person may become aware of unconscious actions that incur negativity. Then reflect on those negative actions, discover the motivation, and work towards positive actions. The fifth step on the path to enlightenment is “ Right Livelihood”. Most people spend the majority of their lives working; find inner peace in a positive occupation. A person working in a negative environment acquires negative feelings. These negative feelings can become overwhelming, and then aimed in the direction of others, in turn causing suffering. “ Right Effort”

is the sixth step. By exerting positive effort, a person will begin to notice positive changes within their life. Right effort also means to pace one's self; do not over examine every word said or action taken, as this can become disturbing over a short period of time. The seventh step is " Right Thought". This step lends confidence in " taming" the mind. Thoughts, feelings, and sensations are erratic, and short-lived. Simpkins explained this simply, " The concrete sense people have of themselves is merely a series of experiences that seem to blend together into one. In reality, the ego is nothing more than this series of experiences." (Simpkins & Simpkins, 2000, p. 56). " Right Concentration" is the final step on the Eightfold Path to enlightenment. In this step, a person pulls together the skills learned from each of the previous steps and places them into the practice of meditation. Meditation, concentrated awareness, allows a person to see through the illusions, seeing the world as it really is, a direct perception. (Simpkins & Simpkins, 2000).

All religions incorporate meditations in with their faith in one form or another; such as prayer, reciting mantras, all the way to induced states wherein visions are seen, gibberish is spoken in the language of tongues, or voices are heard, which are usually the deities, spirits, or other supernatural beings for that particular religion. Buddhist meditations are different. Francis Story points out, " The Christian who has seen Jesus, or the Hindu who has conversed with Bhagavan Krishna may be quite satisfied that he has fulfilled the purpose of his religious life, but the Buddhist who sees a vision of the Buddha knows by that very fact that he has only succeeded in objectifying a concept in his own mind." (Story, 1995-2010). Buddhists embrace two distinct types of meditation: dhyana, meditation that clears the mind, and

prajna, meditation that fills the mind. Usually these two meditations are performed together. Several variations of Buddhist meditations exist today, some methods are for developing mindfulness and concentration, yet others focus on breathing and visualizations. Meditation enhances awareness, and by being aware, one becomes wise. Meditation also calms the mind, allowing a person to feel at ease while reflecting upon life with positive focus. The discipline that Buddhist meditations establishes in a person can be applied to life situations; it teaches clear thinking without bias, and concentration so the mind will be able focus intently on any given situation.

Buddhism is a religion based on real life without theorizing about things that can never be solidified. It is a religion that holds no bias toward any other religion, nor do many other religions hold a bias for Buddhism. The doctrines within Buddhism urges the need for humanity to become humane again, to let go of selfish desires, negative intentions, and be thoughtful of all.

Experiences, and a person's reactions to them, create the ambience of the path of life a person leads. Buddhism is the embodiment of peaceful existence in a world that has become wrought with despair and suffering.