

# BASIC TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA

## THE THREE UNIVERSAL TRUTHS

One day, the Buddha sat down in the shade of a tree and noticed how beautiful the countryside was. Flowers were blooming and trees were putting on bright new leaves, but among all this beauty, he saw much unhappiness. A farmer beat his ox in the field. A bird pecked at an earthworm, and then an eagle swooped down on the bird. Deeply troubled, he asked, "Why does the farmer beat his ox? Why must one creature eat another to live?"

During his enlightenment, the Buddha found the answer to these questions. He discovered three great truths. He explained these truths in a simple way so that everyone could understand them.

**1. Nothing is lost in the universe** The first truth is that nothing is lost in the universe. Matter turns into energy, energy turns into matter. A dead leaf turns into soil. A seed sprouts and becomes a new plant. Old solar systems disintegrate and turn into cosmic rays. We are born of our parents, our children are born of us. We are the same as plants, as trees, as other people, as the rain that falls. We consist of that which is around us, we are the same as everything. If we destroy something around us, we destroy ourselves. If we cheat another, we cheat ourselves. Understanding this truth, the Buddha and his disciples never killed any animal.

**2. Everything Changes** The second universal truth of the Buddha is that everything is continuously changing. Life is like a river flowing on and on, ever-changing. Sometimes it flows slowly and sometimes swiftly. It is smooth and gentle in some places, but later on snags and rocks crop up out of nowhere. As soon as we think we are safe, something unexpected happens.

Once dinosaurs, mammoths, and saber-toothed tigers roamed this earth. They all died out, yet this was not the end of life. Other life forms like smaller mammals appeared, and eventually humans, too. Now we can even see the Earth from space and understand the changes that have taken place on this planet. Our ideas about life also change. People once believed that the world was flat, but now we know that it is round.

**3. Law of Cause and Effect** The third universal truth explained by the Buddha is that there is continuous changes due to the law of cause and effect. This is the same law of cause and effect found in every modern science textbook. In this way, science and Buddhism are alike.

The law of cause and effect is known as **karma**. Nothing ever happens to us unless we deserves it. We receive exactly what we earn, whether it is good or bad. We are the way we are now due to the things we have done in the past. Our thoughts and actions determine the kind of life we can have. If we do good things, in the future good things will happen to us. If we do bad things, in the future bad things will happen to us. Every moment we create new karma by what we say, do, and think. If we understand this, we do not need to fear karma. It becomes our friend. It teaches us to create a bright future.

## THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

Once there was a woman named Kisagotami, whose first-born son died. She was so stricken with grief that she roamed the streets carrying the dead body and asking for help to bring her son back to life. A kind and wise man took her to the Buddha.

The Buddha told her, "Fetch me a handful of mustard seeds and I will bring your child back to life." Joyfully Kisagotami started off to get them. Then the Buddha added, "But the seeds must come from a family that has not known death." Kisagotami went from door to door in the whole village asking for the mustard seeds, but everyone said, "Oh, there have been many deaths here", "I lost my father", "I lost my sister". She could not find a single household that had not been visited by death. Finally Kisagotami returned to the Buddha and said, "There is death in every family. Everyone dies. Now I understand your teaching." The Buddha said, "No one can escape death and unhappiness. If people expect only happiness in life, they will be disappointed." Things are not always the way we want them to be, but we can learn to understand them.

When we get sick, we go to a doctor and ask:

What's wrong with me?

Why am I sick?

What will cure me?

What do I have to do get well?

The Buddha is like a good doctor. First a good doctor diagnoses the illness. Next he finds out what has caused it. Then he decides what the cure is. Finally he prescribes the medicine or gives the treatment that will make the patient well again.

### **The Four Noble Truths**

1. There is Suffering. Suffering is common to all.
2. Cause of Suffering. We are the cause of our suffering.
3. End of Suffering. Stop doing what causes suffering.
4. Path to end Suffering. Everyone can be enlightened.

#### **1. Suffering:** Everyone suffers from these things

**Birth-** When we are born, we cry.

**Sickness-** When we are sick, we are miserable.

**Old age-** When old, we will have ache and pains and find it hard to get around.

**Death-** None of us wants to die. We feel deep sorrow when someone dies.

Other things we suffer from are:

Being with those we dislike,

Being apart from those we love,

Not getting what we want,

All kinds of problems and disappointments that are unavoidable.

#### **2. The cause of suffering**

The Buddha explained that people live in a sea of suffering because of ignorance and greed. They are ignorant of the law of karma and are greedy for the wrong kind of pleasures. They do things that are harmful to their bodies and peace of mind, so they can not be satisfied or enjoy life.

For example, once children have had a taste of candy, they want more. When they can't have it, they get upset. Even if children get all the candy they want, they soon get tired of it and want something else. Although, they get a stomach-ache from eating too much candy, they still want more. The things people want most cause them the most suffering. Of course, there are basic things that all people should have, like adequate food, shelter, and clothing. Everyone deserves a good home, loving parents, and good friends. They should enjoy life and cherish their possessions without becoming greedy.

#### **3. The end of suffering**

To end suffering, one must cut off greed and ignorance. This means changing one's views and living in a more natural and peaceful way. It is like blowing out a candle. The flame of suffering is put out for good. Buddhists call the state in which all suffering is ended **Nirvana**. Nirvana is an everlasting state of great joy and peace. The Buddha said, "The extinction of desire is Nirvana." This is the ultimate goal in Buddhism. Everyone can realize it with the help of the Buddha's teachings. It can be experienced in this very life.

#### **4. The path to the end of suffering:** The path to end suffering is known as the **Noble Eightfold Path**. It is also known as the **Middle Way**.

### **THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH**

When the Buddha gave his first sermon in the Deer Park, he began the '**Turning of the Dharma Wheel**'. He chose the beautiful symbol of the wheel with its eight spokes to represent the Noble Eightfold Path. The Buddha's teaching goes round and round like a great wheel that never stops, leading to the central point of the wheel, the only point which is fixed, Nirvana. The eight spokes on the wheel represent the eight parts of the Noble Eightfold Path. Just as every spoke is needed for the wheel to keep turning, we need to follow each step of the path.

- 1. Right View.** The right way to think about life is to see the world through the eyes of the Buddha--with wisdom and compassion.
- 2. Right Thought.** We are what we think. Clear and kind thoughts build good, strong characters.
- 3. Right Speech.** By speaking kind and helpful words, we are respected and trusted by everyone.
- 4. Right Conduct.** No matter what we say, others know us from the way we behave. Before we criticize others, we should first see what we do ourselves.
- 5. Right Livelihood.** This means choosing a job that does not hurt others. The Buddha said, "Do not earn your living by harming others. Do not seek happiness by making others unhappy."
- 6. Right Effort.** A worthwhile life means doing our best at all times and having good will toward others. This also means not wasting effort on things that harm ourselves and others.
- 7. Right Mindfulness.** This means being aware of our thoughts, words, and deeds.
- 8. Right Concentration.** Focus on one thought or object at a time. By doing this, we can be quiet and attain true peace of mind.

## **THE FIVE PRECEPTS (*Pancha Shila* )**

- 1. Refrain from taking life**
- 2. Refrain from taking that which is not given**
- 3. Refrain from misuse of the senses**
- 4. Refrain from telling lies**
- 5. Refrain from self-intoxication with drink and drugs**

## **BAD THINGS**

### **THE THREE POISONS:**

- 1. Moha - ignorance**
- 2. Raga - greed, lust, craving**
- 3. dvesh - hatred, anger**

### **THE HINDERANCES:**

- 1. Sensual desire**
- 2. ill will**
- 3. sloth**
- 4. restlessness and worry**
- 5. doubt**

## Useful Terms

- **BUDDHA:** Buddha is a title, not the name of a person. It literally means "to wake" and become enlightened. There have been Buddhas before Siddhartha Gautama, and there will be Buddhas after. It is a term that denotes a person who has attained supreme truth and wisdom.
- **DHARMA:** Literally meaning "the course of right conduct", Dharma is the path or the way to enlightenment. Dharma is used to refer to the teachings of the Buddha and the theology that surrounds Buddhist doctrine.
- **KARMA:** Most Buddhists believe that people are responsible for their actions. All acts committed by a person will impact their lives at one time or another. Past actions affect one's present and future incarnation.
- **ENLIGHTENMENT:** This is the ultimate state that each individual works towards. As each soul is reincarnated and learns the lessons of the eight fold path, they are brought closer to this state of perfection. When an individual attains this state, they give up the egotism of personal identity and merge with the entire universe. This is a final state for most, except the Bodhisattva who chooses to continue incarnating in order to teach others.
- **BODHISATTVA:** Literally meaning enlightened being a soul who through compassion and altruism postpones enlightenment in order to instruct others. The Bodhisattva delays their own entry into Nirvana until all sentient beings are enlightened. A Bodhisattva acts as the key figure in Mahayana Buddhism.
- **NIRVANA:** Nirvana is ineffable. It cannot be described. Literally it means "blowing out," as if referring to a lamp. In nirvana, all "individual personality or ego ceases to exist and there is nothing to be reborn." (*The Buddhist Tradition*, 12) The conception of Nirvana differs in the Mahayana and Theravada sects. Mahayana doctrine centers on the bliss and oneness of the whole universe, an integration of the world of Samsara and enlightenment. The Theravada tradition focuses singularly on the bliss of enlightenment that destroys the illusion of Samsara.
- **MANTRA:** Mantras are "highly compressed, power-packed formulas, usually of Sanskrit origin, which are charged with deep meaning and magical potency." (*The Buddhist Handbook*, 96) They are either written, visualized, or spoken. reciting a mantra continuously "purifies the speech and 'protects the mind' by maintaining a constant spiritual connection; and of course it helps disperse mental chatter." (*The Buddhist Handbook*, 96)
- **SAMSARA:** This is the world of illusion which we live. All the things that we consider physical and solid are merely illusory. When individuals are obsessed with this world we neglect our spiritual needs. Samsara relates both to this illusion and our mortal lives.
- **MARA:** Mara is a guardian figure, an evil spirit who tries to keep morals from enlightenment. Mara's ultimate goal is to keep individuals diluted and content in Samsara, not looking towards Nirvana.
- **WISDOM:** Wisdom is not just knowledge, but the active penetration of "truths by testing them against experience" (Snelling, 47). Information and knowledge in and of itself is of no value when viewed in isolation. It also has to do with the evaluation of the motivations that guide action. Wisdom is partially spawned by notion of Right Action in the Eight-fold path.
- **MEDITATION (Samadhi):** An essential element of Buddhist practice, meditation is a vehicle that not only allows the practitioner to gain focus, but also can assist in finding the path to Dharma. The classic Buddhist meditation posture "is a cross-legged one, with one leg laid on top of the other (single Lotus) or the two legs interwoven (double Lotus). . . The important thing is that the back should be straight and unsupported, and lightly balanced on the pelvis. The head should be squarely balanced on an upright neck. The eyelids are lowered, and the mouth is lightly closed. The hands are laid one above the other in the lap, thumb-tip to thumb-tip, or lightly clasped." (Snelling, 51) There are usually two fundamental elements of meditation: *Samatha* - Calm Abiding, a singular focus and *Vipashyana* - insight, awareness of all that surrounding