

Foundations of Buddhist Practice

© Rick Hanson, 2007

*Outstanding behavior, blameless action, open hands to all, and selfless giving:
this is a blessing supreme.*

The Buddha

Introduction

Traditionally, the Buddha emphasized that people should establish a foundation of everyday virtue and morality before confronting the profound teachings of enlightenment contained in the Four Noble Truths: the truths of suffering, its cause, its ending, and the path to its ending.

As Buddhism has moved to America, that order is often reversed, and people are first introduced to the dharma through the Four Noble Truths. That's fine, but it can skip over important building blocks for your efforts to bear the most fruit.

So we invite you to consider the foundations of your practice, in the original terms the Buddha taught.

How to Approach the Teachings Themselves

Take nothing on faith

The Buddha advised each person to "see for yourself." He stressed that people should not just take the word of some teacher or text, but should directly observe their inner and outer worlds to see what was true. Unlike other major religious figures, such as Jesus or Mohammed, he did not claim any special divine inspiration as authority for his teachings: he asked people to judge them on their merits alone. To paraphrase Ajahn Chah slightly (Being Dharma, p. 127): *"The Buddha said he is only the one who points out the way. He teaches you how to swim. It's not that he swims for you. If you want the Buddha to swim for you, you are only going to drown."*

The Pali Canon

Buddhism has three major strands: Theravadan, Tibetan, and Zen. Each of these has much in common with the others, and unique strengths as well. We stand mainly in the Theravadan lineage - the Buddhism of Southeast Asia and "vipassana" - which is founded upon the original teachings of the Buddha as they were first written down in the Pali language (thus the term, "Pali Canon").

One can judge that Canon purely on its own merits, and should. We really recommend you read within it in addition to modern discussions of the dharma. (We love the gold standard anthology of the "greatest hits" of the Pali Canon, translated and arranged by Bhikkhu Bodhi: *In the Buddha's Words* [Wisdom Publications, 2005]). It's striking how much of the Canon is applicable today - coming to us across 2500 years, from an agrarian, Indian, largely Hindu society. Of course, that's because

they discuss two things - physical reality and the human mind - that are the same, here and now, as they were in that far-off time and place when Siddhartha walked the dusty roads with his begging bowl and talked and taught and encouraged people to find their own enlightenment, too.

But it's also reasonable - or at least, interesting - to ask how much the words on the page reflect what the Buddha actually said. The teachings must be evaluated in their own right, but we think there is a particular initial credibility to the words of the actual human being, Gautama Siddhartha, who came from an intensely religious culture and after many years of extraordinary spiritual practices achieved a kind of enlightenment that was remarkable even for that time, drawing thousands of people to him - beggars and Brahmins, housewives and merchants, ascetics and kings - during 45 years of detailed, practical, and relentless efforts to help them share his own great peace, happiness, kindness, and freedom.

During the Buddha's life, monks were encouraged to memorize, chant, and discuss his discourses (and some from a few, highly realized followers) - in a tradition in which oral memory was considered more reliable than the written record and people would be routinely expected to have memorized the equivalent of a hundred pages. Then, soon after his death, a council was convened and the discourses ("suttas" or "sutras") were chanted - many by Ananda, his personal attendant, and someone known for a remarkable memory even for that time (when a sutta begins with "Thus have I heard," the speaker, the "I," is Ananda, which somehow makes the sutta feel more immediate to us). A consensus emerged about the words of the discourses, and various monks or different monasteries were to be responsible for memorizing and passing down certain suttas. After several hundred years, monasteries in Sri Lanka produced the first known written record of them, which was the genesis of the Pali Canon.

Some of the Pali canon is about details of monastic life or philosophical controversies that have little connection with our lives these days. The suttas also contain a good deal of repetitive language as an aid to memorization; no one thinks that the Buddha actually repeated himself so much! And we think a certain amount of exhortation and rhetorical flourish slipped in over the centuries, which is often pretty obvious.

Nonetheless, the central concepts of the teachings, countless expressions, and numerous examples or metaphors all seem to us to have come from a single, remarkable person: Siddhartha himself. The teachings were always spoken to specific individuals - either one-to-one or in a group - and, in effect, the Buddha is still speaking to us today. As you read or reflect on the dharma, you might imagine that the Buddha is talking to you, much as he talked with thousands of people, asking you, right now right where you are, to face your suffering and tell the truth about its

causes, and be heartened and encouraged to change those causes in your own real and daily life as the greatest gift you might ever offer yourself and those you love and all beings everywhere.

The danger in views

Attachment to view (e.g., opinion, belief, thought, perspective, position) is one of the four types of clinging - which is the main engine of suffering.

This applies to the dharma itself. Ultimately, the Buddha advised releasing the dharma - as a body of ideas - as one approaches Nibbana, much as one would leave behind one's raft when finally reaching the farthest shore.

Buddhist teachings and practices are not something you take up instead of your own religion or personal philosophy of life. A person can be a Buddhist Jew or a Catholic Buddhist or a Buddhist atheist or not Buddhist at all and still experience personal benefits from some of the perspectives or practices offered by the Buddha.

The words themselves

The dharma is "the truth of how things are" - the reality of existence and experience. Words represent reality but are not reality itself, any more than a menu is a meal. Consequently, we suggest you take the words of the dharma lightly, giving them room to breathe, seeking the meanings that make sense, looking through and past them to underlying truth they represent. Eat the meal, not the menu.

In addition to the limitations of language itself, please consider:

- That you are reading the dharma in translation. We generally prefer Bhikkhu Bodhi, but other translators can come up with expressions that help one grasp the teachings in a fresh and useful way, such as Thanissaro Bhikkhu's use of "stress" for dukkha ("suffering").
- That you'll encounter expressions that could be off-putting to a modern ear. Like the exclusive use of the male pronoun, moralistic admonitions to male monks about the uncleanliness of the female body, approving metaphors about the wise uses of power by kings, or references to "evil," "defilements," and various hells. If you like, you can replace problematic words with other ones in your mind (e.g., "unskillful for "evil"). Or consider those meanings or connotations of the word - or the Buddha's apparent intention behind it - that are useful for you, while filtering out meanings that are not; perhaps err on the side of opening up to the sometimes hard edge of the dharma and see how that serves you: for example, maybe there actually is something "evil" about malice or ill will.

And we have found it really helpful to keep in mind the settings in which those words were used: mainly to renunciate monastics, and within a culture that was feudal and patriarchal; those charged words make more sense in that context. In fact,

for his time the Buddha was radically inclusive and humane. For example, once someone was admitted to the monastic order, all caste distinctions were completely dropped. Women could become full practitioners, with as much capacity for full Awakening as any man. Householders were also seen as fully capable of enlightenment. The Buddha advocated lovingkindness and peace in an era marked by widespread violence and war.

Last, we suggest approaching the teachings with an attitude of respect and gratitude. Coming to us across 2500 years and from a very different agrarian, feudal, and Indian culture, they are a remarkably precise "pointing out" of how the brain and the physical universe - and even possible immaterial realms - operate. So it's beneficial to consider the dharma closely - even sentence by sentence, and word by word - and really reflect on what could be true in what it says about you and your life. It was given freely and generously, and then painstakingly preserved and transmitted through the centuries and across many lands to come to you today.

Sincere interest

Consider how the teachings apply to you. What brings you to practice? For example, are you motivated by wanting to feel more happiness, more peace, more wisdom -- and less suffering, less struggle and contention with the world, less ignorance?

Skillfulness

The fundamental test of any part of the dharma is not so much whether it is true, but whether it is useful.

The dharma is thus a collection of skillful means, and it also calls us to become ever more skillful over time with our own mind and in relationships with others.

This means applying the skills that you have, i.e., acting on what you know and know how to do. And it means both improving specific skills and creating the general conditions that foster a steep learning curve along the path to liberation.

How are you skillful with your own mind? With the reactions of others?

What would support you becoming even more skillful in the future?

The Laws of Karma

Introduction

Karma means "effects." Everything that occurs is due to prior effects. And everything occurring in this moment will lead to consequences down the road. There is nothing mystical or mysterious about this: every stone cast into a pond leaves ripples.

Impersonal effects

Things happen to us that are not our fault. "That's just the dance of nature."
Buddhism does not "blame the victim" of violence, oppression, war, or disaster.

Personal effects

But we certainly do reap the harvest of the seeds we sow ourselves. In the words of the Buddha: *"Beings are owners of their karma, heirs of their karma; they originate from their karma, are bound to their karma, have their karma as their refuge. It is karma that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior."*

The effects of our actions - our karma - can be positive or negative. Consider the Native American story: *"In your heart are two wolves, one of love and one of hate. It all depends on which one you feed."*

The results of our actions of word, thought, and deed come home to roost in this life, to be sure. And perhaps, as the Buddha taught, in lives to come.

Every day, plant seeds of merit, of good karma.

Everything rests on the tip of motivation

The key cause of the karmas we create is our motivation. Padmasambhava (the great sage who brought Buddhism to Tibet): *"Though my view is as vast as the sky, my attention to the law of karma is as fine as a grain of barley flour."*

Ways to support your own positive motivations

- (1) Exposing yourself to wisdom - Joining a sitting group. Finding a teacher. Going to classes or retreats. Listening to or reading the dharma; setting aside time for study.
- (2) Taking refuge -
 - In the Buddha - a confidence in him as a teacher, a sense that the inherent nature of things he realized is already present in every person, and the possibility of realization for oneself ("he did, so can I")
 - In the dharma - in reality itself, and in wise teachings about it
 - In the sangha - both teachers and the broad community of fellow practitioners
 - Perhaps in other things, such as God, or awareness, or compassion.
- (3) Heeding the Buddha's advice to his son - Before doing an act of speech, mind, or body, consider whether it will lead to good or bad results.
- (4) Committing to certain actions - Such as to sobriety, or to meditate every day, or to not getting angry with your children.

(5) Guarding the sense doors (e.g., sight, touch, mind) - Be mindful of what you expose yourself to or consume. Much as you would protect your body from toxins, protect your mind as well. Avoid temptation.

(6) Identifying with the deepest qualities of the awakened mind and heart - These include Buddhature, Compassion, Lovingkindness, Sympathetic Joy, or Equanimity. Ajahn Sumedho tells a story of being a young monk and bringing criticisms to his teacher, Ajahn Chah, who then looked at him gently and said, *"Well, I'm very grateful to you for bringing up these things to me. I'll really consider what you've said and see what can be done. But also you should bear in mind that perhaps it's a good thing that I'm not perfect. Otherwise you might be looking for the Buddha somewhere outside your own mind."*

(7) Aiming high - What's your primary, most fundamental purpose in this life? Why not aim for enlightenment - or at least get as far as you can? Every morning when you wake up, you could reestablish your highest aspirations in life.

Moral Discipline

Introduction

Moral discipline - known as "sila" in Pali - is one of the three great pillars of practice. The other two are "samadhi" - meaning great steadiness of mind and very deep states of meditative concentration - and "panna," which is wisdom. The bottom-line of practice is to train one's mind and heart in sila, samadhi, and panna.

Themes of sila

At its root, morality is about not hurting anyone in any way ("non-harming") . . . including yourself. "First of all, do no harm."

An emphasis on restraint, and of cooling the fires in the heart.

Healthy concerns about doing wrong, and a healthy openness to hearing the concerns and feedback of others.

Benefits of sila

The bliss of blamelessness.

Cultivates the energy and groundedness that facilitates practice

Reduces the factors that lead to suffering.

Fosters insight not to act upon our habits and impulses.

Gives no person cause to fear us.

The five basic precepts

- Not causing the death of humans or animals
- Not taking or stealing that which is not freely offered
- Right speech (not lying or using speech that is harsh, ill-timed, or not beneficial)
- Not exploiting oneself or others through sexuality
- Not using intoxicants that cloud the mind

Each precept has a negative element - DO NOT - and a positive one: YOU SHOULD. For example, the negative aspect of the First Precept is not to kill, and the positive aspect is to practice compassionate action.

Each precept is a guideline that is a means to the ends of liberation, not a commandment that must be followed absolutely and is a sin to disobey. Together, they comprise a basic framework that helps us enact our intentions to cultivate the wholesome and refrain from or renounce the unwholesome. [As] Suzuki Roshi said, *"I have given you the precepts to help you live your life; but you may walk out of here and find that you have to break them all in order to do the right thing."*

A wide-range focus on wholesomeness

The Buddha identified ten types of unwholesome activity:

- Bodily misconduct - killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct
- Verbal misconduct - lying, malicious speech, harsh speech, idle chatter (gossip)
- Mental misconduct - covetousness, ill will, and wrong view

There is also a short list that summarizes wholesome actions into three broad categories: giving, moral discipline, and meditation. Pretty encompassing . . .

Deep down, you always know where it would be good for you to act with more balance and restraint - and with more of the positive qualities of the various virtues.

Generosity

Introduction

The Buddha really stressed generosity.

Concrete generosity: "Dana"

This is the Pali word for offerings. It commonly applies to contributions to support the teachings and the teachers. In a very real sense, you have encountered the

dharma through the generosity of others over thousands of years. It is through your own generosity that people and generations to come will be able to benefit from the dharma and liberation from suffering.

More broadly, consider how do or could give dana in many areas of your life -- not just financial dana, not just dana in the bowl tonight.

Intangible generosity

Then there is the generosity of compassion . . . lovingkindness . . . and sympathetic joy. These are three of the "Brahmaviharas," the heavenly abodes.

Cultivating these attitudes daily grows beautiful flowers in the heart.

The benefits of generosity

It is a letting go that is an immediate practice of non-clinging.

It is an expression of compassion and kindness. It expresses and cultivates many of the factors of enlightenment.

It's an undermining of self and self-contraction.

It builds merit.

It plain feels good.

Everyday Mindfulness

Introduction

Practice is about what we do all day long, not just during formal meditation.

To help yourself be mindful

Take a moment at each meal to take a few breaths and return to yourself -- perhaps sensing into where the food came from and all the factors that went into it and how all that is becoming a part of you: connected and interdependent with everything else, ultimately the sun and the entire universe.

Use routine events - like the phone ringing, or going to the bathroom, or drinking water, etc.- as "temple bells" to return you to a centered presence.

Focus on your breath while doing daily activities.

Relax into a sense of calm presence with other people.

Slow down

Simplify—less stimulation, less to process

Be silent (as appropriate)

Make agreements with supportive people in which you create times and ways of being that support greater mindfulness, such as meditating together, leaving space between verbal exchanges, or talking about the current cutting edge of your practice.

Use daily life as grist for the mill

It is especially helpful to use upsetting experiences. From Pema Chodren: *"The Buddhist teachings are fabulous at simply working with what's happening as your path of awakening, rather than treating your life experiences as some kind of deviation from what is supposed to be happening. The more difficulties you have, in fact, the greater opportunity there is to let them transform you. The difficult things provoke all your irritations and bring your habitual patterns to the surface. And that becomes the moment of truth. You have the choice to launch into the lousy habitual patterns you already have, or to stay with the rawness and discomfort of the situation and let it transform you, on the spot."*

Be kind to yourself

And be kind to yourself, with realistic expectations, and don't beat yourself up because you are not quickly enlightened. Jack Kornfield relayed this saying: *"If you can sit quietly after difficult news, if in financial downturns you remain perfectly calm, if you can see your neighbors travel to fantastic places without a twinge of jealousy, if you can happily eat whatever is put on your plate and fall asleep after a day of running around without a drink or a pill, if you can always find contentment just where you are . . . you are probably a dog."*

Meditation

Introduction

The primary tool we use to see the world and the mind clearly.

The key elements of meditation

- Intention - To see clearly, to take the practice seriously, to do a good thing for oneself; to be *"diligent, ardent, and resolute"*
- Seclusion - Even with eyes open, we are disengaging from the conventional concerns and activities of the world for a time; more deeply, we are *"abandoning memories and intentions based on the household life."* [The Buddha]

- Supportive aspects - Traditionally, finding a comfortable root of a tree or an empty hut or other quiet place. Maintaining an upright posture that supports both relaxation and alertness; generally not struggling with extreme pain or discomfort; it's OK to scratch! Regular times and places encourage consistency of practice. Some like formal settings, perhaps with an altar, incense, etc.; for others, the couch in the living room before everyone else gets up does the trick.
- Positive emotion – It can be both healing and instructive to meditate when you're upset, when the mind's reactive patterns are really plain to see. But generally speaking, positive emotional states are most conducive to quieting and concentrating the mind. It is skillful means to be happy.
- Mindfulness - This is an awake, accepting, spacious awareness that includes whatever experience is arising or passing away. You are witnessing, observing the contents of mind without getting caught up in them, feeding them, resisting or chasing them, or identifying with them.

Mindfulness is to be established with regard to (A) body sensations (e.g., the breath); (B) the sense of experience as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; (C) the mental "formations" in the mind, including thoughts, feelings, wants, images, and the entire workings of the mind seen through the lens of the dharma; and (D) consciousness and states of consciousness.

Mindfulness is to be practiced all the time, in every condition, including during the four postures: sitting, lying down, standing, and walking.

- Steadying and quieting the mind - This means establishing sustained attentive awareness; as one Southeast Asian meditation master put it: "*The essential thing is your continuity of mindfulness.*" As a practical matter, it usually also means shifting out of the verbal centers of the brain and becoming absorbed in the object of attention (e.g., a phrase of lovingkindness, the sensations at the upper lip, a blissful rapture). In the classic sequence of the Buddha: "*The mind is steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness, and concentrated.*"
- Investigation - A looking into what's true about the world and the mind, ever more deeply and increasingly fine-grained, sustained by interest and curiosity. Focus on the Three Characteristics: impermanence, suffering (and its causes), and interdependence/not-self/"emptiness." Investigation can be subtle and minimal during states of deep concentration (which support investigation and insight after formal meditation) or prominent and active during vipassana-style meditation or structured inquiries (e.g., Who am I? Where is self?).

A progressive training with ups and downs

Meditation is a progressive training of the mind and heart that takes effort and practice, with periods of rapid progress and seeming stagnation. Stick with it. You will get out of it what you put into it.

“When you first start meditating, it’s like catching a monkey and tying it to a leash. When it’s first tied down, it’ll struggle with all its might to get away. In the same way, when the mind is first tied down to its meditation object, it doesn’t like it. It’ll struggle more than it normally would, which makes us feel weak and discouraged. So in this first stage we simply have to use our endurance to resist the mind’s tendency to stray off in search of other objects. Over time it will gradually grow tame. (Pure and Simple, p. 194).”

Some people are natural meditators, others are not. Either way, bring yourself to the practice, and you will create merit and good karma for yourself that will bear fruit.

Benefits of meditation

Meditation has five kinds of benefits.

- Basic stress relief
- Reflecting on and working through personal concerns and issues (without falling into the pitfall of using meditation time mainly to ruminate on your life)
- Cultivating wholesome qualities of mind and heart (e.g., self-awareness, kindness, restraint)
- Uncommon, intense states of concentration, bliss, tranquility, or stillness (including what are called jhanas or samadhis)
- Profound, liberating insight into existence, mind, suffering, and its cessation

Each of these is legitimate and supports the rest. In a single period of meditation, two or more may be present, in a kind of flowing way. Yet each one reflects somewhat different aims, and thus often naturally leads to a different emphasis during formal practice. Consequently, it can be helpful to ask yourself what your primary purpose is in meditating:

Valuing Insight

Introduction

This means realizing things that change you.

The essence of insight

Insight may start intellectually, often by hearing or reading the dharma. That's one reason why study is important.

But the essence of insight is a felt realization that is beyond words and concepts - though we may try to express something of the insight through those means.

It's about the embodiment of realization. Ajahn Sumedho: " Be wisdom itself, rather than a person who isn't wise trying to become wise. Trust in awareness, in being awake, rather than in transient and unstable conditions."

Insight is the key

In the sutta titled, "Insight Surpasses All," the Buddha offers increasingly amazing examples of the good a person might do by taking various actions. Of the last three, culminating examples, the "bronze medal" goes for adopting the five precepts and taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. This is surpassed by "*developing a mind of lovingkindness for even the time it takes to pull a cow's udder*". Finally, for the ultimate form of merit, the Buddha says: "*As great as all this might be, it would be even more fruitful still if one would develop the perception of impermanence just for the time it takes to snap one's fingers.*"

"Penetrative insight joined with calm abiding utterly eradicates afflicted states." Shantideva

"In the deepest forms of insight, we see that things change so quickly that we can't hold onto anything, and eventually the mind lets go of clinging." U Pandita