

Basic Buddhism Revisited

Much of the Buddha Dharma is universal because the basic human condition is universal. We all seek happiness, but sow the seeds of misery.

Spiritual people everywhere recognize the need for a groundswell of mass awakening and that means much individual spiritual evolution. Essential to that is mindful meditation.

Mindfulness is simply Outer and Inner awareness; Being present to the living body; Staying alertly in the now, in the present moment. With prolonged meditation it can develop a focus of concentration, and eventually, Samadhi.

A basic mindfulness meditation that can be done alone or with others is: to follow the breath as an object, either the in- and outflow of air at the nostrils, or the rise and fall of the abdomen. Another possibility is to observe the breath as a whole.

Inevitably, the mind will wander. This “monkey mind” is seldom still. It needs to be tamed. The elephant of mind needs to stay on the path. So, when the mind wanders, we gently bring it back to the breath. If we happen to get into a state of heightened awareness, we go with that. When the mind wanders again, we then bring it back to the breath.

Mindfulness meditation has various positive long term effects. The disposition becomes calmer and less reactive.

Moments of mindful awareness increase in frequency and duration during the day. Outer life gets better as negative emotions subside. Our expression becomes more positive.

The 4 Noble Truths constitute a key teaching in Buddhism. They relate to the universal human condition:

1. Life is or entails Suffering. Our world samsara is a “vale of tears”. We get what we don’t want, can’t hold on to what we want, and we experience the universal sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death. Even the good things in life contain unsatisfactory elements.

2. Our Suffering has a cause, an Origin: our own actions and states of mind.

3. There is a Cessation of sorrow, an Awakening

4. There is a Path to the Cessation of sorrow.

The Noble 8-fold Path is a Buddhist version of the universal principles of ethics and spiritual practice.

A palpable feature of our experience is Impermanence: Nothing lasts. Another feature is the huge amount of suffering in this samsaric world. A third feature, is that nothing is personal: “anatman”- no self. This theory is unique to Buddhism. Add a fourth, “Nirvana is peace” and you have the “Four Seals”.

Buddhist practice is structured in a triad, the ”Three Trainings”:

I. Ethics

II. Meditation and Concentration

III. Wisdom

Buddhist ethics is close to human universal ethics. There are 10 things to avoid, 3 of body, 4 of speech and 3 of mind: no killing, stealing, sexual misconduct; no lying, no slander, no harsh speech, no chatter; no covetous thoughts, no malicious thoughts, no distorted views. The next step is to replace those non virtues with corresponding virtues. Thus affirm life, be generous, honor the body; manifest truth, etc.

The training in meditation starts with mindfulness, and deepens into the 4 “Dhyanas”, the stages of concentration. The Japanese version of that word is “Zen”.

The training in wisdom consists of taking the view that all phenomena lack any essential nature. It involves substantial observation of one’s mind states.

There are 4 thoughts that turn the mind to the spiritual path:

The recognition that a human life with leisure to practice is rare and precious; The recognition that life is impermanent and death can snatch away all opportunity at any time; The recognition that we experience much suffering; The recognition that the cause of our suffering is our own actions and states of mind. Spiritual practice can help us to deal with life as we find it, and can lead to the cessation of sorrow.

The Buddha Dharma is rooted in compassion. The Buddha achieved full and perfect Enlightenment by compassionate and meritorious action over many lifetimes. Out of compassion, Shakyamuni Buddha remained in the world to teach, rather than disappear into the wilderness. Out of compassion his successors remain in the world and propagate the Dharma, to the benefit of many sentient beings.

The 4 Immeasurables

May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness. (Maitri, 'Loving Kindness')

May all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering (Karuna, 'Compassion')

May all beings never part from the happiness beyond suffering (Pramudita, Joy in Joyfulness)

May all beings rest in equanimity, free from attachment and hatred (Upeksha, 'Equanimity')

The 6 Perfections

Dana, Generosity

Shila, Ethics

Kshanti, Patience

Virya, Diligence

Dhyana, Concentration

Prajna, Wisdom