

## BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

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*This article is recommended for anyone who would like to gain a general overview of the different branches of Buddhist practices in various countries. It makes the very important point that while external practices may differ, in essence there is no conflict of opinion regarding the basic teachings of the Buddha.*

– Ed.

For over 2500 years, Buddhist teachings have influenced the lives of millions of people. What is the purpose of this multifaceted system called Buddhism?

The major purpose of the Buddhist teachings is to enable everyone to attain enlightenment. In fact, according to some Buddhist, the purpose of Buddhism is to enable all life to attain enlightenment.

Another purpose of the system called Buddhism is to instruct all creatures in the way of the Buddha which, if followed, is of tremendous value in living the life we presently find ourselves with.

Buddhist teachings may be divided into various divisions such as Theravada, Mahayana, Zen, Vajrayana, and Tantra. In today's world these divisions do not mean very much. Since the above-mentioned systems mean different things depending on the country, they are no longer valid as categories in trying to understand Buddhist teachings.

Let's take the example of Zen Buddhism. Zen Buddhism identifies only that form of Buddhism which was developed within the confines of Japan. Japanese Zen is quite different from Chinese Ch'an or Korean Son, as well as being different from Theravada, Samadhi, or Vipassana. All of these words or systems are defined as meditation, but the forms of meditation are quite different in each country.

Likewise, what is considered Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana differs according to the country.

I propose that we discard this old system of classification and adopt a different one, based on each country. Thus, Buddhism will be divided according to what was developed in India, China, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Korea, Malaysia, the United States, etc. This type of classification will make clear the beauty and strength of the Buddhist Path as practised and lived all over the world.

Buddhism is the object of faith and strength for millions of people because it helps us depart from pain and pleasure, and move towards Samadhi-insight-beauty-compassion-love, and Bodhi. We can achieve this through philosophical, intellectual analysis, or through the development of faith and practice.

It is important that we move from ignorance towards prajna, truth, understanding, and ultimately attaining enlightenment. Only by doing so can we achieve our liberation and Buddhahood.

As Buddhists we devote our lives to practising good and eradicating evil. We do this because we internalize the dharma, the teachings of the Buddha. These teachings guide our ethical behaviour and mental attitudes. In this way we live life to benefit and be of service to our fellow creatures.

Buddhist teachings help us achieve insight into impermanence, impurity, and non-self. To attain this insight we must understand the Eight Sufferings.

The first four sufferings are birth, old age, sickness, and what we define as death.

Next we must understand why we feel bad when we are separated from those we love, or are in the presence of those we dislike. Likewise, why do we feel bad or suffer when we don't get what we want or desire, or when there is an imbalance in our body's equilibrium, whether physical, spiritual, mental, etc.

Understanding the above can be called the first step.

The next step on the Buddhist Path is the development of insight into human desire. Why do we have desire for material wealth? Why do we desire sex? Why do we desire fame? Why do we desire food? Why do we desire sleep?

Answering these few questions will provide us with a tremendous insight into life.

All the characteristics of external phenomena follow a certain path. All external phenomena ascribe to the process of arising, stabilizing, declining, and then dissolving.

In a like manner, the aspects of our mind travel the path of arising, stabilizing, achieving differentiation, and extinction.

Regardless of whether we are talking about external or mental phenomena, everything is subject to cause and effect, once in samsara. There are primary causes and secondary causes; they both result in “dependent origination” which is the result of cause and effect.

A good cause leads to a good result. A bad cause leads to a bad result. Although all things arise from certain conditions, Buddhist practice helps us become extinct from conditions. If I exist, that exists, and when I cease to exist, that will cease to exist.

There are twelve connecting factors in the chain of dependent origination. They are ignorance, mental formations, consciousness, name and form, six sense realms, touch, sensation, desire, clinging, existence, life and old age, sickness, suffering, and death.

Not only do all people experience suffering, but all things are suffering. This is because of the twelve factors of dependent origination. To stop this suffering, develop yourself in the reverse order using as your tools the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path consists of right views, thought, speech, karma, life, practice, mindfulness, and meditation or practice. Though this applies to all existence, it is very important for humans.

It is important to understand that everything is impermanent and without a self-nature. Buddhist teachings explore the existence and non-existence of the dharmas. According to the teachings, there are no external, tangible characteristics that are permanent. Everything contains Nothingness. By following the Buddhist path, you will gain insight into the true aspect of all phenomena.

There are thousands of Buddhist teachings contained within sutra. Buddhist sutras exist to help us save ourselves from our own sufferings. These sufferings are caused by us and can only be ended by us.

The Heart Sutra says: “If you perceive that all five skandhas are empty, you can save yourself from suffering. Form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness, emptiness itself is form. There is no appearing and there is no disappearing of anything. Nothing is tainted and there is no purity. Nothing increases and nothing decreases. All dharmas are marked with emptiness. There is no such thing as cognition and there is nothing to attain. Nirvana and Buddhahood are an illusion.”

The Diamond Sutra says: “All things that have tangible characteristics are only delusions. If you can see that all aspects are not tangible aspects, then you will see your true self.”

“You should not be attached to any object or you will give rise to thoughts. If you see physical matter as a soul or search after a soul, you are practicing the wrong path and you will never see your true self. All compounded things are like a dream, a phantom, a bubble, or a reflection.”

The Mahaparanirvana Sutra says: “All formations are impermanent because this is the law of appearing and disappearing. When both appearing and disappearing disappear, then you have bliss.”

The Lotus Sutra says: “All phenomena from its very origin have the aspects of stillness and extinction. When you as a disciple of the Buddha walk this path you will definitely become a buddha in your future lives. The nature of all dharmas is perfection. They never have two different aspects. All dharmas are unmoving and fundamentally real. They are without name and form. This can only be understood with the help of enlightened wisdom. The one is in the many and the many are within the one. The one is identical with the many just as the many are identical with the one. The many numberless myriads of kalpas are the same as one instant of thought, and one instant of thought is the same as the numberless myriads of kalpas.”

The Hua-yen (Avatamsaka) Sutra says: “If you wish to thoroughly understand all the Buddhas of the past, present, and future, then you should view the nature of the whole universe as being created by the mind alone.”

All other sutras, just like these, explain the wisdom of the Buddha to all.

Buddhist teachings also consist of karma. There are many different kinds of karma. Of importance is what I call Bodhisattva karma, which is complete compassion shown towards all living creatures.

There is also good karma, which must result in happiness, and bad karma, which results in suffering.

It is our accumulation of karma that determines not only our predispositions but also what happens to us each and every day. A good motto to keep in mind is “Same karma equals same action.”

Remember, everything appears through karma and disappears through karma.

There are many ways for us to practise the teachings of Buddhism. There is no need to force ourselves in any way. There are many choices before us. We can approach the teaching of the Buddha through scriptural study, calling the name of a Buddha, reciting Sutras, developing faith, or meditating.

The method or tradition we choose does not matter. The broad spectrum of Buddhist teachings provides a suitable path for everyone. Let's attain enlightenment together and be of service to all mankind. We should also share our treasures with our brothers and sisters of other religions.