

Buddhism Briefly Explained

Melbourne Buddhist Centre
302 Little Lonsdale Street
Melbourne 3000
Australia
Tel: 03 9670 85 95
www.melbournebuddhistcentre.org

© 2002. Reproduction in any form of this text is permitted for any bona fide act that promotes understanding, and is made in the context of the Buddhadharma.

Cover design by Christopher John Falvey.

National Library of Australia

Cataloguing in Publication Data

ISBN 0-646-42335-5

Title: Buddhism Briefly Explained

Authors: Falvey, Lindsay; Siladasa

Date of Publication: 01 Mar 2003-04-09

Price: \$0.00

Format: PB Size: 200x140 No. of Pages: c. 60

Publisher: Melbourne Buddhist Centre

Printed in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Table of Contents

Preface

Chapter 1

What is Buddhism? Understanding Human Happiness

Chapter 2

What is a Buddhist? How to Recognise a Buddhist When You Meet One

Chapter 3

The Buddha: The Archetype of Human Development

Chapter 4

The Dharma: The True Nature of Reality and How to See It

Chapter 5

The Sangha: Friendship and Inspiration for the Journey

Chapter 6

Ethics: Good Actions Beget Good Actions

Chapter 7

Meditation: Practicing Concentration for Developing
Insight

Chapter 8

Buddhism in Modern Society: Addressing the Big
Human Issues

Some Introductory Books on Buddhism

Preface

This book introduces Buddhism by describing its approach to spiritual development and those who undertake the Buddhist path. It aims to make Buddhism more easily understood by those who might be unfamiliar with its objectives – and this task is made easier by the pragmatic ways in which Buddhism meets our enduring urge for happiness. Among the various spiritual traditions that have been developed over the past three thousand years to relieve humans of their suffering and distress, Buddhism is perhaps the most methodical, practical and comprehensive. As a function of its essential tolerance and loving kindness, the Buddhist tradition is expressed in a variety of forms that recognise different individual needs, and diverse cultural environments throughout the world. Our appreciation of this tradition, as it expands in the West, will increase as we understand some of its insights and key principles of spiritual development.

The basis of the Buddhist perspective is the understanding of what constrains our happiness, and how the practices of meditation, study, reflection or contemplation, and ethical living combine to release those constraints. Its central insight is that all phenomena arise dependent on conditions, and this applies universally - to the world, all human activities, and even to our psychological processes. In this way we are responsible for our own happiness, as much as our own ills.

Those who follow the teachings and practices find a meaning that is not readily apprehended in everyday life. Meditation, study and reflection, and adopting an ethical lifestyle provide conditions conducive to a progressive understanding of

reality, which is expressed in a quiet happiness not so dependent on external stimuli. Many Buddhists live in the everyday world while maintaining their practices, which are based around three interrelated principles known as the Three Jewels.

The first of the Three Jewels is the Buddha, who personifies the common human potential to awaken to the enlightened state. The historical and mythical aspects of the Buddha's life story demonstrate the human condition and its transcendence by understanding the true nature of reality and then living fully aware within it. The second jewel is the Dharma, which represents the teachings from the life of the Buddha, which we know today as the doctrine and the path to enlightenment (recorded in part by the voluminous Buddhist scriptures). However, achieving an intellectual understanding of the teachings without experiential development is pointless. By revealing the origin of our disappointments and unhappiness, Buddhism provides a practical basis for creating conditions conducive to increasing happiness and contentment, which might otherwise be called spiritual understanding. The third jewel is the Sangha, the spiritual friendship afforded by fellow travellers on the path – people following the meditative and ethical practices of Buddhism. In the West, the Sangha continues to evolve through Buddhist centres in most major cities.

Ethics and meditation are the basic functional components of the Buddhist approach. Its ethical precepts extend to our treatment of all sentient beings and are expressed as guidelines that express non-violence in any form. These are applied to guide us in everyday life and work, with each of our actions being viewed with increasing awareness and

responsibility. Meditation, a tradition lost to the wider populace in our culture, supports spiritual development through increasing our concentration and awareness as the first step towards insight into the nature of reality. The Buddhist approach is to initially calm and clarify the mind and so reduce our usual state of distraction and constant need for stimulation.

The appeal of Buddhism in the West seems to be related to a missing component in our comfortable yet overly crowded lifestyles. As it engages yet another culture, the adaptability of the tradition's core teachings already appears to be meeting the needs of many. The sometimes superficial exotic appeal of Buddhism will be challenged when its tenets appear to be in fundamental disagreement with our habitual routines that, at root, deny or avoid change. As it spreads in our society, Buddhism will continue to evolve, as it has done in many other cultures. Already we are seeing it forge relationships with the biological and psychological sciences. Now established in the West (more than 385,000 Australians described themselves as Buddhist in the most recent census), Buddhism presents itself on the basis that we are each responsible for our own actions and thereby our future.

May this book stimulate in you an ever-greater urge to understand of the true nature of reality. May any merit associated with this book go to that end.

LF & S.
December 2002

Chapter 1

What is Buddhism?

Understanding Human Happiness

Understanding the constraints to human happiness forms the basis of the Buddhist perspective and so enables the arising of true wisdom and compassion. The development of our human state to its greatest capacity is accomplished with an ever-increasing awareness cultivated by the practice of meditation, study, reflection or contemplation, and ethical living. This practical approach is founded on the profound principle that all things arise in dependence on conditions. This is explained in countless teachings, (many of which are surprisingly consistent with some modern Western philosophical and scientific principles), that have accumulated over its 2,554-year history spread over many different cultures. As Buddhism develops in the West, we should expect to see it again adapt to and positively influence yet another culture as it reveals its universal insights.

Compassion and wisdom are the two principal qualities of Buddhism. The wisdom refers to a deep and practical understanding of the originating cause of suffering, and a truly wise, not just informed and intelligent, response. This response manifests as compassion, which is much more effective in helping others than the mere pity that we may feel toward people who are suffering. This compassion is exemplified by the Buddha, who was described by his closest companion as ‘the one who is so kind’, and has been

illustrated in so many mythical and historical Buddhist figures over the centuries. Compassion and wisdom may be seen as the fruits of Buddhist practice, and in this sense they are the key indicators of growth toward happiness and wellbeing. They also encompass a sense of complete ease with everything, while being at the same time sympathetic to the pain in others; this 'wise compassion' enables us to discern what action, if any, is appropriate to each situation.

Why does this all work? It is founded on true knowledge of the nature of reality. While it may seem foreign to our individualistic and independent notions, Buddhism is firmly based on the insight that every aspect of our existence, and indeed the universe, depends on conditions, many of which have been produced by prior actions. This insight into 'Conditioned Co-production' is discussed in a later chapter, and it is sufficient at this stage to know that its universal application includes those disciplines which create the conditions for spiritual maturity, that are in turn expressed as wise compassion.

We also associate Buddhism with other descriptions and concepts in our attempts to understand it using our rational Western approach to spiritual matters. Particular terms, such as love, peace, happiness, ethics, tolerance, calm and insight are some of the more common ones. Such noble qualities are seen by many people to be embodied in figures like the Dalai Lama. However, without a clear grasp of the underlying universal principles developed by meditation and insight, it is easy to misapprehend the Buddha's teaching.

One example of misconceptions about Buddhism is the popular usage of the teaching of karma as something dealt to

us before birth and unrelated to our ethical behaviour. In fact as explained in a later chapter, it would be closer to the truth to explain it as the physical and psychological effects on others and ourselves that result from our actions. Misunderstandings about Buddhism also arise from attempts to classify it – is it a religion, a philosophy, a code of ethics, a version of asceticism, or exotic cultural ceremony? In some ways it is all of these and none. In more practical terms, we may conceive Buddhism as a unique approach to spiritual development where we rely on our own efforts rather than a personified God. The Buddha himself was a human being who discovered a process of spiritual development to the highest level, then encouraged others to realise their potential in the same way for the benefit of all beings.

How do we learn more about Buddhism? It is not important whether it is defined as a philosophy or religion or any other term - these tend to be comparative terms based on our preconceived ideas of spiritual traditions uncommon to the West. The best way is to meet practicing Buddhists and to try meditation and an ethical approach to life and judge for ourselves. There is little risk in this, for Buddhism is not a proselytising tradition, teaching rather that each of us is responsible for our own spiritual growth. The tradition simply addresses the spiritual needs that every person feels to varying extents at different times which are not necessarily met through religion or philosophy. Buddhist methods today might be referred to as a means to the ultimate personal and social development.

The term ‘personal development’ may have self-oriented connotations in our society, which would be completely out of place in Buddhism, but nevertheless the term provides a

means of appreciating the Buddhist approach. In taking a non-selfish attitude to developing our spiritual life, Buddhism provides a basis to guide us to the highest human potential. This involves associating with like-minded people who constitute a new society in which all strive to act ethically with respect to themselves and other beings, by bringing awareness to each of their actions and thoughts. This basic approach stands on the insight that all things in and beyond the universe are the result of existing conditions, which themselves are often the product of past actions and events. This central insight has been expressed in various ways through the centuries as it adapted to different environments. For this reason, Buddhism in the West will differ from other cultures, and this is another characteristic of the tradition – it has always retained the essence of a personal approach to spiritual development and its core methods while assimilating new cultures.

The ethical expression of Buddhism in the West is based on the principle of non-violence in the form of unconditional loving-kindness. This principle applies to all aspects of human activity, whether they be social, commercial, sexual, communicative, or thinking itself.

All this begins with ourselves. Buddhism teaches that we already have the internal resources for our own liberation from the recurrent unsatisfactory habits that prevent a life lived with creativity and happiness. It allows a new way of relating to the unpleasant aspects of life and it does this through methods that are readily transparent. In fact, Buddhism encourages questioning and genuine doubt, and eschews the blind faith that can undermine confidence in the personal experience of the spiritual path. The Buddha held

that the teachings of an elder, even the Buddha himself, should not be unquestioningly accepted, but rather should be tested in the crucible of our own spiritual life; a practice is valid if it helps to relieve mental and physical anguish and encourages an ethical dimension in our lives.

The many centuries of evolution within the Buddhist tradition have fostered a multiplicity of approaches and teachings, which have been classified and listed in many ways. Although these can appear somewhat mechanistic to us, their structured nature seems strangely familiar, as it is akin to our modern rational and analytical thinking processes. The systematic classifications also had a practical value as an aid to memorize essential teachings in an ancient oral tradition long before the day of books and CDs.

These teachings are detailed and well-argued analyses - but Buddhism does not leave the individual alone to follow a sterile methodology. It upholds the value of example, ultimately in the Buddha himself, whose life can be seen as a series of revelations that have translated into the teachings that we follow. It also encourages fellowship with the like-minded for support and friendship which become another source of happiness and joy. In its diverse teachings and methods, we can readily find similarities with other major religions, yet the Buddhist emphasis is always upon views – those attitudes and ways of looking at the world and reality, which ultimately determine how we experience life. In this way Buddhism can clarify and inform the underlying intention of other faiths.

To explore the Buddhist literature is to immerse ourselves in myth and metaphor, which has the benefit of lifting our minds beyond the everyday thinking processes. Central themes

recurred in various forms as Buddhism emerged from India, and spread to Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, China, Korea and Japan, Tibet and Mongolia. These themes can be explored in many ways with the assistance of a spiritually advanced teacher, yet their universality enables them to be expressed in a diversity of cultures over time.

Hence in the West, we meet various expressions of Buddhism, such as Japanese Zen, Tibetan, or Thai – and this can be confusing. They may appear to represent something like church denominations with opposing doctrines when in fact they all conform to the essential tenets of Buddhism, allowing a tolerance rarely found in the wider religious world. The different approaches of these traditions and cultures will inevitably evolve to suit our own language and culture and in this way cater for the diversity of psychological types and social mores.

We can visit any number of Buddhist centres in any large city and see the range of approaches to the tradition, yet in each one we would also see the three central elements that form the essence of Buddhism. These are the Buddha – as the human example of perfect insight, the Dharma – his teachings and the practices that lead to perfect insight, and the Sangha – the fellowship of those who aspire to insight. These three elements are central to an understanding of Buddhism, and are therefore explained in the following chapters.

Chapter 2

What is a Buddhist?

How to Recognise a Buddhist When You Meet One

Buddhists aspire to find a meaning in life that is not readily appreciable in the humdrum of everyday life. Their practice of meditation, study and reflection and ethical living helps them find a quiet happiness, not dependent on the many stimuli that crowd our world. Their lifestyles reflect ethical decisions in their choice of occupation, use of time, and natural resources, cultivating an increasingly simple life. Their day-to-day life usually includes some meditation practice, study and reflection on the Buddha's teaching, and meeting with fellow Buddhists individually or at a Buddhist centre. Retreats focussed on meditation or study are important fixtures in the Buddhist's calendar. A Buddhist could be said to be someone trying to be more spiritually aware, working toward the highest human achievement – they may not be saints, but they are better than they would be without this conscious effort.

A Buddhist is someone who aspires and practices according to the Buddha's teachings on developing compassion and wisdom. This is the great ideal that each Buddhist wants to realize, and is underpinned by an equally great resolution that defines their life and vision. Similarly, those personal attributes associated with Buddhism introduced in the previous chapter very much inform the Buddhist's life, in both thought and action. There must be then, an emphasis on a discipline of practice as no progress can be made toward the ideals of wisdom and compassion without increasing

awareness through sustained meditation and ethical practice, and study and reflection on the real nature of things. The insights that gradually accrue from this path provide, among other benefits, meaning and purpose to life rarely considered in our modern consumer-oriented lifestyles.

The product of these disciplines is a greater awareness and clarity of thought, which in turn, refine awareness and thoughts even more. This leads to more consideration and care in thoughts, words and deeds, balancing patience and pause with vigour and initiative for timely and positive action. Buddhists are usually conspicuous for being generous with their time, expertise and resources wherever they could be helpful. Such applications follow the law of karma – positive actions bear fruit for self and others, thus establishing conditions for further spiritual development and harmony within oneself and with others.

Indeed, harmony and peaceful co-existence have been the hallmarks of traditional Buddhist societies as the inherent psychological difference between people and their varied paths to the essential truths has long been acknowledged. The Buddha's teachings recommended practices in accordance with each person's basic mental nature. For example, some people come to spiritual understandings through a kind of faith, which relies on, and engages, the emotions in a way that fosters an increasing trust in a teacher or guide; others rely more on their own understanding of Buddhist doctrines that allows them access to the path. No matter which approach, Buddhists readily associate with each other, and rejoice in their diverse approaches to the Dharma.

A Buddhist could also be described as 'one who follows the Dharma'. The Dharma comprises the teachings and practices

that form the Buddhist path of spiritual growth, including meditation and the cultivation of ethics, and the study of and reflection upon the principal tenets as recorded in a variety of texts. This path is traditionally called the Threefold Way, the way of Ethics, Meditation and Wisdom, and will be addressed in greater detail in later chapters. Being a Buddhist means living out this Threefold Way as sincerely and as continuously as one is able. It means trying to live according to the ethical guidelines, or precepts, that encourage:

1. An attitude of loving-kindness
2. The practice of generosity
3. Stillness simplicity and contentment
4. Truthful communication
5. Clarity of mind.

Each of these guidelines or precepts becomes an antidote to the negativity that infiltrates ordinary life - for example, an attitude of loving-kindness for all living things counteracts violence in its many forms from physical and mental aggression, to hateful emotions and to the maltreatment of animals. Likewise, generosity counters acquisitiveness and greed and its consequences of theft and even the rationalisation of processes that exploit people or the environment. And so on. In practicing these precepts, the Buddhist will quite naturally modify their lifestyle and achieve an increasing simplicity of life and the contentment that comes with it.

Regardless of their individual ethical standpoints, Buddhists in the West still need to interact with their society, and this interaction naturally differs from that in countries where Buddhism is the predominant tradition and is intermingled with or even defines the culture. The modern Buddhist still

has to work for a living, shop and consume, yet these basic necessities will be deeply informed by the five precepts outlined above, such that they would not engage in any activity counterproductive to the welfare of living beings and higher social values. Occupations in the military, in meat or skin trades, gambling or liquor industries and other exploitative enterprises would be at least avoided. Ideally, a Buddhist would seek work that conforms to their ethics and ideals – and perhaps even work part-time in order to develop their meditation and other practices. Yet Buddhists in our society will remain interested and concerned with civil and social affairs to some extent, as the stability and health of that society is a necessary condition for the freedoms and privileges that Buddhists enjoy to live as they wish.

Buddhists may therefore be conspicuous by what they do or not do; yet the quieter, simpler life often goes unnoticed in our busy world. And Buddhism is not a proselytising tradition; its followers simply live their lives as well as they can, exemplifying a disciplined and spiritually aware life informed by a profound direction. Indeed, we may have come across a Buddhist who simply impressed as a kind person, but of course, not all Buddhists are saints! They are just more saintlike than they would be without Buddhism. We all come to the path at different stages in life, with different degrees of spiritual maturity, and so there are inevitable variations among individuals. However Buddhists of all traditions subscribe to three essential elements of Buddhism - the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. These three great elements or principles become the heart's guide for each and every Buddhist, informing and enriching their lives at ever deeper and refined levels. This progressive engagement leads to a deep appreciation and reverence to the Three Jewels

which is expressed in many ways. It is to the Three Jewels that we now turn and explore more closely in the following chapters.

Chapter 3

The Buddha

The Archetype of Human Development



The Buddha, as the first of the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha), expresses the common potential of humanity to waken to a higher wisdom. The historical and mythical aspects of his life story demonstrate the human condition and its transcendence, and may therefore be read in more ways than simple biography. His teachings and methods have since been elaborated over the millennia as Buddhism came in contact with different cultures.

Spiritual traditions of the East have come to us rich in symbols, imagery, art and language and so we have the three essential elements of Buddhism symbolized as the Three Jewels the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

The word 'Buddha' is derived from an ancient Indian word meaning 'to be awake' in the sense of waking to a higher wisdom. The story of the Buddha's life and his awakening is

presented in both historical and mythological terms, and to begin with, we present a brief biography.

The Buddha was born, Siddhartha Gotama, to a wealthy leader of a self-governing people in what is now northern India and southern Nepal, and was raised by his aunt when his mother died soon after childbirth. Siddhartha was well educated in ethics, tribal lore and the sports of the day, and was by nature, sensitive and spiritually aware from an early age, apparently experiencing mystical states as he lived in a protected and relatively luxurious lifestyle. He was offered all sensual pleasures, entertainments and diversions as a young man, yet he felt an underlying discomfort with the nature of life, particularly as he became aware of illness, aging and death. Unable to find anyone who could explain these matters to him, he determined to seek the answer himself, and following the spiritual tradition of the time, he left home and became a wandering and meditative ascetic.

Siddhartha learned quickly from more experienced practitioners and developed ever-higher states of consciousness in his meditation. Despite this progress, Siddhartha felt that his yearning for complete understanding was not satisfied after six years of intensive practice, including the extremes of renunciation that he practiced with five other ascetics. He eventually rejected this extreme asceticism, and adopted a more moderate lifestyle and resolved to meditate more and reflect persistently and deeply until he finally understood the true nature of reality. Upon achieving this goal, enlightenment or 'nirvana', Siddhartha became the Buddha, the 'Awakened One', and spent the succeeding weeks in contemplation, absorbing and deepening his understanding of the experience. Rejoining his former companions, he began

to communicate his experience and the means of its attainment, attracting more disciples by his peaceful conduct and kindly bearing as much as his teachings.

During the next 50 years, the Buddha taught more about the methods that lead to enlightenment than he did about the experience itself, as the experience of enlightenment was beyond description, even conception. These methods included an emphasis on the application of continuous attention to our thoughts and actions and the cultivation of an ethical life based on kindness, complemented by meditation and reflection. The Buddha lived simply wandering widely throughout northern India, meeting and inspiring people from all walks of life. Despite his widespread influence, not everyone was convinced to follow his teaching. He died at about 80 years of age surrounded by friends and followers.

We may best understand the Buddha's life and teachings in the context of an era and culture in which the spiritual quest was honoured and supported. There were other teachers and disciplines similar to the Buddha's. Indeed many of the Buddha's teachings can be seen as elaboration or refinement of existing practices and beliefs. For example, the principle of non-violence predated the Buddha, but is axial to the Buddha's ethical code.

The most revolutionary aspect of his teachings in the social terms of the times was his opposition to the caste system, which continues to this day in India. The most revolutionary spiritual teaching, however, was the universal principle of conditionality which states that all phenomena arise and fall dependent on conditions. This will be discussed in a later chapter. The historical and doctrinal aspects of the story of the

Buddha are complemented by a mythical dimension, yet the scientific view of life in the West has depreciated the value of the legendary or mythical aspects of biography. However, it is important to acknowledge their presence and purpose in all cultures and civilisations as they serve as metaphors and allegory, which speak to universal truths. Some of these 'mythical' events may not have occurred at all, yet we should view them with an open mind in the same manner as we regularly revise our understandings of the world with each successive scientific revelation.

The essential teachings of the Buddha, whether by doctrinal formula or myth and metaphor, are readily comprehended because of his genius in expressing them in everyday language – yet still their profundities challenge our common view of the world. The ways that he chose to communicate his enlightenment experience and the path to it acknowledged the different psychological make-ups of people, yet followed the conventions of his time. For example, he communicated by conceptual language, and by analogy, metaphor and myth, and at other times with silence. He reflected the irrelevance of many philosophical questions by maintaining silence, and the self-destructive nature of anger was communicated by his refusing to react when attacked. He encouraged compassion through his caring for an ailing monk. The Buddha's attentive poise and mindful conduct of body and speech exemplified his most important teachings, as did his refined ethical conduct. These teachings so communicated are referred to as the Dharma – the second of the Three Jewels.

Chapter 4

The Dharma

The True Nature of Reality and How to See It



The second of the Three Jewels, the Dharma, represents the collective teachings, doctrines and methods that lead us to enlightenment. The Dharma is more than the voluminous Buddhist scriptures and intellectual understanding of their logic, as it requires the direct human experience of the way things really are. The central teaching of the Dharma is the law of conditionality, which holds that all things arise dependent upon conditions. This deep and subtle law reveals the origin of the disappointments and pain of life, and provides a foundation principle for spiritual growth. Understanding and engaging with this law and the intimately related law of karma and the Four Noble Truths, makes the Buddhist path accessible to all people.

The Dharma usually refers to the teachings, (or path) that help us develop insight into the nature of reality; to see things as they really are. The wider definition of Dharma includes duty, morality and practice. Dharma may also be seen as a turning

about in the deeper seat of consciousness, which allows us to experience reality as the Buddha did. Intellectual penetration alone cannot achieve this end, as the human mind is much more than just thinking processes; there are the emotional counterparts to our thoughts and ideas, many of which are not conscious yet constantly inform our personality and perceptions. Even if we could take a purely 'bookish' approach to the Dharma, it would be limited, as the volume of the Buddhist scriptures is of a magnitude beyond the grasp of any individual.

The Dharma is expressed in a variety of ways, due to the diverse means used to express its truths in the everyday terms for the different peoples across time and cultures. However diverse these teachings appear, they all reveal the essential laws that govern existence in all its forms. The teachings may be seen as two interrelated parts – those concerned with the true nature of reality, and those concerned with the means to realise that nature. Our view of the true nature of reality will remain an abstract concept unless our whole being becomes aligned with reality – the way things really are. To effect this transformation of our whole being, a coherent method will be necessary, and this is the body of teachings we have inherited from the Buddha.

The Law of Conditionality

The heart of the Buddha's teaching lies in the law of conditionality. This deep and subtle truth, at best, can only be glimpsed with words and definitions. The principle states that all things and phenomena, whether physical or mental, arise from conditions, and without those conditions they will not arise. For example, a tree will grow dependent on many conditions; there needs to be a seed, soil and water for

germination and growth, and while growing it needs a continuity of appropriate conditions. In turn the tree's growth becomes a condition for many other things to come into being, such as birds and bees, and so on. Likewise, our thoughts and emotions arise dependent on conditions; for instance, hearing good news can be a condition on which arises joy. And we have all experienced how our outlook is clouded when we are irritable or angry; this is an example of our emotional state conditioning our perception. The principle of conditionality is dynamic; it is something acting all the time in all events, things and phenomena, and the constantly changing play of conditions makes for the ever-changing nature of life.

Where Buddhism starts from

The principle of conditionality can be applied to the understanding of human suffering as much as happiness. Human life is characterised by joy and pain, but it is only from the experience of pain or suffering that we are motivated to do something about it! It is here that the Buddhist path starts - with the experience of unsatisfactoriness, be that physical or mental pain or just a general discontent with life. Once aware of this recurring unsatisfactoriness, we seek a path that frees us from it. This is expressed in the Four Noble Truths - which state that (i) suffering exists, (ii) it has a cause, and (iii) it can end, (iv) by following a specific path or practice.

The first Noble Truth - that suffering exists - defines our problem, the human predicament. 'Suffering' is an expression of the many aspects of the unsatisfactory nature of life. The ancient Indian word 'dukkha' was used to describe this - it refers to the repetitive jolt of an out-of-kilter wheel on an ox cart - an ancient metaphor for the persistent and unpleasant interruptions to the smooth ride through life that we would prefer. This suffering includes all the unsatisfactory aspects of

existence as we know it - such as the end of very pleasant experiences, unwanted change, pain, separation, anxiety, frustration and so on. Far from being a negative view of life, the first Noble Truth simply acknowledges the reality that we are not always happy; most of us know this and assume 'that's life' - but Buddhism teaches that there is a greater potential in life, and provides the means to realize it.

The second Noble Truth teaches that the cause of this recurring unsatisfactoriness is our craving for, and attachment to, the things that give us pleasure. It is not that pleasure itself is a problem, but it is our thirst, or even addiction, to these pleasures that causes the suffering. When we get what we like, we are happy, but we are unhappy when it is gone - yet it is a universal law that all things pass. Being able to maintain our peace of mind as these pleasures come and go would indeed be a freedom!

The end of suffering - the third Noble Truth, comes when the conditions that bring about our suffering no longer apply. In the case of our addiction to certain pleasures, when the condition of craving for them no longer applies, we no longer suffer at the end of our enjoyment. To find this peace of mind, this sublime state, we need a means by which we can respond to the world that is in accord with its true nature; where our thoughts and emotions in all their depths and breadth are fully aligned with reality. This means is the fourth Noble Truth - the path that leads from suffering. The resources for this journey are to be found within us, and therefore make us responsible for our own happiness rather than ascribing the role to a God or any other external force. Traditionally this fourth Noble Truth is expressed as the Noble Eight-fold Path.

The Noble Eight-fold Path

This describes eight avenues of activity that simultaneously practiced lead to the end of suffering. Each of these avenues or limbs was exemplified by the Buddha and when each of the limbs mature to their purest state, we have the mind of the Buddha, we experience the freedom of enlightenment. The Noble Eightfold Path comprises: (i) understanding the ultimate nature of reality, and resolving this into our (ii) emotional life and expression (iii) speech (iv) actions and their motivations (v) livelihood (vi) conscious efforts in spiritual growth (vii) maintaining constant awareness and (viii) cultivation of a clear meditative state. The Noble Eight-fold Path can also be seen more simply as a 'threefold way' of wisdom, ethics and meditation. The first two limbs constitute the intellectual and emotional counterparts of wisdom, whereas the third, fourth and fifth limbs make up the ethical dimension of the path and the last three limbs are concerned with meditation, and these will be introduced in later chapters.

This is the point at which the Dharma moves from teachings about the nature of reality to prescribing means of seeing and realizing that nature and it is this means that is commonly referred to as the 'path'. Taking on this path can be seen as a means of unblocking or liberating the energy usually consumed in the mental conflicts that arise from our constantly seeking to work against the natural order that is reality. Once liberated, this energy manifests as the great wisdom and compassion that creatively informs all of our thoughts and actions – this is the state of perfect insight, enlightenment or nirvana. Seen from this perspective, it is no wonder that we often find ourselves and the world not quite as we would like!

The liberating effect of the Dharma has been lived out and validated countless times over many generations and Buddhism readily embraces all methods and practices which lead to this liberation. The Buddha taught that a mere intellectual grasp of the teachings is useless without the personal transformative experience of the practice of the Noble Eight-fold Path. Yet, he also taught that we should not blindly accept his teachings but rather test them for ourselves according to our own experience. This is best done in the context of spiritual fellowship, which includes our peers and mentors on the Path. These fellow travelers are referred to as the Sangha – the third of the Three Jewels.

Chapter 5

The Sangha

Fellowship, Support and Inspiration for Life's Journey



The third of the Three Jewels, the Sangha, is the spiritual friendship shared by fellow travellers on the path. It has been variously described by different traditions, mainly as a result of cultural differences and interpretations, yet it uniformly retains the essence of fellowship as a vital element for spiritual growth. The traditional form of the Sangha has been the community of practitioners; either the informal association of the Buddha's disciples in his time or the institutionalised or monastic forms in Buddhist countries today. While spiritual friendship is important in all circumstances, practitioners in Buddhist countries of the East also enjoy a broad social respect for following the Dharma whereas Western Buddhists have only their immediate spiritual friends for support. As the path is long and demanding, this fellowship becomes especially critical in the West.

The Sangha is sometimes seen as the most 'mundane' of the Three Jewels, with the term Sangha being often misunderstood as simply the followers of Buddhism. In fact, it is much more than this. It is the very human context in which we learn and

penetrate the Dharma. The word sangha in its earliest meaning means 'a gathering', which includes the sense of collective practice, and to live as one with the Dharma.

In most cases, Sangha refers to the fellowship of spiritual practitioners who are at a similar level of development in the Dharma, and is often portrayed in the general aspect of the term 'spiritual friendship'. Yet it also includes a vertical element in that deep friendship between the greater and the less spiritually mature, or wiser, allowing a progressive communication that enriches both parties. As we progress on the path, our communication may refine to the degree of something sublime, adding another dimension to the meaning of Sangha.

At a basic level, Sangha refers to those who come together on the common feeling that there is something more to life, and seek a deeper understanding of it from the Buddha's teachings. At a later stage, the importance of fellowship with other Buddhists represents a means of developing and maintaining confidence in the Buddha and the Dharma. In some Buddhist cultures the Sangha is seen primarily as the monastic community. Given this background, therefore, a useful embracing definition of the Sangha is – 'both the enlightened and unenlightened practitioners in all generations who have committed themselves to the Three Jewels, regardless of monastic or lay lifestyles'.

No matter how Sangha has been interpreted throughout the evolution of Buddhism, all traditions revere the Three Jewels as the essence of their life. This reverence is expressed in many ways, including devotional rituals which range from a simple salutation and bow before a Buddha figure or image, to long

and elaborate recitations and chants that can last days! The way people express their love and respect for the Three Jewels is, of course, a matter of individual taste and temperament and is to a significant extent, culturally determined.

The customs and culture of the Buddha's times, of course, were very different from ours. He was one of many who wandered as a homeless ascetic on a spiritual search. This tradition was not only common in his time, but also respected. After his enlightenment, the Buddha continued living simply and many of his disciples, from a wide range of backgrounds, followed his lifestyle. So, the earliest Buddhist Sangha was the gathering of those who followed the Buddha in the same spirit of fellowship that defines the Sangha today.

Commitment and friendship

As the Buddhist life formalised into monastic and lay divisions, the distinction between them became more pronounced suggesting that only the ordained were the real or sincere practitioners of the Dharma. This appears to contradict the Buddha's teaching that both laypersons and monks can attain perfect insight. In today's terms, this can be interpreted as the commitment to the Three Jewels being primary and the lifestyle being secondary. While a monastic environment may provide favourable conditions for meditation, learning and reflection for some people, its spare and demanding discipline may be counterproductive for others. Whichever lifestyle we choose, the cultivation of friendship will be an essential part of our spiritual path – so important is this that the Buddha remarked that “spiritual friendship is whole of the spiritual life”. Sangha can only exist where true friendship thrives.

This friendship is the mutual love and regard for someone with whom we share the same higher principles of life. It is a relationship that allows the most complete expression of ourselves and encourages the cultivation of our highest potential. Such deep friendship between kindred spirits provides the most fertile conditions for spiritual growth. Making such a deliberate choice in our human associations exemplifies the principle of karma - we make our life by our choices.

At its most fully developed in all social expressions, the Sangha can provide a model for a better society in which occupations, ethics, politics, economic systems, and all other aspects are based on wisdom and compassion.

The Sangha is therefore a collective expression of the Buddha's wisdom and compassion. It recalls the Buddha in his human form and reminds us of the potential of Buddhahood within each of us. This essential truth provides a deep confidence for those in the Sangha to continue on their path, while encouraging and being encouraged by their fellow travellers.

Given the diversity of our lifestyles, spiritual fellowship in the West must provide the same culture of support and respect that is found at many social levels in traditional Buddhist countries. This milieu is doubly important given the great demands of the spiritual life and the many forces opposing it in our wider society, such as consumerist attitudes, the degradation of family and community, and the proliferation of mindless entertainments and distractions.

Friends in the spiritual fellowship are united in their reverence to the Three Jewels – the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

The actions in their everyday life reflect their commitment to the threefold way of wisdom, meditation and ethics. It is this last aspect that we now turn to, as ethics influences not only the quality of relationship between spiritual friends, but also their relationship to wider society and the world.

Chapter 6

Ethics

Good Actions Beget Good Actions

Ethics is an essential ingredient in the Buddhist life, but it is much more than simply behaving well. Its ethics are as much about intention as the actions themselves. Based on the law of karma, both intentions and actions have consequences for ourselves and others. The five main ethical precepts are based on the principle of non-harm and the cultivation of loving-kindness. This extends into every aspect of our behaviour and thought, and applies to all forms of life and living. Observance of the precepts is both a path to, and an expression of, the greatest wisdom and compassion. The awareness and emotional positivity required for the refinement of our ethical life are supported by meditation, which in turn is influenced by our ethical behaviour.

The Buddhist life is ethical. This is not merely a consideration of other people and the leading of a 'good life', but is a training process integrated with other transformative aspects of the Buddhist life such as meditation and study of the Dharma. The practice of ethical action and meditation are the central means by which we become aware of ourselves, other people and beings, the world and indeed all things. This awareness leads to significant changes in our view of the world and our part in it. Ethical behaviour has the double action of the beneficial effect on others plus a reciprocal personal effect in positively modifying our thoughts and perceptions. The practice of ethics alone, however, will not

lead to wisdom. It may make us a better person but meditation, study and deep reflection are also necessary to develop the receptivity and awareness to see things as they really are.

The Precepts

Rules seem easy to find in Buddhism, but again this can be a misconception that arises from our Western orientation. What might at first sight appear to be rules may be better considered as guidelines for training of the mind. Nevertheless there are some strict rules, but we should understand their original intention, as Buddhism eschews their blind observance. An example of detailed rules is the 227 (or more) specific rules that govern the behaviour of monks in some schools – these are sometimes observed to the letter, even though the intent of the rule may no longer be of importance in our culture or era. However, more important than these long lists of rules are the essential five precepts, which underpin them. This table shows each precept of abstention coupled with its positive counterpart:

The Five Basic Precepts	
Abstaining from...	Cultivating...
Harming living beings	Deeds of loving-kindness
Not taking what's not given	Generosity
Sensual misconduct	Stillness, contentment
False speech	Truthful speech
Intoxication	Mindfulness at all times

The more we think and behave in accord with these precepts, the more we become imbued with the qualities of kindness, generosity, contentedness, honesty and mindfulness.

The first precept concerns abstaining from harming or taking life refers not only to humans, but to all sentient beings – usually interpreted to mean those that can feel pain. The intent of this guideline is to make us constantly aware of other beings and to avoid, wherever possible, their being hurt or killed. One of the implications of this precept is that Buddhists often elect to be vegetarian out of compassion for other sentient beings. It also underpins the Buddhist advocacy of non-violence in political arenas.

The second precept is not taking that which is not given (or stealing, as usually rendered), and can be broadly applied, from common theft to such matters as environmental exploitation. The third precept, abstaining from sensual misconduct, reflects a social rule expressed in enduring and balanced language that advocates the first and second precepts in the area of the senses including sexual relations – it is less concerned with sexuality itself than the avoidance of harmful or exploitative relationships. The fourth precept, forsaking false speech, is emphasised in recognition of the power of speech and extends from the telling of lies to the veil of speaking partial truths. This precept would surely apply to much of the misleading public information and advertising so prevalent in our modern world! The fifth precept, abstaining from intoxication, refers to abuse of any substance that reduces the clarity of our mind, and includes alcohol and drugs.

These five precepts are sometimes expanded to ten, yet remain fundamentally similar – in fact all the precepts can be

understood in one way within the overarching approach of non-violence in any form. Taking what is not given, sexual exploitation, lies, and the actions of an intoxicated mind can all be seen as acts of violence. As a product of cultivating awareness and loving-kindness, Buddhists tend to find their behaviour naturally accords with the precepts without specific additional effort. These precepts anticipate the golden rule – ‘do unto others as you would have others do unto you’ – but in fact, the ancient Buddhist scriptures express this in the converse – ‘do not do to others as you would not have them do to you’, which helps counteract any selfish motivation. And indeed the precepts aim at overcoming our habitual tendency to separate self and other.

The Buddhist spiritual path advocates both a conscience and ethical conduct in the individual, which in turn contributes to a positive and humane social environment. Where this collective attitude pervades society, or where Buddhism is the national religion, the feeling in that society tends to be more genuinely tolerant than it might otherwise be (notwithstanding the excesses that occasional deluded minds can produce anywhere!) Even on an individual scale, we exert some degree of influence on those around us; this effect of wisdom and compassion is another expression of the karmic law. The Dalai Lama sees ethical behaviour and compassion as the natural way, and selfishness and hatred as unnatural; this makes us the cause of our own problems! The Noble Eight-fold Path, as was introduced in Chapter 4 - The Dharma, is the ideal expression of living in this natural way.

Ethics and the Eight-fold Path

The Noble Eight-fold Path incorporates not only ethics, but also their integration with wisdom and meditation. Three of

the eight 'limbs' are specifically oriented to the perfection of speech, action and livelihood. The perfection of speech is an ideal of communication that is truthful, kindly, helpful, useful, and harmonious. The perfection of action is the ideal of our behaviour where our intentions and acts are skilful – based on loving-kindness, generosity and wisdom – as distinct from the unskilful, which are based on ill-will, selfishness and ignorance. The perfection of livelihood is an ideal that recognises the important effect occupation has on our psyche. Our livelihood should be one that affords dignity and wellbeing without harming any living being. In the modern context, this would exclude us working in industries concerned with, for example, weapons manufacture, or the promotion of gambling and liquor.

Ethical conduct is also an essential foundation for an effective meditation practise. It is much easier to focus and calm the mind when our conscience is clear. The cultivation of unconditional loving-kindness, a meditation that the Buddha himself learnt and endorsed throughout his life, directly supports the first precept and therefore the other four. Complementing this practise are the mindfulness meditations, which help us develop greater awareness of self and other and the world around us. So in these ways, ethics is integrated with meditation, the subject to which we shall now turn.

Chapter 7

Meditation

Practising Concentration for Developing Insight

Together with ethics, meditation is the basis for the development of wisdom. In recent decades, meditation has become very popular in the West, often simply focusing on mental relaxation. Buddhist meditation offers more than this, however, as it aims to increase our awareness and concentration in order to develop insight into the nature of reality. This insight also requires an ever-deepening emotional positivity as the basis for the profound compassion that is the active dimension of wisdom. Meditation is experiential in nature and cannot be easily learned from books and words alone; guidance by the more experienced companion has traditionally been the principal way of learning it. The glimpses of reality that can result from progressive meditation and reflection, supported by ethical action, will eventually reveal how the unsatisfactory nature of life ultimately stems from our usually inverted view of reality.

Two very basic practices in the Buddhist world are the cultivation of loving-kindness and concentration on the breath for mental focus and clarity (mindfulness). The loving-kindness practice is the progressive cultivation of a universal and unconditioned kindly attitude to all beings, and is essential for the emotional positivity that underpins the ethical life. So often our mind is clouded by negative emotions and reactions, such as anger or envy, which prevent us from seeing the way things really are. From a positive emotional state we

are much more able to perceive the workings of our own mind, and therefore the world.

In the sitting mindfulness practices, we aim to increase our awareness through concentration on a single theme, such as our breathing. Walking meditation uses the sensation of movement and experiences of walking as the focus of concentration. The principle of mindfulness can be extended into all aspects of our lives, from walking and speaking, dressing and eating, to the ethics of our behaviour. Taken together, the loving-kindness and mindfulness meditations complement each other in helping us develop a clear and positive mind, which prepares us for access to higher levels of wisdom. It is important to remember here that these practices have evolved in a sophisticated philosophical and spiritual context; therefore, when meditation is practised outside this context, its potential benefits are limited compared to the integrated approach of the Buddhist tradition. The recent emergence of meditation as a therapeutic response to the modern syndrome of 'stress', omits any objective of spiritual development, and may therefore be seen as but an introduction to meditation in the Buddhist context.

In addition to emotional positivity and concentration practices, there are a wide variety of other techniques, one of which is 'insight meditation'. Insight meditation works on the principle of sustained awareness of the conditional nature of our most basic sensations and thoughts and the transient nature of all existence. This is intended to bring the practitioner to the direct experience of reality. This is clearly not an introductory practise and assumes a significant experience of the loving-kindness and mindfulness techniques and the guidance of a mentor.

Meditation is experience

There has been much written about meditation, and if there is one overall lesson, it is that meditation is suited best to experiential learning and therefore relies on doing it rather than reading about it. From the Buddhist perspective, meditation has the goal of transforming every aspect of our being in a process that raises consciousness from that of our everyday lives to the transcendental. By taking such a comprehensive approach, Buddhist meditation is far more complex than 'calming the nerves', although that is a pleasant and beneficial by-product of even its initial stages.

Beyond the early impressions that we may form about the Buddhist approach, its tenets centre on the working of the mind in ways that are only beginning to be addressed by Western science. However, despite its sophisticated integration of psychology and philosophy, Buddhism is ultimately an experiential discipline - we have to do it and find out for ourselves. Furthermore its genius includes a number of meditative approaches that accommodate the variety of personality types. For example, the well-intentioned but absent minded will benefit from the mindfulness practices and the grumpy and ill-tempered will benefit from loving-kindness.

The Nature of the Mind

How does meditation bring us closer to 'seeing things as they really are'? The Buddhist approach is based on an understanding of everyday mental processes, in which our minds create concepts, fixate on them and then process all the perceptions that we receive from the senses according to that (pre) conception. We can see how we misunderstand reality by

recalling that all the sensory input to the brain is an analogue rather than reality itself. For example, we may hear the screech of a cockatoo in the Australian bush and assume that it is a cockatoo, but we may discover that it is in fact a lyrebird! Such sensory data can only be processed according to previous analogue information, much of which is absorbed unchallenged from our culture and environment. For example, the sun seems to rise at dawn according to all of the spatial information within our brains that is supported by the conventions of our language. Until recent centuries, this was an indisputable fact for everyone - but of course, such perceptions are wrong simply because we are unable to discern the rotation of the earth that exposes us to sun each morning. In the same way, no one thing is really as it seems.

The need for meditation is based on the tendency of our minds to constantly divide attention and to continually seek new stimuli (tendencies that empower the advertising and entertainment industries to influence us). With our normally divided attention and reliance on conceptions formed from our sense impressions, it is little wonder that the constructions of reality that we make are often wrong. We are reminded of our mis-perception of reality when we experience the stress (or 'dukkha' as discussed in Chapter 4 - The Dharma) of arguments, miscommunications, and unforeseen outcomes of our actions, to name a few examples. Meditation and reflection in this situation can open the mind fully to reality, and in this way we can see that wisdom is the continuous state of awareness of things as they really are.

Meditation, ethics and wisdom are therefore of an integrated nature, and in practice, the integration requires that all three be cultivated simultaneously. Since the many Buddhist

teachings arose within the cultures of their authors, the simple transplanting of these into the modern West inevitably requires further explanation and innovation. For this reason, some Buddhist groups encourage us to develop our creative skills and appreciation of the arts in order to refine our mental and emotional states as a preparation for meditation. Such adaptations follow the millennia-old Buddhist tradition of adjusting techniques and explanatory commentaries of the Dharma to each new culture that it encounters. Buddhism's durability derives from, among other attributes, its deep understanding of the human heart and mind, its practical approaches to developing higher consciousness, and its ready adaptability to new cultures.

Chapter 8

Buddhism in Modern Society

Addressing the Big Human Issues

The appeal of Buddhism to the West seems to be related to the discomfort with the philosophy underpinning our lifestyle, which provides extremes of comfort and choice yet finally fails to satisfy our basic human needs. Despite material benefits and increasing longevity many people have not found happiness and contentment in their lives. Basically this is what Buddhism is offering – happiness and contentment. As it expands in our society, Buddhism will continue to evolve to a form that suits our real rather than our perceived needs, as it has done in many other cultures. As individuals change by their practice of the Dharma, so will society be positively transformed at every level, from its ethics to its identity.

The rapid social change characteristic of our era has introduced complexities, urgencies and a frenetic approach to life that was unforeseen by most of us, and has left little opportunity for consideration of spiritual matters, or even those cultural conventions once guarded by religion. In this way, the modern West has become alienated from its own religious traditions. In contrast to the expected well-being that is to be had from our affluent lifestyles, there is increasing distress and discontent, as shown by the rising incidence of psychological disorders and family breakdown. This seems to be a major factor in the increasing interest in alternative traditions such as Buddhism, now said to be the fastest growing spiritual tradition in the West.

We often hear the phrase ‘our society is sick’ – this must be because so many individuals are sick or suffering in some way. The Buddha’s teachings are an invitation to individuals to approach their lives in a radically different way. We have explored in previous chapters the potential benefits that can be enjoyed from a life of greater awareness and loving-kindness. As more people begin this path of transformation the collective result will be a healthier and happier society. Even the most basic principles of mindfulness and loving-kindness can be incorporated into our community life from the home to the school and work place.

How do these changes affect our outlook on the world at large in such areas as economy, ecology and politics? In terms of economy, a collective attitude of simplicity and generosity would tend to counter the excesses of greed that are responsible for so much trouble in our commercial world, and would also question the need for yet more material goods. In terms of ecology, an awareness of, and respect for, the interdependence of life systems would encourage much greater sensitivity in the way in which we treat our natural environment. Likewise the political domain would be informed by and publicly conducted on the highest ethical principles, based on the five precepts.

We all have to start somewhere in our spiritual search. Buddhism is a practical and methodical approach that remains as emotionally engaging as it is intellectually appealing. It is emotionally engaging because it identifies the human predicament of suffering and unsatisfactoriness in all its forms and provides a means beyond it. It is also intellectually appealing because it begins the exploration of the nature of

reality on a rational platform and encompasses the insightful potential of intuition. Buddhism maintains that the truth is eternal and ever-present, and that the means to understand it are within us; the emphasis always lies with the individual and that is why meditation, the cultivation of ethics and the development of wisdom remain the core practices. It provides many doors, simply to make the truth accessible.

Further Reading on Buddhism

There is a vast range of books on Buddhism, extending from traditional commentaries to modern psychological interpretations. The list below comprises accessible and essential teachings of Buddhism.

Juan Mascaro (translator) and Thomas Wyatt (1973) *Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*. Penguin Classics, Viking Press. 93pp.

Andrew Skilton (1996) *A Concise History of Buddhism*. Windhorse Publications.

Clive Erriker (2002) *Teach Yourself Buddhism*. Contemporary Books/Hodder and Stroughton 224 pp.

Bhikkhu Nanamoli (2001) *Life of the Buddha: According to the Pali Canon*. BPS Pariyatti Editions,. 400pp.

Peter Harvey (1990) *An Introduction to Buddhism*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK. 374pp.

Sangharakshita (1998) *The Three Jewels: The Central Ideals of Buddhism*. Windhorse Publications, Birmingham, UK. 245pp.

Sangharakshita (1996) *Buddhism for Today and Tomorrow*. Windhorse Publications, Birmingham, UK. 60pp.

Steve Hagen (1999) *Buddhism: Plain and Simple*. Penguin/Broadway Books. 159pp.

Walpola Sri Rahula (1967) *What the Buddha Taught*. Gordon Fraser, Bedford, UK. 151pp.

However, the most direct means of learning about Buddhism and centres where Buddhists and others meet is via the

Internet. There are hundreds of excellent Buddhist Internet sites; some to begin with include:

<http://www.fwbo.org/>

<http://www.buddhanet.net>

<http://buddhism.org/link/pages/>

This book is published by the Melbourne Buddhist Centre, which is affiliated with the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), a Buddhist organization that translates Buddhist teachings into forms appropriate to the modern West. The FWBO has centres in some 25 countries where it teaches meditation and Buddhist doctrine. The Melbourne Buddhist Centre operates from two locations:

Melbourne Buddhist Centre
302 Little Lonsdale Street
Melbourne 3000

&

Melbourne Buddhist Centre
1 Pitt Street
Brunswick 3056