

Robert Mann and Rose Youd

BUDDHISM:

The Plain Facts



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Why Follow The Path?

Why follow the path? Because, in the last analysis, things aren't good enough.

All of us want to be happy. Most of us, at least in our earlier years, assume that happiness **can** be found in the world. We believe that given enough money, the right relationships, a satisfying career we could be happy, permanently happy.

With the disappointments that inevitably come our way, our optimism begins to wear thin. However much money we have, we could always do with more ... Our relationships never really match up to our ideals ... Work is always either too challenging or not challenging enough.

Sometimes, of course, there are moments when everything is going well and there is nothing we would want to change - but even these moments are flawed. The better life seems, the more we've got to lose. Happiness is a fragile state. Sooner or later, the realisation dawns that even the most perfect moment fades.

But many of us have a remarkable facility for burying such insights. Time and time again we refuse to pay attention to our growing sense of disillusionment and we redouble our efforts to find satisfaction in money,

Why Follow The Path?

relationships, work, whatever. However hard we try, however enthusiastically we throw ourselves into the quest for happiness, however avidly we pretend to ourselves that everything is OK really, it is not long before discontent resurfaces.

In the end, having tried just about everything we can think of, we are forced to start looking beyond our usual horizons.

In many cases, it is simply the relentless accumulation of minor frustrations that provides the impetus for finding a spiritual path. Alternatively, the motivation may be some sudden trauma - a diagnosis of terminal illness, the loss of a job, the break-up of a relationship; a short sharp shock that clearly reveals that life is not what we would like it to be.

In short, it is because of the existence of pain, disappointment, frustration that we look for a way out.

Many paths claim to lead to permanent happiness. Some live up to their promise - some may only provide temporary relief - others don't work at all.

The Buddha said, quite simply, that **his** way leads to enlightenment, to the total eradication of every aspect of distress.

Buddhism

In the two and a half millennia that have passed since the Buddha first taught, Buddhism has spread across the globe. It has divided and sub-divided into different schools and sects, each taking on a distinct cultural identity. Today, Buddhism can stand for Theravada Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism ... Every variation has its own history, its own traditions, its own scriptures.

Buddhism, it might seem, is a highly complicated proposition.

But however esoteric or intricate the various philosophies and religious forms of Buddhism might appear, the fundamental teaching is simplicity itself. For all schools of Buddhism share this central tenet: that there is an effective path to freedom, to the complete elimination of all distress and unhappiness.

That the path works is not something to be taken on trust. It is something that anyone who is prepared to put it into practice can find out for themselves. The Buddha described his teaching as 'a come-and-see thing'. He wasn't teaching a philosophical theory but a practical way to true happiness.

The Four Noble Truths: Suffering

The whole of the Buddha's teaching - the Dhamma - can be summarised in four concise statements known as the noble truths.

The first truth confirms our perception that there is a problem. It acknowledges frustration, anguish, discontent as facts of life. As the Buddha said, 'There is suffering'. This unequivocal statement is the starting-point of the whole of the teaching.

The term the Buddha used which is normally translated as 'suffering' is *dukkha** . Suffering is in some ways a misleading translation because, although *dukkha* certainly does mean anguish, distress, misery, it also means a lot more.

Suffering can be acute - the anguish felt, for example, at the death of somebody close or at the failure of a relationship. More commonly, it is less traumatic - maybe a general sense of loneliness and isolation, or a sense of the futility of existence. Losing the car keys, having to relate to a boring neighbour, having to go in to work after the weekend - these are all *dukkha*.

* *Dukkha* is a Pali word, Pali being the ancient Indian language in which the teachings were first recorded.

Experiencing things we don't want to experience is *dukkha* - not experiencing the things we do want to experience is also *dukkha*.

The Buddha did not deny, however, that happiness can be found in the world. This is one of the most commonly misunderstood ideas in Buddhism. Many jump to the conclusion that with the first noble truth the Buddha was painting a picture of life that was relentlessly pessimistic.

Clearly there is happiness in the world. Not only was this acknowledged by the Buddha - he also pointed out that without a full understanding of worldly happiness one's wisdom is necessarily incomplete.

There **is** happiness in the world - the trouble is, it never lasts. People try to find happiness through status, health, beauty, family, possessions, and of course they succeed - up to a point. But none of these things can ever provide **permanent** happiness and that, ultimately, is the only thing that will ever really satisfy us.

Being made redundant is *dukkha* - so is getting a pay-rise. Getting cancer is *dukkha* - so is being young and healthy. Being criticised for being inconsiderate is *dukkha* - so is being considerate. Feeling that the world doesn't understand you is *dukkha* - so is thinking you have all the answers. And wanting to be free from *dukkha* is also *dukkha*.

The Buddha said that all things - all aspects of experience - are essentially unsatisfactory, they are all *dukkha*.

In the final analysis, every aspect of experience is suffering or *dukkha* because every aspect of experience is transient. Yet, the Buddha said, complete permanent happiness **can** be found - but not where we normally look.

The Four Noble Truths: The Origin of Suffering

The first truth stated, 'There is suffering' - the second states that suffering has an origin, a cause.

Like all the noble truths, this statement is so simple that it might be easy to underestimate its crucial significance.

Many people believe that suffering occurs in our lives quite fortuitously; that pain and distress afflict us unpredictably and at random. For anyone who holds such a view, the problem of suffering can never be solved; there is no way out.

The Buddha stated that there is a cause of *dukkha*. Distress, unhappiness, anguish, despair - these things are not accidental and, critically, they are not inescapable.

So what is the cause of suffering?

Some people attribute their unhappiness to a lack of the resources necessary to buy their way to paradise. They believe that, if only they had a sufficiently high material standard of living, their problems would drop away. Others make the assumption that the root-cause of suffering is political or social injustice, or the degradation of the environment. Others still are convinced that their unhappiness is due to psychological causes - some

childhood trauma, perhaps, has left them emotionally scarred.

The Buddha dismissed all such theories. He discovered through his own experience that suffering is always caused by craving.

When the Buddha spoke of craving, he was using the term in a subtler, more far-reaching way than our customary usage of the word allows. Essentially, craving means wanting things to be different from the way they are. This, the Buddha said, is the origin of all the suffering in the world.

If a man doesn't have much money and he wants a lot of money, then he suffers. If a woman is outraged by government corruption, believing such things should not happen, then she suffers. If people become incensed about cruelties inflicted on them in childhood, feeling that somehow it **should** have been different, then they suffer.

Craving is rooted in ignorance - an ignoring of the true nature of reality, an ignoring of the way things actually are.

The hallmark of craving is psychological dependence. Whenever we crave, we are emotionally attached to a particular end-result. Whenever we crave, we are - subtly or not so subtly - dependent on getting something. Or we are dependent on getting rid of something. Or we are dependent on becoming something different - a better parent maybe, better educated, more attractive, richer, thinner. Only when our actions are free from any form of dependency are they free from craving and do not cause suffering.

People can crave for food, money, sex; they can crave for world peace or for the elimination of poverty; they can crave for enlightenment. The Buddha said that craving

The Origin of Suffering

leads to suffering - however altruistic or exalted the object craved for.

It is crucial to recognise that the problem lies with our own responses - not with whatever it is we want or don't want. No object, no thing, has the power to make us crave, no matter how attractive we might find it. Craving is always something we choose to do, even though we might not be clearly conscious that that is the case.

Being unable to afford to go on holiday, never being appreciated by the boss, having uncommunicative or badly-behaved children, illness, separation, death - none of these things need make us suffer. We only suffer when we resist. We only suffer when we are attached to things being a certain way - when we feel that we **should** be appreciated, we **should** remain healthy, we shouldn't die.

The Four Noble Truths: The Cessation of Suffering

After the truth about the origin of suffering, there follows the truth about its cessation.

The third truth makes the definitive statement that suffering can end - completely and permanently. Every trace of unhappiness and distress can utterly disappear. As craving - wanting things to be different - is the cause of suffering, so the end of craving is the end of suffering.

The ending of suffering is nibbana (or nirvana), enlightenment. This is the goal of the Buddha's path - the goal, in fact, of all effective spiritual paths.

Descriptions of enlightenment are notoriously prone to misinterpretation. The Buddha usually described enlightenment in negative terms, in terms of what is missing rather than what is present. *Nibbana*, he said, is the cessation of ignorance, craving and hatred; *nibbana* is the cessation of suffering. Such negative terms are, in general, less likely to be misunderstood.

Nevertheless, wrong ideas about enlightenment are commonplace, even in Buddhist circles. One group of wrong ideas centres around the misunderstanding that all human behaviour is based in craving; and so, if we get rid

The Cessation of Suffering

of craving, we can no longer eat, work, relate to others - do anything in fact at all. In Buddhist philosophy this is known as the annihilationist view of enlightenment.

Enlightenment is the cessation of suffering, not the cessation of action. The Buddha himself, after he became enlightened, spent forty-five years teaching thousands of people the way to *nibbana*.

Enlightenment is the cessation of craving, not the cessation of preference. The Buddha preferred to teach; other enlightened people may prefer not to teach. If someone before enlightenment has a particular interest in teaching or people or food or anything else, there is no reason why that interest should not continue after he or she has completed the path.

Another major group of wrong ideas about enlightenment centres around what is called the eternalist view. This essentially sees *nibbana* as the acquisition of all good things, for ever. It sees *nibbana* as a permanent heavenly existence of bliss, power, omniscience, security.

But enlightenment is not unlimited pleasure. It is more accurate to say that it is freedom from attachment to good things or bad, freedom from attachment to pleasure or pain.

Note that pain and suffering are not synonymous. If someone who has attained enlightenment breaks his or her arm, it will still hurt; if he or she is insulted or abused, there may still be mental pain. The crucial difference is that the enlightened person totally accepts his circumstances. He knows that pain is a fact of life, just like pleasure. Neither lasts, neither is a problem, neither needs to be resisted or clung to.

Enlightenment is not learning to cope with distress nor is it merely a reduction in the unsatisfactoriness in our lives. It is the ending of **all** suffering, a total revolution.

Hearing this, many have effectively mythologised *nibbana* to the point where they believe that it is actually no longer attainable. But given sufficient determination, correct instruction and proper application, it is still possible for anyone to realise the goal of the Buddha's path.

The Four Noble Truths: The Path

The problem - suffering - has been identified, its origin defined and the fact that it can be overcome established. The fourth truth states that there is a path to the ending of suffering.

Practically all of the Buddha's teachings are an exposition of this path to enlightenment. Many spiritual teachers have spoken about enlightenment - it was the particular genius of the Buddha that he laid down a precise and detailed course of training which has proved effective in different ages and different cultures and which remains both available and effective to this day.

The Buddha's path is often called the middle way because its essence is the avoidance of extremes. To indulge in extremes is actually easy. To devote oneself to satisfying one's physical appetites, for example, is easy; to indulge in the machismo of self-denial is also easy (it may take will-power but it needs little in the way of thought or sensitivity). The middle way is dynamic - it is not something that can be followed blindly or ritualistically.

The path is usually defined in terms of eight factors, eight aspects of physical, verbal and mental behaviour

which need to be cultivated by those intent on coming to enlightenment. These are: speech, action, livelihood, mindfulness, effort, concentration, view and aim.

The eight factors can be grouped into three main divisions - ethics (comprising speech, action and livelihood); meditation (mindfulness, effort and concentration); and wisdom or understanding (view and aim).

The ethical division of the path is concerned with the restraint of selfish behaviour; the development of these factors requires a lifestyle that is considerate of others and as harmless as possible. Where ethics deals with physical and verbal action, meditation is concerned with the mind, learning to control and balance it so that it becomes an effective tool for the development of wisdom. In developing wisdom we come to know through our own experience what actually causes suffering and how to be free of it.

In broad terms, developing the appropriate level of ethical behaviour allows us to meditate correctly, which in turn brings about the arising of wisdom.

This does not mean that the three sections of the path are developed serially - in practical terms ethics, meditation and understanding are dynamically interdependent and the person following the path correctly is working on all three groups together.

At one stage in his practice, for example, a meditator may recognise that he needs to pay more attention to the content of his speech and restrain a tendency to be economical with the truth. In attempting to do this, he grows in wisdom - he gets a clearer picture of precisely what honesty is, as well as gaining an experiential understanding of why honesty is a positive quality. Thanks to this greater clarity of vision, he finds it all the easier to control his speech.

The Path

Because they are interdependent, none of the sections of the path can be omitted. To minimise the importance of ethical conduct, for example, as some have tried to do, renders the path ineffective. Someone who acts in an habitually selfish manner will find that he is so caught up in his own concerns that he is incapable of seeing beyond those very limited horizons.

The Buddha described this path to nibbana as 'beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle, beautiful in the end'. Anyone who sincerely applies him- or herself to the path will find that suffering diminishes, right from the very start. The greater the application, the greater the reduction in suffering.

In fact, getting rid of things is the keynote of the path - getting rid of craving, getting rid of all the things we do which make us suffer. We gain no credentials, no status, from following the path; we acquire nothing that the world would value. Simply, we do away with suffering.

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