

The Core Teachings: **AN OVERVIEW**



**Editor
Xianyang
Carl Jerome
introduces
and explains
15 of
Buddhism's
key
teachings.**

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The four noble truths summarize the Buddha's view of the human condition and how best to live our lives. The first noble truth explains the basic nature of life as dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), which the second noble truth says is caused by craving or clinging (attachment). The third noble truth assures us that the attaching cycle can be stopped and the suffering brought to an end, and the fourth noble truth then explains the eight-fold path as the means to accomplish this.

Bodhidharma, the first Zen patriarch, presented us with a more concise version of the four noble truths:

- (1) suffering injustice
- (2) adapting to conditions
- (3) seeking nothing and
- (4) practicing the dharma.

On a somewhat deeper level still, the first noble truth reveals impermanence, no-self, emptiness, the five skandhas, and conditionality. The second noble truth deals with karma and dependent origination, furthering our understanding of the concepts in the first noble truth. At this level, the third noble truth is the profound truth of nirvana, (which some consider to be inexplicable in words,) and the fourth noble truth is the practice path. On an even deeper level, all of this can be experienced as a meta-praxis—a skillful means to get us to the other shore, where we are then encouraged to abandon the ship.



THE BODHISATTVA

In the Chinese Mahayana tradition, each of us on the Buddhist path is a bodhisattva, a being (sattva) seeking awakening (bodhi). A bodhisattva, therefore, is a person who is committed to a life of compassion and to saving all beings. Chan Master Yin Shun tells us that a bodhisattva lives in accord with the five precepts and the ten meritorious deeds.

It needs to be added here, however, that in the Chinese Buddhist scriptural literature there are several different types of bodhisattvas, such as past-life bodhisattvas and deity bodhisattvas. When viewed together, these provide a strong and decidedly Chinese Mahayana image for a bodhisattva as (1) a supernatural being of immeasurable compassion and wisdom, (2) a spiritual map which indicates that through cultivation enlightenment is attainable, and (3) compassionate, powerful personal deities which occupy a prominent position in devotional practice.



MEDITATION

Meditation is the central practice of Buddhism. It is the place from which all the teachings arise. Without meditation Buddhism is just words, and words alone can be a source of suffering, not a practice to end it.

There are two basic types of meditation practiced in Buddhism: (1) shamatha/ concentration meditation (which includes vipassana meditation) and (2) analytic meditation. Concentration meditation, in which one focuses on a meditation object, such as one's breath, is the most common type of meditation and is used to stabilize the mind. Analytic meditation, which is usually preceded by concentration meditation, involves the use of koans or questions and is meant to move one beyond one's discursive mind into the realm of pure experience.



THE PRECEPTS

The precepts are behavioral guidelines. They provide the footing from which self-control and restraint can emerge; practicing with them leads to clarity, appropriate and beneficial decision-making, and to lives of peace and harmony.

Each of the five major precepts produces consequences that further spiritual development.

(1) **No killing** allows us to live in communities with a fundamental sense of trust, not to constantly have to be on guard for fear of losing our life or for fear of those close to us losing their lives—and these build gratitude and selflessness, respect for others, and allow for the development of such qualities as lovingkindness and compassion.

(2) **No stealing** leads to a sense of generosity, sympathetic joy and the bodhisattva ideal.

(3) **No sexual misconduct** allows us to build loving families and supportive communities; it deepens our practice by encouraging self-control and restraint in the face of temptation.

(4) **No lying builds** trust-worthiness, dependability, and honesty, providing the groundwork for the practice of equanimity and diminishing conditions that would lead to ill-will.

Without this precept, the foundation for all interpersonal relationships would collapse.

(5) **No intoxicants** builds trust-worthiness and dependability; it makes us alert to temptation and keeps us in a clear mind state. It supports our efforts to meditate, and ultimately see who we really are.

When it comes to practicing with the precepts, nothing is black and white; everything is gray and situational, and we make decisions in the gray area based on acceptance of karmic responsibility and an analysis of the situation in terms of the act, the intention, and the outcome. For example, issues that arise from no killing might include assisted suicide or euthanasia, suicide, 'putting down' pets, hunting and fishing for sport vs. hunting and fishing to prevent starvation, eating meat vs. vegetarianism, etc.

The precepts are not meant to limit behavior; rather, they give guidance and support for actions that will benefit ourselves and others, or at the very least, do no harm.

THE SIX PARAMITAS

The six paramitas are practices that are the outcome of wisdom.

The deeper our practice, the more naturally these arise; the more we practice them, the deeper our practice becomes. They might be considered another developmental series, like the eightfold noble path, leading to liberation. These are both the behaviors of an enlightened being and the behaviors that can lead to enlightenment.

In the Mahayana or bodhisattva traditions emphasis is placed on the paramitas because these are wisdom-oriented traditions that trace their origins to the Heart Sutra. And the paramitas are, after all, the Heart Sutra in action!

(1) **Generosity**, the first of the paramitas, is sometimes viewed as the essence of the bodhisattva ideal and the most important practice of all, but that is not to diminish the importance and relevance of the other five paramitas:

(2) **Living an ethical life**

(3) **Patience** (the antidote for anger)

(4) **The four great efforts** (abandon, restrain, develop and maintain)

(5) **Concentration**

(6) **Wisdom**

Rather than thinking of these as separate practices, it might be beneficial to see them forming a team, like the dogs on a dog sled, with generosity as the lead. Although there is a guide at the front, movement is dependent on all the members of the team working in tandem.



WISDOM

Along with compassion, wisdom is seen as both a goal and an outcome of Buddhist practice. In one sense, wisdom means realizing the four noble truths—seeing that life is characterized by suffering because we attach to the deluded idea that reality is somehow permanent,—and that it is possible to end our delusion and eliminate suffering by following the eightfold path.

On a more profound level, wisdom is the direct experience of things (phenomena) as empty of a permanent, fixed identity. Wisdom is directly realizing that everything, including our “self,” is a product of our mind, and further realizing that “emptiness is form, form is emptiness,” as the Heart Sutra states. Wisdom means clearly understanding that all things are the result of conditioned causality.

KARMA

Karma isn't complicated; it is simply the law of cause and effect. In its simplest formulation, karma can be understood as "If this, then that."



In other words, our actions have consequences. We can't know exactly what or when those consequences will appear because there are too many causal factors in the world that interact with each other and with our actions.

An understanding of karma motivates us to act in accord with the five precepts. It tells us that we are absolutely and solely responsible for what happens to us. And in a profound way, karma explains where we came from, what we are doing here, what to do while we are here, and what it will be like for us after this life. And in Nagarjuna's explanation, on still another level, karma becomes conditioned causality—a series of empty predispositions toward action.

DEPENDENT ORIGATION

Dependent origination is generally taught as deriving from the second noble truth. It is often presented as a sequence of twelve, each forming a condition for the arising of the next, and together comprising samsara, the cycle of birth and death. On the surface, it seems to go like this: our ignorance of the true nature of things leads to the creation of volitional formations, which causes our consciousness to move forward, consciousness giving rise to name-and-form, name and form being conditioned by the six sense bases which make contact with form (thinking is considered a "sense" as well as seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching.), which causes the I-like/don't-like feelings to arise, which creates the conditions for craving, and then clinging, which leads to becoming (identifying as a separate, disconnected entity), which leads to birth, which results in aging and death in ignorance. In this manner, the cycle repeats, again and again, moment after moment, life after life.

Superficially, this concept looks like a 12-link chain, presenting the linear sequence of events inherent in each moment and each life, starting with ignorance and ending with death. When we look more deeply, however, we see that dependent origination explains how dukkha arises

and where we can break the chain and end dukkha. On an even deeper level, this is a description of the causally conditioned nature of all phenomena and a profound explanation of impermanence and emptiness. At its deepest level, it is a description of no-self. When we understand dependent origination beyond its linear appearance, as a process beyond words, we have penetrated emptiness. That's why the Buddha said, "to understand dependent origination is to understand the dharma."

FAITH

Faith in Buddhism is simply a trust, based on personal experience that the teachings of the Buddha work. Faith is a confidence in the validity of the teachings when we see them work in our lives and when we see that these ideas and practices really can and do provide us with the tools to relieve suffering.



While some practitioners are inspired by faith, others are inspired by compassion and yet others by wisdom. However, it would seem that faith, and the cultivation of faith, are the key to successful practice.

If we wish to benefit from practicing the Dharma, cultivating and strengthening our faith is necessary. Why? Because if we lack faith we can never practice wholeheartedly and our practice will not be there for us in times of stress. And if we cannot practice wholeheartedly when it is most needed, our practice may ultimately falter and fail us.

THE FOUR IMMEASURABLES

LOVINGKINDNESS
COMPASSION
SYMPATHETIC JOY
EQUANIMITY



Sometimes called the Four Heavenly Abodes, these four states of mind allow us to remain harmonious and peaceful, regardless of our circumstances or surroundings.

Lovingkindness is a strong wish for others to be happy. In practice, lovingkindness is offered freely and without any expectation of personal gain, reward, or benefit. An offering made in this way, from a base of pure selflessness, is immediately understood

by others as positive and wholesome, and this establishes conditions that will allow more lovingkindness to arise and real benefit to occur.

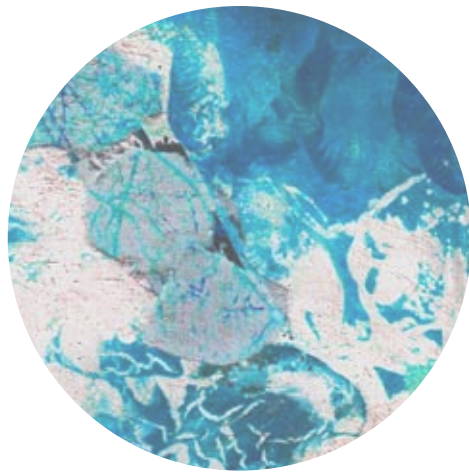
The Buddhadharmā teaches us to be diligent about being unreservedly kind. Practicing with lovingkindness, developing a mind of lovingkindness, is one of the most effective practices for being of benefit to others, for producing harmony in our lives and in the lives of others, and for producing calm and peace within.

Compassion is the empathic feeling that urges us into action to benefit others and ultimately to end suffering. Being compassionate is an outpouring of our own happiness, a happiness that we find increasing in ourselves the more we practice with this and the other three heavenly abodes.

Sympathetic Joy is a selfless feeling of happiness when we see success, prosperity, and good fortune in others. Sympathetic joy is an infinitely wide mood that is utterly removed from suffering. It is unconditional joy for the welfare of others.

Equanimity is the tranquil state that comes from greeting each moment, each situation, with an open heart and mind, neither hindered by preconceptions nor overpowered by the delusions of everyday life.

As long as we practice giving generously and selflessly of the four immeasurables, we will be inclined to continuous and ever-increasing good behaviors, and to the happiness that derives from the courage and confidence of a solid practice.



IMPERMANENCE

While it may appear that we are the same person we were when we woke up this morning, obviously we have changed since then. We have grown a little older, matured physically, developed psychologically, many of our cells have died and been regenerated, and so on. We have changed. And if we understand that, the rational extension of that view is that all phenomena are impermanent.

The traditional explanation goes like this: because everything is constantly changing (I) as a result of everything moving through time and

(2) as a result of everything arising from causes and conditions, in the Buddhist view anything we do, say, think, feel, see, taste, touch, smell or hear (everything inside and outside us) is impermanent.

In other words, nothing is or can be permanent because at the instant it arises in this moment, it decays and ceases, producing new causes and conditions, which in turn produce a new phenomenon to arise and instantly repeat the cycle of arising, decaying, and ceasing.

Once we understand impermanence, we begin to see the world differently and we can begin the real work of reshaping our lives and our world.



NO-SELF

We all know who we are and have ways of identifying our “self”: I am Annette the mother of twin girls, or I am Michael the lawyer, or I am a marathon runner. Because we are human and psycholinguistic animals we cling to what we identify as our “self.” Consequently, we are anxious and unsure because our clinging forces us into a cycle of protecting and defending as permanent something that will never be impermanent.

From the perspective of the Buddhadharma, however, there is no such thing as a self. For there to be an abiding self, it would have to meet four criteria: it would have to be permanent, unchanging, in control and independent. Let’s look rationally at why we are neither permanent nor unchanging, neither in control nor independent.

Generally we tend to identify our self with our body. As we know, from the moment of conception to the moment of our death, our bodies are perpetually changing—temporally we are perpetually arising, decaying, and ceasing moment after moment, physically we are perpetually

being born, decaying, dying and being reborn. So from the perspective of time and space, we are neither permanent nor unchanging. As we cannot stop the clock, as we cannot stop ourselves from maturing and aging and dying, obviously we are not in control. And as we cannot break free of the grip of aging, sickness and death, we cannot say we are independent.

On a more profound level, the self can be viewed as a perpetual blending and reblending of the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, volitional actions, and consciousness) in combination and unity with the four great elements (earth, water, fire, and air).

The absence of a substantial, permanent, abiding self, it must be noted, stands as the foundation of the middle way.



NIRVANA

Nirvana is considered by some to be the most profound and difficult concept in the Buddhadharma. It is impossible to do any more than hint at its nature in words, which is what we are attempting here, based on the great Chinese Master Yin Shun’s description of nirvana in *The Three Essentials of Buddhist Practice*.

When the Buddha’s disciples wanted a description of nirvana, the Buddha provided an illustration: holding a burning torch in his hand, he waved it. The fire was extinguished. The Buddha then asked, “Where did the fire go?” It was impossible to explain where the fire went. The cessation of life and death, which is the realization of nirvana, is like this. We can say that somebody has entered the state of nirvana; but we cannot say that he or she is still an individual entity. We can say that the water from one river has flowed into another river, but we may not expect to separate the waters of the two rivers

once they have merged. Similarly, in nirvana all things are integrated into one absolute equanimity. The scripture says, “the extinguished is immeasurable.” Nirvana (extinction) cannot be measured in amount, number, time, weight, space, or in any other way. In nirvana nothing is distinguishable. Once entering nirvana, where one came from and where one has gone are no longer traceable.

This means that the person is nowhere and everywhere. This is why it is so difficult to understand, for we must not try to understand it through 'I' or any concept related to 'I.' Until we have shaken off our 'I,' we cannot grasp nirvana.

After attaining nirvana, the body and mind are vanished and extinguished. The meanings of vanish, extinguish and tranquil are synonymous. In nirvana, there is no difference between 'I' and you, between self and other. After entering nirvana, eternity is indeed eternity because everything perfect does not increase, decrease or change.

DUKKHA

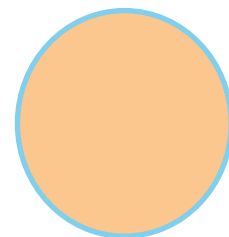
Sitting under the bodhi tree 2500 years ago, the Buddha realized that the fundamental nature of everything was dukkha. The word was later transcribed and translated as 'suffering.'

Dukkha in the Pali language has a very broad and sometimes quite subtle meaning; 'suffering' is too strong a word for it, and too limited in scope.

Dukkha points to unsatisfactoriness, disappointment, dis-ease in the sense of discomfort, a generalized sense of anxiety, apprehension, uneasiness, impermanence, imperfection, insubstantiality, and so on. And it means these individually and collectively at the same time. Dukkha is the opposite of sukha which is ease or well-being in the sense of being comfortable.

Moving beyond the word itself, the oldest teachings of the Buddhadharma list eight kinds of dukkha. Four arise from our physicality: from birth, from old age, from sickness, and from death; and four arise from our more subtle, change-based nature: the dukkha of being apart from those we love, from being with those we dislike, from not getting what we want, and from “the blaze of the five skandhas,” meaning our misconception that there is a self. Since everything in life falls within one of these eight categories, everything is dukkha, life is dukkha.

Understanding this fundamental nature of life, however, shouldn't be seen as pessimistic, for it is through this understanding that we find liberation from delusion and misperceptions that keep us caught in the cycles of birth and death.





THE FIVE SKANDHAS

In Buddhist phenomenology, the five skandhas (sometimes translated as aggregates) are experiential factors that make up what we think of as the self. Bound up in their ever-changing nature, they are comprised of:

form (rupa)
feeling (vedana)
perception (sanna)
mental formations (samskaras)
consciousness (vijnana)

Briefly, the five skandhas operate this way: when we make a sense contact, when we see something [form], a physical sensation arises [feeling] from that contact, a sensation that is either positive or negative. This leads to recognizing the object [perception] and to the full understanding of what is seen and thoughts about how to respond to it [volitional formations]. We then identify ourselves as this person who understands the sight in this way, making our consciousness of who we are a reflection of this process.

The Heart Sutra teaches the inherent empty nature of the five skandhas.

