

Introduction to the Buddha-dharma
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THE FOUNDER

The Buddhist tradition began with the man Siddhartha Gautama in ancient India. He lived sometime between the early seventh century preceding the common era and the late fifth century (B.C.). He followed the Indian custom of leaving home to search for spiritual liberation as soon as his family was economically secure. For the Buddha-to-be this religious search began at the age of twenty-nine. This was a young age to leave behind home and family to study, meditate and practice austerities. Even so, such an early beginning for a religious career is not uncommon amongst India's well-to-do and his family was quite wealthy. He was the regent-elect of Madgha, a small country in an area of Northern India which is currently part of Nepal. This has been decided by the oligarchy to which his clan, the Sakya, belonged. He abandoned the power and riches associated with the life of a crown prince in order to search for a way to genuine liberation for all humankind.

Siddhartha Gautama studied with many of the philosophers who resided in the forests of Northern India. One sutra (a Buddhist scripture) informs us that he has 110 teachers. Besides philosophical study he engaged in various types of meditations, - analytical, visualization, object-less concentration et. al. He also practiced asceticism, eating and drinking as little as possible. After six years of endeavor, at dawn following a night-long meditation, he realized Enlightenment.

WHAT A BUDDHA IS

After his dramatic realization Siddhartha Gautama asked that he not be referred to by his given name but that he be called the Buddha, the/an Awakened One. He is also referred to as Sakyamuni, which means the sage (Muni) of the Sakya clan (Sakya). A Buddha is one who has awoken thoroughly to the true nature of existence. He or she is one who can be characterized as having attained the highest wisdom and most universal compassion. A Buddha has accomplished genuine liberation, - liberation from external controls and from internal compulsions. Such an Enlightened One has obtained lasting happiness and true freedom. For the rest of a Buddha's lifetime(s) he or she will be committed to leading as many living beings as possible to the same enduring happiness and real freedom.

WHAT BUDDHA REALIZE

A Buddha is a person who has realized vast wisdom and compassion. We may still be tempted to ask, "What has a Buddha realized?" The correct answer would be "the non-duality of all person, places, objects and event." This means that each of us, just as we are, are already identical with all living things. While "non-duality" is the most technically correct description of what an Awakened One realizes, it is a bit of an abstract notion. In fact, the true object of a Buddha's realization can only be understood by another Buddha. Even the answer officially

approved by Buddhist tradition is an approximation of the Ultimate Truth in mundane human language. Therefore we may perhaps use a slightly more accessible approximation for the nature of a Buddha's realization - the Oneness of Life.

In so far as those of us who still live in delusion can understand, what a Buddha realizes is that it is a deathless, luminous, universally inter-penetrating, utterly free and magically empty Oneness which flows through and is all things. It is the thorough-going realization of this Truth at every level of his or her being which characterizes an Awakened One, a Buddha.

THE TEACHINGS

What a Buddha awakens to is the Dharma, the law according to which events unfold, the Ultimate truth. In a derivative sense the "Dharma" of the Buddha's is any teaching which effectively indicates this Truth. Our tradition is referred to in English as "Buddhism" or "The Buddhist Religion." These terms are not objectionable, but due to associations which people have with "religion" and the suffix "-ism" we generally prefer the term the "Buddha Dharma". "The Buddha-dharma" (lower case "d" when hyphenated) is any teaching, practice or activity which leads us closer to realizing the profound oneness of all life. In the Chinese Buddhist canon there are approximately 100,00 pages of scripture numbering about 4,000 distinct books. The Tibetan canon consists of about 6,000 books. Our scripture is so voluminous because any teaching which helps to unravel our self-centeredness, which decreases our sense of isolation from others, reveals the deep truth about our lives and is therefore an aspect of the Dharma.

THE PATH - OUR WAYS OF LIVING

Besides teachings which disclose the deep unity of all things, the Buddhist religion provides practices and activities which sensitize us to profound connectedness amidst which we live. Each of the two hundred or so living schools of BUDDHISM includes a variety of activities which help us to feel connected to others. Generally these can be classed under the categories of Conduct, Mindfulness and Wisdom-insight, called the "Three Learning's." Time-honored elaboration's of these three learning's include the Eightfold path (Genuine Viewpoint, thought, speech, action, occupation, endeavor, mindfulness and meditation) and the Six Perfections (Astute Giving, conduct, patience, endeavor, concentration, wisdom). These classic formulations are very useful in helping us to understand what a spiritually evolved person must be like, For actual day to day living most Buddhists over the centuries have not engaged in meditation or rigorous philosophical study.

The Buddhist path always involves decreasing unwholesome activity. In some schools (e.g. Jodo Shu, Jodo Shinshu, Soto Zen and the son tradition of Korea) this wholesome conduct is seen more as an after-effect of being nurtured by the teaching. In Jodo Shinshu, for example, increasingly decent behavior is seen as an expression of gratitude for our receipt of the Nembutsu teaching. Beyond decreasing our destructive behavior what the Buddhist way of living involves for us will depend greatly upon which stream of tradition we follow. Those who follow

Nichiren DaiShonin's guidance repeat often and with great reverence "Nammyo Ho Renge Kyo." This phrase literally means "I rely upon the Lotus Sutra" but indicates veneration of Ultimate Reality. "Namo Amida Butsu." This phrase literally means "I rely on the Awakened One of Endless Life and Limitless Wisdom-light", but indicates encountering the actual Activity of Liberating all suffering beings.

The diversity in our Ways of Living should not obscure the crucial commonalities amongst Buddhist pathways. All Buddhist revere Sakyamuni and his realization of some 25 centuries ago. We all aspire, one day, for the same deep realization of Oneness. We all hope to decrease our negative actions. We all hope to become more caring and compassionate in our relations with others. We all acknowledge the constant change within and about us. We all hope for happiness and freedom for ourselves and others. We each have small, simple ways of trying to allow this dream to come true in our lives.