

Buddhism

I. THE ORIGINS OF BUDDHISM

Buddhism today is the religion of Ceylon, Burma, Siam, Cambodia, Tibet, Japan and much of China. In 1980 there were an estimated 274 million Buddhists, and by the year 2000 the number will have grown to 359 million, or 5.7% of the world's population. Interestingly enough, it began in India but there are few Buddhists in India today.

1. The Founder

Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism is not a "revealed" religion. It was founded by a specific human being, Suddhartha Gautama. He was born about 500 years before Christ to Suddhodana, a king of the Sakya clan of the Warrior or Kshatriya caste. The title "Buddha" means the Enlightened One. According to Buddhism, a Buddha appears from time to time in this world and preaches the true doctrine. Then it becomes corrupted and lost, and is not restored until a new Buddha appears.

Early Years

Gautama was born in India in a corrupted Brahmanical society. Many of his beliefs such as Karma, rebirth and liberation came from Brahmanism, but he transformed them. To prevent his experiencing any distressing experiences, his father raised him to see no death, suffering, sickness and poverty. As a young man he experienced 'Four Signs'. He saw 1) an old man, 2) a very sick man, and 3) a corpse. For the first time he began to question the meaning of life. He began to ask how anyone could truly enjoy living, feeling happy and experiencing lasting pleasure when for everyone there is no escape from suffering, loss and personal extinction. Why should anyone wish to be born - or even to give birth?

One day, wandering by the palace gates he saw 4) a passing ascetic with clam eyes and a face expressing both purpose and detachment. This was the Fourth Sign, and it gave him a new direction and what he needed to know. Shortly after marriage he renounced the throne, and secretly left his sleeping wife and young son in search of truth. This renunciation known as The Great Departure is the first great theme in Buddhist stories and is represented by the symbols of the empty throne, footprints, the wheel and the umbrella. Such renunciations were not uncommon in the Hinduism of that day.

He first studied with learned Brahmins, first Alara Kalama and then Uddaka, using traditional ascetic practices. During this time he won five disciples and camped under a grove of trees near Uruvela. He is said to have spent six years in **hartha yoga**, a form of extreme ascetic practice in an attempt to control what he called the "Mad monkey of the mind" through the mortification of the flesh. Buddhist art depicts this as "The Starving Buddha".

At the end of the period he realized that a person has only a body with a brain and heart through which to attain enlightenment, and to destroy it through extreme asceticism was senseless. Why then was he abusing this once perfect instrument, sternly denying its fundamental needs. So he went to

the village and begged for food, and began to eat. At this his five disciples left him.

Enlightenment

Guatama then sat under a pipal (Fig) tree, determined to remain there until either he died or he reached enlightenment. For 49 days he sat there. during this time a young woman, Sujata, brought him milk-rice in a golden bowl. Some say he ate it at once, others that he divided it into 49 parts and ate some each day. He threw the empty bowl into the river and it floated upstream, symbolizing that fact that Buddhism floats upstream against the current of the mind. He bathed and seated himself, resolved not to leave until he was enlightened. The enlightment came on the full moon of May, 544 B.C. (others put the date at other times).

No one can possibly explain enlightenment. It can only be experienced. There is no divine intervention - no outside revelation. It is entirely a discovery made by a human being brought about by his/her own efforts. The one way to peace, fulfillment and release lay through the calm control of his own mind and senses - and the realization that life's meaning lay in the here-and-now and not in some remote realm or celestial state far beyond one's present existence. At his enlightenment, Gautama saw himself and all life as a vast process, an ever-moving stream of becomings and extinctions, and within this ever-moving flow and interpenetration of energies he recognized as delusion the idea of the existence of an individual ego. What was taken for the 'self' was actually a composite of various aggregates, a series of psychophysical reactions and responses with no fixed center or unchanging ego-entity. Gautama at last clearly saw the whole universe as a system of interrelated parts, a system comosed of various kinds of life of all varieties forever passing from one form to another in a ceaseless flow of energies and appearances.

This illumination gave Gautama a profound and enduring sense of liberation, delivering him from all ego-drives motivated by greed, hate and delusion. He was free from attachment and desire.

During this time he reviewed his previous lives. Mara, the Tempter, came and asked him what right he had to call himself enlightened, and he pointed to the earth (a standard Buddhist pose) as his witness of his cycles of births and self control. Mara sent beautiful damsels but Gautama, now the Buddha, remained serene. Mara sent a storm, but the Serpent King, Mucalinda, coiled his body as a throne, and put his cobra hood over the Buddha until the storm abated (note the role of the snake in Buddhism and Hinduism is the opposite of Judaism and Christianity). Gautama was thirty years old when he reached enlightenment.

Having attained enlightenment, Buddha could have remained in this state of bliss and detachment with no further contact with humans. But he weighted in the balance the alternative between this and of teaching the enlightenment to other humans. The earth 'trembled' awaiting his decision. In the end, he decided to remain among humans to teach. [At a later date this emerged as the doctrine of the Buddha of Infinite Compassion who rejected immediate **nirvana** upon enlightenment and who reentered suffering humanity in order to teach it the truth. As Toynbee notes, this doctrine counters Buddha's basic desire and teaching. Still later this developed

into the doctrine of the **bodhisattvas** or Saviors who have reached enlightenment but who choose to remain to help humankind, a doctrine found in certain Mahayana branches. A Bodhisatva has freed him/herself forever from all ideas of "I," "mine," and "yours," and has no sense of separateness. Yet he/she must remain acutely aware of both "self" and "other" to remain as a teacher. This contradiction is seen as a paradox, and paradoxes are seen as at the root of all human experience - not as things to be gotten rid of by reason.]

Buddha then set out to help others find 'the path'. He met his five former disciples in the Deer Park near Benares (Sarnath), and converted them by preaching his first sermon, "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Law (Dharma)." He said, all humanity is sick and I come as a physician who can diagnose and cure it. The great sickness is:

1. No one can deny that suffering (**dhuka**) is a condition of all existence.
2. Suffering and general dissatisfaction come because humans are possessive, greedy and, above all, self-centered.
3. Egocentrism, possessiveness and greed can, however, be understood, overcome, rooted out.
4. This rooting out, this vanquishing, can be brought about by following a simple, reasonable Eightfold Path of behavior in thought, word and deed. A change of viewpoint will manifest itself in a new outlook and new patterns of behavior.

According to Buddha, this path cannot be attained by human reason. To depend on reason is like a man in a burning house who declares, "I will not leave the house until I find out who set the fire in the first place." Intellectual exchanges, which can never be more than theoretical, are mere pedagogy, a waste of vital energy. Whether the world is eternal or not, there remain birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentations, misery and grief - all grim facts of human existence - and Buddha prescribed the way of deliverance from these. Buddha rejected philosophical speculations as useless. His primary concern was to point out the way to liberation from the deep-rooted attachment to a delusory self which is the source of all passion-desires and their resultant pains and frustrations.

Buddha began to preach his new message and soon attracted many followers. He organized them into bands of monks whom he sent on travels to preach. He said, "There will be someone who will understand." They were to recite a three-fold creed: "**I take my refuge in the Buddha, I take my refuge in the Dharma** (the teaching), **I take my refuge in the Sangha** (community of monks).

Buddha's message appealed particularly to the intellectuals and rulers, for it is rooted in self-reliance and discipline. The Path was one of the control of the mind and senses. There was no God and no divine deliverer. He stressed that nothing is permanent or static - all is made of transient aggregates. The great burden of humankind was sorrow and the only deliverance was to free one's self from attachments and desires. All things are in the end only parts of one interrelated or "interpenetrating" system.

Buddha preached for eight months a year for 45 years, until 480 B.C. He died near Kusinagara as a result of eating poisonous mushrooms or spoiled pork he had taken at the invitation of a blacksmith named Cunda. He noticed the error and asked Cunda not to serve it to others. He went as far as the

river, bathed and drank. He ordered Ananda, his disciple, not to blame Cunda. Rather he sent the message that Cunda had been blessed to have given the Buddha the last alms he was to receive. He lay down in a nearby mango grove on his right side, and in that pose he died. [Another account of his death says he was cured, but told his disciples he had nothing more to teach them, so he left.]

Buddha's last words were said to be, "By one's self evil is done, by one's self one is purified. The pure and the impure stand and fall by themselves. No one can purify another. Work with diligence. Be lamps unto yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Look not for refuge to anyone beside yourself. Hold fast to the Truth as to a lamp. All composite things decay. Strive diligently." He asked that no one mourn his passing.

No successor was appointed. For four centuries none of his teachings were written down. They were transmitted by oral tradition. The first great council of 500 Buddhist leaders was later held to define the orthodox teachings of the Buddha.

2. Teachings

Buddha began with the basic presuppositions of Brahmanism such as **karma** and **samsara**. He differed with Brahmins on how one should seek moksha or salvation.

2.1 Karma. Whatsoever a person sows, that shall he or she reap. therefore what we now experience is due to past evils and goods.

- Karma is a doctrine of responsibility. Each is responsible alone for his or her life and destiny.

-Karma is also a doctrine of irresponsibility. It is wrong to attempt to help better the lot of the miserable and burdened. They are suffering the effects of their past sins. To remove this suffering is to make them suffer even more later.

2.2 Samsara or Rebirth. All pass through endless lives. Unlike Hinduism, Buddha did not believe in the soul or its continuity. Therefore Karma is not the continuation of the soul from one life to another. No soul, no consciousness, no memory goes from one body to another. It is the grasping, the craving still existing at death of one body that causes the new body to arise.

2.3 Dependent Origination. Buddha starts with the human condition, and sees all as dhuka or sorrow, malaise, troubled awareness of transience - and then works his way back step by step to its ultimate cause. The cause of old age, sickness, and death is birth. Birth is caused by Coming into Existence (bhava); behind that is Grasping (upadana); then Craving (trshna); then Sensation (vedana); then Contact (sparsa); then the Six Sense-Organs (sadayatana); then Mind-and-Body (nama-rupa); then Consciousness (vijnana); then the Aggregates, or compositions (samskarah); then the ultimate cause, Ignorance (avidya). He then reverses this and argues that with true insight and knowledge one is released from the cycle.

2.4 Dukha or Suffering. Everything in this world is bound up with suffering, not only those experiences that are obviously painful, but even those that are pleasant. Everything is characterized by impermanence. Life is an ever rolling stream. the soul has three signs:

- 1) It is always becoming something new and losing what it is now.
- 2) It is always suffering, though it often conceals its suffering from itself.
- 3) There is no enduring, permanent personality - the spirit is not anyone's possession. It is the common denominator, that in which we all share. This alone is permanent and eternal. Life is like a dream. The whole universe is an endless flux. Nothing endures. All changes. The soul passes through endless cycles, driven by unsatisfied longings that will not let it rest. These cycles are called **samsara** or the **WHEEL OF LIFE.**

2.5 The Middle Way: Buddha taught The Middle Way. This rejects asceticism, but it also rejects worldliness. Life must be lived between these opposites, and a balance brings perfect peace. This is not philosophy, nor the way of worshipping gods. In his first sermon which he preached to the five followers who left him which is called the **Dhammachakkappavattanasutta**, he said:

There are two ends not to be served by a wanderer. What are these two? The pursuit of desires and of pleasure which springs from desire, which is base, common, leading to rebirth, ignoble and unprofitable; the pursuit of pain and hardship, which is grievous, ignoble, and unprofitable. The Middle Way of the Tathagata avoids both these ends.

The Buddha gave his disciples a simple formula for teaching their converts and it is still repeated by his followers:

"I take my refuge in the Buddha,
I take my refuge in the Dharma (teaching),
I take my refuge in the Sangha (community or order of believers)."

The way of Buddha is not that of thought, nor that of worship. It is the way of mental discipline. Humankind is mortally ill. The solution is the **Four Noble Truths.**

2.6 The Four Noble Truths: The heart of the doctrine of Buddha is found in The Four Noble Truths:

2.61 "What now, O Monks, is the noble truth of Suffering (**dhuka**). Birth is sorrow, age is sorrow, disease is sorrow, death is sorrow, contact with the unpleasant is sorrow, separation from pleasure is sorrow, every wish unfulfilled is sorrow, - in short all the five components of individuality are sorrow."

2.62 "But what, O Monks, is the noble truth of the Origin of Suffering? It is that craving which gives rise to fresh rebirths and, bound up with pleasure and lust, now here, now there - the craving for sensual pleasure, the craving for continued life, the craving for power."

2.63 "But what, O Monks, is the noble truth for the Extinction of Suffering? It is the complete fading away and extinction of this craving, its forsaking and giving up, liberation and detachment from it."

- 2.64 "But what, O Monks, is the noble truth of the Path Leading to the Extinction of Suffering? It is the noble Eightfold Path - namely: Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Bodily Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration."
- 2.7 Desire. It is our human cravings that lead to rebirth. Craving is accompanied by delight and greed. It is desire for what belongs to the unreal self. We crave for and cling to life and this attachment to the worldly things, hoping to quench our craving thirst. This is the force that drives us through endless rebirths. Birth leads to Growth and Growth to Decay, and Decay to Death, and all the suffering that life entails. Then all begins again.
- 2.8 Renunciation. The only way to abolish suffering is to quench desire. To stop the wheel of life we must destroy the ignorance-produced, desire-maintained illusion of the self that binds us from life to life on the wheel of becoming. Only then can we attain the soul's highest destiny, namely **nirvana**.
- 2.9 The Eightfold Path. This is the path that every good person treads he or she is a disciple of Buddha or of any other master. It is the path of morality and the ascent through mystical contemplation. Humans are totally responsible for their own fate. "By one's self evil is done, by one's self one is purified." One does not acquire merit - he or she can only bring the self under control. This can be done neither by asceticism nor sensuality, but by the Middle Way.

But the Eightfold Path is a means and never an end. Its first purpose is to eliminate the thirst for sensual pleasure, leading at last to pure compassion by the cultivation of selfless love for all that lives. It is the Path that leads from the unreal to the real. But this is only the first step on the road to Enlightenment or **nirvana**. There is a long and painful pilgrimage beyond the achievement of the moral life.

The Noble Eightfold Path is (according to the Manuel for Buddhism used in Sri Lanka):

1. Right Understanding is the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. (It is the understanding of one's self as one really is - to see clearly what is wrong.)
2. Right Aspirations and Thoughts are threefold: a) thoughts of renunciation that are opposed to lustful desires, b) benevolent thoughts that are opposed to ill will, and c) thoughts of harmlessness that are opposed to cruelty. (Next you must decide that you want to be cured.)
3. Right Speech deals with refraining from falsehood, slandering, harsh words and frivolous talk. (You must act.)
4. Right Bodily Action deals with refraining from killing, stalling and unchastity. (You must speak so as to aim at being cured.)
5. Right Livelihood deals with the five kinds of trade which should be avoided by a lay disciple: trading in a) arms, b) human beings, c) flesh (that is breeding animals for slaughter), d) intoxicating drinks, and e) poison. (Your livelihood must not conflict with your therapy.)

6. Right Effort is fourfold: a) the endeavor to discard evil that has already arisen, b) the endeavor to prevent the arising of unrisen evil, c) the endeavor to develop unrisen good, and d) the endeavor to promote that good which has already arisen. (The therapy must go forward at the "staying speed," that is, the crucial velocity that can be sustained.)
7. Right Mindfulness is fourfold: Mindfulness with regard to a) body, b) sensation, c) mind and d) phenomena. (You must think about it incessantly.)
8. Right Concentration is the one-pointedness of mind. (You must learn how to contemplate with the deep mind.)

Note: right in these statements does not contrast with wrong. It means 'correct' or 'perfect. The brackets are Gerald Heard's psychological interpretation.

2.10 Emancipation. It is difficult to follow the Eightfold Path. We cannot do so by trying to eliminate desire. We all resist the first of the noble truths and seek to want life. Buddhism, at least in its Theravada form, is a life-denying creed. It involves rejecting everything that constitutes or attracts the everyday self of common experience. This world, being impermanent, is evil, pervaded with suffering and must be rejected.

2.11 Anxiety. There is underlying human experience a deep existential anxiety. Only those who experience it will seek to leave this life.

2.12 Enlightenment. The Place of Bliss is reached only by long discipline, first on the level of morality, and then on the level of mysticism, to develop a habit of mind free from the desires that produce pain, to remove cravings and the cleaving to illusion. This is the dying out in the heart of the fire of the three cardinal sins:

- sensuality and greed.
- anger and ill-will.
- illusion and stupidity.

Gradually one approaches the upward climb; first meditation, concentration and mental control; then mind development and mystical insight into the nature of all existence; then, lastly, The Light or Sudden Illumination. Only then do the delusions leave: 1) the false belief that the individual is real and self-existent, 2) the delusion that correct outward action or religious rites and ceremonies can lead us to salvation. In their place we learn that the Universal Self is one's own true self and that even desire for existence must be rooted out. Then we become freed from the cycles of becoming.

2.13 The skandhas and the Self. Where is the ego or self that is involved in samsara? There in Old and Hinayana Buddhism no real self. Through the realization of the interpenetration of all existence, a blessed state is attained by the destruction of every vestige of ego-centrism. The separate self, an 'ego', is merely an intellectual invention, not a reality, but simply a convenient term for designating an ever-changing combination or bundle of attributes (skandhas).

A person is not an entity, but an aggregate of the five skandhas or "heaps" that make up the empirical individual. These are:

- 1) rupa, form and matter. The material elements, the sense organs

- and their corresponding objects in the external world;
- 2) **vedana**, sensations or feelings, pleasant, painful or neutral, derived from contact with the external world, including mind-objects (since the mind was considered one of the senses or organs, like the eye or ear);
 - 3) **samjna**, conceptions, the recognizing or naming facility;
 - 4) **samskarah**, psychic dispositions or compositions, volitional activities involving karma;
 - 5) **vijnana**, acts of consciousness or thought, especially in relation to the six internal faculties and their corresponding external objects.

2.14 **Arhat**. The one who is Wholly Enlightened, the ideal person, the saint, the sage. One who has shed all attachment to I and Mine, is secluded, zealous and earnest, inwardly free, fully controlled, master of the self, dispassionate. There are many Arhats. They inhabit a super-sensory world of an abiding reality known as **nirvana**. The gods, too, envy them because for them karma and samsara are no more.

2.15. **Nirvana**. This is not the Blessed State of self realization. It is the goal of perfection and not the abyss of annihilation, at least in original Buddhism. It is not blowing a candle out, but letting it burn out and die. So the fires of passion die out. Nor is it absorption of the individual into the eternal. What is extinguished is that self-centered, self-assertive life to which unenlightened people cling as if it were the highest good and the final security. The truly 'real' is not extinguished when nirvana is attained - it is then attained. The horizon of the individual is extended to the very limits of reality, to a completely realized Oneness. Nirvana is not the abyss of annihilation of existentialism, but a boundless expansion. The ocean enters into the drop when it falls into the ocean.

Buddhism does not try to define **nirvana** for it is impossible to define the Absolute Infinite. Often **nirvana** is referred to as **sunyata** or zeroness.

"The Buddhist disciple does not advance merely by accumulating innumerable good deeds but rather by increasing his understanding of his own nature and by learning to quell and transform those harmful and destructive tendencies which not only affect him personally but all life of which he is an integral part. A perfected Buddhist might be described as a human being who has reached a state in which moral training has become so deeply a part of his nature that it would be impossible for him to be involved in violence, cupidity, insensibility, low physical passion or other "unawarenesses." The word "sin" would not be appropriate here. It is ignorance, not fateful predilection . . . that concerns the Buddhist." Nancy W. Ross, Buddhism. 1981:36-37.