

THE BUDDHA'S PRACTICAL TEACHING

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The Buddha's Practical Teaching

In a previous article, 'Comments on the Buddha Word'¹ there was an attempt to demonstrate the theoretical aspect of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism and their continuous presentation, in various guises, throughout the Sutta-piṭaka of the Pali Canon. The Four Truths are the essential and characteristic feature of Buddhism and its goal the complete penetration and understanding of them. The Buddha has stated that it is by not understanding and fully comprehending these Four Truths that we wander aimlessly on in this world, caught between birth and death and subject to innumerable sufferings.

Before going any further however we should be quite clear as to what is meant by 'understanding'. Firstly there is the understanding arising from reading and hearing about the teachings.² This is, of course, only the very first step, insufficiently by itself, but nevertheless to be done carefully; because a wrong grasp of letter and meaning, at this stage, may affect the following stages of understanding. Then there is the understanding arising from thinking over³ what one has learnt, drawing out the implications of the words, digesting and relating them to personal experience. Finally there is the understanding arising from actually putting the Teaching into practice,⁴ treading the path which culminates in the experiencing for oneself of Nibbāna, the real aim of Buddhism. And this last type of understanding is what is intended here. Then the four stages of sanctitude arise in due order, consisting of an understanding that is irreversible, i.e. can never be lost, and which may be called to mind whenever one wishes to do so. The final stage of sanctitude is complete deliverance of mind from all suffering, but to have actual assurance of this final goal it is imperative to reach the first stage called the 'Path of Stream-entry' or the 'possession of clear seeing' into the Four Noble Truths. Without reaching this stage we have no actual guarantee of making true progress on the Buddha's path to final deliverance, and are liable to be swept away and lose all that has been gained in a single moment if circumstances go against us, as would happen, for instance, if we were to die before reaching this stage. The Buddha teaches that it may be very long indeed before we might become fortunate enough to hear of the Teaching again and be able to put it into practice. Therefore our aim should be to reach this stage of assurance, the Path of Stream-entry.

The question now arises how are we to produce that kind of understanding leading to sanctitude? The answer lies in the preparedness of the mind for understanding. Many times in the discourses of the Buddha it is told of individuals who on hearing but a few words on the teaching immediately gained a deep understanding and attained the stages of sanctitude, apparently without effort, but these are actually exceptional cases. Most of the Buddha's disciples had to go through a long and laborious training before being ready to attain the goal. Again, in the Buddha's time, and even today if one has an experienced teacher, it was made easier because the Buddha, through his comprehensive vision, understood the minds of his audience and could correct their faults so that they were prepared for understanding. But those who have no teacher in the flesh may still have a teacher in the Buddha through his recorded utterances, and this was recognised after His passing away by his immediate followers. Indeed the Buddha says just this to the elder Ānanda when he was lamenting over the fact that he was soon to lose his beloved Teacher.⁵

In many places an indication is given of this preparation of mind culminating in 'samādhi', concentration, absorption or one-pointedness, whereby the hindrances which dull and corrupt the mind and act as a block to understanding are set aside.⁶ A summary of the process leading up to

1 'Bodhi Leaves' B. 16

2 *Suta-maya-nāṇa*.

3 *Cintā-maya-nāṇa*

4 *Bhāvanā-maya-nāṇa*, 'understanding derived from mental development', i.e. by meditation and other practical applications.

5 See *Last Days of the Buddha* (The Wheel No. 67-69), p. 73.

6 The Pali word *nīvaraṇa*, or hindrance, has the meanings of an obstruction, a covering; something which prevents, shuts out, or keeps back, something else.

this state is found, for example, in the discourse addressed to Suppabuddha the leper (Udāna, v. 3). Here is the relevant passage:

“Then the Lord saw the leper Suppabuddha sitting in the crowd and having seen him he thought, ‘This one is capable of understanding Dhamma.’

For the leper Suppabuddha he spoke a graduated talk, that is to say, a talk on generosity, good behaviour, the heaven world, the disadvantage, inferiority and defilement of sense desires and the advantage in renouncing them. When the Lord knew that the mind of the leper Suppabuddha was prepared, receptive, free from hindrance, joyful and confident, he then made known the Dhamma-teaching discovered by the Awakened Ones (Buddhas): Suffering, Origination, Cessation and the Path. Then, just as a clean cloth without stain would properly take up a dye, so in the leper Suppabuddha, even as he sat on that seat, arose the undefiled and stainless Dhamma-eye (which sees): Whatsoever is of a nature to arise is of a nature to wholly cease.”

We will now proceed to expand on this passage. At the very beginning a person has to have a capability of understanding, a certain level of intelligence. This is the result of past reasonable human moral conduct⁷ and is called merit or worthiness (*puñña*). This must be present for one even to care to learn of the Teaching or be in a position to learn it. But in Suppabuddha’s case the Lord knew he had the capability of reaching sanctitude ‘even as he sat on that seat’, so his ‘worthiness’ was above average. Then the Lord by just talking to him was able to raise his mind to a high level of purity. To begin with the Buddha uses for this purpose a carefully graded method of teaching in five divisions:

1 Generosity or giving (*dāna*) is the fundamental virtue of Buddhism, the foundation-stone upon which the whole edifice is built. Now in the Buddha’s teaching the intention or state of mind is most important and generosity produces a broad and open disposition, weakening the tendency to avarice and egoism. It is the cultivation of the habit to be able to let go of things easily and not hold fast to them.

2 The next step, morality or good behaviour (*sīla*), follows on naturally from generosity, for being well-disposed towards others, one would conduct oneself so as to not deprive them of anything nor harm them in any way. This implies a restraining and guarding of the activities of body, speech and thought. It is an attitude of self-control.

3 The ‘heaven world’ is a state of mind of pure and blameless happiness. The mention of it is meant to indicate the result of generosity and good behaviour. By it the mind is healed of any ungenerous and perverted behaviour still remaining, and becomes balanced, well and wholesome.

4 Next, seeing the disadvantage of sense-desires is necessary to counterbalance the previous step, for, the Heavenly World being such a pleasant state, one is liable to become enamoured by it and unable to progress and discover the true aim of the Buddha’s teaching. Heavenly enjoyment is the highest form of sensuality and to break one’s attachment to it the Buddha shows it has the disadvantage of not lasting, of being impermanent and mixed with disappointment and distress. He points out that sensual pleasures are really an inferior form of happiness compared with the bliss obtained by the practice of meditation, and even this is of little worth when one has experienced the supreme bliss of Nibbāna. Sensuality is a very real and strong defilement and difficult to get rid of. It dulls and corrupts the mind so that those controlled by it find it hard to believe there could be any condition superior to it, not to mention any happiness outside of it.

7 The stress here is on the ‘human’ state. Neither the divine or god-like state nor a sub-human, e.g. animal state, is a suitable basis for ‘the practice of moral conduct and discipline and this is one of the reasons why a human birth is praised and regarded as valuable in Buddhism.

5 Finally the Buddha teaches the advantage of being free from sensual desires and the escape from the suffering engendered by them. Whenever we attempt to gratify our desires sooner or later we are bound to experience disappointment and frustration, for the objects of our desires are continually altering and disappearing. The Buddha has said that the average person knows of no escape from suffering other than pleasures of the senses, so it is merely a vicious circle: suffering leading to the search for pleasure and the latter leading back to suffering again. If we could break away from this circle by disciplining the mind not to automatically run to the distractions of the world, but to face and investigate the causes of our unhappiness, we would then discover the sure deliverance from it. The way of deliverance is by the practice of meditation which withdraws the mind from the senses and turns it upon itself, then *samādhi* arises, a state of great calm and bliss, superior to the dubious pleasures of the world of the senses.

Suppabuddha understood this and turning away from sense-desires his mind became endowed with five qualities: preparedness, receptiveness, freedom from hindrance, joy and confidence.⁸ These counteract and replace the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*)⁹ which prevent the attainment of concentration (*samādhi*) and clarity of mind. The first and foremost of these hindrances is the desire for sensual pleasures; by being rid of this the mind is prepared to clearly comprehend whatever it may turn to. The second is aversion which sets up the barrier of not wanting to understand; by breaking this down the mind becomes sympathetic and receptive. The third is sloth and torpidity of mind and is opposed to alertness and clarity. The fourth is worry and distraction, discarded by a joyful serenity of mind, and the fifth is doubt, overcome by confidence and trust.

The state so attained is called *upacāra-samādhi*, concentration that is approximate or akin to *sammā-samādhi*, perfect concentration of the noble eightfold path.

On careful examination it may be seen that the four Noble Truths have already been presented here in a disguised manner, for the disadvantage or impermanence of sense-pleasures is the Truth of Suffering, the desire for the sense-pleasures is the Truth of the Cause of Suffering, being free of this desire is the Truth of the Cessation of Suffering and the renouncing of sense-pleasures is the Path. But the understanding arising from this is not a stage of sanctitude, it is unstable because the vision of Nibbāna is not obtained here. It is merely an insight into the nature of sensuality, yet it is a sound foundation, for it gives a glimpse of what might be and may generate an aspiration (*dhamma-chanda*) for the true goal. Furthermore, by anticipating the trend of the actual Four Truths, which come next, the mind will take them in more easily. Being familiar with the 'method' of the Truths they will not be utterly outside one's experience and so will be easier to assimilate.

For those of us less endowed than Suppabuddha, the way to the attainment of this state may be more circuitous, taking a long time, perhaps years, to realise, and for us the Buddha teaches the many meditation exercises and other devices whereby our merit, character and mind are strengthened and purified. For instance, again from the Udāna (4.1), is told a story about the bhikkhu Meghiya who, although he attempted to practice assiduously, was continuously assailed by distracting and impure thoughts. The Buddha when told of this state of affairs instructed him in five things leading to preparedness of mind for understanding or according to the text, for maturing a mind immature for release:

- 1 Having good friends and companions to encourage and advise one;
- 2 being scrupulous in observing the rules of moral behaviour;
- 3 being able to listen to talk that inspires one in the practice,—perhaps today we may substitute this with reading the discourses of the Buddha and the life-stories of famous disciples;

8 *Kalla-cittaṃ, mudu-cittaṃ, vinīvaraṇa-cittaṃ, udagga-cittaṃ, pasanna-cittaṃ.*

9 See The Wheel No. 27: *The Five Mental Hindrances and their Conquest.*

4 being firmly resolved to make a continuous effort in getting rid of bad, unwholesome states and cultivating good states; and

5 developing wisdom and discrimination by observing how everything in this world arises only to pass away again is conditioned and impermanent.

After this the Buddha advised Meghiya to practice four more things, four hints we might say, for overcoming four specific negative states of mind:

1 The contemplating of the non-beautiful (*asubha*), unpleasant nature of the body by mentally dissecting it into its various component parts and organs and also its functions such as digestion and excretion. This is for overcoming excessive attachment and love of one's own body and the bodies of others, and gives freedom from worry and concern about the body.

2 The impartial development of an attitude of friendliness (*mettā*); or kindness, sympathy and identification with others. This overcomes anger, ill will and annoyance and leads to a happy, contented and tolerant state of mind.

3 Mindfulness of Breathing, the awareness of the breaths entering and leaving the body by the sense of touch at the nostrils, which overcomes the turmoil of excessive and distracting discursive thoughts. The mind is then able to be controlled and concentrated and to be used more effectively. This last is an important meditational practice in Buddhism, its reputation being enhanced by the tradition of it being the main practice of the Buddha himself.¹⁰

4 Developing the idea of the impermanence of everything that is called oneself, which removes egotism and pride and leads to an understanding of the teaching that all phenomena are empty and without a permanent core, i.e. are not-self (*anattā*).

Another preparatory practice occurring in the Pali canon (*Aṅguttara-nikāya*, iii) consists of five contemplations, their importance stressed by being described as 'five things often to be contemplated by laymen as well as by bhikkhus':

1 'Old age will come: I have not outstripped old age'.

2 'Disease will come; I have not outstripped disease.'

3 'Death will come; I have not outstripped death.'

These three overcome the 'three prides' (*mada*), of youth, health and life respectively, causing people to do evil deeds.

4 'All things near and dear to me are subject to alteration, subject to separation.'

This overcomes excessive attachment to people and possessions.

5 'I am the result of my own deeds; whatever deed I do, skilled or unskilled, good or bad, I shall become an heir to it.'

This overcomes wrong acts of body, speech and thought.

The ideas of impermanence, suffering and not-self are at the heart of the Four Noble Truths and produce the experience of Nibbāna. As the Buddha says to Meghiya:

"By perceiving impermanence, Meghiya, the perception of what is not-self is established. Perceiving not-self means the up-rooting of the 'I am' conceit and one realises Nibbāna in this life."

10 See *Mindfulness of Breathing. Buddhist Texts from the Pali Canon and the Commentaries*, by Ñāṇamoli Thera (Buddhist Publication Society. Kandy).

That the body, feelings, perceptions, activities and mind are actually impermanent and impersonal is highly unsatisfactory and so we experience suffering because we crave to exist and experience the things of the world as if they were really permanent and belonged to us. This disparity between reality and our views and longings concerning it is what is termed suffering. By developing the idea of impermanence we cease to identify ourselves with what is impermanent and so do not crave for it, because if we did we would only experience suffering. If there is no craving, there is no suffering,—when this is clearly seen it is called Right View, the first step on the eightfold path. According to our View, so we think, speak, act and live (steps 2–5); all our efforts to purify and rid our minds of suffering-producing cravings and the practice of mindfulness and meditation (steps 6–8) are directed by this Right View and lead towards the cessation of all such craving-engendered suffering.

In Suppabuddha, his mind compared with a clean cloth ready to be dipped in the dye of understanding, arose this Right View, ‘the undefiled and stainless Dhamma-eye’ which sees that suffering arises from craving and can cease by the cessation of craving. This is the Dhamma discovered and taught by the Buddhas and known as the Four Noble Truths:

(1) Suffering, (2) its Origination in craving, (3) its Cessation or Nibbāna, and (4) the Path leading to its cessation, composed of eight factors, right view, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration.

This ‘clear seeing with the purified eye of Dhamma’ into the Four Truths is the first stage of sanctitude, the ‘entry into the stream’ that carries one to the ocean of Nibbāna. From here there is no turning back, one knows where the final goal lies and one sets out on the journey towards it. Previously there was aimless wandering, being pulled first in this direction and then in another by one’s desires, opinions and speculations, but now one knows the direction in which to go. One has started out on the path and however long or short the journey one is bound to reach the goal, final deliverance from all suffering.

Suppabuddha’s attainment of this state is confirmed in the continuation of the passage from the Udāna quoted above:

“Then the leper Suppabuddha, having seen the Dhamma, realised the Dhamma, understood the Dhamma, penetrated the Dhamma, crossed beyond doubting, being freed from uncertainty, confident, not needing another (to inspire him with faith) in the Teacher’s message, arose from his seat and approached the Lord. Having drawn near and prostrated himself before the Lord he sat down at one side. Sitting there the leper Suppabuddha said:

‘Excellent, Sir, excellent, Sir. Just as if one should set upright the overturned, or should uncover the hidden, or should show the path to one who is lost, or should bring an oil-lamp into darkness so that those with eyesight could see objects,—even so, by various methods has the Dhamma been explained by the Lord. I, Sir, go for refuge to the Lord, to the Dhamma and to the Community of bhikkhus. May the Lord accept me as a lay follower gone for refuge from this moment forth for as long as life lasts.’

Thereupon the leper Suppabuddha having been taught, instigated, roused and gladdened¹¹ by the Lord’s talk on Dhamma, pleased and appreciative of the Lord’s words, arose from his seat, prostrated himself before the Lord and keeping his right side towards Him¹² went away. Now (soon after) a calf attacked the leper Suppabuddha and deprived him of his life.

Then a large number of bhikkhus approached the Lord and said:

‘Sir, the leper called Suppabuddha who was taught, instigated, roused and gladdened by the Lord’s talk on Dhamma has died. What is his destiny? What is his future state?’

11 The Pali word *sampahaṃsito*, translated as ‘gladdened’, is also connected with the ideas of ‘beaten, refined and wrought’ (as with metals by a smith); hence it suggests purification and alteration of character by his attainment,

12 This is a mark of respect.

‘The leper Suppabuddha, bhikkhus, was a wise man. He practiced according to Dhamma and did not trouble me with queries about Dhamma. By destroying three of the fetters, bhikkhus, the leper Suppabuddha is a Stream-enterer, not liable to fall away, assured, bound for complete Enlightenment.’

The beginning of this passage leaves no doubt on Suppabuddha’s assurance as to the nature of Dhamma and his confidence in it and in the Teacher. He then openly makes known his realisation, illustrating it with four similes, and declares that he goes for refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, i.e. that he accepts them as his sole guide and ideal ‘for as long as life lasts.’

In the Pali Canon there are listed four characteristics of the Stream-enterer: having unshakable confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, and the practice of perfect morality. The simple ceremony of going for refuge to the three ‘Jewels’ of Buddhism and the undertaking to observe the five precepts of non-killing, non-stealing, etc. before a member of the Buddhist Sangha is the outward token of acceptance into the Buddhist religion. But strictly speaking only on the attainment of Stream-entry does one truly become a follower of the Buddha, for only then does one understand what is really meant by the three refuges and the vital importance of correct moral behaviour. For an ordinary person the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha are external, whereas for a Stream-enterer they are within his own mind, a part of his being and intimately bound up with his realisation. The definition of a Stream-enterer is a person who has completely destroyed the first three of the ten fetters (*saṃyojana*) so that they can never arise again. They are:

- 1 The view that the various factors such as the body, feelings, perceptions, etc. are actually permanent, satisfying and constitute or are owned by a personal entity or ‘self’, thought of as having existed in the past and continuing into the future.
- 2 Doubts about the Dhamma and the path to be pursued.
- 3 Looking externally to the world for purification and deliverance.¹³

The next two fetters, which the Stream enterer still has intact, are sensual passions and animosity. Their grosser aspects are eliminated on reaching the second stage of sanctitude and completely eradicated at the third stage, where he severs his attachment to the world as we know it. There still remains however attachment to existence of a subtler kind, conceit, restlessness and residual ignorance (about the Four Truths) which are only destroyed on attaining the fourth and final stage of the Arahant, the complete deliverance from suffering by the destruction of the last vestiges of craving and attachment.

The fact that Suppabuddha was gored to death may not have been purely accidental. The commentary suggests it was the work of a *yakkhinī*, a demoness who had taken on the form of a calf, but no concrete reason as to why this should have happened is given. It is recorded of other disciples that they died in similar circumstances after attaining a stage of sanctitude: for instance, Bāhiya, after becoming Arahant (Udāna 1.10) and Pukkusāti who had reached the third stage of sanctitude (MN140). A possible explanation could be that in Buddhism what we are is the result of former deeds (*kamma*) and when these are worked off, like a debt, a change must occur in our circumstances. The discourse states that Suppabuddha was a leper, ‘a poor, insignificant, wretched person’, maintaining himself by begging. He had only happened to come and hear the Buddha’s teaching with the idea he might get something to eat from the other people listening there. His circumstances were the end of a long series of sufferings, the result of an evil deed in a former life. However on the attainment of sanctitude, a powerful source of good, and the simultaneous wiping out of his past evil, he could not continue living in his previous miserable state and so died and was reborn, the Buddha says, among the gods (*deva*) of the Tāvātimsa-heaven, ‘where he outshines the other gods in beauty and glory.’ He is now destined for rebirth seven times at the

13 *Sīlabbataparāmāsa* usually translated as ‘dependence upon mere rule and ritual.’

most, in happy states of existence either among humans or gods, before attaining final deliverance, this being the result of his attainment of Stream-entry.

To summarise what has been indicated above, our aim should be complete deliverance from suffering, or stated positively, the unconditioned and perfect happiness of Nibbāna; to be differentiated from other forms of happiness which are imperfect because 'conditioned' by impermanence, and thus liable to revert to suffering when circumstances or 'the conditions' change. By an understanding of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism we are set in the right direction to achieve this aim. But to reach this understanding the mind must be carefully prepared by moral discipline and other virtues, released from the grip of worldly pleasures and emotions and reach a state of clarity and purity through meditation and wise discrimination. Then by reflection on the three characteristics of existence, the impermanence, suffering and absence of an underlying entity, this understanding will arise giving assurance and confidence. The practical nature of the Buddha's teaching is that it leads one gradually step by step, like a building raised brick by brick upon secure foundations.

Although what has been said above may appear fairly straight-forward, in fact it is very difficult to do and so we must not be disheartened by apparent setbacks and failures. And in case one may be led astray along false paths, it is worthwhile bearing in mind the following distinction from the *Āṅguttara-Nikāya* (vol. IV) that this Dhamma "leads to dispassion and not to attachment; to release from bondage and not, to bondage; to the dispersion of defilements and not to accumulating them; to fewness of wishes and not to wanting much; to contentment and not to discontent; to solitude and not to mixing in crowds; to exertion and not to laziness; to frugality and not to greediness." And by this test one will know whether one is really following the Buddha's teaching or not.



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