

What is Theravada Buddhism?

by John Bullitt

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Theravada (pronounced "terra-VAH-dah"), the "Doctrine of the Elders," is the school of Buddhism that draws its scriptural inspiration from the Tipitaka, or Pali Canon, which scholars generally agree contains the earliest surviving record of the Buddha's teachings.¹ For many centuries, Theravada has been the predominant religion of continental Southeast Asia (Thailand, Myanmar/Burma, Cambodia, and Laos) and Sri Lanka. Today Theravada Buddhists number well over 100 million worldwide.² In recent decades Theravada has begun to take root in the West.

Many Buddhisms, One *Dhamma-vinaya*

The Buddha — the "Awakened One" — called the religion he founded *Dhamma-vinaya* — "the doctrine and discipline." To provide a social structure supportive of the practice of Dhamma-vinaya (or *Dhamma* for short [Sanskrit: *Dharma*]), and to preserve these teachings for posterity, the Buddha established the order of *bhikkhus* (monks) and *bhikkhunis* (nuns)— the *Sangha* — which continues to this day to pass his teachings on to subsequent generations of laypeople and monastics, alike.

As the Dhamma continued its spread across India after the Buddha's passing, differing interpretations of the original teachings arose, which led to schisms within the Sangha and the emergence of as many as eighteen distinct sects of Buddhism.³ One of these schools eventually gave rise to a reform movement that called itself *Mahayana* (the "Greater Vehicle")⁴ and that referred to the other schools disparagingly as *Hinayana* (the "Lesser Vehicle"). What we call Theravada today is the sole survivor of those early non-Mahayana schools.⁵ To avoid the pejorative tone implied by the terms Hinayana and Mahayana, it is common today to use more neutral language to distinguish between these two main branches of Buddhism. Because Theravada historically dominated southern Asia, it is sometimes called "Southern" Buddhism, while Mahayana, which migrated northwards from India into China, Tibet, Japan, and Korea, is known as "Northern" Buddhism.⁶

Pali: The Language of Theravada Buddhism

The language of the Theravada canonical texts is Pali (lit., "text"), which is based on a dialect of Middle Indo-Aryan that was probably spoken in central India during the Buddha's time.⁷ Ven. Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and close personal attendant, committed the Buddha's sermons (*suttas*) to memory and thus became a living repository of these teachings.⁸ Shortly after the Buddha's death (*ca.* 480 BCE), five hundred of the most senior monks — including Ananda — convened to recite and verify all the sermons they had heard during the Buddha's forty-five year teaching career.⁹ Most of these sermons therefore begin with the disclaimer, "*Evam me sutam*" — "Thus have I heard."

After the Buddha's death the teachings continued to be passed down orally within the monastic community, in keeping with an Indian oral tradition that long predated the Buddha.¹⁰ By 250 BCE the Sangha had systematically arranged and compiled these teachings into three divisions: the Vinaya Pitaka (the "basket of discipline" — the texts concerning the rules and customs of the Sangha), the Sutta Pitaka (the "basket of discourses" — the sermons and utterances by the Buddha and his close disciples), and the Abhidhamma Pitaka (the "basket of special/higher doctrine" — a detailed psycho-philosophical analysis of the Dhamma). Together these three are known as the Tipitaka, the "three baskets." In the third century BCE Sri Lankan monks began compiling a series of exhaustive commentaries to the Tipitaka; these were subsequently collated and translated into Pali beginning in the fifth century CE. The Tipitaka plus the post-canonical texts (commentaries, chronicles, etc.) together constitute the complete body of classical Theravada literature.

Pali was originally a spoken language with no alphabet of its own. It wasn't until about 100 BCE that the Tipitaka was first fixed in writing, by Sri Lankan scribe-monks who wrote the Pali phonetically using their own Sinhala alphabet.¹¹ Since then the Tipitaka has been transliterated into many different scripts (Devanagari, Thai, Burmese, Roman, Cyrillic, to name a few). Although English translations of the most popular Tipitaka texts abound, many students of Theravada find that learning the Pali language — even just a little bit here and there — greatly deepens their understanding and appreciation of the Buddha's teachings.

No one can prove that the Tipitaka contains any of the words actually uttered by the historical Buddha. Practicing Buddhists have never found this problematic. Unlike the scriptures of many of the world's great religions, the Tipitaka is not regarded as gospel, as an unassailable statement of divine truth, revealed by a prophet, to be accepted purely on faith. Instead, its teachings are meant to be assessed firsthand, to be put into practice in one's life so that one can find out for oneself if they do, in fact, yield the promised results. It is the truth towards which the words in the Tipitaka point that ultimately matters, not the words themselves. Although scholars will continue to debate the authorship of passages from the Tipitaka for years to come (and thus miss the point of these teachings entirely), the Tipitaka will quietly continue to serve — as it has for centuries — as an indispensable guide for millions of followers in their quest for Awakening.

A Brief Summary of the Buddha's Teachings

The Four Noble Truths

Shortly after his Awakening, the Buddha delivered his first sermon, in which he laid out the essential framework upon which all his later teachings were based. This framework consists of the Four Noble Truths, four fundamental principles of nature (Dhamma) that emerged from the Buddha's radically honest and penetrating assessment of the human condition. He taught these truths not as metaphysical theories or as articles of faith, but as categories by which we should frame our direct experience in a way that conduces to Awakening:

1. *Dukkha*: suffering, unsatisfactoriness, discontent, stress;
2. The cause of *dukkha*: the cause of this dissatisfaction is craving (*tanha*) for sensuality, for states of becoming, and states of no becoming;
3. The cessation of *dukkha*: the relinquishment of that craving;
4. The path of practice leading to the cessation of *dukkha*: the Noble Eightfold Path of right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Because of our ignorance (*avijja*) of these Noble Truths, because of our inexperience in framing the world in their terms, we remain bound to *samsara*, the wearisome cycle of birth, aging, illness, death, and rebirth. Craving propels this process onward, from one moment to the next and over the course of countless lifetimes, in accordance with *kamma* (Skt. *karma*), the universal law of cause and effect. According to this immutable law, every action that one performs in the present moment — whether by body, speech, or mind itself — eventually bears fruit according to its skillfulness: act in unskillful and harmful ways and unhappiness is bound to follow; act skillfully and happiness will ultimately ensue.¹² As long as one remains ignorant of this principle, one is doomed to an aimless existence: happy one moment, in despair the next; enjoying one lifetime in heaven, the next in hell.

The Buddha discovered that gaining release from *samsara* requires assigning to each of the Noble Truths a specific task: the first Noble Truth is to be *comprehended*; the second, *abandoned*; the third, *realized*; the fourth, *developed*. The full realization of the third Noble Truth paves the way for Awakening: the end of ignorance, craving, suffering, and *kamma* itself; the direct penetration to the transcendent freedom and supreme happiness that stands as the final goal of all the Buddha's teachings; the Unconditioned, the Deathless, Unbinding — Nubbin (Skt. *Nirvana*).

The Eightfold Path and the Practice of Dhamma

Because the roots of ignorance are so intimately entwined with the fabric of the psyche, the unawakened mind is capable of deceiving itself with breathtaking ingenuity. The solution therefore requires more than simply being kind, loving, and mindful in the present moment. The practitioner must equip him- or herself with the expertise to use a range of tools to outwit, outlast, and eventually uproot the mind's

unskillful tendencies. For example, the practice of generosity (*dana*) erodes the heart's habitual tendencies towards craving and teaches valuable lessons about the motivations behind, and the results of, skillful action. The practice of virtue (*sila*) guards one against straying wildly off-course and into harm's way. The cultivation of goodwill (*metta*) helps to undermine anger's seductive grasp. The ten recollections offer ways to alleviate doubt, bear physical pain with composure, maintain a healthy sense of self-respect, overcome laziness and complacency, and restrain oneself from unbridled lust. And there are many more skills to learn.

The good qualities that emerge and mature from these practices not only smooth the way for the journey to Nibbana; over time they have the effect of transforming the practitioner into a more generous, loving, compassionate, peaceful, and clear-headed member of society. The individual's sincere pursuit of Awakening is thus a priceless and timely gift to a world in desperate need of help.

Discernment (*pañña*)

The Eightfold Path is best understood as a collection of personal qualities to be developed, rather than as a sequence of steps along a linear path. The development of right view and right resolve (the factors classically identified with wisdom and discernment) facilitates the development of right speech, action, and livelihood (the factors identified with virtue). As virtue develops so do the factors identified with concentration (right effort, mindfulness, and concentration). Likewise, as concentration matures, discernment evolves to a still deeper level. And so the process unfolds: development of one factor fosters development of the next, lifting the practitioner in an upward spiral of spiritual maturity that eventually culminates in Awakening.

The long journey to Awakening begins in earnest with the first tentative stirrings of right view — the discernment by which one recognizes the validity of the four Noble Truths and the principle of kamma. One begins to see that one's future well-being is neither predestined by fate, nor left to the whims of a divine being or random chance. The responsibility for one's happiness rests squarely on one's own shoulders. Seeing this, one's spiritual aims become suddenly clear: to relinquish the habitual unskillful tendencies of the mind in favor of skillful ones. As this right resolve grows stronger, so does the heartfelt desire to live a morally upright life, to choose one's actions with care.

At this point many followers make the inward commitment to take the Buddha's teachings to heart, to become "Buddhist" through the act of taking refuge in the Triple Gem: the Buddha (both the historical Buddha and one's own innate potential for Awakening), the Dhamma (both the Buddha's teachings and the ultimate Truth towards which they point), and the Sangha (both the unbroken monastic lineage that has preserved the teachings since the Buddha's day, and all those who have achieved at least some degree of Awakening). With one's feet thus planted on solid ground, and with the help of an admirable friend or teacher (*kalyanamitta*) to guide the way, one is now well-equipped to proceed down the Path, following in the footsteps left by the Buddha himself.

Virtue (*sila*)

Right view and right resolve continue to mature through the development of the path factors associated with *sila*, or virtue — namely, right speech, right action, and right livelihood. These are condensed into a very practical form in the five precepts, the basic code of ethical conduct to which every practicing Buddhist subscribes: refraining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and using intoxicants. Even the monks' complex code of 227 rules and the nuns' 311 ultimately have these five basic precepts at their core.

Concentration (*samadhi*)

Having gained a foothold in the purification of one's outward behavior through the practice of *sila*, the essential groundwork has been laid for delving into the most subtle and transformative aspect of the path: meditation and the development of *samadhi*, or concentration. This is spelled out in detail in the final three path factors: right effort, by which one learns how to favor skillful qualities of mind over unskillful ones; right mindfulness, by which one learns to keep one's attention continually grounded in the present moment of experience; and right concentration, by which one learns to immerse the mind so thoroughly and unwaveringly in its meditation object that it enters *jhana*, a series of progressively deeper states of mental and physical tranquillity.

Right mindfulness and right concentration are developed in tandem through *satipatthana* ("frames of reference" or "foundations of mindfulness"), a systematic approach to meditation practice that embraces a wide range of skills and techniques. Of these practices, mindfulness of the body (especially mindfulness of breathing) is particularly effective at bringing into balance the twin qualities of tranquillity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassana*), or clear-seeing. Through persistent practice, the meditator becomes more adept at bringing the combined powers of *samatha-vipassana* to bear in an exploration of the fundamental nature of mind and body.¹³

As the meditator masters the ability to frame his immediate experience in terms of *anicca* (inconstancy), *dukkha*, and *anatta* (not-self), even the subtlest manifestations of these three characteristics of experience are brought into exquisitely sharp focus. At the same time, the root cause of *dukkha* — craving — is relentlessly exposed to the light of awareness. Eventually craving is left with no place to hide, the entire karmic process that fabricates *dukkha* unravels, the eightfold path reaches its noble climax, and the meditator gains, at long last, his or her first unmistakable glimpse of the Unconditioned — Nibbana.

Awakening

This first enlightenment experience, known as stream-entry (*sotapatti*), is the first of four progressive stages of Awakening, each of which entails the irreversible shedding or weakening of several fetters (*samyojana*), the manifestations of ignorance that bind a person to the cycle of birth and death. Stream-entry marks an unprecedented

and radical turning point both in the practitioner's current life and in the entirety of his or her long journey in samsara. For it is at this point that any lingering doubts about the truth of the Buddha's teachings disappear; it is at this point that any belief in the purifying efficacy of rites and rituals evaporates; and it is at this point that the long-cherished notion of an abiding personal "self" falls away. The stream-enterer is said to be assured of no more than seven future rebirths (all of them favorable) before eventually attaining full Awakening.

But full Awakening is still a long way off. As the practitioner presses on with renewed diligence, he or she passes through two more significant landmarks: once-returning (*sakadagati*), which is accompanied by the weakening of the fetters of sensual desire and ill-will, and nonreturning (*agati*), in which these two fetters are uprooted altogether. The final stage of Awakening — *arahatta* — occurs when even the most refined and subtle levels of craving and conceit are irrevocably extinguished. At this point the practitioner — now an *arahant*, or "worthy one" — arrives at the end-point of the Buddha's teaching. With ignorance, suffering, stress, and rebirth having all come to their end, the arahant at last can utter the victory cry first proclaimed by the Buddha upon his Awakening:

"Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done! There is nothing further for the sake of this world." [MN 36]

The arahant lives out the remainder of his or her life inwardly enjoying the bliss of Nibbana, secure at last from the possibility of any future rebirth. When the arahant's aeons-long trail of past kamma eventually unwinds to its end, the arahant dies and he or she enters into *parinibbana* — total Unbinding. Although language utterly fails at describing this extraordinary event, the Buddha likened it to what happens when a fire finally burns up all its fuel.

"The serious pursuit of happiness"

Buddhism is sometimes naïvely criticized as a "negative" or "pessimistic" religion and philosophy. Surely life is not all misery and disappointment: it offers many kinds of happiness and sublime joy. Why then this dreary Buddhist obsession with unsatisfactoriness and suffering?

The Buddha based his teachings on a frank assessment of our plight as humans: there is unsatisfactoriness and suffering in the world. No one can argue this fact. Dukkha lurks behind even the highest forms of worldly pleasure and joy, for, sooner or later, as surely as night follows day, that happiness must come to an end. Were the Buddha's teachings to stop there, we might indeed regard them as pessimistic and life as utterly hopeless. But, like a doctor who prescribes a remedy for an illness, the Buddha offers both a hope (the third Noble Truth) and a cure (the fourth). The

Buddha's teachings thus give cause for unparalleled optimism and joy. The teachings offer as their reward the noblest, truest kind of happiness, and give profound value and meaning to an otherwise grim existence. One modern teacher summed it up well: "Buddhism is the serious pursuit of happiness."

Theravada Comes West

Until the late 19th century, the teachings of Theravada were little known outside of southern Asia, where they had flourished for some two and one-half millennia. In the past century, however, the West has begun to take notice of Theravada's unique spiritual legacy in its teachings of Awakening. In recent decades this interest has swelled, with the monastic Sangha from various schools within Theravada establishing dozens of monasteries across Europe and North America. Increasing numbers of lay meditation centers, founded and operated independently of the monastic Sangha, strain to meet the demands of lay men and women — Buddhist and otherwise — seeking to learn selected aspects of the Buddha's teachings.

The turn of the 21st century presents both opportunities and dangers for Theravada in the West: Will the Buddha's teachings be patiently studied and put into practice, and allowed to establish deep roots in Western soil, for the benefit of many generations to come? Will the current popular Western climate of "openness" and cross-fertilization between spiritual traditions lead to the emergence of a strong new form of Buddhist practice unique to the modern era, or will it simply lead to confusion and the dilution of these priceless teachings? These are open questions; only time will tell.

Spiritual teachings of every description inundate the media and the marketplace today. Many of today's popular spiritual teachings borrow liberally from the Buddha, though only rarely do they place the Buddha's words in their true context. Earnest seekers of truth are therefore often faced with the unsavory task of wading through fragmentary teachings of dubious accuracy. How are we to make sense of it all?

Fortunately the Buddha left us with some simple guidelines to help us navigate through this bewildering flood. Whenever you find yourself questioning the authenticity of a particular teaching, heed well the Buddha's advice to his stepmother:

[The teachings that promote] the qualities of which you may know, 'These qualities lead to passion, not to dispassion; to being fettered, not to being unfettered; to accumulating, not to shedding; to self-aggrandizement, not to modesty; to discontent, not to contentment; to entanglement, not to seclusion; to laziness, not to aroused persistence; to being burdensome, not to being unburdensome': You may definitely hold, 'This is not the Dhamma, this is not the Vinaya, this is not the Teacher's instruction.'

[As for the teachings that promote] the qualities of which you may know, 'These qualities lead to dispassion, not to passion; to being unfettered, not to being fettered; to shedding, not to accumulating; to modesty, not to self-aggrandizement; to contentment, not to discontent; to seclusion, not to entanglement; to aroused persistence, not to laziness; to being unburdensome, not to being burdensome': You may definitely hold, 'This is the Dhamma, this is the Vinaya, this is the Teacher's instruction.'

[AN VIII.53]

The truest test of these teachings, of course, is whether they yield the promised results in the crucible of your own heart. The Buddha presents the challenge; the rest is up to you.

Notes

1. *Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction (fifth edition)* by R.H. Robinson, W.L. Johnson, and Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 2005), p. 46.
2. This estimate is based on data appearing in » *CIA World Factbook 2004*. South Asia's largest Theravada Buddhist populations are found in Thailand (61 million Theravadans), Myanmar (38 million), Sri Lanka (13 million), and Cambodia (12 million).
3. *Buddhist Religions*, p. 46.
4. Mahayana today includes Zen, Ch'an, Nichiren, Tendai, and Pure Land Buddhism.
5. *Guide Through The Abhidhamma Pitaka* by Nyanatiloka Mahathera (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971), pp. 60ff.
6. A third major branch of Buddhism emerged much later (ca. 8th century CE) in India: *Vajrayana*, the "Diamond Vehicle." Vajrayana's elaborate system of esoteric initiations, tantric rituals, and mantra recitations eventually spread north into central and east Asia, leaving a particularly strong imprint on Tibetan Buddhism. See *Buddhist Religions*, pp. 124ff. and chapter 11.
7. Modern scholarship suggests that Pali was probably never spoken by the Buddha himself. In the centuries after the Buddha's death, as Buddhism spread across India into regions of different dialects, Buddhist monks increasingly depended on a common tongue for their Dhamma discussions and recitations of memorized texts. It was out of this necessity that the language we now know as Pali emerged. See Bhikkhu Bodhi's Introduction in *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1999), pp. 1ff, and n. 1 (p. 275) and "The Pali Language and Literature" by the Pali Text Society (» http://www.palitext.com/subpages/lan_lite.htm; 15 April 2002).
8. *Great Disciples of the Buddha* by Nyanaponika Thera and Hellmuth Hecker (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 1997), pp. 140, 150.
9. *Buddhist Religions*, p. 48.

10. The Hindu *Vedas*, for example, predate the Buddha by at least a millennium (*Buddhist Religions*, p. 2).

11. *Buddhist Religions*, p. 77.

12. See Dhp 1-2.

13. This description of the unified role of samatha and vipassana is based upon the Buddha's meditation teachings as presented in the suttas (see "One Tool Among Many" by Thanissaro Bhikkhu). The Abhidhamma and the Commentaries, by contrast, state that samatha and vipassana are two distinct meditation paths (see, for example, *The Jhanas in Theravada Buddhist Meditation* by H. Gunaratana, ch. 5). It is difficult to reconcile these two views just from studying the texts; any remaining doubts and concerns about the roles of samatha and vipassana are best resolved through the actual practice of meditation.