

## **Buddhism: a rough guide**

Buddhism is a path of practice and spiritual development leading to Insight into the true nature of life. Buddhist practices are means of changing oneself in order to develop the qualities of awareness, kindness, and wisdom. The experience developed within the Buddhist tradition over thousands of years has created an incomparable resource for all those who wish to follow such a path - a path which ultimately culminates in Enlightenment or Buddhahood.

The basic tenets of Buddhist teaching are straightforward and practical: nothing is fixed or permanent; actions have consequences; change is possible. Thus Buddhism addresses itself to all people irrespective of race, nationality, or gender.

Buddhism teaches practical methods (such as meditation) which enable people to realise and utilise its teachings in order to transform their experience, to be fully responsible for their lives and to develop the qualities of Wisdom and Compassion.

There are many ways to describe the path of Buddhism; this leaflet presents its teaching of the well-known Noble Eightfold Path in a simple two-part division: the Path of Vision and the Path of Transformation.

The text is based on the first two of the Eight-Fold Path lectures given by Sangharakshita.

### **The Path of Vision: glimpsing the nature of existence**

Buddhism begins with a vision of the nature of existence, the Truth or the Reality of things. This is the Path of Vision, *darsana-marga* in Sanskrit, the first step of the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path.

Perfect Vision represents the phase of initial spiritual insight and experience. This may arise many different ways for different people: personal tragedy and loss; spontaneous mystical experience; by experience of nature or the arts, from deep thought, philosophical study, or meditation; as the result of altruistic activity or our whole experience of life; even in a dream. There is no uniform pattern. But however it arises, we should be very careful we do not lose or forget it: this so easily happens.

Buddhism itself has employed many means to communicate its vision of Truth: images such as the Wheel of Life and the Six Realms, representations of the Buddha himself and later elaborations such as the Mandala of the Five Buddhas, also the very image of the Path itself. All these communicate in some way a vision of our actual present state of spiritual bondage, our future potential state of Enlightenment and the way leading from the one to the other.

Conceptually speaking, Perfect Vision is often explained in terms of experiencing the truth of Buddhist concepts such as the Three Laksanas or Characteristics of Conditioned Existence: these teach that conditioned existence is 'marked', or shot through, with *dukkha*, or unsatisfactoriness; *anitya*, or impermanence; and *anatman*, or the absence of any fixed selfhood. Other formulations include the Four Noble Truths, Karma and Rebirth, and the Four Sunyatas or Emptinesses.

Buddhist concepts may be compared to a map, whose study can lead us to a glimpse of the mountain itself: however the territory is described, it is important to remember Perfect Vision is a glimpse of Reality that is quite simple, direct, and immediate, and more of the nature of a spiritual experience than intellectual understanding.

After Vision comes Transformation: transformation of one's whole being in all its heights and depths, from top to bottom, in accordance with one's insight and experience.

## The Path of Transformation: cease to do evil, learn to do good

The Path of Transformation is a complete, total, and thoroughgoing transformation of one's emotional life, speech, communication with other people, relationships, livelihood and more. The Path of Transformation aims to enable us to bring the whole of our being on all levels up to the level of the highest moments of our lives. This is what it really means to follow the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path.

Buddhism sees life as a process of constant change, and its practices aim to take advantage of this fact. It means that one can change for the better. The decisive factor in changing oneself is the mind, and Buddhism has developed many methods for working on the mind - most importantly, the practise of meditation. Meditation is a way of developing more positive states of mind that are characterised by calm, concentration, awareness, and kindness. Using the awareness developed in meditation it is possible to have a deep understanding of oneself, other people, and of life itself.

One aspect of Transformation is a giving up of all that limits us or holds us back. This is the practice of renunciation or nekkhama. This springs naturally from a decrease of craving within us, consequent upon our vision of the true nature of conditioned things. It manifests as stillness, simplicity, and contentment.

The positive aspect of transformation consists in cultivating the remainder of the Eightfold Path:

Perfect Emotion,  
Perfect Speech,  
Perfect Action,  
Perfect Livelihood,  
Perfect Effort,  
Perfect Mindfulness, and  
Perfect Meditation.

To take just the first, the positive aspect of Perfect Emotion consists in developing dana, maitri and karuna: generosity, loving-kindness, and compassion. These are followed by mudita and upeksa: sympathetic joy and tranquillity, and finally sraddha - faith and devotion.

The central problem of the spiritual life - for most people at least – is to find emotional equivalents for their intellectual understanding. This is illustrated in the well-known story of the great Indian teacher Bodhidharma meeting the Emperor of China.

The Emperor asked, 'What is the fundamental principle of Buddhism?' Bodhidharma answered 'Cease to do evil, learn to do good, purify the heart'. The Emperor was rather taken back, and said 'Is that all? Even a child of three can understand that!' And Bodhidharma replied: 'Yes your majesty: but even an old man of eighty cannot put it into practice!'