

# Concepts of Buddhism by American Disciples



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## Foreword

The collection of writings in this volume are done, with only two exceptions, by the monastics and teachers of International Buddhist Meditation. Most of them were given first as talks at Sunday service and show a wide variety of beliefs.

When we decided to publish a book of basic Buddhist thought, I realized that a lot of it had already been given by our monks at Sunday service. Therefore, I put together this booklet with at least one talk from each of our monks. I have included two others to finish the presentation of basic Buddhist philosophy.

Our monastics and teachers, true to Vietnamese Buddhist tradition, follow different paths within Buddhism. Ven. Dr. Thich Thien-An identified himself as a Zen monk; Ven. Havanpola Shanti and Rev. Ruja Karuna (Thich Tam-An) are Theravadan monastics; Rev. Kusala Ratna Karuna (Thich Tam-Thien) is a mixed Theravada/Mahayanist; Rev. Tri Ratna Priya Karuna (Thich Tam Tue) follows Pure Land practice; and Ven. Karuna Dharma (Thich An-Tu) is a Zen practitioner, as are Rev. Vajra Karuna (Thich Tam Thi) and Bro. Jhana Karuna Vajra. This mixing of traditions within one temple is typical of Vietnamese Buddhism.

You can tell a lot by the teachers' names. The term Venerable before the name indicates that he/she is a fully ordained monastic of at least ten years. The last name of their Sanskrit name indicates who their primary teacher is. Dr. Karuna is the only monk to have the last name Dharma, the name Dr. Thien-An gave to his direct disciples. Anybody who takes refuge here determines who their primary teacher is and uses that teacher's first name as their last. Those who have Vietnamese names which begin with Thich indicate that they were fully ordained in the Vietnamese tradition. Fully ordained Vietnamese monks are ordained according to a poem of their lineage. Therefore, Rev. Karuna's name starts with An, the second syllable of the poem which begins "Thien-An". The next generation all begin with Tam, which means mind.

I hope that you will enjoy this slender volume and find it useful in your study of the Dharma. I have included Dr. Thien-An's discussion of meditation that follows chapter one from his book *Zen Philosophy, Zen Practice* and thank Dharma Publishing for allowing us to use it here. The only topic missing is a discussion of pratitya samut-pada, the third sermon of the Buddha, which explains how karma develops and its relationship to our rebirths. Since this is a complex topic that will take up quite a bit of room to explain, perhaps in the future it will be published by itself.

Ven. Dr. Karuna Dharma, Abbess  
September, 1998  
Los Angeles, California

## The Three Jewels

by Ven. Sarika Dharma, (Thich An-Tinh) Late Head Monastic

When we offer incense, we light three sticks, bow toward the altar and place each stick separately in the incense burner: one for the Buddha, one for the Dharma and one for the Sangha.

We may think of these three jewels in different ways. Here is one view:

The Buddha can be seen as the trailblazer. He explored

unknown territory, went further than others had gone and came back with a map showing the way to the end of suffering. That map is the Eightfold Path.

The Dharma then is the trail, the path to follow, the teachings of the Buddha, the teachings of others who have followed him and attained awakening. This trail also includes the world outside us and within us. When we begin to see clearly, we gain understanding of how this world works.

The Sangha are the pioneers, the practitioners who follow the trail, making their own discoveries with the guidance of the Buddha's map. Whether monks or laity, we all need to do our own explorations; we also help each other on the way.

## Buddha as the Greatest Human Being

a talk given by Ven. Havanpola Shanti, Vice-Abbot, on January 4, 1998

Today I am going to talk on the Buddha as the greatest human being. So, who is the Buddha? Buddha was born like all other human beings. He was born into a royal family. He grew like other children. His name was Siddhartha. When he was young, he married like other people. And he spent with his wife more than thirteen years in a very luxurious life in his palace. One day he became a father. After that he decided not to stay at home because he was not happy after he saw that suffering was the common state for all beings. So he left home. He left his wife and baby, looking for the truth, for six years in India, going different places, going with different teachers, practicing with them. Yet, he was still not happy. He dropped his teachers and his friends, and he was alone, going here and there looking for the truth. Finally, he went to a place called Gaya and sat beneath the bodhi tree to meditate, until he discovered the truth, and he became Buddha, the Enlightened One. Until he became a Buddha he had the normal human being's attitudes. Once he became a Buddha, he introduced himself as he was. One time he introduced himself as the Accomplished One, a Tathagata, and at another time as a Worthy One, an Arahant; and the Fully Enlightened One, Samasam Buddha. Just after he became fully enlightened, he introduced himself as Wisdom Arising, Knowledge Arising, Light Arising.

After that he wandered for forty-five years, teaching. For his full life he worked for other people, going here and there helping people. He spent his life selflessly, not selfishly. He was born into a rich, wealthy family, a great family of high ranking, but he helped all people without discrimination: rich or poor, black, white or yellow, he did not make any distinction. He helped all human beings for forty-five years. In his life he practiced the Four Sublime States: *metta*, loving kindness; *karuna*, compassion; *mudita*, sympathetic joy; and *upekha*, equanimity. These four states he practiced towards other people. Love means being attached to something, but Loving kindness means universal love for all living beings. Buddha practiced loving kindness all his life: for men and women, children, animals, rich people, poor people, his relatives, strangers, also non-Buddhists. He helped them all with his loving kindness. Sometimes he helped animals and non-humans as well. *Karuna* means coming from our mind the desire to help someone that we see needs help. We should also practice that. *Mudita* or Sympathetic joy is very difficult for us to practice. It means when we see someone happy, we should be happy for him. It is the opposite of jealousy. It is difficult to practice, because always we have opposites in life. We are sometimes happy, sometimes unhappy. I don't feel happy when I see someone who is happy because I am human. I may feel jealousy when I see someone who is rich and has whatever he needs. I cannot be happy looking



at somebody else's happiness. Sympathetic joy means being happy about other people's happiness. It is very difficult to practice, but Buddha himself always practiced it. *Uppekha* or equanimity, is also quite difficult for us to practice, because we always have positive and negative, good and bad all the time. Today we are happy. Tomorrow we are not happy. Today we are winning something. Tomorrow we are losing something. Today people talk about what a good monk I am, a good person. Tomorrow they are gossiping about me, saying, "you bad guy," like that. So what can we do? This is the nature. Whatever good things come to us we are always happy. Bad things we don't need. We want to throw them away. Look at bad things the way they are. When you are happy, be happy. Once you are not happy, what are you going to do? Can you be happy? No, it is not easy. But look at what it is and see its nature. Today I am happy; tomorrow I will be sad. Look at things and see what they are. When I am happy, think, "Of course I am happy today. Tomorrow I cannot be. It is the nature." Try to keep your mind not really keeping happiness nor unhappiness. Try to keep your mind in between these states. That is equanimity. That is very difficult to practice, especially for this society. But Buddha himself always practiced this equanimity, *uppekha*. That is a kind of meditation also to practice.

Good things and bad things always come to us. We always think different things. I am sick today and I was sick yesterday and the day before. But December 30 I was happy. I was not sick. I was feeling healthy. The last few days I am not well. I am not happy today, but I know that this will change. Tomorrow maybe I will be better. So, we have to face those kinds of things. That is the nature about our life. Buddha faced these kinds of things and practiced the Four Sublime States.

Then, he is the greatest teacher, a very wise person. Buddha practiced the sublime states, equally toward everyone. He practiced loving kindness and compassion his entire life.

One day a non-human deity came to Buddha and asked one question, "Venerable Sir, I would like to find the greatest being in the world." The Buddha gave the answer. "Think of yourself. Go find the greatest being in this world." So, he went looking to find the greatest being. He looked at humans and non-humans and at animals. Some of them had four legs, some had a tail, some were fat, some were tall. But he could not determine which was the greatest being. He returned to the Buddha and said he could not decide which was the greatest. The Buddha said, "Okay I will help you. Humans are the greatest beings in this world." Then the deity went back again, looking at the humans: men, women, children, old people, young people, black people, fair people, short ones, fat ones, all kinds of people, still he could not decide which was the greatest. At times he would think, "This one is better than most. This one is better than that one. This one is handsome, that one is pretty." Some talked very nicely. But then he noticed something wrong about them. This one became angry too easily. That one had a bad temper. He found a very pretty lady but discovered that she wore too much make-up. He thought that was not good. He went back to the Buddha and said, "I looked everywhere but I could not find the greatest human in the world. I think that you, Venerable Sir, are the greatest human being. The Buddha replied, "Yes, you are right. The Tathagata is the greatest human being. You can also be the greatest being if you practice my teaching and become a Buddha." The deity was very happy and listened to the Buddha's teaching and practiced it. He attained a very high state. So, through this story we can see who is the greatest human being in this world. The Buddha, we

can say, is that. I do not say that other religious teachers are not great. They have many good qualities.

But the Buddha mentioned you can be the best human being. We were all born in this world as human beings, so we have a good opportunity to practice as a human being. Once you are born as an animal, you cannot practice this kind of thing. Animals can become enlightened, but first they must be born as a human. Non-humans are the same. They can practice, but first they must be born human. We are all born as humans, we are very similar. When I cut myself I have blood, you have blood. We all have blood. We are very similar. We have a great opportunity to practice the Buddha's teaching of truth, loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. We can practice these kinds of qualities. Once we practice these qualities we have the opportunity of becoming the greatest person like the Buddha. So, you have the opportunity of practicing. It is very important to reduce your anger, your ill will, to reduce all kinds of bad attitudes, to develop good human qualities. Once you practice loving kindness you will gain respect from other people. We say you have to respect other people in order to get respect from them. The same way when you practice good things, you will receive good things from other people. You can be the greatest human being. I wish you all the best in the new year.

## **The Blueprint of Happiness,**

*by Ven. Anoma Mahinda, Guest Writer, taken from his book of the same name*

### **The Foundation of Right Living**

In the first sermon which the Buddha preached after attaining His Enlightenment, He explained the Middle Way, the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. These may be likened to foundation stones on which the entire Dharma is based. Everything which is found in the entire Buddhist Scriptures, is in fact, an expansion of the Four Noble Truths.

The Middle Way is the Path of moderation, the Path of balance. We are warned to avoid abandoning ourselves to a pleasure-seeking life and the unbridled gratification of the senses. On the other hand we should avoid a useless life of painful and unnecessary austerity or asceticism. Since the Four Noble Truths form such an important basis of the Buddhist life, we should study them seriously and not be deceived by their apparent simplicity. In the study of Buddhism, a mere superficial glance or even the learning and repetition of words is useless unless it leads us to deep understanding. A boy can learn the Four Noble Truths in ten minutes, yet it may take thousands of lives before there is real understanding.

The Master Himself stressed the importance of real understanding when he said: "It was through not understanding, not penetrating four things, that I, disciples, as well as you, have wandered so long through the long round of rebirths. What are these four things? They are,

- the Noble Truth of Suffering
- the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering
- the Noble Truth of the Cure of Suffering
- the Noble Truth of the Path which leads to the End of Suffering."

### **The First Noble Truth is the Universal Nature of Suffering**

We understand this Truth when we awaken to the realisation that sorrow and suffering are the principal characteristics of life. All living beings (human or animal) without exception are subject to the ever-present danger of pain and suffering. There are no

conditions which guarantee happiness, peace or security. At any hour, or even any moment, we are likely to become victims. What can be classified as Suffering? Birth, death, old age, hunger, thirst, heat and cold, abnormal functioning of the body, disease, sickness and accident. All these are suffering. To be separated from the people we love or to live with unpleasing and difficult people; mental worry, anxiety, anguish, grief, woe and despair; not to obtain the objects of our desires; dwelling in unfit or uncongenial surroundings or having unpleasant employment; irritating noises and discordant sounds; mental or physical ill-health in ourselves or in those we love; suffering endured by those to whom we are attached. Suffering must be viewed in its correct perspective. It has attended us in the past, envelopes us in the present and will be with us in the future--unless we take active steps to escape it.

### **The Second Noble Truth Is the Origin of Suffering**

In this we learn of the desires and emotions which are factors causing suffering, either in this life or a subsequent one. They include greed; attachment to or infatuation with people, ideas or objects; the failure to obtain or satisfy our desires; the unhappiness and disgust which comes from these people, ideas or objects, sooner or later. Restlessness, ambition, self-exaltation, pride, vanity, delusion, craving; the belief that the ego, or personality, is a permanent soul or entity.

The failure to learn from our past experiences; forgetting the tragedies of life by losing them in a round of artificial pleasures; insufficient self-control, immoderate living, anger, ill-will, hatred and irritability; bad habits, sexual excess; and putting reliance in others. In the past and in the present, all these and many more, are the causes of suffering.

### **The Third Noble Truth of the Cure of Suffering**

The threshold of understanding is reached when we realise that suffering can be brought to an end. The Path of the Master leads to this very goal. Suffering, although accepted by so many, is not without a remedy. Once the mind is awakened to the existence and causes, we are on the road to conquering them. Just how far we are prepared to go along the Path depends entirely on ourselves. The causes can only be removed if we undertake a course of self discipline and training. The realisation that it is worthwhile to do so, is the first step.

### **The Fourth Noble Truth of the Path Which Leads to the End of Suffering**

No other religion or philosophy reveals so clearly the Path of Virtue, leading to deliverance. It is called the Noble Eightfold Path because it is actually one path but is subdivided into eight sections. It is the Buddhist code of mental and physical conduct which leads to the end of suffering, sorrow and despair; to the Perfect Peace, Nirvana.

#### **The Eight Fold Path is:**

Right understanding, right thoughts, right speech, right actions, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. "This is the Middle Path which the Perfect One has discovered, which makes us both see and know, which leads to peace, to discernment, to enlightenment and Nirvana."

The eight sections of the Path are not intended to be cultivated in the order they are given and the perfection of one stage is not required before another is begun. They must be regarded as a complete whole, requiring progress in all the sections. We

practise and develop as we are able and progress in any section will lead to success in others. In its entirety, the Eightfold Path leads to the cultured mind, for only when it is brought under control are we able to conquer greed, ill-will and delusion.

### **The Noble Eightfold Path**

by Ven. Sarika Dharma, (Thich An-Tinh), Late Head Monastic, I.B.M.C.

These are steps on the path the Buddha discovered as the way to the end of suffering. The eight steps are divided into three categories:

- A. *Sila* or harmonious living 1. Right Speech 2. Right Action 3. Right Livelihood
- B. *Samadhi* or meditation 4. Right Concentration 5. Right Mindfulness 6. Right Effort
- C. *Prajña* or wisdom 7. Right Thought 8. Right Understanding

The "right" in every case is not spelled out in detail. Life is too complicated for that. And, because our choices are our own responsibility, we need to consider each situation as it arises; it's not helpful to make rules and assume they will cover every possible event. The criteria we need to follow is whether what we do is beneficial to ourselves and other sentient beings and is not harmful to ourselves or other sentient beings.

*Sila* tells us how to get along in the world, with other human beings, in such a way that we don't burden ourselves with negative *karma*. We do not live in isolation. We are part of our family, our community, our society; and, to be happy within ourselves, we must find ways to be happy in these groups. It is not practical nor is it beneficial to separate ourselves from others. In fact, as our practice develops we become more and more aware that we are connected to everyone.

The most important thing we can do in our lifetime is to attain awakening and become Bodhisattvas, helping others to end their own suffering. The Buddha did Bodhisattva work by staying in the world and teaching what he had learned. Other Bodhisattvas, such as Kwan Yin who personifies compassion, Kshitigarbha who chooses to be reborn into hell to help all beings there, and Manjusri who represents wisdom and uses his sword to help all beings cut through ignorance are all predominate images in Mahayana Buddhism.

The three steps in this category of moral behavior are Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. The hardest one for most of us is Right Speech. It is so easy to open our mouths and watch the wrong words come out. We may not realize that what we say is harmful until it is too late. Often we react, rather than taking time to be silent and then respond when we have a better grasp of the situation. Despite the fact that, as children, we hear "Sticks and stones can break our bones, but words will never hurt us," words do cause pain.

Impure speech includes not only lying but actually speaking more or less than the truth; gossiping and carrying tales that cause friends to become enemies; making disparaging remarks and using harsh language that disturbs others; using manipulative ways that persuade people to do something they would not do otherwise, being involved in keeping secrets, all of these can cause others harm. And if this happens, we have strayed far from the compassion and loving-kindness that moves us along the path. If we honor and respect the other person, we are less likely to be inconsiderate in our speech.



Right action is a further extension of the intention to do that which benefits ourselves and others and not to do that which harms ourselves or others. Here is where *karma* is created. If we plant a seed by our actions, that seed will grow and eventually the fruit will ripen and plop on our heads. For better or for worse. Good karma or bad. It is all a manifestation of cause and effect. And it is our intentions that create the outcome. We have no control over the results of our actions. We must consider carefully before we do something, for all our actions affect other people and the world around us.

Right Action means that we refrain from killing any living being, refrain from taking what is not given to us, refrain from impure sexual acts, refrain from becoming intoxicated. But it also means going beyond this to encourage life, to give rather than take, to have loving relationships, and to keep our minds clear. If we become intoxicated, we are more likely to break our other precepts. If we act impurely in sexual relationships, being manipulative in order to force someone to do what they do not want to do, applying pressure to get our own way, we are harming both others and ourselves.

The last of the steps under harmonious living is Right Livelihood. It is very important that we earn our living in a way that benefits the world and does not cause harm. Our livelihood should not involve breaking the precepts nor should it involve encouraging others to break the precepts. Obviously, it is wrong to earn money through degrading actions, such as procuring prostitutes or committing crimes. And manufacturing weapons or chemicals that can kill or maim other beings is also clearly harmful. Killing of humans or animals is not right livelihood, nor is dealing in the parts of slaughtered animals, their skins, flesh, bones, etc. Selling liquor or drugs may be profitable but is certainly harmful, even if we don't indulge in them ourselves. Operating or working for a gambling casino is also harmful, not only to the gamblers, but to their families as well.

Beyond that we may need to decide whether the company we work for is doing beneficial things for society by enhancing peace and participating in good works or if it is harming the world by creating and dumping toxic wastes and otherwise destroying the environment. Some choices are harder than others, especially when the job is allowing us to support our families and when the ties to improper action are somewhat tenuous. For example, it may be beneficial to help build airplanes, but what if those airplanes carry bombs. It is good to be a farmer and help to feed the world, but what if that includes killing sentient beings. Each individual must make their own choices.

Three more steps on the path come under the heading of meditation or *samadhi*. The Buddha attained his enlightenment after meditating for six years. Meditation allows our minds to become clearer so we can see the world as it really is, without illusion. The mind is full of many thoughts; it acts like a drunken monkey, jumping from branch to branch, never stopping. All these thoughts distract us from being in each moment. And if we are not in the moment, we have missed our lives, for the moment is all that exists.

If we have a glass of water and put some dirt in it, hoping the dirt will settle to the bottom, it does us no good to take a spoon and push the dirt down. The water only becomes muddy. However, if we let the glass sit on the counter, the dirt will settle to the bottom, and the water will become clear. We can not force that clarity. We must simply encourage it to happen by sitting on our cushions and, at least for those moments, not

adding any fuel to the fire.

That we cannot force this is obvious. If we try not to think of elephants, elephants come into our mind. The harder we try, the more elephants surround us. Indian elephants, African elephants, pink elephants, wild elephants like the one Devadattu sent to kill the Buddha and even Dumbo, the flying elephant, all walk across our inner field of vision. But if we just sit and watch our thoughts, without pursuing them, we see that they pass away after they arise. The elephants walk right out of our minds. It is a continual process, rising and passing away. We do not need to do anything about thoughts, simply see them and let them go.

The three steps that lead to *samadhi* are Right Concentration, Right Mindfulness and Right Effort. When we meditate, we develop our powers of concentration as well as our skill in being mindful. Different meditation techniques help us to focus on these two areas.

Concentration comes when we have an object of meditation and discipline our minds to pay attention to that object while allowing our thoughts to arise and fall without pursuing them. Counting the breath is one of the techniques that helps with concentration. Breathing normally, we count each exhalation, from one to ten and back down to one again. We may lose our count, find ourselves not counting at all or counting up to seventeen. No problem. Just return to one and begin again. As we repeat this practice, we find our skills of concentration growing.

For *samadhi* to happen, for concentration to lead to liberation, we must use an object that is free of all craving, all aversion, all desire. Concentration on an object of desire, some material thing, a potential sexual partner, a new job, will not free us, but only consume us more into the sense realm.

As our powers of concentration become stronger, we feel more relaxed and full of energy. Our breath becomes lighter and softer. As our mind reaches tranquility, our body also becomes calm and our metabolism slows down. This is very restful and allows us to maintain the state of *samadhi* for a longer period of time. We can stop trying and thus practice with ease.

To develop mindfulness, a good practice is to begin by watching the breath as air enters and leaves our nostrils. We can also watch our abdomen, seeing the rising and falling of our diaphragm. When we have done this practice for a while, we may direct our mindfulness to other areas of our bodies. During walking meditation, we focus on the movement of our feet. Right foot, left foot, raise, push forward, step. This exercise can also be done while we are eating, being totally aware of holding our fork, picking up the food, moving the food to our mouths, chewing the food, swallowing, etc. But it all starts with mindfulness while we are seated on our meditation cushion.

The Buddha's awakening was based on his seeing his true self. When he attained *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*, complete and perfect enlightenment, he laughed. He had thought he would find what he sought outside of himself, but he discovered the truth was within all along, none other than his own true nature which was ever with him. That same Buddha nature is within all of us. We too can attain awakening.

## Taking the Precepts or the First Step Toward Enlightenment

by Rev. Vajra Karuna, (*Thich Tam Thi*), Zen Teacher, I.B.M.C.

What are the precepts? (1) not knowingly harming another being (2) not taking what is not given (3) not speaking falsely or harmfully about others or oneself (4) not engaging in improper sexual conduct (5) not becoming intoxicated.

Taking the precepts has nothing to do with trying to make oneself a good or a better person. If you are not already a good person then taking the Precepts is either an ego trip (of pride or guilt) or just a waste of time and energy. The purpose of the Precepts is to make you truly mindful or aware of just how good you already are. The Precepts are the first step of insight or wisdom as well as discipline or morality. The taking of the Precepts brings you into the lineage of the Enlightened Ones (Buddhas).

Let us now look at each Precept.

(1) You cannot avoid harming or even killing other beings altogether. The very act of breathing kills microorganisms that enter your body. In walking with your eyes forward, to avoid knocking into others or getting hit by a car, you inadvertently step on insects. If you own a house you must protect it from termites. Even in eating only vegetarian foods you must acknowledge that the farmer who grew the food for you killed worms and other organisms in plowing the soil. When we pay taxes we pay to support the police and military, who are hardly sworn to non-violence. This precept is taken not to demand that you live an impossibly holy life, or to make you feel guilty if you cannot. It is to make you conscious of your acts, be they to fulfill or violate the Precept.

It is in this consciousness, not in trying to be perfect, that you acknowledge the sacredness of all life. Because this awareness includes acknowledging that life, by its very nature, has a large component of violence to it.

(2) The speech Precept is taken, first of all, to make you conscious of how much most of your talking is unnecessary or just verbal diarrhea. It makes you aware that contrary to the usual assumption you, or your ego, will not dissolve if your opinion is not imposed on others. It makes you aware how much of your speech is prideful and boastful nonsense. Trying to follow the Precept makes you a real listener to others, which actually allows you to learn more about others than your intruding on the conversation. Since most people crave to be listened to it makes them feel very good about you. The Precept is a great encouragement to keep you from putting your foot into your mouth and making unnecessary enemies. How often have you harmed yourself or others by tacky gossip or repeating rumors? This Precept supports the other Precepts, especially the first. Most of the violence in the world originates with someone saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. Silence is not only golden but leads to life-enhancing wisdom.

(3) Respect for other people's property is as important as respect for lives. Property is ego. Threaten other people's possessions and you threaten them. "Taking" not only refers to outright theft but to casual "borrowing" without permission, even with the best intentions of returning the item or providing compensation for it. Moreover, the Precept tries to make you aware that you are not what you possess or do not possess; that you have a value far beyond your property. Obsessively acquiring of property is contrary to this fundamental

understanding. Materialistic society encourages the worth of a person to be judged by their possessions. The rich are thus seen as more worthy; the poor, especially the homeless, are seen as barely human. The third precept screams out, "That is a lie!" Human dignity is also a form of possession and one that must never be taken from another. Whenever you call someone by an ill name or show prejudice towards another you are stealing dignity from him or her.

(4) The first Buddhist practitioners were celibate monks and nuns, thus the Precept on sexuality was a requirement for no sex. But when the Buddha's teachings were taken up by lay people this Precept came to be defined as avoiding adultery. This is actually an extension of the third Precept. To steal someone else's mate is as much a failing to respect others as taking their money or other goods. The Buddhist attitude has always been that married persons have committed themselves to belong to each other as long as the marriage lasts; a person who has taken the Precept should try his or her best to respect this. However, this Precept means far more than the above. Too often society, especially the advertising industry, tells you that your value depends upon your sex appeal. The right toothpaste, clothes, car, cigarettes, plastic surgery, etc., is what makes you worthy of other people's attention and desire. It says that without sex appeal your life is wanting in value. To accept this judgment is devaluing, dehumanizing or turning a person into just a sex object. This is to steal one's own and others' self respect, and that violates the third as well as the fourth Precept.

(5) The Buddhist Path is dedicated to clarity of mind, and rejects all false or deceptive methods of trying to be liberated from suffering. To have the bliss or self forgetfulness of a drug high or alcoholic stupor is to seek escape in a temporary and ego-reinforcing way. Enlightenment is a jealous path; it demands full commitment, not the embracing and encouraging of intoxicants which will lead only to more suffering, not less. This last, but definitely not least Precept seeks, above all, to prevent all the other Precepts from being broken. It is very easy to harm another, steal from another, or to sexually abuse another under the influence of even a small amount of intoxicants. Finally, the Precept reminds you that intoxicants are not just substances you consume or inject into your body. Almost anything can be an intoxicant: money, sex, power, etc. To be intoxicated by any of these is as detrimental to true liberation as is alcohol or heroin.

Taking the Precepts is the gateway to Enlightenment. Even the most thorough academic study and knowledge of Buddhism is lifeless without them. A particularly ignorant person who takes and struggles mightily with the Precepts has more chance of deep spiritual progress than the erudite but preceptless scholar does. The Precepts are empowerment, be they practiced with Herculean intensity or observed poorly but to the best of your abilities. Enlightenment is not facilitated by practicing the Precepts perfectly. One must struggle diligently with them to gain real benefit. To struggle is to gain insight into the deceptive nature of ego. It is to wear out egotistical self-confidence. To be able to keep the Precepts perfectly, or almost perfectly, without struggle, more often than not encourages holding on to self-pride, not letting go. The struggle with the Precepts makes you aware of the three characteristics of existence: Impermanence (Now I keep them, now I don't.); Suffering (How difficult it is to keep them); and No-Self (Why, if I am supposed to be such an autonomous self, can I not just say, "I will keep them" and do so?) Seeing into these is Enlightenment. Imperfections and weaknesses are great teachers. Taking the Precepts allow them to teach you.



## The Practice of Compassion

by Ven. Dr. Karuna Dharma, (Thich An Tu) Abbess, I.B.M.C.

The attainment of enlightenment in Buddhism is often characterized as a flying bird. In order to fly the bird must have two wings; so it is for the achievement of full enlightenment: one must have perfected both wisdom and compassion. Often we think of these two characteristics as being different. But in actuality, they are merely two aspects of the same attainment.

Compassion is the active form of wisdom. For if one has attained wisdom, one sees the innate unsatisfactoriness of things. One sees how suffering and unhappiness arise and how sentient beings are caught in this web of samsara, the continuous round of the arising, maturing and ceasing of existence. And when one sees others caught in *duhkha*, in suffering, in unsatisfactory conditions, one's compassion arises, for one has experienced this *duhkha* also, and knows the source of it. The understanding of the existence of suffering causes the arising of compassion, and the understanding of its source is the wisdom that must underlie compassionate action.

Wisdom is cultivated through the practice of meditation and ethical conduct. Compassion is cultivated with the practice of the six perfections: *dana*, selfless giving; *ksanti*, patience; and *virya*, spiritual effort; as well as *sila*, ethical conduct; *dhyana*, meditation; and *prajña*, intuitive wisdom. The cultivation of wisdom is the cultivation of compassion, and the cultivation of compassion is the cultivation of wisdom.

*Dana*, selfless giving, is the base of all Buddhist practice and the base of compassion. One can give material goods. One can give time and energy. One can give security, emotional refuge, or spiritual guidance. But one must give from a place of no self, as easily and as naturally as a mother gives milk to her infant. If the giver thinks, "I am giving to this poor wretch," that is poor giving. If one thinks, "I will attain merit from this giving," that is no giving at all. *Dana* is giving which has no giver, no given and no receiver. It is an action that arises with no separation of subject and object. This non-separation of giver and receiver is not a metaphor. It is reality, for Buddhism does not see separate, innate beings of any kind. Rather, all beings are one and ultimately cannot be separated into individual personalities or separate existences.

Compassion is all embracing and non-discriminatory. It is given freely to all beings, just as the rain does not discriminate as to which plants and beings deserve its benefits. It just falls and nourishes all life. So, too, compassion arises without any ego thoughts, without any concepts, to all beings: human, animal, vegetable. All life forms benefit from it.

Compassion is not sentimental, nor particularly emotional. Since compassion necessitates an understanding of the source of suffering and the relief of suffering, wisdom must underlie and give impetus to any compassionate act. If compassion does not grow from wisdom, then the action taken may cause much harm. Since compassion must help to end suffering, the compassionate being cannot be swayed by pity or by emotional appeals to give the sufferer something that does not ultimately help to relieve suffering. A compassionate act does not enable the sufferer to continue behavior which will only bring more suffering. Therefore, the wise person sees where the suffering arises, does what he can to help alleviate the suffering, and does not become morose or feel guilty when he cannot help.

In Mahayana Buddhism, compassion became idealized and

embodied in the great spiritual heroes: the Bodhisattvas. These Bodhisattvas are greatly revered, for they exemplify total compassion. Although fully enlightened, and able to enter into the final Parinirvana, they remain in the world of samsara, in the realms of suffering, to help all beings, until all beings attain Nirvana. At the same time, while the Bodhisattvas work to liberate all living beings, they do not perceive of themselves as saviours. Their compassionate acts flow freely from them, without reservation, without discrimination, for their very nature is compassion. It is this compassion that the sincere Buddhist tries to cultivate.

## Anatta, The Teaching on No Self

by Ven. Dr. Karuna Dharma, (Thich An Tu), Abbess, I.B.M.C.

Twenty-five centuries ago when the Buddha turned the wheel of the Dharma and began to teach, he presented a philosophy which differed significantly from the current belief systems of India, by presenting a profound spiritual path, which had at its very core a denial of God and soul. The Buddha proclaimed the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality (*anitya*, *duhkha* and *anatman*)

These three characteristics are seen as applying to all phenomena. The one great law of the universe, then, is change. Phenomena come into being, mature and disappear. They are the result of conditions; when the conditions change, they also change or disappear. Even those things which appear as permanent are impermanent. Entire universes come into being, mature and disintegrate. Buddhism does not recognize a primal cause, nor does it recognize the existence of a permanent, unchangeable substance in anything. Rather, it sees all things as constantly changing, as conditionally created. The constant creation and modification that occurs is seen as being the natural result of the influence of all beings that live within that sphere. We, then, along with all other beings, create our own world. This is sometimes called collective karma or collective action. There is no beginning and no end to this process which continues endlessly, because desire and aversion, which is followed by craving and clinging, produces the constant re-enactment of bringing into existence all manner of things, physical, mental and emotional.

Things do not exist because they have an innate quality to them. Rather, they come into existence because they have no innate quality. They are created out of our own desires. Because there is no fixed quality to anything, anything can be created. Each creation carries within it its own seeds of destruction, because the conditions which brought it into existence cannot continue ad infinitum. So there is the endless round of process of production and extinction, fueled by desire, which arises from a profound ignorance of the conditionality of things, of what causes our own suffering. This ignorance comes from a basic misunderstanding of the nature of all things. The mistaken and fabricated notion of an ego creates within us a need to make permanent those things which we desire. Since we desire more than anything immortality, we will create the notion of an immortal self or soul. This belief in an immortal soul is viewed as the cause of the endless round of our unsatisfactory existence.

Buddhism, then, sees all beings as a result of conditions. The human is viewed as being a collection of five conditions, called *skandhas*. These are body-form (*rupa*), sensations and perceptions (*vedana*), conceptions (*samjña*), karmic predilections or tendencies, or habit energies (*samskara*), and basal consciousness (*viññana*). All five of these conditions are necessary for a sentient being to exist. These are clearly all conditional. When the person dies, these five *skandhas* break apart and

When the person dies, these five *skandhas* break apart and disappear. Since Buddhism teaches that rebirth occurs unless full, complete enlightenment has been reached, what is it then that is reborn? Hinduism posits that it is the *atman*, the soul, the tiny bit of Brahma, an unchanging entity that reincarnates, taking on another bodily form. Buddhism does not agree. The Buddha taught in his second sermon that *atman* is an illusion, that a fundamental law of the universe is *anatman*, no soul. What Buddhism does see as causing rebirth is the continuation of a constantly changing energy or process, that ends only when one's basic ignorance and attachment to "self" is ended. The psycho-physical organism which has died without attaining Nirvana still clings tenaciously to life in the mistaken notion that he/she has a separate, permanent self. This self, the ego, carries a heavy load of perpetual habit energy (*samskaras*), all centered around self-involvement, self-love. The basal ignorance that caused the being to come to birth still exists. This ignorance, enmeshed in the idea of a permanent self, encumbered with a packet of strong habit energies, and fueled by a tremendous desire for existence, propels the basal consciousness of the being, which is now latent and inactive, forward into rebirth, a rebirth which is the natural consequence of the person's own craving. The rebirth process is the result of this basic ignorance and the habit energy forces, not the result of the reincarnation of the soul, and it is this continuity that creates the illusion of the existence of a soul.

When a being becomes enlightened the karmic bonds are broken. The person no longer acts out of self-interest. He/she no longer is plagued by ignorance, delusion or passions. Instead, all action is free from desire and aversion and does not create karmic consequences for the person. The self which had been erroneously fabricated has ceased to exist.

Upon the death of a fully enlightened one, since there is no delusion, no desire for life, no habit energy which drives one's behavior, one then enters *parinirvana*, the state of supreme bliss, the *dharmakaya*. There is no longer any separate separation, no separate identity.

## Dukkha, The Teaching on Unsatisfactoriness

by Ven. Do An Kim Sunim, Abbot of Kwan Um Sa and  
Rev. Ramya Gunasekera, Minister of Dharma Vijaya Vihara

The first Noble Truth, *dukkha* (*dukkha*, Pali) or suffering, can be explained as an embodiment of imperfection, suffering, impermanence, emptiness, sorrow, pain and unsatisfactoriness.

The term *dukkha* represents the Buddha's view of life in the world of form, but we can not translate *dukkha* as mere suffering or pain because it has a much deeper philosophical meaning.

Buddhism does not deny happiness in life. It is neither pessimistic nor optimistic. Buddhism is realistic and it looks at things objectively. Buddhism tells you exactly what you are and what the world is. It shows you the way to achieve perfect freedom, peace, happiness and tranquility.

In Buddha's discourses there is a list of happinesses, such as the happiness of family life, the happiness of a recluse, the happiness of sense pleasures, the happiness of renunciation, physical happiness, mental happiness, etc. All of these are included in *dukkha*. It is *dukkha* not because there is suffering but because whatever is impermanent is *dukkha*.

The physical attraction of two individuals for each other will bring pleasure and satisfaction to both parties. This is enjoyment and a fact of experience. It is not permanent and the attraction is not permanent either. The physical form changes and so does one's outlook, which makes one sad when deprived of the enjoyment once shared.

We must take into account the pleasures of life, its pains and sorrows, and the freedom from them in order to understand life completely and objectively. It is only then that true liberation is possible.

The conception of *dukkha* can be viewed from three aspects.

1. Dukkha as suffering.
2. Dukkha produced by change.
3. Dukkha as conditioned states.

Included in *dukkha as suffering* are all forms of physical and mental suffering or pain in life, such as is experienced in birth, old age, sickness, death, not getting what one desires, grief, lamentation, etc.

A happy condition in life is not permanent. It changes sooner or later, producing pain and unhappiness. This vicissitude is included in *dukkha as produced by change*.

The third form, *dukkha as conditioned states*, should be explained analytically. In Buddhism what we call a being is a combination of ever changing physical and mental forces of energy which may be divided into five aggregates. The aggregates of matter, sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness are by themselves *dukkha*. They are all impermanent, all constantly changing. What ever is impermanent is *dukkha*. According to the Buddha: "The world is in continuous flux and is impermanent." It must be stated that in Buddhist philosophy there is no permanent, unchanging spirit called a soul.

It is a misconception to state that the life of a Buddhist is melancholy and sorrowful. A true Buddhist has no fears or anxieties. They are always calm and serene; they cannot be upset by changes or calamities because they see things as they are and in the correct perspective.

Although there is suffering in life, a Buddhist should not be despondent over it or angry as a result of it. According to Buddhism repugnance is one of the principal evils in life and being angry does not remove it. On the contrary, it adds to the troubles. What is necessary is the understanding of the question of suffering, how it arose and how to overcome or get rid of it. If life and the world is *dukkha*, and birth, decay, disease and death are common to everyone, should we live looking at only the negative side of life and the world?

If we hold negative thoughts, it is because we have not derived from life what we expected of it. As physical realities such as death, sickness and old age are things that cannot be made to disappear by denying them, they cease to hold us captive when *dukkha* is resolved.

Negative thoughts and denial will never make us see phenomena as they really are. Seeing *dukkha* is the beginning of the way to cast off illusions we have about phenomena.

Fear, frustration, uncertainty, insecurity do not exist except in our thoughts. Happiness, joy and ecstasy exist also in our thoughts. All these mental phenomena are *dukkha*.



## Why Do We Suffer?

by Ven. Dr. Karuna Dharma, (Thich An Tu), Abbess

When the Buddha was asked, "Where did the world originate? How did we come into existence," etc. The Buddha replied, "I teach about suffering and how we can get out of suffering only. If you have metaphysical questions, go to a metaphysicist."

Buddhism is based upon the question of suffering and how we can free ourselves from it. All of the Buddha's teachings originate from this basic question, Why do we suffer and how can we free ourselves from that suffering? The Buddha, as the young prince Siddhartha, left home to find the answer to that question. After six years of wandering and studying with the world's great yoga teachers, he sat on the banks of the Naranjana River to meditate. On the morning of the full moon month of May, as the morning star arose, the last fetters of his mind dropped and he clearly saw the answer; he had become enlightened, freed from any future births. At that time he became the Fully Awakened One, the Buddha.

From Bodhgaya, he walked for three months until he arrived at Benares and sought out the five ascetics with whom he had traveled and meditated and there he gave his first sermon and taught the answer to the question of suffering. He taught the Four Noble Truths.

The first Noble Truth is that suffering exists. It is the major experience of life and comprises our lives. The Second Noble Truth is that we ourselves cause this suffering by our own desires. Life comes into existence because of the desire of our parents. Suffering continues with our birth, even if it is highly desired. Both baby and mother suffer during birth. And our suffering continues through every phase of our life. Actually the word *dukkha* means unsatisfactoriness or ill at ease, rather than the acute states we think of when we say suffering. So that *dukkha* ranges from dis-ease or ennui to acute stages of physical and mental hurt.

We experience *dukkha* from birth, old age, sickness and death; from being with people and situations we dislike, from being apart from people and situations we love; and from not getting what we want. Most of our suffering rises from these problems. We become miserable if we have to work with someone we dislike; we suffer when we lose someone dear to us; witness the events of the past two weeks with the deaths of Diana, Princess of Wales, and Mother Teresa, Saint of Calcutta.

As long as we look at our enemy as our enemy we will always experience suffering. As long as we think, "How tragic that these two women died, what will the world do next?" we suffer. But, if we change our attitudes, if we stop grieving for those who have left us, and instead are grateful for what they gave us, we stop our *dukkha*. If we stop wanting to be with someone we love and enter into the moment where we are now, we end our *dukkha*.

We also experience *dukkha* when things change. When we are young and healthy, we are happy and rarely experience our own mortality. But when we begin to grow old and experience pain and can no longer do what we once did easily, we experience *dukkha*. Should I bemoan the fact that I have had a stroke and can no longer do the things which I did so easily just five years ago? That is pure foolishness. And if I wish to be happy, I can not be foolish. Instead, there are still many things I can do, many pleasures that still await me in this life. I do not have time for sorrow over lost things.

The Buddha taught us that if we created our *dukkha*, we can also end it. We hold the end of *dukkha* in our own hands, just as we hold in the beginning and continuation of *dukkha*.

The fourth noble truth explains how we can end our *dukkha* by following the Eightfold Noble Path. We need to watch our actions of body, speech and mind, so that we no longer create *dukkha*. We need to engage in heartfelt actions, speech and livelihood. We need to control our minds so that we have healthy attitudes: good motives, good efforts, proper concentration and meditation and correct thoughts and understanding. If we develop our heartfelt, wholesome deeds and diminish and keep from arising unhealthful deeds, we will truly diminish our *dukkha*.

## The Practice of the Paramitas

by Dr. Karuna Dharma, (Thich An Tu), Abbess of I.B.M.C.

When a person first declares his allegiance to the Buddha and embarks upon living a Buddhist lifestyle, he declares his loyalty to the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Then he vows to practice the five precepts (*pañca sila*) of not killing, not stealing, not engaging in improper sexuality, not speaking falsehoods and not using intoxicants. While these general principles are usually stated in the negative, that is, "I vow not to . . .", the opposite positive principles are implied and ought to be observed. Thus, one practices not only not killing, one actively practices *ahimsa*, not causing harm to any creature, including both animate and inanimate objects, such as the environment.

In addition to the practice of the five great principles, the serious practitioner will also try to develop the perfections (*paramitas*). The term *paramita* literally means, "going to the furthest"; in other words, attaining perfection. For those individuals intent upon reaching enlightenment, the practice of the perfections is necessary. All Buddhas, when they were Bodhisattvas striving toward enlightenment, practiced the *paramitas*, leading directly to enlightenment. In the Mahayana tradition, all Buddhists, both lay and cleric, are encouraged to seriously undertake the practice of the *paramitas*.

In Mahayana there are six great paramitas and four lesser *paramitas*. The six great perfections are generosity (*dana*); disciplined behavior (*sila*), patience or forbearance (*ksanti*), strength (*Virya*), contemplation (*dhyana*) and (intuitive wisdom, (*prajña*)). It is these six paramitas that are especially emphasized and that this article will describe.

*Dana*, the practice of generosity, is the basis of all the *paramitas*, for it encourages the practice of an open heart, of giving freely what is needed by others. Individuals wishing to develop *dana* are encouraged first to practice generosity towards those people closest to them: their family, friends and teachers because it is easiest for us to give to those who benefit us. Laypeople are encouraged to generously support the community of monks, for they devote their lives to helping others and by giving the most precious of all gifts: Buddha Dharma. But the practice of *dana* cannot end with giving a few alms to the monks and to the homeless. One needs to give generously, without thought of self, to give wherever there is need, as much as one can. To give a couple dollars each day in the temple donation box is not *dana*! For the complete practice of *dana*, the individual must extend generosity to all sentient beings: to not only the human realm, but to the animal realm as well. In fact, to all the universe. Therefore, those who truly develop generosity do not separate themselves from the rest of the universe. They understand that when they help

others they help themselves. If one has a generous heart, one is acting in accord with what the Buddha taught.

The second paramita, *sila*, is also an essential part of Buddhist practice. A person cannot progress well without having the three-fold disciplined behavior of body, speech and mind. The development of disciplined behavior allows the individual to refrain from doing, speaking or thinking deeds which are harmful to self and others. The first level of developing *sila* is to refrain from inappropriate behavior, to learn to discipline one's self to keep from engaging in harmful behavior. The second stage is to learn to discipline the mouth, to keep from speaking ill of others or engaging in speaking nonsense. This discipline is very difficult for most people, yet it is the mouth, not the body that causes the most problems for people. Once a harsh word is spoken, it can never be reclaimed and the damage is done. Of course, the most difficult of all *sila* is discipline of the mind. If the mind is disciplined, one need not worry about actions or speech, for all behavior begins in the mind, begins from thought. Remove harmful thoughts and harmful behavior disappears.

The third paramita of patience and forbearance, *ksanti*, is very useful, for one who is patient can endure long and be able to overcome many difficulties which an impatient person cannot. We are afforded many opportunities to practice patience. If we are patient in various situations and with tiring people, we will develop an open heart, and our frustration will diminish. How wonderful to go through life content and happy wherever we are. If we have developed patience, we will be able to accomplish all things. All of the great religious teachers have highly developed patience.

If one has well developed *ksanti*, one can easily develop the fourth paramita of *virya*, or strength and endurance. *Virya* does not refer to zealotry or to short periods of concentrated activity. While it is commendable for a person to spend ten hours a day in meditation, if that one has not well developed *virya*, he will "burn out" early. The individual who does not give up but continues in the face of long lasting difficulties has well developed spiritual strength and will eventually succeed in what he is doing.

The fifth paramita of *Dhyana*, the practice of contemplation or meditation, helps the practitioner to develop the other paramitas. For the periods of meditation allow the meditator to concentrate upon the mind, to learn to understand it and to develop non-subjectivity about things. One comes to understand the false constructs the mind forges, to understand the illusions that the mind develops and clutches to itself. It is the practice of *dhyana* which can rapidly lead one to penetrate the mind's delusions and gain insight into ultimate reality. Thus, the Buddha emphasized its importance and encouraged his disciples to practice it daily.

This leads to the sixth paramita of *prajña*, or intuitive wisdom, which is necessary for the attainment of enlightenment. Compassion, *karuna*, is the active side of *prajña* and is the other part of enlightenment. These two factors must be fully developed for enlightenment to take place.

## Rebirth! What Is the Problem?

by Rev. Tri Ratna Priya (Thich Tam-Tue), Leading Monastic, I.B.M.C.

If you had asked me this question sixty years ago, I probably would have been shocked and at a loss for words. However,

now I am 72 and nearing the end of a long journey of discovery, and far from being shocked by the concept of Rebirth, I consider it to be the only explanation for the pattern of life, death, growth and evolution of consciousness which is apparent all around me.

Sixty-five years ago, I was deeply influenced by my parents, both of whom came from families that were affiliated with rather fundamentalist forms of Christianity. Consequently, I was sent to a local Episcopalian church, where I was systematically indoctrinated with the beliefs and values of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and as a result of early training, I became a typical product of the white Anglo-Saxon society to which I belonged. At this early stage of my life, my mind was like a sponge, with little content of its own, drinking in all that came its way without question. In those days, you usually stayed with your own culture and didn't know or care about the beliefs or customs of the other racial groups. Then my parents sent me off to boarding school and later a good university on the east coast. Nourished by the intellectual opportunities at the university as well as by the vast cultural resources of nearby New York city, I found that my provincial attitudes were melting away to be replaced by a greatly expanded awareness of the world in all its diversity.

I was intrigued to discover that there were other religions in the world besides Judeo-Christianity. Hinduism, and especially Buddhism, offered solutions to certain of life's most pressing problems and enduring mysteries made more sense than the explanations I had received during my early church training. I came to realize that most of what I perceived as inadequacies in Christianity, Judaism and Islam, seem to be caused in those religions by the lack of one great concept which is a foundation stone of Buddhism: the doctrine of Rebirth and growth through the course of many lives until Enlightenment is achieved.

In the Judeo-Christian scriptures, it is implied that the challenges, rigors and experiences of life will bring levels of wisdom and understanding. If this is true, then, where and how are the persons who die in infancy or early childhood supposed to have these experiences, since in the Near Eastern religions, presumably one has only one earthly life to lead before going to permanent heaven or hell. In Buddhism, on the other hand, we have as many lives as it takes to grow from a state of abject ignorance and grossness to one of transcendent wisdom and virtue.

Furthermore, In the three Near Eastern religions, it is not explained why some persons are born, live and die in conditions of poverty, squalor, disease and political oppression with no chance for proper education, while other persons, as if by the whim of capricious fate, are showered from birth onwards with every conceivable advantage, luxury and opportunity to develop their full potential and lead secure, fulfilling and happy lives. All people with compassion must be horrified by the Nazi holocaust and the more recent political upheavals in Africa. Why do these innocent victims experience such anguish and suffering while we do not? Western religions which have as their focus a supposedly loving deity never adequately address this issue. Whereas, the doctrines of karma and rebirth became universally accepted in Buddhist society as immutable cosmic laws that satisfactorily explained the apparent success and happiness of some and wretchedness of others. *Karma*, the law of cause and effect, refers to the great system of impersonal, universal justice, according to which good deeds bring reward, while evil deeds bring punishment. Therefore, suffering persons who seem to be innocent victims of the whims of fate, are being punished for wrongs committed at some time in the past, while those who appear to be enjoying astonishing good fortune are really being rewarded for previously performed good deeds.



## Buddhist Afterlife

by Rev. Kusala Ratna Karuna, (Thich An Thien), Monastic of I.B.M.C.

a talk given on February 26, 1998

Do Buddhists go to heaven?

I have had the great fortune of speaking about Buddhist afterlife to a lot of Christians. One of the things that prompted me to investigate Buddhist afterlife was giving a talk at Central Juvenile Hall, where one of the Catholic girls said to me that I was going to go to hell because I did not believe in God and Jesus Christ. After reflection I had to agree with her that I was going to Christian hell because I did not believe in God or Jesus Christ. But was I going to Buddhist hell? That is the question. If a good Catholic married a good Buddhist and they lived happily ever after, when they died were they going to the same place? Most Catholics answer "Of course. Because there is only one place to go." Well, if that's the case where did all the Christians go before Christ was born, and where did all the good Buddhists and Egyptians and the worshippers of the great goddess go before Christ came to the world. So, I needed to investigate it and with great honesty say, "So, what is the Buddhist contribution to afterlife? The Buddhist contribution is Nirvana. Nirvana is the end of suffering while you are alive and the end of rebirth after you die. The Buddha said that all forms of life are unsatisfactory and that you will eventually end up suffering. Well, what if somebody did not reach Nirvana in this life. Where would he go? The Buddha borrowed from Brahmanic tradition: *karma* was already established in India by the time the Buddha was born. Heavens and hells already were established in India before he was born. He used those as examples, as models, as paradigms, for where a good Buddhist and a bad Buddhist would go. I brought this up to a Catholic friend and he said, "Why of course, bad Buddhists will go to heaven and good Buddhists will go to Nirvana." I like that.

So, how many heavens and how many hells do we have? Well, we have more than one. There is a wonderful book that was published in 1997, called *Buddhist Cosmology, Philosophy and Origins*. It goes into very detailed explanation. There are more heavens and hells. There are 33 of this and 33 of that. I am going to simplify it. We have the best heaven. Everything there is just what you want it to be. If you go there you have no reason to change anything. You are ultimately happy. The problem is that it is not permanent, as is everything in Buddhism, except Nirvana. One day in the heaven realm is equal to 400 human years, and your stay is four thousand heaven years, so you will be there a long time. But eventually the *karma* you have will wear out. You are only withdrawing from your *karma* account, not depositing. You are not practicing generosity or compassion, you are not striving to gain wisdom. When the *karma* that put you to be born in this heaven wears out, you have to be reborn again, and that will make you unhappy.

The second heaven realm, which is a lower one, is where things are almost perfect. I call this the Donald Trump heaven realm. It could be just a little better. There is still some desire associated with this heaven realm. The next realm is the human realm, where we all ended up for whatever reason. This is the best place for us to come because this is the only place where we can become enlightened. We cannot become enlightened in heaven, because things are too nice and we have no reason to strive. We cannot become enlightened in the hell realm because things are too bad and all we can do is suffer. We have enough happiness and joy to keep us from

taking our own lives and we have enough anxiety and suffering to keep us honest. We cannot relax too long in any one mental state, because they will not last.

The next realm is the animal realm. The animal realm is marked by wanting to have sex, wanting to have food, wanting to have sleep and being totally confused. Those are the four characteristics that we find in the animal realm. So you can see that we are not likely to become enlightened in the animal realm. The question may arise, "Does a dog have Buddha nature?" Yes, a dog does have the potential to become enlightened, but only in the human realm. Can an animal be reborn as a human being? Yes, if they come into contact with Buddhism. If they see a stupa or hear the dharma. That can plant a seed which allows them to be reborn as a human. And there they can achieve their full potential there and become enlightened.

The next realm is called the hungry ghost realm, and is often pictured as a giant creature with a large stomach and a pinhole for a mouth. They can never fulfill their hunger. So they are always filled with craving and desire. They can never be satisfied.

In the hell realm, that is where there is the most suffering. We have these little hell bodies. The leaves of the trees are like razor blades. They fall off the tree and cut us into a million pieces. Then our bodies resurrect and we are again cut into little pieces. And there is molten lead and we burn to death. The only way we can get out of the hell realm is to burn off our *karma* that got us there through suffering. Suffering is the act of purification that enables us to be reborn in a higher realm.

So, do Buddhists go to heaven? I think they do. Do Buddhists go to hell? I think they do. Do Buddhists go to Christian heaven? I don't think they do. Do Buddhists go to Christian hell? I don't think they do. In the Buddhist model we have specific practices that are necessary to achieve rebirth in heaven. We have specific practices to achieve rebirth in the *jhanic* realms. We have specific practices necessary to achieve Nirvana. The Buddha did not leave this up to chance. Just because one calls himself a Buddhist does not ensure rebirth in heaven or Nirvana. It is a labor intensive practice that requires personal responsibility. Now, it is no surprise that we are going to die. How many people on a daily basis think about the next lifetime? If you are a Buddhist you have to look at life as a continuum, as a process of birth and death. And we are in a constant state of becoming. Now I like the analogy of going to an airport with a suitcase. We put it on the conveyor belt so it can be loaded into the luggage area of the airplane. But we are not getting onto the plane. That suitcase contains our *karma*. When it gets to its destination, the next person picks up the suitcase. That is what they have to work with. Now they can get more clothing, better clothing if they practice acts of generosity and compassion. Or they can turn the clothing into rags if they have greed, anger, hatred and delusion. I am not going to the next lifetime. My *karma* is. It is not the event that is going, it is the process that is going.

While Buddhism stayed in India, this seemed to be an acceptable model of rebirth. But Buddhism did not stay in India. It went to China, and these concepts did not jive with Chinese concepts all ready in place. So, Buddhism had to change a bit. So, what we find in China is Amitabha Buddha and the Pure Land. It is said that if one has faith, vows and practice, one can achieve Pure Land. All you have to do is say "Namo Amitabha Buddha" ten times with faith, take a vow and have a practice. But there everything teaches the Dharma, so you become enlightened.

## Expectations

talk given at IBMNC on December 25, 1995

by Ven. Sarika Dharma (Thich An-Tinh), Late Head Monastic

Last week somebody asked, "What do Buddhists do on Christmas?" This is it. We meditate. Some of us are doing an all day meditation retreat. It is nice and quiet and peaceful here today. Unlike some of the Christmas days in my life.

Thinking about giving a talk on Christmas brought up a lot of memories of Christmas as a child. And all the expectations that went along with it. This day is perhaps the biggest day for expectations in the year.

I was born into a Jewish family. My parents were of the generation that came of age during the Depression, and they wanted their children to have a different experience to make sure they weren't deprived of anything they could give us. So we celebrate Hannukah and Christmas both. Christmas, of course, was the most exciting because you went to sleep at night and then things appeared. If you're little and stay asleep, then you don't know where these things came from. But from very early on, you know that they are going to appear, and some of them will be for you. So morning comes and you wake up and go into the front room and there are all these packages wrapped up in colorful paper with fancy bows. At least that is how it was in my house. As well as in every sitcom on television.

So everyone is real excited. Parents to see the surprise and pleasure on their children's faces, and children to tear apart the packages, and others to join in the fun. We all plan for a wonderful day. But maybe it's not so wonderful in reality. The family all gets together, maybe lots of people in and out of the house. And maybe uncle Joe drinks too much and has to throw up in the back yard. And Aunt Fanny makes a pass at her sister's husband, and the sister gets mad at both of them and pouts all day. The teenagers may be smoking dope where they think nobody can see or smell them and acting accordingly. And the little kids are fighting over whose toy is whose.

We all have lots of expectations. But expectations can lead to disappointments.

This mornin' in the L.A. Times comic section, Calvin and Hobbes is very incisive. Calvin says, "I'm getting disillusioned with these New Years. They don't seem very new at all. Each year is just like the old year. Here another year has gone by and everything is still the same. There's still pollution and war and stupidity and greed. Things haven't changed. I thought things were supposed to improve. I thought the future was supposed to be better."

Hobbes replies: "The problem with the future is that it keeps turning into the present."

We have all sorts of expectations. Next week we will expect that things will change because we are beginning a new year. On our birthdays we expect that being one year older will change us, we'll automatically be more mature, we'll finally get our lives together. But all of that is just notions in our heads. It has very little to do with our true understanding that comes from our bellies.

One more example. My mom, who was a real sweetheart, also had some funny ideas, not her ideas alone, but those of her generation and the culture in which she grew up. I remember one time, when spring vacation was coming up and I was

teaching school so would have a week off, so I asked her to come with me and the kids and we'd go some place different for the week. She got excited as we planned to go to Northern California to visit friends. But when we called them to confirm, it turned out that they had a houseful of guests and had no room for us. So I suggested we go somewhere else. That we go camping. I did that with the kids a couple of times a year anyhow. Now, this was not a very realistic expectation for me to have of my mom. She was a city girl who grew up in Chicago, and even though we now lived in the suburbs of Southern California, she rarely went out in the backyard, much less to uncivilized places with outhouses and bugs and animals. But I had the strange idea that she might enjoy this experience.

She was very disappointed about not going where she had planned originally. But she kept her teeth clenched and pretended she was happy anyhow. We went out to the desert, to Joshua Tree, and put up our tent. The wind was blowing fairly constantly, and it was chilly. Every morning, she woke up, put on her deodorant and make-up and swept in front of the tent. After a couple of days, I could no longer stand watching her suffering and drove her home. Then the kids and I returned to our tent. The problem with Mom wasn't that she couldn't enjoy different things, nor even that she couldn't deal with disappointment. It was that she couldn't let go of her expectations. She wanted things to be the way she wanted, but pretty much didn't expect them to work out anyhow. As I was growing up, I remember her often saying, "Don't get your hopes up, or you'll just get disappointed." We can say that, but we can only avoid disappointment if we let go of our attachments to our expectations.

Sometimes our expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies. We expect something of the world or of ourselves or of another person. Because we have those expectations, we behave as though they are reality. If someone says, "Did you know there's going to be a riot on Hollywood and Vine at 10 pm tomorrow night," a lot of people would go there at that time. And if there were no riot, they might create one to satisfy their expectations.

I recently spoke to a friend of mine who lives in Utah. She told me that people in that state have a big concern about the millenium, that is, the year 2000, because they believe that the world will end at that time. If that's true, we only have a few years left. We can never tell how long we will be alive, anyhow. But apparently a lot of people are preparing for this time by buying weapons so they can protect themselves when this disaster occurs. I don't understand why one might need a weapon if the entire world is going to end, but the important point is that they are building their lives around an idea. There is no way to know what will happen in the future and no way to know when and how we will die. A good reason for us to do the best we can in every moment.

Thoughts fill our minds, and we take them very seriously as though they are the truth revealed to us by some higher power. They are only thoughts, the sensory impressions of the working of our minds. If we see them in such a way, we have a better chance of letting them go. For that is all we need to do, see them and let them go, just as we see a butterfly, appreciate its beauty, and turn our attention to the next moment.

We can't control our thoughts by sheer will power. We need to see them and let them go, not resist them or push them away or pursue them. Gritting our teeth only gives us a pain in the jaw. If I say to you, "Don't think of elephants. Don't think of pink elephants or gray elephants or circus elephants or elephants in the wild," what is in your thoughts? Elephants, of course. We could sit an hour and try not to think of those elephants any more, but we'd



probably just add different kinds of elephants and different situations elephants might be in. Baby elephants and lumbering, trunk-swaying elephants, and we would get tenser and tenser, more and more frustrated, so caught up in our task that nothing else exists. But relax and watch the elephants walk across your mind and wave so long, and they'll be no problem.

Expectations are just more thoughts. They don't have much to do with the real world. They distract us from our precious moments of here and nowness and get in the way of our seeing clearly. We expect ourselves to be perfect, important, significant, advanced, and more. When we are not those things, we become judgemental and disappointed. This happens to a lot of people as they continue their meditation practice; it can be a sticking point.

Our minds settle, and we see more clearly. We see who we are and what we do and are not always pleased with ourselves. We may say to ourselves, "I am no good. I've failed. I can't do any better than this, and it's not good enough." So we reject ourselves, have no compassion for ourselves, and haven't yet attained the wisdom that allows us to accept with passing judgement. We are human beings, and that includes our imperfections.

Expectations prevent us from seeing ourselves and what exists in our world with clarity. For example, our relationship, marriage, partnership may break up. We may say that it was all the other person's fault because they did this and they did that and they did a very long list of transgressions that don't fit into our expectations. We may not understand that relationships are interactions and depend on both parties' efforts in order to be tenable. If it's somebody else's fault all the time, we don't have to take the "blame," but we also don't get any credit. It is up to us to do the best we can in order to be happy.

When we can't open up enough to see what went wrong, we can't have better luck with our next relationship. We push other people away out of fear of failure or we continue to have relationships that never quite work out. A whole industry has been founded based on people's inability to stop smoking. It is a very difficult problem and can not be accomplished with sheer will power and gritted teeth. A business arose based on people's addiction to nicotine. Different methods are available: workshops, support groups, psychotherapy, hypnosis. Paraphernalia and medications are for sale, promising to help us to overcome a habit that can shorten our lives.

Changing our habits is very difficult. Most of us expect that we should be able to do it, and then we are disappointed with ourselves. We try all the ways others suggest, and we feel like failures if we can't do what's expected. Until we can relax, open up, be clear, we can't do it.

When I first met my teacher, he smoked. He preferred a pipe, but I also saw him smoke cigarettes. After a few years, he decided to stop. He said, "A lot of my students are giving up smoking; I should also give up smoking." We didn't even realize how unhealthy a habit it was back then. But he decided, and he stopped. He never went around picking up other's cigarette packs, or borrowing cigarettes, or even sitting next to someone while they were smoking so he could inhale the smoke, although I've certainly seen such behavior in others who were trying to break the habit. Suto was very Zen. He didn't think about it; he just did it. Make a decision and do it. Don't wobble.

He didn't have expectations of himself, as far as I could tell. He

just saw that he didn't need to do that anymore, so he stopped doing it. But he was very advanced in his practice. He was open and easy and relaxed.

I will just mention the posture of meditation, because I notice that some people sit tensely. Posture is very important in practice. If you have the position and posture down, it's much easier to reach a state of *samadhi*. When you sit tense and tight, you're using a lot of muscle power to hold yourself up. When you relax and sit as though you are hanging by a wire from the ceiling to the top of your head, your body is in line. Then energy flows smoothly through your chakras. Put your mind in your belly.

Relax and be open and aware. Zen meditation is not about being in a trance state; it's about being as aware as possible. We don't need to take any action, but we do need to be aware.

When we expect to do something in a certain way and then we find that doesn't work, a conflict is created inside of our minds. That conflict distracts us from our real work. We need to become mindful and see this process without expectations. What will happen to us if we drop our expectations? Will we never achieve anything? Can we never have an impact on the world?

If everyone dropped their expectations, we would all live peacefully. We would be living in the moment and not living in our gray matter. Not saying things based on our intellectualization, rather on the reality of the here and now.

When I was young, sixteen or seventeen, going out on a date, I'd go to my mom for the final check before I was ready to leave. I'd say, "How do I look?" My mom would say, "You look very nice, dear, but your part isn't quite straight."

That blew the whole thing. Either I had to go back and try to get my part straight or I had to go around thinking all evening that people were staring at me because the part in my hair was crooked. (As you can see, I've solved that problem now.)

We have expectations about our relationships. Every time our partner says some-thing that might indicate they don't plan to stay with us forever, we get real nervous. And we miss being together. Being aware. Being fully in the moment. Our Buddha nature is clouded over by our greed and our anger and our ignorance of how the world really works.

In Zen, we talk a lot about this moment. Attain this moment. We don't need to attain fame and fortune. We may think we'd like it, but when we see how it affects people who do attain such things, we may prefer to keep our lives simple. Fantasies of such a life are more appealing than the reality from what I can see. But to attain the moment is to have it all. And more and more. Moment after moment.

What are you doing now? Just do that. Just be here and now. Let your expectations flow through, along with your feeling/thoughts, dreams, opinions, attachments. Feel them fully. Watch them clearly. But don't grasp on. You don't need to clutch onto any one of them; more will come when each one leaves.

We come into this world empty-handed. We leave this world empty-handed. If we live empty-handed, we can be in the now and experience it all fully. Without expectations of ourselves that separate us from reality. Without expectations of others.

From the point of view of anyone who is following a monk's path, expectations are very important. This way of living is more intense

in terms of practice than we can manage while living as a householder. Not everyone wants it nor is cut out for it. One of the hardest parts is that non-monks have "expectations of monks, in addition to the expectations we have of ourselves. People may think that, because someone wears robes, they have attained enlightenment. Of course, it's not true. But when they see a monk acting in a way that they consider "unmonkly" they are disappointed.

People also feel this way about their parents when they are children. We only begin to realize they are simply human beings when we are adults. Our teachers. Our government officials. All the people we expect to be beyond human foibles. No one is. We all have Buddha nature, but we can't all manifest all the time yet.

As always, I don't have answers for you. Each one of us must find our own answers. When I talk on a topic, I share my own explorations and encourage you to pursue it. Expectations is a good topic for meditation; take it as a koan. Look at who is doing the expecting. If no expectations, then what?

Each moment. Only that.

## Enlightenment as Ordinary Mind

*from a talk given by Rev. Vajra, (Thich Tam Thj), Zen Teacher, on August 16, 1998*

Before I start on my topic I want to make it perfectly clear that my talk is not on the Buddhist view, but on just one of several Buddhist views of Enlightenment. In this case, it is a Zen view, or more specifically, a classical Chinese Zen and present day Japanese Zen view; not necessarily even shared by other Zen traditions.

The term 'ordinary', as in 'ordinary mind', is to distinguish it from Enlightenment in an 'extraordinary' mind. Enlightenment in Buddhism can be viewed as something that is the special privilege of the few or the truly extraordinary, or as something that is the common inheritance of ordinary people, hence all of humanity. That it is only for the very few is the older Buddhist, or Indian, way of viewing Enlightenment. That it is something shared by all people is a development of Chinese Buddhist thinking.

These competing views are each based on a fundamentally different concept of Time. Indian culture, from the pre-Buddhist era up until the present, has been dominated by a belief in the concreteness of the past, present and future. The Indian mind has created a vast mythology of endless past and future universes, as well as theories of near endless multiple pasts and future individual lives. In such a concept Life is seen as a state of meaningless repetitiveness of *dukkha*. Initial Enlightenment is the realization of this fact and the logical desire to find a way to escape from this at any cost. Anything, therefore, which would interfere with this goal, such as clinging to worldly passions is deemed repulsive. This rejection of the world, if held on to over a sufficient number of lifetimes, will result in Final Enlightenment and liberation from all future lives and suffering.

The Chinese hold a very different view of Time. The past no longer exists and the Future is yet to exist. Thus, for them, the only concrete time is the Present, or Now. In the Now there is no sense of meaninglessness. The Now is complete and perfect just as it is. While there may be some sense of

discomfort in any one Now, true suffering comes into being when the Mind leaves the Now and projects this discomfort in the Past and/or into the Future. According to this view of Time, most of our suffering is due to guilt, or regrets of the Past, and/or hopes or expectations of the Future. In other words, it is not due to clinging to worldly pleasures but to the Past and Future that is the cause of our suffering.

To focus totally on the Now is, therefore, the real absence of, elimination, of, or liberation from suffering. In the Now there is no birth or future death. Birth and death are identical in the Now. In the Now, impermanence is accepted as perfectly natural and hence, it is our true essence or No-Self. There is nothing beyond this impermanence to escape into, and this realization is Enlightenment. Since we are already in this state of impermanence and can not be other than this, we are already complete and perfect just as we are. Just as we are ordinary human beings, we are Buddhas. In the Now, every action is an expression of our enlightened state, if we are willing to accept this. In the Now, nothing is meaningless or unenlightened. Everything reflects the beauty of our already achieved Buddhahood. Unenlightenment is simply our refusal to accept this state. It is self-alienation, or the suffering of thinking that the Buddha or Buddhahood is something other than our present self.

We do not have to renounce our present self to be or to achieve this state of enlightenment. To reject the world or even the mundane aspects of our daily life (washing the dishes, making the bed, etc.) as meaningless is the real source of our suffering. Instead, to renounce living in the extremes of the Past or in the Future, for living in the Now is the Zen Middle Way. Ordinary life, hence Ordinary Mind, is even including our ordinary passions, if anchored completely in the Middle Path of the present moment is Nirvana. How does one achieve this Zen Nirvana? By the sudden realization of the non-necessity for a process of purification of self, rather than by any future oriented or gradual attempts to purify self, which does not need purifying.

To sum up the difference between the Indian view and the Chinese or Zen view, I offer the following simple comparison: In the Indian mind, Enlightenment is looking at the beauty of a flower and seeing its impermanence. In the Chinese mind, Enlightenment is looking at the impermanence of a flower and seeing it as beautiful..





## Retracing the Path

from a talk given by Br. Jñāna Karuna Vajra, Zen Brother

The Noble Eight-fold Path actually starts with the Four Noble Truths, as stated by the Buddha, most particularly with reference to the Fourth Noble Truth, that there is a means by which the cause of *dukkha* may be terminated. The means are practical steps we have to take to root out the thirst or craving to be able to prepare the fertile ground in which Nirvana may arise. Those practical steps are laid out in the teachings of the Noble Eight-Fold Path.

It is important to note that the Buddha specifically described the steps to be taken to achieve nirvana as a Path AND not as a Remedy or as a Cure. There is nothing in the words "remedy" or "cure" that suggests that it has necessarily been tried or tested by anyone before us, but... inherent in the connotation of the word Path is the idea that someone has treaded it before, that is, a Path just doesn't come into being all by itself.

Shakyamuni Buddha did NOT create the Path, he only discovered it. It had been trod by many enlightened Buddhas and Arhants before him.

Before we consider each of the eight components or factors of the Path, it is helpful to acknowledge that all of them are inter-related and are inter-dependent of one another. One does not cultivate them one by one in the order of their listing, as if they were successive steps to be followed, as they are to be developed more or less simultaneously, insofar as possible. When we develop one factor it helps in the development of other factors and the perfection of one factor coincides with the perfection of all other factors.

The comparison has been made of the eight factors as akin to eight different strands that are closely intertwined in one rope which a man is attempting to climb. Each time the climber grasps the rope, his fingers will come into closer contact with one particular strand than with any other. At the next moment the contact will be made with another strand. Yet, all the while he is climbing.

Similarly, in treading the Eight-fold Path, one may sometimes concentrate on one factor at one time, on others at other times, but with no loss of progress at any time. Hopefully, you will leave here this morning with some increased intellectual awareness of the Path, but that alone ultimately means very little. Any Path is meaningful to us only if we actually follow it and keep to it.

With these preliminary thoughts in mind, let us turn to some specifics: Traditionally, the eight divisions of the Noble Path are considered in three groupings, each grouping representing one of the essential principles of Buddhist thought and practice: *Prajña*, *Sīla* and *Samādhi*.

The Path is a way of life that beings with the Mind and ends with the Mind tran-scended. Accordingly, let us first consider *Prajña*, in Sanskrit, or Wisdom or Insight in English. Within this category of Wisdom fall two of the eight factors of the Path: Right Understanding and Right Thought

1) Right Understanding is the understanding of things as they are. It implies that in order to practice we need to have heard (or read) the Buddha's teachings, notably that of the Four Noble Truths. We must have not merely understood them theoretically but have actively ascertained their truth by testing them against

experience.

Buddhism distinguishes between two sorts of understanding:

a) What we generally call understanding, which actually is not very deep, is knowledge, an accumulated memory, an intellectual grasping of a subject according to certain given data, and the understanding of Right and Wrong.

b) The real, deep or Highest Understanding, is also called 'penetration' and truly sees reality, a thing in its true nature, without name and label. Only the highly concentrated mind, focused on the three great characteristics of existence: suffering, impermanence and non-self (*dukkha*, *anitya*, *anatman*) is able to achieve the Highest Understanding.

(2) Related to Right Understanding is Right Thought. Whereas Right Understanding is a vision of reality, thoughts are inner yearnings, aspirations, and wishes. Thoughts are all important, as words and deeds are nothing but manifestations of thought. Thought rules the world. Right Thought involves correct motivation... to move away from our traditional egocentric orientation to a new, wider, more selfless one, to switch over to mental modes that are more altruistic and benign.

The Buddha focused on Right Thought in three ways:

- a) Thoughts of renunciation—not of the physical world but of the mental world, as founded on desire and greed.
- b) Thoughts of goodwill and benevolence toward others.
- c) Thoughts of non-harming or compassion.

Compassion is an extraordinarily important virtue in Buddhism; in Mahayana it is considered the central virtue.

The second of the three categories is that of *Sīla*, or Morality which includes three of the eight elements of the Path: Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood.

3) Right speech necessarily follows Right Thought, for as people think, so will they speak. Humans are the only animals gifted with the power of speech and, as the channel of expression for their thoughts, it should not be abused. Right speech is essential for Wisdom or Virtue. Right speech is about not telling lies, slandering and backbiting, swearing and using 'harsh' language, wasting one's own and other peoples' time with frivolous chatter, and generally not using one's speech faculties in harmful or unproductive ways. It is also about being truthful, kind and open in one's speech.

Right speech also goes deeper and is closely related to Wisdom, focusing both on what it is skillful and unskillful to think and talk about. It is noteworthy that the Buddha refused to engage in metaphysical arguments, believing that they only led to ill-feelings and resulted in continued attachment to one's own views, a manifestation of ego. This is commonly referred to as the Silence of the Buddha.

4) Right action is about decent behavior generally. Right action, where the term 'action' is broadly used, is most significantly defined in terms of avoidance: refraining from killing, refraining from stealing, and refraining from wrong sexual behavior. The five precepts of the Upasaka, or Buddhist layperson, include not only vows of the avoidance of these behaviors, but also to refrain from telling lies and to refrain from self-intoxication.

Underlying the principle of Right Action is the Buddha's concern with the spirit of universal benevolence, which should characterize human conduct in all of its forms. An attitude of selfless benevolence and right motivation causes a person's action to be

## Right Action.

(5) The third component of Morality is Right Livelihood. At its simplest, Right Livelihood means to gain a living by right means, which are honorable, blameless and innocent of harm to others and to avoid any profession which would be detrimental to any sentient being. In the Buddha's time one was to abstain from trading in: arms, animals for slaughter, human beings (slavery), intoxicating drinks and poisons. Also, practising trickery, cajolery, insinuation, dissembling or rapacity for gain upon gain was considered as wrong livelihood. This original listing would have to be expanded many times over to cover the possibilities provided by modern life.

The serious Buddhist does not wish to compromise his integrity by becoming involved in any activity that is going to cause harm to other people, animals, or the environment, or even outer space. Also, serious Buddhist practice itself becomes impossible if one is caught up in the ramifications, mental, emotional, and/or practice of corruption of any kind. The inclusion of Right Livelihood as a key element on the path to liberation is a very novel and original idea of Buddhism. The Buddha's doctrine teaches that, for perfect humanhood, religion practiced in one's daily life is just as important as any temple rituals.

The development of the three factors of Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood ultimately ensure that purity of conduct is attained. *Sila*, in and of itself, is less meaningful than if it is directed to the desirable end of the realization of the highest Wisdom and the development of mental concentration. The purer one's conduct is, the purer is one's mind, and the purer one's mind is, the greater is the ability to concentrate. Then purity of conduct and purity of mind help in the realization of Wisdom.

We finally come to the third category, being that of *Samadhi*, or Concentration/Meditation. This category focuses on aspects of mental discipline. Found here are the eight elements of the Path: Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration

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So we have returned to Wisdom, which is where we commenced. Let me conclude with a quotation from Walpola Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught*.

From the brief account of the Path, one may see that it is a way of life to be followed, practised and developed by each individual. It is a self-discipline in body, word and mind, self-development and self-purification. It has nothing to do with belief, prayer, worship or ceremony. In that sense it has nothing which can popularly be called "religious". It is a Path leading to the realization of Ultimate Reality, freedom, happiness and peace through moral, spiritual and intellectual perfection."





## Buddha Amitabha: Fact or Fiction?

by Rev. Tri Ratna Priya Karuna (Thich Tam Tue), Leading Monastic

During Sakyamuni Buddha's ministry of forty-five years, He revealed that there is a clear cut and accessible path, the Eightfold Noble Path, leading to liberation and release or Nirvana. He did not discuss the existence of a supreme deity or the prospect of a union in the future with that deity as in the prevalent religion of his time, because he had seen the excesses to which such beliefs could lead. The Lord Buddha obviously perceived that the existing religion of his time probably did more harm than good. The Tathagata Sakyamuni founded a new religion which borrowed from the old one, the doctrines of karma and rebirth, but eliminated the superfluous trappings such as the idols, rituals, sacrifices and professional priesthood. He presented a practical, efficient method by which the goal of Nirvana could be reached through the efforts of the individual practitioner himself, without relying on any outside agency, such as a priest or a deity. This original Buddhism was a tremendous philosophical and religious breakthrough for its time.

But what is the first of the three marks of existence? It is, of course, *anitya*, or impermanence, constant change. We might ask ourselves, if the original Buddhism was so perfect, why did such great changes take place in it?

First of all, Buddhism was not destined to remain a small, local, Indian religion. Buddhism, I believe, was intended by its creator Sakyamuni Buddha to escape from the narrow, confining structure of its original form, and by adapting to the traditions and customs of every country through which it passed, to become the greatest moral and civilizing force in the history of the Oriental world. Because of this fact, the Lord Buddha will forever be known as The Light of Asia.

The amazing expansion of Buddhism could not have occurred unless the religion that was propagated in China, Vietnam, Tibet, Mongolia, Korea and Japan had undergone a far reaching and fundamental transformation. The original teachings of the Lord Buddha were retained, of course, as the bedrock core or foundation of the whole structure, but a new element, a shift of emphasis, occurred in the Northern School which we know as Mahayana. While the cultivation of wisdom and the practice of discipline was still revered as tremendously important, there was a dawning recognition among the great masters of Mahayana that every human being not only has an intellectual faculty which must be developed, but in addition, has deep seated emotional needs that yearn for fulfillment.

Many persons, as they proceed on their journey, discover that their relationships with other human beings are often unsatisfactory, in truth, sometimes bitter and filled with sorrow. Having failed to find the ideal friend, parent, or lover, they often turn to religion for solace, comfort and emotional nourishment. Probably the most important relationships people have are with their parents. Sometimes, personality conflicts or other factors cause these child-parent relationships to become a succession of arguments, misunderstandings and confrontations which lead to total incompatibility, rejection, bitterness and sometimes even complete estrangement. In such cases

there is likely to be in the back of the minds of both parties an insatiable longing for the perfect mother, father, child, or friend, someone who will understand them.

Also, many, if not most romantic attachments wither and are terminated because of the frailties and deficiencies inherent in human nature. The anguish generated by such personal tragedies only increases the all pervasive longing and need for a being that can be loved and served without fear of rejection or betrayal, a being that can accept us pathetic humans "warts and all" with unconditional love and forgiveness.

Unquestionably, Buddhism has brought many benefits to the world, but in my estimation, its greatest achievement and greatest glory is making known to the world such a sublime being as this. He is the ideal essence of beauty and goodness, the all-seeing, all-knowing, all-accepting, all-loving Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, Infinite Life and Infinite Love.

Amitabha Buddha is not dead and passed into the extinction of Nirvana, but vibrant, alive, dynamic, loving and helping us for all eternity. The sutras dealing with this dominating figure in Mahayana Buddhism were originally written down in the first century of the common era. However, as in the case of most Buddhist scriptures, they must have existed as an oral tradition for centuries before they appeared in written form.

At this point it might be a good idea to remind my audience that the Mahayana sutras are not included in the Pali Tripitaka and are, therefore, not considered authentic by the Theravadans. The disciples of the Great Vehicle, on the other hand, believe that the Mahayana sutras, esoteric in nature, consist of discourses that Sakyamuni Buddha delivered to his more advanced followers. Sakyamuni Buddha came into the world to lead humanity out of the morass of ignorance, confusion and corruption which characterized his own time.

The revelation of Amitabha to the suffering masses of humanity can be thought of as a second outpouring of Divine Grace which had as its objective the redemption of the countless meek and humble beings who though uneducated and therefore undeveloped intellectually nonetheless possessed by natural endowment great emotional resources, purity of heart, innate goodness and humility and a capacity for great faith. Though poor and downtrodden, millions born in Asia, through devotion to Amitabha Buddha have been able to ascend to a higher dimension of consciousness and experience the bliss of the Pure Land in this very lifetime.

Probably at this point in order to avoid confusion to those more familiar with Theravada Buddhism, I should make a comment about the Trikaya doctrine, one of the key concepts of Mahayana. The historical Buddha Sakyamuni was no longer thought to have been a mere human being, but was considered to have been an expression of the Absolute Reality, which is called the *Dharmakaya*, or Body of Law. The *Dharmakaya* had manifested itself on earth countless times before Sakyamuni and is expected to appear again in the form of Maitreya Buddha. These earthly, historical Buddhas are collectively known as the *Nirmanakaya*, the Body of Transformation. While the *Dharmakaya* remains in *Arupadhatu*, the completely abstract formless realm, while the *Nirmanakaya* or earthly Buddhas have inherited the *Kamadhatu*, or phenomenal world, which is dominated by passion and desire.

According to the *Trikaya* doctrine, there is a third realm existing between the formless and the mundane planes. It is called *Rupadhatu*, Realm of Forms, and this is the level in which many transcendental beings reside, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and lesser divinities. These beings who are also manifestations of the

primordial Buddha essence or *Dharmakaya*, are referred to by the term *Sambhogakaya*, or the Body of the Bliss.

The most important representative of the *Sambhogakaya* is Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light. The eminent author Sangharakshita sums up the attitude of Mahayana devotees with regard to the *Sambhoga* Buddha very eloquently. He states in his book *A Survey of Buddhism*, "Just as the *Nirmanakaya* Buddha, in the sense of the human and historical Sakyamuni is the central figure of the Hinayana, so is the *Sambhogakaya* in one or another of its numerous, resplendent manifestations the dominating figure of the Mahayana. He is the supreme object of faith and devotion, the ultimate, dazzling focus into which are concentrated, like innumerable, converging beams of light, all those incipient strivings and yearnings of the heart, those half-blind impulses to perfection; those mighty soaring flights of love and devotion and adoration, which in less philosophical religions are directed towards more or less crude conceptions of the theistic order."

Furthermore, it was thought that every earthly or *Nirmanakaya* Buddha was a reflection or emanation on the mundane plane of one particular *Sambhogakaya* Buddha. Consequently, Sakyamuni came to be considered as the most recent manifestation of Amitabha, and the present world period is, therefore, thought to be under the special protection of Amitabha and his son/daughter Avaslokitesvara, perhaps better known as Kwan Yin.

Some years ago I was standing in the lobby of a hotel in Kyoto, Japan, chatting with a lovely Japanese lady, a friend of my mother. I said that I believed in Sakyamuni Buddha, but I could not believe in Amitabha, because he did not seem to have been an actual, historical person. Her answer I will never forget. It was so eloquent, yet so simple. She just said, "They are the same." After hearing these words all my doubts left me. I felt that Amitabha himself had touched and claimed me as His own for all time to come.

I would now like to talk about the three sutras which provide a detailed background and solid philosophical foundation on which the Pure Land is based. Perhaps I should first make clear the meaning of the term Pure Land.

Buddhas after their enlightenment are granted authority over certain Buddha fields, which come in two varieties, pure and impure. Into the latter grosser type are born gods, titans, humans, animals, hungry ghosts and denizens of hell. A pure Buddha field, on the other hand, is inhabited only by the presiding Buddha and his glorious entourage of Bodhisattvas, gods, and minor divinities. The purpose of establishing a Pure Land is obvious. In our own impure world such concerns as domestic responsibilities and social obligations, civic duties, earning a living, etc., make it difficult if not impossible for us to make progress towards enlightenment. After being reborn in a pure land, however, regression or rebirth in one of the six samsaric realms is no longer possible, unless after enlightenment it occurs voluntarily for the purpose of saving other beings. Having arrived in the Pure Land, one discovers that there are no longer any worries concerning food, shelter, clothing or earning a living. In fact, all conditions are conducive to the attainment of enlightenment, which at this point is assured and inevitable.

The great masters who shaped and developed the Mahayana or Great Vehicle during the latter decades BCE and the early centuries CE, were keenly aware of the deep need that existed

among the majority of laypersons who followed the Dharma teachings for a primarily devotional form of Buddhism that could bring meaning and inspiration into their drab lives.

With the appearance of the three sutras which tell the story of Amitabha Buddha and the development of the *trikaya* doctrine which I discussed earlier, a purely devotional sect of Buddhism not only became a possibility, but eventually a reality. In India a preference for the intellectual approach and the supreme importance of wisdom as the ultimate goal prevented any form of Buddhism that emphasized faith and devotion from becoming an independent school there. However, it is interesting to note that the great Nagarjuna, who lived in the second century CE, founded the extremely influential Madhyamika sect, and according to tradition, revealed the *Prajñaparamita* literature to the world, expressed the view "that for those who seriously undertake to lead the Buddhist life, two paths are open, the difficult path of self reliance and the easy path of dependence upon the compassion of the Buddha." Nagarjuna has been called by some authorities the second most important figure in the history of Buddhism, and because of his recognition of the legitimacy of the path of faith and devotion, he is considered to be the first Patriarch of the Pure Land devotional schools of the Far East.

Nagarjuna stated that the principal activity of those who follow the devotional path should be simply, the worship of the Buddha of the future, Maitreya, and Amitabha Buddha.

Maitreya, waiting in the Tusita heaven until it is his time to come into the world is, obviously, not now or for thousands of years to come, involved in the unfolding destiny of the world. Thus, it would seem that the deities most deserving of veneration in Nagarjuna's day, as well as our time, are Amitabha Buddha and his son/daughter Kwan Yin, since it is they who are actively in charge during this world-period.

Even though for many centuries devotional Buddhism of one sect or another was practiced by all schools of Mahayana as an integral part of their programs of study, practice and worship, it was not until the fourth century of the common era in China that a monk named Hui Yuan (333-416 CE) developed an intensely devotional sect whose adherents concentrated upon the worship of Amitabha Buddha. Eventually, this sect became acknowledged as a separate school, the Pure Land school, which, in time, was accepted universally as one of the four main schools of Mahayana Buddhism.

Buddhism, in general, passed through many vicissitudes in China, reaching its zenith of power, influence and popularity during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE), declining and periodically reasserting itself during later centuries. In time, as a result of all the strains to which Buddhism was subjected, the scholastic sects fell by the wayside, while only the two strongest and most popular sects managed to survive. These two were the Ch'an sect, known as Zen in Japan, and the Pure Land sect.

In Japan, where Buddhism was originally introduced in 552 CE, it was not until the Kamakura period (1185-1397 CE) that Pure Land Buddhism, which emphasized the idea of salvation through the grace of Amitabha Buddha, was propagated. Before long it gained a wide following among the farmers, fishermen, laborers, and shopkeepers, who were grievously oppressed by the higher classes of society.

Toward the end of the twelfth century, two great masters appeared on the scene, and it is to their credit that Pure Land Buddhism has flourished and grown until it has become the most popular and



widely accepted form of Buddhism in Japan. The first of these masters, Honen Shonen (or Saint Honen) founded the Jodo shu, Pure Land sect, and later Shinran Shonin (Saint Shinran) founded the Jodo Shin shu, the True Pure Land sect. Both masters emphasized that those persons who, while longing to be reborn in the Pure Land, thought of Amitabha Buddha with sincerity and faith and repeated the nembutsu or the mantra *Namo Amida Butsu*, would after their death, be welcomed into the Sukhavati, Pure Land. Honen and Shinran both believed that calling upon the sacred name of Amitabha Buddha (Amida Butsu, Jap.) was sufficient, since the name itself contains the essence of Amida Buddha and is inseparable from Him.

Honen, while not disparaging other Buddhist practices such as study, meditation, asceticism, etc., clearly considered that the repetition of the nembutsu was superior to all other practices. However, he repeatedly states that unquestioning faith in Amida Buddha and his power to lead one to rebirth in the Pure Land is absolutely essential for the attainment of this goal. Shinran, on the other hand, taught that the desire to be reborn in the Pure Land was sufficient to ensure rebirth there, because Amida Buddha himself, will supply this unquestioning faith once a devotee sincerely wishes for salvation and begins to believe in Him.

Honen taught that Amida Buddha has the power to come forth and welcome to his Pure Land those persons who possess the very worst karma, because humankind has so seriously degenerated since the time of Sakyamuni Buddha. Shinran went even further and stated that Amida Butsu's vow of salvation was intended primarily for the sinner, since a virtuous person can attain enlightenment through self effort.

Devotional Buddhism, then, after twelve centuries of development, reached its climax in the teachings of Shinran Shonin. He went so far as to state categorically that rebirth in the Pure Land is identical with the attainment of Nirvana. In a beautiful quotation Shinran said, "In the Pure Land is unsurpassed Enlightenment."

Shinran recommended that we should seek rebirth in the Pure Land or Enlightenment not so much during the course of our everyday lives, with all their stress and distractions, but especially when we are dying. Then the faith that Amida himself has supplied, if we have fervently and sincerely desired to be reborn in the Pure Land, will lead us to an instant of pure egolessness, during which we will realize that any attempt to gain Enlightenment by our own efforts will only strengthen our sense of separateness.

As we drift closer to death, we will surrender unconditionally to the Compassion of Amida Buddha, relying on Him to carry us, regardless of our unworthiness, to the blessed shores of Sukhavati. Just imagine that after a life fraught with suffering, frustration and anguish, the heart in your bosom begins to falter, and each new breath requires a supreme effort. A minister of the Jodo Shin shu has been called to console you in your moment of extreme distress. He has brought with him to your bedside a beautiful painting or image of Amida Buddha, and he will place in your hand one end of a golden thread. The other end of the thread will be attached to the radiant figure of Amida Buddha, and symbolically you are united with him. As your consciousness leaves your worn out body, your eyes will linger for a moment on the painting or image of Amida, and then as your spirit rises from your discarded physical remains, the depiction of Amida will fade and be replaced by the real Amida Buddha, accompanied by Kwan Yin and Seishi, and surrounded

by His heavenly host. Amid the rejoicing and celestial music of innumerable angels, you will be carried off to the Happy Land of Bliss, Sukhavati, the Western Paradise. Once there you will never again be subject to the law of karma and have to be reborn in one of the six realms of the wheel of transmigration. However, even at this point you will not retreat into the cool refuge of final Nirvana, detached from the world and all of its suffering creatures. Nothing will force you to return to the earth except your own overflowing compassion and intense desire to liberate other beings from suffering if and when the opportunity arises. Eventually, according to the inexorable will of Amida Buddha, all beings in one way or another will be led to Enlightenment.

Now let us look at the figures which I have brought for you to see. The main figure, naturally, represents Amitabha Buddha, looking in all respects exactly like Sakya-muni Buddha, because they are in essence the same. The hands are in the mudra which symbolizes Amida's vow to save all beings. To the left of Amitabha you see the representation of his son/daughter Avalokitesvara, called Kwan Yin in China and Kannon in Japan, a personification of the compassion of Amitabha. She holds in her hands a lotus blossom with a reliquary, in which she will carry the spirit of the deceased human back to the Western Paradise, where it will be reborn. On the other side of Amitabha, you see a representation of Mahastamprapta, which literally means One Who Has Gained Great Power, called Seishi Bosatsu in Japan, he can be thought of as a personification of great wisdom.

The other two figures I have placed on the altar, one on each side of the triad of deities, may at first glance, appear incongruous and inappropriate. Instead, they are touching depictions of the most humble devotees one could hope to find anywhere. To me they represent those millions of oppressed persons who possibly must wear rags and hardly have a crust of bread to eat or a place in which to sleep. These humble ones are worthy to stand beside Amitabha because they are not separated from him by a false sense of a permanent self or ego, which is the worst barrier that can prevent a person from receiving the transforming grace and abundant life energy that Amitabha eagerly sends to all his children. They see only beauty around them, reflected from the purity and benevolence of their own inner beings, and all outward unpleasantness fades into nothingness compared to the bliss and security they feel coming from Amitabha's limitless love for them. With a faith this secure, even here and now in this world, the samsara that afflicts other persons, becomes for them, the Happy Land.

I am sure that everyone here today, like the imaginary couple we have just discussed, would prefer to cast his/her cares aside and experience the peace and bliss of the Pure Land here and now in their own daily lives. It is as though each of us is a lightbulb, until the electricity which is Amitabha is turned on. As far as rebirth in the Pure Land is concerned, once we allow Amitabha Buddha to shine through us, we become like homing pigeons that instinctively will find our way home to Sukhavati, no matter what the distance, difficulty or danger of the flight.

So, what does Amitabha mean to my own life? I can state categorically that without the influence and inspiration of Amitabha I would not be here today. I accept the doctrine of *Anatta* or no permanent soul and realize that lacking any essence of my own, I only function as a channel through which Amitabha may send his healing, enhancing, nourishing energy to all other living beings. If there is any merit in my work, it is because Amitabha Buddha is expressing himself through me.

However, practically all of my training in Buddhism has been here

at I.B.M.C., which considers itself to be a Zen temple. Therefore, in addition to my faith in Amitabha, I believe that every sincere Buddhist devotee should have a meditation practice if he is mentally equipped to do so. My channel through which Amitabha flows is partially obstructed and the flow of Amitabha's grace is impeded by the accumulated sludge of defilements which I have allowed through ignorance, anger and delusion to creep into my consciousness. I know of no better way to scour, cleanse and unblock my channel than by the daily practice of meditation. Is it possible to be both a Zen Buddhist and a Pure Land Buddhist at the same time? For the answer to this question I refer to the inspiring book *Zen Philosophy, Zen Practice*, by our esteemed founder Dr. Thich Thien-An. He states that certain eminent scholars who advocate the exclusive development of Zen style "self power" do not consider reliance on the "other power", meaning that they rely only on the Zen master who teaches them how to sit, discipline the mind, work with a koan and practice *shikentaza*. Dr. Thien-An asks the question, "Without the constant prodding of the master how many people would reach *satori*?"

This question leads to the inescapable conclusion that if a Zen master who has realized only a limited amount of wisdom and compassion can be of such enormous assistance to his students during their quest for enlightenment, then Amitabha Buddha who has reached a state of perfect wisdom and infinite compassion, undoubtedly can help them infinitely more.

Dr. Thien-An states categorically that belief in the "other power" of Amitabha Buddha helps us develop our "self-power". In fact, he strongly recommends a practice which combines the development of Zen-style "self power" with reliance on the "other power" of Amitabha Buddha. In other words, the student should combine formal meditation with the chanting of the mantra *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. The meditator and the Buddha become fused together in a mystical union. No longer is there any distinction between Zen and Pure Land, self-power or other power, wisdom or compassion, for everything has become transformed into the brightness of Infinite Light. Samsara becomes Nirvana. All the bliss and purity of the Western Paradise are realized in the here and now of every day life.

Here the Zen and Pure Land schools meet in that common center from which they both emanate, the One Mind of Buddha, which is our true and permanent Essence of Mind.

## The Method of Meditation Practice

by Ven. Dr. Thich Thien-An, Founder and first Director

To fully experience the benefit of meditation it is best to practice in a quiet place with a congenial atmosphere, such as a meditation center or in a quiet secluded area of the home. The quality of meditation is strongly influenced by the environment. While meditating it is best to have a soft light or candles, incense burning, and some fresh flowers tastefully arranged about a small altar.

The first thing to learn in practicing meditation is the proper posture. Strictly speaking, Zen meditation has nothing to do with any particular posture. At its highest level, meditation is to be practiced in the midst of all sorts of activities—standing, walking, studying, working, driving, etc. In the history of Zen Buddhism many a master attained enlightenment while washing dishes, cooking, carrying water and collecting fuel. If the mind is kept under control and the adept remains mindful of what he

is doing, even washing dishes can become a vehicle to self-realization.

However, while we can meditate in any activity, the best way to control the mind is by the practice of sitting meditation. In the Zen tradition there are two ways of sitting, the full-lotus and the half-lotus. The full-lotus posture involves placing each foot across the opposite thigh. The half-lotus involves placing one foot across the opposite thigh with the other foot resting upon the ground. If the half-lotus is too difficult, the beginner may move his foot from his thigh, placing it directly on the floor in front of the other leg, the ankles close together. The knees should be spread as far apart as possible, resting on the floor. Higher cushions will help to lower the knees to the proper position. If the meditator cannot sit on the floor, a chair may be used. The most important point in sitting is to hold the body erect, stable and comfortable. The meditator must not let the body lean to the right or left, forward or backward, but he must keep it straight. When the body is stabilized through the proper posture, the mind too becomes stable and calm, and with a calm mind the practice of mental concentration can be undertaken.

Once the body is erect, the hands are placed on the lap, the left hand on the right palm; both hands lay near the lower abdomen. The two thumbs should be joined at the top, making an empty circle. The circle represents the moon, the symbol of emptiness, Mu. The circle signifies that during meditation while the hands are empty the mind is also empty. A meditator does not think about the past or future, does not worry about the external world, but just sits in meditation, at one with himself here and now. If meditating alone, the eyes may be kept partially open, looking downwards at a distance of about three feet. If practice is with a group, it is best to close the eyes to avoid distraction. The tongue should be touching the upper part of the mouth to avoid excess salivation.

The most important thing is to keep the mind under control, so it can return to its natural condition of calm and quiet. To regulate the mind the first and most effective method is awareness of breathing. Breathing in the Zen tradition differs from yogic breathing, where the meditator breathes deeply and retains the air for long periods of time. In Zen everything is natural. The sitter just breathes in and out, lightly and naturally, but remains aware of his breathing. He does not allow his mind to wander here and there. He ties it down to the here and now of present existence. When he finishes one cycle of inhalation and exhalation, as he finishes breathing out he counts one; when he finishes the second cycle he counts two; and so on, up to ten. Then he counts backwards from ten down to one. This method is very simple, but it is not easy to practice. As we practice, many times we find that the mind is drifting away from its object. We may find ourselves counting: "One, what time is it? Two, what am I going to do tomorrow? Three, what is the best way to go home tonight? etc." When the mind drifts the sitter should just let go of all extraneous thoughts and bring his attention back to the breathing, just breathing in and out fully aware of what he is doing. Just counting and breathing—there is nothing more.

## Anitya, The Teaching on Impermanence

by Ven. Dr. Karuna Dharma, (Thich An Tu) Abbot, I.B.M.C.

*Anicca* (*anitya*, Skt.) impermanence, underlies all Buddhist thought and practice and is the foundation of Buddhist understanding of reality. It is one of the three marks of all existence, along with *Anatman* and *Duhkha*, which the Buddha explained in his second sermon.

For many centuries most Western people had thought that the



universe was a permanent thing, put into place by a Creator God, with the earth at its center. They reasoned that such a complex system could not come into existence except through the creation of a superior intelligence. They named that superior intelligence God and declared his permanence. They believed that humankind reflected the image of God and contained also an immortal essence, which they termed soul. So, while things around them might change, they reasoned, at least they were assured of permanence, an eternal existence after death if they lived in accordance with God's will.

In India twenty-five centuries ago, Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, proclaimed that there is no permanence anywhere. In his enlightenment experience he witnessed the arising and disappearing of entire universe systems. He saw very clearly that all things are impermanent, that they arise, mature and pass away. He recognized that all things are comprised of conditioned states and that there is no permanent essence to anything. He also realized that the arising and disappearing of states of existence occurred because of various conditions. Should any condition change, the object changed or disappeared.

Even those things which appear to be permanent and unchanging also are in a constant state of change. The mountains appear to be permanent and unchanging, but their very existence is the result of tectonic forces within the crust and mantle of the earth. Volcanoes, inactive for many centuries come alive and new ones pop into existence. Earthquakes build mountain ranges. Ocean becomes land and land becomes ocean. These changes never cease. All matter itself is alive with constant change. Its very nature is a mass of constantly moving energy. Rocks may appear to be inert objects, but in actuality, their very structure is one of constant movement.

The Buddha taught that all conditioned things are impermanent and constantly changing and that they have no permanent essence. He explained that while we may think of ourselves as single objects of existence, in fact humans are made up of a collection of five conditioned, impermanent states: body (*rupa*), sense contacts and sensations (*vedana*), perceptions and conceptions (*samijña*), volitional actions and karmic tendencies (*samskaras*) and basic consciousness (*vijñāna*). These collections (*skandhas*) of things are the true nature of the person and they are constantly changing. The body grows old, becomes ill and dies. Sense contacts lead to perception and conception and these are constantly changing. Our karmic activities never cease and underlying all these is the basal consciousness, which at death also disappears with all of the other *samskaras*.

The Buddha explained that we should not become too attached to our bodies and their sensual experiences and thoughts that arise from them, because the attachment to our bodies and to life causes us great *dukkha*, suffering and misery. Sense contact brings us sense experiences which we then term as desirable or undesirable. From this judgment arises the desire to re-experience similar sensual experiences, which lead directly to attachment. This attachment then leads to a great thirst or craving for the experience. Soon we are entrapped in the need to continue such experiences, for we feel we need or want them. But all experience is very momentary. Hardly have we grasped onto one, when it disappears and a new attraction grabs our minds. Soon we are enmeshed in a great, complex web of desire, all of which is very transitory, and thus unsatisfactory.

The Buddha stated that for us to become free from the constant round of rebirth and suffering, we would need to realize the changing nature of things in its true perspective, so that we could free ourselves from the need for certain experiences, attachment to self and to the illusion of permanence.

One of the major causes of *dukkha* is our puny attempts to make impermanent things permanent. We want to amass and hold on to things which please our ego concepts. We strive to hold on to youth, to wealth, to fame, to romance. All of these experiences are fleeting. They arise, mature and disintegrate. It is not change itself which causes the greatest pain, it is our resistance to this change that causes the real *dukkha*. The Buddha again and again explained: "Impermanent indeed are all conditioned things; they are of the nature of arising and passing away. Having come into being, they cease to exist. Hence their pacification is tranquility."

He urged his disciples to truly understand the ultimate nature of all things, that is their impermanence. He had his disciples meditate upon the disintegration of things, including their own bodies, in order to try to break their inordinate clinging to objects of all kinds: physical, vocal or mental.

Once the individual truly sees that things cannot be grasped for more than a few moments, then these unhealthy attachments and aversions can be given up and the practitioner can be freed from the enslavement he has produced for himself.

## Bringing Dharma into Relationships

by Ven. Dr. Karuna Dharma

I would like to share a few things I have learned over the years about bringing Dharma into relationships. Human relations is the area in which our practice is most seriously tested. By looking at our relationships, we can gauge the progress of our practice and see how profoundly it is affecting our lives.

In a room with forty people, there are forty different universes. Each one of us sits at the center of our universe. Because it is a universe that we have created, we believe in it. The problem is that each of us views our individual universe from our own particular little time and space, and our universes do not always coincide, so frictions develop. Each of us sits and looks at the others, honestly not understanding what has created the disharmony. Each of us creates our own fictitious universe which we genuinely believe to be true. This can cause serious problems when we become involved in relationships.

How do we solve these problems? How do we remove the barrier that we have drawn around our little universe so we won't be constantly bumping and grating against someone else's? The best way is to drop all the defenses we've thrown up to protect the person who sits in the middle of that universe. We spend so much time building and shoring up these defenses. That means less time is spent in communicating directly.

Where do the defenses come from? Our defenses are there to protect the fictitious universe we have fabricated and regard as true. I may not buy your fabrication, because I didn't create it, but I buy mine and I know mine is superior to yours. See? This is what really interferes with our human relationships. We very busily try to keep a fiction going that is all of our own creation.

Suppose we are on a train and see, for just one second, something happening outside the window. How accurate is our

Interpretation of that event? How much can we understand of the image we see? We peek into each other's universes for a brief moment, as if passing on a speeding train, yet we're very quick to interpret what we glimpsed in that moment. We are sure our interpretation is correct. This is very dangerous

If I can free myself from what I have fabricated, there will be no need to continue building or repairing my defenses. And the fewer defenses I have, the better I can communicate and understand you, because I no longer feel threatened. What you think of me means nothing if I feel secure. I only feel fearful because my view of reality has been threatened. The problem is not that someone has been talking behind my back; the problem is that I found out about it and feel that I do not deserve it.

We can disagree about things, but why should that cause conflict? We may never agree on some things, because we perceive things from different angles, but that does not have to result in conflict. Why should we be upset because we disagree? When we do not have anything to protect, there is no longer anything to fear. We can experience everything fully, which is wonderful. We can really enjoy being in other people's company, because we're not busy maintaining our own identity. Why waste the time? Why create the anger and the hurt?

We need to let go, but it is not easy. The closer the relationship, the closer we come to our image of who we are. The closer things strike this concept of self we have fabricated, the more difficult it is. Meditation can be very helpful here. We need just hear the sounds, observe the view, and become one with all of it, without feeling any separation. This can help us change our viewpoint and interpretation of the self. We don't have to protect ourselves from the little bird that just went by; we just hear it.

We can begin knocking down the barriers in everything we do: in groups, at work, with our friends, our boss, our lover. If something disturbs us, we can just observe it, and gradually we become a bit more objective. When someone says something, we do not automatically think: "What does that mean? It is because I am a woman. It is because of my ethnic background. It is because I belong to a certain religious tradition." Maybe it is because you did something that was insensitive or hurtful. There may be many reasons, but once we let our fabricated self-image drop away, we can begin to understand people.

We can be either contented or discontented, happy or unhappy. So why be unhappy? Usually we regard as positive those things which reinforce our concept of who we are, and as negative those things which either do not reinforce that concept or threaten it. These habit patterns are very difficult to break, but once I break them, I am not bothered even if someone launches a full-scale attack on me.

If others are making our life miserable, why let them win? Instead, we can look at ourselves and our idiosyncrasies, accept them, and learn to laugh at them. We learn to love ourselves with all our perceived strengths and all our perceived weaknesses. When I become angry, or when I feel guilty because I am not a fully enlightened Buddha is the height of egotism. On the phenomenological level, we are not Buddhas yet. When misunderstandings occurred, my teacher used to say, "Well, we're not Buddhas yet!" We need not expect ourselves to be Buddhas nor expect our partners to be Buddhas either.

Situations of hurt need to be depersonalized so that the victim

does not become burdened with guilt or shame. Healing cannot occur as long as we internalize events and blame ourselves. In a sense, in not understanding the essence of the mind, the perpetrator is also the victim. Rather than creating a separation between myself as victim and the other as perpetrator, we need to understand that each of us is capable of the most heinous acts. If you do not believe it, you have not explored yourself very well yet. Rather than deny it, we need to confront ourselves very directly. There are also countless ways in which we victimize ourselves.

By contrast, a bodhisattva, one who is truly on the path, has an invincible armor: the armor of love. The love of a bodhisattva is immeasurably great, and we can glimpse it through intensive meditation. Such a being willingly endures lifetimes of suffering to save other beings. The bodhisattva path is wisdom and compassion: a path of choosing wisely, with love.

## Living With Our Ordinary Selves

by Ven. Sarika Dharma

What is ordinary self? What is True Self? And what is self? I'd like to begin by describing the progress one makes in Zen practice by using the Zen circle analogy, which is the one Zen Master Seung Sahn uses.

If you picture a circle, starting at zero degrees up at the top, that is ordinary self. That is the place where we get up every day, we go to work, we drive our cars on the freeway, we deal with our families. Ordinary life. But all the time that we're doing this in our ordinary life, in our ordinary self, we also have lots of stuff in our heads. We make constant commentary on what is going on in our life. So we get on the freeway and it's backed up, and we say "I wish these people would get out of the way. Why does everybody have to be driving here? I've got to get to work, I'm going to be late, my boss is going to give me a hard time." Or while driving on the freeway we're thinking about what we're going to do that evening. We sometimes drive right past our exit because we're thinking so much. So many thoughts fill our head.

That's our ordinary lives, at zero degrees around the circle. Something happens then. We realize that we are not totally happy in our ordinary lives and maybe there is something else, some other way of being, some other way of dealing with the world. And perhaps we begin to read about meditation and Zen, and we get some ideas that life doesn't always have to be like this. That's 90 degrees around the circle, a quarter of the way. Intellectually, we become aware that we could change in some positive way and make our lives easier, make our lives happier.

180 degrees around the circle is once we start meditating. We actually take the action to sit down to practice what we've read about, and we find that we get very peaceful. Sometimes we even get attached to that peace and want to meditate all the time. "Don't want to live my life. Want to stay in the Zendo and be peaceful and calm and not worry about all these thoughts. Let them go, let go of all these annoying thoughts." My master used to say that our mind is like a drunken monkey jumping from branch to branch, never stopping with all these thoughts. But once we start meditating we do start to let go of the thoughts.

Then we go another quarter of the way around the circle, 270 degrees, and this is the place where we begin to realize that we can have power. This is the place where you see Indian fakirs sleeping on nails and walking on glass. You may begin to have powers of seeing what people are really thinking; not reading their minds so much as just being aware of these things. In Zen, this place is very dangerous. In Zen, we say go right through it, don't



stop there or it will catch you. It can embroil you; it's a place where you could learn to be very manipulative of other people. So in Zen practice we want to go right through that place.

And when we do get beyond that place, we come out to 360 degrees around the circle. What is 360 degrees? It's the same place as zero degrees. We're now at the same place we started, except everything is different. Because now, when we eat, we just eat; when we sleep, we just sleep; when we drive on the freeway, we just drive.

So, the ordinary self that is at zero degrees and the True Self that is at 360 degrees is really the same in a way.

The attained masters that I've met seemed to me to be very extraordinarily ordinary. My teacher was that way. He was a very important man, very highly thought of, but if you were around him you could see that he was just ordinary. He would water the lawn and rake the leaves and he would participate in the events at the Center. If we were doing a retreat, he would do some of the cooking. He would laugh a lot and sometimes he would cry and sometimes he would be upset. But it all would pass right through him. When he got angry, he would be angry and let it go. And when he looked at you, he saw you. He was just right there, right with you. He could do this because his mind was not cluttered with thoughts. He was one of the most unpretentious people I have ever met. Extraordinarily ordinary.

When I was preparing this talk I consulted the dictionary to see what it said about the word "ordinary." This is what I found: "The regular or customary condition or course of things. Of a kind to be expected in the normal order of events. Routine, usual. Of common quality, rank or ability. Deficient in quality, poor, inferior, common."

In light of this definition, none of us wants to be ordinary. We don't want to be deficient in quality, poor, inferior, or common. But we need to think of ordinary in a different way: in the sense of every day and every moment. Our lives happen moment by moment.

We may think that we need to live a very exciting and adventurous life to have any significance. This is not necessarily the case. We watch people who have fame and fortune and see how sometimes it is much more painful to them than our ordinary lives, yet we still have an idea that we are inadequate unless we can accomplish great things.

When I was in college, a long time ago, I wanted to become a fiction writer. My idea was that if I could write a short story that would be published in a college textbook, essentially I would live forever, and with some status. Somehow that would make my life meaningful. Well, I never did and I certainly don't care about that anymore, but I think it's very common for us to want something more than ordinary. What Zen says to us is be in your ordinary self, aware and conscious, and things change, and everything looks different.

Zen is not about anything special. When we sit in meditation we don't try to get into an altered state of consciousness. In Zen, we are simply aware. We hear the dogs barking, we hear the water running in the pool. When we sit, we don't try to go into a trance. We stay grounded. Zen is about being here now.

There's a Zen story of a student who asked her master, "How can I find the true meaning of life?" And the master asked, "Did you eat your meal?" The student replied that she had. The master said, "Wash your bowl."

It's very interesting to live in a monastic setting. While training and doing retreats, you find that you no longer have to make decisions, unless you're leading the group. Everything is just follow the leader. Everything is done together. No one is to stand out, everyone follows whoever's leading. And the person who is leading is not some special authoritarian figure. That person is just the leader, and that's the one you follow. By doing that you don't need to think about what should I do next. You don't need to think about is it time to do this. You simply go along and follow. That frees you up in many ways to see the world as it really is, to experience each moment, to be ordinary and yet still be connected.

Let's talk about the self, because in Buddhism there is no such thing as a permanent self. There is no such thing as a soul. The self is the same as everything else in the world, it's simply a process that's constantly, constantly changing. We can't grab on to it because it's always in motion.

In Buddhist psychology, the skandas are said to make up the self, our personality—who we are. The word skandas can be translated as "aggregates" or "heaps." There are five skandas, called nama-rupa. Rupa is form, the matter which makes up our bodies. The nama are the mental aggregates: sensation, perception, conception, and consciousness. Sensations are the messages we receive through our sense organs. Perception occurs when a sensation connects into our brain and we have an idea, perhaps assigning a name to the sensation. For example, we might see a flower and then we might think, "flower." Conception has to do with what meaning the flower has for us; we might think something like, "That flower is really beautiful." Finally, we have consciousness, our awareness of what's going on. What we call the self is essentially a process of all these things happening.

One of the characteristics of the skandas is that they are imperfect (dukkha), meaning that nothing works out the way we want it to exactly. The skandas are sometimes called aggregates of attachment, because they can lead to craving and desire. Another characteristic of the skandas, though, is that they are without essence (anatta). The skandas don't have an essence because they are impermanent (anicca). Thus, the skandas are empty. Emptiness is a very important concept in Zen, but it's difficult to understand initially because we think of empty meaning there's nothing there. In Zen, emptiness is a lot closer to the idea that there's nothing to grab on to because everything, including the self, is constantly changing.

Sometimes in our practice we get a kensho experience, a flash of what is our True Self. At first, it's just a flash, a momentary flash. As we go along in our practice, it might last a little longer each time until we get to the point where we can be with our True Nature a lot of the time. But even so, we have to remember that our ordinary self comes back. When we are in our ordinary self we can still make many misjudgments, and we need to be aware of that.

I think you know from your own lives how we deal with things when we're just our ordinary selves. Somebody says something that isn't very complimentary, something critical, and we think, "Hey! You can't say that to me. I'll get you for that!" We have an urge to strike out. Suppose we're in a relationship with someone and we aren't getting along. We think we're right and the other person is wrong and we want it our way. It all has to do with our ego. One of the differences between ordinary self and True Self is our ego involvement, our focus on the belief that we have a self that can be injured and therefore has to be protected.

As we begin to get closer and get glimpses of True Self, we have a better understanding that all life has to do with interaction. That in life, things arise together. In our relationships with other people, we begin to think maybe "That person's having a bad day. Maybe that person's under a lot of stress. That's why they said what they said to me. It didn't really have to do with me." We begin to understand that if we get into a traffic jam on the freeway it wasn't designed to make us late or cause us trouble, it's just a traffic jam.

In Zen, people talk about how you have to die on the pillow. You have to sit on your zafu until your ego is annihilated, and then you will find your True Nature. I believe it is more like you have to expand your ego to include everything. Because we are one with everything around us. We are one with everybody, whether we like it or not. That is who we really are. We are all connected.

Once you expand this feeling of ego, you don't have to defend yourself so much, you don't have to protect yourself so much, you don't have to worry about being attacked all the time. You can relax and you can be more open to other people and more flowing with whatever's happening.

The growth of the True Self comes through practice. It's necessary to study, it's necessary to hear discourses and discuss dharma with people and to read what the masters have written, but it's also very necessary to sit.

When you sit, you begin to break down the wall of ego. You get a little crack at first, a tiny little hole you can see through. But ultimately, total enlightenment must be the annihilation of the wall. Now this was the same wall that our ordinary self was trying to get through by butting our heads against it. We can get very bloody and battered on our heads, but it just won't work. We often don't know any better so we have to try that at first. But once we can sit down, once we can let go, the wall begins to dissolve and we get that much closer to our True Nature.

There is a koan in Zen, which is "What was your original face before you were born?" Sometimes it's "What was your original face before your parents were born?" How would you answer that?

Yes, it's driving at your True Nature. It's asking what is your True Nature. This is what is, what we are all part of, our True Natures. If you find who you are, if you find how your mind works, if you find your own True Nature, you know everyone's True Nature. Of course you still have to deal with their ordinary selves, as we all continue to deal with our own ordinary self.

I'll close with another Zen story. Three Zen students were talking about whose master was most attained. One student says, "My master is so powerful that she can stand on one side of the river and write through the air, making marks on a piece of paper held by her attendant on the other side of the river." The second student says, "Well, that's okay, but my master's so powerful that she can go across the river without a boat, without any help, without getting wet, because she simply walks on the water." And the third student says, "Well, that's all very fine, but my master is truly attained. Because when she eats, she just eats, and when she sleeps, she just sleeps."

## What Is Karma and How Can I Change It?

*by Rev. TriRatna Priya, Thich Tam Tue, given at IBMC on November 21, 1999*

Buddhism teaches that each being passes through many lives until by rigorous self effort, or in the case of Pure Land teaching, profound faith, he/she is able to attain liberation from the cycle of continuous rebirths. One might ask "Why is it so bad to live eternally in a series of different bodies? The answer to that question is that in the six realms, life is pleasant only in the heaven of the gods. Even those who dwell in heaven are haunted by the knowledge that they are only there as a reward for meritorious conduct in the past, and when they have used up all the reward that is coming to them, they will be toppled from their thrones and forced to face the ignominious indignity of being born again in one of the lower realms.

In the realm of the demigods, the Asuras are always squabbling and fighting among themselves. Even the human realm, the one best known to us, can hardly be described as all fun and games.

Because of the great cosmic law called anitya, everything is constantly changing. One day we are on top of the world; the next we are down in the dumps. When we are young we usually enjoy good health and are surrounded by our loved ones, who, we assume, will always be with us. We are filled with optimism and high hopes for the future. As time passes, however, we see our dreams, aspirations and ambitions fade into nothingness. Our parents grow old and die. Possibly our marriages fail and our children grow up, and we find ourselves old, alone and in failing health.

Is this the scenario we want repeated forever with no hope of some sort of progress to a higher state that will not fade and dissolve before our very eyes, but will be eternal? Not much needs to be said about those tragic beings who have had the terrible misfortune of being born in the animal realm, the hungry ghost realm or the hell realm. In their case the law of anitya can be considered a supreme blessing. Since not even punishment is eternal, the denizens of these realms of extreme suffering are not condemned to remain in their pitiable state forever, but as soon as they indicate that they have learned their lessons and are sorry for their past misdeeds, they will attain their next rebirths in higher realms with the possibility of eventual advancement to the human realm, the most desirable of all, because only a human is able to attain enlightenment and pass into the eternal release of Nirvana and transcend forever the "Wheel of Transmigration." If there is so much suffering connected with existence, why do we have to be born at all?

According to Buddhism the whole of existence, its continuity through many rebirths and ultimate cessation are explained by a detailed formula stressing the principles of conditionality, relativity and interdependence. This formula is called pratitya-samutpada, Conditioned Genesis or Co-dependent Arising, consists of twelve factors or pre-conditions. They are: 1) ignorance of the Four Noble Truths, the suffering ridden nature of existence. Through this ignorance come conditional, volitional actions or karma formations. 2) Through volitional actions is conditioned consciousness. 3) Through consciousness are conditioned mental and physical phenomena. 4) Through mental and physical phenomena are conditioned the six faculties (the five sense organs and mind). 5) Through the six faculties are conditioned sensorial and mental contact. 6) Through sensory and mental contact is conditioned sensation. 7) This sequence, repeated over and over until



Enlightenment is attained, explains how life arises, exists and continues.

Also, by examining the formula carefully, we can discover the manner in which existence and suffering can be brought to an end.

Through the complete cessation of ignorance, volitional activities or karma formations cease to exist. Through the cessation of volitional activities, consciousness ceases to exist. Through the cessation of consciousness, mental and physical phenomena cease to exist, and so forth until through the cessation of birth to so that death, sorrow and lamentation also no longer occur.

Another important and time honored belief pertaining to the twelve links or causal stages is that they are distributed over not just one life, but over three lives. The first and second links belong to the last birth, the eleventh and twelfth to the next birth and the remainder to the present life. Each existence, then, may be regarded as possessing two links from the past, eight from the present and a second pair belonging to the future life.

Pursuing this logic even further, it becomes evident that when the three divisions are combined, each life can be regarded as possessing twelve links or causal stages, and the three lives as possessing thirty-six. Thirst or *tanha* (trsnā, Skt), the eighth causal stage occurring in the chain of *pratitya-samutpada*, called the Buddhist law of cause and effect, is most intimately linked or associated with what is generally accepted as the universal law of karma. This thirst or desire, according to the Second Noble Truth, is the factor which causes re-existence or rebecoming. It expresses itself as a thirst for sense pleasures, a thirst for existence and becoming as well as a thirst for non-existence (self-annihilation). Therefore, we can easily see that this thirst, desire, craving, leads to all forms of suffering, since it is responsible for our being reborn over and over again. However, as should be clear by now, *tanha* should not be thought of as a first cause since everything is relative and interdependent. Its arising can be traced back according to *pratitya-samutpada* through the stages of 7) conditioned sensation, 6) sensorial and mental contact 5) the six faculties 4) mind and body 3) consciousness, 2) volitional actions all the way to 1) *avidya* - ignorance.

Thus, *tanha*, thirst, is not the first cause of the arising of *dukkha* - unsatisfactoriness, the results of karma, but it is the most palpable and immediate cause. At this point we should clear up some confusion which may linger concerning the term karma. This much abused word literally means action or deed. However, in Buddhist theory it means only volitional action, not all action. Unfortunately, some confusion exists in the public understanding of this term since the word karma is often misused to indicate the result of the action instead of the action itself. The result, or fruit, of volitional action is properly called *karma phala* or *karma vipaka*. Volitional action, motivated, instigated, by *tanha*, thirst or desire may be relatively good or bad. Therefore, good karma (a good action or deed) produces good results and bad karma (a bad action or deed) produces bad results.

Thus, thirst leads to volition. Volition leads to action or karma, and the end result is that a force has been set in motion that causes life to continue either in a good or bad direction. In this manner we are bound to the cycle of continuity which is *samsara*.

The volitional impulses or intentions, called *samskaras*, that precede every action, whether physical, verbal or mental, create the condition for a new rebirth. In addition, these *samskaras* determine the type of rebirth, since they can be good, bad, or neutral. Their quality conditions the new consciousness that arises, guiding it to a specific womb after the death of the old body and thus, bringing about the existence of a new being.

What we call death is the total non-functioning of the physical body. However, we have all learned in the past that a living being is composed of five aggregates, or collections: form, sensation, perception, volition and consciousness, in other words a combination of physical and mental forces or energies. The Buddhist religion emphatically teaches that will, volition, the desire to exist and continue is the greatest force, the greatest energy in the world. This force does not become extinct with the death of the body, but furnishes the irresistible drive that ensures rebirth and a continuation of *dukkha* on this terrestrial plane.

Actually, the difference between death and rebirth is only a thought moment: the last thought moment of this life conditions the first thought moment in the next life. In the absence of a fixed soul that passes from life to life, the only thing that passes is this mental, psychic, karmic energy. Weaknesses, flaws of character, tendencies, habit patterns, good qualities all seem to be expressions of this karmic energy brought over from the previous life.

However, the main problem seems to be this terrible thirst to be and to become and to gratify all the desires of a non-existent personal ego, which drive us on from one life to the next. Only through the acquisition of wisdom, which finally perceives reality and truth can this driving force, this thirst be extinguished forever. Those persons who are intent on acquiring wealth or fame, while enjoying every conceivable sensual pleasure, even if it means inflicting pain or suffering on other beings, certainly does not diminish the terrible, driving thirst, but binds them more tightly to the wheel of transmigration.

Obviously, the moment has come for us to make an all important choice. Are we going to just drift with the tide of false ideals and values of our society or are we going to follow the less popular path, the one indicated by our Lord Sakyamuni Buddha? This path does not offer the promise of wealth, luxury, or the tantalizing pleasures of a Las Vegas lifestyle. In fact, at times our tender feet may have to tread over jagged rocks and sharp thorns. However, we have one promise that will console us and strengthen our resolve, abiding with us every moment at the ordeal in front of us. This promise is encapsulated in the stirring words of Sakyamuni Buddha: "Here is the path leading to the end of suffering, tread it."

It is not difficult for a thoughtful, serious person to choose between the two paths open to him. Such a person realizes that all beings will have to one day tread the path of righteousness. Even Hitler and Mao Tse Tung will become Buddhas eventually. The path leading to worldly success, sensual pleasure, wealth and fame, may appeal to frivolous, shallow persons, who live for the gratification of the moment. Nevertheless, those individuals will be sorry to learn that the hedonistic, materialistic pleasures cannot be fulfilled, but in its place there will be an abundance of suffering.

Now let us assume that we have chosen a serious commitment to follow the path indicated by Lord Buddha. What should we do? How must we go about setting our feet firmly on the path leading to enlightenment and liberation? We may be confused at first, because after the most superficial search, we will discover that there is not just one, unified form of Buddhism. On the one hand,

we will discover the Theravada form of Buddhism, and on the other, Mahayana with its various branches: Zen, Pure Land and Tibetan Buddhism. With such a surfeit of riches, where should we start?

Probably the wisest course to follow is to find out what all the various traditions of Buddhism have in common. In other words, our inquiry should seek to locate and identify the basic foundation stones on which the magnificent edifice of Buddhism is built. If we ask almost any Buddhist concerning this matter, we will instantly be told that the most basic doctrines of the Buddhist religion are the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Even a practitioner with relatively little experience will be able to tell us that, in the early stages of Buddhist practice at least, there is no better blueprint for a lifestyle that in all its aspects will be conducive to positive growth towards a state of wisdom than the Noble Eightfold Path.

The first step of the Path, Right Views, is extremely important since it confronts the basic problem of ignorance, the starting point of the twelve links in the chain of Conditioned Genesis, and therefore of all our problems, suffering or dukkha. Ignorance or avidya, in a general sense, is the antithesis of Bodhi, or wisdom, and can be considered a general deprivation of wisdom. From a Buddhist point of view, it is considered specifically to be ignorance of Conditioned Genesis, the Four Noble Truths and other basic doctrines of Buddhism. If one wishes to discover the antidote to the poison of ignorance, he must study, read, attend classes and lectures, and in every way possible, seek to learn about and understand these fundamental tenets, doctrines and beliefs which were taught by our master, the great Lord Sakyamuni Buddha.

The second step of the Eightfold Noble Path, Right Intention, is equally important, maybe even more so, because at this stage, we have to look into our deepest "heart of hearts" and ask ourselves: Are we really ready to put the welfare of other beings before our own? Can we sincerely and without regret give up any thought of pursuing the goals of wealth, power, fame and sensual gratifications as favored by the hedonistic revelers who have assumed the position of self-styled arbiters of taste and style in our society? Finally, are we ready out of love and devotion to Lord Buddha, to realize the interconnectedness with all other beings and make an irrevocable commitment to help the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the immense task of leading all sentient beings to redemption?

If the answer to this question is "No", there is no use at this time of pursuing the quest. However, sooner or later, samsara and all pervasive dukkha will bring those who have strayed back to the path of the Buddha.

If we have managed to get past the second step, Right Intentions, of the Eightfold Noble Path, we will find that the next three steps deal with sila, ethical, moral behavior. They are Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. The idea here is that the sincere devotee must adopt a simple, virtuous lifestyle which, while diminishing his own attachment to samsara, harms no creature, and is helpful and beneficial to all.

We talked earlier about tanha, the terrible thirst which is the driving force behind karma or action. We certainly will not overcome the thirst for money, power, fame, material possessions and sensual pleasures by indulging out appetite. Indulgence never brings satisfaction. There is never enough. The more you get, the more you want. Therefore, we must consciously replace bad habits with good habits. Buddhism,

after all, is the Middle Way, located between the extremes of asceticism and excessive indulgence. Consequently, if we make up our minds that we are going to adopt a simple, restrained lifestyle, refusing for evermore to feed the flames of desire, we can expect to see the terrible driving thirst begin to wither away.

Aiding us in this destruction or annihilation of tanha will be the next three steps on the Eightfold Noble Path, namely, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. These three steps include the development of rigorous self-discipline, mind training, and above all, the cultivation of the supreme technique taught by the Lord Buddha for the purpose of developing wisdom and compassion. This technique, meditation, purifies the individual's consciousness of all hindrances, impediments, and especially this terrible, false ego-driven thirst which has already dogged our footsteps for who knows how many aeons.

Armed with the potent weapons the Lord Buddha left for us, we are no longer defenseless, since we can without further delay develop a personal program of deliverance whose features and organization will depend upon each individual's present level of development, special needs and particular temperament. We may choose from a number of techniques which have proved effective to hundreds of practitioners in the past. We may begin by counting and observing the breath and then cultivate more advanced forms of samatha in order to calm the mind. Also, we may practice the time honored vipasyana that develops insight into the true nature of the world and the ultimate reality - sunyata - emptiness. Another option is intense sitting meditation and koan study according to the Zen method, which is focused on the attainment of samadhi and instant enlightenment. Certain persons may find the Tibetan method of endless chanting of mantras combined with intricate visualizations well suited to their personal needs. Finally, the Pure Land path of intense devotion and faith in the saving grace of Amitabha Buddha may be chosen by some devotees as the best way for them to reach the end of suffering.

Nevertheless, whatever technique or combination of techniques a practitioner may choose for his personal meditation practice, there is another method of eliminating the unwanted baggage. We drag wearily from life to life. This baggage is the karmic energy which manifests as undesirable traits, flaws, predilections and habit patterns, and it will continue to pursue us until we have effectively dealt with it.

Some of these flaws and traits are so firmly entrenched that it will take a lot of work to get rid of them. First of all, we must probe deeply, without excuses or self-deception, into the innermost levels of our consciousness in order to locate and identify the pathetic accumulation of unwanted karmic luggage, much of it probably almost hidden beneath mold and cobwebs.

If we find selfishness and cruelty, we must drag it out into the sunlight without apology or excuses, and immediately embark on a program of deliberate acts of kindness and consideration towards others. In addition, during our meditation periods, we should emphasize the repetition of loving kindness chants.

If we reveal to ourselves that we are stingy, then we must deliberately become involved in philanthropic activities. If we are addicted to sensual pleasures, we must use all our willpower to refrain from indulgences that in reality hurt no one but ourselves.

If we are filled with hate and bitterness and are likely to flare up with a horrible display of temper, wrath and fury, we must use all our powers of restraint and control at all times. During our periods of meditation we must remember with special emphasis the



always loving and infinitely compassionate Lord Buddha. In time, by following a method such as this, old bad habits and tendencies will be replaced by good habits and wholesome patterns of behavior.

By striving diligently along the lines I have described, the devotee will discover that the vast accumulation of basic ignorance within his being will begin to diminish and fade away. Deprived of the sinister fuel which originally set in motion and has sustained the whole sequence of links in the chain of Dependent Origination for so many years, the whole loathsome chain will collapse and disappear. Wisdom will triumph over ignorance, sweeping away irrevocably the last trace of belief in a false ego.

The scorching flames of thirst, *tanha*, desire, like a fire from which all oxygen has been withdrawn, will flicker and die forever. Karma and its results will cease to exist, and we will be free from bondage at last, and able to transcend *samsara* and pass into the eternal peace of Nirvana.

## Self and Non-Self, a talk given at IBMC

by Rev. Kusala Ratna Karuna (Thich Tam-Thien)

Sometimes when I am speaking about Buddhism around other Buddhists, they will say, "But that's not Buddhism. Why are you saying that?" Sometimes when I hear a Christian speaking about Christianity, probably somebody is also thinking, "But that's not Christianity." So, I would like to talk about what Buddhism is and how to listen to somebody speaking about Buddhism. One of the Bodhisattva vows goes like this: "Dharma gates are limitless, I vow to study them all." So if somebody says, "That's not Buddhism," I think we need to be concerned. And if somebody says, "That is Buddhism," I think we need to be curious.

So, what is Buddhism? Buddhism had a founder, Siddhartha Gautama, in the same way some wise and skillful person made the first motorcycle. As Buddhism went through the world Buddhism became diverse. Cultural and religious perspectives got mixed in with it. In the same way as motorcycle technology became more sophisticated we have a vast variety of motorcycles to choose from now. So, can we say that a Yamaha is not a motorcycle; can we say that a Duhkati is not a motorcycle. Can we say that an Italian motorcycle is not a motorcycle? Can we say that a German motorcycle is not a motorcycle? Can we marvel in that diversity of motorcycles that are available today? Can we marvel in that diversity of Buddhist perspectives that are available to us today? If I had the time and money I would love to ride all the motorcycles and see which one suits me best. Do I want to be on one of those little sports bikes with 135 hp between my legs with the potential of doing 175 mph, or would I like some big old fat Harley Davidson that lumbers along and makes a great sound and vibrates like my heartbeat: ta tum ta tum ta tum. For me, I listen to people talking about Buddhism and I find it just wonderful because there are so many kinds, and yet they all came from one founder, Siddhartha Gautama.

So, I think we need to be concerned and curious when someone makes a statement "This is Buddhism," or "That is not Buddhism." And now I am going to talk about something which those folks might have a problem about. I am going to talk about no self, no soul and emptiness. And the different perspectives have different things to say about it. What I hope to do is bring these perspectives together and unify the basic

concept. In the same way that most motorcycles have two wheels, most Buddhism have the same basic philosophies and psychotechnologies. So, why do we have this concept of *anatta* no soul. And if we are talking about no soul, are we talking about the soul of Christians, are we talking about the soul of Hindus or the soul of Phoenicians? Well, we cannot be talking about the soul of Christians, can we, because the Buddha was born 500 years before Christ. The Buddha never met a Jew. The Buddha never met anyone who was practicing the one god of the desert. He had nothing to say about the Christian soul, but he had a lot to say about the Hindu soul. So, as Buddhists talk to Christians we need to be comfortable in our presentation, because we do not deny the fact that a Christian soul exists. Neither do we accept the fact that a Christian soul exists. We are simply listening. Stephen Bachelo in his book, *Buddhism Without Beliefs* takes the approach of an agnostic: "I don't know." And I like that approach. I don't know if there is a soul. I don't know if there isn't a soul. I don't know if there is a god. I don't know if there isn't a god. I don't know. So what do we need to defend as Buddhists? I don't know.

So, what did the Buddha say about the Hindu soul? He said that the Hindu soul led to the concept of eternalism and led to the concept of nihilism. And both of those philosophical approaches did not lead to personal responsibility. It is an ethical reason that the Buddha spoke about no soul in the beginning. The problem with eternalism is that in the Hindu sense there is a chance for reincarnation where the soul is reincarnated time and time again time and time again until finally it gets it right. And then at that moment that piece merges back with Brahma, the Creator, and the task is done. But what does that say for personal responsibility in the present lifetime? Well, if I screw up in the present lifetime. I've got plenty more to make it right. So, the Buddha saw a problem with eternalism. The Buddha also saw a problem with nihilism. And nihilism or the nihilistic approach is that this is all there is. So it really doesn't matter what I do in this lifetime, because I am going to feed the trees, whether I'm a saint or a sinner. And the Buddha saw a problem in that. So he said there is no soul. He said there is no event that we can say exists independently, that travels from rebirth to rebirth or that simply vanishes after the body and mind die. He said there is something called no self, no soul, no event, process, process, not event. Well, for a Buddhist coming from a Hindu background, there was a big problem in rebirth as you can imagine, because if there is no soul that is reincarnated lifetime after lifetime, then what the heck goes on in the concept of rebirth. Now, Stephen Bachelo in his book says that he doesn't think Buddhism needs rebirth, but I want to state that in my personal feeling and understanding Buddhism does need rebirth because rebirth and karma are linked. And you can't get rid of one without the other. And we need karma, we need karma because we don't have a creator god that defines correct behavior for us. So, karma defines our behavior for us. The results of our karma our consequences, allows us to have reference point of skillful action, skillful speech, skillful intention. It is not the Creator God so we cannot get rid of rebirth. So how can we understand rebirth? Well, the Buddha said that our karmic energy is reborn lifetime after lifetime, that everything we intend, our speech and our action creates energy, and this energy has consequences. That energy cannot be killed, it cannot be created, it can simply be transformed. It is that karmic energy in fact that is reborn. Now in early Theravada Buddhism they speak about *gandhabba*, that is the energy that combines with the sperm and egg for a new human being to be reborn. They also speak about the *bhavanga* consciousness and it's imprinted with our past speech, action and intentions. In later Buddhism, in the Mahayana tradition, they talk about the storehouse consciousness, which is very similar. So we have a process that continues, but the event known as *Kusala* ceases to exist at the end of this lifetime.

So, where is the self, where is the soul, where is the essence, where is that quality that is unchanging? The Buddha looked, but he could not find it. So he had to come to the conclusion that it is process, not event. And this is considered the MiddlePath. But as the basic teachings of Theravada left India and went into China and Korea and Japan and Vietnam, we had some wonderful philosophers and scholars and practitioners who sat down with this basic stuff and took it to the next level. Through personal practice and dialogue with other philosophers and practitioners and they took this idea of no self, *anatta*, and came up with something that is really remarkable, it seems to me: and that is *sunyata*: emptiness, emptiness. They said that the whole world is empty. Everything has a quality of emptiness about it. Now what the heck are they talking about? I know that there is form and sound and sight and touch, and it seems pretty full to me when I look at the world. And I look at some people and they seem pretty full also. So, what are Mahayanists speaking about when they say everything is empty? Well it is not the emptiness that we find in a glass. Because when the glass is empty we have the idea of the container and nothing in the container. It is not that kind of emptiness. This emptiness directly relates to the self. In the early school of Theravada they said that everything lacks an independent existence, every thing lacks an essence, everything lacks a personal identity, everything. Wow. What does that mean to us as people who use speech to create the world around us and to create ourselves. Well, that means that this speech, this labeling technique that we have acquired, makes us deluded, creates the appearance of independent existence.

Let's get back to my favorite topic of motorcycles. Where does the motorcycle exist? In the 70's there was a book called by Robert Pirsig. He spoke about this same issue. Where is the essence of the motorcycle? What is the essence of quality? How can I look at a Harley and see a different kind of quality than I do with a Suzuki? What is the difference in quality between the two? Where is the essence between the two? They both have wheels and motors and brakes and gearshifts. Some has more plastic and some has more metal. But is there an essence, a quality? Yes, there is. I can sense the difference between a Suzuki and a Harley Davidson. But if we investigate it, if we take that Suzuki apart, if we take the Harley apart we end up with ten thousand pieces. We do not end up with an essence. And if we take ourselves apart the way the Buddha took himself apart, he didn't find an essence. He simply found parts. And in his later teachings he never spoke of a human being as one. It was always many. It was always more than one. A human being was *nama rupa*, name and form. A human being was the five aggregates. A human being was the thirty-two parts of the body. A human being was everything, but never one thing. We see only the one. We don't see the multiplicity and that gives us a chance to experience personal suffering, because we think that there is something to defend when somebody says something against us.

But who are we, where do we exist, in the same way as the Suzuki and the Harley Davidson. Where do they exist? Now philosophically this is a fascinating approach. We can tear our world apart into ten thousand pieces and what we start to see is that if we go smaller and smaller and smaller. We have the atoms, the protons and neutrons, the quarks, and we get even smaller and we come to this place where we have the wave particle theory, where everything goes back into itself, where there is no smallest part, where there is no smallest definable essence, and if we go into the universe, and we seek to find the end to the universe we find that it collapses upon itself again. It always comes back into itself. So there is no biggest part either

And if we look at ourselves, we find that there is no biggest part or smallest part. It is simply process, not an event. So philosophically we can say, "Okay, I can understand this. But how can it lead to the end of suffering in the world? Again, the Buddha's teaching is suffering and how we can end suffering. How can we use this concept to lead us to a place of equanimity and balance? Well, if in fact, we have this concept of Rinzai Zen Buddhist, that prevents us from connecting to the multiplicity of the world. We need to stand independent in order to define ourselves. We can define ourselves in gender roles, we can define ourselves as belonging to certain countries and states and cities. We can define ourselves according to employment. But whenever we define ourselves in any specific way we are forever separate from the multiplicity of the universe. So, if we come to this idea of *sunyata*, of emptiness, and if we define that as being void of an independent existence, at that moment of true experience, not simply intellectual understanding, at that moment of true experience of emptiness, *bodhicitta* arises, mind of enlightenment. The last piece that kept us separate from the universe has now been dissolved. We are in a wonderful, magical dance, something that we lost initially when self arose as we became human beings and needed to separate ourselves from the world. Now we are coming back to the world in a transcendental place. We are not going back to that primordial ignorance. We are going ahead. And at that moment when that last bit of separation dissolves if anybody in the world cries, we weep, because they are us. And if anyone in the world laughs we smile because they are us. It is impossible at that moment to turn away from the world. That is true compassion. When we are them that is true compassion and that only comes through personal experience of emptiness. Theravada Buddhism achieves the same thing through the concept of *anatta* and Mahayana Buddhism experiences it through *sunyata*. And it is my contention that the path of the Arhat and the Bodhisattva leads to the same place. There is no difference in the same way that there is no difference between a Suzuki and a Honda. Those differences are there because of marketing, not because of any kind of inherent reality. If someone says, "That is not Buddhism," we need to be concerned and if anybody says "That is Buddhism", we need to be curious.

