



Finding a Place From Which to Start

By Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi

It is not unusual for newcomers to Buddhism to approach me and raise the question about how much of Buddhist doctrine they must accept before they can integrate Buddhist practices into their daily lives.

When one sets out to choose a religion, how does one make the right choice? Different religions offer us such different perspectives on the nature of human life, and such different paths of practice, that it is impossible to find a unifying scheme capable of reconciling their opposing claims. Yet so much depends on the choice we make. Most religions tell us that the world is the creation of an all-powerful God, and they say that if we want to find salvation we must accept this God in faith and love him with all our being. The problem we face, however, is that different religions describe their God quite differently, in ways that are not mutually compatible, and we have no means at our disposal for determining which description is true and which is false; it is also possible that they are all unacceptable. Some religions teach that we live but a single life on earth and then spend eternity in another realm depending on how we behaved in this life; other religions teach that we pass through many lives, in this world and in other worlds, until we attain liberation from the chain of rebirths.

Buddhism is a non-theistic religion that teaches rebirth. It does not accept any concept of a creator God, yet it teaches that we migrate from life to life, in the human realm and in other realms, depending on our karma, our intentional actions. When I teach the Dhamma, I do not hesitate to teach these basic tenets of Buddhist doctrine. It is not unusual for newcomers to Buddhism to approach me and raise the question about how much of Buddhist doctrine they must accept before they can integrate Buddhist practices into their daily lives. Do they have to believe in rebirth? Do they have to believe in heavens and hells? Do they have to believe in gods and hungry ghosts?

I never urge others to uncritically take on board the whole package of classical Buddhist doctrines and beliefs. For me, these teachings of Buddhism are not dogmas that one has to accept blindly. In fact, I usually appreciate it more when the person who comes to me expresses honest doubts and reservations. Then I know that this person is ready to examine the teachings with full earnestness, and once they do gain confidence in the Dhamma, it is likely that this confidence will be firm and steady.

The Buddha, too, didn't expect those who came to him for guidance to surrender to him and place unquestioning faith in everything he said. Faith is critical to progress on the Buddhist path, for it is the seed out of which all wholesome qualities grow, the light that guides us through the darkness of doubt and confusion. But for faith to germinate and send down healthy roots, it has to be planted in nourishing soil, and the proper soil for faith is not a mind that has been covered into belief by dogmatic demands, by fear of punishment and hopes of rewards in a blissful afterlife. The Buddha treated those who inquired from him as rational adults capable of arriving at informed decisions. Instead of using threats and bribes, he appealed

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to two capacities readily available to all of us, capacities that we can draw upon to find a suitable starting point for resolving our spiritual doubts. One is the ability to reflect on our own experience, to evaluate our own experience honestly and lucidly. The other is the ability to extrapolate from our experience, that is, to draw inferences from what lies within the range of our immediate experience to wider areas of life that are relevant to us but not directly accessible to observation.

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The starting point for all reflection in Buddhism is a universal urge that lies at the bottom of our being: the desire to avoid pain and suffering and to find happiness and well-being. To acknowledge this truth does not require that we assent to any doctrines that appeal to matters beyond range of our own experience. We need only look into our own minds, and it will then become clear that the desire to avoid pain and suffering, and to achieve happiness and true well-being, underlies all our thought and action. It is this desire that shapes our lives, that comes to expression in our plans and projects, our visions and undertakings; it is this aspiration for freedom from sorrow and the realization of happiness that becomes diffused in a thousand hopes and fears.

Beginning with this observation, we can then translate our basic aim into a pair of questions: (1) What can we do to avoid suffering? And: (2) What can we do to achieve happiness? When we posit these questions, we can see that most of the time we are, in fact, acting to avoid suffering and to achieve happiness. Yet, if ordinary unguided actions, based on spontaneous instinct and calculated self-interest, automatically guaranteed us the happiness we so deeply desire, we wouldn't be discontented with our mundane lives or feel a need for spiritual guidance. Our problem is that our natural, everyday actions don't fulfill our desire for deep and superior happiness. To the contrary, they either keep us tethered to dull, wearisome routines or, if we behave unwisely, plunge us into conflict and misery. Therefore the questions that we frame have to be expressed more precisely. What we have to ask is: (1) What should we do to avoid long-term harm and suffering? And: (2) What should we do to achieve long-term happiness and well-being?

This reformulation differs from the previous one in three respects. First, it qualifies the suffering that we want to avoid and the happiness we want to attain as "long-term," thereby indicating that what we seek is not merely transitory gratification, which may quickly be followed by bitterness and regrets, but stable, solid, and lasting benefits. Second, it links "suffering" with "harm," indicating that what we seek to avoid is not only felt pain but also personal damage, which may include damage to the moral fabric of our character. And third, it links "happiness" with "well-being," indicating that what we want to achieve is not only a state of felt pleasure, a peak of euphoria, but a state of inner well-being secure against future loss.

Once we put the questions in these terms, the Buddha asks us to use our own experience as a guide for determining the right answers. He first tells us where we shouldn't turn for answers. In the well-known Kalama Sutta (Anguttara Nikaya III 65), he advises us not to look to authoritative traditions, to lineages of teachers, to collections of sacred texts. This does not mean that traditions, lineages, and sacred texts can't give us helpful answers. It doesn't mean that they are wrong. It just means that they aren't insusceptible to doubt. The traditions may have been handed down impeccably, but they could be wrong. The texts might be regarded as sacred, as divine revelation, but they might be the work of human authors and their teachings might be far from holy. The Buddha also tells us not to rely on abstract logic and reasoning. Again, this doesn't mean that logic and reasoning are useless. It just means that the answers they give will always be open to doubt. A chain of reasoning can be flawless as it proceeds from premises to conclusions; but the premises are axiomatic, taken for granted, and they might be questionable. Or the movement from one step of reasoning to the next might be faulty. Hence, even when employed with utmost skill, logic can lead to

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contradictory conclusions. Further, the Buddha tells us not to be swept away by impressive speakers and charismatic teachers. This doesn't mean that we can't learn from others, or that the guidance given by spiritual teachers is inherently untrustworthy. It is just that different teachers, equally impressive and charismatic, might teach different things, which each claims to be the highest truth; they might give different answers to the most critical spiritual questions. We are looking, however, for an unshakable platform on which to stand, for some truths that are beyond doubt and questioning.

What we want to find is a secure and solid base upon which we can establish faith; we don't want to begin with a demand for faith. The Buddha therefore says that we should begin with things that *we can know for ourselves*, and take that as our starting point. When we know for ourselves what leads to our harm and suffering, then we will know what we have to avoid; when we know for ourselves what leads to our well-being and happiness, then we will know what we have to pursue and develop.

To be sure, the Buddha doesn't leave us to our own devices. Nor does he simply give us a meditation technique to practice and tell us that we don't have to think of any wider issues but just direct our minds to our meditation subject. The Buddha does not ground the spiritual life upon mere technique, but sets technique within a context, and to find an appropriate context for the technique we have to begin by clarifying the aim of our practice.

To help us get clear about our aim, the Buddha poses certain questions that steer our thinking into the proper channels. These questions do not take us into the mists of metaphysical speculation, into theories about the origin and ending of the world. They do not make any appeals for belief in things that lie beyond the range of observation. They take us, rather, towards an examination of our own minds and reflection on our own actions. The questions he asks – or wants us to ask ourselves – relate to *intentionality*, the fundamental motives of thought, emotion, and action. The Buddha wants us to ask ourselves whether, when greed, hatred, and ignorance arise in our minds, they arise for our good or for our harm. The answer, naturally, will be that greed, hatred, and ignorance arise for our harm. They might give us pleasure, but what they bring is a transient pleasure, which may well be followed by long-term harm. We can see that they arise for our own harm, and they also drive us to act in ways that bring harm and suffering to others. The degree of harm and suffering they cause may not be particularly obvious in every individual instance, but when we consider the consequences of greed, hatred, and ignorance functioning as motives for action on a global scale, the danger becomes staggering. On reflection, we can see that actions springing from greed, hatred, and ignorance can be terribly destructive. Indeed, such reflection would reveal to us very much the world that leaps out at us from our daily news reports: a world afflicted by senseless violence and brutality, by agonizing wars, by reckless over-exploitation of our natural resources; a world, moreover, in which those most responsible for harm shamelessly resort to mendacious stratagems to avoid taking responsibility for their actions. But if we can see this when the picture is blown up globally, we can then return to any given instance of greed, hatred, and delusion, and recognize that it is from these small seeds, these unwholesome driving forces of thought and action, that terrible calamities arise and bring so much misery. We can then further realize that if we are to secure our own well-being and happiness, and to promote the well-being and happiness of others, it is necessary for us to restrain and overcome our own greed, hatred, and delusion. This then becomes the first requirement of a spiritual path.

The next series of questions the Buddha poses brings to light the opposite side of the mind. He asks us to consider whether, when non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion arise in our minds, they arise for our good or for our harm. These three terms, formulated in the negative, are synonymous with generosity, loving-

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kindness, and wisdom. When we reflect, we can see that generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom arise for our welfare and happiness. When we are able to give freely to others, out of concern for their well-being, we experience lightness and peace, freedom from the grip of attachment. When our hearts rise above anger and hatred and radiate loving-kindness, a genuine wish for the welfare and happiness of others, we experience joy and harmony. When our minds are illuminated with the light of understanding, when we see and understand

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true principles, we experience brightness and clarity. We can then realize that if we are to secure our own well-being and happiness, and to promote the well-being and happiness of others, it is necessary for us to cultivate generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom. This then becomes the second requirement of a spiritual path.

Thus, we can understand, right here and now, that greed, hatred, and delusion are the roots of harm and suffering, while non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion – or generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom – are the roots of happiness and well-being. On this basis we can be certain that whatever else we require from a spiritual teaching, whatever other principles it might teach, it must take as its principal aim the elimination of greed, hatred, and delusion, and it must esteem such values as generosity, love, and wisdom.

For the Buddha, this understanding does not yet mark the achievement of right view, the view that leads onward towards the ultimate goal of his teaching, liberation from suffering. Right view begins with an acceptance of the principle of karma, which holds that our actions inevitably bring their fruits or results, and this principle depends upon acceptance of its corollary, the idea of rebirth. But an understanding of the immediately visible consequences of the unwholesome and wholesome roots offers a starting point for placing confidence in the Buddha as one who teaches a doctrine that is good and beneficial in all respects, a teaching that cannot lead astray. Once one gains confidence in the Buddha by examining those aspects of his teaching that come into range of one's immediate experience, one can then place trust in him as one who speaks truthfully about things that lie beyond range of one's immediate experience. And on the basis of this trust one can devote oneself wholeheartedly to the practice of his teaching.

But even the final goal of the Buddha's teaching is continuous with the certitude that we achieve as our starting point. At the beginning, through reflection, we gain confidence that a worthy spiritual discipline must be one that leads to the overcoming of greed, hatred, and delusion. The final goal of the Buddha's path is Nibbana, and in the suttas we find Nibbana defined precisely as "the extinguishing of greed, the extinguishing of hatred, the extinguishing of delusion." The practice of the Dhamma is a gradual process of removing greed, hatred, and delusion, of replacing them with greater generosity, with greater loving-kindness and compassion, with greater wisdom and understanding. The confidence that comes by gaining faith in the Buddha is the confidence that it is possible to eradicate greed, hatred, and delusion entirely. With faith, one takes up the practice of the Buddha's path in the confidence that this path leads to the end of greed, hatred, and delusion. ☸

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER NEWS BRIEFS

BODHI BULLETIN

MEDITATION PROGRAM:

In Appreciation: Fall Weekend Meditation Retreat

Thank you to our team of endurance volunteers who supported the twenty yogis participating in the October meditation retreat; registration manager, Tom Spies; yogi managers, Conni Santschi, Chris Raines, and Jerry Chen; retreat coordinators, Marcie Barth, Frances Wey, and Ju Lee Tay; and general retreat helper, Sean Hyland. We are grateful to Rosaline Lin for preparing most of the lunch dishes.

Thanks also to the several short-term volunteers who worked on tasks such as dorm prep, breakfast prep, registration, etc., also helping to make the retreat to run smoothly.

Metta Meditation Retreat: "Welcoming the New Year" Dec. 30th - Jan. 1st.

Registration/Orientation: Saturday afternoon, Dec. 30th

Program: Begins Saturday, Dec. 30th, early evening and ends Monday, Jan. 1st after breakfast

Dana: There is no fee, but donations to support the Sangha are appreciated.

This retreat will be led by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi assisted by other members of the Bodhi Monastery Sangha. All retreatants must arrive on Saturday afternoon, Dec. 30th and attend the entire retreat from start to finish. Unique to this retreat will be a mid-night meditation session "welcoming the new year."

The main subject of practice for this retreat will be loving-kindness (*metta*). There will be periods of sitting meditation alternating with

walking meditation, as well as guided instruction throughout the day. There will be an evening Dharma talk.

More details and registration information will be provided soon by e-mail and on our website.

Volunteers Needed: Managers/Coordinators for New Year's Retreat

We will need volunteers to participate in the running of the upcoming retreat being held from Dec. 30th - Jan. 1st. This requires both short-term volunteers and endurance volunteers. Importantly, there is a need for commitments from people to be the endurance volunteers; these are the yogi managers, coordinators, kitchen manager, and general retreat helpers all of whom will need to work the entire retreat (*with opportunity to participate in some meditation sessions*).

Remember, the continuation of the Bodhi Monastery retreat program depends on selfless service from our friends. Specific details about these volunteer positions will be provided soon by e-mail and on our website.

Sunday Morning Meditation Group

The Sunday morning meditation group from 9:30 to 10:45 am, has been meeting for a few years now. Anyone is welcome to attend these sessions which includes both sitting and walking meditation. A short time at the end is reserved for questions, readings, and brief Dharma talks. The group is guided by either Ven. Xin-xing or Ven. Hui-yong.

Beginner's Instruction in Meditation

On the first Sunday of each month, instructions in basic sitting and walking meditation are given at 9:00 am, taught by either Ven. Xin-xing or Ven. Hui-yong. Students are then welcome to stay for the Sunday meditation group from 9:30 to 10:45 am. The upcoming instructions will be on November 4th and December 2nd.

WEEKDAY EVENING DHARMA:

Majjhima Nikaya Class Winter Breaks Scheduled

Election Day Off: Nov. 7th, 06

Cancellation: Nov. 28th, 06

Holiday Break: Dec. 26, 06 - Jan. 2, 07 (resuming on Jan. 9th)

Winter Break: Feb. 6, 07 - Mar. 13, 07 (resuming on Mar. 20th).

MN Study Group Meets Monthly

This study group was started to expand on our learning from the Tuesday night Majjhima Nikaya class. The group meets on one Thursday of each month from 7:00 to 8:15 pm. Our next two meetings will be on November 16th and December 14th. We will discuss a recently explained sutta from MN Class. Peter and Janet Rabinowitz, two of our classmates, facilitate the discussion each month. If you are interested in joining our group e-mail Janet at j554er@yahoo.com. Type "MN Study Group" into the Subject box.

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SATURDAY DHARMA:

Saturday Morning Dharma

English Study Group:

Saturdays, 9:50 - 10:40 am

Ven. Xin-xing and Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi are facilitating a discussion of the *Dhammapada*, widely considered the most succinct expression of the Buddha's teaching found in the Pali Canon.

Chinese Dharma Talk:

Saturdays, 9:50 - 10:40 am

Ven. Jen-chun gives a Dharma talk in Chinese based on his Dharma verses.

Saturday Afternoon Dharma

English Dharma Talk:

Saturdays, 12:40-1:30 pm

On alternate Saturday afternoons, Bhante continues his Dharma talks based on the *Sutta-nipata*, while Ven. Xin-xing lectures on topics taken from Ven. Yin-shun's *The Way to Buddhahood*.

Chinese Study Group:

Saturdays, 1:45-2:30 pm

Shifu continues with the study of the history of Indian Buddhism, based on Master Yin-shun's work, *Yindu Fo jiao Sixiangshi*.

Bodhi Youth Program

Teacher: William Bertolotti.

Teacher's Assistant: Jane (Chwen) Wu

Creative Advisor: Mary Houtsma

Children between the ages of 6 - 13 years old are welcome to join us for instructional and fun classes on Saturdays, November 18th and December 16th from 9:50 to 11:00 am.

For more information you can contact William at 516.314.0306 or by email, williambertolotti@yahoo.com.

Miscellaneous:

**Welcome Visiting Monk,
Venerable Gunasiri**

Ven. U Gunasiri, a China-born monk who grew up in Burma and was educated in Taiwan and the U.S., has been visiting Bodhi Monastery and intends to stay until the middle of November.

Ven. Gunasiri had lived for many years in the U.S. before going to Burma for ordination. He was ordained under the famous meditation master, Ven. U Panditabhivamsa Sayadaw, but for the past four years has trained in Vipassana meditation under the Chanmyay Sayadaw, Ven. U Janakabhivamsa. Both meditation masters are disciples of the late Mahasi Sayadaw, the foremost Burmese proponent of Vipassana meditation.

NOV/DEC DHARMA SCHEDULE

Saturdays:

9:50 - 10:40 am English Study Group and Chinese Dharma Talk
10:50 - 11:10 pm Devotional Service
11:15 - 12:15 pm Lunch and cleanup
12:40 - 1:30 pm English Dharma Talk
1:45 - 2:30 pm Chinese Study Group

Sundays:

9:30 - 10:45 am Meditation Group
First Sunday of each month:
9:00 - 9:30 am Beginners instruction in meditation

Tuesdays:

7:00 - 8:15 pm Sutta Study Class

Daily:

4:30 - 5:00 pm Chanting Liturgy
5:05 - 6:00 pm Sitting meditation