

To Be a Buddhist

Rev. Master Jiyu once told us that all Buddhists, regardless of tradition, believe in four things: the Three Treasures of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and the law of karma. “Belief” in Buddhist practice is faith, trust, confidence, respect, reverence, and devotion. It is an activity—a verb rather than a noun—a quality, a capacity, or vigor that we continually grow and cultivate through training. This trust and confidence knows no limits—it is always moving, unfolding, always becoming Buddha.

Faith in the Buddha means that we have confidence that Shakyamuni Buddha, the historical mendicant teacher of ancient India (5th century BCE), is the wisest person we know of, without peer, and the Buddha, the Awakened or Enlightened One of this world. Other teachers may also point to the truth, but none compares to Him, at least for us.

The Buddha’s teaching, the Dharma, is also without equal. It is complete, sufficient, with nothing lacking. The essential and distinguishing Dharma of Shakyamuni Buddha is the Four Noble Truths. To be a Buddhist is to hold and explore through practice—have confidence and trust in—this foundational teaching. All other Buddhist teachings find their source here, or they are not the Buddha Dharma. This approach does not make us narrow-minded; tolerance of other faiths is a vital part of the Buddhist worldview. Rather, relying upon the Buddha Dharma alone is focusing on what we come to know with certainty to be most valuable and trustworthy. It enables us to know through practice the deep liberation inherent in the Buddha’s teaching.

From or within the four noble truths can be found all the other teachings of our great master. Within the first truth—that suffering (*dukkha*) is inherent in all existence—can be found the three marks or seals (“seal” in the sense of authoritative stamp proving authenticity): 1) impermanence or inconstancy (*anicca*—all is in flux); 2) *anatta* (no fundamental, unchanging, separate self); and consequently, 3) all experience, within or without, eventually proves to be dissatisfactory or tinged with suffering (*dukkha*).

The second noble truth states that this dissatisfaction, dis-ease, stress, unhappiness, discontent, ill-being, or uncertainty (there are many shades of meaning for the word “*dukkha*”) is caused by craving based in ignorance. This

craving can be affirmative, “I want,” or negative, “I don’t want.” Thus arise greed and aversion, two of the three poisons, and the third comes into being when we compound these two and act on ignorance, resulting in delusion. The Buddha’s teaching on dependent origination, which we won’t go into here, is an expanded explanation of this second truth.

The third noble truth is that Nirvana, ultimate peace and joy, exists. There is a purpose to our universe, all is not meaningless, human beings do indeed have Buddha nature and can transform themselves, there is an Unborn, Undying, Unchanging, Uncreated. The fact of Its existence was conveyed to the young Prince Siddhartha through the sight of a renunciate, considered the fourth heavenly messenger, convincing him that there was a way to end the sorrow and suffering which he learned of through the first three messengers: sickness, old age, and death. This sight led him to renounce his kingdom, wealth, family, status, and security in order to embark on the discovery to realize this Truth, motivated by compassion for those he loved and for all beings. This wonderful truth doesn’t stand against our existence in samsara, the endless cycle of birth-and-death in which all beings find themselves adrift. What the Buddha saw was the possibility of liberation.

The fourth noble truth is the particular way the new Buddha discovered out of this entanglement of sorrow. It was only through his enormous, difficult, indeed life-endangering efforts that he achieved his aim. It was not a new way. Like all conditioned things, the Dharma declines over time, and then we need the appearance of someone to rediscover the teaching and share it again with the world. This fourth truth, known to all the Buddhas of the past, is the Eightfold Path, which encompasses faith, compassion, and wisdom (right understanding or view); the Precepts (right intention or thought, speech, action, and livelihood); and mindfulness and meditation (right mindfulness, effort, and concentration). “Right” is used here not in opposition to “wrong,” rather as “appropriate,” “skillful,” or “wholesome” – that which leads to the end of suffering and benefits all beings.

While reserving the Third Jewel or Refuge for discussion last, let us explore how the law of karma, cause and effect, flows out of right view or understanding. The Buddha emphasized that the intention motivating an action, rather than the action itself, is the cause of future results. The understanding he gained and taught went significantly beyond the Indian philosophy and reli-

gious thought of His day regarding the universal law. For example, the difference between the karmic consequences of accidentally killing someone and intentionally killing them is great. Even our legal system of contemporary U.S.A. recognizes this difference, distinguishing between manslaughter and degrees of murder, and dispenses justice accordingly. However, this recognition of intent was not the norm in the Buddha's time.

The understanding of karmic consequence, which is a natural law not dependent on a lawgiver or a judge, is intimately connected with the first noble truth, *anatta* – there is no fundamental self or “I” who creates karma. There is only action, though dependent on causes. And there is no fundamental self-existent, unchanging being who feels the fruit. There is feeling alone, though that feeling occurs within a matrix of other mental and physical constituents. Buddhists call these constituents that make up a human being the five *skandhas* or aggregates. These aggregates are flowing energies, nothing is permanent and unchanging – *anicca*. Life in all forms, animate and inanimate, is always in flux.

We have insight into *dukkha*, dissatisfaction, when we connect the suffering we feel with the causes that produced it – our intentional or willful actions. This is one of the primary purposes of meditation. Fortunately, the third truth shows us the possibility of skillful actions leading to happiness within our present life, better rebirth, and eventually nirvana, a final end to our seemingly senseless wandering through samsara for unknown eons. The last or fourth truth encompasses all the various methods and practices different Buddhist traditions have developed to convert unskillful karma and realize this freedom.

Returning now to the Third Treasure or Refuge: the Sangha, the Buddhist fellowship of practitioners. At the time of the Buddha, the “Sangha” included only those disciples, monastic and lay, men and women, who had entered at least the first of the four stages of an arahant (a completely liberated being), called “entering the stream [toward Nirvana]” or a first kensho. The premier value of this august body, the *arya* (noble) sangha, is conveyed to followers of the Meditation (Zen) tradition through the reverence accorded the Buddhas and Ancestors. Every day in our Order liturgy, we recite the Ancestral Line and acknowledge their presence, ask for their help and guidance, and give thanks for their lives and teaching. When we receive the Precepts at ordination (both lay and monastic), these great beings are represented by their names on the blood-line certificate (*ketchimyaku*): one can trace the life of meditation and precepts as

it flows directly through all of the Ancestors to each of us from Shakyamuni Buddha Himself, the Buddhas of the Past, and the Unborn. And we return the flowing, keeping that life alive and vibrant through our training.

Over the course of time the noble sangha came to be represented by the monastic sangha, the living contemplatives of the Buddha's community who remind us of the goal of contentment and selflessness we all seek to realize. Also, the monastic sangha, with its detailed precepts and full-time commitment to practice, has traditionally been entrusted as the caretakers of the Buddha's Transmission, the torchbearers of the Dharma. This entrustment includes a teaching responsibility – always we assist others. The Dharma does not exist as an end in itself – it is to be shared freely so that all beings may benefit.

And then historically, quite early on, out of response to what seems to have been an overemphasis on monasticism, arose the Mahayana (Great Vehicle) teachings. In the Mahayana branch of Buddhism, practiced primarily in northern and eastern Asia, both laity and monastics are included in "sangha." This can be viewed as the restoration of the Buddha's original intent, which was to establish a fourfold sangha – male and female householders, and male and female monastics. This shift finds illustration in the fact that most of the great Bodhisattvas emphasized in Mahayana teachings, such Avalokiteshvara (Kanzeon) or Manjusri, are dressed in lay clothing, that of the royalty of the day, and tend to be of either gender or androgynous (having characteristics of both). The term "Greater Sangha" can also be used to include Buddhists of all traditions.

All three dimensions of Sangha – noble (spiritual/ideal), monastic, and greater – still operate and have their particular purpose and function. When we place our confidence or trust in the Sangha, always the emphasis is on taking refuge in those who practice and have realized the Buddha's liberative teaching found in the four noble truths, or at the very least in those more experienced than ourselves.

These four aspects of training are then those that all Buddhists would affirm together, perhaps not in all the details, but at least in principle.

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