

Chapter 2 The Buddhist Context

Historical Background

The compassionate and skilful teacher Buddha Shakyamuni lived in India more than 2,500 years ago. He taught various techniques and methods of spiritual transformation, and did so according to the diverse dispositions, interests, and mentalities of the sentient beings he taught. A rich spiritual and philosophical tradition developed that was enhanced and maintained by continuous lineages of great Indian masters such as Nagarjuna and Asanga. It came to full flowering in India and later went to many other countries in Asia. In Tibet, Buddhism began to flourish in the seventh and eighth centuries. A great many personalities were part of this historical process, including the Indian abbot Shantarakshita, the teacher Padmasambhava, and the then Tibetan monarch Trisong Detsen. From this period onward the development of Buddhism in Tibet was extremely rapid. As in India, successive lineages of great Tibetan masters contributed tremendously to spreading the Buddha's teachings across the breadth of the entire country. Over time, and due to Tibetan geographical factors, four major Buddhist schools evolved in Tibet. This led to a divergence in the choice of terminology and to the emphasis placed on the various aspects of Buddhist meditative practices and views.

The first of the four schools is the **Nyingma, the "old translation" school**, which began from the time of Padmasambhava. Since the period of the great translator Rinchen Sangpo, the other three schools, known collectively as the **"new translation" schools, evolved, giving rise to the Kagyü, Sakya, and Geluk**. What is common to these four traditions is that **they are all complete forms of Buddhism**. Not only does each contain the essence of the teachings of the Hinayana, each lineage also contains the essence of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism.

The Buddhist Path

For those who are not Buddhist or who are new to the teachings, it may be of benefit for me to provide a general overview of the Buddhist path.

All of us, as human beings with feelings and consciousness, instinctively seek happiness and wish to overcome suffering. Along with that innate aspiration, we also have a right to fulfil this fundamental aim. Regardless of whether we succeed or fail, **all our pursuits in life are, in one way or another, directed toward the fulfilment of this basic desire.** This is the case for all of us who seek spiritual liberation; whether nirvana or salvation, whether we believe in rebirth or not. What is obvious is that **our experiences of pain and pleasure, happiness and unhappiness, are all intimately related to our own attitudes, thoughts, and emotions.** In fact **we could say that all of them arise from the mind.** We see, therefore, **in the teachings of all the major religious traditions of the world, an emphasis on spiritual paths based on a transformation of the heart and mind.**

What is unique to the Buddhist teaching is that underlying its entire spiritual path is the premise that there is a profound disparity between our perceptions of reality and the way things really are. This disparity at the heart of our being leads to all sorts of psychological confusion, emotional afflictions, disappointments, and frustrations; in a word, suffering. Even **in our day-to-day life, we are constantly exposed to situations where we feel deceived, disillusioned, and so on. One of the most effective antidotes to this type of situation is to consciously develop our knowledge, widen our perspectives, and become more familiar with the world. By doing this, we will find ourselves more able to cope with adversities and be not so constantly in a state of frustration and disillusionment.**

Similarly, **at the spiritual level too, it is crucial to broaden our perspectives and develop a genuine insight into the true nature of reality.** In this way, **the fundamental misperception, or ignorance, that permeates our perceptions of the world and our existence can be eliminated.** Because of this, in Buddhism, we find **discussions on the nature of two truths that form the basic structure of reality.** Based on this understanding of reality, the various levels of spiritual paths and grounds are explained. They can all be realised within ourselves on the basis of genuine insight. So, **in Buddhism, when we embark upon a spiritual path toward enlightenment, we need to do so by cultivating genuine insight into the deeper nature of reality.** Without such a grounding, there is no possibility of attaining heightened spiritual realisations, and our spiritual endeavour may become a mere fantasy built on no foundation at all.

Causality and the Four Noble Truths

When the Buddha gave his first public sermon following his full awakening, he did so within the framework of the **four noble truths. These are the truths of suffering, the origin of suffering, the ceasing of suffering, and the path that leads to the cessation of suffering.**

At the heart of the teaching on the four noble truths is the principle of causality. With this knowledge, **the four truths can be divided into two pairs of a cause and an effect. The first pair is about what we do not desire, and concerns our experience of suffering. The second pair of cause and effect is about our happiness and serenity.** In other words, **the first truth of suffering is the effect of the second truth, its origin; and similarly, the third truth of cessation, which is the state of liberation, or freedom from suffering, is the effect of the fourth truth, the path leading to that state of freedom.**

The end to suffering is the goal of the spiritual aspirant, and is true freedom, or happiness. These teachings reflect a deep understanding of the nature of reality.

Three Kinds of Suffering

The truth of suffering refers to more than just our experience of our very obvious sufferings, such as the sensation of pain; animals also recognise this as undesirable. **There is a second level of suffering, known as the *suffering of change*, which refers to what we more often regard as pleasurable sensations. Based on our own day-to-day experience of the transient nature of these pleasurable sensations, we can also recognise this level of suffering, for we can see in its very nature that dissatisfaction must always be a part of it.**

The third level of suffering is known as the ***pervasive suffering of conditioning***. This is much more difficult for us to recognise as suffering. To do so requires a degree of deep reflection. **We have all sorts of preconceptions, thoughts, prejudices, fears, and hopes. Such thought processes and emotions give rise to certain states of mind, which in turn propel various actions, many of which are destructive and often cause further mental confusion and emotional distress. All of these afflictive thoughts and emotions are thus related to certain actions; mental, verbal, or physical.** Some actions, however, are not specifically motivated by any negative or positive states of mind; rather they come from a state of indifference, a neutral state of mind. Such actions are normally not powerful and leave little impact. In contrast, **actions that are driven by strong motivation or emotion (be it positive or negative) leave a definite impression on both our state of mind and our behaviour. Especially if the motivation is negative, the imprint on both mind and body tends to be very marked.** So, based on our own daily experience, **we can infer a causal connection between our thoughts and emotions and their expression in our outward behaviour. This cycle of thoughts and emotions producing negative behaviours, which in turn condition further afflicted thoughts and emotions, is a process that perpetuates itself without any special effort from our side. The third level of suffering refers to the nature of our existence as fundamentally enmeshed in an unsatisfactory cycle. When Buddhism speaks of the possibility of an end to suffering, it means freedom from this third level of suffering.**

The Potential for Freedom

The questions could be raised here: **“Is it ever possible to change the very nature of our existence, formed as it is by contaminated physical and mental components? Is it at all possible to exist without being enmeshed in such a conditioned existence?”** In discussing cessation, Buddhism is pointing to the possibility of freedom, meaning the total elimination of all negative aspects of our psyche, the possibility of complete freedom from all suffering. This is an issue that requires serious thought on the part of a practitioner.

In the first turning of the wheel of Dharma, the Buddha talked about cessation, however it is only in the Mahayana teachings of the second and the third turnings of the wheel of Dharma that the nature of cessation and liberation are explained to their full extent. In the second turning of the wheel of Dharma, principally in the perfection of wisdom (*prajnaparamita*) scriptures, the Buddha explained that the essential nature of the mind is pure. From this viewpoint, our various troublesome emotions and thoughts are adventitious,¹ that is they are not an integral part of the essential nature of the mind and can therefore be removed.

As practicing Buddhists we should critically reflect on the following questions: **“Do our afflictive states of mind (and in particular our underlying misperception and ignorance, which has us grasping at the intrinsic existence of phenomena) accord with the nature of reality? Or are our afflictions distorted states of mind that have no grounding in valid experience or reality?”** Through this reflection it will become evident that it is first necessary to examine in general whether phenomena possess (as they most often appear to) an intrinsic and independent reality. **Do individual people, things, and events each exist separately, in their own right? In the perfection of wisdom scriptures we find an extensive discussion concerning the absence of the intrinsic existence of all phenomena.** These scriptures state that although we may perceive and experience both our own existence and other phenomena as having intrinsic existence, if we probe with deeper analysis, we find that our perception of their concrete and independent existence is distorted and therefore false. **We will find that this perception is in fact a misperception and has no grounding in reality.**

It follows that **all the ensuing states affected by this type of misperception, such as the afflictive emotions (anger, hatred, desire, jealousy, and so on) are also devoid of a valid correlation with reality. Because this underlying root cause, the fundamental ignorance, which mistakenly perceives all things and events as being intrinsically real, is distorted, it can therefore be corrected, through insight. This implies the possibility of putting an end to the whole cycle of unenlightened existence**

¹ adventitious ,adv(e)n'tʃɪs accidental, happening as a result of an external factor or chance rather than design or inherent nature

caused by ignorance. The effects of ignorance, those contaminated aggregates of body and mind, which bind us in this unenlightened existence, can be eliminated as well. The state of being utterly free from the entanglement resulting from this fundamental misperception is nirvana, or true liberation. In this way the Buddha presented the teachings on the four noble truths. The Buddha explored and further developed the themes of the four noble truths in his teachings on the twelve links of dependent origination.

Dependent Origination

In the *Dependent Origination Sutra* Buddha states:

If there is this, that ensues;
Because this came into being, that came into being.
It is thus: Due to ignorance volition arises...

In other words, in order for a particular event or experience to take place, there must be a cause, and the cause itself must be existent. That cause will also be an effect of a preceding cause, because if it is not itself a product, then it will lack the potential or capacity to produce any results. So the cause itself has to be a product of another cause. Therefore, the Buddha said that because this cause arises, the effect is produced. And not only must the cause have a cause, the cause must also correlate to the effect. It is not true that just anything can produce everything; rather, only certain causes can lead to certain types of effects.

Following on from this, Buddha stated that the presence of fundamental ignorance leads to *karma*, or action. Our undesirable experiences of suffering, such as pain, fear, and death, are all basically effects produced by corresponding causes. So in order to put an end to these sufferings, we have to put an end to the relevant sequence of causes and effects. Buddha explained how, within the framework of the twelve links of dependent origination, the earlier elements in the causal sequence give rise to the later elements. He also explained the process of reversing the twelve links of dependent origination. In other words, by putting an end to the earlier elements, we can eliminate the later elements. So, by completely cutting the causal root (eliminating our fundamental ignorance) we will finally come to experience total freedom from all suffering and its origin.

In the twelve links of dependent origination, ignorance is listed as the first cause. This, I feel, reflects the basic truth that we all instinctively desire happiness and seek to avoid suffering. No one needs to teach us this innate desire. However, although we possess this natural aspiration to seek happiness and overcome suffering, we nonetheless find ourselves without lasting happiness and enmeshed in suffering. This indicates that there is something wrong in our way of being. We are ignorant of the means to fulfil our basic aspiration for happiness. So the insight that we gain from the teachings of the twelve links of dependent origination (that ignorance is the root cause of our suffering) is indeed true.

There are of course differing interpretations among Buddhist thinkers, such as Asanga and Dharmakirti, about the nature of this fundamental ignorance. Predominately this ignorance is thought of not simply as a state of not knowing, but rather as a state of active misunderstanding, meaning we think we have understood when we haven't. I.e, a distorted way of understanding reality where we experience the things and events of the world as if each one had some kind of independent, intrinsic existence.

Insight

The term *ignorance*, used generally, may refer to both negative and neutral states of mind. However, by *fundamental ignorance* we mean that which is the root cause of our cyclic existence. We are referring to a state of mind that is distorted. Because it is distorted, misapprehending the nature of reality, it follows that the way to eliminate this ignorance is to generate insight into the true nature of reality, to see through the deception created by the ignorance. Such an insight can be gained only by experiencing the utter groundlessness of the viewpoint created by this distorted state of mind. Merely praying, "May I be rid of this fundamental ignorance" will not bring the desired goal. We need to cultivate insight.

It is only through generating such an insight and penetrating into the nature of reality that we will be able to dispel this fundamental misperception. By this insight, or wisdom, I am referring to what is known in Buddhist terminology as the understanding of emptiness or no-self. There are diverse interpretations of what is meant by the terms *emptiness*, *no-self*, *selflessness*, and *identitylessness* in the Buddhist teachings. However, here I am using these terms to refer to the emptiness of intrinsic existence. Grasping at the opposite (that things and events possess some kind of intrinsic or independent existence) is the fundamental ignorance. The profound insight that arises with the realization of the absence of any such intrinsic existence is known as the *true path*.

In the second turning of the wheel of Dharma, mainly in the *perfection of wisdom sutras*, the Buddha states that our ignorance lies at the root of all our afflictions and confusion: our negative thoughts

and emotions and the suffering they cause. He states that our fundamental ignorance and the afflictions it causes are not the essential nature of the mind. These afflictions are fundamentally separate from the essential character of mind, which is defined as “luminous and knowing.” The essential nature of mind is pure, and the capacity to perceive things and events is a natural function of the mind. This description of the mind’s natural purity and its capacity for cognition are emphasised in the perfection of wisdom sutras, which present the essential nature of mind as having the character of *clear light*.

Practicing Wisdom

The Basis of Success

For a practicing Buddhist the final spiritual objective is *nirvana*, the state of the mind that has been cleansed of all its distressed and deluded states. This is possible through a gradual process of practicing, and it requires time. If we are to possess the vital faculties necessary to pursue our spiritual journey, then right from the initial stages of this path to nirvana, or liberation, we have to ensure that our form of existence and our lifestyle are fully conducive to Dharma practice.

In his *Four Hundred Verses on the Middle Way (Chatuhshatakashastra)*, Āryadeva² presents a specific procedure for proceeding on the path to enlightenment.³ This suggests that it is important to pursue the path in a systematic order, beginning by refraining from negative actions and maintaining an ethically sound way of life. This is to ensure the attainment of a favourable rebirth so that we will be able to continue to pursue our spiritual path in the future. Aryadeva states that the first phase of the path is to avert the effects of negative and troublesome states of mind as they manifest in our behaviour, because this safeguards us against taking unfavourable rebirth in the next life. In the next phase, the emphasis is placed on generating insight into the nature of no-self or emptiness. The final phase of the path is the total elimination of all distorted views and the overcoming of even the most subtle obstructions to knowledge.

It is on the basis of understanding the four noble truths that we will be able to develop a real understanding of the nature of the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Through deeply understanding the four noble truths, we will be able to genuinely recognise the possibility of attaining nirvana, or true liberation. When we understand that our afflicted and negative states of mind can be removed, we will then be able to recognise the real possibility of attaining true liberation; not just in general, but in relation to one’s own self. We will sense, as individuals, that this freedom is actually within reach through our own realization. Once we gain such conviction, we will understand that we can also overcome the habitual patterns formed by our deluded states of mind. In this way we generate a conviction in the possibility of attaining full enlightenment. Once we develop such a conviction, we will then be able to appreciate the true value of taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

1. Our first expression of going for refuge in the Three Jewels (our first commitment) is to lead our life in accordance with karma, the law of cause and effect. This entails living an ethically disciplined life where we restrain from the ten negative actions: the three physical misdeeds (of killing, stealing, and engaging in sexual misconduct); the four verbal misdeeds (of lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, and gossip); and the three mental misdeeds (of covetousness, ill will, and harbouring wrong views).
2. The second step is to overcome grasping at self, or intrinsic existence. This stage primarily involves the practice of the three higher trainings: ethical discipline, meditation, and wisdom.
3. In the third and final phase, we need to overcome both our afflictive and negative states of mind, and also we must overcome even the predispositions and habits formed by these deluded states.

This final stage is achieved through combining insight into emptiness (the ultimate nature of reality) with universal compassion. In order for that to be achieved, our realization of emptiness must be complemented with the skilful methods of attainment, including such factors as the altruistic aspiration to attain buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings, universal compassion, and loving-kindness. It is only through complementing our wisdom realising emptiness with these factors of skilful means that we will actually be able to develop wisdom powerful enough to eliminate all the predispositions and habits formed by our deluded mental and emotional states. This will then lead to the realization of the final state, buddhahood.

² Āryadeva (200-250AD), was a Mahayana Buddhist monk, a disciple of Nagarjuna and a Madhyamaka philosopher. Most sources agree that he was from "Sīṃhala", which some scholars identify with Sri Lanka. After Nagarjuna, he is considered to be the next most important figure of the Indian Madhyamaka school.

³ “First avert what is not meritorious
In the middle avert [grasping at] self
Finally, dismantle all views and avert them
Whoever knows this is indeed wise.” ch. 8, v. 5.

When our realization of emptiness arises on the basis of the complete preliminaries, it becomes an antidote powerful enough to eliminate all the obscurations to full enlightenment. Right at the beginning of the ninth chapter (see below), Shantideva states that all the other aspects of Dharma practice have been taught by the Buddha for the sake of generating wisdom. Therefore, if your objective is to bring about an end to suffering, then you must develop the wisdom of emptiness.

Meditation

Meditate here on the understanding of the four noble truths as we have discussed them so far. In particular, reflect how fundamental ignorance keeps us locked in a cycle of suffering and how insight into the true nature of reality allows us to eradicate the negative thoughts and emotions from our mind. Reflect how insight into emptiness combined with the skilful means of compassion and the altruistic intention can even eliminate the subtle predispositions toward negative actions.