

6. The Unity of Buddhism

Enlightenment is the Essence of all Schools of Buddhism

Lecture excerpt (edited): *The Nature and Development of Buddhism*

Sometimes it happens in the course of our study of Buddhism, especially at the beginning, that we cannot see the wood for the trees. So sometimes it's good to take a bird's eye view of the whole terrain, to forget about this school and that school, and try to have a sort of universal view of this cosmos of Buddhism. It's very useful to have a sort of general historical framework within which one can fit all the insights one acquires, as regards the teaching of the Buddha. So what is Buddhism in its ultimate essence? What is really behind it?

Not so many weeks ago I was at Delphi in Greece. It's a place where in ancient times there was the oracle of the god Apollo. When I was there, walking through the olive trees on the slopes of the hill on which Delphi stands, we came across a little spring. This spring was bubbling vigorously from rock to rock in a little cascade, and I didn't at first pay it much attention. But later on I found the same little cascade reappeared higher up it was falling down from different levels. And then when I went higher up still I found that this was none other than the famous Castellan spring. If you drink it you're supposed to become a poet on the spot. And it welled out from between two great rocks, two cliffs almost, in a very mysterious sort of way. You couldn't quite see where it came from or how it came.

In the same way we can trace back Buddhism to its very and mysterious source. And the ultimate source of Buddhism is the Buddha's spiritual experience of Bodhi or Enlightenment. Everything comes out of that. Sometimes the connection may not be very clear. Sometimes the living waters of Buddhism get lost among the stones and sand. But if you follow it back you come to this everliving source of the Buddha's his experience of Enlightenment. It was by virtue of this experience that he became known as the Buddha, the one who is awake. And what we call Buddhism (what is traditionally called the Dharma in Sanskrit, Dhamma in Pali or chur in Tibetan) is the sum total of all the different ways in which the Buddha and his disciples after him strove to communicate to others some hint of that experience, so that they might eventually know that experience for themselves. So if we leave aside all the complexity of the different schools and teachings, it's a very simple matter. Buddhism, is simply the means to this experience of Enlightenment. It's very easy to forget this.

Now the fact that Buddhism itself is not an end in itself, but only a means to an end, is brought out very powerfully, in a number of passages in the scriptures. There's the famous parable of the raft. In this parable or simile Buddhism is likened to a raft whose function is simply to get you across to the "other shore". This shore of course represents our present egobound existence, with its suffering and disharmony, and the other shore represents what we aspire to, in other words Enlightenment or Nirvana or whatever else one cares or wishes to call it. And that's the only purpose of Buddhism. In the passage of the scriptures where the Buddha makes this comparison he explicitly says that when you get to the other shore you no longer need the raft. In a way Buddhism is (ultimately) something to be left behind.

Then think of those marvellous words of the Buddha to his aunt and fostermother Mahaprajapati Gotami. Even in the Buddha's day Buddhism had become a bit confused. There were many apparently contradictory versions. One disciple said this, another disciple said that. So even someone as close to the Buddha as his own aunt and foster mother could become confused. She went to the Buddha and asked him personally how people were to know your teaching. This is the same question that people often ask today. What did the Buddha really teach?

So in effect the Buddha said: 'You can recognize it by inner results. You can recognize it by its transforming influence on your own life. Whatever conduces to freedom from conditionings, to freedom from craving, to inner peace, to detachment, to delight solitude, to awareness, to inner illumination, take that as my teaching.' In other words the criterion is not external, not logical, not philosophical; it's pragmatic. But the pragmatism is spiritual. So she went away happy. She knew.

Taking another example, in the Japanese Buddhist tradition it's said that Buddhist teachings are like a finger pointing to the moon. The finger is there to guide our attention from it to the moon. If someone says "look there's the moon" and points with their finger, it would be a big mistake to keep looking at the finger and think that the finger was the moon itself. In the same way we are exhorted to pass from a religious teaching to spiritual experience rather than

remaining stuck with the teaching, think that it's the essence of Buddhism. In fact Buddhism takes great precautions against the possibility of its followers mistaking the finger for the moon.

Spiritual commitment or "Going for Refuge" is what makes someone a Buddhist

Lecture excerpt (edited): *the Path of Regular and Irregular Steps*

You may have come across the expression: "Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels". The Three Jewels are "the Buddha" (the ideal of Enlightenment), the Dharma (the path to enlightenment) and the Sangha (the spiritually advanced community of those treading the path to Enlightenment). This act of "Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels" is mentioned many times in the early Buddhist scriptures. Often it is formulated in the chant that comes after the third verse of the sevenfold puja:

Buddham saranam gacchami, Dhammam saranam gacchami, Sangham saranam gacchami

[These lines translate more accurately as: "to the Buddha for Refuge I go; to the Dharma for Refuge I go; to the Sangha for Refuge I go.]

This is where Buddhism really begins. It is with this act that we really start practising the spiritual path - in other words committing ourselves to:

becoming Enlightened even as the Buddha was enlightened;

the systematic and wholehearted practice of the path to Enlightenment, to Nirvana; and

the spiritual fellowship of spiritually advanced people who are also treading the path. (Technically this third "refuge" is to those who are so advanced that their spiritual progress is irreversible.)

If one "Goes for Refuge to the Three Jewels", this is the fundamental act of the spiritual life, and any differences in lifestyle are of secondary importance. Whether one is a monk or a nun, married with a family, living alone or living in a so called spiritual community is of secondary importance only. Whether one is living in society or in relative isolation, whether one is concentrating on one type of practice or another type of practice. What these people have in common is far more important than what they do not have in common. What they have in common is *The Three Jewels*. Nothing can be more important for the Buddhist than that. Unfortunately, the supreme importance of "Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels" is not always appreciated, even among Buddhists! Very often its chanted in a perfunctory way, and not paid much attention.

How Going for Refuge is typically depicted in the early scriptures

In the early scriptures there are countless examples of people encountering the Buddha and as a result having some sort of spiritual illumination. They see the nature of existence more deeply than ever before. What they experience is so sublime that in comparison other matters seem trivial. So they decide to give themselves to this spiritual illumination, and this giving is encapsulated in Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. Here is a typical example from the scriptures:

"In awe, his hair standing on end, Kasi Bhadrava went to the Blessed One [ie. the Buddha] and, throwing himself down with his head at the Blessed One's feet, said to him, "Magnificent, Master Gotama! Magnificent! Just as if he were to place upright what was overturned, to reveal what was hidden, to show the way to one who was lost, or to carry a lamp into the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way has Master Gotama made the Dhamma clear. I go to Master Gotama for refuge, to the Dhamma, and to the Sangha."

Some other points about "Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels"

1. There are various levels or degrees of depth with which people "Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels" so there is in fact no clear line of demarcation between those who have and have not done this. For example someone may be wholeheartedly committed to spiritual practice, but their connection with the Three Jewels may not endure under less favourable circumstances. One person's "Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels" may weaken or intensify over the course of their lives.
2. Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels is not something somebody only does once. It is something to be constantly re-affirmed in all situations
3. In a way everybody "Goes for Refuge" to something - in the sense of looking for security and ultimate satisfaction in something. The distinction is sometimes made between "true refuges" that will never let you down and which are endlessly attractive, and "false refuges" which are unreliable and may lose their charm.
4. Sangharakshita later on says that "although commitment is primary and lifestyle is secondary, that is not to say

lifestyle is unimportant". For example if you are spiritually committed you will naturally tend to be more ethical, and will probably move towards a less cluttered lifestyle.

Common teachings

The different forms of Buddhism that have developed around the world have some basic teachings in common. For example they all agree with the teachings we studied in week one of this unit, namely:

conditionality (*pratitya samutpada*); and

the three "marks" (*laksanas*) of existence (ie. impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality).

Similarly, virtually all schools recognise the value of practising mindfulness (*sati*), and the value of cultivating loving kindness (*metta*).

Further Reading

The theme of the 'unity of Buddhism' is explored chapter two of Subhuti's book *Sangharakshita. A new voice in the Buddhist tradition*, Birmingham 1994, pp. 27-59.