

How to be a Buddhist? How to be a Buddha!

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There are many people in all parts of the world who claim to be Buddhists and some say there are 500,000,000 followers of this form of dharma. Yet although they accept this huge figure, many of them have been speaking in derisive terms of others and one is not always sure as to what they mean by "Buddhism" and "Buddhist."

Lord Buddha never actually taught "Buddhism." He sought to revive arya dharma which means "noble wisdom" or even "ageless wisdom." He said that all people had perfect enlightenment but did not know about it. He laid down certain fundamental principles but these are fundamentals only so far as they are expressed in words. They cannot be called absolute. For words are creations of minds at certain stages of cosmic evolution. It may be difficult if not impossible to express in words what belongs to other stages of evolution.

Buddha Sakya Muni tried to express his experiences in current terms. These were memorized by disciples, some of whom, according to the records, did not experience enlightenment. Still the words were remembered and recorded. Many of these words have been accepted with reverence even by those who would not be called Buddhists or included in the 500,000,000.

Among these words are anatta, anicca and dukha. These belong to the Pali language which was employed as the literary vehicle of the time. Anatta means that there is no inherent self in things. Anicca means that every thing (not everything) is subject to change and decay. Dukha means that pain is an essential ingredient in life. In this every follower of dharma should show compassion and respect to the Theravadins, for they are Buddhists, and they have both respected and preserved fundamental teachings.

We have from the same source the very celebrated Pali formula:

Buddham saranam gacchami ... I put my trust in the Buddha

Dharmam saranam gacchami ... I put my trust in the Dharma

Sangham saranam gacchami ... I put my trust in the Sangha

Their repetition in some form may qualify what is a Buddhist, as apart from one who may be known as a non-Buddhist.

Here one may ask, If there is no “self,” no “ego,” who is it that says: “gacchami” ... “I put my trust...?” How can this first personal pronoun be used if there is no self? Who is it and what is it that becomes enlightened?

From a certain point of view this Pali Formula of the Three Jewels constitutes the essence of the Dharma. Not the essence of Buddha or Sangha but of Dharma. And this acceptance of Dharma, in this form, constitutes the essence of Buddhism, or the arya dharma of Lord Buddha.

Those who accept this formula without realizing Buddhahood may be called Hinayanists or Theravadins, which is to say, followers of the old or traditional teaching. In a sense they have the Dharma, but have they the Buddha-jewel and the Sangha-jewel? Do they really know the Eightfold Path?

One must comment on the usual interpretation of the Eightfold Path as offered by the Southern Buddhists:

- (a) The interpretation is not given from the standpoint of the experience of enlightenment.
- (b) The whole Tipitaka literature is presented as if it were a supreme revelation offered by a unique personality appearing in the midst of total savagery.

This may be far from the truth. The India of Sakya Muni was of a very high order socially, intellectually and theologically. There was, if anything, too much prosperity; but the easy acquisition of wealth did not bring peace of mind. Much time was given to disputations and one mission of Lord Buddha was to end useless disputations. The very fact of these disputations proves it was not an era of idiots. Buddha did not come to destroy anything but ignorance. Consequently it is a mistake to ignore the Indian culture of the time and of preceding times.

Naturally there have grown up interpretations of the Eightfold Path quite diverse from the experience of enlightenment, and even showing verbal contradictions. The word samma which appears in each of the elements of the Eightfold Path really means “highest” (correlated to our summit) or “universal.” True Buddhism does not propose any “right” way of life as against any “wrong” way or ways, but a superlative, universal, supreme Way; an all-embracing anatta view, terminating in samma-samadhi consciousness of totality.

In the Pali literature it would appear that one of the first missions of Buddha Sakya Muni was to elevate humanity to perfection so that all who joined his brotherhood or Sangha became Arhats, i.e. perfect, enlightened beings. Yet this universal point of view seems to have become lost and while Buddhism spread both as religion and philosophy, it did not always carry with it this experience of samadhi, or satori—as it is now called. This led to a break between those who had the

experience and those who did not. It was something like a break between those who could write cook-books and those who could cook. Humanity cannot live off cook-books; it must have food.

The same diversion may be seen in the interpretation of “Sangham saranam gacchami.” Was this Sangha or brotherhood composed of monks only or did it include lay devotees (sravakas) or was it confined to those who experienced enlightenment? Could it also not be that many monks—i.e. bhikkus or bhikshus, may not have achieved spiritual emancipation and that many lay devotees did? As the power and authority rested with the monks, theology and institutionalism were fostered. All Buddhists did not achieve enlightenment; many non-Buddhists did.

There is also the formula: **Namatasa Bhagavato Arhato Samma-Sambhodasa**, which is translated, “Salutation to the Perfect One, the Wholly Enlightened One, the Most Supreme Buddha.” This formula identifies the Arhat-experience with the Buddha-experience. It does not leave large gaps between one stage and the other. But in Mahayana literature there are such gaps. One may sometimes wonder if, having become freed from one set of recipe-writers one has not fallen into the hands of another set without finding any real cooks and so obtaining bread.

From another point of view the Dharma-tradition is not a Dharma-transmission. That is to say, it cannot be limited to doctrines. The Three Jewels emphasize Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. Satori also emphasizes Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. But this is not a verbal experience, it is not a limiting of truth to words; it signifies the truth of Buddha-enlightenment passing from person to person and it also means a Sangha-transmission or truth-in-the-while-of-manifestation.

Here we have something more than philosophical truth. We have living truth. Buddha-transmission goes from enlightened person to enlightened person and this has been from the time of Sakya Muni to now. This is also called “transmission of Dharma.”

And what does the experience of enlightenment bring? Not some philosophical explanation of ten kingdoms which may exist in theory or in actuality, but the conscious realization of them both within one’s “self” and in the universe. Then there is no difference between self and self, between self and totality. We are everything we comprehend or apprehend. What we understand is, or becomes us; separations are in words and illusions.

Thus there is much more in universal Buddhism than in becoming a Buddhist. One becomes Bosatsu, the Bodhisattva who sees all beings, enlightened and ignorant, with the same compassion. He does not frown upon the multitudes who do not know the Dharma or who have incomplete notions of Dharma. He treats all from the standpoint that nothing is true except enlightenment and yet this enlightenment belongs to all. Thus he is able to help others though he does not consider his actions as help-to-others. In other words, the supreme end of Buddhism is that everyone is a Bodhisattva and comes to realize that he has always been a Bodhisattva—or Buddha.