

# THE BARE BONES OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING

## By Victor Byrd

### INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2003, I gave a series of dharma talks on the Eightfold Path to our sangha in Long Beach, California. Naively, I thought I could rectify an anomaly in our group, an oddity that truly has mystified me. Even though I have referenced aspects of the Eightfold Path many times in the past few years, in particular the pivotal seventh and eighth steps of the Path, sati and samadhi, no one ever seemed to remember them. I began to suspect that we had a genuine black hole in our midst, some psychic vacuum cleaner lurking in the air sucking up all these Buddhist terms.

Our selective amnesia was disturbing to me, but it was also fascinating. We have been sitting together for over a decade and there is a palpable sense of serious intention in our sangha, but after hearing over seven hours of talks on the Eightfold Path, I doubt if one member of our sangha could name all eight steps. What does that say about us? Could it indicate some serious flaw in our teacher's ability to pique the students' interest and curiosity, or is it possible that our sangha is full of meditators with short term memory issues? Reluctantly, I will admit that these two possibilities are not mutually exclusive.

Another thought is the possibility that many of us do not consider the context of meditation – its Eastern underpinnings – a necessary prerequisite for American Vipassana meditators, or Zen meditators for that matter. Perhaps we feel that the Eightfold Path is nothing more than a cultural appendage that no longer serves any purpose for contemporary Western meditators. Perhaps we think of the Eightfold Path as an Eastern version of the Ten Commandments and just about as relevant.

Many Asian teachers have commented on the difference between American meditators and their Asian counterparts. U Panditta, perhaps the foremost teacher of Theravada Buddhism presently living, once said that Western students have a tendency to do therapy while sitting on their cushions, as opposed to meditating. The problem with his observation (however accurate) is that he was taking the American meditator out of *our*

context and trying to squeeze our square heads into the round circle of Eastern mentality. “Doing therapy” is the culmination of two thousand years of Western Civilization. It is a magnificent flower of our culture, just as meditation is one of the supreme achievements of the East. Both Hinduism and Buddhism point us toward the goal of freedom through a life of non-attachment, but it was the genius of the West that examined and came to understand the absolute necessity of healthy infant attachment. As we attempt to integrate Buddhist teaching into our culture, in particular the Buddhist perspective of no-self, is it possible for us to embrace one culture without discarding the other? Is there some way to “hold” the paradox of no-self as we work to heal our psychological wounds?

American impatience has become a cliché, but it is truly an apt description for the frenetic pace of our lives. Most of us are anxious for the payoff and prefer to skip the boring details. Indeed, I just described the first forty years of my life and perhaps some of your lives as well. It is hardly surprising that many of us who meditate have jumped into the technique with little concern for the context, for instance, the Eightfold Path. Who needs to understand it? Just do it!

Our impatience also speaks of a Judeo-Christian culture that rejects the Eastern belief in reincarnation. For most of us, this very life is the only life we have or ever will have. It is all there is. We only have one chance at the big E – enlightenment – and then it’s curtains. The conviction that we have just sixty, seventy, maybe eighty years to get it right creates an interesting paradox that Asians raised in the Hindu or Buddhist traditions do not experience. In America we put a rush order on our spiritual practice, as we do on everything else. We do not embrace the comforting belief that we have more than one lifetime to wake up, and, let’s face it, one single lifetime doesn’t seem long enough to improve one’s diet, let alone achieve enlightenment. At the same time, few of us believe in the possibility of complete and radical transformation – right here, right now.

So we children of the West hedge our bets. We sit on the cushion and aspire to improve, which is to say that we want to gain more peace and insight into ourselves, but we don’t really believe that we have within our own minds the capacity for complete and radical change. How many of us sit to end all delusion, to find the ultimate goal that the Buddha literally guaranteed to each of us as our birthright: the unshakable deliverance of the heart?

Krishnamurti has a disturbing analogy that illustrates our penchant for improving our lives rather than radically changing them. He imagines someone busily frittering away her precious life decorating a prison cell: moving the couch here; putting lovely curtains there; painting the walls a nice color; all the while denying the stark reality, “My God! I’m trapped in a prison!” Krishnamurti’s analogy, as disturbing as it may be, describes the real context in which most of us sit.

We don’t really have a model for radical change in the West. This explains, in part, our deep-rooted need for a savior. In the span of twenty-something years, which is all the time most of us have left after we have squandered our youth and middle age, how many of us have sufficient energy to do the intense work of spiritual transformation? Do we even believe it’s possible to escape the jail cell of ignorance? Indeed, how many of us can remember for more than five seconds at a time that our lives are lived beneath a blanket of ignorance? The belief in a divine and powerful entity that will save us from the rushing sound of our own mortality makes perfect sense. We try to improve and pray for salvation, and this is our Western Way.

In the East, the quest for enlightenment arose as an intrinsic part of the culture, but for most Americans even the word “enlightenment” causes us to scratch our heads. Most of us have never read about nor even heard of the rishis who lived in India over four thousand years ago: the wise beings who carried the oral tradition of the Vedas (religious hymns) from generation to generation. Their deepest longing was “to be led from the unreal to the Real,” and this intention was a goal worthy of lifetimes of dedication. In the East, these rishis *saw* truth. They didn’t *think* or contemplate the truth as do we. The vehicle for seeing truth was meditation. Meditation arose out of the rishis’ longing for awakening, and as a spiritual practice it was the flowering of that urge. Even though the Buddha repudiated much of what had become reified and corrupt in the spiritual practices of his time, there is no question that the Buddha-dharma came from those ancient Indian roots.

If we are practicing an Eastern form of meditation – Yoga, Zen, Tibetan or Vipassana – to what extent can we remove meditation from its roots, its context, without destroying something core to it, some essence present in the soil that is a necessary part of what flowers? Our bias is “just learn to meditate, and don’t worry about the Sanskrit details.” Wanting to be inclusive (God forbid that we exclude anyone) and wanting to assure

everyone that our meditation group isn't weird or out of the mainstream, we talk about how meditation works for everybody, whether Christian, Buddhist or nonbeliever. Just cut the stem and flower of meditation from its spiritual roots and plant it in your church, synagogue or kitchen window, and watch the new plant grow! In other words, don't be put off by this strange "oriental" stuff.

Similarly, we have taken the ancient practice of yoga and turned it into a form of aerobic exercise where you can stretch, sweat, get healthy and relax while new age music softly wafts through the room. It feels really spiritual and neat. Our most popular yoga magazines feature absolutely gorgeous bodies in fantastic postures gracing the cover. The subtle message is that you can really have it all: glorifying the body beautiful while developing inner peace. Our capacity to turn everything, including all things spiritual, into entertainment is nonpareil.

Over the last forty years, the first seeds of the Buddha-dharma have been planted and are taking root in our Western soil, but any true process is far deeper than what appears on the surface. Process implies a change, a transformation that reaches down to the root of a thing. In the case of Buddhism and meditation, the synthesis of East and West will have to accommodate our own deep cultural archetypes, as well as the core elements handed down by the rishis and buddhas in ancient times. Historically, this conforms to the pattern of Buddhism in every country where it has taken root. For over two thousand years, it has morphed into new forms within different cultures.

When Buddhism spread from India to China, it settled in for at least five hundred years before Ch'an (Zen Buddhism) began to emerge as a new and vibrant spiritual practice. One can see why Zen, which urges us to "just sit" and not get bogged down in the intellectual traps of dogma, spread so quickly in America: it so perfectly fits with our default. Many of us have confused "just sit" with "just do it." But in the scheme of things, forty years is not a lot of time. It's possible that an authentic American form of Buddhism may not emerge until the third century of this millennium. In *The Faith to Doubt*, Stephen Batchelor says:

In the final analysis there is not an entity called "Buddhism" which travels from one culture to another. The insights and values of Buddhism are transmitted solely through their being realized in and communicated through the lives of individual women and men. And

we can no more create a Western form of Buddhism than we can manufacture a fairy tale or a myth. For Buddhism achieves its cultural expression in a mysterious and unpredictable way over many generations in a way that no one can possibly predict.

Recently, I reread *The Symbolic Quest*, by the noted Jungian analyst, Dr. Edward C. Whitmont, who did his best to help me grow an inner adult during the years I lived in New York City. Whitmont says that the obstacle to deep change is not some nebulous or intangible unconscious wall blocking our efforts. It stands right before us, as bright as day. It is our conscious attitude toward change that we must come to grips with. An intelligent and thoughtful client once said to me, "You can't make me grow up!" That spoke volumes about her conscious attitude toward change. Whitmont says:

The function of the analysis is to bring about the change of conscious attitude, the metanoia. [Metanoia is a fundamental change in one's beliefs.] This is the indispensable prerequisite for the transformation which itself, however, occurs spontaneously in the unconscious and cannot be brought about directly by any deliberate effort of will, or by any urging or suggestion on the part of the analyst. It is like a free gift of grace which is experienced by the soul in the course of living devotedly, in an attitude of dedication to one's life and one's difficulties.

Dr. Whitmont's words are as relevant to the transformation that can come through meditation, the getting well track, as they are to psychological work, the growing up path. In the meantime, all that we can do is work with what is right in front of us: our conscious attitude. Transformation occurs beyond the grasp of our conscious will, but ironically, it also requires the cooperation of our conscious will.

Do we feel a tug of resistance as we study the Buddha-dharma? Do our eyes glaze over as we listen to a teacher talking about the five hindrances, the five spiritual faculties, or the twelve nidanas? Do we wonder why we have to listen to all those words and endless lists that seem so irrelevant to our sitting practice? Perhaps our desire to nurture the baby of meditation while throwing out the bath water of its Asian context is evidence that we are working at cross-purposes with the unconscious. In other words, our genuine efforts to embrace the radical teaching of the Buddha may be undermined by an attitude that is, in fact, draining off the

potent, transformative energy of meditation.

If the manifestation of radical change or transformation happens first in the unconscious, beyond the immediate power and control of the ego, we are called to a certain attitude of humility in our conscious attitude. For instance, if my conscious attitude is one of aversion toward this very difficult material, that very recognition may help soften my resistance and allow the teaching to penetrate into the deep unconscious. If we have faith in the miracle of process and if we believe that deep psychological growth is our birthright, can we not find a measure of solace that our lives, indeed our very consciousness (or soul, as Whitmont calls it), will change as we learn to live our lives devotedly, in an attitude of dedication?

What is our conscious attitude as we read this material and study the Eightfold Path? Can we work with our deep resistance and open to the amazing possibility of radical change as we live devotedly in an attitude of dedication to the challenges we face in our lives? Even though we may sincerely want to incorporate meditation into our daily lives, is it possible that we are unconsciously spitting out those aspects that are too foreign to our Western way of thinking? Does our psychic system digest techniques of Eastern meditation while eliminating elements that are too foreign or spicy to process? What if some of this nondigestible food is crucial to the deepest potential of meditation?

Earlier, I mentioned how Zen Buddhism had emerged from the earlier Indian form of the Buddha's teaching. Although it took centuries for the Indian roots of Buddhism to graft to core aspects of Chinese and Japanese culture, the amazing thing is that it eventually succeeded. The Buddha-dharma was able to maintain the essence of its Indian origins while morphing into something uniquely Chinese and Japanese. In a sense, this amazing process could not have occurred without an intrinsically powerful conservative force that maintained the core of Indian wisdom as it melted down in China and Japan, re-emerging a thousand years later as a vibrant new practice. The Buddha's teaching made a similar and equally remarkable transformation as it went through a morphing process in Tibet.

This process of synthesis involves the interplay of two unstable and potent elements that seem to dance at the core of all living things. In English, we call these forces liberalism and conservatism, two dynamic energies that seem locked in an eternal power struggle. Not only does this struggle play out in each individual life but it is ever-present in our culture

as well.

There is a fascinating parallel between the forces of conservatism and liberalism and the ancient Indian Gods Vishnu and Shiva. Vishnu is the God who preserves life and Shiva is the destroyer. The river of life flows between these two archetypal forces – at times it sustains and at other times it floods and destroys.

Over many thousands of years, our human brains have created an ego structure that can “save” the past – just as a computer saves content before we turn it off for the night. Without that function, there could be no preservation of what has been gained from the expansion of consciousness over generations. Were it not for this tremendous force of conservatism, which preserves – conserves – a truth that transcends all words, the dharma would have disappeared as Buddhism spread to distant lands.

At our Sunday sats, we occasionally discuss the notion of getting rid of the ego and its deluded belief that it is a permanent, separate entity – if only we could catch the damn thing! When I think about the ancient struggle between the two archetypes of Shiva and Vishnu, I wonder about this need to destroy the ego. Is it possible that Western psychology has taken the role of protector – nurturer – and preserver of the ego, thus doing Vishnu’s work; while Shiva’s aims of destruction of the unreal are more readily seen through the Buddha’s teaching? It is quite a paradox.

Surely the primal force of Shiva urges us toward growth and transformation. It provides an irritant, a thorn in our side that can create a miracle, the pearl of something new. When liberalism is unchecked, it becomes psychic chaos. When conservatism is unchecked we end with stagnation and rigidity. Death by freezing or death by boiling: Choose your temperature!

From this perspective, the anomaly of a person in Long Beach, California, practicing Vipassana meditation while relentlessly forgetting minor details such as the Eightfold Path makes perfect sense. The liberal urge to grow beyond the limits of our traditional spiritual forms has led many of us to this practice, but the conservative instinct to preserve the deepest inner streams of our traditions by getting rid of the more foreign elements of the practice is not necessarily a bad thing either. A liberal urge to get rid of “bad” psychological, Judeo-Christian traditions while embracing the whole cloth of Eastern deities, customs, and trappings may

enmesh one into a practice that looks good but is only skin deep.

So, what elements of Eastern soil do we preserve in our Western flower pot? The question is troubling and the answer is not apparent. What we do know is that we are trying to integrate meditation into our lives and are part of an amazing process that has already taken place in other cultures throughout the world. Michele McDonald, a Vipassana meditation teacher who blends the best of the East and the West, suggests that we are the prototypes.

My hope is that we prototypes can each maintain a degree of open-mindedness as we consider the possibility that our resistance to the Eightfold Path is not an accident but, in fact, is deeply subtle, conservative and psychological. My psychotherapy clients have taught me that it is futile to try to beat resistance. Resistance is everything; it must be recognized and it must be understood. In a space of understanding and acceptance, a softening of boundaries and new possibilities can open up, allowing the unconscious to create a miracle. The Eightfold Path is intrinsic to our Vipassana practice, and it is a core part of the bare bones of the Buddha's Teaching, so we must look honestly at the very resistance that keeps us from plumbing the depths of this practice.

One key, in particular, will help us unlock the door of our resistance to this material. That key is our willingness to work with certain Sanskrit and Pali words. At a recent conference, I sat at a table with a group of psychotherapists. We were surprised and amused to discover that five of us had majored in English in college. One interesting woman from Korea told us that she had a Master's Degree in literature from a Korean University. What subject did she choose for her thesis? Shakespeare! According to her, even though her paper had to be written in Korean with Korean footnotes, she realized that her only hope of understanding Shakespeare lay in her willingness to read his plays in their original language, which as we know is English.

We were all fascinated by her story, perhaps because it illuminates something that people know intuitively. The essence of meaning is ephemeral and easily lost even when we speak the same language. But Shakespeare in Korean? Voltaire in English? And more to the point, what about the Buddha's teachings in English? Dare we pretend that profound Indian meaning is not inevitably lost in translation?

Few of us are going to learn Sanskrit, Tibetan or Pali, and in fact, there is no reason to assert that someone spending years learning any of these languages will necessarily have a real advantage in understanding the profound meaning of the Buddha's teaching. If we intuitively grasp the absurdity of capturing the essence of Shakespeare in Korean, we can also sense how ridiculous it is to assume we can embrace the vastness and subtlety of Buddhism by way of an English translation.

At best, we who think, dream, and speak in English are called upon to hold a certain measure of humility as we approach these subtle meanings so alien to our traditions. Our cultural milieu is dualist from stern to stem and we see through the context of duality. We live in a reality that imagines an outside and an inside. I experience reality from the perspective of an inside "me" looking at an outside world. That is the very essence of duality. Most of us believe in a "God up there" and a "me down here." We live in a world that posits good as the opposite of bad, hate as the opposite of love, right as the opposite of left. These are the fundamental aspects of a dualistic reality system.

There is nothing inferior about seeing through the lens of duality. Indeed, the genius of ancient India lay in its capacity to hold both dualism and nondualism within its religious systems – something early Christianity failed to do as it utterly stamped out the nondual perspectives of early Gnostic Christians. The spiritual discipline of Yoga is grounded in a dualistic reality. Even the word "yoga," which means "to yoke," implies uniting two things: the individual soul with the cosmic soul; joining head and heart; balancing feminine energy with masculine energy; the sun and the moon; and so on. That is duality. Our problem comes when we make unconscious assumptions, such as the belief that there is no way of seeing truth other than through our dualistic perception. When I cannot even acknowledge that there is a different and perhaps far deeper way of perceiving, I robotically retranslate the non-dual aspects of the Buddha-dharma into my dualistic default or bias.

My suggestion is that we learn to hold onto this idea that our minds are conditioned to process reality through the lens of duality, not with an attitude that we are doing something wrong but surely with the humility of accepting that what we are trying to do is about as easy as trying to put socks on a rooster, to quote an old Southern adage. We must remind ourselves that these foreign concepts and the most subtle aspects of the Buddha's teachings are grounded in a non-dual way of seeing. Thus,

profound respect and curiosity for “the other” is crucial.

Can we ponder, even taste these words and meanings, as if we are approaching a sacred temple? Can we contemplate what sati is rather than attempting to cage it within the net of that English word “mindfulness?” In that attitude of respect and humility, perhaps there is a chance for us to open our hearts to the unknown. That is my deep wish as you read what follows. Blessings and Metta to us all.