

# THE BARE BONES OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING

## By Victor Byrd

### CONCLUSION

Life seems to fly by at an increasingly frenetic pace as we enter the twenty-first century. We careen through the obstacle course of our busy lives and grab whatever synopsis is available to help us “bottom line” difficult or dense material. But there is no short cut to listening to a Mozart Symphony and there are no quick and easy “Buddhist Cliff Notes” that will open us to the essence of the Buddha-dharma. One can stand back and admire a beautiful flower, but there is only one way to experience its subtle fragrance: up close and personal. Either we dedicate our time and attention to the Buddha-dharma, with an open mind and tender heart, or we do not.

This presents the writer with something of a dilemma. I wanted to present the bare bones of the Buddha's early sermons, in a way that would make them accessible to anyone with little or no knowledge of Eastern philosophy but with a mind still open to possibility, with ears and eyes still open to the music of the dharma. Unfortunately, my aspiration was naïve and greatly out of sync with my ability. After I started to transcribe a series of dharma talks on the Eightfold Path, I discovered that my understanding was impossibly shallow. I don't mind admitting that this came as both a surprise and a blow to my ego. So I started grappling with the Eightfold Path once again. I rewrote as I studied and contemplated as I rewrote. Each chapter eventually evolved into a new series of dharma talks. As a consequence of this long process, each chapter tends to be a self-contained unit, rather than flowing seamlessly from the one before it. Some material in the *Bare Bones* is repeated simply because I had forgotten what I wrote ten chapters and three years ago.

To most Americans, the word “Buddha” conjures up the image of a little fat guy sitting with a silly grin on his face or worse, an emaciated, grim looking man who looks like he never had a friend in his life. “Buddha” triggers an automatic deflector shield that rises to protect us from worshipping a false idol. God forbid that our religions should be contaminated by some foreign demon. We are programmed to reject

heathen, alien and impure gods. "Thou shall have no other Gods before thee." That programming has been extraordinarily and terribly successful in each religion on earth, including, sad to say, Buddhism.

I can never get my mind around this. Here we have a man who said that his aim was to point out the reality of suffering and to show us a way to end our suffering. He never once claimed to be divine, or a god (Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhism notwithstanding), yet this man ranks in the highest pantheon of teachers who ever walked the face of this earth. To most of us in the West, he remains a stranger. This is astonishing and it speaks of a spiritual poverty that I find terribly sad.

The Buddha's message is not about belief. He did not demand that you believe in this or in that. I think he would have been okay if you worshiped a chicken. To the Buddha, the journey begins with *practice*, not belief. You can believe in the Big Chicken and light candles and incense to him/her. But in the meantime, how about learning to quiet your mind and work skillfully with the poisons of greed, hatred and delusion? How about looking at the core of your own ignorance? My astonishment at our spiritual poverty comes home to roost as I face the truth that ignorance begins with me, especially as I begin to look at my own impatience with the ignorance of others. What is it in me that despises ignorance, if not my own ignorance? If I accept the Buddha's teaching that it is *avijja* (delusion) that got me here in the first place, rather than an accident of birth, and if I accept his teaching that ignorance or delusion is universal, why then should I be astonished that almost no one seems to have heard of the Eightfold Path, and if they have, they don't take it very seriously?

Perhaps it is too painful for us to accept the proposition that we really have not changed that much since the Buddha's time. In the twenty-five centuries since the Buddha's passing, are we more conscious? Are we more compassionate? Do we have more wisdom? The Buddha was a revolutionary then, and he is a revolutionary now. He had no use for metaphysical questions about God, or a First Cause, or evil, or heaven or hell. He was not interested in questions such as, "Do we have a soul? Where does it go after death? Do we reincarnate?" Neither was he interested in proclaiming one set of beliefs to be superior to another, for instance, the Mahayana and Vajrayana belief that the bodhisattva ideal is "superior" to the "selfish" idea of individual enlightenment, as espoused by Theravada Buddhism. I cannot believe that the Buddha would have tolerated such hogwash for one moment. His focus was relentless. "You're

stuck in that hole and asking me if one tradition is superior to another? Let me ask you a question: Now that you figured out that you fell into a hole, are you suffering? Yes? Well then, let's find a way to get you out of there!"

After asking us if we are suffering in our individual hole, if he heard a sincere response from deep below, the Buddha would not have hollered back, "Now let's all turn to page 780 in our Sacred Book and start praying together." Nor would he say, "In order to get out of that hole, we must first believe in a higher power." Instead, he would analyze the problem of this particular hole, its depth, the possible places to establish our footing, etc., and look around for what was immediately at hand in terms of tools to help us climb out. But if a person needed to believe that a higher power would give him the strength to escape from his hole, the Buddha would have worked with that belief too. This is called upaya, or skillful means. The Eightfold Path is his elegant Upaya Instruction Book for climbing out of the hole that ignorance has dug for us.

The Eightfold Path is a dharma wheel of eight spokes. Right Understanding, the first spoke, colors every facet of the Buddha-dharma, especially the First Noble Truth.

I acknowledge that suffering is hard-wired into my brain.

From the First Noble Truth comes the Second:

When I am oblivious to desire, my desire sinks back into the unconscious and turns into craving. Craving then turns into clinging and suffering is guaranteed.

From the Second Noble Truth comes the Third:

If I can break the chain before my craving has turned to clinging, I will be free of suffering, at least momentarily.

From the Third Noble Truth comes the Fourth:

The Eightfold Path is a blueprint for constructing the spiritual laboratory that eventually can produce an end to all clinging, thus an end to all suffering forever.

When I complimented a client on the depth and intensity of her psychological work, she replied with a simple, "It's because I am desperate." I will not soon forget the expression on her face. It was a look of recognition of her situation. It terrified her; it bewildered her, but it also gave her the courage and strength to get off the dime. As I observed the sincerity on her face, I was reminded of the Zen saying that we must practice as if our hair is on fire. She knew that her hair is on fire, and what makes her work so powerful is that she recognizes that I cannot save her. If she is to find psychological healing, it will be through her own effort. This is the Buddha's teaching par excellence.

The hard message of Right Understanding is that no one can, and no one may save us but ourselves. Most of us stay in the prison of our minds, waiting for someone to come and rescue us. We decorate our little cells as best we can and soon forget that we live in a prison. The unconscious fantasy of rescue is a core delusion, and it is the death of the healing process in psychotherapy as well as in our spiritual practice. Recently, I reminded a client of a dream that he had brought to a session years ago. In it, he saw himself as a teenager who had been beaten up by school thugs. In the dream, he realized that he literally took a certain pleasure in being beaten to a bloody pulp because he hoped and prayed that someone would see his terrible condition and come and hold him, nurture and comfort him. In the recent session, he looked at me and said, "So all my life I have waited for someone to come and help me?" I said, "Yes. But perhaps you are now able to become your own hero." If we discover that our hair is on fire, that we have *no* time to wait for a loving mama or divine savior to rescue us, we grab what is available and start climbing out of our particular hole. We rescue ourselves. The truth of suffering is a hurdle that either blocks our way or gives us a toehold to start the upward climb!

If the first spoke of the dharma wheel is the meaning of the Buddha-dharma, the second spoke is the content of that meaning. Martin Luther King said that we should judge someone not by the color of his skin but by the content of his character. Right Thought is the content of our character, pure and simple. This is why I much prefer "right thought" to "right intention" for the second spoke of the wheel. Right intention is too fancy for me and I suspect it would have been too fancy for Martin Luther King. If my thoughts are filled with ill will and envy, or if I am relentlessly self-loathing, what is the point of my high-toned Buddhist understanding of anicca, anatta or the Twelve Nidanas? Who cares if I can quote the Four

Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path in Pali, Sanskrit or Greek, if the content of my thought is a total mess?

The third spoke is the immediate expression of the content of my thought, Right Speech. The fourth and fifth spokes, Right Action and Right Living, are the expression of my practice through my daily interactions with others. I love the way the Dharma Wheel curves in an outward direction here. Earlier, we saw a relentlessly linear path with Patanjali's eight limbs of yoga, a steady movement of interiorization. The Eightfold Path however, is circular. It curves in and it curves out, a constant turning toward truth even as it appears to move away from it.

The last three spokes of the wheel are the meditation (dhyana) ones. Right Effort, Right Sati and Right Samadhi are the core of our meditation practice. What chance do we have to observe the crazy movie in our heads, to create the wedge that gives us a precious moment of release from being lost in the content, without intense mind training? Who among us does not have a wild nature? Our minds are the Wild West without any semblance of John Wayne on the horizon. So how do we work with our own wild nature without the tools of meditation? And yet, what is the point of a meditation practice if we do not have its context? What is the point of sitting on a cushion and getting wonderfully still if, two hours later, we have completely forgotten that clinging causes us to suffer?

This is the meaning that I gleaned from the story of Harry the Shanghai Jew. He first endured; then he learned the new language. Unlike Harry, most of us want to skip the boring details and get to the reward of a thing. But what if the meaning of a thing rests within its context? What then for those of us who are too impatient to learn the new language? In the Ch'an tradition, it is said that *the wise enshrine the miraculous bones of the ancient teachers within themselves*. This is what it means to learn the language: to give our heart and soul, blood and guts to the new thing. Incorporating the teaching of the ancient masters means that we are willing to learn it in our bones, not in our heads. Learning the language is grounded in faith and nurtured in humility. If we are to open our minds to the unknown, we must leave our comfort zone, where layers of memorized facts have created a false sense of security and certainty, and enter a world that is new and unfamiliar. Sad to say, the line to purchase that ticket is not very long.

As we come to the last spoke of samadhi and the wheel turns, an amazing truth is revealed about the Eightfold Path. Like prospectors panning for gold, we find, through our practice, the essence of sati shinning at the bottom of the pan. At the same time, the set of mirrors (samadhi) becomes ever more clear and capable of magnifying sati even deeper down to the roots of greed, hatred and delusion. Now, Right Understanding opens into far more subtle levels of knowing. This level of knowing illumines and purifies as the wheel turns again and again into Right Thought and on to Right Speech. From this constant turning comes even greater depth of insight. Eventually, we discover that the dharma wheel of the Eightfold Path is not a circle at all. In fact, it is a spiral of development that guides us with the sure eye of the most seasoned sailor. It will take us across the ocean of unconscious existence, where, until now we have been caught between joy and misery, clarity and confusion, yes and no, before and after. This ascending spiral spreads in all directions and it goes deep down as well as soaring into unimagined heights. It takes us beyond the relentless subtext of life, death and suffering, to a distant shore of liberation. The Buddha teaches us that this spiral is our birthright. It is an urge within each of us, a deep unease knocking at our door, asking us all to come home.