

THE BARE BONES OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING

By Victor Byrd

THE THIRD NOBLE TRUTH: NIRRODHA THE END OF SUFFERING (Nirrodha means *ending* or "blocking")

This is the moment that our Dharma Symphony bursts into a triumphant chorus, because, with the third great truth, the Buddha teaches an extraordinary thing: *Dukkha is not a life sentence*. There can be an end to suffering in this very life. This profoundly optimistic statement stands in sharp contrast to the commonly held notion that Buddhist philosophy is dark and negative. What the Buddha presents is not some carrot stick of hope that promises future salvation beyond tomorrow. He guarantees no paradise of milk and honey, no reward for those who believe every word of a holy book, or who place blind faith in a guru, priest, a pope, minister, rabbi or shaman from the Amazon. Nor does he offer salvation through performing a set of rituals, such as bowing ten thousand times, or doing good works.

No one saves us, but ourselves.
No one can and no one may.
We ourselves must walk the path,
Buddhas merely teach the way." (Paul Carus)

This is the bare bones teaching of Buddhism.

Radical? You better believe it. Adult? Totally! What is the end of suffering? *It is the complete fading away of craving*. Notice that the Buddha does not say the "partial" fading away of craving. He says, "complete." But he is just getting started. Even "fading away" is not enough for this guy. He adds, "and the *extinction* of this craving." OK sir, are you finished now? Hardly. He adds, "forsaking and giving up" craving. And heaven help us, there's more. The Buddha says that the last part of the process of freeing ourselves from craving is the "liberation and detachment from it."

“And for the disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, and naught more remains for him to do. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so, neither forms, nor sounds, nor odors, nor tastes, nor contacts of any kind, neither the desired nor the undesired, can cause such an one to waver. Steadfast is his mind, gained is deliverance.”

He adds,

“Verily, there is a realm, where there is neither the solid, nor the fluid, neither heat nor motion, neither this world nor any other world, neither sun nor moon.”

And in one of the most memorable and beautiful Buddhist passages, he says:

“Hence, the purpose of the Holy Life does not consist in acquiring alms, honor, fame, nor in gaining morality, concentration or the eye of knowledge. That unshakable deliverance of the heart: that, verily, is the object of the Holy Life, that is the essence, that is the goal.”

The unshakable deliverance of the heart. Can you imagine more stirring words? Surely, no religion on earth offers a more empowering vision of our human potential. The Buddha taught that the healing power of self-blessing resides in one place only. It lives within our own heart.

But who among us believes in the Buddha’s vision? Do we sit in meditation to die to the illusion that has trapped us since beginningless time, or do we sit to *improve*? Recently, one member of our sangha said it doesn’t matter to him if we are sitting to improve or sitting to change. Improvement can lead to change. No doubt he is correct, but it is vitally important that we examine just what our attitude is in relation to this powerful message in the Third Noble Truth. Do you really believe that human beings have the potential to end all suffering in this very life? And, if you do believe that, do you believe that *you* still have the time and energy to become free?

Here is a description of a course in Vipassana that is offered at a local junior college in Los Angeles. It is entitled:

Vipassana/Mindfulness Meditation for Everyday Life.

“Explore Vipassana Meditation in a gentle and caring class for students of all levels. The practice of this simple, direct, and powerful sitting-walking-moving meditation invites you to expand your awareness and learn to see things as they really are, freeing your heart and mind. Learn to be fully present in the moment, developing your patience and self-acceptance. Potential benefits from doing this include *improved* decision making, communication, health, and happiness. The consistent use of this meditation technique can help you *become more effective* in all areas of your life. Wear comfortable clothing you can move in easily.” (italics mine)

In this class, the emphasis is on technique, improvement, and becoming more effective in all areas of your life. “Becoming” is the keyword. This is “California Vipassana” at its best, and one will find this emphasis on improved psychological functioning or raising our self-esteem in meditation classes near and far. Notice how Vipassana Meditation has been lifted out of the context of Theravada Buddhism, and reframed into the language of our culture. In the brochure, there are no disturbing words about suffering or attachment to desire and nothing as unsettling as the suggestion of anatta (no self), awakening, or radical change. Not even a hint.

But something intrinsic to the Buddha’s core teaching has vanished. In promoting and extolling *improvement*, we have completely missed the Buddha’s promise of radical and complete liberation. Here is one of my favorite stories about the Russian mystic, Gurdjieff. It illumines the profound gap between our Western path of improvement and the Buddha’s path of radical change.

An American, who studied with Gurdjieff, was addicted to cigarettes, and desperately needed to quit. Through her intense inner work with her teacher she was able to stop smoking entirely. Later, she visited him, expressing her joy and gratitude. Gurdjieff smiled back, and reaching for a pack lying on the table, he said, “Good. Now have a cigarette!”

I have always loved this story, *not* because it points to a fallacy in our Twelve Step programs (*which have helped untold thousands suffering from addiction*) but because it perfectly describes an entirely different mind set about liberation. Gurdjieff’s silent message to his student was that she

would never be truly free from an addiction to smoking, as long as she lived in fear of it. He believed in the possibility of complete and radical change *from the inside out*. But how irresponsible this must seem to those who have struggled to overcome decades of addiction. Imagine a group in AA celebrating a member's 5th year of sobriety with champagne.

In a previous chapter, I made reference to a great meditation master of the last century. A lifetime of meditation did not release him from an addiction to alcohol, and my understanding is that he was drunk when he died. How can this be? How can a great teacher be so profoundly flawed? Can we hold this as paradox, or does our dualistic mentality compel us to find a ready and easy solution to this dilemma by dismissing him as a fake who was not *really* enlightened?

Thus we come again (as we always will!) to the great mystery of two very separate paths to healing. I believe that this Zen master only worked one side of the "mighty thin plank." He was "well" from the Eastern perspective, but from the psychological point of view, the split-off wounded part of his psyche was never accessed, nor embraced, despite a life-long practice that included the deepest and most profound meditative states.

In the West, we tend to believe that the only way that a person can break free of a terrible addiction is to remember, with single-minded tenacity, that "I am an alcoholic and powerless over my addiction. Any moment, I can fall off the wagon." Our motto is once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic. But this is a statement of surrender and acceptance, not of self-condemnation.

And what of the Buddha's message that we can be *free* of our personal story? His radical message is so startling, that we tend to dismiss it out of hand. For one thing, he says that we are **all** addicts. We all crave *something*. Maybe gin or Marlboros. Maybe we are addicted to thinking and accumulating knowledge or just wanting to feel good. What the Buddha teaches is nearly impossible to believe: We can be released from all addictions. "Good! Now have a cigarette."

These are two very different ways of looking at our capacity and power to heal. The Path of the Buddha imagines complete and radical transformation, which is precisely his song of healing in the Third Noble Truth. Our Western path imagines healing as a movement or progression

through time. The Vipassana/Mindfulness class is clearly about this process of “becoming,” as the brochure describes.

Interestingly, this path of radical change has created tension and disagreement within Buddhism, itself. In ancient China, for example, one school of Buddhist masters insisted that radical change (enlightenment) occurs as a sudden awakening, as if one instantly awakens from the darkness of sleep. The other school asserted that gaining enlightenment is a gradual affair. It may be true that we suddenly wake up, but then we may lie in bed, half awake and half asleep, for the rest of the morning...or the rest of our lives, still clinging to our old desires.

And of course, we Westerners have our own version of this “tension between opposites.” Christianity has millions of followers who believe in the radical change of being “born again” in Christ. Depth psychologists believe in profound inner change as opposed to the behavioral changes that we hope to accomplish in Twelve Step programs. But in general, we conceptualize change as something that occurs over time, and we do not conceptualize change in the radical terminology of *complete and final liberation from all suffering in this very life*.

Our way may be different, but that surely does not make it inferior. Many hospitals in America are now teaching Vipassana techniques to help patients manage chronic pain. They are taught to direct mindfulness *toward* the pain; and when mindfulness merges with equanimity, the pain can be penetrated. By “penetrated,” I mean that pain can be broken down into more “bearable parts.” As a result, the body begins to relax around the pain because the unconscious resistance to that pain is reduced. Eventually the pain can diminish and perhaps, in time, vanish altogether.

What was experienced as “pain” may begin to break up into smaller patterns of sensations, and a person may be able to learn to observe how the pain is actually a pattern of sensations that increase or decrease in intensity. With the ability to “stay with” these sensations, the patient-meditator may notice movements that are sharp or dull, throbbing or steady, hot or cold, and he can watch as the sensations move from one area to another. The experience of watching sensations as sensations rather than labeling them as “pain” opens the door to equanimity with what is.

As one becomes more skillful in watching intense sensations, resistance to the experience begins to lessen, and suffering is reduced.

Shinzen Young's famous and brilliant equation (only a Western teacher could have come up with this one!) explains the power of Vipassana to reduce suffering: $P \times R = S$. *Pain times Resistance equals Suffering*. In other words, 10 units of pain plus 10 units of resistance equals 20 units of suffering. But 10 units of pain *times* 10 units of resistance produces one hundreds units of suffering, and that is a lot of suffering.

Shinzen's equation describes our human condition precisely. If we can learn to reduce our resistance to pain, we automatically reduce the level of suffering. Many Western teachers such as Shinzen Young and Jon Kabat-Zinn have introduced Vipassana into the American mainstream, and the benefits of this teaching are inestimable.

Then, there is the psychological parallel. Our resistance to emotional pain is certainly the primary inhibitor to growing up, psychologically. A person's capacity to tolerate mental discomfort is the sine qua non of her ability to stay with grief, fear, loneliness long enough for it to become her teacher and guide. Many people who have sat for years (including weekend or week long retreats) overlook the most obvious benefits of Vipassana and Zen meditation: learning to sit with and tolerate unpleasant and painful feelings. Slowly, we learn to open to our emotional pain rather than repress it. Sure, we may be waiting for enlightenment to strike like a lightning flash, but unseen, and often unnoticed, the nervous system is silently rewiring itself and we are actually beginning to grow up.

Even if we are just using Vipassana as a technique to reduce physical or psychological pain, it is still a precious gift. How could we minimize the relief it may give a cancer patient who is lying in a hospital bed, enduring pain beyond imagination? And Vipassana, as well as yogic breathing techniques, can offer significant relief to someone suffering from panic attacks.

Using Vipassana or Zen meditation as a technique to improve our lives offers immeasurable benefits to anyone willing to spend time on the cushion. Indeed, compassion encourages us to share meditation with others who are in discomfort and pain, regardless of their motivation. But, remember that our American talent for mastering superior technique can become a real hindrance to our understanding the meaning of the Buddha's Third Noble Truth. This certainly concerned Carl Jung, who warned that our western ego is uniquely capable of using meditation

technique as a means of gaining even *more* tyrannical control over nature, inside and out.

The Buddha-way is a “Path of Radical Change,” and it imagines something that is, in fact, unimaginable: **a state of *nonresistance* rather than *lowered resistance***. Why is this so? Because the Buddha’s core teaching posits a reality where *there is no one left to create suffering*. This refers to the Buddha’s teaching of anatta, and we will take that up in the following chapter on Right Understanding.

The Third Noble Truth poses profound questions for each of us. *Why are we doing this?* What is the underlying movement of our practice? Are we sitting to learn techniques that may help to improve our lives and perhaps reduce dissatisfaction and discomfort? If the answer is “yes” to these questions, surely, that is okay. But the other possibility is to dare to believe in the Buddha’s profound message, and to embrace the idea of dying to this small suffering self. With faith as our rudder, can we set our sails toward complete liberation?

These words of W.H. Auden have become a personal mantra that I repeat often. While they are disturbing to contemplate, like a bitter tasting fruit, they have the power to heal.

We would rather be ruined than changed.
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
And let our illusions die.

There is a road map leading toward the “cross of the moment” where our illusions can die. It is the Fourth Noble Truth, and the Way is known as the Eight fold Path.