

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

YOGA AND BUDDHISM

Earlier we spoke of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, his codification of the Indian yoga system into eight limbs and the close connection between the fifth limb of pratyahara and the Buddha's teaching of the sense restraints. The Yoga Aphorisms (or Sutras) is a monumental work, and, to a degree, it bears a remarkable similarity to the Buddha's Eightfold Path. This should not be surprising however. By the time Patanjali codified yoga into a cohesive system – generally accepted to have occurred sometime between the 2nd and 3rd century C.E. – Buddhism had been a dynamic movement in India for well over 500 years. It must be added, however, that the origins of yoga stretch back at least to the time of the Buddha, and probably far earlier. Indeed, it is more than likely that the Buddha was himself an accomplished yogi; one could argue that his intense sadhana of six years was based on the yoga discipline of his time. While it is impossible to say which of these two spiritual blueprints most influenced the other, surely the two great traditions of Yoga and Buddhism tremendously influenced each other.

The most obvious similarity between the eight limbs of yoga and the Eightfold Path is the fact that they both culminate in samadhi. I have long believed that this is the strongest circumstantial evidence suggesting that yoga had a profound influence on early Buddhism. The yoga system is an elegant, linear path from beginning to end, with samadhi

its inevitable pinnacle and crown. We will explore samadhi in the chapter on Right Concentration, and perhaps understand why the crown rests somewhat uneasily on top of the Buddha's Eightfold Path.

There are other interesting similarities between these two great systems. The yoga system begins by training the disciple in morality. These are the first and second limbs of the tree of yoga: the famous yamas and niyamas. The yamas are those universal aspects of human morality that have withstood the test of time. The reader will recognize how closely they resemble the Buddhist precepts:

- Ahimsa: Non-violence.
- Satya: Truthfulness.
- Asteya: Non-stealing.
- Brahamacarya: Sexual abstinence (or at least responsibility).
- Aparigraha: Abstention from greed.

The niyamas, which are the second limb of the yoga discipline, refer to the ethical discipline of the individual seeker.

- Saucha: Cleanliness.
- Santosa: Contentment.
- Tapas: Austerity.
- Svadhyaya: Self-study.
- Isvara pranidhana: Surrender to the higher power.

The idea that the spiritual journey must begin with moral training does not reside exclusively in the yoga system, however. It is the cornerstone of most religions, including Judaism and Christianity. In Buddhism, it is particularly emphasized, as sila, in the Theravada tradition. Teachers grounded in Theravada Buddhism tell us that the

Eightfold Path may indeed begin with Right Understanding, but, in truth, the actual working order of the Path begins with sila: the practice of abstaining from taking life; abstaining from taking what has not been freely given; abstaining from sexual misconduct; abstaining from false speech and abstaining from taking intoxicants that cause heedlessness. The belief that sila is the foundation of practice is fundamental to the classical teaching, and is known as the gradual path. It is along this fault line that early Buddhism began to split into two great systems, Theravada and Mahayana.

On its face, the Buddha's Eightfold Path is not linear. It begins with a paradox, which presents a problem for anyone espousing the gradual path of Theravada Buddhism. Although the Buddha praised the gradual path, comparing it to the ocean floor's gradual sloping, this can hardly mean that he was suggesting that there is *only* a gradual path. Indeed, one might suggest that in choosing to begin the Eightfold Path with Right Understanding, the Buddha presented an alternative. How does one begin with Right Understanding, when in fact it is the end of the journey?

It is not the aim here to argue for the superiority of the Theravada gradual path over the Ch'an path of sudden awakening or vice versa. Indeed, any Mahayana teaching that proclaims its superiority over the earlier Theravada tradition has shot itself in the foot. Unfortunately, Theravada tends to have a similar tendency toward foot shooting – smugly wrapping itself in its claims of orthodoxy. In truth, the two vehicles are simply two different possibilities, depending on the meditator. Our aim here is to focus on an interesting tension and mystery in the Eightfold Path, something completely missing from the Yoga Sutras. Rather than following the linear and eminently rational plan of the yoga discipline, the Buddha places sila, or morality

training, second. It comes *after* Right Understanding. In other words, the Eightfold path is not linear. One suspects that this cannot possibly be accidental.

As stated above, it is at least possible to think of the Buddha's great sadhana – his six years of spiritual training – as his working through the very yoga discipline that Patanjali eventually codified. Clearly, he practiced the yamas and niyamas. In particular, we know that he went to the extreme boundaries of tapas (austerities). He nearly died from fasting. We also know that he experienced the profound states of the eighth limb of yoga. With the help of two teachers, Alara Kalama, and Uddaka, the Buddha first experienced the lower state of samadhi and then reached the highest state of samadhi, known as nirvikalpa samadhi.

The Buddha saw that all of the yogic austerities and high states of meditation were temporary fixes. When he came out of the deepest states of samadhi, he found the seeds of a most subtle personality still waiting for him. Even if that subtle spirit was distilled to its utmost purity, and seemingly without a trace of desire, the Buddha's genius allowed him to see that there was still a there there. It was this sight that turned him in a new direction. He saw that the linear path, by definition, cannot possibly lead to cessation. One could argue that this is the great truth the Buddha saw. Old age, sickness, death and suffering can only end with the cessation of the illusion that there is this ephemeral somebody in the body.

The Buddha realized that the old discipline was not sufficient to take him to the other shore and the end of suffering, and from this realization we know that he sat under the bodhi tree with the firm intention to stay there until his mind opened to the Real. What he saw in the dawn of his awakening can never be known, nor could the Buddha

say in words what the mind actually saw. But his Eightfold Path offers us some clues. We have already seen that his placing Right Understanding as the first step on the spiritual journey defies logic. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this mirrors the seemingly irrational statement of Ch'an Buddhism that awakening precedes cultivation. It also reminds one of Krishnamurti's statement that freedom begins with the first step.

The Buddha actually added a crucial element to the Path of yoga; one might argue that this new element uniquely defined and clarified Buddhism. According to the Buddha, mindfulness must precede samadhi, and, in a sense, take precedence over it. Here are the Buddha's famous words in Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation:

There is the case where a monk, having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building, sits down folding his legs crosswise, holding his body erect, and setting mindfulness to the fore. Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out.

Whether it is "setting mindfulness to the fore" or "placing mindfulness before him" or "putting mindfulness in front," it is the Buddha's insertion of mindfulness as the seventh step that moved Buddhist meditation in a new direction and which distinguished the Eightfold Path from the ancient path of yoga. "Setting mindfulness to the fore" is easier said than done, however. Indeed, it is not easy to put into words what the Buddha meant by mindfulness. It is this seventh step of mindfulness to which we now turn.