

Buddhism as Philosophy and Practice

In the West, the place for Buddhism in our collective lives is a pretty confused one: in both academia and society, Buddhism seems to exist in a hazy nebulous which constantly eludes solid definition. Simply put, we are often left to wonder: is Buddhism a religion, a philosophy, a practice, a lifestyle? These are questions I hear regularly.

When there are answers, they can be contradictory and confused.

- i) A common example I can think of is when I overhear people talking about Buddhism, or if I ask someone “Oh, are you Buddhist?” I usually hear the following two answers:
 - a. “I like it and agree with the philosophy” (OR)
 - b. “I like the life-style.”

- 1) This is a peculiar tendency: after all, with most other religions, the lifestyle and the actions are totally interconnected. But with Buddhism, it is common for people to place Practice and Philosophy at different ends of a spiritual spectrum.

- 2) So, today we’ll be discussing Buddhism as a Philosophy, and Buddhism as a Practice, and discuss how in reality these are not to be seen as two distinct facets, but rather as a unified Path.
 - i) Both fulfill mutually complementing functions. The Philosophy is the route and destination to a life without suffering; the practice is the vehicle to get there (this is why different Buddhist schools are called “vehicles”).

Buddhist Philosophy

- 1) To describe Buddhist philosophy as a whole is completely impossible, considering how many different schools there are, and then how many different texts there are within those schools. After all, you’ve heard Ron and I bicker about little numerical differences (“Well, you only have *SIX* perfections, Chris”)—imagine that to a much more insane degree.

- 2) However, there are shared ideas which make up the basis for all Buddhist thought and theory; these are the raw materials from which all Buddhist traditions are shaped, although their shapes may be very different.

- 3) What are these ideas? Things like:
 - a. The Four Noble Truths (There is suffering, a cause to suffering, a removal of suffering, and a way to remove suffering)
 - b. This removal of suffering comes about as an attainment of enlightenment; as seeing the world entirely for how it truly is.
 - c. This “True-world” is an impermanent, ever-changing one. Instead of resisting this change, the Buddhist philosophy is to accept this change on all levels. This includes our belongings, our ideas, our loved ones, and even *ourselves*—they all will change.
 - d. Even though all things change, all things are also “real”—the world around us is a magnificent tapestry woven of interconnecting, ever-changing threads.

- 4) These ideas—this “Philosophy”—represents how Buddhists view reality. For us, to be in touch with reality is to find peace; to be out of sync with reality is to suffer.
- 5) Now, there doesn’t seem to be much that seems “religious” about these ideas—they seem like straight-forward, non-mystical statements. This is something Adeesha mentioned last week when talking about the Mangala Sutta.
 - i) However, to a practicing Buddhist, these truths—whether seeming to be secular or not—take on the seriousness that we often associate with religion. In a sense, Buddhism is a religious expression of common sense.

Buddhist Practice

- 1) What we would call “Practice” is the life-style, actions, and traditions which seek to express and internalize this philosophy. Practice is how we express the Dharma with our Thoughts, Actions, Speech, and Choices; it is what makes the Dharma and all that philosophy a reality, rather than an idea.
- 2) The most common way we Practice is through meditation. At first we build up concentration, and then we slowly begin to use that new-found concentration to look deeply at our thoughts.
 - i) As many of you learned last semester, concentration can only get you so far; Vipassanna meditation, or insight meditation, is what truly deepens our practice.
 - ii) In insight-meditation, we recognize where the philosophy enters our lives; we see the First Noble Truth in our own suffering, and are given hope and a means to change in the other Three. We slowly learn to loosen our attachments to what is changing; we slowly learn to loosen our attachments to ourselves.
- 3) Essentially, meditation is a way of *experiencing* the philosophy.
 - i) To know the Dharma in total memorization is one thing; to fully realize even a single truth, however, is the most wonderful thing of all.
 - ii) To experience the dharma, the philosophy, of Buddhism, we must practice it; we must meditate, contemplate, and in this way, we realize.
 - iii) I’ll now quote the Angutarra Nikaya—(although not a Theravadan, wise words are wise words). The Buddha discouraged blind belief, blind recitation of philosophy. He said:

...When you know for yourselves: These are wholesome; these things are not blameworthy; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness, having undertaken them, abide in them (AN 3.65)

H.H. Dalai Lama writes that “Meditation is a familiarization of the mind with an object of meditation.” Often times, this object may be a philosophical truth, or it may be compassion, but in any case, H.H. says: “compassion and wisdom [are] not being the object on which you are meditating, but that entity into which you are seeking to transform your consciousness through a process of familiarization.” (*Kindness, Clarity, and Insight*).

In the Tibetan tradition, we have the image of Yab-Yum to remind us that Philosophy must be balanced with Practice.

- i) The image of Yab-Yum depicts two deities—one male, one female—in a passionate, intertwined sexual embrace that one would likely expect to find in COSMO more than a temple.
 - ii) The male deity represents Compassion and Skillful Means—the capability to do good works in the world through practice—and the female represents Insight. This is similarly expressed in the vaguely phallic *dorje*-dagger and the more feminine bell.
 - iii) Ultimately, this is a very sexy way to remind us that our practice must be a balance between Practice and Philosophy.
- 4) To adhere to a vague, general philosophy does not *truly* help us when we need it. Perhaps when we are sitting here, or when we're pouring over an old Buddhist text, we can *understand* the philosophy—we can recognize the impermanence of all things, but it is only with practice that, when we truly lose something, when we truly face suffering in the face, that the Dharma can become a reality.
- i) This is not to say that we will always do so—we'll fall short, we'll suffer, we'll make mistakes. To quote the ever-wise, rhythmic words of the Beastie Boys: "As long as I learn, I'll make mistakes" ('Just a Test'). But practice will allow us to turn those mistakes into advancements. It'll turn philosophies into realizations, and thus into realities.

Conclusion

- 1) So, in the end what we find is that the Philosophy and the Practice must be mutual expressions of each other. The Philosophy is our roadmap, marking our Destination and giving us direction; Practice, however, is the ultimate vehicle which will transport us to that Destination on the shore beyond Samsara and suffering.
 - i) To sit and study the map endlessly will get us nowhere; to careen randomly into the spiritual world, aimless and lost, will get us nowhere.
 - ii) To have both—to have the Wisdom and the Means, the Philosophy and the practice—is to truly obtain everything that Buddhism has to offer.