

Buddhist

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I find the Buddhist rationale for social action to be grounded in the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha Shakyamuni:

1. Anguish is everywhere.
2. The source of anguish is our desire for permanence, and our desire to prove ourselves superior and exclusive. These desires conflict with the way things are: nothing abides, and everything and everyone depend upon everything and everyone else.
3. We find release from anguish with the personal acknowledgment and resolve: we are here together very briefly, so let us accept reality fully and take care of one another while we can.
4. This acknowledgement and resolve are realized by practice, and this practice, called the Eightfold Path, consists of Right Views, Right Thinking, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Recollection, and Right Meditation. Here "Right" means "correct" or "accurate"-in keeping with the reality of impermanence and interdependence.

BUDDHISM

Here is my explication of the Eightfold Path:

1. Right Views offer a clear understanding that all things are insubstantial and transitory. They change and change again. Moreover, they completely depend upon each other. *This* is because *that* is; *this* happens because *that* happens.
2. Right Thinking is correct mental formulation of interdependence and the lack of any enduring self. It rests upon a mature, multi-centered attitude, rather than upon one that is self-centered. Right Thinking leads in turn to mature speech and conduct. For the responsible adult, Right Thinking is the careful use of temporary mental formulations that will be useful in persuading people what they know in their hearts to be true: that we are here only temporarily, that countless generations will follow us, and that our fellow beings feel things every bit as keenly as we do.
3. Right Speech is the step on the path where we move from personal understanding to a position of active responsibility and leadership. When our words are in keeping with the true nature of things, then harmony and mutual support will be encouraged everywhere.
4. Right Action is logically the next step. Everyone is a teacher. By our manner and conduct we guide everyone and everything, for better or for worse. When we are settled and comfortable with our own transience and dependence, then our conduct in turn nurtures our sisters and brothers.
5. Right Livelihood is classically explained by showing how certain occupations create pain and confusion in the world: butchering, selling liquor, manufacturing weapons, trading in human beings, swindling, and so on. The rise of technology makes Right Livelihood difficult today. Few of us are crafts people with independent occupations. We must work for companies, very often large ones with questionable policies, or for a government, with its imperative of *Realpolitik*.

Where should we draw the line, considering all the factors, particularly the support of a family? Right Livelihood also implies fulfilling one's particular potential. This too is problematic today. Masses of people across the world are obliged to work in stultifying jobs, in circumstances at least comparable to the slavery which the Buddha deplored.

6. Right Effort is the way of the sage--an ultimately modest life style, traditionally with a simple diet of Earth products, and modest accommodations. This would include today the least wasteful means of transport.
7. Right Recollection is sometimes rendered Right Mindfulness. This is the act of consciously returning to Right Views, re-minding oneself to order thoughts and conduct in keeping with compassion. The parent or social leader at any level functions best with a wordless mantra, or perhaps even a mantra of words, as Gandhi did. Remember your source, and prompt yourself to recall it at each turn of your day. Soon this practice will be second nature, and you will come forth from your source with speech and conduct that can only be decent and loving.
8. Right Meditation refers not to simple reflection, but to "*samadhi*," a Sanskrit term that is translated in many ways, all of them flat or misleading or both. I think it is best to leave the word untranslated and just try to explain it. *Samadhi* is the practice and condition of a very settled, focused state exemplified by the seated images of the Buddha. As a perennial archetype it is the religious practice of an altogether sincere disciple of truth. Fulfillment of *samadhi* is the realization that the other is no other than myself--the personal inclusion of all beings.¹

Many teachers succeeded the Buddha and mined his teaching for treasures that enrich it in turn. The *Hua-yen Sutra*, the last great development of Mahayana Buddhism, amplifies the

BUDDHISM

Buddha's doctrine of interdependence with a multidimensional model of the universe called "the Net of Indra," in which each point of the Net is a jewel that perfectly reflects and contains all other jewels.²

The *Hua-yen Sutra* also offers the model of "the Tower of Maitreya" in its story of Sudhana, a pilgrim who studies under a succession of 53 great teachers. He learns much and deepens his practice until he meets Maitreya, the Future Buddha, the potential of every human being, and indeed of all beings. Maitreya leads him into his Tower, the ultimate abode of realization and compassion. When Sudhana enters, he finds the interior as vast and boundless as outer space, beautifully adorned with all manner of embellishments, and containing innumerable similar towers, each of them completely inclusive, infinitely spacious within, and likewise beautifully adorned, yet these towers do not in any way interfere with each other.³ Thomas Cleary writes:

This image symbolizes a central *Hua-yen* theme, represented time and again throughout the scripture--all things [are] interdependent, therefore imply in their individual being the simultaneous element of all other beings. Thus it is said that the existence of each element of the universe includes the existence of the whole universe and hence it is as extensive as the whole universe itself.⁴

Like the Buddha, the genius of the *Hua-yen* was not content simply to offer cognition of the truth of interdependence and interpenetration, but also required rigorous practice by way of application. The "Pure Conduct Chapter" of the *Hua-yen Sutra* consists entirely of *gathas*, cautionary verses that set forth explicit the way of compassion that is grounded in the all-encompassing practice of one being as all beings. Here are some

AITKEN

examples that set forth the way of the *bodhisattva* (those who enlighten themselves and others), translated by Thomas Cleary:

When entering a hall,
They should wish that all beings
Ascend to the unexcelled sanctuary
And rest there secure, unshakable.

When on the road,
They should wish that all beings
Tread the pure realm of reality,
Their minds without obstruction.

If they see flowing water ,
They should wish that all beings
Develop wholesome will
And wash away the stains of delusion.⁵

Prompted by perceptions of trees, rivers, and other people--by acts of entering the hall of a temple, stepping forth on a road, of dressing, brushing the teeth, going to the toilet--the student of the Way remembers to practice the all-encompassing views. Dr. Cleary uses the third person plural: "They should wish with all beings," but another translator working from the Chinese, where pronouns and prepositions are commonly omitted, might be more personal and render the line: "I vow with all beings." Thus the *gatha* about seeing: flowing water could be:

When I see flowing water ,
I vow with all beings
to develop a wholesome will
and wash away the stains of delusion.

I think that such a translation would be in keeping with a movement one can discern in Buddhism, and indeed in all religions to make the teaching ever more personal and concrete. In the Far East, this movement can be seen in the rise of the Mahayana, giving followers a sense of responsibility for the

BUDDHISM

practice. For example, the Kamakura Reformation of twelfth century Japan brought the recitation of the Buddha's name, and (to a lesser extent) Zen meditation to lay people. No longer was Buddhism just something for priests in the monastery.

This process of personalization and laicization can also be seen in the evolution of archetypal figures, such as Pu-tai and Kuan-yin, that give ordinary followers an intimate sense of involvement in the teachings of the Buddha and his successors. These figures are peculiarly Far Eastern, but are very instructive for us in the West.

Pu-tai, or Hotei in Japanese, is the ragged old monk in the tenth of the Ten Oxherding Pictures, who, in D. T. Suzuki's memorable words, "enters the city with bliss-bestowing hands."⁶ After years of arduous practice, he has learned to forget himself completely, and so to embody compassion. He carries a bag filled with candy and toys for children, and mingles with publicans and prostitutes, leading them all to deepest understanding.

In China, the Pu-tai figure is inextricably mixed with Maitreya, the Future Buddha. Both are laughing figures with huge bellies. My teacher Yamamoto Gempo Roshi used to say, "The whole universe is in Pu-tai's belly." It contains all beings, and he plays with them as richly diverse elements of himself. Thus he is also Maitreya Buddha, the fulfillment of our deepest aspirations.

Kuan-yin, or Kannon in Japanese, is called the Great Bodhisattva of Mercy and Compassion. Her name means "The One Who Hears Sounds." She is compassionate because she not only hears the innumerable sounds of suffering of the world, but she includes them. Like Whitman, Pu-tai, and Maitreya, she is large, and contains multitudes.

Pu-tai apparently originates in Chinese mythology, but Kuan-yin was first a male deity named Avalokiteshvara in the Indian Buddhist pantheon. He was the Sovereign Observer who dispensed mercy to those who petitioned him. He became androgynous and female in Far Eastern cultures, still dispensing mercy, as we can find in the *Lotus Sutra*.⁷ From the Zen Buddhist point of view, at least, none of the archetypes of the Mahayana pantheon are exterior figures. They inspire us as our own noblest aspirations.

The process of making the religion personal and intimate for all followers continues as the religion moves to the West. Suddenly, Buddhism is taken seriously as a primary religion. This could not happen in the Far East. In China, Korea, and Japan, Buddhism has been secondary in importance to Confucianism, with its ideals of honor, loyalty to the superior, responsibility to the inferior, which set standards for human conduct. The Eightfold Path, the Buddhist Precepts, and the various myths and archetypes were, generally speaking, used simply as references and supplemental guides. In the West, Christianity and Judaism are the traditional religions, but Western Buddhists tend to move from those foundations and look to their new religion for counsel.

Thus the first vow of the Mahayana Buddhist, to save the many beings, can become as important for the Western Buddhist as the Lord's Prayer is for the Christian. Where does this vow extend? Does it apply to public affairs? The tradition that Buddhists should not become involved in politics should be seen clearly for what it is: simply a custom that grew up as a way of protecting the religion from persecution by Confucian and Shinto rulers. In the West we are not limited by such constraints, and our *dojo*, our place of practice and enlightenment, is as broad as the Earth, including everyone and everything.

BUDDHISM

So we plow new ground. The old ways are instructive, but they are exploded from their traditional confines. The Buddha Sangha or fellowship is still a network of relatively small groups of followers, but the followers are no longer necessarily priests, and no longer almost exclusively male. Looking over descriptions of self-governance within the traditional Sangha, we can pick up many ideas for community building among our own members,⁸ but we can also pick up ideas from the Human Development movement in our modern culture.

Taking the Eightfold Path to heart, and making the Net of Indra, the Tower of Maitreya, the *gathas*, vows, and precepts our own, we find guidance in seeking harmony in our community, including our national and international community, and our inter-species community. We are free also to find inspiration from a vast pantheon of Western thinkers and doers, in particular those who have resisted the exploitations of big industry and the nation-state. E.F. Schumacher is an important teacher, as are earlier anarchist thinkers such as Peter Kropotkin and Gustav Landauer. Many cooperative movements, such as Liberation Theology with its Base Communities, the Catholic Worker, co-op groceries, investor-owned financial institutions, and land banks, show us what we can do and how we can go about it.

In the past, leaders of cooperative movements have made grave mistakes, and these can be instructive. In their anxiety to apply their ideals in the real world, such leaders sometimes neglected to establish firm ground for their structures, and saw them disappear. Most of the famous utopian communities in the nineteenth century, like Brook Farm, survived only a short time, some of them just a few months. The greatest utopian experiment of them all, the Paris Commune, lasted just seventy-two days.

AITKEN

Underlying these failures has been a serious underestimation of the massive power of conventional forces. Chief Executive Officers, Governors, and Senators might individually be concerned about the satisfaction of workers, peace in the world, and the protection of the environment, but they are at the mercy of systemic exploitation, even as you and I. Compromise with self-centered, corporate-centered, and state-centered enterprises are built into parliamentary procedures, and widespread despoliation of land, water, and air--and the extirpation of species--is the outcome. Earth and seas are dying, and the stockpiling of nuclear weapons makes hostages of us all.

What to do? The danger of the emergency should not blind us to the importance of what can be called the ninth step on the Path: Right Method. I am not sure just what this would be, but surely it involves first of all a life-commitment to perennial teachings, and to the kinship of all beings. As lay people we must resist destructive worldly conventions as vigorously as our clerical ancestors did in their hearts, if not in their deeds. And like them, we must find our home, our inspiration, and the support for our work with like-minded and like-spirited friends.

NOTES

1. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), pp.16-50.
2. Thomas Cleary, *Entry into the Inconceivable : An Introduction to Hua-yen Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), p. 37.
3. Thomas Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra*, 3 vols. (Boston: Shambala, 1984-1987), III: 365-372.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

BUDDHISM

5. Thomas Cleary, *The Flower Adornment Scripture*, I: 316, 319, 321.
6. D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series* (York Beach, Maine: Weiser, 1985), p. 376 & plate X.
7. Bunno Kato et al., *The Threefold Lotus Sutra* (New York: Weatherhill, 1975), pp. 319-327.
8. Sukumar Dutt, *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India: Their History and Their Contribution to Indian Culture* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1962), pp. 66-91.