

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 1: Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels

Week 3: The Buddha (1) – The Goal of Buddhism

Introduction

The first of the Buddhist refuges is the Buddha himself. In the next four parts of this course we will be looking at the figure of the Buddha, and exploring what it might mean to ‘Go for Refuge to the Buddha’ – seeking to break through the strange and maybe alien words to the experience they point to.

The Buddha’s importance does not lie in *who* he was, it lies in *what* he was. ‘Buddha’ is not a name, it is a title, meaning something like ‘he who is awake’. The Buddha’s importance to Buddhists comes from the fact that he woke up - he reached the state which we call Enlightenment. The Buddha is one who woke up out of the sleep-like state in which we exist to a true experience of reality.

In the following text Sangharakshita explains something of the meaning of the term ‘Enlightenment’, telling us what it was that was so important about the Buddha. In the process he clears up some common misunderstandings about the nature of the Buddha and his place in Buddhism. He also perhaps gives us a clue to how ‘Going for Refuge to the Buddha’ can be a cure for our underlying dukkha – suffering or dissatisfaction – because this means committing ourselves to realising our own spiritual potential, which is the only way to true happiness.

The Ideal of Human Enlightenment

(Text condensed from ‘The Ideal of Human Enlightenment’, by Sangharakshita.)

Even people who do not know anything at all about the teachings of Buddhism will at least have seen an image of the Buddha. What does that image show? It shows a man in the prime of life, well built and handsome. He is seated cross-legged beneath a tree. His eyes are half closed, and there is a smile on his lips. The figure conveys an impression of solidity, stability, and strength. It conveys an impression of absolute calm, absolute repose. But what attracts us most of all is the face, because this conveys something which it is very difficult to put into words. As we look at it, perhaps even concentrate on it, we see that the face is alive, that it is *alight*, and in that light we see reflected an unfathomable knowledge, a boundless compassion, and an ineffable joy.

This, then, is the figure, the image of the Buddha, the Enlightened One. Usually it represents the historical Gautama the Buddha, the ‘founder’ of Buddhism, the great Indian teacher who lived approximately five hundred years before Christ. But the figure also possesses a wider significance. It represents *The Ideal of Human Enlightenment*.

Human Enlightenment is the central theme of Buddhism. It is what Buddhism is basically concerned with, both theoretically and practically. Indeed, it is what the Buddhist himself is basically concerned with. Therefore in this lecture we shall be trying to understand what is meant by Enlightenment in general and, in particular, by ‘Human Enlightenment’. This raises three questions:

1. ‘What is Enlightenment, or Buddhahood?’
2. ‘How do we know that this state which we call Enlightenment is the ideal for man?’
3. ‘Where does this ideal of Enlightenment come from? Whence does it originate?’

What is Enlightenment?

Buddhist tradition speaks of Enlightenment as comprising mainly three things. To begin with, Enlightenment is spoken of as a state of pure, clear, even radiant awareness. Some schools go so far as to say that in this state of awareness the subject/object duality is no longer experienced. There is no ‘out there’, no ‘in here’. That distinction, that subject/object distinction as we usually call it, is entirely transcended. There is only one continuous, pure, clear awareness, extending as it were in all directions, pure and homogeneous. It is, moreover, an awareness of things *as they really are*, which is, of course, not things in the sense of objects, but things as transcending the duality of subject and object. Hence this pure, clear awareness is also spoken of as an awareness of Reality, and therefore also as a state of knowledge.

This knowledge is not knowledge in the ordinary sense, not the knowledge that functions within the framework of the subject/object duality, but rather a state of direct, unmediated spiritual vision that sees all things directly, clearly, vividly, and truly. It is a spiritual vision, even a Transcendental vision, which is free from all delusion, all misconception, all wrong, crooked thinking, all vagueness, all obscurity, all mental conditioning, all prejudice. First of all, then, Enlightenment is this state of pure, clear awareness, this state of knowledge or vision.

Secondly, Enlightenment is spoken of as a state of intense, profound, overflowing love and compassion. Sometimes this love is compared to the love of a mother for her only child. This comparison occurs, for instance, in a very famous Buddhist text called the *Mettā Sutta*, the ‘Discourse of Loving Kindness’. In this discourse the Buddha says,

‘Just as a mother protects her only son even at the cost of her own life, so should one develop a mind of all-embracing love towards all living beings.’

This is the sort of feeling, the sort of attitude, that we must cultivate. You notice that the Buddha does not just talk about all human beings, but all *living* beings: all that is sentient. This is how the Enlightened mind feels. And that love and

compassion consists in a heartfelt desire, a deep, burning desire, for their well-being, for their happiness: a desire that all beings should be set free from suffering, from all difficulties, that they should grow and develop, and that ultimately they should gain Enlightenment. Love and compassion of this kind, – infinite, overflowing, boundless, directed towards all living beings – this too is part of Enlightenment.

Thirdly, Enlightenment consists in a state, or experience, of inexhaustible mental and spiritual energy. Energy is characteristic of the state of Enlightenment. The state of Enlightenment is one of tremendous energy, of absolute spontaneity, continually bubbling forth: a state of uninterrupted creativity. The state of Enlightenment is a state of perfect, unconditioned freedom from all subjective limitations.

This, then, is how Enlightenment is usually described. But of course Enlightenment cannot really be put into words or separated into parts. What really happens is that knowledge passes into love and compassion, love and compassion into energy, energy into knowledge, and so on. We cannot really split any one aspect off from the others. Nonetheless, we are traditionally given this ‘tabulated’ account of Enlightenment, to convey some hint of the experience, to give some little idea, or feeling, of what it is like.

If we want to have a better idea than this, then we shall have to read, perhaps, some more extended, poetic account, preferably one found in the Buddhist scriptures; or we shall have to take up the practice of meditation, and try to get at least a glimpse of the state of Enlightenment as we meditate. So when Buddhism speaks of Enlightenment, of Buddhahood or Nirvana, this is what it means: it means a state of supreme knowledge, love and compassion, and energy.

How do we know that this state of Enlightenment is the ideal for man?

Before attempting to answer this question, we shall have to distinguish between two kinds of ideal – ‘natural ideals’ and ‘artificial ideals’. A natural ideal is an ideal which takes into consideration the nature of the thing or the person for which it is an ideal. The artificial ideal, on the other hand, does not do this. The artificial ideal imposes itself from the outside, in an artificial manner.

Using this distinction, we may say that Enlightenment is not an artificial ideal. It is not something imposed on human beings from outside, something that does not belong to us or accord with our nature. Enlightenment is a natural ideal for man, or even *the* natural ideal. There is nothing artificial about it, nothing arbitrary. It is an ideal that corresponds to our nature and our needs.

We know this in two ways. I have spoken about the nature of Enlightenment, and obviously it has seemed something very rarefied, something remote from our experience. But the qualities that constitute Enlightenment are, in fact, already found in man, in germinal form. They are not completely foreign to us. They are, in a sense, natural to human beings. In every man, in every woman, there is *some*

knowledge, *some* experience of Reality, however remote and far removed, *some* feeling of love and compassion, however limited and exclusive, and *some* energy, however gross and unrefined, however conditioned and unspontaneous. All these qualities are already there, to some extent.

But in the state of Enlightenment, these qualities are fully and perfectly developed, to a degree that we can hardly imagine. It is for this reason, because the qualities of knowledge, love, and energy are already present within us, in however embryonic a form, that we have a natural affinity with Enlightenment, and can respond to the ideal of Enlightenment when we encounter it. Thus even when someone speaks in terms of absolute knowledge, of the vision of Reality, or in terms of boundless, unlimited love and compassion for all living beings, it is not something completely foreign to us, it is not just so many words. We *can* feel something. And this is because the germ, the seed, is already there, in our own experience, and we can respond to the ideal of Enlightenment whenever and however we encounter it, even when we encounter it in comparatively weak, limited, or distorted forms.

We also know that Enlightenment is the natural ideal for human beings because, in the long run, we are never really satisfied by anything else. We can have all sorts of pleasures, all sorts of achievements, but eventually we still feel within ourselves something not satisfied. This is what in Buddhism is called dukkha: unsatisfactoriness, or even suffering.

Tradition speaks of three forms of dukkha. The first is called simply, ‘the suffering which is suffering’. It is obviously suffering if we cut our finger, or when someone upsets us or disappoints us, for instance. This is the kind of suffering that is, simply, suffering. Then there is what is called ‘suffering by way of transformation’. We have something, we enjoy it, we get a great deal of pleasure from it, but by its very nature that thing cannot last. And because we have enjoyed it and become attached to it, suffering results. This is the suffering that comes about as a result of change, of time. Then there is ‘the suffering of conditioned existence itself’: the suffering, ultimately, of everything which is not Enlightenment. Even if we do acquire things, and even if we go on possessing them and enjoying them, there is still some corner of our heart which is not satisfied, which wants something more, something further, something greater. And this something is what we call Enlightenment.

So from this too we know that Enlightenment is the natural ideal for man, because man ultimately is not satisfied with anything less. Personifying the ideal of Enlightenment, and borrowing the theistic language of St. Augustine, we may say, ‘Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee.’

Where does the ideal of Enlightenment come from?

The ideal comes from human life itself; it comes from human history. It could not come from any other source. The ideal for man, we may say, can only come from

a human being. And if we look back into history we can see various people who have actually achieved Enlightenment, who have closed the gap between the real and the ideal. If we look back in history we can see individuals who are living embodiments of the ideal.

In particular, we see the figure of the young Indian patrician who, some 2500 years ago, gained Enlightenment or, as the Buddhist scriptures call it, *Bodhi*, which is 'knowledge', or 'awakening'. He it was who, after gaining that state of Enlightenment, inaugurated the great spiritual revolution, the great spiritual tradition, that we now call Buddhism.

Misunderstandings

At this point I would like to clear up certain misunderstandings with regard to the Buddha. At the beginning of this lecture I said that even the non-Buddhist has at least seen an image or picture of the Buddha, and that he might even be quite familiar with it. However, although he might have seen it many times, he may not have a very clear idea of what it represents; he may not know who, or what, the Buddha is.

There are, in fact, on the part of many people, some quite serious misunderstandings about him. There are in particular two major misunderstandings: firstly that the Buddha was an ordinary man, and secondly that the Buddha was God. Both of these misunderstandings are the result of thinking, consciously or unconsciously, in theistic terms, which is to say, in terms of a personal God who has created the universe, and who governs it by his providence.

For orthodox Christianity, God and man are entirely different beings. God is the creator. Man is the created. Man can never become God: such an idea would be meaningless. Orthodox Christians, therefore, when confronted by the figure of the Buddha, classify him as an ordinary man, essentially just like everyone else, even as a sinful man, albeit perhaps better than most people.

The second misunderstanding arises out of the first. You often read in books, even now, that after his death the Buddha's followers 'deified' him, or made him into a God. This is indicated, we are told, by the fact that Buddhists *worship* the Buddha, and of course worship is due only to God. If you worship someone or something, a Christian will inevitably think that you are treating it, or him, as God.

Now both these misunderstandings can be cleared up quite easily. All that we have to do is to free ourselves from our Christian conditioning, which affects, at least unconsciously, even those who no longer think of themselves as Christians. We have to stop trying to think of the Buddha in what are really non-Buddhist terms.

A new category

So who, or what, was the Buddha? How do *Buddhists* think of him? How did he think of himself? In the first place, the Buddha was a man, a human being. But he

was not an ordinary man. He was an *Enlightened* man: a man who was the living embodiment of perfect knowledge, unbounded love and compassion, and inexhaustible energy. But he was not *born* an extraordinary man. He *became* an extraordinary man, as a result of his own human effort to make actual what was potential in himself. So Buddhism recognizes two great categories: the category of the ordinary man, and the category of the Enlightened man.

Although the gulf between these two is not unbridgeable, as is the gulf between God and man in Christianity, the distance between them is very great, and it takes a tremendous effort to traverse this gap. Many Buddhists, in fact, believe that this effort has to be maintained through a whole succession of lives, whether here on earth or in higher realms. For this reason, the Enlightened man is regarded as constituting an independent category of existence. The Enlightened man is regarded as the highest being in the universe, higher even than the gods. For this reason the Enlightened man is worshipped. He is worshipped out of gratitude for setting an example, for showing the way, for showing us what we too are capable of becoming. In other words, the Buddha is worshipped, not as God, but as teacher, as exemplar, as guide.

In this connection, Gautama the Buddha is often referred to as ‘the elder brother of the world’, or ‘elder brother of mankind’, because He has been born, spiritually, first, and we are born, spiritually, afterwards. Sometimes the Buddha is compared to the first chick to emerge from a clutch of eggs. This first-born chick starts to tap on the shells of the other eggs with his little beak, helping the other chicks to emerge. And so, we are told, the Buddha is like that first chick. He is the first to emerge from the shell of ignorance, the shell of spiritual darkness and blindness, and then he taps on our shells, he wakes us up with his Teaching, He helps us to *emerge*.

From all this we can see that the Buddhist conception of the Enlightened man represents a category for which we have no equivalent in Western religious tradition. He is neither God nor man in the Christian sense. He is not even man-without-God, man left on his own without God. He is something in between and above. Perhaps we can best think of Enlightened man in evolutionary terms. Man is an animal, but he is no ordinary animal. He represents a new category: an animal, but, at the same time, infinitely more than an animal. In the same way, a Buddha is a man, but he is not an ordinary man. He is an Enlightened man. He too represents a new category of existence: a human being, but, at the same time, infinitely more than a human being: an *Enlightened* human being, a *Buddha*.

Conclusion

Let us conclude, then, as we began, with the figure of Gautama the Buddha. He is seated under the Bodhi tree, just a few weeks after His great awakening. According to one of the oldest accounts, at that time He looked out over the world, over the whole of humanity with His spiritual vision, or what is called His ‘divine eye’.

And as He looked out in this way. He saw mankind as like a great bed of lotus flowers. He saw that some of the flowers were deeply immersed in the mud, while others rose half out of the water. Some were even standing completely clear of the water. In other words, He saw all human beings as being at different stages of growth. And that is how Buddhism has seen humanity ever since: as a bed of plants capable of producing shoots, as shoots capable of producing buds, as buds capable of opening into flowers, into lotus flowers, even into the thousand-petalled lotus itself.

But in order to grow, in order to develop, human beings must have something to grow *into*. They cannot grow unconsciously, as the plant does: they must grow consciously. In fact for human beings growth *means* growth in consciousness, growth in awareness. This is why man needs an ideal for himself as a human being. It must be an ideal, moreover, which is not artificial but natural, not imposed upon him from without but implicit in his own nature, in the depths of his own being: an ideal which represents, indeed, the fulfilment of his nature in the deepest possible sense. It is this ideal, the ideal of human Enlightenment, that I have tried to communicate.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What are your responses to the traditional image of the Buddha?
 2. Sangharakshita describes Enlightenment as a state of clear awareness, infinite love, and boundless energy – and also as “perfect, unconditioned freedom from all subjective limitations.”
 - a) Which of these aspects of Buddhahood do you respond to most strongly?
 - b) Are there any other qualities that you think are part of the ‘natural’ ideal for human beings?
 3. Sangharakshita says that, no matter what ‘worldly’ pleasures we experience, until we fulfil our spiritual potential “there is still some corner of our heart which is not satisfied, which wants something more ... something greater.”
 - a) Does this agree with your experience?
 - b) If it is true, does it throw any light on how the Buddha can be a refuge from *dukkha* (dissatisfaction or suffering?)
 4. A Buddha, we are told, represents a new category of being: much more than human, just as human beings are much more than animals.
 - a) Can you relate to this idea?

- b) Would you prefer to think of the Buddha as a more or less ordinary human being? Alternatively, would you prefer to think of him as a god?
5. Do you believe you can become Enlightened? How magnificent can you imagine yourself becoming?