

BUDDHISM WITHOUT BELIEFS

A Contemporary Guide to Awakening

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AWAKENING

As long as my vision was not fully clear. . . regarding four ennobling truths, I did not claim to have realized authentic awakening. . .

—The Buddha

LET'S GO BACK to the beginning: to the awakening of Siddhartha Gautama, aka the Tathagata, Shakyamuni, the World Honored One—the Buddha himself. He was the one who set the wheel of dharma spinning in the first place. He was the one who pointed out the central path (the famous "Middle Way"). He was the trailblazer. His are the footprints we will find at the end of the track.

Let's start with the Buddha's first discourse, delivered to his five former ascetic companions in the Deer Park at Sarnath, near Benares. It was here, several weeks after the awakening and his ensuing ambivalence about saying anything at all, that compassion moved him to embrace the anguish of others. Plunging into the treacherous sea of words, he "set in motion the wheel of the dharma."

This short discourse can be summed up as follows: The Buddha declares how he has found the central path through avoiding indulgence and mortification. He then describes four ennobling truths: those of anguish, its origins, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation. Anguish, he says, is to be understood, its origins to be let go of, its cessation to be realized, and the path to be cultivated. And this is precisely what he himself has done: he has understood anguish, let go of its origins, realized its cessation, and cultivated the path. Only through knowing these truths, knowing how to act upon them, and knowing that he has acted upon them can he claim to have found "authentic awakening."



DESPITE THE BUDDHA'S own succinct account of his awakening, it has come to be represented (even by Buddhists) as something quite different. Awakening has become a mystical experience, a moment of transcendent revelation of the Truth. Religious interpretations invariably reduce complexity to uniformity while elevating matter-of-factness to holiness. Over time, increasing emphasis has been placed on a single Absolute Truth, such as "the Deathless," "the Unconditioned," "the Void," "Nirvana," "Buddha Nature," etc., rather than on an interwoven complex of truths.

And the crucial distinction that *each truth requires being acted upon in its own particular way* (*understanding* anguish, *letting go of its* origins, *realizing* its cessation, and *cultivating* the path) has been relegated to the margins of specialist doctrinal knowledge. Few Buddhists today are probably even aware of the distinction.

Yet in failing to make this distinction, four ennobling truths to be acted upon are neatly turned into four propositions of fact to be believed. The first truth becomes: "Life Is Suffering"; the second: "The Cause of Suffering Is Craving"—and so on. At precisely this juncture, Buddhism becomes a religion. A Buddhist is someone who *believes* these four propositions. In leveling out these truths into propositions that claim to be true, Buddhists are distinguished from Christians, Muslims, and Hindus, who believe different sets of propositions. The four ennobling truths become principal dogmas of the belief system known as "Buddhism."

The Buddha was not a mystic. His awakening was not a shattering insight into a transcendent Truth that revealed to him the mysteries of God. He did not claim to have had an experience that granted him privileged, esoteric knowledge of how the universe ticks. Only as Buddhism became more and more of a religion were such grandiose claims imputed to his awakening. In describing to the five ascetics what his awakening meant, he spoke of having discovered complete freedom of heart and mind from the compulsions of craving. He called such freedom the taste of the dharma.



BUDDHA AWOKE from the sleep of existential confusion. So shocking and unexpected was this experience that he initially assumed that were he to speak of it no one would understand him. A person who is asleep is either lost in deep unconsciousness or absorbed in a dream. Metaphorically, this was how the Buddha must have seen both his previous self as well as everyone else he had known: they either were blind to the questions of existence or sought consolation from them in metaphysical or religious fantasies. His awakening, however, brought *both* the questions *and* their resolutions into vivid and unanticipated focus.

The Buddha woke up to the nature of the human dilemma and a way to its resolution. The first two truths (anguish and its origins) describe the dilemma, the second two (cessation and the path) its resolution. He awoke to a set of interrelated truths rooted in the immediacy of experience here and now.

The Buddha experienced these truths as ennobling. Awakening was not just the acquisition of a more enlightened viewpoint. It granted a natural integrity, dignity, and authority to his life. Although the five ascetics had vowed not to acknowledge their apostate former companion, as he entered the Deer Park in Sarnath and came toward them, they found themselves standing up to offer him respect. In spite of themselves, they were unable to resist the authority of Gautama's presence.



ANUNAWAKENED EXISTENCE, in which we drift unaware on a surge of habitual impulses, is both ignoble and undignified. Instead of a natural and non-coercive authority, we impose our will on others either through manipulation and intimidation or by appealing to the opinions of those more powerful than

ourselves. Authority becomes a question of force rather than of integrity.

Instead of presenting himself as a savior, the Buddha saw himself as a healer. He presented his truths in the form of a medical diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment. If you have a pain in your chest, you first need to acknowledge it. Then you will go to a doctor for an examination. His diagnosis will both identify the cause of pain and tell you if it is curable. If it is curable, he will advise you to follow a course of treatment. Likewise, the Buddha acknowledged the existential condition of anguish. On examination he found its origins to lie in self-centered craving. He realized that this could cease, and prescribed the cultivation of a path of life embracing all aspects of human experience as an effective treatment.



WHILE "BUDDHISM" SUGGESTS another belief system, "dharma practice" suggests a course of action. The four ennobling truths are not propositions to believe; they are challenges to act.

There is a passage in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in which Alice enters a room to find a bottle marked with the label "Drink Me." The label does not tell Alice what is inside the bottle but tells her what to do with it. When the Buddha presented his four truths, he first described what each referred to, then enjoined his listeners to act upon them. Once we grasp what he refers to by "anguish," we are enjoined to *understand* it—as though it bore the label "Understand Me." The truth of anguish becomes an injunction to act.

The first truth challenges our habitual relationship to anguish. In the broadest sense, it challenges how we relate to our existence as such: our birth, sickness, aging, and death. To what extent do we fail to understand these realities and their implications? How much time is spent in distraction or oblivion? When we are gripped by a worry, for example, what do we do? We might struggle to shake it off. Or we try to convince ourselves that things are not the way they seem, failing which we seek to preoccupy ourselves with something else. How often do we embrace that worry, accept our situation, and try to understand it?

Anguish maintains its power only as long as we allow it to intimidate us. By habitually regarding it as fearful and threatening, we fail to see the words etched on it by the Buddha: "Understand Me." If we try to avoid a powerful wave looming above us on the beach, it will send us crashing into the sand and surf. But if we face it head-on and dive right into it, we discover only water.

To understand a worry is to know it calmly and clearly for what it is: transient, contingent, and devoid of intrinsic identity. Whereas to misunderstand it is to *freeze* it into something fixed, separate, and independent. Worrying about whether a friend still likes us, for example, becomes an isolated thing rather than part of a process emerging from a stream of contingencies. This perception induces in turn a mood of feeling psychologically blocked, stuck, obsessed. The longer this undignified state persists, the more we become incapable of action. The challenge of the first truth is to act before habitual reactions incapacitate us.



ASIMILAR PROCEDURE can be applied to the other truths. Just as the presence of anguish is an

opportunity for understanding, so the presence of the self-centered craving that underlies it is an opportunity for letting go. Such craving is manifest in a variety of ways: it extends from simple egoism and selfishness to that deep-seated, anxious longing for security to fear of rejection by those we love to the compulsion to have a cigarette. Whenever such feelings arise, the habitual reaction is either to indulge them or to deny them. Which again blinds us to the phrase stamped on them by the Buddha: "Let Go!"

"Letting go" is not a euphemism for stamping out craving by other means. As with anguish, letting go begins with understanding: a calm and clear acceptance of what is happening. While craving (the second truth) may be the origin or cause of anguish (the first truth), this does not mean they are two separate things—any more than the sprout is separate from the daffodil that emerges from it. Just as craving crystallizes into anguish, so does understanding flower into letting go.

Letting go of a craving is not rejecting it but allowing it to be itself: a contingent state of mind that once arisen will pass away. Instead of forcibly freeing ourselves from it, notice how its very nature is to free itself. To let it go is like releasing a snake that you have been clutching in your hand. By identifying with a craving ("I want this," "I don't want that"), you tighten the clutch and intensify its resistance. Instead of being a state of mind that you have, it becomes a compulsion that has you. As with understanding anguish, the challenge in letting go of craving is to act before habitual reactions incapacitate us.

By letting go of craving it will finally cease. This cessation allows us to realize, if only momentarily, the freedom, openness, and ease of the central path. This sudden gap in the rush of self-centered compulsion and fear allows us to see with unambiguous immediacy and clarity the transient, unreliable, and contingent nature of reality. Dharma practice at this moment has relinquished the last traces of belief; it is founded on authentic vision born from experience. It no longer requires the support of moralistic rules and religious ritual; it is grounded in integrity and creative autonomy. In revealing life in all its vulnerability, it becomes the doorway to compassion.



IN THE CESSATION of craving, we touch that dimension of experience that is timeless: the playful, unimpeded contingency of things emerging from conditions only to become conditions for something else. This is emptiness: not a cosmic vacuum but the unborn, undying, infinitely creative dimension of life. It is known as the "womb of awakening"; it is the clearing in the still center of becoming, the track on which the centered person moves. And it whispers: "Realize Me." But no sooner is it glimpsed than it is gone. Cessation of craving is like a momentary gap in the clouds. The sun shines brilliantly for a few moments, only to be covered over again. We find ourselves back in the humbling fog of anguish, craving, habit, restlessness, distraction. But with a difference: now we know where this track goes. We have set foot in the territory for which these words are just a map.

We *realize* that until this point we have not really been on the path at all. We have been following hunches, heeding the words of those we respect, exploring blind alleys, stumbling and guessing. No matter how strong our resolve and conviction, all along there may have been a nagging unease that we didn't really know where we were going. Each step felt hesitant and forced, and we were terribly alone. The difference between then and now is like the idea of sex and the first experience of it. On the one hand, the act is a

momentous and irrevocable step; on the other hand, it is just a part of life. Henceforth, resolve to cultivate this path becomes unwavering yet entirely natural. It is simply what we do. There is no longer any sense of self-consciousness, contrivance, awkwardness, or hesitation. Awakening is no longer seen as something to attain in the distant future, for it is not a thing but a process—and this process is the path itself. But neither does this render us in any way perfect or infallible. We are quite capable of subverting this process to the interests of our far-from-extinct desires, ambitions, hatreds, jealousies, and fears. We have not been elevated to the lofty heights of awakening; awakening has been knocked off its pedestal into the turmoil and ambiguity of everyday life.

There is nothing particularly religious or spiritual about this path. It encompasses everything we do. It is an authentic way of being in the world. It begins with how we understand the kind of reality we inhabit and the kind of beings we are that inhabit such a reality. Such a vision underpins the values that inform our ideas, the choices we make, the words we utter, the deeds we perform, the work we do. It provides the ethical ground for mindful and focused awareness, which in turn further deepens our understanding of the kind of reality *we* inhabit and the kind of beings we are that inhabit such a reality. And so on.

To cultivate these diverse elements of our existence means to nurture them as we would a garden. Just as a garden needs to be protected, tended, and cared for, so do ethical integrity, focused awareness, and understanding. No matter how deep our insight into the empty and contingent nature of things, that alone will do little to cultivate these qualities. Each of these areas in life becomes a challenge, an injunction to act. There is no room for complacency, for they all bear a tag that declares: "Cultivate Me."



THE ACTIONS THAT accompany the four truths describe the trajectory of dharma practice: understanding anguish leads to letting go of craving, which leads to realizing its cessation, which leads to cultivating the path. These are not four separate activities but four phases within the process of awakening itself. Understanding matures into letting go; letting go culminates in realization; realization impels cultivation.

This trajectory is no linear sequence of "stages" through which we "progress." We do not leave behind an earlier stage in order to advance to the next rung of some hierarchy. All four activities are part of a single continuum of action. Dharma practice cannot be reduced to any one of them; it is configured from them all. As soon as understanding is isolated from letting go, it degrades into mere intellectuality. As soon as letting go is isolated from understanding, it declines into spiritual posturing. The fabric of dharma practice is woven from the threads of these interrelated activities, each of which is defined through its relation to the others.



THE BUDDHA'S FIRST discourse convinced the five ascetics that he was onto something. So they stayed with him, listened to his teaching, and came to awakening themselves. They too understood anguish, let go of craving, realized cessation, and embarked on the cultivation of the path. They too achieved freedom

of heart and mind from the compulsions of craving. The words used to describe their awakening are the same as those used to describe the Buddha's own. Henceforth, at the conclusion of the Buddha's discourses, it would often be reported not only how many people had come to awakening through that particular teaching but to what degree.

The early discourses suggest that awakening was a common occurrence among those who listened to the Buddha and acted upon what he said. A difference in degree was acknowledged between those who had experienced the initial moment of awakening and entered the path, and those who had further cultivated the path and even reached the point where the habit of craving was extinguished. But access to the process of awakening itself was relatively straightforward and did not entail any great fuss.

Yet as Buddhism became institutionalized as a religion, awakening became progressively more inaccessible. Those who controlled the institutions maintained that awakening was so exalted that generally it could be attained only with the detachment and purity of heart achieved through monastic discipline. Even then, they admitted, it was rare. To explain this state of affairs they appealed to the Indian idea of the "degeneration of time," a notion that regards the course of history as a process of inexorable decline. According to this notion, those who lived at the time of the Buddha were simply less degenerate, more "spiritual," than the corrupted mass of humanity today.

Periodically, however, such views were challenged. The doors of awakening were thrown open to those barred from it by the strictures and dogmas of a privileged elite. Laity, women, the uneducated—the disempowered—were invited to taste the freedom of the dharma for themselves. Awakening was not a remote goal to be attained in a future lifetime. No: awakening was right here, unfolding in your own mind at this very moment.

To put it bluntly, the central question Buddhists have faced from the beginning is this: Is awakening close by or far away? Is it readily accessible or available only through supreme effort? If its proximity and ease of access are emphasized, there is the danger of trivializing it, of not according it the value and significance it deserves. Yet if its distance and difficulty of access are emphasized, there is the danger of placing it out of reach, of turning it into an icon of perfection to be worshipped from afar.

Doesn't the question itself deceive us? Aren't we tricked by its either/or logic into assuming that only one option can be true? Couldn't the ambiguous logic of both/and be more appropriate here? Awakening is indeed close by—*and* supreme effort is required to realize it. Awakening is indeed far away—*and* readily accessible.