

Lecture 7

Buddhism: Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path

Last time we concluded our discussion of Hinduism, and today I'm turning to a religion founded by a former Hindu: namely, the religion of Buddhism. I place Buddhism at this point in the course because it serves very well as a transition between South Asian and East Asian religious traditions. As you'll remember, I've organized our studies this term by dividing the world's religions into four major families. Beginning next time, when we discuss Confucianism, we'll be turning geographically from South to East Asia—more precisely, from India to China—and with this transition in mind Buddhism is the perfect link. For although Buddhism first came to light in India, it was from the very beginning a missionary religion (like Christianity and Islam, but unlike Hinduism), and it eventually spread North and East beyond the borders of the Indian subcontinent, where it became a major spiritual force in such countries as Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, Thailand, Cambodia, and Viet Nam. Meanwhile, there have remained relatively few Buddhists still practicing that religion in India.

Buddhism is one of two world religions whose name comes from the spiritual ideal or goal their followers seek. The other is Islam; the word "Islam" comes from an Arabic term meaning both submission and peace, and the Muslim seeks above all for the peace of mind that comes from submission to God. The word "Buddhism" is derived from a Sanskrit word that means "wakefulness" or "enlightenment", and this is precisely the goal of the Buddhist: to rouse himself from the stupors of sleep and to wake up to Reality. As I hope you can see, this goal is similar to that of the Hindu, who seeks to break free from the double delusion of *Mâyâ*. As a matter of fact, as I discuss with you the main teachings of Buddhism, you'll notice several similarities to Hindu doctrine, especially when it comes to the Buddhist's interest in what I've called the "problem of self". Buddhism is typically South Asian in its introspective, meditative focus on the question of who or what we really are, and this is no accident, for Buddhism began in a Hindu environment. Initially it took the form of a protest against what its founder regarded as the excessive rituals of Hindu worship and the oppressive social side effects of the caste system, while at the same time it attempted to get back to the Hindu essentials so as to simplify (if you will) the quest for self-knowledge. With regard to its spiritual "parentage", Buddhism is to Hinduism what Christianity is to Judaism; in view of its strong critique of its parent, however, it might be more accurate to say

(at least in certain respects) that Buddhism is to Hinduism what Protestantism is to Catholicism. One of the great ironies of religious history, however, is that the founder of Buddhism—even though his teachings soon crystallized into a separate religion—is regarded by Vaishnavite Hindus as an *Avatâra* (the ninth) of Vishnu. It would be as if Roman Catholics had canonized Martin Luther as a saint!

Having mentioned the founder, let me spend a few minutes saying something about him. Like Christianity—but unlike Hinduism—Buddhism begins with a particular historical figure. In the case of Christianity, this figure is Jesus of Nazareth, whom Christians believe to be the incarnate Son of God. In the case of Buddhism, the historical founder was a man named Siddhartha Gautama, whom Buddhists refer to as the Buddha, meaning the “the awakened one”.

Siddhartha was a man who had it all and who gave it all up. Born around the year 560 B.C. into the Hindu *kshatriya* caste—as you’ll remember, this is the royal or warrior class of traditional Indian society—he grew up in princely luxury and with more power, wealth, and prestige than most of us could ever imagine. He appears to have been extremely handsome as well, for there are references in traditional Buddhist texts to the “perfection of his visible body”. Furthermore, he was given an exemplary upbringing and married a beautiful princess from a neighboring kingdom. Here in short was the stuff of which fairytales are made.

As if all this wasn’t enough, we learn that Siddhartha’s father had taken steps since his son was an infant to ensure that he was surrounded solely with beautiful things, shielding the young man from all contact with the distasteful or objectionable sides of life. There was a very important reason for this. Before Siddhartha was born, fortune-tellers had explained to his father that this would be a most unusual child, but that a sort of paradox or ambiguity in the stars prevented them from knowing precisely what would come of his life. What they could say for sure was that if he remained attached to the things of the world, he would one day come to unify all of India and become her greatest ruler. On the other hand, if he renounced the world and its allures and enticements, he would become not a king but a world redeemer and savior. His father was in no doubt as to which of these fates he himself wanted to see materialize. He desperately wanted a powerful political heir, and with this in mind no expense was spared in making sure of Siddhartha’s worldly contentment and pleasure. According to tradition, palaces were provided for him, sumptuous food was prepared for his every meal, and numerous courtesans were placed at his disposal.

Things didn't work out as Siddhartha's father had hoped, however. These early precautions soon backfired, and despite the king's elaborate plans his son came to realize what life was really like on "the other side of the tracks". How this transpired is linked with what Buddhism calls the Four Passing Sights. Four times Siddhartha managed to escape from the palace without anyone seeing him, and each time he saw something he had never seen in all his life: on the first occasion, an old man; second, a sick person; third, a dead body; and fourth, a *sadhu* or ascetic (perhaps someone like Swami Ramdas). Thus he learned about the facts of age, illness, death, and spiritual sacrifice. The very night after seeing the fourth and last of these sights, Siddhartha resolved to make a clean break with his princely past. He left his bed in the middle of the night, kissed his sleeping wife goodbye, slipped from the palace, and headed for the forest, never to return to his former life.

Now according to Buddhist tradition, among all his other great strengths and talents, Siddhartha had enormous will-power, and using this power he now resolved to set himself single-mindedly toward the goal of understanding the reason for the first three of the sad sights he had seen. Why is there old age; why can't we remain forever young? Why is there disease; why can't we always be healthy? Why is there death; why can't we live forever? What exactly is wrong with the world? For six years he set about trying to answer these questions, not simply by thinking about them abstractly but by studying with some of the greatest spiritual teachers of his time and by undertaking incredible ascetic practices and austerities which (say the Buddhists) it would have been impossible for an ordinary mortal to endure.

To make a longer story short, there finally came for Siddhartha a night of revelation. It was the full moon of May, and he'd seated himself in the forest at the base of a welcoming tree, determined never to move again until he had solved the riddle of existence and mastered the great secrets of the Universe. As the night wore on, he was severely tempted by a demon named Mara, in much the same way as Jesus was tempted by Satan at the start of his own earthly ministry (see Luke 4:1-13). Siddhartha was subjected to everything from the full force of hurricanes to the allure of voluptuous women. But he remained tranquil and totally unmoved and unaffected. Mara and his demonic companions eventually withdrew in defeat, and as the rest of the night wore on Siddhartha's mind became progressively more and more still and more and more clear until at last it broke through to a perfect enlightenment. He now knew the secret of sickness, old age, and death. He had awakened to the Truth and had become the Buddha, the Enlightened One. He was

thirty-five years old at this point, and for the next forty-five years, until his death around 480 B.C. at the age of eighty, he made it his mission to teach others what he had learned.

What the Buddha had learned remains to this day the very essence of Buddhism. His teachings are summed up in a set of core doctrines that are referred to as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, and I would like to spend some time now describing what they involve.

Noble Truths

1. *Dukkha*. The first of the Noble Truths of Buddhism is that all life is suffering. “Suffering” is a translation of *dukkha*, a term in the Pali language (closely related to Sanskrit) literally meaning “dislocation”. I once dislocated my elbow, so I can very easily identify with that meaning. The term is intended to connote not only pain but also loss of movement or constraint. *Dukkha* isn’t merely a physical sensation; it’s also connected with all of the many psychological and emotional aggravations and hassles that tend to make up the greater part of our lives. If you associate this first teaching with physical suffering alone, you may think that the Buddha was being too pessimistic. But if you extend the idea to include all the non-physical “dislocations” of life, you can see he was almost certainly right, for even in our very happiest moments—if we’re honest with ourselves and look at things squarely—we can’t help but notice at least a slight lingering sense of distress and malaise. If nothing else, the very knowledge that the happy moments won’t last gives even the most delightful of our days a kind of poignancy. So you see, says the Buddha, all life really is *dukkha*. Something, somewhere, down deep is “out of synch”. That’s the first Noble Truth.

2. *Tanha*. The second Truth concerns the cause of our suffering. It’s called *tanha* in Pali, a word often translated as desire. “Desire” may not be the best term, however, because the Buddhist is among the first to admit that there are such things as noble desires—for spiritual progress, let’s say, or for the welfare of other people. Sometimes the term “craving” is used, and that’s probably better. For *tanha* refers to a purely egotistical desire for private satisfaction or fulfillment. You might say that *tanha* is the desire or craving we have for things we must compete for, and giving in to *tanha* therefore means the breakdown of community and love and sharing, and the beginning of fear and hatred.

Now I realize this Second Truth may seem pretty obvious, and you may be wondering why so much is made of the Buddha’s discovery—how something so commonplace could have spawned a whole religion. But a Buddhist would tell you that if that *is* your response—if you think

these observations are simplistic or trite—it's because you've never fully considered the full scope of *tanha* or how deep-seated is the infection it spreads. Perhaps it seems trivial, but consider this fact (I'm borrowing this analogy, once again, from my friend Huston Smith): When you look for the first time at a group photograph in which you appear with the rest of your family or a bunch of friends, which face do you look for first? Don't you look first to see how *you* "came out"? This is a small, but very telling, symptom, Buddhists will tell you; indeed, here is where all the troubles of the world come from. The swelling up of self-interest, which is the essence of *tanha* and which results in our tendency to think first of ourselves, is like the bulge in a convex lens: It distorts everything we see through it, and as long as we're not seeing reality truly, just as it is—the way we *would* see it if we were looking instead through plate glass (let's say)—we're never going to be happy. Life will continue to be filled with *dukkha*.

3. *Nirodha*. Now we come to the third Noble Truth, which is the Buddha's solution to these problems. This solution is summed up in the single word *nirodha*, which means "cessation" in Pali. *Nirodha* is the ceasing, stopping, or overcoming of *tanha*—the fading, letting go, or rejection of craving. Here's the point of this third Truth: if you don't want to suffer, eliminating your congenital *tanha* or self-centeredness is the key. You must figure out a way to get rid of the demanding, egocentric attitude that typifies virtually all of your thoughts and actions. I compared *tanha* to the bulge in a convex lens. But we could also use this analogy: the swelling of selfishness is like a painful, infected boil. If you want to get rid of the boil, it needs to be lanced or punctured so that the infectious substances in your system that have caused the swelling can be drained away. There are in fact three such substances, three "poisons" as Buddhists call them, which need to be expelled: namely, greed, hatred, and delusion. *Nirodha* or cessation can be described as a draining away of these poisons.

4. The Eightfold Path. This brings us to the fourth Noble Truth. At this point, the obvious and pressing question is: *How?* The Buddhist analysis of our lives may be accurate, but what are we supposed to do about it? Siddhartha's answer to this question took the form of the Eightfold Path, a path consisting of eight, sequential steps leading toward a remedy for the human condition. It's been pointed out—speaking of "remedy"—that the Four Noble Truths can be compared to a physician's assessment and treatment of a patient. First, he tries to understand his patient's symptoms, which correspond in this case to *dukkha*; the overriding "symptom" of life is our incessant feeling of dislocation. Second, the doctor provides a diagnosis of his patient's condition,

explaining the root cause of the illness, and this is where *tanha* comes in; it's craving (says the Buddha) that causes man's suffering. Third, the doctor tells the patient that such and such is needed in order to cure the disease, that a particular therapy is required; *nirodha* is the essence of Buddhist therapy. And finally, the physician gives a prescription; he doesn't just speak theoretically but tells the patient what to do, what medicine to take, what exercises to perform. In the case of Buddhism, the equivalent to the doctor's prescription is the Eightfold Path, and the steps of that Path are as follows:

Eightfold Path

1. *Right view*. This refers to the importance having an accurate understanding of your condition. As is always the case with the world's religions, spiritual method or practice presupposes a firm foundation in theory or doctrine. In Buddhism doctrine takes the form of the first *three* of the Four Noble Truths. So in effect the first step of your practice consists in a reiteration or reinforcement of the teachings we've just considered. How do things stand with me? How do I fit in with Reality? What's the basic problem I face?

2. *Right intention*. It's not enough, however, simply to understand the Truth of doctrine. There must be a resolve to do something about it—to put your “book-learning”, as it were, into practice. Comprehension must be coupled with commitment, and this is the point of the second step on the Path: intention or aim. Given what I now know about my situation, my immersion in *dukkha*, I must wish with all my heart to escape.

3. *Right speech*. The Buddha seems to have been a master psychologist; he knew to what an extent our perspective on life is determined by the words we use. On one level, right speech refers simply to the fact that we shouldn't lie; more deeply, however, it also involves things like indiscretion, exaggeration, and gossip. If you're to have any hope of overcoming your cravings, says Buddhism, you simply must be attentive to what you say and how you speak.

4. *Right action*. Even more than speech, however, it's crucial that you also very carefully monitor the things you *do* and that you avoid anything that might serve in any way to exacerbate your selfishness—anything that might feed the three poisons. Here we come to what Buddhism calls the Five Precepts. Each of these precepts or commandments has to do with abstaining from something. The first four of these precepts are mirrored in the Ten Commandments, with which Jews and Christians are familiar: namely, no murder, no stealing, no bearing false witness, and no

sexual immorality. To these the Buddhists add that there should be no use of hallucinogenic drugs, alcohol, or other intoxicants.

5. *Right livelihood*. The next step concerns Siddhartha's insistence that the spiritual life is not merely a matter of certain isolated acts or deeds. We must also take care that our vocations or professions are consistent with the welfare of others—and "others" here means not simply other human beings but "all sentient beings"; forbidden professions thus include any job involving the killing of animals. One of the Buddhist *sūtras* (scriptures) elaborates further: "A lay follower of the Buddha should not engage in five types of business. Which five? Business in weapons, business in human beings, business in meat, business in intoxicants, and business in poison." The list of prohibited work for monks, I might add, is much longer.

6. *Right effort*. Right effort concerns the importance of what we might call focus or proportionate and effective action. Let's suppose that you've made it up to this point on the Path. You understand what's at stake; you've resolved to do something about it; and you're being careful with what you say, how you act, and the job you work at. Now, however, it's vital that you begin taking pains to eliminate all the excess in your life. You must simplify things so that your mental energies are not wasted in trivia or in having to do the same thing twice because of inadvertence or carelessness the first time round. Right effort is rather like laser surgery, where an extremely intense beam of concentrated light is directed at a single spot.

7. *Right mindfulness*. What *effort* is to our actions, *mindfulness* is to our thoughts, feelings, and choices. Effort in other words pertains primarily to our relationship with the world outside, while mindfulness pertains to our inside: to our inward states of consciousness. The step of right mindfulness stresses the importance of attentiveness and awareness. To be mindful is to be fully present in any situation. Consider how fully aware you would be if you were being chased by a bull or—to pick a less frightening but more embarrassing situation—if you were on stage in a play and your pants fell down! That's the kind and degree of attention we should seek to cultivate at every moment of life.

8. *Right concentration*. This last of the steps in the Eightfold Path is concerned with specific techniques of meditation, similar to those we touched on in discussing Hindu *yoga*. These differ somewhat among the various branches of Buddhism, but essentially the aim of them all is to still or calm the mind and achieve mental focus. The seventh step, the practice of right mindfulness, has to do with mustering all of one's mental resources; it's like bringing all your best players onto

a football field at the start of a game. In the eighth step of concentration, these resources are then given direction, just as the coach sends in a play telling his players exactly what to do to reach the goal.

Now for the Buddhist, of course, the aim of the Path isn't a touchdown! On the contrary the goal line is a very specific state of being called *Nirvâna* (Sanskrit) or *Nibbana* (the Pali equivalent). Each of the Four Noble Truths and each of the steps in the Eightfold Path are designed to bring us to this ultimate destination.

Nirvâna, you might say, is the Buddhist word for Heaven—though I hasten to add that there are some very important differences. In the Christian vocabulary, heaven usually connotes something concrete and positive: a particular place (not of course geographical but nonetheless real) with specific rewards and joys, where those who are faithful and have followed Christ's commandments are blessed to go after death. By contrast, the fundamental meaning of *Nirvâna* is primarily negative. Literally, the word means "extinguished", and it's sometimes illustrated by the act of blowing out a candle flame. If someone were to ask you where the flame has gone, you would probably answer: Nowhere. It's not that it's "traveled" to a "place" of some sort; the flame is simply no more. This is what Buddhists say about *Nirvâna*. Of course the flame in this case doesn't come from a candle. What we're talking about are the passionate fires of *tanha* or selfish craving. When those fires finally cease, the result is *Nirvâna*. As you can see, there's a very close connection between *nirodha* (or cessation) and *Nirvâna* (or extinction); the first is the cause, and the second the effect.

Now I realize that for those of you who come from Christian backgrounds, *Nirvâna* isn't going to sound very promising. In fact it may seem downright pessimistic or nihilistic. Who (after all) wants to be extinguished? It's often hard for people from the Western religious traditions to see how Buddhists are in any way different from atheistic materialists, who believe we're strictly physical beings and that when we die, that's it. How could *this* be heaven? How are we supposed to take comfort from something so negative?

When you dig a bit deeper, however, what you discover is that the "negativity" of *Nirvâna* has a positive purpose. What is truly radical about the Buddhist religion is its awareness of how tenacious and seductive our egocentric selves can be, and how easily all our ideas and concepts can be twisted by those selfish selves for their benefit. This includes even the ideas of Heaven and God. If you think back to what I said about the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, you'll

realize that at no point was “God” or the “Divine” ever mentioned, and it’s for this reason that Buddhism is sometimes regarded as “atheistic”. (As you’ll remember, “a-theism” of the Buddhist sort was the first of the nine conceptions of the Divine I talked about in Lecture 4.) However weird or contradictory it might seem for there to be a religion that doesn’t talk about God, the logic is actually quite simple. According to the Buddha, questions about such things as the nature of God and the origin of the universe are much too speculative and too remote to be of any practical spiritual use. Our focus instead should be on the down-to-earth situation of man in the world. True spirituality begins when you realize your life is a dislocated mess, and when you *do* realize that, your chief concern will *not* be how it got that way to start with or what the Supreme Reality might be like. No, you’ll want to know what you yourself can do to help fix it.

We find a similar reticence when it comes to Buddhist views of human destiny. It’s extremely important, they say, that in thinking and talking about life after death or in contemplating a supreme state of fulfillment, we don’t simply perpetuate *tanha*. It’s so very easy after all for Heaven to become no more than a place where all our cravings are finally satisfied: you know, the sort of place where you can eat all the chocolate you want and never get fat, and where you can indulge all your other passions without paying the price, and where—and this is very important—none of your enemies or the people that used to get in your way will be allowed! “Heaven” in short can easily become one gigantic ego-trip. But if you allow that to happen, if you lead the rest of your life with that sort of goal in mind, you’ll in fact never succeed in breaking free from the grip of your cravings, and any genuine Heaven—any true state of joy and peace—will remain forever beyond your grasp.

So the Buddhist strategy is to stick to negations ... even to the point of negating your very sense of yourself. According to Hindus, remember, there exists beneath the superficial illusions of your ordinary day-to-day consciousness a true Self, called *Atman*, and salvation or *moksha* consists in realizing the identity of this *Atman* with *Brahman*. Buddhist strategy is just the reverse. They teach by contrast a doctrine of *Anatman* (Sanskrit) or *Anatta* (Pali); both words simply mean “not-self”. According to Buddhist teaching, beneath the surface of your usual consciousness there’s really nothing at all, no permanent or abiding entity. What you *think* is yourself is simply a cluster of forces held together by the grip of blind craving. Your moods and feelings and worries and memories and all the other stuff that you think is you, including the very molecules of your body, are all like little iron filings attracted by the great magnet of *tanha*. Let go of *tanha*, give up all

selfish craving, and this so-called “self” will scatter and dissolve. It will be “blown out” or “extinguished” in the state of *Nirvâna*. As to what happens then—what we may then feel or experience or know—Siddhartha refused to say, considering it a moot point, a question (as he said) “not tending to edification”. There’s no point in trying to describe the indescribable. Best to wait and let experience itself show us what’s real.

The Christian who’s puzzled by this way of looking at things would do well, I suggest, to remember the words of Saint Paul: “Eye hath *not* seen, *nor* ear heard, *neither* hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive, what God has prepared for them that love Him” (1 Corinthians 2:9). I’ll say a few more things about this difficult point in my YouTube lecture, but for now consider this: *Nirvâna* is simply what you get when you add up Paul’s “not”, “nor”, and “neither”.

Think about it.