

The Vinaya Pitaka is regarded as the anchor of the order of monks and nuns. It deals mainly with the rules and regulations of the monasteries for Buddhist monks and nuns. Reasons for the promulgation of rules, their various implications and specific ceremonies of the Sangha are fully described in the Vinaya Pitaka.

The Sutta Pitaka consists chiefly of instructive discourses delivered by the Buddha to both monks and nuns as well as to lay people. A few discourses delivered by highly respected disciples are also included and are accorded as much respect as the words of the Buddha himself because he approved them.

The Abhidhamma Pitaka contains the profound philosophical aspects of the Buddhist teachings. Those students who wish to develop wisdom and lead an ideal Buddhist life can utilize this text to further their study. The Abhidhamma is not a subject of fleeting interest designed for superficial reading. In it, consciousness is defined, all mental properties are enumerated, the composition of each type of consciousness is set forth in detail and how thoughts arise is minutely described. Most devoted students of the Dhamma say knowledge of the Abidhamma is essential to comprehend fully the teachings of the Buddha.

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS

Shortly after his Awakening, the Buddha delivered his first sermon, in which he laid out the essential framework upon which all his later teachings were based. This framework consists of the Four Noble Truths, four fundamental principles of nature that emerged from the Buddha's radically honest and penetrating assessment of the human condition. He taught these truths not as metaphysical theories or as articles of faith but as categories by which we should frame our direct experience in a way that brings us to enlightenment.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

- ❖ The First Noble Truth is that all living beings are subject to suffering or Dukkha.
- ❖ The Second Noble Truth is that suffering arises from craving. This craving is born out of ignorance. Ignorance means not seeing the true nature of reality.
- ❖ The Third Noble Truth is that there is a cessation of suffering through the relinquishment of craving. Craving is eliminated through gaining wisdom into the true nature of reality.
- ❖ The Fourth Noble Truth is the path of practice leading to the cessation of suffering called the Noble Eightfold Path.

Because of our ignorance of these Noble Truths, because of our inexperience, we remain bound to samsara, the wearisome cycle of birth, aging, illness, death and rebirth. Craving propels this process onward, from one moment to the next and over the course of countless lifetimes in accordance with kamma, the universal laws of cause and effect. According to this law, every action that one performs in the present moment, whether by body, speech or mind itself, eventually bears fruit according to its skillfulness. Act in unskillful and harmful ways and unhappiness is bound to follow; act skillfully and happiness will ultimately follow. As long as one remains ignorant of this principle, one is doomed to an aimless existence: happy one moment, in despair the next.

The Buddha's teaching is often called the "Middle Path" or "Middle Way" because it avoids two extremes, the search for happiness through pleasurable self-indulgence and the search for spiritual insight through self-mortification.

THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH

The Fourth Noble Truth is the Noble Eightfold path, which leads to the cessation of suffering. The eight principles of the Noble Eightfold Path should not be followed one after another but developed and practiced simultaneously as a unified whole. They are linked together and each one helps the cultivation of the others.

THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH

- ❖ Right Speech
- ❖ Right Action
- ❖ Right Livelihood
- ❖ Right Effort
- ❖ Right Mindfulness
- ❖ Right Concentration
- ❖ Right Understanding
- ❖ Right Thought

The Noble Eightfold Path is organized into three aspects, ethical conduct or morality; mental development or concentration and wisdom. Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood make up the morality aspect. Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration make up the concentration aspect and Right Understanding and Right Thought make up the wisdom aspect.

RIGHT SPEECH

Right Speech means to use the faculty of speech for meaningful communication, such as uniting people, encouraging understanding between friends and neighbors and imparting helpful information.

Traditionally, there are four aspects of Right Speech: the avoidance of lying, the avoidance of backbiting, slander and the avoidance of harsh speech and the avoidance of idle talk. Lying opens the door to all kinds of unwholesome acts. Slander is divisive. Harsh words create pain and discord in society. Idle talk and malicious gossip divert us and other people from the path of enlightenment.

Refraining from these forms of harmful speech will naturally result in speaking the truth and using words that are friendly, gentle and useful. Right Speech also means that if one cannot say something useful, then one should maintain a "noble silence."

RIGHT ACTION

Right Action means to act with respect for life, respect for property, respect for personal relationships and avoiding intoxicants that cloud the mind.

Right Action aims at promoting moral, honorable and peaceful conduct. Respect of life means to not knowingly kill any life form, humans, animals, or insects for example. Respect for property means to not steal from, cheat, or rob others. Respect for personal relationships means avoiding sexual misconduct, avoiding adultery, and avoiding sexual liaisons with people who are likely to be harmed by such relationships. Avoiding intoxicants that cloud the mind means not using alcohol, drugs, or abusing the senses.

RIGHT LIVELIHOOD

Right Livelihood means to earn a living in a manner that does not bring harm to oneself or others. Right Livelihood extends the rules of Right Action to our role as breadwinners in society. The underlying values are respect for truth, for the welfare of others and for life, property, and personal relationships. Right Livelihood means earning a living in a way that does not violate these basic moral values.

Five kinds of livelihood are discouraged for Buddhists: trading in slaves, trading in arms, trading in poisons, trading in intoxicants, and the killing of animals. These five are discouraged because they contribute to the ills of society and violate the values of respect and welfare of others.

RIGHT EFFORT

Right Effort is preventing unwholesome thoughts from arising, rejecting unwholesome thoughts once they have arisen, cultivating wholesome thoughts, and maintaining wholesome thoughts after they arise.

These four aspects of Right Effort focus the energy of the mind on our mental states. Their purpose is to reduce and eventually eliminate the unwholesome thoughts that occupy our minds and to increase and firmly establish wholesome thoughts as a natural integral characteristic of our mental state of being. Wholesome states of mind include loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and generosity.

RIGHT MINDFULNESS

Right Mindfulness is to be fully aware and to avoid a distracted or cloudy state of mind. Traditionally, the practice of Right Mindfulness has been expanded to four specific applications: mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of feelings, mindfulness of consciousness and mindfulness of mind objects. The four applications of mindfulness are important for cultivating a heightened level of awareness of all forms of movement, feelings and sensations as they arise and fade within the body and mind.

RIGHT CONCENTRATION

Right Concentration is to develop a single-pointed concentration of mind through meditation. Concentration is the practice of focusing the mind on a physical or mental object to the exclusion of all other mental activity. Practice in this kind of meditation has two principal benefits. First, it leads to mental well-being, comfort, joy, calm and tranquility. Second, it turns the mind into an instrument capable of seeing the true nature of existence.

Thus Right Concentration prepares the mind to attain wisdom. To directly experience the Four Noble Truths we have to achieve single-pointed concentration of mind. When we have achieved single-pointed concentration of the mind, we are then ready to join concentration with wisdom in order to gain enlightenment.

RIGHT UNDERSTANDING

Right Understanding means to know and understand the Four Noble Truths and to understand the real truth of existence, rather than simply accepting that life is only that which it appears to be on the surface.

When we approach the teachings of the Buddha, we are encouraged first to study, then to consider and examine them and finally to meditate on what we have examined. In this way, Right Understanding eliminates ignorance, which is the root cause of suffering.

In Buddhism, real and deep understanding is called *pativedha* (penetration), which means seeing the true nature of existence without naming or labeling it. This type of penetration is possible only when the mind is free from delusion and fully developed through meditation. Right Understanding gives direction and orientation to the other steps of the path.

RIGHT THOUGHT

Right Thought is abandoning negative thoughts and cultivating wholesome thoughts. Right Thought is a means to remove the attachment and desire that grows from the root of ignorance by letting go of unwholesome thoughts and by developing compassion and wisdom. To cultivate wholesome thoughts, we must consider the undesirable consequence of unbridled pleasure of the senses. We can develop compassion through recognizing the essential equality of all living beings. We gain wisdom by developing our mind through meditation.

TAKING REFUGE IN THE THREE JEWELS

At the end of many discourses, the person to whom the Buddha is talking takes refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. These are known as the Three Jewels. The act of taking refuge indicates that a person has formally committed to the teaching of the Buddha as a way of life. To understand why this commitment is called taking refuge, it is helpful to look at the history of the custom.

In pre-Buddhist India, taking refuge meant proclaiming one's allegiance to a patron, a king or deity, submitting to their authority in hopes of receiving protection in return. In the early years of the Buddha's teaching career, his followers adopted this custom to express their allegiance to him, his teachings and the community of monks and nuns. However, in the Buddhist context this custom takes on a new meaning.

Buddhism is not a theistic religion. The Buddha is not a god so a person taking refuge in the Buddhist sense is not asking for the Buddha personally to intervene in the affairs of daily life or provide physical protection. However, the Buddha's teachings center on the realization that human life is fraught with the dangers created by attachment, aversion and delusion that prevent us from seeing the true nature of reality. Therefore, the concept of refuge is applied to the path of practice in that its aim is to gain release from these dangers.

When a Buddhist takes refuge, it is a commitment to living in line with the understanding that actions based on skillful intentions lead to happiness while actions based on unskillful intentions lead to suffering. Taking refuge is an act of protection in that we trust that by following the Buddha's teachings that we will not fall into misfortunes that unskillful kamma engenders.

Taking refuge in the Buddha means accepting him as our teacher, trusting that he did awaken to the truth by developing qualities that we too can develop and relying on the truths to which he awoke as a guide for the conduct of our life. Taking refuge in the Dhamma means to follow the Buddha's teachings on moral conduct, wisdom and compassion. Taking refuge in the Sangha means living in an awakened way and drawing support for this life style from the community. Taking refuge also means to have confidence in our own ability to develop understanding and compassion, practice the Buddha's teachings in our lives and to attain Nibbana. This act of going for refuge is what qualifies a person as practicing Buddhism as opposed to someone interested in the Buddha's teachings.

THE FIVE PRECEPTS

The awakened mind has gone beyond attachment, aversion and delusion. However, those of us who are still striving toward this goal must address such unskillful qualities in our daily lives. The Buddha has provided guidelines for developing skillfulness in our words and actions. For laypeople, these guidelines are called the Five Precepts. The Precepts are a guide to behaviors that are to be either avoided, because they lead to unfortunate consequences or to be cultivated, because they promote favorable circumstances. By following these precepts, we align our actions and speech with those of enlightened beings.

They are practical, down to earth and do not require a belief in supernatural forces. Like the lane markings on a highway, they guide us along our journey without colliding with others or going completely off the road. They give the practitioner a guide to living that does not cause harm to anyone and empowers them to cultivate virtue, wisdom and compassion. The ethics embodied in the precepts thus engenders an attitude and manner that lead to the ultimate goal of Nibbana.

Additionally, the precepts should not be considered a concrete set of rules or laws. They are meant to challenge us by closely examining our actions and their consequences and are specific to each individual and experience.

THE FIVE PRECEPTS

- ❖ Affirm Life-Abstain From Taking Life
- ❖ Be Giving-Abstain From Taking What Is Not Given
- ❖ Honor the Body-Abstain From Sexual Misconduct
- ❖ Manifest Truth-Abstain From False Speech
- ❖ Proceed Clearly-Abstain From Intoxicants

AFFIRM LIFE – ABSTAIN FROM TAKING LIFE

This precept requires that we avoid killing and act with reverence toward all forms of life. This means honoring and embracing all life forms including insects and other creatures that may be regarded as threatening, bothersome, or insignificant. It discourages taking one's own life as well as the lives of others.

BE GIVING – ABSTAIN FROM TAKING WHAT IS NOT GIVEN

This precept means no stealing and avoiding taking what belongs to others. It applies not only to the act of deliberately taking something from someone but also to any situation where we do not have expressed permission to take possession of something.