

## What is Buddhism? Part Three

The Dhamma Talk for Wednesday, August 19<sup>th</sup> 2009 was given by Robert Cusick, and was the third talk on “*What is Buddhism?*,” a booklet written by Western monks for Westerners. Please see our archives at <http://coastsidevipassana.org/dharmataalks.htm> for the previous talks in this series. A copy of “*What is Buddhism?*” is included with the first talk in the series.

Robert told us that when he became a monk, he followed the Vinaya (the monk’s rules), living a life of renunciation. He had to give up all his material goods and money before entering the monastery, and watched his friends come over with trucks to go through his stuff and take what they wanted. What would it feel like to voluntarily give up all your belongings? “I don’t need this anymore, I don’t need that....”

Right now, I’m imagining what it would be like for me... I’m not so concerned with material goods in the “look at all the cool stuff I own” sense, as I am with the memories associated with them. Many, many years ago, I used to play blues harp (harmonica). I practiced at least 3 -4 hours every day, and I must say, with all due modesty, I was hot. However, I haven’t played in over 15 years, and now I’m not so hot. I still have my complete set of professional quality instruments, and giving them away would break my heart. I would feel as if I were losing years of my life, and some really great memories. So, is giving away your possessions like selecting memories to be erased by Alzheimer’s?

Renunciation has a significant positive effect, though. Letting go of all the material goods and money changes *everything*. Once you are able to let go, renunciation is not a burden – it's freedom. Meditation goes much deeper when the worries, chores, and concerns of daily life outside the monastery disappear. The energy that supported the material goods goes to practice and meditation instead.

Forty-five minutes prior to Robert's talk, I had just finished the first draft of a "*Non-Authoritative Introduction to the Pali Canon*." Much to my surprise and delight, the first part of Robert's talk covered the same material as in the first part of my draft, a copy of which accompanies these notes. If you don't mind jumping around, and I'm allowed to be a little lazy, read *A Non-Authoritative Introduction to the Pali Canon* up to at least to ***The Second Basket*** on page 10.

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All done? Back to our story...

In the early centuries of the Common Era, India was wealthy. Rich in gold and silver, and the only place in the world where diamonds were mined, it was a treasure chest and the envy of those less well off. This wealth attracted attention from neighboring countries... and armies.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> Century, envy became violence. Arab armies plundered their way through Northern India, and eventually settled down in the conquered Sind region (Punjab). There was more to come. In the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, Mahmud of Ghazna led armies of Turks

and Hindu mercenaries, and invaded central India 17 times in 25 years. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Turks had conquered India, and established a Muslim Emperor. Buddhism was no longer tolerated, and had been exiled from India, surviving primarily in Sri Lanka and China, and spreading out from there.

In the exodus from India, Buddhism began to take on characteristics of the lands and cultures through which it traveled. For example, the animism of Tibet became absorbed in Tibetan Buddhism and populated it with demons and spirits, and then traveled to Mongolia and Bhutan. Many different schools of thought arose in Buddhism, reflecting the localization and isolation from other groups. Over the years, these variations either died out, or merged.

One stream of Buddhist thought migrated through China, Korea, Japan and Tibet, and is now known as Mahayana (“Great Vehicle”) Buddhism. Included in this school are Pure Land, Chan, Zen, Nichiren, and Tibetan Buddhism, prevalent throughout East Asia.

Another stream of Buddhism came out of Sri Lanka and traveled through Southeast Asia, including Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma. This stream is Theravada, or the “Way of the Elders” and is the Buddhism brought to Sri Lanka by Ashoka’s son.

Theravada is the oldest school of Buddhism, and has changed little since Buddha and his followers practiced it.

Each school of Buddhism tends to have its own set or definition of what sacred texts are included and studied. Theravada follows the Pali Canon (Tipitaka) from Sri Lanka and

the Buddhist Councils. The stream of Buddhism expanding from China, uses the Chinese Canon. The Buddhism that came out of China brought the Chinese Canon (and a great deal of the culture) to Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. The Tibetan Mahayana stream took the Tibetan Canon to Mongolia and Bhutan, along with Tibetan animism.

The goals of Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism are different. In Theravada, the goal is to become enlightened, i.e., become an Arahant. In Mahayana Buddhism, on the other hand, the goal is to become a bodhisattva.

There are different views of what a bodhisattva is. Generally, a bodhisattva is someone on the way to becoming enlightened, but is deeply committed to helping others also become enlightened. There are various types of bodhisattva, providing different types of leadership and paths to enlightenment. Regardless of the path, the bodhisattva vow is what defines a bodhisattva. One such vow is “May I attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.”

Another kind of bodhisattva is someone who holds off on enlightenment until *everyone* is ready. Avalokitesvara (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avalokite%C5%9Bvara>) is a bodhisattva of this type. Avalokitesvara is the bodhisattva of compassion, and is known as Kannon in Japan, Chenrezig in Tibet, and Kwan Yin in China. Anyone who vows to delay their own enlightenment until all sentient beings are saved is following the way of Avalokitesvara.

In many representations of Avalokiteshvara, he is portrayed with multiple arms and heads (up to 1,000).

*One prominent Buddhist story tells of Avalokiteśvara vowing never to rest until he had freed all sentient beings from samsara. Despite strenuous effort, he realizes that still many unhappy beings were yet to be saved. After struggling to comprehend the needs of so many, his head splits into eleven pieces. Amitabha Buddha [the Buddha of Infinite Light], seeing his plight, gives him eleven heads with which to hear the cries of the suffering. Upon hearing these cries and comprehending them, Avalokiteśvara attempts to reach out to all those who needed aid, but found that his two arms shattered into pieces. Once more, Amitabha comes to his aid and invests him with a thousand arms with which to aid the suffering multitudes.*

- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avalokite%C5%9Bvara>

From this point of view of an Avalokitesvara, the Theravada goal appears rather selfish. Rather than helping *all* sentient creatures, the Theravadan appears to be going for his/her personal salvation first.

As one of the differences between the Buddhist schools of thought, a counter argument has been made that only an enlightened person can help others become enlightened. Since a bodhisattva is not yet enlightened, there is no way the goals of enlightening others can be achieved by any bodhisattva.

On the other hand, some people believe that enlightenment is a gradual process, and the all-or-nothing state of enlightenment implied by Mahayana is misleading. As a

person becomes more enlightened, they become more able to help others, and grow in wisdom.

All those who practice meditation and follow the path to enlightenment interact with others in a different way. The energy of meditation changes the world. The Theravada Buddhists believe that the only way to help others achieve enlightenment is to follow the path to personal enlightenment. This approach brings to mind the slogan, “Help yourself, so you can help others.”

*Ahimsa* is a Pali word that means non-violence, and it is the core of all Buddhism. It is also integral to other Indian religions such as Jainism and Hinduism. Gandhi used the principle of ahimsa to great advantage against the British empire.

When Robert entered the monastery, he found that renunciation and the monastic discipline allowed him to take a deeper look into his own practice of ahimsa. He didn't think he would have to spend much time on ahimsa – he was a very gentle, non-confrontational person, and thought that aggressive, angry behavior was not an issue for him.

To his surprise, ahimsa became his #1 practice. With the life-changing practice of following the Vinaya, he became aware how often violent thoughts entered his mind and flew away before he could act on them. Outside the monastery, when resentments and irritations arose, he would suppress them so quickly, that they were not visible. As a monk, he began to recognize how quickly his mind turned to aggressive thinking – when the person ahead of him in line was taking too long or when he was mentally criticizing

others and inventorying their faults and shortcomings, he was astounded at how quickly the lizard brain jumped up and urged him to knock those fools out of the way.

Ahimsa is a world-saving characteristic of Buddhism . Robert concluded his talk by reading to us from “What is Buddhism?”

### ***Buddhism In the World Today***

*At present, Buddhism continues to gain an ever-widening acceptance in countries and societies far beyond its original home. Many people throughout the world, through their own careful choice, are adopting Buddhism’s peaceful, compassionate and responsible ways as guiding principles in their lives. Meditation has always been at the very heart of the Buddhist path, and as its proven benefits to both mental and physical wellbeing are becoming more widely known, meditation grows increasingly popular. When stress is shown to be such a major cause of human suffering in modern society, the quieting practice of meditation is even more valued. The world in the 21st century is too small and vulnerable for us to live in isolation or conflict. In all its long history no war has ever been fought to spread the Buddha’s teachings. Tolerance, loving-kindness and forgiveness, essential for world harmony and individual happiness, are generated and developed through virtuous behavior and more deeply through Buddhist meditation. When put into practice in everyday life, the path of the Buddha gradually cultivates the heart with harmlessness. This is then offered to all beings, especially oneself. There is no place for dwelling in guilt or self-hatred in Buddhism. The down-to-earth teachings and practices of the Buddha*

*culminate in pure joy, unshakeable serenity and penetrating wisdom, qualities identified with Buddhism for over 2,500 years and sorely needed in today's world. The gentle and sagacious peace of enlightenment is what makes the Buddha's message timeless and always vitally relevant.*