

Teachings



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Path to Enlightenment

It is said that Buddhism reveals the path of wisdom and Christianity the path of love. It's not clear they are separate, more perhaps like a braid in which the strands are intertwined.

Many of us know the story of the most recent Buddha's journey to enlightenment. The prince was sheltered from the realities beyond the palace walls. At the age of 29, he rode his chariot into the world outside and saw aging, disease, death, and an ascetic who was searching for the cause of suffering.

Though he returned to the palace, his mind was deeply disturbed. With his charioteer, He rode his favorite horse, Kanthaka, out of the palace but sent Channa back with his possessions and set upon the mendicant's path to find the cause of suffering.

The second important full moon in Taurus brought the answer to His questions.

After six years of ascetism, the now Enlightened One gave a talk in a deer park in which he revealed the Four Noble Truths. The first stemmed directly from what we might call His shock of seeing old age, disease, and death. The suffering comes from the impermanence of the pleasure we experience when we are satisfied. That pleasure may end or what once was enjoyed may no longer satisfy. It may become boring or perhaps be supplanted by newer and bigger aspirations. We suffer from the desire to be happy all the time, but what makes us happy may be taken away or lose its allure.

The explanation of suffering is that desires for ephemeral satisfaction can become the eventual cause of unhappiness. A distinction is made between desires that can lead to suffering and desires that are ennobling such as the desire for wisdom or the happiness of others.

The method for avoiding disappointments is to detach from the desires that are impermanent. This is, of course, easier said than done. We could suggest that making a distinction between personal desires and noble desires is like splitting hairs because even the desire for tolerance or peace may not happen exactly as we wish, but certainly the consequences tend to be less personal than when what we want arises from selfishness or the instinct to avoid something unwelcome.

Lastly, enlightenment becomes possible when the causes of suffering are extinguished. This can happen through transformation or realization. It usually requires considerable inner preparation and effort. Nirvana is not a place but a state of mind. We can, of course, take this understanding with us when we die.

There is a path with eight steps that help us to reach the goal of enlightenment, but what is most important is that the transpersonal nature of an enlightened being is not simply wise but compassionate. Once there is profound understanding, judgment fades into acceptance of the reactions to the life

experiences that were part of the imbalance associated with the disappointments that led to suffering.

It can easily be suggested that Buddhism is not a religion but rather a philosophy based on deep wisdom and a combination of psychological and spiritual understanding. It does not require any specific form of worship; however, respect for those who showed us the Way is normal. A statue of the Buddha is thus nothing like an image of Jesus nailed to a cross. The Buddha is not going to intervene in our daily affairs nor save us from our mistakes. He is one in a series of teachers who help us to live more meaningful lives. The serenity of the Buddha is inspiring but not really a deity of any sort; but, of course, it is perfectly appropriate to establish a sacred space in which we find inner alignment easier to maintain than is the case when tangled up in the hustle and bustle of the world.





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