

# BUDDHISM IN PRISONS



## **Worship at a Stupa**

The Buddha, represented by a flower-garlanded stupa, is venerated by worshippers and celestial beings who swoop down from the sky.

**Place of Origin:** India, State of Madhya Pradesh, Bharhut, Shunga dynasty  
**Date:** Early 2nd century BCE

**Material:** Sandstone  
**Size:** 47.5 x 51.9 x 8 cm  
**Collection of** Freer Gallery of Art, The Smithsonian's Museums of Asian Art, Washington, DC  
**Photo taken:** October 21, 2017

## Buddhism in India after the Buddha

For many years after his passing, images of the Buddha were symbolic — a wheel, a pair of footprints, an empty seat, or a stupa, as represented in the image above.

When the Buddha passed away near Kushinagara in northern India, he left no successor. Instead, he urged his disciples, monks and nuns, to work hard on their own spiritual growth, while at the same time helping each other and supporting the Sangha (the Buddhist community).

### **First Buddhist Council**

Shortly after the Buddha's passing, the first Buddhist Council was held and the senior students gathered to hear the words of Ananda, the Buddha's attendant for 27 years. Ananda had a remarkable memory and recited to the assembly all the teachings he had heard. Their language, Pali, had no written form, and so everything had to be learned by rote. This is why many sutras begin with the words; "Thus have I heard." because they were shared by

Ananda with the assembly. The senior students then discussed the teachings to be certain they understood them and could pass them on to others.

### **King Ashoka**

The teachings of the Buddha spread rapidly through India, and much of this can be attributed to King Ashoka, who lived about 200 years after the Buddha. He was a powerful and cruel ruler who led his armies into war to conquer new territories. After one extremely ruthless battle, he walked through the battlefield and was suddenly filled with horror at the destruction. Soon after that, he met a Buddhist monk and was so impressed by his calm manner that he put down the sword and took up the path of peace. He began a program of social welfare: establishing hospitals, digging wells, planting trees and supporting the Sangha. He also erected pillars at many sacred sites. Some of these are still standing today, and have carved on them edicts, which are spiritual proclamations. Through them, Ashoka encourages

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# Three Marks of Existence

The Three Marks of Existence is a teaching that is an important part of the foundation of Buddhism and is present in all the schools and the traditions. You may have seen this teaching also called the three seals of existence or the three seals of the Dhamma; it is all the same fundamental teaching – a teaching which refers us to three intrinsic characteristics of human existence.

These three perspectives describe what the nature of the perceived world looks like and all the phenomena that occur there. Understanding this triad provides the foundation for personal liberation. So, beyond just understanding the three marks intellectually, we must also integrate them fully and authentically on an emotional level, always consistent with our attitude and behaviour. I would say that most of the problems that bother us are linked to our non-acceptance of the three marks of existence. This is why we are confused, disoriented and lost.

So, what are the three marks of existence?

1. Impermanence (Anicca)
2. Inconsistency of an I (Anatta)
3. Suffering (Dukkha)

## Impermanence (Anicca)

The first mark is a teaching of critical importance; as the Buddha said, “everything is impermanent.” Everything has a beginning and an end, nothing lasts forever or is permanent, everything passes. Everything is constantly changing, and that is why calmness and stability can only be an illusion. Everything that exists inside and outside of us is dynamic. All realities are

born, live, die, and are reborn transformed to begin a new cycle.

This means that who we are today is not the same as who we were yesterday. We never put our feet in the same river because the current makes the water flow constantly; there is nothing in this world that is not dynamic and constantly changing. So, it is true with us too.

## Inconsistency of an I (Anatta)

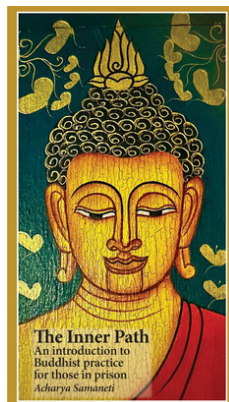
The second mark teaches us that “all is without substance.” This mark is what many people struggle with at the beginning of the Buddhist path. This mark means that nothing exists on its own, and nothing occurs independently. Everything that is and everything that happens is linked to multiple circumstances, factors, and facts. Thich Nhat Hanh, a famous Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, calls this Interbeing. There are connections between everything that exists. This is why, when we speak of the individual, we refer to the absence of a true “me” or “ego”. As we saw with the first mark, everything is constantly changing – so a fixed identity is a false idea. We are something

dynamic and transforming every moment.

Our existence is a series of things heading towards their disappearance. This mark of existence encourages us to forget ourselves and not worry about the ego. What is important is that we are awake to the present moment completely. It is not important who we were yesterday and who we will be tomorrow; what is important is the action of this moment – the present moment.

## Suffering (Dukkha)

The third mark is dukkha – “everything is unsatisfactory.” You have probably already read or heard that no one can generate constant and permanent satisfaction. When you think about it, for Buddhists, what generates happiness is probably the cause of subsequent suffering. All things are victims of impermanence, even the causes of our happiness and pleasures; if we are not able to accept the first mark of existence – we will always suffer when the good times or sensations end. As the saying goes, “Good news, everything is impermanent. Bad news, everything is impermanent.” 🌸



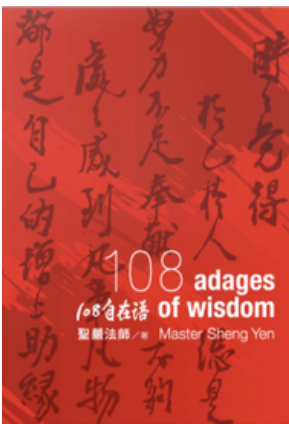
*This article has been excerpted with permission from The Inner Path: an introduction to Buddhist practice for those in prison (Sumeru Press Inc., 2024).*

**Acharya Samaneti** is a Canadian Buddhist prison chaplain, philosopher, lover of the written word and seeker of truth. He wishes to bear witness to the universality of suffering and actions of love that awaken hearts.



# Adages of Wisdom by Master Sheng Yen 聖嚴法師 自在語

1. Our needs are few; our wants are many.  
需要的不多，想要的太多。
2. To be grateful and repay kindness—this is first;  
benefit others is to benefit ourselves.  
知恩報恩為先，利人便是利己。
3. Devote wholehearted effort without calculating  
who does or gains more.  
盡心盡力第一，不爭你我多少。
4. Kindness and compassion have no enemies;  
wisdom engenders no vexations.  
慈悲沒有敵人，智慧不起煩惱。
5. The busy make the most of time; the diligent  
enjoy the best of health.  
忙人時間最多，勤勞健康最好。
6. Those who give selflessly are blessed; those  
who do good deeds are happy.  
布施的人有福，行善的人快樂。
7. Cultivate a big heart—but a small ego.  
心量要大，自我要小。
8. To take on anything, one must first be able to  
let go. One is truly free who can take on and let  
go of anything in peace.  
要能放下，才能提起。提放自如，是自在人。
9. Know yourself and others, and the ways of the  
world, so as to have a peaceful body and mind.  
Recognize, cherish, and nurture your blessings,  
and seize every chance to be of service.  
識人識己識進退，時時身心平安；知福惜福多  
培福，處處廣結善緣。🌸



*These adages are excerpted from the book 108 Adages of Wisdom by Master Sheng Yen.*

**Master Sheng Yen** (1930-2009) was one of the twentieth century's foremost Buddhist teachers, scholars, and meditation masters, and was instrumental in the revival of Chinese Buddhism in modern times.

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compassionate behaviour such as thoughtfulness towards family members, the proper treatment of prisoners, non-harm to animals and respect for other religions.

*Dhamma sadhu, kiyam cu dhamme ti?*

*Apasinave, bahu kayane, daya, dane, sace, socaye.*

*Dhamma is good, but what constitutes Dhamma? (It includes) little evil, much good, kindness, generosity, truthfulness and purity.*

- King Ashoka



### Ashoka Pillar at Vaishali

*The pillar is made of a single piece of polished stone and topped by a life-sized sculpture of a lion. It stands near a stupa said to contain the ashes of the Buddha from his cremation. Vaishali was the site of the Buddha's last sermon before his death.*

**Place of Origin:** India, State of Bihar

**Date:** Early 2nd century BCE

**Material:** Red Sandstone

**Photo taken:** December 22, 2016

### Spread of the Teachings

In order to help others learn about Buddhism, Ashoka sent religious teachers to other lands: Greece, Afghanistan, Syria, North Africa, and Egypt. He sent his own daughter, who was a nun and son who was a monk to Sri Lanka, with an offshoot of the Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha became enlightened. His daughter, Sanghamitta, was instrumental in establishing the order of nuns there. The sapling thrives, and at more than 2,300 years of age, is now the oldest living human-planted tree in the world.

## Nalanda University

Buddhism continued to flourish in India and in the 5th century CE Nalanda University was founded. Considered the world's first residential university, at its height, it had thousands of students from all over central Asia and housed nine million books. Over the course of its 700-year history, it was the centre for education in mathematics, medicine, astronomy and Buddhist studies. In 1190, invaders attacked the monks and set fire to the complex, which by then was so large that the fire was said to have burned for 3 months. Though blood was shed and countless precious books were destroyed, the role it played in the spread of Buddhism can still be felt today by all who practice the Buddha's way. 🌸

**Barbara** is a volunteer at Warkworth Institution in Ontario and a Lay Priest at the Toronto Zen Centre.

## March 14 is Shakyamuni Buddha's Nirvana Day (Mahayana)

Nirvana Day marks the passing of the Buddha into parinirvana, which is the release from the cycle of birth and death. The translation of this Pali word is literally extinction, as in the blowing out of the flame of a candle.

In his 80th year, the Buddha saw that his time was coming to an end, but continued instructing his disciples and introducing others to the Dharma. Near the town of Kushinagar, his final resting place, he lay on his right side on a stone bench between 2 sala trees and gave his final teaching. He urged those who had gathered to follow the Precepts, which are guidelines for ethical behaviour, and to continue working on their meditation practice, for the benefit of all. He reminded them that all meetings come to an end, and though he was leaving, each of them had within themselves the means to liberation (freedom). With these words, the Buddha drew his last breath. 🌸



**The Reclining Buddha**

*Niushou Shan, Jiangsu, China*

## About Buddhism in Prisons Newsletter

This monthly newsletter is published by Buddhism in Prisons Canada. It is intended to help inmates learn and practice Buddhism and for prison chaplains to provide Buddhist spiritual care. Authors of the articles published herein share teachings they learned from their own particular schools and traditions. These teachings may not necessarily be exactly the same as those taught in another Buddhist school or tradition. The three major traditions in Buddhism are Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana.

This newsletter is sent electronically to prison chaplains. Copies can also be downloaded from [BuddhismInPrisons.ca](http://BuddhismInPrisons.ca). Prison chaplains may also email or write to us to receive this newsletter.

P.O. Box 1048, Stratford PO MAIN ON N5A 6W4  
[info@BuddhismInPrisons.ca](mailto:info@BuddhismInPrisons.ca)      [www.BuddhismInPrisons.ca](http://www.BuddhismInPrisons.ca)