

BUDDHISM IN PRISONS



The Statue of Shakyamuni Buddha

The statue depicts the Buddha in the bhūmisparśha mudra, or earth-touching gesture which symbolizes the moment he overcame his final obstacle to enlightenment. This pose is also known as the vajrasana Buddha, or "Diamond Seat".

Place: *The Mahabodhi Temple (literally: "Great Awakening Temple"), Bodhgaya, Bihar, India is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, marking the location where the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment.*

Date photo taken: *February 6, 2020*

Message from the Publisher

This is the first monthly Buddhist newsletter our volunteer team has put together specially for practising Buddhism in prisons.

In these newsletters, we want to share with you the Buddhist teachings (Dhamma/Dharma) that have inspired us to set out on our paths toward freedom and ease of body and mind. Through the beautiful photographs of Buddhist Asia, we would like to take you with us to trace the transmission of Buddhism from India, its place of origin, eastward across Asia over thousands of years. Now in the West, we are the fortunate recipients of the Buddhist teachings in the major (Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana) traditions from all of these Asian countries. We hope our Buddhist calendar of important dates presented here will facilitate your Buddhist practice in prisons in these traditions. ▣

Shantong is a volunteer study partner with the Buddhist book study correspondence program for inmates offered by Buddhism In Prisons Canada.

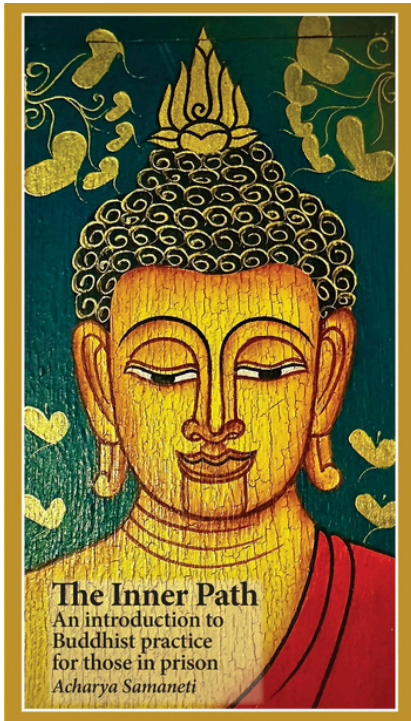
The Life of the Buddha

The person we call the Buddha (which means the enlightened one) was born Siddhartha Gautama near the current northern border of India with Nepal, over 2600 years ago. He was the long-awaited son of a royal couple, and at the time of his birth, it was foretold that he would grow up to be either a mighty world ruler or leave home to become a wandering monk. Hearing this, his parents decided to protect him from any difficulty or sadness so that he would never feel the need to search for the meaning of life.

A Truth Seeker

He grew up in luxury and ease. He married and was surrounded by friends and family. At age 29, to learn about life outside of his palace, he decided to travel into town. Hearing this, his father ordered that the town be scrubbed clean, decorated with flowers and cleared of any people who were not young and healthy. But as it turned out, during 3 visits, Siddhartha saw a sick person, an old person, and a corpse. When he asked his servant about what he had

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

Its author, Acharya Samaneti, selected the chapter on Dukkha (dissatisfactoriness) to be shared in this newsletter. It is undeniable that we experience dissatisfactoriness daily, in forms such as anxiety, stress, depression, fear, anger, etc. Many people try to find ways to temporarily escape these feelings by seeking pleasures and avoid pain rather than trying to understand the causes and conditions that give rise to their dissatisfaction. This chapter invites you on a journey of discovery and investigation.

Dukkha

Dukkha is an important concept in Buddhism. I would even say that it is one of the first concepts that we learn about (I mean, it is the basis for the First Noble Truth). It's true that when I talk about dukkha during my groups or our conversations, I'm talking about dukkha simply (dukkha can be taught as a general concept, and it is often taught as a general understanding of life's difficulties); but the Buddha presented us with three kinds of dukkha because we experience this dissatisfaction at various levels. We experience dukkha first, but there are three types of dukkha in this experience:

1. dukkha dukkha – ordinary suffering
2. viparinama dukkha – suffering due to change
3. sankhara dukkha – suffering revealed through training

Ordinary suffering is experienced outside of meditation too. There are two types of attention – ordinary attention and attention capable of understanding the true nature of phenomena (bhavanamaya). Examples of this type of dukkha are pain, itching, irritation, any illness or physical suffering. Others could be unhappiness, sadness, pain, worry or any mental suffering.

The pain of change is experienced when we meditate with our backs straight, our legs crossed, and we try to maintain attention on the breath with determination; over time the pleasant feeling gives way to the unpleasant. Here is an example of the suffering of change. Pain appears in the back, buttocks, knees, ankles, either in the form of hardness, numbness, tingling, and so on. We notice these unpleasant sensations; they intensify, and we see them clearly. At the beginning of our practice, our patience is not developed enough, and we want to move. It is important to remember

that the desire to move can decrease if we are patient.

If it does not decrease over time (try to wait a little before), one can move very carefully, and the pain might decrease. Then, after some time, the pleasant again gives way to the unpleasant in the form of pressure, pain, pulsations, etc. and this time we are trying to show even more determination. Someone who is a non-practitioner or a complete beginner is unaware of the existence of these unpleasant feelings and unconsciously changes their posture. This is often because these people do not understand that the body is impermanent (anicca), unsatisfactory (dukkha) and insubstantial (anatta).

The Buddha taught us that there are two realities: the conventional reality (a man, a woman, a bhikkhu, etc.) and the reality of the body and matter which is only understood through vipassana. There is no permanent entity within us, only spirit and matter in continual flux. So, with each sensory contact, there is change. To be able to see this clearly and completely requires that we have practiced diligently for some time. So, when we meditate and observe the breath (abdomen, etc.) we must also be able to carefully observe and note all new sensory contacts: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, or thinking. At first, we only see the prominent sensation of the abdomen rising and falling. Over time we see the beginning and the whole cycle in successive phases until the end. When we pay deep attention, we see that the abdomen (for example) does much more than just rise and fall. With experience, we can even observe sensations of softness, tension, pressure, and

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so on. These sensations too are no longer only observed in the abdomen during formal meditation – but for every sensory contact. Thoughts and emotions are also perceived from their very beginning; this comes with time and practice. But over time our attention becomes uninterrupted. This is why we call it suffering revealed through training. Our trust and faith in the dhamma develop. Our contact with this teaching of dukkha allows us to become a better person and a freer person.

Dukkha is an important teaching, and it helps us to see the possibilities of liberation with our deeper understanding of this essential teaching to the Buddhist path. ▣

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.

The Dhammapada

“Hatreds never cease through hatred in this world; through love alone they cease. This is an eternal law.”

seen, he was told that this happened to all people. He was shocked. Growing up in a sheltered home he had never witnessed such difficulties and began questioning what the point of life is if it ends in suffering and death.

On his 4th and final visit, he saw a holy person, dressed in a simple robe and carrying a begging bowl, who radiated peace. Siddhartha decided that this was the life he would pursue. That very night, while everyone was sleeping, he left the palace, cut off his hair, threw away his fancy clothes and began a life of truth-seeking.

The Moment of Enlightenment

Because he was so determined, he soon attracted 5 followers. For 6 years he practiced methods to subdue his body, including holding his breath for long periods and eating almost no food. Finally, so weak that he could barely walk and at the point of dying from starvation, he had a memory. There was a day when as a boy, he had slipped into a state of meditation and experienced deep concentration. Remembering this, he ate some food to regain his strength. Then, seating himself under a tree, he began meditating again. He was challenged by physical sensations and mind states but vowed to keep going. He pressed on through the night, until the dawn when he looked up to see the morning star and was awakened.

At that moment he realized that we are one with all life and fundamentally wise and kind, but greed, anger and confusion prevent us from seeing the truth.

Important Teachings

Soon after, he began sharing his insights with his disciples. He taught the 4 Noble Truths: that in life, there is suffering, caused by craving. We try to avoid what we do not like and cling to what we do. The Buddha understood that by developing a peaceful mind we could put an end to this craving, by following the Noble 8-Fold Path. This path is one of “Right” understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration.

This was the first Sangha (community), which now includes all followers of the Buddha’s way. For over 40 years he travelled the dusty roads of northern India, showing people the way to focus the mind and live in harmony with others.

In his 80th year, he saw that it was time to leave this life behind. Summoning his followers, he instructed everyone to continue working for their own understanding.

“Come now, monks, for I tell you all conditioned things are subject to decay, strive on with heedfulness!” Each of us who follows the Buddha’s path should try to see for ourselves what he saw when he looked up at the morning star. ▣

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

Buddhist Calendar of Important Dates

This calendar highlights popular Buddhist festivals and ceremonies practised by Buddhists around the world in the first quarter of 2025. Because these Western calendar dates are tied to the Lunar calendar or cultural events, the exact dates would vary slightly from year to year. Also, some festivals may be unique to a particular stream of Buddhism.

2025	Buddhist Festivals and Ceremonies
January 7	Shakyamuni Buddha's Enlightenment Day (Mahayana)
January 29	Maitreya Bodhisattva's Birthday (Mahayana)
January 29	Lunar New Year (Mahayana)
February 12	Magha Puja (Makha Bucha) Day (Theravada)
February 28	Losar New Year Day (Mahayana)
March 7	Monlam Chenmo Great Prayer Festival (Vajrayana)
March 14	Shakyamuni Buddha's Nirvana Day (Mahayana)
March 18	Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva's Birthday (Mahayana)
March 20	Samantabhadra Bodhisattva's Birthday (Mahayana)

March 7, 2025 is Renunciation Day of Shakyamuni Buddha (Shakyamuni means the wise one from the Shakya clan.)

This date marks Siddhartha Gautama's decision to leave the palace to search for truth. Though his existence was one of ease, it was unsatisfactory to him because it could not answer his questions about the meaning of life. When he realized that his path of asceticism (of excessive restraint) was not bringing him closer to enlightenment, he had another kind of renunciation (of giving something up for a higher purpose). By giving up both a life of luxury and a life of hardship, he chose the Middle Way and became Buddha, the enlightened one.

Giving up, or letting go, is an important part of the spiritual journey. If things are not going our way, it helps to practice acceptance and patience. Constantly trying to control, manipulate and avoid what we do not like, or hang on to what we do, creates fear, tension and anxiety in us. By letting go, we can begin to experience true freedom. ▣

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

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. Prison chaplains may also email or write to us to receive this newsletter.

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