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Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhasa

### Summary

This article provides a brief overview on Buddhism. The story of the Buddha's and His Enlightenment and the Dhamma he passed on 2,600 years ago.

There is a summary of the Buddha Dhamma, including the Law of Karma, and how we can cultivate a generous and kind nature towards ourselves and all beings. The practices and activities that would help us to escape the cycle of suffering, and to discover the causes for permanent happiness.

### What is Buddhism

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**I undertake to abide by the precept to abstain from killing**

**I undertake to abide by the precept abstain from stealing**

**I undertake to abide by the precept to abstain from sexual misconduct**

**I undertake to abide by the precept to abstain from lying**

**I undertake to abide by the precept to abstain from intoxicants that cloud the mind.**

The Dalai Lama has said many times that what all beings are seeking is happiness. While we can agree with this statement, it is a rare person that can honestly claim he or she enjoys a sense of tranquillity and contentment all the time. For most of us, it seems we are never very far away from mental afflictions such as irritation, anxiety or sadness despite living in a period of unprecedented material wealth. We are constantly buffeted by the vicissitudes of life's ups and downs. Why does permanent happiness always seem just beyond our reach? What are we missing?

Buddhism asserts *you can* attain a permanent state of inner peace and happiness by understanding their cause. The process of how and why our minds experience happiness and stress is what the Buddha discovered over

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2,600 years ago. He uncovered the truth about suffering, why living beings suffer and the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

To begin to understand what Buddhism is about, we will start with the history of the Buddha and what he achieved. The person who was to become the Buddha was born approximately 2,600 years ago in a place called Lumbini in ancient India, as Prince to the Sakya clan. He was named Siddhartha.

Shortly after his birth, there were many visitors to the royal palace to pay respect to the king and the child, including learned Brahmins and religious ascetics. Some of these learned and holy men gave predictions concerning the future of the young prince and many concluded that his life could take one of two possible courses. He could become a world ruling monarch or a fully enlightened teacher and saviour of humanity.

Siddhartha's Father, King Suddhodana, wished only that his son would continue to rule the kingdom and maintain the family's royal lineage and sought to avert the possibility that one day his son would leave the kingdom to follow the holy life. The king took steps to prevent the young prince from coming into contact with anything that may cause him to become disillusioned and forsake life in the royal courts.

He built the palace walls so high they could not be scaled by Siddhartha and restricted his experience of living to luxury and comfort, sensual pleasures and enjoyment. The Buddha later said of this time of his life "A white sunshade was held over me day and night so that no cold or heat or dust or grit or dew might inconvenience me". (Nanamoli 1995) 1.

Siddhartha had no knowledge about the life of his subjects and the difficulties and sorrows they experienced as a normal part of living. He never came into contact with elderly or sick people, the dead, or those who had decided to renounce the worldly life in favour of a spiritual path.

Siddhartha grew up as a healthy, gifted and handsome young man. At the age of sixteen he married his beautiful cousin Yasodhara who was princess of a neighboring kingdom, and later they had one son together.

Even though Siddhartha lived with all the luxuries of the palace and an entourage of attendants he gradually became unsettled and wished to travel throughout his kingdom to know the life of his people.

Eventually his father consented to such a journey, but fearful that his son would encounter sights or experiences that would lead him toward the holy life, the king made arrangements to prepare the city for the royal tour to ensure that Siddhartha would only meet young and healthy people.

Yet as Siddhartha was passing through the capital Kapilavatthu, an old man happened to stumble out of his hut beside the road.

"When the prince saw the old man, he didn't know what he was looking at. It was the first time in his life that he had seen an elderly person.

'What is that, Channa?' he asked his driver. That really cannot be a man! Why is he all bent? What is he trembling for? Why is his hair silver-grey, not black like mine? What is wrong with his eyes? Where are his teeth? Is this how some people are born? Tell me, oh good Channa, what does this mean?' Channa told the prince that it was an old man and he was not born like that. "When young he was like us and now, due to his old age he has become this way." Channa told the prince to forget this man. But the prince was not satisfied. "Everyone in the world, if he lives long enough, becomes like this man. It cannot be stopped," said Channa.

The prince ordered Channa to drive back home at once, as he was deeply disturbed and wanted to think carefully about this terrible thing called old age. 2. Buddhanet

On three subsequent journeys outside the palace Siddhartha would see a sick person lying on the ground in agony, a dead body being cremated on a funeral pyre and finally he also saw a holy person, living the religious life of an ascetic.

Siddhartha's whole world had been turned upside down by the thunderbolt of these four visions of truth of which he had been unaware. He was consumed by the realization that one day he too would be afflicted with sickness, old age and death and so would his loved ones.

That he would be separated through death from his wife and child, who he loved dearly, and that he knew of no way to avoid this tragedy for himself or others.

He wished to find out why there is suffering in life, why there is old age, sickness and death? He longed to find a way to help his loved ones and all beings by understanding suffering and finding an answer to it. Finding out the truth of these things became his vow and life quest. His renunciation of the worldly life became complete when he left the palace secretly one night to become an ascetic in search of the truth.

He travelled throughout India and visited many teachers and holy men. He studied and practiced what they taught him until he had mastered each of their teachings, even better than his teachers had mastered them. Then, one after the other he left saying, in these teachings I have not found the truth I am seeking about why beings suffer and how they can escape from these sufferings of sickness, old age and death.

After 6 years of practicing as an ascetic Siddhartha had not discovered what he was looking for. His practice at that time involved renunciation of all worldly pleasures, refraining from taking food, water, bathing, cutting hair, speaking.

He practiced these austerities in the belief that he could become free of attachment to his body by extreme self-denial. He became so emaciated from such practices that he was near death.

One day a music teacher was teaching his student how to play a string instrument. Siddhartha heard the teacher say, "if you wind the string too tight it will break and if you have the string too loose, there will be no music".

On hearing these words, Siddhartha came to the realization of the middle way of living - the path between extremes, it must be neither strict, nor undisciplined.

Siddhartha then decided to give up the extreme austerities he had been practicing and take proper food once again to recover his health and strength. He remembered once as a child he had sat under a tree and had the experience of observing his own breath. He remembered how his mind had become very calm, peaceful and clear in that concentrated state.

He decided that he would sit with his back against a large tree and not leave that meditation, even if his body wasted away, until he had found the answer to his quest, the attainment of the highest wisdom and perfect enlightenment.

Intense thoughts of desire, fear and attachment that entered his mind could not disturb his concentration on that evening and, eventually, his mind became very peaceful and bright.

In the early part of the night he began to recall his past lives in detail stretching back in time over an immense period, then he understood the absolute nature of impermanence of all things and the process of death and rebirth that occurs for all beings.

By the end of that full moon evening in May, the Buddha had discovered the cause of suffering and the path leading to the complete cessation of suffering. This was Siddhartha's Enlightenment as a Buddha, meaning an "awakened one".

The Buddha said that each person can find out the things that he had found out for themselves. He said that persons had to find out for themselves - that this is the only way to wake up, by seeing for yourself. Only when you see for yourself do you have real wisdom.

He taught the method of what he had done, so others could follow in his footsteps and come to understand about the nature of the world.

The Buddha found that there was great suffering in the world - he was not referring to famine or war - he was talking about the reality that, regardless of our financial status, we are bound to suffer through sickness, old age and death of ourselves and our loved ones. We must experience this great loss throughout our lives.

This is not only true for humans, but also for animals and heavenly beings, hell beings, demi-gods and ghosts. All beings in the six realms of existence experience loss through their life and death.

He found out that beings are always in this cycle of birth and death. That beings take birth in the six planes of existence - human, heavenly, hell, hungry ghost, demi-gods and animal. Buddha discovered that wherever there is birth, there must be death.

Nature shows us this impermanence of living, passing away and rebirth, if we can recognize it. A breath arises and then passes away, followed by a new breath arising and passing away. This is the life cycle of birth, passing away and death.

The Buddha discovered that just as there are physical laws relating to the behaviour of materiality in our universe so there are also mental laws, laws that relate to the behaviour and conditions of our minds.

He saw how the mental laws and conditions determine and drive our individual existences both within our present life and from life to life. One of these laws is the Law of Karma.

"Everything is mind wrought" the Buddha said. "If with an impure mind one thinks or acts, suffering follows him like the wheel of a cart follows the hoof of the ox". "If with a pure mind one thinks or acts, happiness stays with him like one's never departing shadow".

This is the missing information that we need to attain a permanent sense of happiness. The reason why contentment always appears beyond our grasp is because we are unaware that it comes from causes that have been made in the past, also known as the Law of Karma. Any action we perform with body, speech or mind produces an effect that will be experienced by the actor at some time in the future. Such actions can be classified into three parts:

1. Morally beneficial: kind and helpful actions to ourselves or others which produce outcomes that are beneficial and conducive to the happiness and well-being ourselves and others
2. Morally neutral: actions which do not contribute either positively or negatively to the well being of the actor
3. Morally harmful: unkind and destructive actions to ourselves or others which produce outcomes of harm, difficulty and unhappiness for ourselves and others.

The Buddha discovered a person commits negative and harmful actions because of an attachment to the physical body and senses, and in the illusions of worldly passion. These thirsts and illusions when traced to their source are found to be rooted in the intense cravings and desires of physical instincts. Desire, having a strong will to exist, as its basis, seeks that which

it feels desirable, even if it is sometimes death. This is called the Truth of the Arising of Suffering.

If desire, which lies at the root of all human passion, can be removed, then passion will die out and all human suffering will be ended. This is called the Truth of the Cessation of Suffering.

To reach the state where there is no desire and no suffering, nirvana in the Sanskrit language, one must follow a path of training which the Buddha taught his many students over a period of 45 years until he passed away.

The Buddha advises there are three main activities we must engage with in order to escape this constant cycle of suffering and stress. We need to cultivate a generous, kind nature towards ourselves and other beings; develop a pure clean heart and mind by observing morality and; by practicing meditation.

Generosity is developed by employing our resources to lend a helping hand to others. We can do this in many ways such the donation of our time, wealth, energy, knowledge and skills. From a Buddhist perspective by helping others you bless them, but as a by-product you are certainly creating causes and conditions for your own well-being and happiness, so you bless yourselves also.

In addition to the worldly benefits of service, developing generosity in the mind is an antidote to the greed, desire, craving and selfishness. Love and compassion are also developed in Buddhism towards all beings, as an antidote to callousness, indifference, hate, jealousy, and narrow mindedness.

The practice of morality is cultivated through observation of the five precepts, which are:

1. to not kill any living beings
2. to not steal
3. to not commit sexual misconduct
4. to not lie
5. to not indulge in intoxicants that cloud the mind

The first precept acknowledges the sanctity of life – no beings wishes to be deprived of his or hers. Killing causes immense suffering by shortening the life of the actor and creating sadness for oneself and others. By practicing this precept, one develops a serious concern for the wellbeing of all sentient beings, from the greatest heavenly being to the smallest insect.

By refraining from stealing, we acknowledge the value of other beings resources. Possessions, time, wealth and so on are valuable assets to persons, stealing such causes us to lose our personal belongings and experience the heartbreak of being stolen from. This precept assists us to cultivate the mind of limitless generosity.

Avoiding sexual misconduct aids us in appreciating the preciousness of family and personal relationships. Much emotional distress in the form of intense hatred and jealousy are the results from breaking this precept. It is also difficult to maintain stable relationships and a harmonious family life if one breaks this precept. Buddhism is difficult to practice in the absence of supportive relationships.

Restraining from lying is integral to the ability to see the true nature of phenomena. In order for the mind to see the absolute truth about the way things are the mind has to stop distorting and twisting reality to suit itself by lying. The mind that lies can never perceive reality clearly, nor can it know the higher levels of knowledge and truth.

Abstaining from intoxicants that cloud the mind assists to improve mental clarity and physical well-being. Intoxication leads to heedlessness and erratic behavior that can result in physical harm and mental illness. The Buddhist Path brightens and clarifies the mind very powerfully so that in meditation insight into the true nature of reality can be experienced. Intoxicants have the exact opposite effect by dulling and clouding the mind. Meditation is the third activity the Buddha advises us to engage with. If we really want to discover the causes for permanent happiness, we have to develop the ability to investigate the true nature of our mind. This involves the cultivation of mental calmness and concentration.

When a body of water is tainted by mud stirred up from the bottom, it is difficult to see through. The mind is similar, when it is all stirred up with emotions, thoughts and feelings, its true nature cannot be revealed. Using a base of mental purity and mental calmness, the mind can become highly concentrated by focusing on the breath as an object of concentration. When the correct mental qualities have been developed, we can begin to see how our minds work.

By following the advice of the Buddha, one can secure a future of well-being and happiness each for himself or herself.

May you be well and happy.  
May all beings be well and happy.

Written by Anita and Frank Carter

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