



## Theravāda-Buddhism

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Theravāda means school of the elders. It is the original Buddhism, which refers to the teachings of Buddha Gotama, who lived in India about 2500 years ago.

Buddhism is a method of training the mind with the goal of purification, development and liberation of the mind.

The Buddha's teaching is not a religion of faith. It is a path of one's own investigation of the laws of our existence. There is nothing mystical about the Buddha's teaching. All stages of the path of knowledge and liberation can be understood through one's own experiences. The Buddha himself instructed his disciples to carefully verify the teaching through their own practice.

The Buddha was neither a god nor the prophet of a god, but a human being who developed and himself walked a path of mind training with the goal of liberation from suffering.

According to the Buddha, the cause of suffering lies in craving (*lobha*), aversion (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*), as these roots of consciousness create unpleasant results. The Buddha found a way to completely overcome these suffering-causing roots. This path leads to a state free of all craving, aversion and delusion.

By actively working on one's own mind, one can thus become free from all mental defilements and experience real happiness.

Buddho means awakened one, Buddhism means the teaching that leads to awakening. Awakening in the Buddhist sense is the end of all mental defilements through the attainment of wisdom. This goal can also be achieved in modern times.

The path to this goal is a step-by-step path of exploring existence with all its appearances, which leads to the purification of the mind. Thus, the Buddha's teaching is a path of life that, based on one's own strength and determination, should illuminate all fields of life. It is a path to wholesome

happiness and peace in this life and beyond.

Meditation is an essential part of this practice. (see *Samatha/Vipassanā*).

Theravāda Buddhism is a fast, disciplined path to awakening, i.e. a path of overcoming all mental defilements and thus to liberation from suffering, as taught by the Buddha Gotama in his life and as we find in the early Buddhist scriptures. This path is only a fast path if followed with discipline, as already said, and according to the scriptures of the Pāḷicanon.

Theravāda Buddhism, the original Buddhism, is still practised today mainly in Burma, in Thailand and Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Laos.

### **The Teaching (*dhamma*)**

The Buddha Gotama describes the path he developed, the teaching (*dhamma*), with six aspects:

1. Well-preached: This aspect means that the teaching is noble because it leads to the liberation of beings from suffering, and that it was experienced by the Buddha himself and subsequently explained in detail. We still find it today in the ancient scriptures of the Pāḷicanon.
2. Visible: This aspect means that if one practices correctly, one can realize the teaching oneself and see and attain the path.
3. Not bound by any time: This aspect can be seen in two ways, firstly that the practice of the teaching always brings good fruits immediately and also in the future; secondly, the law of the teaching is always valid and not bound to any time or epoch. It is always valid because it deals fundamentally with existence.
4. Inviting: The teaching is so pure and clear that it invites one to practise immediately.
5. Inspiring or leading: The teaching stimulates to practise because it leads to liberation.
6. To be realized by the wise: Already many beings have attained wisdom through the teaching. They have found liberation from suffering.

*Dhamma* are laws, therefore they cannot be discussed. They are to be found out, verified and understood through one's own correct practice. Therein lies liberation according to the Buddha's teachings.

## The Four Noble Truths



In summary, we find the teaching to which Theravāda Buddhism refers in the Four Noble Truths, which the Buddha explained to a group of five monks in his very first teaching discourse after his own awakening in the Deer Park in Benares:

### The 4 noble truths:

(which are to be developed - *bhāvanā*).

1. **The truth about the difficulties and problems (*dukkha*)** which existence (body and mind) make us, namely as:

Worrying, lamenting, complaining, physical discomfort/pain, mental discomfort (sadness, anxiety, depression, burn-out etc.), despair; not getting what one wants;

being with people and things one doesn't like;

being separated from loved ones and desired things ... ;

Impermanence of all conditionally arisen phenomena,

as changing experiences of happiness and suffering;

summarized as the unsatisfactoriness in the five groups of existence (body, feeling, perception, mental factors, consciousness).

► This truth has to be investigated and to be known.

2. **The truth of the cause of difficulties:**

Thirst (craving, attachment, dependence and aversion based in unclear view of things). These causes have been elaborated by the Buddha in 12 factors as *paṭiccasamuppāda*, conditional arising.

► This truth has to be overcome (through direct recognition of the causes).

**3. The truth of the end of all difficulties:***Nibbāna*,

the unconditioned, the desireless, the signless.  
or the end of craving, aversion and delusion.

► This truth has to be realized.

**4. The path that leads to the overcoming of difficulties,**

the noble eightfold path:

Practice in wisdom:

1. right view
2. right thinking

Practice in ethics:

3. right speech
4. right action
5. right livelihood

Practice in concentration:

6. right effort
7. right mindfulness (*sati*)
8. right concentration.

► This truth has to be practised.

With the noble eightfold path we find three essential trainings of Theravāda Buddhism:

- ethical conduct
- concentration
- wisdom.

The realization of the four noble truths is not just an acute, temporary problem-solving strategy, but a fundamental liberation from suffering. It was very common in India during the lifetime of the Buddha Gotama to seek a way out of the fundamental suffering in existence. The Buddha Gotama sought and found a way.

**Pāḷicanon**

We have this teaching, called *dhamma*, today in written, traditional form, the Pāḷicanon, as well as in an authentic lineage of practice. The knowledge was handed down from generation to generation by the realized, that is, by those who have understood and realized it. Only in this way, through beings who have realized the teaching to the final goal of awakening, the teachings can be upheld after the death of a self-awakened Buddha. The scriptures offer the possibility of verifying one's own experiences.

The Pāḷicanon has been reviewed and confirmed in 6 councils since the death of Buddha Gotama. The first council was held in India three months after the death of Buddha Gotama. The sixth was held in Myanmar (Burma) from 1954 to 1956.

The Pāḷicanon consists of three parts, called baskets (Tipitaka):

The first basket is the Vinaya, the rules of conduct with explanations, which the Buddha gave to his ordained disciples to bring them closer to the goal of awakening and to enable them to live together harmoniously, without conflict. This is the training of ethics.

The second basket are the discourses (*suttā*) given by the Buddha. They are collected in 5 collections called Nikāya. They provide comprehensive explanations and guidance on all aspects of the teachings.

The third basket is the *abhidhamma*, translated as higher teaching. Here we find meditation experiences listed in a systematic way.

The Suttā provide the instructions, the *abhidhamma* shows the result. The *abhidhamma* only becomes understandable when one begins to practise according to the Suttā. The *abhidhamma* serves to check the results of one's practice, because the things (*dhamma*) listed there can be found, seen and understood through concentration.

### Practice according to Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta as an example

The well-known Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (The Great Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness) is divided into 4 kinds of mindfulness (*sati*):

1. contemplation of the body (*kāyānupassanā*),
2. contemplation of feelings (*vedanānupassanā*),
3. contemplation of consciousness (*cittānupassanā*),
4. contemplation of mind objects (*dhammānupassanā*).

The first chapter begins with the description of mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*).

- Mindfulness of breathing is a *samatha* meditation that leads to deep concentration, namely up to the 4th *jhāna*<sup>1</sup>.

At the end of this discourse, the Buddha describes that right concentration in the sense of the noble eightfold path is the attainment of the four *jhāna*.

- Furthermore, in this first chapter he instructs to develop not only mindfulness (*sati*) but also clear understanding during all postures and activities one performs in the course of a day.

Other instructions in the first chapter of this teaching are:

- The contemplation of 32 parts of the body as unattractive, by which one can attain the first *jhāna*.
- The four-elements-meditation, which should be practised in all postures,
- as well as corpse contemplations as not beautiful by which the first *jhāna* can be attained.

At the end of each chapter, based on the *samatha* concentration of the 4th *jhāna*, as described at the beginning of this teaching, the Buddha then instructs,

- to look inwardly and outwardly at the body.
- Based on this, the next step is to look at the arising and passing away of appearances,
- and their causes.

This is followed by instructions on the other three kinds of mindfulness:

- the contemplation of the feelings,
- the contemplation of the modes of consciousness and
- the contemplation of mind objects.

Each of these foundations of mindfulness is, after their analytical contemplation, then always to be observed internally and externally,

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<sup>1</sup> *Jhāna* are states of deep concentration in which the mind is completely absorbed in the object of contemplation. The mental defilements can therefore not occur, the mind becomes clear, purified and prepared for insight.

as well as the arising and vanishing of the factors involved, as well as their causes.

When practised in this way, the *abhidhamma* forms a good support for comparing one's own experiences.

If one does not create the conditions for understanding the *abhidhamma* in one's own stream of consciousness, i.e. *jhāna* concentration, one cannot measure its value. The dimension of consciousness from the 4th *jhāna*, based on which the Buddha himself also practised, is completely different from that of the ordinary thinking mind. Therefore, *abhidhamma* remains ultimately incomprehensible to a mind that is only on an everyday level or that tries to approach *abhidhamma* purely intellectually.

In the Theravāda tradition there are extensive reports of monks who practised according to the Pāḷicanon in succession of the Buddha.

In this later commentary literature, the two parts of the Tipitaka, the *suttā* (discourses) and the *abhidhamma*, are often combined to help the practitioner compare his or her own practice, or to make the instructions in the *suttā*, which the Buddha gave based on the knowledge of individual listeners, understandable and practicable for a wider audience.

Thus, in the Visuddhi Magga<sup>2</sup>, a manual on Buddhist meditation based on the Tipitaka, we also find broad explanations of *sutta* instructions on how to effectively and satisfactorily acquire the practice. Unfortunately, due to the degeneration of practice in Theravāda Buddhism over several centuries, also due to unqualified teachers, these connections have been forgotten in many groups.

The possibilities of profound insight (*vipassanā*) and liberation that arise through correct practice according to the *suttā* and *abhidhamma* of Theravāda Buddhism go far beyond modern consciousness training, which is often also called *vipassanā*. Above all, with correct practice, long-lasting states of wholesome happiness and joy develop (joy is one of the awakening factors), which are the base for continuing on this path until the end, that is overcoming all mental defilements.

## Theravāda Buddhism in Western countries

Until the end of the nineteenth century, the Buddha's teaching was only very little known in the West, in America and Europe. It was only in the last century that numerous centres were established in Western countries and the Pāḷicanon was translated into Western languages. The Buddha's teaching is thus quite young in Western countries and cannot really look back on cultural integration. Many practices that are taught in Western countries that are called Theravāda have nothing in common anymore with the path of the Elders. Techniques have been separated from the real teachings and are presented as a worldly program for mental development with the aim of worldly success.

## Goal of Theravāda

When we read the discourses (*Suttā*) of Buddha Gotama, it is clear that his teaching has a clear goal, the goal of completely cutting off mental defilements. This means attaining the fourth stage of awakening, called arahatship. This goal goes hand in hand with the realization of the unconditioned, called Nibbāna, or the complete cessation of craving.

Concerning the transmission of the teaching, the Buddha says in MN 8 Sallekha Sutta:

*"Cunda, that one who is himself sinking in the mud should pull out another who is sinking in the mud is impossible; that one who is not himself sinking in the mud should pull out another who is sinking in the mud is possible. That one who is himself untamed, undisciplined, [with defilements]*

<sup>2</sup> A commentary on the Pāḷicanon and especially about meditation practice, written in the 5<sup>th</sup> century by the Indian monk Acariya Buddhagosa.

*unextinguished, should tame another, discipline him, and help extinguish [his defilements] is impossible; that one who is himself tamed, disciplined, [with defilements] extinguished, should tame another, discipline him, and help extinguish [his defilements] is possible.”*