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Introduction and Overarching Themes of Buddhism

In this course, we'll explore some of the more prominent and consistent themes of Buddhism. These are themes that are found throughout Buddhism literature and across various sects and teachings. The study of Buddhist doctrine, and applying it to the real world is a lifetime path, but having a solid understanding of the basics can help give one greater confidence to continue studies, and help expand the mind to possibilities they may have overlooked before.

The Buddha's teachings can be summarized a few different ways. The most common in modern Buddhist doctrine is the Four Noble Truths. However, another popular alternative in Buddhist history is the Three Dharma Seals. These “seals” are used to determine whether a particular teaching can be considered Buddhist or not. They also serve as a good summary of Buddhism as a whole:

1. **All phenomena are impermanent** – this includes physical, material objects, but also abstract things like culture, language, emotions, states of mind and even Buddhism itself!

2. **All things exist without a static, independent “self”** - all phenomena mentioned above arise due to other causes and conditions, and exist only in relation to all other phenomena. You can only be who you are through all other things.

3. **The only true, lasting peace is the state of Nirvana** – Nirvana is the ultimate end-goal for all Buddhists, and only in Nirvana can one attain lasting freedom, liberation and peace of mind.

The subsequent sections will explore these three themes along with other aspects of Buddhism, and how they all fit in together.

Finding A Refuge

The Buddha: “The instructed disciple of the noble ones, [however,] attends carefully & appropriately right there at the dependent co-arising:

“"When this is, that is.

“"From the arising of this comes the arising of that.

“"When this isn't, that isn't.

“"From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that.

– SN 12.61 Assutavā Sutta

The Buddha described all phenomena as impermanent. They arise through external causes and conditions and when those conditions are no longer viable, they fade away. Thus, it is all but impossible to maintain a permanent state of peace of mind, or a permanent state of happiness when we
depend on external things. Such things will naturally fade and with it our happiness fades. Or, we simply become acclimated to them, and although they do not fade, our feelings do.

The Buddha formulated several causes of stress or unease:

“People of the world, being weak in virtue, engage in strife over matters which are not urgent. In the midst of abject wickedness and extreme afflictions they painstakingly toil for their living. Whether noble or corrupt, rich or poor, young or old, male or female, all people worry about wealth and property. In this there is no difference between the rich and the poor; both have their anxieties. Groaning in dejection and sorrow, they pile up thoughts of anguish or, driven by inner urges, they run wildly in all directions and they have no time for peace and rest.”

--The Immeasurable Life Sutra

Thus, if we take refuge in our bodies, it will grow old, sick and eventually die. If we take refuge in something we like, we will inevitably be separated from it, and so on.

**So What If I Die? Why Not Just Live For the Moment?**

"From an inconstruable beginning comes transmigration. A beginning point is not evident, though beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving are transmigrating & wandering on. What do you think, monks: Which is greater, the tears you have shed while transmigrating & wandering this long, long time — crying & weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing — or the water in the four great oceans?"

--Assu Sutta SN 15.3

An important concept in Buddhism is the notion of Samsara, which means “aimless wandering”. The Buddha, while deeply meditating under the Bodhi Tree on the night of his Enlightenment, saw all his past lives laid out before him: princes, paupers, animals, etc. The number of lives was countless, and he realized that if he continued on as he did, he would continue to wander aimless through countless, countless cycles of rebirth. These eons and eons of lifetimes were measured in kalpas, which is a very long span of time in Indian culture. The exact definition of a kalpa varies, but it can often be measured in hundreds of thousands of years at minimum, or even as great as millions or even billions of years.

**This Great Universe**

In Buddhist cosmology, the universe is seen as near-infinitely large, and near-infinitely old. Unlike religions that see a definite, often short, beginning and a precise moment where it will end, Buddhism sees the Universe as beyond measure and ultimately unknowable. Though ancient Indian people knew nothing of astronomy, modern-day scientists have confirmed that the Universe is indeed very old (15 billion years old), and 28 billion parsecs or 53,200,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 miles across and growing faster and faster. Also, what lies before the Big Bang is unknowable at this time.
Perhaps the ancient Indians were not so far off as one might expect...

**Jaded**

In any case, the Buddha realized that when compared to kalpa after kalpa’s worth of lives, whatever lifestyle he could live, he probably lived it. Whatever joys and tragedies had could experience, he had experienced in one lifetime or another. He had lost countless loved ones, had many loves and so on.

While he probably had many joyful and pleasurable moments in his past lives, all of these states were not destined to last, and thus he pursued happiness again and again, lifetime after lifetime, *ad nauseum*.

Further, the cravings and aversion in life drove him onward, generating more and more karma, like seeds in the ground. When external conditions were ripe, these seeds would grow, and lead to future conditions, even future births. Thus he would repeat the cycle over and over again, sometimes with an advantageous rebirth, sometimes with a disadvantaged one. But there was no long-term direction. It was aimless wandering.

Additionally, as the Buddha later taught, **human rebirths were very rare**:

The Buddha: "Monks, suppose that this great earth were totally covered with water, and a man were to toss a yoke with a single hole there....And suppose a blind sea-turtle were there. It would come to the surface once every one hundred years. Now what do you think: would that blind sea-turtle, coming to the surface once every one hundred years, stick his neck into the yoke with a single hole?"

Monks: "It would be a sheer coincidence, lord, that the blind sea-turtle, coming to the surface once every one hundred years, would stick his neck into the yoke with a single hole."

The Buddha: "It's likewise a sheer coincidence that one obtains the human state. It's likewise a sheer coincidence that a Tathagata, worthy & rightly self-awakened, arises in the world.

--SN 56.48: Chiggala Sutta

Outside of a rebirth as a human, one wander many lives in other states, some celestial, others more hellish before they were reborn again as a human. Realizing that there was no lasting refuge in this world, the Buddha became jaded and sought a more permanent refuge.

**Is There Any Lasting Refuge?**

The Buddha taught that there were three things that a person could take refuge in:

- **The Buddha** – The Buddha, or “fully self-awakened one”, perceived the nature of things
without help from others (i.e. another Buddhist teacher). He set the wheel in motion for others. In many respects the Buddha is more like a doctor than a teacher, because he helps to cure the ills of the world, and gives prescriptions on how to accomplish it. In practical terms, the Buddha also provides a model for disciples to follow, and an inspiration when one lacks confidence. Another term used to describe the Buddha is Tathagata or “thus come one”.

- **The Dharma** – The Buddha's words, as memorized by disciples and set down in the sutras provide the best reference we have to what the Buddha taught. Many sutras exist in Buddhism, there is no single “book” as found in other religions. Instead, the entire collection of sutras form the basis of Buddhist doctrine, however, many schools center around and “specialize in” certain sutras. Not all sutras were written at the same time, and not all of them are written in India, but certain over-arching themes can be found in all sutras, and this represents the Dharma or teachings of the Buddha.

  Note that “Dharma” in the original Pali language can also means “the way things are”. The idea of the Dharma is less a doctrine or dogma, and more of a universal set of principles. One can perceive these principles in life, and validate them, or they can live their whole life ignorant of them if they so choose. By understanding and living a life that aligns with these principles, though, one can save themselves a lot of unnecessary grief and frustration.

- **The Sangha** – The Sangha represents both the monastic community (monks and nuns), but also lay-followers of various backgrounds. It can represent one's immediate temple, or the unbroken line of followers who helped bring Buddhism. While the Dharma is the teachings of the Buddha, the Sangha is what keeps it alive and flourishing across many cultures and times.

**So, Now What?**

Hunger: the foremost illness.

Fabrications: the foremost pain.

For one knowing this truth

as it actually is,

Unbinding

is the foremost ease.

--The Dhammapada, verse 203

The Buddha taught that there is no lasting refuge in this world, but he contrasts this world with its impermanence and inconsistency with a concept called nirvana. Nirvana literally meant “blowing out”
as in a candle flame. In the Buddhist context though, the candle flame is the endless passions that drive us to chase after things, even when our intellect knows it will give us no satisfaction. Thus, another translation for Nirvana is “unbinding”.

Nirvana is a supreme state of peace and freedom that comes from being a complete master of one's self. One is no longer at the whim of passions, no longer troubled by the ups and downs of life, and no longer troubled by the opinions that others have of them. Because one is no longer subject to passion, one no longer generates karma, and thus no longer creates conditions for future rebirths.

But what is the state of Nirvana like? The Buddha was circumspect on this:

...Deep, Vaccha, is this phenomenon, hard to see, hard to realize, tranquil, refined, beyond the scope of conjecture, subtle, to-be-experienced by the wise....Freed from the classification of consciousness, Vaccha, the Tathagata [the Buddha] is deep, boundless, hard to fathom, like the sea.”

--MN 72, The Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta

Further, the state of Nirvana is a state that transcends phenomena we know such as birth and death:

There is that dimension, monks, where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind; neither dimension of the infinitude of space, nor dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, nor dimension of nothingness, nor dimension of neither perception nor non-perception; neither this world, nor the next world, nor sun, nor moon. And there, I say, there is neither coming, nor going, nor staying; neither passing away nor arising: unestablished, unevolving, without support [mental object]. This, just this, is the end of stress.

Ud 8.1, The Nibbāna Sutta

Thus, while the Buddha could only describe Nirvana in terms of what it is not, he emphasized that the Nirvana was the only true peace that one

**Buddhahood**

In any case, when one has reached the supreme state of Nirvana, they have become a Buddha, a fully self-awakened one. The state of Buddhahood is the culmination of many lifetimes of effort, and thus the appearance of a Buddha is extremely rare. However, with the appearance of a Buddha, the wheel of the Dharma (the laws and principles of Buddhism) is turned once again, and many others are inspired to take up the Buddhist path and become Buddhas themselves in the future and attain liberation, while assisting others to do the same.

The Buddha of our era is Shakyamuni Buddha of the Sakya clan in India. He lived 2,500 years ago, when the Dharma was unknown, perceived the truth, and attained full clarity or enlightenment. Through awakening and clarity, residual desire and passions were immediately extinguished and Nirvana was also attained.
Buddhism as we know it today is all due to the accomplishments of this one man, and thus we revere him as our teacher, and the sage of our times. However, we also recognize that other Buddhas exist in the past and future and have made the same great accomplishment in some place and some time.

For example, Buddhism states that in the far future, when Buddhism itself fades and the Dharma is forgotten, another Buddha will arise named Maitreya. Another example is Amitabha (Amida) Buddha, who is said to have attained Enlightenment and become a Buddha 10 kalpas ago:

> Ananda further asked the Buddha, "How much time has passed since he attained Buddhahood?"

> The Buddha replied, "Since he attained Buddhahood, about ten kalpas have passed."

--The Larger Sutra Of Immeasurable Life

**But How to Get There?**

Much of the Buddha's teachings, the *Dharma*, pertain to either:

- Describing the state of things.
- How to eventually reach Buddhahood

The Buddha, like a doctor, prescribed “remedies” to people based on their background, their grasp of the Dharma, and so on. Thus, these teachings might pertain to more mundane matters for a layperson, or deeply philosophical teachings intended for bodhisattvas and the senior monastic disciples. Because Indian tradition felt that writing down sacred teachings was profane, thus they would memorize the teachings and pass them down to later generations as the *Sutras*.

Later generations also composed new sutras as a way of encapsulating disparate Buddhist teachings into a single, comprehensive school of thought, or rehash previous teachings for a newer generation and environment.

In any case, the Sutras provide a series of road-signs along the road to Enlightenment.

**What Are the Sutras?**

During the Buddha's lifetime, teachings were memorized and then passed down by recitation from one generation to the next. To make memorization and organization easier, these teachings were grouped into collections called *nikayas* and the wording would be modified to be more repetitive (and therefore easier to remember and recite). Often times these sutras begin with some kind of preamble such as:

> Thus have I heard. At one time the Buddha was staying in the Jeta Grove monastery of Anathapindada's Garden at Shravasti, together with a large assembly of twelve hundred and
fifty monks, who were all great arhats, well-known to the people.

--The Amitabha Sutra

Early sutras collections had many small teachings in them, but as stated above, it became more common in later Buddhist generations to not only write them down, but also write new sutras that refreshed or encapsulated earlier teachings. These sutras might be written down in the local languages, or when sutras were introduced to new cultures, such as China, they would be translated into something readable by the local population. Thus, sutras can come in all shapes and sizes, and in many old languages depending on the original source, or tradition.

Nevertheless, even in later generations, the recitation of sutras has been a time-honored tradition. This has practical benefits:

- It helps to “internalize” the teachings contained therein. Traditions will have a smaller number of sutras they tend to focus on, and most often recite.
- It upholds the unbroken tradition from the time of the Buddha to repeat what was heard.
- It generates good karma, which in turn can be shared for the benefit of others.

The Road to Awakening

In traditional Buddhist thought, the disciple undergoes a series of stages of awakening, culminating in Buddhahood:

- Stream-enterer – a person who gains enough confidence in the Dharma to continue pursuing it lifetime after lifetime.
- Arhat – a “noble one”, a person who has reached a very high state of awakening. In some traditions he is analogous to an enlightened Buddha. In others, he is not fully enlightened yet.
- Bodhisattva – a “seeker of enlightenment”, who aspires to reach full Buddhahood, usually by making a set of vows to assist others before fulfilling their own goal.
- Buddha – a fully awakened being, who has completed the Buddhist path, experiences Nirvana (unbinding) and is said to be completely liberated.

How to get from A to B: Buddhist schools and practices

Due to many complex factors, the original Indian Buddhist community flourished and spread, but also developed subtle nuances that helped to distinguish them from other communities. As Buddhism spread outside of India and adapted to new cultures such as Persia, China, Myanmar, etc, these differences magnified and individual schools and traditions rose to the surface.

However, all traditions seek to answer the same basic question: how does one put the Buddha's
teachings into practice in such a way as to cross over from the existing state to the state of Nirvana. Because of the diversity and breadth of sutras, to say nothing of history and geography, various Buddhist schools will tend to center around a specific sutra, or sutras, and formulate practices and teachings around it.

Further, depending on the particular Buddhist culture and for complex historical reasons, sometimes these schools blend together practices and teachings, and sometimes they have distinct boundaries between one another. For example, in the Japanese *Tendai* school, elements of meditation, esoteric teachings and devotion can be found. On the other hand, Japanese Zen focuses primarily on seated meditation, while Japanese Pure Land focuses on Amitabha Buddha and the recitation of his name.

**What Next?**

Buddhism is a deep, rich tradition that can be somewhat daunting at first glance, but some general advice is in order:

1. Do not rush things. Buddhist teachings can be difficult to grasp at first, but through life experiences, they tend to validate themselves. One may also find themselves “rediscovering” a previous teaching in a new light.

2. Befriend the sutras. When reading sutras, it's important not to get bogged down in details. Instead, if you read sutras, you learn to “read between the lines” and notice certain patterns of teachings, etc. This is where the Dharma really comes alive.

3. Ask questions. Shakyamuni Buddha was once a seeking person, and asked many questions in his wanderings before he finally achieved Buddhahood.

4. Do not compare yourselves to other Buddhists. Everyone comes into this world with different conditions, burdens, and inclinations. There is no profit in comparing yourself to others.

Most of all, have fun. Buddhism is something you can learn at your own pace, apply to your life for greater peace of mind, and gradually transforms all who encounter it.

*Peace*