



# Teaching Buddhism in America

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

I have been thinking about the discussion we had yesterday on the problems you've encountered in teaching Buddhism in America. I would like to offer a few of my own thoughts on this subject. As we go along, I will also share with you the general outlines of one scheme I've worked out for pulling the Buddha's teachings together into a single, all-embracing whole.

In my view one of the major errors that is being made in the teaching of Buddhism here in the U.S. (and more broadly in the West) is the flat identification of Buddhadhamma (the teachings of the Buddha) with meditation, especially with insight meditation. I see the Dhamma as having a much more extensive range. It involves at least three essential components, which I would call right faith, right understanding, and right practice. The practical side is also extensive, and might be summed up in the famous verse of the Dhammapada (183): "To abstain from all evil, to cultivate the wholesome, and to purify one's mind: that is the instruction of the Buddhas." These three principles, stated so simply, are quite compressed. They can be elaborated in diverse ways at great length.

At the very root of all proper Dhamma practice, in my view, is proper faith, which is expressed by the act of going for refuge to the Triple Gem. By going for refuge, one reposes faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as one's supreme ideals. This expression of faith

should be grounded in understanding what the Three Gems represent. Thus faith, understanding, and practice are intricately interwoven.

Now, the importance of going for refuge can be grasped by raising the question: "What connects a person to the Buddhadhamma from one life to the next?" Is it keeping one's mind on the breath? Is it, when you hear sounds, noting "hearing, hearing"? Is it, when you're walking, noting, "right step, left step," or "lifting, putting down, lifting, putting down"? Of course, these practices are good. They lead to calm and insight, but on their own they are insufficient. What keeps one tied to the Buddha's teaching life after life, until one reaches the stage of irreversibility, is the act of sincerely and earnestly going for refuge to the Three Jewels: "*Buddham saranam gacchami, Dhammam saranam gacchami, Sangham saranam gacchami.*" Going for refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha is like placing a block of iron in one's heart, so that the magnet of the Dhamma will attract one as one fares on from life to life.

Right faith gives birth to right understanding. When one accepts the Buddha as the supremely Enlightened One, one opens oneself up to his disclosures on the human condition and on the fundamental principles at work behind the visible order of events. This means that one is prepared to accept his teachings on the basic ethical lawfulness of the cosmic process as it unfolds in human life and throughout all sentient existence. This lawfulness is expressed in the teaching on karma and its corollary, rebirth. The background to authentic Buddhist practice, even to the Four Noble Truths in their deeper dimensions, is this teaching of karma and rebirth. Yet

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*Excerpted from Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's remarks to the Community Dharma Leaders program at BCBS, June 29, 2006.*

many teachers find it embarrassing to talk about these principles that underlie the whole system. But to short-circuit the Dhamma in this way seems to me to be bargaining one's trust in the Buddha. It's almost as if one is half-guessing the Buddha as the Enlightened One.

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**Student:** When we finished our original training and various teachers were giving us advice, especially on how to teach with authenticity, one said, "Teach what you know to be true based upon your own experience. Do not teach what you do not know." For most lay teachers in the West, it is relatively uncommon to have personal knowledge of previous lives. This presents something of a conundrum. For those who don't have that personal knowledge, it becomes merely theoretical knowledge.

I would agree with this advice in so far as it pertains to one's role as a meditation instructor. I agree that when one is giving instructions in meditation, one shouldn't make pretensions to have experienced things that one has not personally experienced. However, if one is a Dhamma teacher, one has to teach more than what one experiences in meditation. One also has to explain the theoretical framework that underlies and supports the practice, and this is where these teachings on karma and rebirth enter in. If one is going to teach the Dhamma correctly, one has to teach on the basis of *sammādiṭṭhi*, right understanding or right view, which includes understanding cyclical existence: how past lives, the present life, and future lives are interwoven and penetrated by the law of karmic causation, which is above all a law of moral causation.



If one intends to teach Dhamma without teaching this, I have to say very frankly one is not teaching the Dhamma correctly; one is not teaching the Buddhadhamma. One is basically teaching Buddhist meditation practices uprooted from their original foundation, integrated with transpersonal psychology, and grounded on a secular humanism. I should add that I don't have any gripe with secular humanism as the foundation for our social and political life; in fact, I think that in any multi-religious, multi-cultural society, it is the best basis for political and social institutions. But we should not use secular humanism as a lens through which to interpret the Buddhadhamma. Let's instead take it on its own terms.

Very few of the monastics in Burma, Thailand, and Sri Lanka have recollections of previous lives, but when they teach the Dhamma, they explain the teachings of karma and rebirth. How is that? If we are going to understand our existence correctly, we have to take account, not just of the present—in what I call its vertical immediacy—but also of the ground out of which the present moment arises and against which it rests. This means that one has to locate the present in relation to its spatial and temporal horizons. If we want to understand this little

black dot here on the whiteboard, we can't just take this dot and separate it from the rest of the board. To understand this black dot, we have to see it in relation to the whole whiteboard: in relation to this point here, and that point there, and that point over there. If I'm going to explain to somebody what this black dot is all about, I'm going to have to situate it in relation to the whole board.

**Student:** Bhante, the principle of karma is a difficult one for a Westerner who doesn't have the background of Asian culture. Even from my own experience the idea of karma was so foreign that it was hard to get my mind around it. Over the years of doing my practice, I began to understand that karma is a central principle, but to introduce it to someone who hasn't had it in the culture....

One has to change the culture! The question is, do you capitulate on the Buddhadhamma to fit the culture, or do you provide an opportunity for the culture to be changed by the Buddhadhamma?

**Student: It's not that most Western teachers don't want to teach the true Buddhadhamma. We struggle to find graduated teachings to bring people along. With a new group of students, I'm a little reticent to begin laying out the cosmology in terms of rebirth. For me it's a question of timing.**

I agree that if somebody comes in and asks, "What is Buddhism about?" one shouldn't begin with a detailed lecture on Buddhist cosmology, or even on karma and rebirth. I myself would be reticent about introducing the teaching of karma and rebirth at the very beginning. I think it is best to let people see the clear existential truth in the Dhamma first, those aspects that are immediately visible. But when the time is ripe, explain the real Dhamma. One can lead them on to see that the same causal relations that explain suffering in the here and now can be extrapolated to explain the unsatisfactory nature of the cycle of existence. Don't be afraid to teach the real thing. Don't think that you're going to frighten people off by doing so. If you teach the Dhamma straight and direct, people will come to it and drink it up. They'll delight in the taste of the real Dhamma.

Many people turn to fundamentalist Christianity because they're teaching something straight, direct, and clear. Even though their doctrines are dogmatic and intellectually shaky, people are drawn to them because they are straightforward, clear, and ethically consistent. From what I have seen, much of Buddhism as presented in America has been ambiguous and apologetic. It's almost as though we are half-hiding the truth about the Dhamma, saying it's not really this, it's not really that. It's almost as if we are trying to put it across in a pleasant disguise, fitting it out in a nice skirt and blouse, with falsies and lots of makeup. With one side of our mouth we pay homage to Gotama the Buddha as our original teacher; with the other side, we make the teaching sound not much different from that of a transpersonal psychologist with a shaved head and saffron robes.

There is a popular saying nowadays: "The Buddha didn't teach Buddhism, he taught the Dhamma." This saying is a half-truth, and a misleading half-truth. Of course, the Buddha didn't teach "Buddhism," because that is a word of Western coinage, and it has come to

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include all the cultural and social phenomena that have arisen in the course of Buddhist history. But the saying is used to suggest that as long as you do a meditation practice stemming from the Buddha, you need not uphold a particularly Buddhist faith or subscribe to Buddhist doctrines: you're practicing Dhamma. And thus a follower of any religion—a Christian, Hindu, Jew, or Muslim—who practices insight meditation or mindfulness of breathing is just as much a "Dhamma-practitioner" as a Buddhist is. Now this is highly misleading. It tends to undermine and subvert the strong emphasis on "faith in the Tathāgata" and the acquisition of right view that we meet so often in the Buddha's discourses.

What the Buddha actually taught, according to the suttas, is called "the Dhamma and Discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata," and this is comprised of a doctrine and training unique to the Buddha, not found outside his system. Those of other faiths can certainly practice Buddhist meditation techniques, for "the Tathāgata doesn't have the closed fist of a teacher." Anybody who wants to make use of the Buddha's teachings can do so. They can take whatever they want from the tool kit of the Dhamma, and if it's beneficial, make use of it. But please don't say that there is no such thing as a distinctive Dhamma unique to the Buddha with its own unique goal. Don't say that one can have faith in another religious teacher or another religious doctrine and be practicing Dhamma in the same way, with the same intention, with the same view and conviction, as someone who has taken refuge in the Triple Gem.

**Student: Bhante, when I first came to the Insight Meditation Society, I was so disillusioned with organized religion that if there had been anything that really seemed religious, I probably would have left. But through years of practice, the levels of the teaching gradually reveal themselves as one sees experience match what the teaching says. The concept of karma over many lifetimes remains a difficult one for me, though.**

I'm aware that there have to be different approaches to the presentation of the Dhamma in the U.S., and I wouldn't want all to present the same "religious" front. I

appreciate the use of different “dharma doors” for people with different inclinations and aptitudes. For many who have turned against traditional religion, a non-religious presentation of the Dhamma will be more appealing. But this doesn’t mean that one should abandon the core insights at the heart of the teaching just to be more accommodating. Perhaps one can emphasize the “immediately visible” aspects of the Dhamma, while also keeping the “world-transcending” aspects in view.

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Of course, karma is a difficult subject to teach, especially in light of *anattā* (non-self). In the commentaries it is said that it isn’t easy to explain the technical details of how a rebirth takes place without a being that’s reborn.

**Student: Are you saying it would be unskillful of us to present the Dhamma and to not include teachings on karma?**

Of course, the teaching on karma and rebirth can be misused. I am hesitant to explain peoples’ personal troubles in terms of past life retribution. Generally, I prefer to seek concrete causes in this present life and to work out present-life solutions. It’s hard to give one simple recipe for how one should bring in the teaching on karma. When I teach an introductory class, I usually begin with the enlightenment of the Buddha, and then I have to teach truthfully what the Buddha realized on the night of his enlightenment. Am I going to hide, out of embarrassment, the fact that he recollected his previous lives and saw the death and rebirth of beings according to their karma? That would be a cover up, a *bowdlerized* version of the teaching.

And these knowledges weren’t unique to the Buddha himself. During the Buddha’s time, many of his disciples also realized these

knowledges, and there are indeed meditators even today who attain them. These knowledges don’t serve the purpose of entertainment, either, but contribute towards the destruction of the *āsavas* (taints, influxes, outflows). When one sees one’s many past lives, one sees how one repeatedly goes through the cycle of birth, aging and death; how one takes up so many false, transient identities, gives each one up, goes through growth, romance, relationships, separation, then decay and death. Everything appears as an ever-changing, shifting stream of appearances and forms. When one sees with the divine eye the death and rebirth of beings as a process governed by their karma, how they fall from higher realms to lower realms, and then rise up, and fall again, one obtains an extraordinarily vivid picture of *samsāra*. This strengthens the understanding of *dukkha*, the first noble truth, the truth of suffering, and thereby the understanding of all four noble truths.

That truth of suffering isn’t just about: “When I miss the bus, I get upset.” “When my children don’t follow my instructions, I get annoyed.” “When I stub my toe, I get angry.” “When I have to sing in front of a group, I feel embarrassed.” Of course, all that is *dukkha*, but the deeper meaning of *dukkha* is this ever-changing, empty flow of five aggregates, a changing kaleidoscopic of empty phenomena, the rolling on of bare “formations” (*sankhārā*) from life to life.



The scheme for arranging the Buddha’s teaching I would like to share with you today is based on a short text in the Anguttara Nikāya:

*Monks, abandon the unwholesome. I tell you it is possible to abandon the unwholesome. If it were not possible to abandon the unwholesome, I would not tell you to do so. But it is possible to abandon the unwholesome. Therefore, I tell you, abandon the unwholesome. (A 2:2.9)*



Unwholesome conduct is summed up in the ten unwholesome deeds of body, speech and mind, which are explained in many places (e.g., M 41). Then there are unwholesome states that constantly arise in the mind, in day-to-

day life, that have to be dealt with through meditation. One list is the sixteen *upakkilesas*, sometimes called the “minor defilements” of the mind (listed, e.g., in M 7), followed by the five hindrances, which we find in many texts. At the deeper level there are the three (in early lists) or four (in later lists) *āsavas* and the seven dormant tendencies (*anusaya*).

But I don’t want to dwell on the unwholesome types just now. This might reinforce the perception of Buddhism, especially Theravada Buddhism, as negative, over-obsessed with the dark side of human nature. You probably have students who have left the Protestant fold after being told, “All sinners are condemned to hell,” or who have left the Catholic church after hearing, “You are stamped with original sin.” If they turn to Buddhism and are immediately told, “You have seven underlying tendencies, four *āsavas*, five hindrances, three unwholesome roots, and ten fetters,” they’ll conclude: “Wow! Perhaps I should just settle for the one original sin.”

I suggest instead that we place more emphasis on developing what I call “the power of the wholesome,” taking joy in the wholesome. This Anguttara text encourages us to do just that:

*Develop the wholesome. It is possible to develop the wholesome. If it were not possible to develop the wholesome, I would not tell you to do so. But because it is possible to develop the wholesome, therefore, I tell you develop the wholesome. (A 2:2.9)*

I have taken the wholesome qualities and put them into three main categories, each governed by a different principle.

### ***The Bases of Merit***

The first group of wholesome deeds in Buddhism is called the ten bases of merit. The suttas speak of three bases of merit; the commentaries then extend the list to ten:

- 1) Giving or generosity (*dāna*).
- 2) Moral conduct (*sīla*).
- 3) Meditative development (*bhāvanā*). Here, meditative development is considered as a cause or basis for merit that leads to a favorable rebirth rather than as a means to enlightenment. Meditative development of this sort is considered principally as the devotional meditations, such as recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, or as the four divine abodes (*brahmavihāra*).

4) Reverence: toward those worthy of reverence, like honoring the Buddha, stupas, elders, venerable monks and nuns, and one’s parents.

5) Service: doing service to others, anything helpful and beneficial to others, any kind of self-sacrificial labor for the good and benefit of others. In a way, service is an extension of giving, but the commentaries make it an item in its own right.

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6) Sharing one’s merits with others. When one does meritorious deeds, one invites other beings to rejoice in one’s meritorious deeds. One can’t actually transfer the merits to others, but one mentally requests others to acknowledge one’s deeds and rejoice in the merits.

7) Rejoicing in the merit of others: When one sees or hears about others doing good deeds, one rejoices in those meritorious deeds, or tries to help them and support them in those meritorious deeds.

8) Listening to the Dhamma. In ancient times, this was the way one learned because there were no printed books. But today we can even include studying the Dhamma in this base of merit, if one is studying with the aim of understanding the Dhamma as a guide to life and not just as a subject of research.

9) Teaching the Dhamma.

10) Straightening out one’s view, which can be done by listening to the Dhamma, studying the Dhamma, reflection, and by insight meditation.

The Bases of Merit are governed by what I call “the principle of fortunate retribution,” the law that wholesome activities create wholesome karma, and this in turn leads to fortunate results in the future. Wholesome activities will lead to a fortunate rebirth, and to fortunate circumstances within that rebirth.

### ***The Perfections***

The perfections (*pāramis*) are ten qualities that one has to develop both in daily life and through meditation practice. These qualities are seen primarily as contributing to the development of a noble character, to the upliftment and transformation of character. They

enable one to bring one's character into accord with the noble ideals of the Dhamma. They are:

- 1) generosity,
- 2) moral conduct,
- 3) renunciation,
- 4) wisdom,
- 5) energy,
- 6) patience,
- 7) truthfulness,
- 8) determination,
- 9) loving-kindness and
- 10) equanimity.

The one who fulfills the *pāramis* to the ultimate degree is the perfectly enlightened Buddha (*sammā sambuddha*), who has become like a perfectly crafted diamond, with each *pārami* in balance with the others, just as

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each facet of the diamond is balanced with every other facet. Disciples fulfill the *pāramis* to different levels, but everyone who wants to reach the liberating path has to develop them to a sufficient degree. So these *pāramis* provide a useful scheme for understanding the wholesome qualities we need to implement in our daily lives in order to develop as worthy human beings in the noble Dhamma. The *pāramis*, in my scheme, represent “the principle of conservation of energy” in the spiritual domain. As one continually develops these qualities and pursues the goal of enlightenment by the practice of the *pāramis*, the energy inherent in wholesome qualities is conserved and accumulates from life to life until it is sufficient to permit a breakthrough to realization.

**Student: Is it true the *pāramis* are not mentioned together in any sutta?**

That is so. One doesn't find the *pāramis* mentioned in the old Nikāyas. They first appear in a later stratum of the Sutta Pitaka, in such texts as the *Cariyāpitaka* and the *Buddhavamsa*. The idea of the *pāramis* probably arose in the early Buddhist schools even before the rise of the Mahayana. This idea was originally introduced

to schematize the virtues a bodhisattva perfects to reach Buddhahood, but it was later extended to signify the qualities that have to be developed by any practitioner in order to reach any kind of enlightenment. The *pāramis* explain how our moral qualities build up an inner force from life to life, gain momentum, and then become integral components of our character.

### *The Aids to Enlightenment*

Now we come to the third group, the thirty-seven *bodhipakkhiyā dhammā*. These are thirty-seven states, factors, or aids to enlightenment, arranged in seven groups. The popular name for them now has become “wings to enlightenment,” though this is not literal. Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu has published a helpful book about them called *The Wings to Awakening*, which collects numerous sutta passages on each of the seven groups. These are the things that initially contribute to enlightenment, and then, at the most advanced stage, become the factors that precipitate the experience of enlightenment itself. I'm sure you're familiar with the basic groups: 1) the four foundations of mindfulness; 2) the four right efforts; 3) the four bases for spiritual potency; 4) the five faculties; 5) the five powers; 6) the seven factors of enlightenment; and 7) the eight factors of the noble eightfold path.

Of these thirty-seven factors, four occur repeatedly in the different lists: energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. It is these factors, rooted in faith or trust, that bring realization of the Dhamma. First they bring gradual insights into dependent origination, impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*). Then, at the peak of their development, they bring the breakthrough beyond the conditioned to the unconditioned—*nibbāna*.

**Student: I wonder if you could say more about the way faith is understood in Buddhist context. So often in a western context it's associated with belief and dogma, but I know in Buddhism there is also the sense of confidence.**

The Pali word *saddhā*, which I translate as “faith” rather than “confidence,” doesn't suggest belief in dogmas. I know some people who come from Christian backgrounds struggle with “faith” as a translation, but for me this word has a richer emotional nuance than confidence. In my translation scheme I use the word “confidence” to render the Pali word *pasāda*, which seems to fit well. *Pasāda* suggests the clarity and tranquility of



*Full moon and branches, Thanksgiving 2005.*

mind that come when one meets a teacher whom one trusts. I take *saddhā*, faith, to be faith in the Triple Gem, particularly in the Buddha as the Fully Enlightened One, the one who has fully understood the ultimate truths that bring the resolution of our existential predicament. It also means trusting confidence in the Dhamma as the teaching that discloses the truth about the existential predicament and its solution, as well as the path that leads to that resolution; in other words, the path that leads to enlightenment and liberation. And faith in the Sangha, that is trusting confidence in the community of noble ones, the confidence that those who have followed the teaching have personally gained wisdom and purified themselves of defilements.

Faith, as I see it, has three interwoven components: one is intellectual, one volitional, and one emotional. Of course, such separation is somewhat artificial, but with this qualification one can still speak about them separately. The intellectual component is a willingness to accept on trust the truths that the Buddha discloses, even though they might go contrary to our own habitual ways of understanding. It doesn't mean blind belief. The way we arrive at this faith is to first test and verify for ourselves certain things the Buddha teaches that come within range of our experience. So we try out the Buddha's teaching and find that it does bring well-being and happiness. It changes our lives for the better, so instead of being miserable, wretched, and degraded, we now feel wholesome, healthy, and strong, on the way to peace, bliss and liberation. So even though we cannot, right now, verify everything for ourselves, we have confidence that as we advance, when we develop

the required faculty of wisdom, we'll be able to validate the crux of the Dhamma and gain liberation from all suffering. That is the intellectual component of faith.

The volitional component means that faith acts upon the will, motivating one to undertake the training, to make a resolution, a commitment, a determination to follow this path without turning away, and to follow this path, not only in this life, but as long as it takes to reach the goal.

The emotional component of faith is love and devotion directed towards the Buddha, by reason of his exalted, incomparable qualities; towards the Dhamma, by reason of its beauty, purity and profundity; and towards the Sangha, by reason of the excellent qualities of its members.

To summarize briefly, I encourage you all to bring at least as much attention to the cultivation of what is wholesome as to the abandoning of the unwholesome. And you may find it a more complete and skillful means when teaching the Dhamma to others. I have sketched a very broad outline of how this might be done, and invite you to continue your own investigation of the teachings with clarity and diligence.

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*Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi is a Buddhist monk originally from New York City. He lived altogether for 23 years in Sri Lanka. His publications include several translations from the Pali Nikayas and most recently an anthology, In the Buddha's Words (Wisdom 2005). He currently resides at Bodhi Monastery in northwest New Jersey.*