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An Introduction to
Mental Development

*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato
sammāsambuddhassa*

Homage to the Blessed One, the Worthy One,
the fully awakened Buddha

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Preface

This book offers a brief and rather technical summary of the doctrine of the Buddha. There will be little inspirational talk. The teachings of the Buddha have proven to be an effective way towards peace of mind over and over again, so when you pick up this book, you probably already know what you are looking for. This book will provide a solid ground for actual meditation practice.

Almost all chapters of the text (except for the last one) follow some core concepts of the Buddhist doctrine, like the marks of existence, the Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, etc. This part introduces a lot of Buddhist terminology, including its *Pāli* terms, and then proceeds to explain those core concepts in my own words. The second part, which consists of the last chapter, is an introduction to meditation practice, which, while based on the concepts discussed in the first part, is mostly an account of own experience.

The book will introduce a lot of information on very few pages. You may get overwhelmed, especially by the sheer mass of new terminology and *Pāli* language. Do not get discouraged by that! Key concepts will be repeated, and you can still get back and re-read passages that you feel you did not understand properly. In fact, this book started out as some kind of “quick reference”, so you might as well use it as one. As in every quick reference, concepts will not be explained in great depth, so you should consult more authoritative works in order to fill in the blanks I left. Some starting points can be found in the bibliography.

All *Pāli* terms that are used in the book are explained somewhere in the text. Use the glossary or the index to look up things that seem unclear. This should not happen when reading the book back to back, but may be the case when jumping in somewhere in the middle.

Finally note that reading inspiring books about Buddhism is like reading inspiring books about riding a bicycle—you can read lots of them and

really enjoy yourself, but you will still not be able to ride a bicycle. Its is exactly the same thing with meditation. This book is intended to give you enough instructions on the path of meditation to keep you engaged for a while, but sitting down and practicing is something you have to do on your own.

Nils M Holm, January 2021

The Buddha

From a historic perspective the *Buddha* was born into an aristocratic (*khattiya*) family in *Lumbinī* in today's Nepal. He was known as *Siddhattha Gotama* (Sanskrit: *Siddhārtha Gautama*) before he left his home and became an ascetic. Later he was also known as the *Sakkamuni* (Sanskrit: *Śākyamuni*), which means “the sage of the *Sakkas*”, where *Sakka* (*Śākya*) is the name of the clan to which his family belonged. The exact time of his birth is not known and different sources deviate from each other by multiple centuries. A common consensus is, though, that the Buddha was born around 560 BCE.

At the age of 29 he left his home, became an ascetic, and studied meditation under multiple teachers, most notably *Āḷāra Kālāma* and *Uddaka Rāmaputta*. His search for liberation from suffering (*dukkha*) lasted for six years and ended when he attained full awakening (*nibbāna*) at the age of 35. He became then known as the *Tathāgata*—the “Thus-Gone”. This is also the name that he often used to refer

to himself. For the rest of his life he traveled the Gangetic Plain and taught the *dhamma*, the universal law which he had discovered.

The Buddha died and attained *parinibbāna* (final liberation from the wheel of existence) in 480 BCE at a location known as Vulture's Peak in *Kusinārā* in today's India.

During his 45 years of wandering and teaching he covered an area of about 300x600 kilometers on foot and taught the *dhamma* to countless people, of which many attained full awakening themselves and became *arahants* (Noble Ones or saints).

Buddhism

Buddhism is one of the most wide-spread religions these days. It is notable not only because it is agnostic – it neither promotes nor denies the existence of a “higher power” – but also because it gives very clear instructions on attaining the promised goal of its practice: complete liberation from suffering, *nibbāna* (Sanskrit: *nirvāṇa*). Hence Buddhism may also be considered to be a philosophy, but one that puts great emphasis on direct experience instead of abstract contemplation.

After the death of the Buddha the Buddhist doctrine was orally transmitted in verse form from generation to generation. It was probably first written down around 30 BCE in Sri Lanka. These first texts formed the basis of what would later be known as the *tipiṭaka*, the “three baskets”, because palm-leaf manuscripts were kept in baskets. The *tipiṭaka* is also known as the *Pāli Canon*, because the first texts were composed in a (now ancient) Indian language called *Pāli*.

Even as Buddhism fragmented and various denominations evolved, the *Pāli* Canon remained a common basis on which all schools agreed.

Around 100 BCE *Mahāyāna* (“great vehicle”) *Buddhism* came to existence, which also accepts the doctrine of the *Pāli* Canon, but extends it with lots of own ideas, such as putting great emphasis on the *bodhisatta* path, which aims to liberate all beings and not only the one doing the practice. *Mahāyāna* Buddhism also adds a lot of cosmology and mythology, which seems to be a stark contrast to the predominantly matter-of-fact and straight-forward nature of the original doctrine.

Around 760 CE, about 1200 years after the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*, a new branch of Buddhism, the *Vajrayāna* (“diamond vehicle”) school, appeared and claimed to teach the “secret doctrine” of the Buddha. The appearance of this school can be regarded as the beginning of a return to the esoteric or tantric practice that was wide-spread before the Buddha’s time. Esoteric Buddhism adopts the

mythological aspects of *Mahāyāna* and in addition emphasizes practices like repetition of mantras, chanting, ritual gestures (mudras), and meditation on mandalas.

The Buddha himself seemed to be opposed to any esotericism (secret teachings), as he says in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, II.25:

*The Tathāgata has no “teacher’s fist”
[in which some truths are held back].*

Most Buddhist schools of the present time diverge from *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, while the school that teaches the original *Pāli* Canon is now known as *Theravāda*, the “doctrine of the elders”.

Theravāda Buddhism adheres strictly to the doctrine laid out in the *tipiṭaka*, but still encourages critical thought. New commentaries are added to the corpus of teachings even today.

This book discusses *Theravāda* Buddhism.

The Marks of Existence

The “three marks” or “three defining qualities” (*tilakkhaṇa*) are characteristics that are inherent in any form of existence:

1. impermanence (*anicca*)
2. suffering (*dukkha*)
3. absence of self (*anatta*)

Anicca, impermanence, means that everything is in a perpetual state of flux and nothing ever remains the same. Everything that comes to existence must fade away, everything that is born must die eventually. This is very obvious when watching a flower during the course of a year. It springs to life from a grain in the ground, grows and thrives, blooms, and then withers away, dies, and decays to dust. At what point is there a solid, unchanging “flower”?

Other phenomena seem to be more solid, like trees, houses, and mountains, but, given enough time, they too will disintegrate and nothing but dust will remain of them. It is tempting to say

that these phenomena are solid during the lifetime of a human being, but when watching closely, this turns out to be a superficial view. Trees grow new leaves in spring and shed them in autumn. Houses get repainted, fixed, and restored. The trees on mountains change, and rocks move. The process of change is slower, but present never the less.

The *mind (citta)* of the human being in particular is impermanent, even though it often feels like a solid object to which all the suffering in the world happens. But even the mind is in a constant state of change. At one moment it is in a neutral state and in the next moment it is in a happy, sad, or angry state. Even the *views (ditṭhi)* it holds are subject to change. It may hold on to some specific view very firmly and then something happens that questions that view and then the view becomes stale. At one time mind is busy with one thing and some time later it is busy with something different. Like flowers, trees, and mountains, it is a phenomenon that changes perpetually.

In the case of the mind this may be particularly hard to accept, because it *seems* to feel solid and our entire culture is based on the idea that “personality” is a solid entity that must be protected and cared for.

Dukkha, suffering, arises when reality disagrees with expectations. This is particularly true when something that is expected to be solid turns out to be a fleeting phenomenon, which *everything* is. Things wear down and break, loved ones grow old and die, health and fitness deteriorate. It is not the phenomenon itself that causes suffering, but the expectation that is linked to the phenomenon. Some of these expectations even anticipate change, like the expectation that

- something we want will happen
- something we do not want will happen
- something we want will go away
- something we do not want will go away

In this case, suffering is caused by uncertainty, which can also be regarded as an instance of impermanence. If phenomena were solid,

worrying about the way in which they change would not be necessary. Because mind anticipates change, it accepts the validity of impermanence (*anicca*), but it still refuses to acknowledge all the consequences of this cognition. It knows that change exists, but cannot fully accept it, hence suffering arises.

Anatta, the *absence of self* (literally *not-self*), means that there is no *self*, *substance*, *soul*, or “solid core” in phenomena. While *anicca* declares that everything, even the personality, is a fleeting phenomenon, *anatta* states that the “sense of self” or “ego” that appears to be present in every living being is merely an illusion. Of course there is perception, feeling, and cognition, but these are fleeting phenomena like everything else. There is no solid “core” to which all the feeling, perceiving, and thinking happens or who “does” any of that.

The assumption that the “self” exists causes suffering, because change – and hence suffering – seems to happen to “somebody”. The assumption that this “somebody” exists is only

a belief, though, a *wrong view* (*micchā-ditṭhi*) that will be questioned and finally removed by Buddhist practice. This idea may sound very foreign to someone who is deeply rooted in our culture, where one's personality is a central ingredient of everyday life. "Giving up" this ingredient seems unintuitive and counter-productive, because how can you live a fulfilled life without a personality? However, recognizing *anatta* does not mean to give up your personality, but only the *belief* that there is a solid core in that personality. It means to give up a belief in something that does not exist anyway. All that the belief does is to cause suffering. There is no solid core to begin with, and has never been.

The Four Noble Truths

1. There is suffering (*dukkha*).
2. Suffering has a cause (*samudaya*).
3. Suffering ceases (*nirodha*).
4. There is a path leading to the cessation of suffering (*nirodhagāminī paṭipadā*).

The Four Noble Truths (*cattāri-ariya-saccāni*, mostly just called *sacca* or *saccāni* – truths) are probably the briefest possible summary of the teachings of the Buddha.

(1) *Dukkha* has already been discussed as the first of the three marks of existence (*tilakkhaṇa*). All living beings suffer during their lifetimes. The Buddhist doctrine puts great emphasis on old age and death, most probably because these affect everyone and are unavoidable, but *dukkha* is not limited to those. There are many kinds of suffering, big and small, that can afflict living beings. The first truth includes all of them. The first step towards liberation from suffering is to acknowledge that suffering *exists*.

(2) The origin (*samudaya*) of suffering is *craving* (*taṇhā*, literally *thirst*). Even this has been covered in the chapter on the marks of existence. Every form of suffering is the result of some craving: for something to be attained, for something to remain the way it is, or for something to cease. Without craving, there is no suffering.

The interesting lesson here is that suffering has a *cause*. It is not something that is inflicted upon us by some force beyond our understanding and not even something beyond our control. Craving originates in us, and it can cease in us.

(3) Because craving causes suffering, its *cessation* (*nirodha*) causes the cessation of suffering at the same time. Craving ceases all the time, for example when the desire that caused the craving is fulfilled. However, such a cessation is not permanent and very soon the next desire will arise, gain momentum, and turn into craving, and then into suffering.

The interesting point, though, is that *taṇhā*, like all phenomena, is of fleeting nature. It will go

away eventually, and this is something that can be observed, understood, and *trained*.

(4) The *path* (*paṭipadā*, but more commonly *magga*) that trains mind in such a way that craving will be identified, understood, and then avoided or overcome, is the path that leads to the cessation of suffering (*dukkhanirodhagāminī paṭipadā*) and therefore eventually to *nibbāna*, the complete liberation from the ailments of human existence. With a mind (*citta*) well trained, *taṇhā* will lose its grip. The path that leads to this goal is the Noble Eightfold Path (*aṭṭhaṅgika-ariya-magga*), as formulated by the Buddha after his full awakening. This path is the core of the Buddhist practice and will be described in detail in a subsequent chapter.

The Unwholesome Roots

Craving (*taṇhā*) originates from three roots called the *unwholesome roots* (*akusala-mūla*, often just *mūla*, roots). These roots are:

1. greed (*lobha*)
2. hatred (*dosa*)
3. delusion (*moha*)

Because the *mūla* are the roots of craving, they are also the roots of suffering. All suffering emanates from them. Of course “greed”, “hatred”, and “delusion” are strong words, and it might be tempting to say that there are less extreme states of mind that also cause suffering. However, the roots are the foundations of all these “lesser” states. The lesser states grow from the unwholesome roots like leaves from the root of a young tree. When you let the leaves grow or even nourish them, they will eventually turn into a strong and massive tree.

All craving can be divided into three categories:

- the desire for something to arise – greed
- the desire for something to cease – hatred
- the imagination of something being different – delusion

All three go hand in hand. The wish for something to arise may exist in combination with the wish for something to go away. If neither happens, the illusion that things are different may come up. Of course craving is not always strong, but it can always be traced back to the unwholesome roots (*mūla*). For example, wanting to go shopping is greed, and resenting having to do the daily chores is hatred. Imagining to do something else or having an internal dialog while doing the chores is delusion. Yelling at someone is obviously hatred, flirting with someone is obviously greed, and thinking that you are a person whose wishes have to be fulfilled is delusion.

The three unwholesome roots are deeply ingrained in our being and their expression is

often very subtle. When you shift position on your chair, it is hatred, because the previous position was uncomfortable and you disliked it. Having a scratch is greed, because it feels good when the itching subsides. Playing a song in your mind is delusion, because it distracts you from the things around you. The process that makes you aware of these processes is called *insight* (*vipassanā*), and it is a central part of Buddhist practice. It will be described in detail in the later chapters.

Each unwholesome root (*akusala-mūla*) is paired with a corresponding *wholesome root* (*kusala-mūla*), which is expressed as the negation or absence of an unwholesome root:

1. *alobha* – non-greed
2. *adosa* – non-hatred
3. *amoha* – non-delusion

The wholesome roots are expressed as negatives, because wholesomeness can only be attained by eradicating the *akusala-mūla*.

The Three Jewels

*Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*

I take refuge in the Buddha
I take refuge in the dhamma
I take refuge in the sangha

The Three Jewels (*tiratana*) are the *Buddha*, the *dhamma*, and the *saṅgha*. *Dhamma* is a word with many meanings, including “law”, “natural phenomenon”, “doctrine”, and “mind object”. It is often used to refer to the teachings of the Buddha, but it also denotes a natural law that is expressed as the Four Noble Truths (*sacca*).

The *saṅgha* in the context of the Three Jewels indicates the community of the disciples that have attained the *higher path* (*ariya-magga*), i.e. those people who have progressed so far on the path that the first fetters (*saṃyojana*) of existence have been shed. These people, and the *arahant* (saints) in particular, serve as a role model in Buddhism, as well as an affirmation

that the path can be walked all the way to the ultimate goal of liberation from suffering.

In the more general sense *saṅgha* denotes the community of Buddhist monks (*bhikkhu*), or in an even broader sense even the community of all practitioners of Buddhism, including the *lay practitioners* (*upāsaka*). When taking refuge, though, *saṅgha* refers to the *ariya-puggala*, the attainers of the transcendental path.

A person “becomes a Buddhist” by reciting the *Triple Refuge* (*tisarāṇa*, printed at the beginning of this chapter) three times with the serious intent to follow the Noble Eightfold Path (*magga*). This can be done in a monastery, in the presence of another practitioner, or in solitude. There are no formalities, it is the intent alone that is important.

Becoming a Buddhist does not require any belief (*diṭṭhi*) except, maybe, a little bit in the beginning – just enough to motivate you to gather further information. Buddhist practice is not built upon a belief in a higher power or future wellbeing. It is a doctrine that can be

tried and experienced. In the beginning you just follow the rules, then you begin to understand how the rules improve the practice, and eventually you begin to experience the fruit of the practice.

The faith (*saddhā*) that Buddhist practice requires is *confidence* in the person of the Buddha, in the truths expressed in the *dhamma*, and in the *saṅgha* of the *ariya-puggala* who successfully brought the *dhamma* to fruition.