

Why Buddhism?

Why Theravada?

Theravada, Mahayana, Hinayana

Three Essays

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Why Buddhism?

From *The Buddhist Path* July 1967

There is a periodical called '*Which?*' which provides guidance to the shopper as to the best bargains among the various branded wares in the market—from cars to contraceptives, from sausages to sewing-machines. Nowadays people will shop around for anything, even a religion or a philosophy of life. There is plenty of choice: Christianity in 57 varieties, Communism, Humanism, Spiritualism, Alcoholism, Drugism, Beatleism, not to mention those steady favourites Don't-knowism and Couldn't-care-lessism. Since every ism usually has several schisms, the selection is practically unlimited. Catholicism with a capital C has given place to Catholicism with a small c. The din is appalling as the siren strains of the Admen compete with the manic screams of the Madmen—and sometimes the two are hard to tell apart. Among the

wares on offer is something called Buddhism. This too comes in several brands including Instant Zen.

All these things must be seen for what they are: manifestations of *dukkha*. We find life unbearable, and so we drug ourselves—with spirits, sex, LSD, speed or even horror films. We go off into reveries and fantasies of all kinds. We are willing to face anything and everything in life but ourselves. The short answer to the question “Why Buddhism?” is simply this: because it was Gotama Buddha who taught men how to come to terms with the nasty mess inside their own minds. That is really the only problem we have.

Youth, we are told today, is in revolt. The younger generation faced with the atom bomb and all the horrors of respectable society bequeathed by its elders is not going to pray. It has decided to “drop out.” This is just one of those half-truths and quarter-truths we all put up, and is no more valid than any one of the other excuses put up by people of all ages. Of course the world is in a mess, but it always has been, because man is unenlightened.

Of course it is not true to say with some that our present-day troubles are due to decline of religion, just like that. But the crisis in the churches adds to the general moral confusion, and Rome burns while the Pope ponders the pill. If Christianity suffers from a fatal credibility gap, the thoughts of Mao and Kosygin seem scarcely more relevant, while the loudly proclaimed optimism of the Humanists begins to sound suspiciously like what it really is: a desperate whistling in the dark. Besides, our so-called “scientific humanists” are extraordinarily “selective” in their facts. For there is a whole dimension to life beyond the reach of computers of any conceivable kind. Mind is more wonderful than matter, and far less understood. As the facts of extra-sensory perception, “spiritual” healing and the rest become more and more generally known, the total inadequacy of conventional science to explain the world becomes almost as glaringly obvious as is that of conventional religion.

And this is where Buddhism comes in. Biologists as well as bishops need to do their homework better here. We have one reason—and a very good and proper reason—for preferring Buddhist to Western schools of thought: it provides more adequate and credible explanations of the world we live in and of man's existential dilemma. Yet this, though true and admirable, is by no means enough. For Buddhism, taken purely intellectually, does not do the patient much real good. Buddhism is not something to believe but something to do. It is a do-it-yourself religion, although, as has been pointed out by one bhikkhu, this means “Do it yourself and not “Do it your SELF.”

The Dhamma is described in the following terms: “*Svākkhāto Bhagavatā Dhammo, sandiṭṭhiko, akāliko, ehipassiko, opanayiko, paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhī ti.*” This means “Well proclaimed is the Dhamma of the Blessed One, to be seen for oneself, timeless, inviting inspection, leading onwards (to Nibbāna), to be realised by the wise, each one for himself.”

Every word of this characterisation merits the most careful consideration. Thus *sandiṭṭhiko*, “to be seen for oneself,” implies the Right View (*sammā diṭṭhi*) which is the first step of the Path: a view unclouded by greed, hate and delusion. *Akāliko*, “timeless,” denotes that the Dhamma is not in time, is not affected by time, and also that its effect is immediate. And its message is as much for this age as for any other. The idea of seeing is again expressed in the term *ehipassiko*, derived from the imperative “come and see.” The doctrine is open to inspection and examination. We are not being offered a pig in a poke. *Opanayiko* means “leading onwards” (to the goal). Finally this Dhamma is something to be realised or experienced (*veditabbo*) by the wise (*viññūhi*), each for himself (*paccattaṃ*). By treading the Path we can come to know, of our own experience, the truth of the Buddha's teaching. None can say fairer than that.

There are other, and good, spiritual paths which can bring those who tread them to much happiness. Whether they lead him right out of saṃsāra, to the Beyond of Suffering, is a different matter which we shall not consider here. Within the Buddhist field too there are different schools of thought. The claim of Theravada Buddhism as taught in the Pali Canon rests on the directness of its approach and its penetration to the very heart of reality.

The West is still preoccupied with the old conflict of science and religion and whether these can be reconciled, or whether indeed science leaves any room for religion at all. In the terms of this conflict Buddhism cannot be identified with either science or religion as conventionally conceived, though, if we define religion as “a way of salvation” then obviously Buddhism is a religion. But it is better viewed as the true scientific basis underlying all religions. If that is so, then while other paths may lead to the same goal, they are detours. Buddhism, and Theravada Buddhism in particular, is the direct way.

Why Theravada?

From *The Buddhist Path* September 1967

The Theravada, or Teaching of the Elders, is the form of Buddhism based on the Pali Canon, as taught in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, and its claim is that it represents the original teaching of the Buddha in its purity. There may be—indeed there are—arguments about this, but it is difficult to resist the conclusion that in the Pali Canon we have, to all appearances, the only authentic record of what Gotama the Buddha actually said. And if the Pali language in which his words are preserved is not quite identical with his own language of discourse—as most, but not quite all, Western scholars seem to agree—there is certainly no reason at all to suppose that he spoke Sanskrit, still less any other of the languages of the various Mahayana canons.

More important is the fact that we have here a system of practice which leads directly to the goal: the world's finest mental therapy.

For that is what Buddhism is. The Buddha diagnosed our ills and prescribed the cure. Here in the West we sometimes describe the Theravada as Basic Buddhism. This is fair enough; though the term can be interpreted in more than one way. It can be taken to mean that here we have all the fundamentals, all that is really necessary, so that whatever is additionally taught in other schools is ultimately superfluous; or it can be taken to mean that this must be learnt and mastered first before one goes on to the “higher flights” of Mahayana, etc.

The former supposition represents the Theravada standpoint, properly speaking. Its validity will not be argued here. What about the latter view? The implications of this view are actually rather interesting and may prove disconcerting to some. Let us examine the resultant situation, for which purpose a little historical knowledge is necessary.

Mahayanists in general, apart from some scholars in quite modern times, have normally had virtually no direct knowledge of the Theravada tradition. What they refer to as “Hinayana” is in fact a scholastic tradition by no means totally identical with Theravada, and Mahayana polemics have therefore little or no relevance to this, being simply concerned with flogging the long-since dead horse of the Sarvāstivāda.

The strength of the Mahayana (if one can generalise about such a vast range of proliferating traditions) lies in its recognition of the provisional nature of certain truths enunciated in the “Basic” scriptures. Its corresponding weakness, even in the East, lies in a frequent failure to appreciate that these provisional truths must first be thoroughly mastered before they are

discarded. While it is useless to carry a raft after you have crossed the stream, it is premature to throw it away before you get to the water.

It was perhaps unfortunate for some Oriental countries that they received Buddhism in a purely Mahayana form, which must inevitably make it extremely difficult to get started. For Western Buddhists to ignore the opportunity to lay a firm foundation by training in the Theravada way is folly.

But we can go further. Granted that one is interested in Mahayana, how far then should one first proceed on the Theravada path? The answer must surely be: until the moment of crossing the stream or—to use a canonical variant of the metaphor—the moment of “entering the stream.” This is the moment at which for the first time the profundity of the Dhamma is truly intuited and the fictitious nature of “self” is clearly perceived. After this there is no turning back, no relapsing into “states of woe,” though the way ahead may still be long and possibly arduous. He who has reached this point is no longer a “worldling” (*puthujjana*), and ultimate Enlightenment is assured. It is really only at this stage that one can with certainty judge the relevance of this or that “higher” doctrine. But the prospects which appear beyond this point will not be considered here; they are in the true sense esoteric.

”Stream-entry” is not an unattainable goal, though obviously it requires perseverance—and humility. And its attainment or otherwise can be objectively measured. Self-deception in this respect is possible; deception of the teacher is not. When the insight of the Path has been truly gained, the possibility of infallibly discriminating right doctrine will for the first time be given. Likewise the true meaning of “non-discrimination” will be grasped. The “Faculties” of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom will at this stage be so developed that they can no longer be overthrown by their opposites. From “Faculties” they will have become “Powers.”

Ancient Oriental polemics have produced—in the name, incidentally, of “non-discrimination”—a spurious dichotomy between Hinayana, or “Lesser Vehicle,” and Mahayana, or “Greater Vehicle,” and the Theravada teaching has been arbitrarily and illegitimately equated in modern times with the “Hinayana.” Let us drop these terms, which merely reflect long-defunct controversies.

Theravada, Mahayana, Hinayana

From *Sangha*, March 1970

Theravada, the form of Buddhism based on the Pali scriptures which prevails in Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand, is sometimes referred to as “Basic Buddhism.” This can be interpreted, according to taste, in various ways. We would claim that it represents the original teaching of Gotama the Buddha, free from later additions or modifications. Others would regard it as merely the “groundwork” on which higher metaphysical superstructures can be erected. There are several of these superstructures in different Mahayana schools. Let us look at this situation.

The term Mahayana, meaning “great vehicle” (or career), was coined in contrast to another term, Hinayana, meaning “lesser vehicle” (or career), and Hinayana is the label commonly applied by Mahayanists to the Theravada. Strictly speaking, this is incorrect, as the Theravada school was probably scarcely known to the early Mahayanists who coined the term. What they had in mind were certain other ancient schools, more particularly the Sarvāstivāda, whose views differed comparatively little from the Theravada. But these schools have died out, and Oriental Theravadins now often accept the label Hinayana themselves. However, we shall not argue about labels. We can, if we like, refer (without implying any value-judgment) to the Narrow Path and the Expanded Path.

Our claim for the Narrow Path of Theravada would be that in the Pali scriptures we find a way that works—that leads to the goal of Nibbāna (or Nirvana in the Sanskrit form favoured by Mahayanists)—and that those scriptures contain all the essential features of the original doctrine proclaimed by the Buddha for the purpose of attaining that goal. There may be, here and there in the Pali scriptures, some passages which derive from later developments, but there is no evidence that non-Pali sources contain anything vital that is missing from those scriptures.

If this is so, then in the Pali Canon we have all we need for the attainment of Nirvana (let us, in this article, use the well-known Sanskrit form of this word). Such being the case, it would seem unnecessary to look any further afield. To say this is not, of course, to argue that Mahayanists cannot attain Enlightenment. Because the Mahayana scriptures contain things not

included in the Pali Canon, this does not mean they are wrong, or useless. All teachings in the form of doctrinal formulations or prescribed practices are—and here all Buddhists of whatever school would agree in principle—fundamentally nothing but *upāyas* or “skilled devices.” Any method that gets us moving on the right path is justified. The Truth lies beyond words and theories, and whatever we can say about it is only relatively correct or provisional—a finger pointing at the moon. Some of the “skilled devices” of the Mahayana schools may seem unnecessary to one type of mind, and yet be very helpful to another.

Historically, in very general terms, Buddhism spread in the form of the “Narrow Path” to the south and south-east of India. It was taken in the form of the “Expanded Path” to the countries to the north and north-east. When, in modern times, it was introduced to the West, this was at first mainly in the “Narrow” form, chiefly in the first place from Sri Lanka. Only considerably later were different forms of the “Expanded Path” imported, mainly from Tibet in the form of Tantrayāna (often more or less diluted, or reinterpreted, by Theosophy), and rather later again from Japan in the form of Zen. These are the only three paths (out of various possible ones) which have any considerable following in Western countries. It may be noted in passing that in Japan itself, the “Pure Land” school of Shin has far more followers than Zen, not to mention some of the “neo-Buddhist” schools which often have only tenuous links with the original or even the ‘Expanded’ teaching. Incidentally, Japan also has the Shingon teaching which has much in common with the Tantricism of Tibet, and yet has aroused little interest in the West. Could it be because Shingon lacks the sexual symbolism of Tibetan Tantra? Perish the thought!

Doctrines apart, there is one thing that accounts in large measure for the preference some people have for the “Expanded Path”: it tends to be more colourful and—apparently—more immediately emotionally satisfying than Theravada. It makes the kind of appeal which, in Christianity, Roman Catholicism makes in contrast to some of the more dour Protestant sects. Theravada is seen as dry and “doctrinaire”—nor does it give a clear picture of the goal. It has been compared by one writer to a truncated cane, like a mountain whose lower slopes are visible but whose peak is shrouded in mist. Zen might seem like the peak of Fuji-San rising clear into the sky, its lower slopes invisible. Yet somehow, if one can only get into the right state of mind, one would find oneself instantaneously transported to the top! (Actually, one is there already...) To the Western follower of Tibetan Buddhism, perhaps, the even loftier peak of Everest might appear out of the mists, and transport would be forthcoming in wondrous wise if one managed to cope with certain mystic rituals... These descriptions are, of course, libellous. They merely

indicate how the three paths may appear to the “ignorant worldling” who contemplated trying one of them.

To such a worldling, the path of Theravada may seem too much like hard work, and the goal itself may appear far too uncertain. The other paths seem to offer both more exciting and, at the same time, perhaps easier possibilities. But after all, it is of nature of “skilled devices” that they are not what they seem. They are in fact “educational toys,” as a famous Mahayana parable puts it. A father induced his children to leave a burning house by showing them the most fascinating toys outside.

Let us not indulge, then, in polemics. And let us remember that, when Mahayana scriptures speak in superior tones, as they often do, about the adherents of the “Lesser Vehicle,” they are referring not to the existing Theravada but to the long-extinct Sarvāstivādins and others who may, in fact, have deserved at least some of their strictures, and who probably perished as a result in the deserts of scholasticism—the likely outcome of too much speculation and too little meditation.

The Mahayana schools have a wide range of scriptures, scarcely any of which claim historical “authenticity” in the mundane sense. They presuppose some supplementary higher revelation. While this may at one level be regarded as pious fiction, we must realise that these writings are, after all, the work of advanced spiritual teachers and the result of profound meditation. If they are fiction, it is only in the sense of “skilled devices,” not vulgar fraud! Their claim is—and whether true or not, it is a serious claim—that they represent more profound aspects of truth than those revealed in the “Hinayana” scriptures, which they transcend but do not abrogate. A Christian writer called one such work “The New Testament of Higher Buddhism,” and though we may not accept the claim, this gives a rough idea of the intention.

The main Mahayanist innovation is the exaltation of the Bodhisattva ideal above that of the Arahant. Coupled with this is the proclamation of wisdom and compassion as the “twin pillars” of the Mahayana. But before considering this further, let us briefly look at the Theravada scheme of things. Enlightenment is to be gained by treading the noble eightfold path, which comprises three sections: wisdom, morality and meditation (or mind-training). A measure of mundane wisdom is necessary before one can even begin to tread the path, but the final fruition of supermundane wisdom can only come when the ethical and meditative sections of the path have been perfected. Thus the goal can in a sense be termed the “wisdom gone beyond” or, in Sanskrit, Prajñāpāramitā. This is, of course, the name given to a voluminous class of Mahayana

sutras. Now, while it might be rash to equate the two “wisdoms” too hastily, it would be equally rash to distinguish sharply between them. We at least will not attempt to do so.

An article in *The Buddhist Path* some time ago discussed the Bodhisattva (or rather “Bodhisatta”) ideal from the Theravada standpoint. In Theravada, the term Bodhisatta is applied, especially in the Jātakas, to Gotama before his Enlightenment—he had to perfect various qualities before he was able to become a Buddha. It is also suggested that the original Sanskrit form of the word was not *bodhisattva* or “enlightenment-being” but *bodhisakta* or “one intent on enlightenment.” Either derivation of the Pali is possible, but it goes to show that the current Sanskrit may be based on a misconception.

In any case, the Mahayanist argument is that the ideal of gaining enlightenment for oneself is selfish, and that the Bodhisattva who seeks to save all beings represents a higher ideal than the Arahant. But since an Arahant is by definition “self-less,” this scarcely holds water. However, we have to consider the possibility that at the time when this view became prominent there may have been many spurious “arahats” whose “enlightenment” was merely self-delusion. Such people have been seen in the West, too, in this day and age.

And the authors of the Prajñāpāramitā scriptures never tired of reminding would-be Bodhisattvas that though they were pledged to “save all beings,” there were in reality no beings to save! It is perhaps fair comment, based on some experience in the West, to say that spurious “arahats,” who generally keep themselves to themselves, are likely to be less of a nuisance than spurious “bodhisattvas” who go round preaching strange doctrines of their own, and who are anyway using their outward activities as an excuse for not “looking within” where the real trouble lies!

And the trouble, of course, with both, is conceit. Far too many Western people (certainly more than one might have believed possible) have snapped up a few “Buddhist” phrases (generally at second-hand). Then, perhaps having had some “experience” which they have misunderstood, they have jumped to the conclusion that they are “enlightened” or nearly so. Whether they then believe themselves to be Arahants or Bodhisattvas is of little importance. On the other hand, it is another matter whether there are any genuine Arahants or Bodhisattvas about in the West today. Who knows? In any case, such people would never recognise them... Incidentally, Zen, which is technically Mahayana school, seems a bit mistrustful of Bodhisattvas. It aims at self-help, and Hui-neng declared that we should take the Bodhisattva vow to “liberate all beings” in our own minds!

Let us return to “Basic Buddhism.” The third section of the Path consists of three steps: right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. That some effort is needed is surely obvious, though some “Zenful” characters in the West have been heard to deny it. They should try just one week in a Zen monastery! Right mindfulness has been declared by the Buddha to be the “one and only way” to liberation. It is the way of vipassanā—insight-wisdom. And how else could wisdom be gained but by “mindfulness and clear awareness”? Right concentration includes various things, among them the four Brahmavihāras: the development of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. So by practising these two steps of the Path we can develop the “twin pillars” of the Mahayana: wisdom and compassion. Perhaps it scarcely matters whether we set out to become an Arahant or a Bodhisattva. But suppose a Bodhisattva, by practising too much mindfulness, became an Arahant by mistake... That would be terrible. Or would it?