

Intro to Buddhism in the US

Week 2: Fundamentals (and a lot of lists)

The Center at Belvedere
Charlottesville, VA

Link to extended readings & slides:<https://parusanalytics.com/introbud2025/week-two-2025.html>

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Some links to local sanghas

- Insight Meditation Community of Charlottesville: imeditation.org
- Cloud Floating Free (Plum Village): <https://cloudfloatingfree.org/>
- Serenity Ridge/Ligmincha International (Tibetan Bön):
<https://ligmincha.org/centers-usa-serenityridge/>
- Jefferson Tibetan Society: <http://jts.avenue.org/>
- Serenity Sangha (Zoom but based here; Insight): <https://www.serenitysangha.org/>
- UVA Contemplative Sciences Center: <https://csc.virginia.edu/>
[yeah, they aren't a sangha per se but they sponsor a lot of relevant events]

[if you know of others, let me know and I'll update the list]

Several caveats

- This is largely from a Theravadan perspective, and a number of core terms, e.g. *samadhi*, are used quite differently in different schools. "Buddhism" here means "Theravadan Buddhism"
- Because it was transmitted for 400+ years orally, Buddhism contains a *huge* number of lists: these are a tiny fraction
- Even within the English language Theravadan tradition, there is a great deal of disagreement on how to translate some key words, e.g. *dukkha*
- Teachers can and have done multiple-week classes/dharma talks on the contents of each one of these slides: remember, this is the departure lounge, not the baggage claim

Presuppositions from South Asian culture

- Rebirth: see <https://tricycle.org/article/traleg-kyabgon-karma/> (Oct-2024)
- Karma
- Complex cosmology ranging from devas (minor immaterial beings, much like angels) to major gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva with lots of intermediate levels, and a couple of hell levels. The *Lotus Sutra* reports the audience for the Buddha's sermon as follows, with detailed names for many of the beings
 - "a whole assembly of such humans and nonhumans as monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen, the devas, nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, asuras, garuḍas, kiṃnaras, mahoragas, kings, and noble emperors, filled with joy as they gazed attentively at the Buddha"

Parallel: Christianity and Islam both take from Judaism an eternal omnipotent (all powerful) and omniscient (all knowing) creator god who wishes to be worshiped exclusively, as well as a cosmology with other immaterial beings, some named.

Four Noble Truths

1. Suffering (*dukkha*) is universal
2. Attachment/craving (*tanha*) is the cause of suffering
3. It is possible to escape suffering and achieve *nibbana* (Sanskrit *nirvana*)
4. One escapes suffering by following the Eightfold Path

Some issues with the Four Noble Truths

- They probably were added after the death of the Buddha as a compact way of summarizing the Buddhist path
- From the perspective of an elite Indian in 500BCE, they would have seemed like common sense; they also follow a standard Indian medical formula: symptom⇒cause⇒cure⇒means of achieving cure
- "A great deal of suffering has been caused by translating *dukkha* as 'suffering'": "reactivity" or "unsettled" are two good alternatives
 - Best analogy I've heard, and apparently this goes back to the Sanskrit root, is that *dukkha* is the equivalent of pushing a shopping cart with a wonky wheel: anyone able to relate to that?
- They aren't really "noble": better translation might be "truths acknowledged by the noble ones"

And just what is *nibana/nirvana*?

It's complicated: e.g. Upaya recently did a day-long seminar on this, conveniently available as a podcast. There was little or no consensus.

Web definition: "a transcendent state in which there is neither suffering, desire, nor sense of self, and the subject is released from the effects of karma and the cycle of death and rebirth." (but we can't verify the rebirth part)

But there's also "enlightenment" (or "awakening"): "Buddha" literally means "the awakened one"
Some people use these as synonyms; other people give long discourses on why they aren't synonyms

Practical definition 1: Freedom from the three poisons/hinderances of anger, greed, and delusion

Practical definition 2: Full realization of the truths of emptiness, no-self, and impermanence

Eightfold Path

- right view/understanding
- right intention
- right speech
- right livelihood
- right action
- right effort
- right mindfulness/vipassana
- right "concentration"/ *samadhi*

Key point: this is not an ordered list! The symbol of Buddhism is an eight-spoked wheel, not an eight-stepped ladder



Universals of all Buddhist schools (Dalai Lama)

- Acknowledging *dukkha*
 - Origin: Dukkha is like a cart wheel that is off-center
- No self: *annata*
 - There is no permanent "soul": this is quite radical in the context of karma (and Hinduism), but can also have a variety of non-karma interpretations, e.g. the mind consists of many parts (or at least the brain does); our mind is constantly changing from experience
- Impermanence: *annica*
 - All things are conditioned and always changing. Unlike *annata*, this concept is shared with Hinduism
- Ethical living: precepts

The Five Precepts

- Abstain from killing and harming of living creatures
 - Vegetarianism or veganism would be the logical conclusion
- Abstain from taking that which is not freely offered
- Appropriate speech: abstain from lying and gossip
- Appropriate use of sexual energy
- Abstain for the use of substances that cloud the mind and cause misjudgement
 - Often interpreted as avoiding intoxicants altogether
 - Thich Nhat Hanh: this includes media. Particularly media...

There are numerous variations on the extent to which these are commandments, e.g. "undertake the training of..."

Three additional precepts some follow on retreat

- Not eating after noon (or lunch)
- Refraining from "dancing, music, visiting shows, flowers, make-up, the wearing of ornaments and decorations" (so retreats are rather low-key)
- Refraining from "sleeping in a tall, high place"
 - Generally interpreted as avoiding luxury

Most retreats also extend the precept on sexual misconduct to celibacy during the retreat

As noted in Week 2, the full monastic precepts—the vinyana—are much much longer, with 227 rules for men and 331 for women in the Theravadan lineage

Thich Naht Hanh's Order of Interbeing: 14 Mindfulness Trainings

1. Openness
2. Non-attachment to views
3. Freedom of thought
 - Very strong emphasis on tolerance in these first three trainings, e.g. "I am determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory or ideology, even Buddhist ones."
4. Awareness of suffering
5. Simple, healthy living
6. Dealing with anger
7. Dwelling happily in the present moment
8. Community and communication
9. Truthful and loving speech
10. Protecting the sangha
11. Right livelihood
12. Reverence for life
13. Generosity
 - includes a ecodharma component
14. Right conduct
 - specifically sexual conduct

The 14 Mindfulness Trainings

of Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing

1. Openness

Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, I am determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist teachings are guiding means to help me learn to look deeply and to develop my understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill or die for.

2. Non-attachment to Views

Aware of suffering created by attachment to views and wrong perceptions, I am determined to avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. I will learn and practice non-attachment from views in order to be open to others' insights and experiences. I am aware that the knowledge I presently possess is not changeless, absolute truth. Truth is found in life and I will observe life within and around me in every moment, ready to learn throughout my life.

3. Freedom of Thought

Aware of the suffering brought about when I impose my views on others, I am committed not to force others, even my children, by any means whatsoever – such as authority, threat, money, propaganda or indoctrination – to adopt my views. I will respect the right of others to be different and to choose what to believe and how to decide. I will, however, help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness through compassionate dialogue.

Brahmaviharas and their near enemies

- Compassion (karuna)
 - vs. pity, despair
- Metta (goodwill, lovingkindness, benevolence, *agape*)
 - vs. attachment
- Sympathetic (or empathetic) joy (mudita)
 - vs. envy, jealousy, comparison of self with others
 - Also note we have a borrowed term for the opposite, *schadenfreude*...interesting...
- Equanimity (upekkha)
 - vs. indifference

"Three Jewels"

- I take refuge in the Buddha
- I take refuge in the dharma
- I take refuge in the sangha

In some traditions, these are essentially used as a declaration of faith, comparable to the Islamic *shahada*. In other traditions, just a nice chant, typically in Pali, often at the beginning or end of a gathering

"Three Poisons"

- anger, hate
- greed
- delusion, ignorance (generally in the sense of not seeing things as they truly are, that is, dharma)

These occur many times in the suttas

And as I constantly if obnoxiously (but truthfully...) note, for social media (and arguably more generally, e.g. politics, advertising) they are a business model

On to some mostly Theravadan lists/concepts
you might encounter but are less central

Five Aggregates or Khandas

1. Form or Rupa
2. Consciousness or Vinnana
3. Feelings or Vedana
4. Perception or Sanna
5. Mental states or Sankhara

Five hindrances to meditation

1. Focusing on pleasant thoughts: sensual desire
 - Joseph Goldstein: retreat romance fantasies
2. Focusing on unpleasant thoughts: ill-will
 - Joseph Goldstein: retreat revenge fantasies
3. Too little energy: sloth and sleepiness
 - Stand up, and if that doesn't work, take a nap
4. Too much energy (agitation/restlessness and remorse)
 - Go for a walk; watch the caffeine
5. Doubt
 - Any of this familiar?: "I'm never going to get this meditation thing", "I'm a terrible meditator", "This is completely pointless"

"If evil, unskillful thoughts — imbued with desire, aversion or delusion — still arise in the monk while he is attending to the relaxing of thought-fabrication with regard to those thoughts, then — with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth — he should beat down, constrain, and crush his mind with his awareness." Vitakkasanthana Sutta: The Relaxation of Thoughts " (milder remedies are first suggested)

Seven factors of awakening

1. mindfulness
2. investigation
3. energy
4. joy
5. tranquility
6. samadhi
7. equanimity

From the Pali Canon:

In the Pali Canon's [Samyutta Nikaya](#), several discourses juxtapose the five hindrances with the [seven factors of enlightenment](#) (*bojjhanga*).^[a] For instance, according to [SN 46.37](#), [the Buddha](#) stated:

"[Bhikkhus](#), there are these five obstructions, hindrances, corruptions of the mind, weakeners of wisdom. What five? Sensual desire... ill will... sloth and torpor ... restlessness and remorse... doubt....

"There are, bhikkhus, these seven factors of enlightenment, which are nonobstructions, nonhindrances, noncorruptions of the mind; when developed and cultivated they lead to the realization of the fruit of true knowledge and liberation. What seven? The enlightenment factor of mindfulness... [discrimination of states... energy... rapture... tranquility... concentration...] equanimity....^{[5][b][c]}

source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_hindrances

Ten perfections (paramita)

1. *Dāna pāramī*: generosity, giving of oneself
2. *Sīla pāramī*: virtue, morality, proper conduct
3. *Nekkhamma pāramī*: renunciation
4. *Paññā pāramī*: wisdom, discernment
5. *Viriya pāramī*: energy, diligence, vigour, effort
6. *Khanti pāramī*: patience, tolerance, forbearance, acceptance, endurance
7. *Sacca pāramī*: truthfulness, honesty
8. *Adhiṭṭhāna pāramī* : determination, resolution
9. *Mettā pāramī*: goodwill, friendliness, loving-kindness
10. *Upekkhā pāramī*: equanimity, serenity

FIVE DAILY RECOLLECTIONS*

1. I am of a nature to grow old;
I cannot avoid aging.
2. I am subject to illness and infirmity;
I cannot avoid illness and infirmity.
3. I am of a nature to die;
I cannot avoid death.
4. I will be parted from all that is dear
and beloved to me.
5. I am the owner of my actions and heir to my actions.
Actions are the womb from which I have sprung.
My actions are my relations; my actions are my protection.
The fruits of all my actions,
Both wholesome and unwholesome,
Skillful and unskillful,
I will inherit.

*NUMERICAL DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA - AN ANTHOLOGY OF SUTTAS FROM
THE ANGUTTARA NIKAYA (Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhū Bodhi, trans.),
and as conveyed in the teachings of Ayya Khema.

Bodhisattva Vows (Mahayana)

Sentient beings are numberless, I take a vow to save them

The passions of anger, greed, and delusion are inexhaustible, I take a vow to extinguish them

The gates of the dharma are infinite, I take a vow to pass through them

The Buddha-way is supreme, I take a vow to complete it



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These vows are recited in morning practice before bows, and at the end of the evening during retreats.

- 1. Sentient beings are numberless. We vow to save them all.**
- 2. Delusions are endless. We vow to cut through them all.**
- 3. The teachings are infinite. We vow to learn them all.**
- 4. The Buddha Way is inconceivable. We vow to attain it.**

The Four Great Bodhisattva Vows

The Bodhisattva Vows exist in many different forms; at Upaya they are chanted as follows:

Creations are numberless, I vow to free them.

Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to transform them.

Reality is boundless, I vow to perceive it.

The awakened way is unsurpassable, I vow to embody it.