The Buddha
As A Teacher

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Essays on The Buddha

The Buddha as a Teacher

A message, no matter how logical or true, is useless if it cannot be communicated to others. In the Dhamma we have a perfect teaching, and in the Buddha we have a perfect teacher, and the combination of these two meant that within a short time of being first proclaimed, the Dhamma became remarkably widespread. The Buddha was the first religious teacher who meant his message to be proclaimed to all humankind and who made a concrete effort to do this. He was the first religious universalist. He told his first disciples to spread the Dhamma far and wide. "Go forth for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the good and the happiness of gods and men. Let no two of you go in the same direction. Teach the Dhamma which is beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle and beautiful at the end. Proclaim both the letter and the spirit of the holy life completely fulfilled and perfectly pure" (Vin.IV,20).

He also hoped that after his final Nirvana the teachings would continue to spread and he instructed his disciples, both ordained and lay, accordingly. "I shall not die until the monks, the nuns, the laymen and the laywomen have become deeply learned, wise and well-trained, remembering the teachings, proficient in the lesser and greater doctrines and virtuous; until, having learned the teachings themselves, they are able to tell it to others, teach it, make it known, establish it, open it up, explain it and make it clear; until they are able to refute false doctrines taught by others and are able to spread the convincing and liberating truth abroad. I shall not die until the holy life has become successful, prosperous, admired and popular; until it has become well proclaimed among both gods and humans" (D.II,104).

The Buddha's motive in proclaiming the Dhamma was compassion. He said: "Whatever has had to be done by a teacher out of compassion, for the welfare of his disciples, I have done for you" (M.I,169). He saw humans as being limited by their greed, tormented by their hatred and misled by their delusion and he knew that if they could hear the Dhamma and practise it they could become happy, virtuous and free. This compassion turned the Buddha into a tireless and skilful teacher and studying his techniques of teaching can not only help us in our efforts to proclaim the Dhamma to others but also deepen our appreciation for this most compassionate and wise of men.

The Buddha would approach people according to their needs and dispositions. Generally, good people would come to see him while he would go out to meet bad people or those in distress. In both cases, he would first give what was called a talk on preliminaries (*anupubbikatha*), that is, "about generosity, virtue, heaven, about the dangers of desires and the advantages of giving them up" (D.I,110). This allowed the Buddha to know the listener's level of intelligence and receptivity. If the response was good, he would then "teach that Dhamma which is unique to the enlightened ones – suffering, its cause, its ceasing and the way leading to having it cease".

Often the Buddha would talk to groups or individuals giving what we would call a sermon or engaging in dialogue, asking and answering questions. The people he talked with always found him "welcoming, speaking kindly, courteous, genial, clear and ready to speak" (D.I,116). When he met people strongly attached to their views and whom he knew he could not change, he would suggest discussing points of agreement so as to avoid fruitless arguments. At such times he would say: "About these things there is no agreement, let us put them aside. About the things on which we agree let us take up and discuss" (D.II,124). Sometimes rather than talk about his own Dhamma he would invite his opponents to explain their teachings first. At a time when there was great competition and jealousy among different religions, the Buddha's fairness often caused surprise. Once a group of ascetics met the Buddha and their leader asked him to explain his Dhamma. The Buddha said: "Better still, tell me about your teachings." The ascetics were astonished and said to each other: "It is wonderful, truly marvellous, how great is the ascetic Gotama in that he will hold back his own views and invite others to explain theirs" (D.III,40). When people asked a particularly appropriate or relevant question the Buddha would praise them, thereby encouraging

discussion, questioning and inquiry. When Bhadda asked such a question, the Buddha replied: "Well said! Well said, friend Bhadda! Your understanding is welcome. Your wisdom is welcome" (S.V,15).

Debates were a very common feature of religious life in ancient India and large crowds would gather to hear speakers defend their own doctrines against the attacks of their opponents or critics. Sometimes passions became quite heated during these debates with one party trying to shout down or ridicule the other. Because a speaker's pride and reputation were at stake, those who participated in these debates were sometimes prepared to engage in trickery in order to win or at least give the impression of winning. A monk called Hatthaka used to enjoy debating but eventually suffered several defeats. After this he would arrange to meet his opponents at a particular time, show up several hours earlier and then boast to his admirers that his opponents were too frightened to confront him (Vin.II,266). It was probably for these reasons that during the early part of his career the Buddha avoided debates (Sn.780).

But gradually as the Dhamma became more popular and began to be challenged or misrepresented by ascetics of other sects, the Buddha began to frequent debates. In fact, he was soon recognised as the most persuasive debater of his time. Certain rules governed the conduct of debates and the Buddha always abided by these rules and expected others to follow them also. When a young man named Canki kept interjecting while the Buddha was debating with some learned brahmans, he turned to him and said firmly: "Quiet, Canki! Do not interrupt while we are speaking" (M.II,168). If, on being asked a question for the third time a person could still not answer, the Buddha would insist that they admit defeat as was the rule (A.I,185-88). Once he asked an ascetic if he readily believed in the view he held, the ascetic said: "I believe it and so do all these people" as he pointed at the large audience. The Buddha replied: "What they believe is not the point. Is that your view?" (M.III,37)

But the Buddha's purpose was not to defeat his opponents but to lead them to a clearer understanding. To this end he would often use something akin to what is called the Socratic Method, so called because in the West it was first used by the Greek philosopher Socrates; asking clearer questions as a means of leading people to an insight or to prove a point. For example, once during a discussion, the brahman Sonadanda asserted: "A true brahman has pure ancestry, he is well-versed in the sacred scriptures, he is fair in colour, he is virtuous, he is wise and he is an expert in the rituals." The Buddha asked: "Could a person lack one of these qualities and still be considered a brahman?" Sonadanda thought for a moment and then admitted that one could have a dark complexion and still be a true brahman. Continuing to ask the same question, Sonadanda was led to the same view as the Buddha's, that it is not ancestry, knowledge, colour or social status that makes one superior but virtue and wisdom (D.I,120-121).

Humour plays an important part in psychological well-being as it does in effective communication. Consequently, it is not surprising to find the Buddha sometimes including humour in his teaching. His discourses contain numerous clever puns, amusing stories, irony and sometimes satire. After King Ajatasattu had killed his father and started to become suspicious that his own son might be plotting to kill him, he began to realise that the fruits of worldly ambition could be bitter and went to seek guidance from the Buddha. He asked: "Sir, can you show me any benefits of the monk's life that can be seen here and now?" The Buddha replied by asking him a question: "If you had a slave who ran away and became a monk and later, on finding out where he was, would you have him arrested and brought back?" "Certainly not" replied the king, "On the contrary, I would stand up for him, respect him and offer to provide him with his needs." "Well there!" said the Buddha, "That is one of the benefits of being a monk that can be seen here and now" (D.I,60-61). The humorous vein of this answer was clearly meant to put Ajatasattu at his ease, lift him out of his gloom and make him receptive to the fuller and more serious answer which the Buddha then proceeded to give.

The Buddha often poked good-natured fun at the pretensions of the brahmans and what he considered the weakness in some of their beliefs. When they claimed to be superior to others because they were born

from God's mouth, the Buddha would comment: "But you were born from the womb of your mother just like everyone else" (M.II,145). He told stories in which he portrayed the all-knowing God of the brahmans as being embarrassed and not a little annoyed at being asked a question he could not answer (D.I,215-222).

Another characteristic of the Buddha's method of teaching was his use of similes, analogies and parables. Drawing upon his wide interest in and knowledge of the world in which he lived, he had a rich store of these to clarify his teachings and make them more memorable. For example, he compared a person who fails to practise the teachings he proclaimed to a beautiful flower without fragrance (Dp.51). One should replace negative thoughts, the Buddha suggested, with positive ones, just as a carpenter knocks a peg out of a hole with a second peg (M.I,119). He was also skilled at using whatever was at hand to make a point or dramatize or make clear his meaning. Prince Abhaya once asked the Buddha if he had ever said anything that made people feel unhappy. At the time the prince was holding his baby son on his knee. The Buddha looked at the child and said: "If your son put a stone in his mouth, what would you do?" Prince Abhaya replied: "I would get it out straight away even if I had to hurt the child. And why? Because it could be a danger to the child and I have compassion for him." Then the Buddha explained that sometimes he would say things that people needed to be told but did not like to hear, but that his motive was always compassion for that person (M.I,395).

Another characteristic of the Buddha's skilful way of teaching was his ability to give a new or practical meaning to old ideas or practices and to reinterpret things in order to make them relevant. When someone asked him what the most powerful blessing was, rather than mention various charms or mantras, as they expected, he said that to act with honesty, kindness and integrity would bless one. When he was accused of teaching annihilation he agreed that he did, but then qualified his agreement by explaining that he taught the annihilation of greed, hatred and delusion (M.I,375). The Buddha used words like brahman and outcaste (*vasala*) not in the way they were used by the upholders of the caste system but to indicate a person's virtue or lack of it (Sn.136).

In some religions, it is only necessary to believe certain dogmas in order to be saved, while in Buddhism, Nirvana can only be attained through understanding. As such, those who came to hear the Buddha teach and who became his disciples were often the better educated lay men and women, the intellectuals of the time. The Dhamma, the Buddha said, had "to be understood by the wise each for himself" (*paccattam veditabbo vinnuhi*, M.I,37). But this did not mean that the Buddha had nothing to say to the unsophisticated. On the contrary, with his skill and creativity, he was able to make his message intelligible to people of all levels of understanding, even to children, and as a result people of all types became his disciples. So successful was he in fact, that some of the other teachers of his time accused him of using magic to lure their disciples away (M.I,375).

Because the Buddha's motive in teaching the Dhamma was compassion and because his compassion was infinite, he never tired in his efforts to proclaim it or explain it to others. Only a few months before his final Nirvana he said: "There are some who say that as long as a man is young he possesses lucidity of wisdom but as he ages that wisdom begins to fade. But this is not so. I am now worn, old, aged, I have lived my life and am now towards the end of my life, being about eighty. Now if I had four disciples who were to live for a hundred years and if, during that time, they were to ask me questions about the four foundations of mindfulness, except when they were eating, drinking, answering the call of nature or sleeping, I would still not finish explaining Dhamma. Even if you have to carry me about on a stretcher there will be no change in the lucidity of my wisdom. If anyone were to speak rightly of me they could say 'A being not liable to delusion has arisen in the world, for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good and the happiness of gods and humans'." (M.I,83)

And the Buddha was true to his words in this respect. As he lay dying, a man approached him to ask a question. Ananda and the other disciples held him back saying that the Buddha was tired and ill, but when

the Buddha saw this, he beckoned the man forward and answered his questions (D.II,149). The Buddha's great gift to humankind was the truth and his compassion motivated him to give it to all who were willing to receive it.