



Manchester  
Buddhist  
Centre

# Introduction to Buddhism Course

## *'Day Retreat'*



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This handout is intended to give you a little bit more background to some of the topics that we'll cover on the 'day retreat'. It will hopefully support you in carrying on your interest with the principles of Buddhism, and the practice of meditation, after the course. Let's start with some very practical things:

### 1. Meditation posture

We can see the meditation that we'll be doing on this course as the practical aspect of practising Buddhism. Before doing anything else, we must first learn how best to sit for meditation. There are two main principles to posture:

- That you are upright and stable;
- That you are comfortable and relaxed.

Bearing these needs in mind, you can either sit in a chair, or else on the floor using cushions to find the right posture. On cushions you can use an astride or a cross-legged posture. However you decide to sit, remember that the two principles above are the ones that count!

If you are sitting on cushions, consider:

- Cushion height;
- Knee support (if sitting cross legged) - remember that, ideally, the knees need to be lower than the hips;
- Hand support, to prevent the weight of the arms from dragging the shoulders down;
- Ankle support (if you are sitting astride the cushions and your ankles ache).

In sitting on a chair, consider:

- Back support;
- Hand support;
- Your feet should be flat on the floor or cushion.

## 2. Starting to meditate

On the course we began to look at meditation through cultivating an awareness of our bodies. Body awareness is very important in meditation; in fact, we can see it as the foundation of all meditation practices.

In the body awareness practice we simply bring awareness to different areas of the body and notice what is going on there. We also notice when the mind has become interested in something else. Particularly, we notice thoughts; when we notice that our awareness is with thought we bring it back to the body, gently and without judgment.

### **Body the root of stillness**

As we sit in our chosen meditation posture, although there are movements of the breath and other slight movements of the body, the body in general is still. We can use this stillness in our practice. The body is solid and has weight - this can be acknowledged, and the more we acknowledge it the more grounded we can feel.

The other thing that can happen in this posture is that the contents of the mind come more into focus. We become more aware of the thoughts that occupy us, and our feelings and emotions. We may be quite surprised at how unruly the contents of the mind are, but this is quite natural. Up until now how much time have you spent just sitting and not doing anything in particular? There are a lot of aspects of our experience that have been waiting to be acknowledged by awareness and now they have come to make their presence known!

### **Shifting from thoughts to body**

As we acknowledge the stillness of the body, we begin to experience it fully. We can also learn how to shift our awareness. This means that that, as we notice the thoughts pulling us here and there, we also acknowledge that the body is still and we begin deliberately to bring our awareness down into it. The more you allow the awareness to rest with the body the more you experience its stillness.

## 3. The 'Three Jewels'

The highest values for a Buddhist are the Three Jewels. Whatever country Buddhists practice in, whatever style they follow, all Buddhists try to bring these values more and more into the centre of their lives. They are:

- The Buddha – who was a man who lived in India roughly 2,500 years ago. The 'Buddha' is a title, not a name, and it means something like 'he who knows or understands', or 'the awakened one'. His name was Siddhartha Gotama, but people began to call him the Buddha some time after he gained Enlightenment or Buddhahood.

The Buddha said that others could do what he did – we can all become Enlightened if we make the effort – so the Buddha Jewel also represents our own potential. Practising Buddhism means gradually realizing our potential for Enlightenment.

- The Dharma – has a number of related meanings. It means the Truth that the Buddha realized; his teachings, which are his attempts to communicate that truth; and also the various practices which lead to Enlightenment.
- The Sangha – the community of those who are trying to share in the Buddha’s insight, or have gained insight themselves.

We sometimes use the expression ‘**Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels**’ to indicate that a practising Buddhist has chosen to express his or her profound confidence in them – in a sense, deciding to live their lives with reference to them. ‘Going for Refuge’ isn’t meant to suggest escaping from the everyday world. Instead, it refers to living in that world through a commitment to the example of the Buddha, the profundity of his teaching and the example of the spiritual community.

#### 4. A little more on Enlightenment

As this is the goal Buddhists are trying to reach, you’ll want to know what it is. It’s very hard to describe it though, as it’s outside our usual range of experiences – a bit like trying to describe the taste of chocolate to someone who’s never eaten it. Still, we have to try, and the Buddha and other enlightened people have given us some clues to what it might be like. Throughout the centuries over which Buddhism has been practised there have been a huge number of approaches and a bewildering mass of literature. In a sense, the problems for Westerners who first encounter Buddhism are both which part of this huge tradition to focus upon, and then how to make sense of what has been handed down to us in Buddhist literature. On this course we’ll use a relatively simple model to give some structure to our discussions – this model is known as the ‘Threefold Path’ of **ethics, meditation** and **wisdom**.

Whatever model we choose to help us understand the Buddha, his teaching and the Buddhist community, the really important thing is that we can relate what we learn to **our own direct experience**. This can’t be stated too strongly, as the alternative is to exercise ‘blind faith’ to a greater or lesser extent. It’s also the reason why Buddhists practice meditation, taking time out of their normal, busy lives to examine that direct experience and see what they find!

#### 5. The Principles of Buddhist Ethics

Buddhist morality is based on the law of karma. Karma means action, specifically an action that has an ethical dimension. An ethical action is one

that results in happiness, for oneself and for others. An unethical action is one that results in suffering - actions have consequences.

There are three kinds of action, according to Buddhist thought – physical action, speech, and acts of the mind. The latter means that an ethical thought will result in happiness, while an unethical thought will result in suffering. Wishing someone well, for example, makes us feel happy, and we'll probably do things to try to help that person. If we wish harm to someone, however, such a state of mind is an unpleasant one, and if we act from that state, we'll cause suffering.

The mind is in fact the most important of the three kinds of action, because our physical actions and our speech are expressions of our mind states. Buddhist ethics have been called an ethics of intention. One of the most famous Buddhist books, the Dhammapada, begins with the words:

*Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows even as the cartwheel follows the ox (drawing the cart).*

*Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never departs.*

Buddhism doesn't speak in absolute terms of good and bad, but in terms of skilful (kusala) and unskilful (akusala) actions. This means that our actions are not judged to be good or bad (much less still wicked or evil) but relatively skilful or unskilful. This also means that with practice we can become more and more skilled in action.

## 6. Buddhist ethics in practice

As we all know, life can be quite complex and it's not always easy to know what is the skilful thing to do in every situation. To help us to apply this principle in our lives we can make use of the **Five Precepts**. These are training principles, which have both negative (try not to do this) and positive forms (try to be like this, in *italics* below). They are:

1. I undertake to abstain from harming living beings.  
*With deeds of loving-kindness, I purify my body.*
2. I undertake to abstain from taking the not-given.  
*With open-handed generosity, I purify my body.*
3. I undertake to abstain from sexual misconduct,  
*With stillness, simplicity and contentment, I purify my body.*
4. I undertake to abstain from false speech.  
*With truthful communication, I purify my speech.*
5. I undertake to abstain from taking intoxicants.  
*With mindfulness clear and radiant, I purify my mind.*

The **first precept** encapsulates them all – if you're practising the first precept then you're practising all of the precepts. The basis of Buddhist ethics is non-harm.

The **second precept** includes stealing but also includes the more subtle act of taking things that are not freely given, such as taking up other people's time and energy against their wishes.

Because the area of sexual relationships is one in which our emotions can be very strong, the Buddha devoted the **third precept** to it. It's the first precept applied to the sexual arena.

The **fourth precept** recognises that Buddhists try to find and then live by the truth, so to tell lies – even small ones – would be to go against that commitment. Not telling the truth causes confusion and mistrust because it undermines human relations. Of course the truth is sometimes painful to hear so we also need to speak with kindness and at an appropriate time.

The principle behind the **fifth precept** is awareness. Intoxicants tend to make us less aware, which blurs our ethical sense – it's easier to break the other precepts when we're intoxicated. Obviously alcohol and recreational drugs are included here but so are more subtle intoxicants, such as the beauty of another person or even oneself (if you happen to be beautiful!), and intoxication with youth (if you're young).

Buddhism draws a distinction between **natural** and **conventional morality**. Natural morality arises from the universal psychology of the human mind: if we act from a skilful intention we are likely to move towards happiness, and vice versa. The five precepts are based on natural morality.

Conventional morality is the morality of a particular society, whether that's a family, a tribe, a country or a culture. Sometimes the ethics of a society accord with natural morality, sometimes not. For instance, most societies condone violence in specific circumstances, such as in war or in revenge. According to Buddhism though, acts of violence are always unskilful, in that they always lead to suffering. The Buddha once said "Hatred does not cease by hatred; hatred only ceases by non-hatred [or friendliness]. This is a universal law."

## 7. What is meant by 'Wisdom' in Buddhism?

The ultimate goal of Buddhist teaching and practice is wisdom – but what do we mean by this? One thing that we don't mean is knowledge – knowledge can be regarded, in a sense, as information; things that you know 'intellectually' because you've been informed, or even because you've worked something out for yourself. From a Buddhist point of view, knowledge in this sense is not wisdom – as we know very well, people who know a lot are not necessarily wise! Instead, the Buddha often used the metaphor of *seeing* to represent wisdom. Seeing implies having *direct experience* of something, as opposed to reading about it, being told about it, or even working it out through rational deduction.

We may all have moments of 'seeing' that we can regard as 'insights' These moments may be rare but, when they do occur, they have a quality of being meaningful on a level that is much more than just rational understanding – we might say that they affect our heart rather than our mind, and may 'stir us up'.

The problem then is how to interpret such small insights, and to make it more likely that we'll be in a position to 'see' a little more. This is where the Three Jewels become precious to us, in that they help us to set up **conditions** that will support the further development of wisdom. The Buddha stressed, very importantly, that we shouldn't accept any of his teachings as an act of 'blind faith'. However – and this is the important thing – we can develop a more balanced sort of **faith**, or 'confidence' if we prefer, in those teachings as a provisional guide until such time as we 'see' the truth of them for ourselves.

This approach to the Dharma is described by the *Parable of the Raft*, which likens the Dharma to a vessel that is required, for the time being, to carry us across a river to the further shore. Of course, once we reach that shore the vessel is of no further use – we wouldn't continue our journey dragging it along with us – so we can just leave it behind.

## 8. Recommended reading:

Change your Mind – by Paramananda  
Who is the Buddha? – by Sangharakshita  
What is the Dharma? - by Sangharakshita

If you would like to be led through the meditation practices when you are alone you could consider buying one or more of the led CDs – for example, 'Body Scan', 'Mindfulness of Breathing' and 'The Heart'.

## 9. What to do after today

If you are really interested in seeing changes to your life we recommend that you try the following things.

- to meditate 6 out of 7 days a week - even if this is just for 10 minutes;
- to consider coming on a 'Going Further with Buddhism' course.

You could see your meditation sessions as your treat - to give yourself permission to sit and allow the mind to settle; to allow yourself space in which to let go of some of the business of the day. There will probably be times when you come up against some resistance to meditating - you may not feel like it or you may think "What's the point?". This is where patience is required, seeing that to change ourselves takes time and consistent effort. It is helpful to commit to the practice and allow this commitment to take you through the ups and downs.

If you're interested in the next level of course ('Going Further with Buddhism'), there should be an option to attend a day retreat within the next few weeks – check at reception or on our web site for details.