WHAT IS MEDITATION?

Meditation is at the core of all Buddhist practice. But what is meditation? It is not just thinking about something. What is the purpose of meditation? To put it simply, it is to discover who we really are. We do not know this at the beginning. But to obtain this knowledge, we must discover it within ourselves. We will not find it written in books.

Meditation provides us with a method whereby we can access our immediate experience. Why do we need to do this? Because we are at present not really aware of our immediate experience. And we are not aware of it because we are distracted and not present in the moment. And being distracted, we are off-center and ungrounded. Normally, we live not in our immediate experience, but in our thought constructions about experience and reality. We continually impose our desires and preconceptions upon what we actually perceive. And these thoughts and thought constructions take time to form. Therefore, we live in the past and not in the present of our immediate experiences, whether external or internal. But through meditation we can discover and access the present moment. We can discover what is our immediate experience and discover what is the center of our being. We can access the base or the primary level of our conscious existence. Meditation thus represents a crucial part of the spiritual path and our personal development. However, in Buddhist terms, the ultimate goal of this path is not just happiness and fulfillment of our desires in this present life, but liberation and enlightenment.

But what does this mean? Liberation from what? Enlightenment in terms of what? Liberation means freedom from the suffering we experience within cyclical existence or Samsara that is brought about by our ignorance or lack of self-knowledge, which leads to our being under the sway of our negative selfish emotions. Enlightenment means discovering who we really are, our inherent Buddha-nature. It represents the full realization of our spiritual potential.
THE SPIRITUAL CAREER OF THE BUDDHA

Some 2500 years ago, in his own personal experience and meditation practice, the potential as human beings for our liberation and enlightenment was discovered by the Buddha. His realization of self-discovery is called Bodhi, or “enlightenment”, which literally means “awakening”. Because of his realization, he received the title of the Buddha, which means “the awakened one or he who has awakened”. And what he had awakened to was the true nature of existence and this is called Dharma. In the Buddhist context, Dharma means “existence”, but it also means the teaching about what actually exists. And this teaching includes here both theory and practice. Only through practice do we come to understand something experientially, as a living knowledge. Practicing the Dharma represents the spiritual path to liberation and enlightenment. And this path fundamentally represents a process of purifying and dissolving our obscurations, both emotional and intellectual, the obscurations that obscure our minds and distort our perceptions of reality and who we really are.

The path begins with an examination of our actual existential situation and condition in the world in this present life. It begins with the human predicament inherent in our conscious existence. It begins with the discovery of human suffering in terms of birth, sickness, old age, and death. The young Indian prince named Siddhartha, who eventually became the Buddha, discovered this for himself, although previously he had led a very sheltered life. Escaping from the palace of his father, on four successive days he saw for himself the four sights of a sick man, an old man, a dead man, and a yogi meditating beneath a tree. He realized that the fate of all human beings, no matter how financially secure and happy they may be at present, is sickness, old age, and death. No one, no matter how rich, powerful, or wise they may be, escapes this inevitable fate. However, the sight of the yogi in meditation beneath the tree inspired the young prince to seek a path leading beyond the suffering and death experienced in Samsara, the beginningless cycle of death and rebirth.

Samsara or cyclical existence means our human existence, our existential condition, in which we find ourselves in the world. It means our frailty before sickness and it means our mortality. But death is not the end of the story or the end of consciousness existence. Because of karma, we find ourselves propelled again and again into rebirth in different bodies and circumstances. In each lifetime we experience the consequences of our karma, the deeds we have intentionally committed in our previously lives. In each lifetime we create the karma we will experience in our future lives. So, in this sense, we have the opportunity and the free will to create our own future.

But how is such a path possible? In terms of ancient Indian religious culture, the spiritual seeker is the yogi and the method is yoga. Disillusioned with the trivial pleasures of his father’s pleasure palaces, signifying both paradise and the innocence of childhood, Prince Siddhartha escaped the palace at night and fled into the countryside. He renounced the worldly life, giving
away all his worldly possessions and as a mendicant or homeless wanderer, he set off on his
spiritual quest. This was known as "the Great Renunciation". In general, in myth and folklore, in
order to become a hero, the young man must first leave home, the world of his parents. Prince
Siddhartha wandered homeless for six years in the forest wilderness of Northern India, seeking
teachers of the wisdom that lies beyond the surface of meaning of things.

THE SHRAMANA MOVEMENT

In the 6th century before Christ in Northern India, at the time when Prince Siddhartha began his
spiritual quest, there existed various philosophers known as Shramanas, as well as their
mendicant followers, some of whom were organized into distinct orders or sects. There were a
large number of these competing groups of ascetics and yoga practitioners. In fact, the name
Shramana means ascetic, one who is engaged in austerities and ascetic practices that deny all
sensual pleasure to the individual. This ascetic discipline may be individual or communal in
nature. In general, these Shramana teachers shared a common world-view entailing a radical
dualism and a common method of renouncing the worldly life in order to practice meditation,
yoga, and asceticism in the forests and the mountains of India. Among these ascetic orders of
mendicants, besides the Buddhists, only the Jains survive until this present day.

Kapila was the first recorded master in this Shramana tradition of Central and Eastern India. He
lived on an island in the Ganges river several hundred years before the time of Prince
Siddhartha. His philosophy became known as Samkhya and this provided the earliest recorded
philosophical basis for yoga practice. Like other Shramana philosophers, his view represented a
radical dualism, dividing reality into two distinct substances or orders of being, namely, Spirit
and Nature, or in the Sanskrit language, Purusha and Prakriti. “Nature” encompasses
everything that is active and dynamic, including matter and energy, but also what is usually
called mind. However, this Nature is blind and unconscious, even though all things, both mental
and physical, evolve in time out of primordial matter (mulaprakriti). It is Spirit alone, as a
separate substance or order of being, that is conscious and aware, although in itself it is passive
and inactive. Spirit is simply a witness to the manifold activities of Nature that are unconscious.
Moreover, there exists a plurality of these conscious spirits. They are like a group of men in an
audience watching the sensuous and erotic dance of a young beautiful girl. They become
captured in the beauty and the sensuality of her dance, so that they forget their own true
nature (as pure spirit) and find themselves trapped and imprisoned in nature, matter, and
rebirth. The name of this dancer is Maya or illusion. Charmed, distracted, and enchanted by her
dance, thereafter these spirits come to experience the suffering of rebirth again and again in
Samsara.. The only way for them to escape and attain liberation from this condition of
imprisonment is to renounce altogether Nature and the worldly life connected with it and
practice exclusively the ascetic path of self-denial. Liberating the spirit from the clutches of
body, emotion, and mind, it will then rise up into the air, ascending into the heavens, and will
return eventually to its original home beyond the stars, to what represents a purely spiritual
dimension of existence. This ultimate goal is variously known as liberation (moksha) or as
isolation (kaivalya) or as Nirvana (extinction). This means the end of our material existence.
These two orders of being or substances may be characterized as follows: Spirit represents everything that is mind, consciousness, above, reason, good, light, and masculine; whereas Nature represents everything that is matter, unconsciousness, below, emotion, evil, darkness, and feminine. This dualistic model of spirituality also had great influence in the West. This same paradigm was found, for example, in Pythagoras and Orphism and especially later in Gnosticism and Christianity. We are all familiar with this model of spirituality from our own Christian tradition. Indeed, it represents our conventional model of spirituality. The key motif here is world-alienation and rejection of everything that the feminine represents symbolically, that is to say, the earth, nature, matter, domestic life, family, and the worldly life in general. The young spiritual hero escapes from the village and from agriculture, the domain of women, in order to live in the forest with other spiritual young men, freed from all domestic responsibilities, liberated from the rule of the Mothers. The young man may then follow a life of celibate renunciation; the path laid out before him is that of austerities and the renunciation of all sensual pleasures in order to free his spirit from the clutches of the body, so that the spirit, sprouting its wings, can escape into a pure spiritual dimension of bodiless and emotionless male intellectual consciousness. The aim here in ascetic discipline is to radically separate spirit from the world, from the physical body, from the irrational emotions, and most of all from the feminine. This liberation or salvation from the world is effected by way of gnosis (jnana), that is to say, by way of the knowledge of the true nature of spirit and its condition of alienation and subjugation in the realm of Nature down here below on earth. In a theistic system like Christianity, this salvation is effected by the grace of God. It is the same in the Hindu theistic systems. But in the Shramana traditions, it is not God who bestows this knowledge of liberation, but it is won through the individual’s efforts in terms of meditation, yoga, and discriminating wisdom (prajna). It is interesting to observe that this Gnostic dualism, this radically dualistic model of spirituality, appeared nearly simultaneously before Christ in both Ancient Greece and Ancient India.

In the forests of Northern India, Prince Siddhartha studied with two Shramana teachers of meditation. The first teacher, known as Kamala Alada, taught him the meditations required in order to access the altered states of consciousness or dhyanas that still entail thought forms. Thereby he attained what is called Savikalpa-samadhi, or absorption with forms, enabling him to access and explore the higher mental planes beyond the world of sense experience. If an individual dies while absorbed in such a dhyana, one will realize rebirth in a Devaloka or divine world as a Deva. These Devas are rather similar to the Christian notion of angels. His second teacher, Udraka Ramaputra, taught him how to ascent beyond these mental planes that still entail subtle forms and ascend into the Samapattis or the formless planes of cosmic consciousness. He accessed these levels of mystical experience by mastering what is known as Nirvikalpa-samadhi, or absorption that is without forms, and thereby come into a mystical union with the entire universe as infinite space or as infinite consciousness. By the dedicated and
methodical practice of these dhyanas and samapattis, accompanied by austerities and asceticism that evoke tapas or psychic heat, he attained these samadhis or higher states of consciousness. However, he then came to realize that all of these altered states of conscious, no matter how exalted, were conditioned by antecedent causes and therefore impermanent. All of these dhyanas and samapattis, both divine consciousness and cosmic consciousness, belonged to Samsara or conditioned existence. They did not represent release (moksha) or Nirvana. The divine consciousness of the Devas and the cosmic consciousness of the Brahmas are all Samsaric states of mind; they are conditioned and brought about by causes and circumstances. Therefore, they are impermanent. They are impermanent and insubstantial and ultimately they represent suffering. The mere ascent to heaven by the spirit does not represent release from Samsara, the cycle of death and rebirth.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF THE BUDDHA

Prince Siddhartha became dissatisfied with this dualistic philosophy and its ascetic path leading to spirituality and therefore he sought elsewhere some higher path genuinely leading beyond Samsara to a state of awareness transcending cause and effect. At that point he broke his fast and accepted nourishment in the form of a bowl of rice and milk from a young beautiful village girl named Sujata. Symbolically, she represented the Dakini or the feminine principle and his reintegration with the feminine. The five yogis, who were his companions in ascetic practice, were thoroughly scandalized and disgusted by this action, feeling that he had betrayed them and had abandoned the ascetic path. They turned their backs upon him.

Siddhartha then crossed the Niranjana river to the farther shore. Symbolically, the crossing of water by the hero signifies a change in state of consciousness and a change in one’s state of being. He sat down beneath the Bodhi Tree and vowed to stay there until he found the way beyond Samsara. Symbolically, this tree, which is both the Tree of Life and the Tree of Wisdom, stands at the center of the world. By sitting in meditation here, he re-connected with the center of existence. Practicing meditation, he entered into a condition of mindfulness, that is to say, a remembering to be aware and present at all times and under all circumstances, and this represents the very foundation of meditation practice. Then, in terms of his meditation, he entered into a condition of peaceful calm and practicing higher insight known as shamatha and vipashyana respectively. Thereby he came to discover that the mind, a notion that is just an abstraction, is neither a thing nor a substance, but actually a stream of consciousness in constant flux and change, much like a river. He came to speak to others about this stream of consciousness, not in terms of some entity or substance, but in terms of five interactive processes called skandhas.

At that time, Mara, otherwise known as Kamadeva, the demon-god of lust and death, the lord of this world, came to him, offering him temptations of wealth and power in order to distract his concentration. Mara was afraid that if Siddhartha found the way that led beyond Samsara, this would completely depopulate the world and Mara would have no more subjects in his kingdom. Then Mara called upon his three beautiful scantily-clad daughters to dance and distract the
meditation of the yogi with sex fantasies and thoughts of lust. When this strategy failed, he sent forth his terrifying demon armies against Siddhartha in order to frighten him into distraction. But the future Buddha was unmoved and called upon the Earth Goddess herself to manifest and to witness this fact. Symbolically, this was another indication of centering and grounding, of integrating and being in touch with the earthly and the feminine. Thus Mara and his delusions were overcome and defeated.

Siddhartha continued his meditations through the three watches of the night. Shortly before dawn, he entered into contemplation (samadhi) and discovered the Nature of Mind that lies beyond the mind, or what we normally know as the thought process, but which, is, at the same time, its source and matrix. He discovered the clear, open, unobstructed space of the Nature of Mind, where there is room enough for the manifestation of all possible phenomena of past, present, and future. Moreover, he discovered the clear light of the intrinsic awareness of this Nature of Mind. In brief, he discovered his own Buddha-nature at the core of his being. So, at the first light of dawn, he manifested his enlightenment, like the rising of the sun signifying the dawning of the inner light. Symbolically, this represents the rebirth of the sun, the passage through the darkness of night into the light of dawn. Through his meditation practice, Siddhartha discovered the state of contemplation beyond the mind, the intrinsic awareness of the Nature of Mind, and thereby attained enlightenment. This contemplation represents the non-dual awareness that is beyond the mind, beyond all time, all conditioning, and all causality. The discovery of this and the remaining in that state is what as meant by enlightenment or Bodhi. It was not a temporary experience, like a mystical experience, but a state of being. Siddhartha had awakened, and because he had awakened to the nature of reality, he was thereafter called the Buddha, the awakened one or the enlightened one. And because he belonged to the Shakya tribe, he became known as Shakyamuni, the sage of the Shakyas.

For the next seven weeks he continued to meditate beneath the Bodhi Tree, and he was protected from the storms and the weather by the great serpent or Naga king Muchalinda. This is another symbol of integration with the earthy and the chthonic. Meditating beneath the tree, he found himself attended by Devas and Nagas, the spirits of sky and earth. Even the two high gods Indra and Brahma descended from the distant heavens and, coming before him, requested him to teach. At first he maintained a noble silence because, after having realizing the Real, what more is there to say? But then because of his overflowing compassion for the suffering experienced by sentient beings, he consented to teach. But who? His old teachers were already dead. But then he remembered the five yogis who were his companions previously. They were now dwelling in the deer park at Sarnath near the old city of Varanasi. So he set off in quest of them.

Arriving at Sarnath, the yogis were overwhelmed by the brilliance of his aura and asking the newly awakened Buddha what he had discovered, they requested his teaching. He proceeded to expound his first discourse, “the Discourse of the Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma”. The
word Dharma in the Buddhist context means Reality, what actually exists, but it also means the teaching about what actually exists. So the teaching the Buddha came to be called the Buddha Dharma. The Sangha is the community of practitioners who follow this teaching. The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, that is to say, the teacher, the teaching, and the community, constitute the Three Jewels to which the practitioner goes for refuge in order to enter into the practice of the Dharma. This first exposition of the Dharma by the Buddha was cast in the form of the traditional Ayurvedic medical model, namely, the diagnosis of the disease, the etiology or cause of the disease, the prognosis of the disease, and the prescription for a cure to the disease. These are known as the Four Holy Truths.

**RELEVANCE OF THE DHARMA FOR TODAY**

What is the relevance of the Dharma and the practice of meditation for contemporary life and the modern predicament? For indeed, the Buddha lived in another culture in a distant land and in another period of history some 2500 years ago. What relevance do his teachings have for us in the modern world?

Meditation is found in many spiritual and religious traditions, but it does not always have the same meaning and function there. However, in Ancient India, meditation, yoga, and science of mind were developed to an extraordinary degree. The approach in the Buddhist tradition especially was psychological and very practical. We now find that this approach is very accessible to us because it is empirical and based on the immediate experience of the individual. It is not based on some myth or on some story about the creation of the world that one must accept on faith or on some theological doctrine asserting the existence of a transcendent God. The Buddhist teachings are humanistic rather than theocentric. Buddhist teachings always points to our immediate experience in life. Personal experience is always the touchstone. However, the Buddha merely indicated the way, but we ourselves must walk the path. No one else can do that for us, not even God.

Buddhist meditation practice begins with our actual situation here and now, with our existential predicament. We begin with our present human condition, not with a myth or story about creation of the world or with a doctrine concerning the alien origins of the spirit. This was emphasized in the first discourse of the Buddha, the First Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma. The first Holy Truth is the diagnosis of our present condition or predicament. Our life in this world is ultimately frustrating and dissatisfactory. Even though things may be going well at the moment, inevitably we will suffer from old age, sickness, and death. This is our human condition in time and in the world. It is called Duhkha, which is usually translated as suffering.. It is our illness and our disease. The second Holy Truth represents an etiology or investigation of the cause of this illness of Duhkha. This condition is due firstly to our ignorance, our not knowing and not being aware, and secondly to our craving and desire. This craving is both of unconscious instinctual origin and of consciousness origin. The third Holy Truth is that of the prognosis for this disease, that there exists the possibility of a cure and a cessation of our symptoms. The fourth Holy Truth prescribes the cure or treatment, namely, the Eightfold Path, which is embodied in the threefold training in ethics, meditation and psychology, and philosophy.

Thus, in terms of our human condition, Buddhism places the emphasis on the healing of our
body, soul, and spirit that, in turn, represent our three dimensions of Body, Speech, and Mind. The Buddhist teachings clearly address the ultimate questions concerning our human existence here on this planet earth.

[Note: This is a partial transcript from the workshop entitled “Self-Discovery through Buddhist Meditation”, presented by John Myrdhin Reynolds at Phoenix, Arizona, on October 20, 2001.]