

INDIAN BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY: PROGRESSIVE STAGES OF INSIGHT INTO EMPTINESS

Session One: Buddhist Philosophy as Practice

1. Why does Philosophy matter?

Zen is often introduced as “a special transmission outside the scriptures, not founded upon words and letters. By pointing directly to [one’s] mind, it lets one see into [one’s own true nature] and thus attain Buddhahood”.

Traditionally, Zen tends to throw us in the deep end.

However, Zen teachers also give Dharma Talks, and in a sense, it is through the dharma talks that we present philosophy, but in a way that is also pointing to the direct experiential realisation of Mind.

Also, even Bodhidharma himself came carrying a scroll of the Lankavatara Sutra tucked under his arm and most of the Chan/Zen Masters were well acquainted with the literature that had been translated into Chinese from Sanskrit.

But dharma talks necessarily leave out hundreds of years of philosophy.

In contrast, Tibetan Buddhism has always valued philosophical understanding and debate as an important practice which is inseparable from meditation.

I am not a philosopher but I have found acquainting myself with the Indian Buddhist philosophical tradition has been helpful in enriching my Zen practice and I want to share that with you. And because Indian Buddhist philosophy is also very psychological, I think in the same way we have imported a psychological perspective into Ordinary Mind Zen, we can import a philosophical perspective. So, what have I found helpful?

2. Essential background to understanding the enormous literature on the Sutras and Zen Koans. Important Buddhist teachings on Buddha nature, karma, and the nature of reality, are often referenced in this literature, so having some background in Buddhist philosophy helps to understanding the context of the Zen dialogues.
3. Buddhist philosophy, like the Hellenistic philosophies such as Stoicism and Epicureanism, is primarily concerned with happiness and the alleviation of suffering. The Buddha is quoted as saying "I teach only suffering and the ending of suffering". The role of Buddhist philosophy is to clarify the original teachings, such as the Four Noble Truths, on the origins of suffering and the ending of suffering. For example, by understanding how suffering arises because we fundamentally misinterpret our experience of reality, by seeing permanence where there is only impermanence, independence where there is only interdependence and separate selves where there are none!

To bring our suffering to an end we must see things as they really are – we need to see through our default way of perceiving the world and each other

through the lens of subject-object duality. However, because we are so deeply conditioned to perceive the world in this way, even though philosophy can help us to see things differently, ultimately *only* meditation can uproot our fundamentally deluded way of perceiving reality.

Philosophy in this sense was a kind of therapy that can take us some of the way but in the end it is only meditation that brings us across to the other shore.

4. This is because, in Buddhism the emphasis is not on belief but on direct experience. In some ways we engage in philosophy and then let it go - after it has served its purpose, like the metaphor of the raft to get us to the other shore – once we have reached the other shore we can leave the raft behind.

5. The View, the Path (Meditation and Conduct) and the Result (Liberation)

The View is primary and orientates us to the path we will walk to receive the result (transformation). The view is concerned with liberation from confusion and suffering via the path of meditation and conduct.

6. **SCREEN SHARE: The View and Three Kinds of Wisdom**

The view, the meditation, and the conduct must all work together for our overall practice to be effective. It is possible to seek the view through meditation, but it is also possible to arrive at meditative practice or realization through the view (or philosophy). We achieve this by practicing the three kinds of wisdom:

1. The wisdom that arises through learning or studying

To begin with, we seek to understand these key concepts and frameworks. We learn the content of the teaching. For example, we learn what idea of self the teaching is critiquing.

2. The wisdom that arises through contemplating what you have Learned

When issues and questions emerge, start contemplating them. It doesn't need to be analytical. Questions can just be kept in mind, perhaps during your day. Let yourself think about them. For example, you might ponder whether your "self" is identical to the components of your body and mind, or different from them, or neither identical nor different. Can anything that exists be neither identical nor different?

3. The wisdom that arises through meditation

At a certain point, you might have an *aha!* moment: a breakthrough, when something makes sense. This is when you want to do the settling the mind meditation. Simply allow yourself to be in that *aha!* moment.

7. Indian Buddhist Philosophy included what we would call psychology or cognitive science today. For example, theories of perception. It can be

argued that Zen lost this psychological dimension when the sixth ancestor – promoted only the emptiness teachings to the neglect of the Yogacara philosophy found in the Lankavatara Sutra. In OMZ we talk about a psychologically minded zen practice, initially through the study of contemporary psychology and psychotherapy but I think an appreciation of Buddhist psychology complements this process.

8. It provides us with a foundation for living a meaningful and purposeful life and contributes to the clarification of our values and ethics.

9. **Diversity:** Diverse teachings for diverse people (sangha). It is said there are 84,000 different teachings for the diversity of all people. Hence there are many variations of Buddhist philosophy.

10. **Importance of lineage.** When we are talking about philosophy, we are also talking about the lineage that embodies this philosophy. For example, there are four different schools of Tibetan Buddhism – which could be simplified into those schools that emphasize rationality and those schools which place the emphasis on experience.

11. SCREEN SHARE: OMZS LINEAGE CHART

The Ordinary Mind Zen School is a lay lineage. Independent Lay teachers are a new development in modern times. The first important lay Zen

sangha was called the Sanbo Zen Lineage, which was started by Yasutani Hakuun Roshi in 1954. Maezumi Roshi, who had already received dharma transmission from the traditional Soto lineage, also received transmission from Yasutani, who integrated Koan Zen with Soto Zen.

Joko Beck received dharma transmission from Maezumi, but Joko Beck did not continue the Koan curriculum style of teaching, preferring instead a more psychological approach. Barry Magid continued to emphasize a psychological approach and has also been keen to emphasize our connection with Dogen's Soto Zen, especially Dogen's main practice of *just sitting*. This form of practice can only be understood by appreciating the Mahayana tradition of Buddha nature, the teaching of Original Awakening – awakening is not something we gain but something we recognise is already here. The Soto lineage was established by Dogen, who is the most important philosopher of the Soto lineage. During this course we will get some background on Buddha nature teachings, but we will not be studying Dogen. (We may get to Dogen later in the year).

My studies in Zen have been complemented by studying the nondual teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, in particular, Prajnaparamita, Mahamudra and Dzogchen, with Peter Fenner. Peter Fenner is an Australian nondual teacher and therapist who began his journey as a Tibetan Monk in Australia.

Hence, I can't teach you the **one true Dharma**, because there is no such thing. Every teacher has their version of the Dharma. Everyone teaches in their own way because there is no other way you can teach - it has to be based upon your own realization of the Dharma. So, what will I be teaching you?

- a. The course will culminate in an appreciation of nondual awareness or non-conceptual wisdom as I understand it: *"From earliest of times the Buddha's doctrine of ultimate reality has been presented both in positive as well as negative terms. On the positive side, the Buddha is described as eternal, non-conditioned, compassionate, all-knowing and so forth, having realised nirvana, which is eternal, non-conditioned, bliss and so on. On the negative side, the Buddha is described as having realised nirvana, which is the cessation of all that is conditioned, impermanent, suffering and so on. He realises this through ceasing to cling to conceptual creations, either positive or negative"* (Hookman 1991, 1).
- b. In this sense we bring an end to philosophy and embrace intuitive nonconceptual nondualistic wisdom – prajna.
- c. The background to this understanding will be based in the history of Buddhist philosophy practiced in India before it moved into Tibet and China. I will therefore be covering what the Tibetan Buddhists call the **three turnings of the Dharma**. This begins somewhere around

500 BCE with the original teachings of the historical Buddha through to the end of Indian Buddhist philosophy around 900 CE

12. Outline of Course: The History of Buddhist philosophy in India

- a. First Turning, for example, the Four Noble Truths, The Four marks of existence (No-self/ interdependence, impermanence, suffering and Nirvana) and the first view on the ultimate nature of reality (Abhidharma teachings).
Realist ontology.
- b. Second Turning: Nagarjuna: emptiness of all existence, not just the self. Madhyamaka (Middle Way) School. Anti-Realist constructionist Ontology.
- c. Third Turning: Yogacara (The practice of Yoga) School: emphasis on the experiential aspect of emptiness: nondual wisdom or awareness. Idealist-Cognitivist-Ontology with a Phenomenological View.
 - i. Karma
- d. Great Compassion: The Path of the Bodhisattva.
- e. Revision: Demonstrate application of Buddhist Philosophy
 - i. Heart Sutra
 - ii. Psychology of Self

iii. Koans

f. Nonduality

i. Movie: Awareness: A contemplation with Peter Fenner

13. PHILOSOPHICAL TERMS

a. Metaphysics: what is the nature of ultimate reality?

i. Questions:

What is the nature of Reality?

Is there an external world we can know or can we only know mind?

ii. Ontology: the study of the nature of being, becoming, existence or reality

iii. Nominalism: Buddhist commitments to impermanence and interdependence entails nominalism with respect to universals such as nouns of any kind. They do not exist other than being merely names or labels.

iv. Realism: The view that objects exist in an external world independent of perception or independent of mind.

v. Idealism: The view that reality is mind-only, or consciousness only. This doesn't necessarily mean that there is no reality external to our individual mind, but that reality is also mind-only or consciousness only. In other words, Idealism is not solipsism. Idealism tends towards an appearance/essence

distinction. That appearances are only relatively real or illusory and essential reality or ultimate reality is changeless.

b. Epistemology

i. Questions:

How do we know reality?

What is truth?

Can we have a form of objective knowledge?

- ii. Correspondence to reality (verification/falsification)
- iii. Pragmatism: results are what make a theory or practice true, not correspondence with reality.
- iv. Cognitivism: the view that we never experience an external world we only ever experience the interface between mind and the external world.

c. Phenomenology

- i. The study of phenomena or first-person experience, as distinct from being or ultimate reality

d. Ethics

- i. Innate Goodness and the cultivation of Virtues (The Precepts)
- ii. Consequentialism (Karma)

iii. Good and Evil

References

Hookman, S. K. (1991). The Buddha Within: Tathagatagarbha Doctrine According to the Shentong Interpretation of the Ratnagotravibhaga. Albany, State University of New York Press.

Suggested Reading:

Carpenter, Amber D. "Indian Buddhist Philosophy" Routledge, 2014.