

Lessons from the Buddha's Awakening

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It's possible to derive all the Buddha's teachings from his awakening. That's why his awakening is the object of our conviction: We're convinced that he, through his own powers, gained awakening. And what he saw in the course of his awakening has information that can give us guidance in how we run our lives, even today, more than 2,600 years later.

We have to keep in mind that the Buddha told us very little about his awakening. He emphasized the three main knowledges: knowledge of his past lifetimes, knowledge of how beings are born after they die in line with their karma, and then knowledge of how to put an end to effluents—in other words, how to get rid of the defilements of the mind that keep you bound to this process of samsara. It was the result of that last knowledge that he, the Buddha, gained unbinding.

In the case of the first two knowledges, he gives only a sketch. You remember that story about the handful of leaves, that what he tells us was just a handful of leaves, whereas what he had learned was like all the leaves in the forest. What he tells us about his first knowledge is just enough to give rise to a sense of samvega. He didn't go into all the details about how he'd been a king many times—occasionally, after that, he would mention this, but again, only briefly. The important thing is, what's left? You take on an identity. You have a certain appearance and a name. You belong to a class of beings. You have experiences of pleasure and pain. You eat certain food. And then you die. That's it. And you do that over and over and over again. That's the information he conveyed, again, for the purpose of samvega.

Later on in his teaching career, he would elaborate, but again, it was all for the purpose of samvega. Think about his simile of the ocean: The tears you've shed over your many, many lifetimes are more than all the water in the oceans. And that's just, say, over the death of your mother. Over the death of your father, you've shed tears more than the water in all the oceans. Over the death of a son, more than all the waters in the oceans. The same with the death of a daughter, a brother, a sister.

His reflection on how it'd be hard to meet someone who hadn't been a mother father, daughter, sister, son, or brother was not meant to encourage thoughts of goodwill for everybody, because after all, we know what family life is like. It has its positive and its negative side. But just the fact that you've had those close

relationships so many times, and then they end and get scattered apart: When you meet people, you have to think, “This person was my mother at some point, and now this person’s a total stranger.” It’s meant to give rise, again, to samvega, for a desire for release.

When you look at the Buddha’s teachings, ask yourself: What are they intended to inspire in you? In this case, the answer is: samvega.

The same for the second knowledge: Beings are reborn in line with their karma. Their karma is influenced by their views, and their views are influenced by whom they respect. Just those facts can take you all over these many, many levels of the cosmos. The Buddha very rarely goes into detail about what he saw that night and how many levels there are. He gives a broad sketch, but he doesn’t provide a census. In the Mahasamaya Sutta, which does give a list of all the devas who came to see him one night, he says that these were not all the devas in the universe. Most of them came. Then again, they’re listed as groups, as types, in addition to the naming of some individuals. It would be hard to go anywhere in the world where you wouldn’t find the local deities and local spirits falling into one of those types.

One of the interesting developments in the history of Buddhism *after* the Buddha was a desire to fill in all the details, to paint a complete picture of the cosmos. There’s a book out—I think it’s called *The Buddhist Cosmos*—that talks about the beliefs that developed over time. It doesn’t make much distinction between which parts of the picture come from the Canon, which parts come from the commentaries and later texts—which is a shame, because the later interest in all those different levels seems to go beyond what the Buddha intended, which is to think simply that no matter how good it gets within the realm of fabrication, it’s all going to end. You become a deva, you become a Brahma, you think that you’re the creator of the universe, even—and then you fall from that, and you become an ordinary being of one kind or another.

You can think about all the work that’s done to get up to those high levels. And think about how people, when they get to a high level, get the rewards of their good actions, but then their rewards, even though they’re pleasant, can spoil them. As I’ve said before, samsara’s like a sick joke: You work hard to get higher up in the cosmos, and then the very rewards of your good actions turn on you. So again, the purpose of thinking about all this is to get a sense of samvega, to get a sense that you really want to get out.

Another one of the strange developments over time: There were some deities who said, No, they’re not just regular deities. They’re actually bodhisattvas, and they’re going to teach you the special, secret doctrine that the Buddha didn’t

teach his immediate followers because it's too special and secret. It's very much different from what the Buddha taught, and that's a sign of how special it is. That's what they say. Of course, these deities don't come with identity cards. There's no deva certification agency. So you have to regard them with suspicion.

The Buddha said the Dhamma is whatever is in line with what he taught. For example, he taught that things arise and pass away. The later teachings came out and said, "No, nothing arises. Nothing passes away. It's all a great oneness." But if everything were a great oneness, what are we doing here? The Buddha said of the things that arise and pass away, and especially suffering: It's real, not other than what it seems to be. It really is suffering. The cause of suffering really is a cause of suffering. And the path really is the path. And the cessation of suffering to which that path leads—that's the highest noble truth.

That's what the Buddha discovered in his third knowledge of the night. He was able to discover it because he didn't get waylaid by the kinds of questions that normally would waylay people as a result of the first two knowledges. There are many people who, prior to the Buddha, had seen their previous lifetimes and seen beings dying and being reborn. But they would start asking the question, "What is it that stays the same as beings change from one life to the next?" That turned it into a question of identity. The Buddha said, "Actually, the real issue is the actions." So he looked in more detail at the actions. That's how he arrived at the principle that when you pass away, it's not just your cumulative karma from the past. It's also the choices you make at the moment of death that will determine where you go—the combination of the two. And it's not just the moment of death that's important. It's every moment when you're making choices.

When he saw that that was the case, he realized it would be useful to look at the present moment in his own mind and see what choices he was making, and how he might make choices that would lead to the end of suffering. And he saw that if you divided experience into four categories—suffering, its cause, the cessation of suffering, and the path leading there, without reference to who was doing it or where it was happening—that's how you can get out: by comprehending the suffering, abandoning the cause, realizing the cessation, and developing the path going there.

That was the part of his teaching that he taught in great detail, again and again and again. Either he'd talk about the suffering and go into the five aggregates and what clinging is, or he went into the different types of craving and the conditions leading to craving, or he went into the factors of the path—particularly the factors of the path, because those are the things that are going to get you out.

So as you think about the Buddha's awakening and what it means to have conviction in it, remember that the huge focus is on the third knowledge. That's where all the details come. The other two are more for background. And as I said, they're just a sketch. There are very few stories of the Buddha's previous lifetimes in the parts of the Canon that seem to be original. The Jataka tales are in the Commentary. And as for the verses associated with them, even though they are in the Canon, they seem to be a much later addition—because the previous births not where the real issue lies. As the Buddha said, the parts he taught about his awakening—the four noble truths—are for the sake of getting people to come to the end of suffering. You focus on that, and you're focusing on the right spot. Which is why we're here meditating, developing some of the factors of the path—right mindfulness, right concentration—or, at the very least, trying to. But by doing this, we're putting ourselves in the same spot where the Buddha was.

That's the other part about having conviction in the Buddha's awakening. As he said, his awakening came from developing qualities that any human being can develop. This is where we're going to learn the truth about the awakening—not by reading the books, but by developing those qualities in our own minds, and listening to the advice that he gave on how we can apply those qualities so that we can get the same results that he did. This is a point you hear again and again in the Forest tradition: Even though, as followers of the Buddha, we may not have the same breadth of knowledge that he gained, still the purity of mind that can be attained is the same for everyone. You'll know whether that's true or not only if you really give yourself to the path, which demands that you learn how to be very observant.

This is why the forest masters don't explain everything. There's a passage I found in Ajaan Chah's talks. He had a Western disciple who was always asking questions: "What's this? What does this mean? What does that mean?" Ajaan Chah said it's like a father getting questions from his own child, asking, "What's this animal? What's that animal?" The father will answer for a while. But then he'll get to a point where he says, "Well, you've got to figure this out on your own," because it's only in exercising your own ingenuity that you're going to grow up and develop the discernment you need. It's not a matter of paint-by-number.

The Buddha developed discernment. He developed concentration. You've got to develop discernment and concentration through the two qualities he said were necessary for every follower on the path: that you, one, be honest, and two, be observant. You commit yourself to the path, and then you reflect on what you're doing. That's how you come to know.