

# *Understanding the Buddha's Teachings* (excerpt)

Thich Nhat Hanh

THE HEART OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING

When we hear a Dharma talk or study a sutra, our only job is to remain open. Usually when we hear or read something new, we just compare it to our own ideas. If it is the same, we accept it and say that it is correct. If it is not, we say it is incorrect. In either case, we learn nothing. If we read or listen with an open mind and an open heart, the rain of the Dharma will penetrate the soil of our consciousness. (1)

*The gentle spring rain permeates the soil of my soul.*

*A seed that has lain deeply in the earth for many years just smiles. (2)*

While reading or listening, don't work too hard. Be like the earth. When the rain comes, the earth only has to open herself up to the rain. Allow the rain of the Dharma to come in and penetrate the seeds that are buried deep in your consciousness. A teacher cannot give you the truth. The truth is already in you. You only need *to* open yourself - body, mind, and heart - so that his or her teachings will penetrate your own seeds of understanding and enlightenment. If you let the words enter you, the soil and the seeds will do the rest of the work.

The transmission of the teachings of the Buddha can be divided into three streams: Source Buddhism, Many-Schools Buddhism, and Mahayana Buddhism. Source Buddhism includes all the teachings the Buddha gave during his lifetime. One hundred forty years after the Buddha's Great Passing Away, the Sangha divided into two schools: Mahasanghika (literally "majority," referring to those who wanted changes) and Sthaviravada (literally, "School of Elders," referring to those who opposed the changes advocated by the Maha-sanghikas). A hundred years after that, the Sthaviravada divided into two branches — Sarvastivada ("the School that Proclaims Everything Is") and Vibhajyavada ("the School that Discriminates"). The Vibhajyavadins, supported by King Ashoka, flourished in the Ganges valley, while the Sarvastivadins went north to Kashmir.

For four hundred years during and after the Buddha's lifetime, his teachings were transmitted only orally. After that, monks in the Tamrashatiya School ("those who wear copper-colored robes") in Sri Lanka, a derivative of the Vibhajyavada School, began to think about writing the Buddha's discourses on palm leaves, and it took another hundred years to begin. By that time, it is said that there was only one monk who had memorized the whole canon and that he was somewhat arrogant. The other monks had to persuade him to recite the discourses so they could write them down. When we hear this, we feel a little uneasy knowing that an arrogant monk may not have been the best vehicle to transmit the teachings of the Buddha.

Even during the Buddha's lifetime, there were people such as the monk Ariththa, who misunderstood the Buddha's teachings and conveyed them incorrectly.(3) It is also apparent that some of the monks who memorized the sutras over the centuries did not understand their deepest meaning, or at the very least, they forgot or changed some words. As a result, some of the Buddha's teachings were distorted even before they were written down. Before the Buddha

attained full realization of the path, for example, he had tried various methods to suppress his mind, and they did not work. In one discourse, he recounted:

I thought, Why don't I grit my teeth, press my tongue against my palate, and use my mind to repress my mind? Then, as a wrestler might take hold of the head or the shoulders of someone weaker than he, and, in order to restrain and coerce that person, he has to hold him down constantly without letting go for a moment, so I gritted my teeth, pressed my tongue against my palate, and used my mind to suppress my mind. As I did this, I was bathed in sweat. Although I was not lacking in strength, although I maintained mindfulness and did not fall from mindfulness, my body and my mind were not at peace, and I was exhausted by these efforts. This practice caused other feelings of pain to arise in me besides the pain associated with the austerities, and I was not able to tame my mind. (4)

Obviously, the Buddha was telling us not to practice in this way. Yet this passage was later inserted into other discourses to convey exactly the opposite meaning:

Just as a wrestler takes hold of the head or the shoulders of someone weaker than himself, restrains and coerces that person, and holds him down constantly, not letting go for one moment, so a monk who meditates in order to stop all unwholesome thoughts of desire and aversion, when these thoughts continue to arise, should grit his teeth, press his tongue against his palate, and do his best to use his mind to beat down and defeat his mind. (5)

Often, we need to study several discourses and compare them in order to understand which is the true teaching of the Buddha. It is like stringing precious jewels together to make a necklace. If we see each sutra in light of the overall body of teachings, we will not be attached to any one teaching. With comparative study and looking deeply into the meaning of the texts, we can surmise what is a solid teaching that will help our practice and what is probably an incorrect transmission.

By the time the Buddha's discourses were written down in Pali in Sri Lanka, there were eighteen or twenty schools, and each had its own recension of the Buddha's teachings. These schools did not tear the teachings of the Buddha apart but were threads of a single garment. Two of these recensions exist today: the Tamrashatiya and Sarvastivada canons. Recorded at about the same time, the former was written down in Pali and the latter in Sanskrit and Prakrit. The sutras that were written down in Pali in Sri Lanka are known as the Southern transmission, or "Teachings of the Elders" (Theravada). The Sarvastivada texts, known as the Northern transmission, exist only in fragmented form. Fortunately, they were translated into Chinese and Tibetan, and many of these translations are still available. We have to remember that the Buddha did not speak Pali, Sanskrit, or Prakrit. He spoke a local dialect called Magadhi or Ardhamagadhi, and there is no record of the Buddha's words in his own language.

By comparing the two extant sutra recensions, we can see which teachings must have preceded Buddhism's dividing into schools. When the sutras of both transmissions are the same, we can conclude that what they say must have been there before the division. When the recensions are different, we can surmise that one or both might be incorrect. The Northern transmission preserved some discourses better, and the Southern transmission preserved others better. That is the advantage of having two transmissions to compare.

The third stream of the Buddha's teaching, Mahayana Buddhism, arose in the first or second century B.C.E. (6) In the centuries following the Buddha's life, the practice of the Dharma had become the exclusive domain of monks and nuns, and laypeople were limited to supporting the ordained Sangha with food, shelter, clothing, and medicine. By the first century B.C.E., many monks and nuns seemed to be practicing only for themselves, and reaction was inevitable. The ideal put forth by the Mahayanists was that of the bodhisattva, who practiced and taught for the benefit of everyone.

These three streams complement one another. It was impossible for Source Buddhism to remember everything the Buddha had taught, so it was necessary for Many-Schools Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism to renew teachings that had been forgotten or overlooked. Like all traditions, Buddhism needs to renew itself regularly in order to stay alive and grow. The Buddha always found new ways to express his awakening. Since the Buddha's lifetime, Buddhists have continued to open new Dharma doors to express and share the teachings begun in the Deer Park in Sarnath.

Please remember that a sutra or a Dharma talk is not insight in and of itself. It is a means of presenting insight, using words and concepts. When you use a map to get to Paris, once you have arrived, you can put the map away and enjoy being in Paris. If you spend all your time with your map, if you get caught by the words and notions presented by the Buddha, you'll miss the reality. The Buddha said many times, "My teaching is like a finger pointing to the moon. Do not mistake the finger for the moon."

In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, it is said, "If you explain the meaning of every word and phrase in the sutras, you slander the Buddhas of the three times - past, present, and future. But if you disregard even one word of the sutras, you risk speaking the words of Mara. Sutras are essential guides for our practice, but we must read them carefully and use our own intelligence and the help of a teacher and a Sangha to understand the true meaning and put it into practice. After reading a sutra or any spiritual text, we should feel lighter, not heavier. Buddhist teachings are meant to awaken our true self, not merely to add to our storehouse of knowledge.

From time to time the Buddha refused to answer a question posed to him. The philosopher Vatsigotra asked,

*"Is there a self?"*

and the Buddha did not say anything. Vatsigotra persisted,

*"Do you mean there is no self?"* but the Buddha still did not reply.

Finally, Vatsigotra left.

Ananda, the Buddha's attendant, was puzzled.

*"Lord, you always teach that there is no self. Why did you not say so to Vatsigotra?"*

The Buddha told Ananda that he did not reply because Vatsigotra was looking for a theory, not a way to remove obstacles. On another occasion, the Buddha heard a group of disciples discussing whether or not he had said such and such, and he told them, *"For forty-five years, I have not uttered a single word."* He did not want his disciples to be caught by words or notions, even his own. When an archaeologist finds a statue that has been broken, he invites sculptors who specialize in restoration to study the art of that period and repair the statue. We must do the same. If we have an overall view of the teachings of the Buddha, when a piece is missing or has been added, we have to recognize it and repair the damage.

1. According to Buddhist psychology, our consciousness is divided into eight parts, including mind consciousness (manovijñāna) and store consciousness (ālayavijñāna). Store consciousness is described as a field in which every kind of seed can be planted — seeds of suffering, sorrow, fear, and anger, and seeds of happiness and hope. When these seeds sprout, they manifest in our mind consciousness, and when they do, they become stronger. See fig. 5 on p. 208.
2. From Thich Nhat Hanh, "Cuckoo Telephone," in *Call Me By My True Names*, p. 176.
3. Arittha Sutta (Discourse on Knowing the Better Way to Catch a Snake), *Majjhima Nikaya* 22. See Thich Nhat Hanh, *Thundering Silence: Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Catch a Snake* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), pp. 47-49.
4. Mahasaccaka Sutta, *Majjhima Nikaya* 36.
5. Vitakka Santhana Sutta, *Majjhima Nikaya* 20. This same passage was inserted into a Sarvastivada version of the Buddha's discourse on mindfulness, *Nian Chujing, Madhyama Agama* 26, Taisho Revised Tripitaka.
- 6 See Thich Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love: The Practice of Looking Deeply in the Mahayana Buddhist Tradition* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1996).
- 7 Mara: the Tempter, the Evil One, the Killer, the opposite of the Buddha nature in each person. Sometimes personalized as a deity.