

Background for Zen Practice

There are some core teachings at the heart of Buddhist practice. Here are some brief introductions to these principles.

Four Noble Truths

The Buddha's first discourse following his enlightenment was the teaching on the four noble truths. Here is Nanamoli's translation of this discourse, given to the five disciples who had followed him so faithfully, and then abandoned him when he seemed to forsake the ascetic's life by taking nourishment. It begins with Ananda's customary opening, Thus I have heard:

Setting Rolling the Wheel of Truth

(Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana-sutta)

Thus I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Benares in the Deer Park at Isipatana (the Resort of Seers). There he addressed the bhikkhus of the group of five.

"Bhikkhus, these two extremes ought not to be cultivated by one gone forth from the house-life. What are the two? There is devotion to indulgence of pleasure in the objects of sensual desire, which is inferior, low, vulgar, ignoble, and leads to no good; and there is devotion to self-torment, which is painful, ignoble and leads to no good.

"The middle way discovered by a Perfect One avoids both these extremes; it gives vision, it gives knowledge, and it leads to peace, to direct acquaintance, to discovery, to nibbana. And what is that middle way? It is simply the noble eightfold path, that is to say, right view, right intention; right speech, right action, right livelihood; right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. That is the middle way discovered by a Perfect One, which gives vision, which gives knowledge, and which leads to peace, to direct acquaintance, to discovery, to nibbana.

"Suffering, as a noble truth, is this: Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; association with the loathed is suffering, dissociation from the loved is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering — in short, suffering is the five categories of clinging objects.

"The origin of suffering, as a noble truth, is this: It is the craving that produces renewal of being accompanied by enjoyment and lust, and enjoying this and that; in other words, craving for sensual desires, craving for being, craving for non-being.

"Cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, is this: It is remainderless fading and ceasing, giving up, relinquishing, letting go and rejecting, of that same craving.

"The way leading to cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, is this: It is simply the noble eightfold path, that is to say, right view, right intention; right speech, right action, right livelihood; right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

"Suffering, as a noble truth, is this.' Such was the vision, the knowledge, the understanding, the finding, the light, that arose in regard to ideas not heard by me before. 'This suffering, as a noble truth, can be diagnosed.' Such was the vision, the knowledge, the understanding, the finding, the light, that arose in regard to ideas not heard by me before. 'This suffering, as a noble truth, has been diagnosed.' Such was the vision, the knowledge, the understanding, the finding, the light, that arose in regard to ideas not heard by me before.

"The origin of suffering, as a noble truth, is this.' Such was the vision... 'This origin of suffering, as a noble truth, can be abandoned.' Such was the vision... 'This origin of suffering, as a noble truth, has been abandoned.' Such was the vision... in regard to ideas not heard by me before.

"Cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, is this.' Such was the vision... 'This cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, can be verified.' Such was the vision... 'This cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, has been verified.' Such was the vision... in regard to ideas not heard by me before.

"The way leading to cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, is this.' Such was the vision... 'This way leading to cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, can be developed.' Such was the vision... 'This way leading to the cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, has been developed.' Such was the vision... in regard to ideas not heard by me before.

"As long as my knowing and seeing how things are, was not quite purified in these twelve aspects, in these three phases of each of the four noble truths, I did not claim in the world with its gods, its Maras and high divinities, in this generation with its monks and

brahmans, with its princes and men to have discovered the full awakening that is supreme. But as soon as my knowing and seeing how things are, was quite purified in these twelve aspects, in these three phases of each of the four noble truths, then I claimed in the world with its gods, its Maras and high divinities, in this generation with its monks and brahmans, its princes and men to have discovered the full awakening that is supreme. Knowing and seeing arose in me thus: 'My heart's deliverance is unassailable. This is the last birth. Now there is no renewal of being.'

That is what the Blessed One said. The bhikkhus of the group of five were glad, and they approved his words.

The Teachings on the Four Noble Truths

There are two different interpretations of the Buddha's teachings on the Four Noble Truths. They are mutually exclusive: ultimately you will discover or determine based on your experience and understanding, which one makes the most sense to you. The first view is the "canonical view," the one taught by Buddhist scholars and teachers for many hundreds of years. The second view is proposed by David Brazier, a Buddhist teacher, scholar, and psychotherapist in the book *The Feeling Buddha*. He returned to the root meanings of the terms the Buddha used and studied the Buddha's style of teaching and presentation and came to a radically different understanding.

Overview of the Traditional Teaching

The first noble truth, the truth of *dukkha*, is that all formations are characterized by suffering, dissatisfaction, disease, and in this view refers to suffering as distinct from pain. This is explained by the second noble truth, *samudaya*, that suffering is the result of craving or clinging. Desire for sensual pleasure and the avoidance of pain create suffering. The third noble truth, *nirodha*, is that everything that arises also ceases, and thus cessation of suffering is possible. The fourth noble truth, *marga*, lays out the eightfold path by which this cessation can be achieved, through the cultivation of right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right samadhi (concentration of the mind, insight). Practice under

this model focuses on the elimination of craving or attachment, and the ongoing effort to follow the eightfold path.

Overview of Brazier's Teaching

David Brazier presents his quite radically different interpretation in *The Feeling Buddha*. The first noble truth, the truth of *dukkha*, is the inescapable fact of suffering that is bound up with existence. Every life is subject to the suffering of birth, losses, sickness, old age, and death. The Buddha mentioned these physical sources of suffering to make it clear that *dukkha* refers not just to psychological distress, but to the inescapable fact that life is bound up with suffering. To face this truth fully and accept it is noble. The second noble truth, *samudaya*, is that together with suffering arises thirst, the natural longing or craving in the face of suffering: our deep desire that reality be other than it is. It is noble to recognize this natural and inescapable arising, and to meet it. The third noble truth, *nirodha*, comes from the root word for containment, literally from the word for an earthen bank built around a fire so that its energy can be useful—neither extinguished nor uncontrollable. There is nobility in this sense of containing the energy that arises as we meet *dukkha* and experience *samudaya*. This is the truth of "intimacy with all things:" without suppressing, venting, "zoning out," or distracting ourselves, we meet directly and intimately the suffering, the longing, and our aspiration to transform it into that which serves life and benefits ourselves and others. Containment here does not refer to muscular attempts at some kind of "equanimity" or stoicism. It means the capacity to hold all that we encounter within our vast aspiration for our lives and our world. The fourth noble truth, *marga*, is a description of just what such a life looks like: it is the result of our engagement with life and our containment of its fires, and that containment is ultimately expressed through right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right samadhi. In Brazier's view, Nanamoli's translation above is a mistranslation: the word *cessation* should actually be translated as *containment*. Because scholars disagree on the precise translation of this word, and because it seems to have several different meanings, the

“correct” interpretation probably can never be known. It’s up to you.

The View from Appamada

Here at Appamada we do not generally concern ourselves with scholarly debates over the fine points of translation. We have been reading Brazier’s book, primarily because it offers a fresh look at these ancient teachings, with great interest and discussion. But our fundamental practice is zazen, and we hold the four noble truths in our regular chant, which seems congruent with either perspective:
Caught in the self-centered dream, only suffering;
holding to self-centered thoughts, exactly the dream;
each moment, life as it is, the only teacher;
being just this moment, compassion’s way.

So the question is up to you: what do you do about suffering, and the thirst that accompanies it?

The Buddhist Precepts

In Soto Zen, practitioners may take these precepts in a formal ceremony. The ceremony represents a public declaration of an aspiration to follow the Buddha way, but they are ethical principles that seem to be generally shared by all great wisdom traditions. They are not in conflict with principles of other religions. We present the precepts as an unfolding aspiration that we are realizing moment by moment.

The three pure precepts:

To refrain from all evil
To make every effort to live in enlightenment
To live and be lived for the benefit of all beings

The ten grave precepts:

A disciple of Buddha does not kill
A disciple of Buddha does not take what is not given
A disciple of Buddha does not misuse sexuality
A disciple of Buddha does not lie
A disciple of Buddha does not intoxicate mind or body of self or others
A disciple of Buddha does not speak of the faults of others
A disciple of Buddha does not praise self at the expense of others
A disciple of Buddha is not possessive of anything, especially the dharma

A disciple of Buddha does not harbor ill will
A disciple of Buddha does not disparage the Triple Treasure

Three Marks of Existence

Dukkha

All existence is bound up with suffering, dissatisfaction, distress. This refers not only to physical existence, but also psychological and emotional formations as well. We include here social structures, institutions, and relationships.

Anatta

Nothing whatsoever has any independently existing self. Also included here are social structures, institutions, and relationships. This is the teaching of mutual causation, or dependent origination.

Everything exists because of everything else and in relation to everything else that is or has ever been or will ever be.

Anicca

Everything is impermanent. It exists in a state of flux in which it is part of an ongoing process of coming into being, maintaining its existence, declining, and ceasing to be. While some things are decaying other new ones are coming into beings. This is true for thoughts, feelings, sensations, perceptions, social structures, institutions, and relationships.

A fourth term is often included:

Nirvana, literally, “the other shore.” Liberation from samsaric existence, the cycle of suffering we create for ourselves and others.

The Chain of Dependent Arising

This “chain” described by the Buddha is actually more like a web, in that it arises at once and together, but it is mutually dependently arisen. It is like a chain in the Buddha’s metaphor, because if you cut any link, the whole chain drops away. And it is like a chain in that we are all chained within it, quite blind about its workings, until we are liberated. There is no such thing as “partial freedom.” There is, however, a process for the realization of complete freedom. It is called the Buddha Way.

The typical formulation the Buddha used for describing this chain was “dependent on this, that arises.” We can think about this through the example of the whole miserable complex of poverty, drug abuse, gang violence, child abuse, crime, and

depression. It comes into being all together, in a web of mutual causation. For this reason, there are no simple solutions. Here is the great chain of being as the Buddha taught it:

The Twelve-fold Chain of Causation

(Paticca-samuppada)

Short Form:

When this is, that is.

When this arises, that arises.

When this is not, that is not.

This ceasing, that ceases.

1. Through ignorance is conditioned volitional actions or karma formations.
2. Through volitional actions are conditioned consciousness.
3. Through consciousness is conditioned mental and physical phenomena.
4. Through mental and physical phenomena are conditioned the 6 faculties.
5. Through the six faculties are conditioned (sensory and mental) contact.
6. Through (sensory and mental) contact is conditioned sensation.
7. Through sensation is conditioned desire.
8. Through desire is conditioned clinging.
9. Through clinging is conditioned the process of becoming.
10. Through the process of becoming is conditioned birth.
11. Through the process of birth is conditioned
12. Decay, death, lamentation, pain

Steve Hagen's teaching on dependent arising:

Bondage is...

- 1...to ignore the Reality of this moment. It is blindness to the direct perception that this moment neither arises, persists, nor perishes.
- 2...instability of mind, caused by ignorance, that sets the mind to leaning. All actions produced by such a mind are willed.

3...to discriminate between separate objects of mind, and to see them as persisting from moment to moment.

4...to see distinct, persistent, self-identical mind and body supporting consciousness. Thus a subject is discerned, along with its objects.

5...to conceive a world of mind objects, external to body and mind, as being taken in through the windows of the senses.

6...to conceive that through sensation the subject makes contact with an objective world, "out there."

7...to react emotionally to the objects of mind, while remaining isolated from them.

8...to experience wanting and craving, since mind objects are conceived as being apart from "me," the subject.

9...to grasp at what appears "out there." It's the hopeless wish that this moment will either vanish or last.

10...to conceive (believe in) the persistence (existence) of self and other.

11...to conceive (believe) that all beings have come into existence.

12...to conceive (believe) that all beings will die.

Liberation is...

1...to see the reality of this moment. It is to perceive directly that this moment neither arises, persists, nor perishes.

2...to see no substance in any object of mind. Hence the mind leans neither toward nor away. All actions produced by such a mind are unwilled.

3...to see all mind objects as momentary and conditional.

4...to see no persistent mind or body – no subject – since there are no distinct and persistent mind objects available to perception.

5...to see sensation as a function of Mind alone – that the objects of Mind are never external to Mind, but are always Mind itself.

6...to realize there's no connection or disconnection between the senses and a world external to Mind.

7...not being swept away by emotion. Since nothing is perceived as external to Mind, feeling is ever intimate.

8...not to want. Since nothing is perceived as being "out there," there's no sense that anything is lacking.

9...to see all of experience as utter fluidity and, therefore, as nothing to grasp, own, or fear.

10...to see all as stream.

11...to see that nothing is born.

12...to see that nothing dies.

Steve Hagen, *Buddhism Plain and Simple*

Other books for the Beginner's Mind:

Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*.

Joko Beck, *Everyday Zen*.

Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*.

Pema Chödrön, *Start Where You Are*.

Dainin Katagiri, *Returning to Silence*.

Jack Kornfield, *A Path With Heart*.

Mark Epstein, *Thoughts Without a Thinker*.

Guide to Terminology Used in Soto Zen

Note: Many of the Japanese forms in traditional Soto Zen are not practiced by Joko's followers, and other terms have been rendered in English. We speak of practice discussion or practice interview rather than dokusan or daisan, for example. However, you may be curious about these terms you might encounter when visiting more traditional Zen centers.

Buddha	Gautama Siddhartha, the historical figure who realized enlightenment, and whose teachings are the foundation of Buddhism.	duhkha	literally, "wheel out of kilter," also translated as stress, suffering, dissatisfaction, dis-ease. Buddha's first noble truth states that all existence is marked by duhkha.
buddha	any fully enlightened being, not necessarily a Buddhist practitioner or student.	fukudo	technically, the assistant to the doan. The fukudo strikes the han to signal the beginning of zazen, hits the mukugyo (small drum) for Japanese chants during services, and strikes the time drum and the densho bell when needed.
Buddha nature	the inherent quality of being a buddha, always already present in every sentient being.	gassho	a formal position of the hands in which you bring the hands together a few inches in front of your nose, palms flat and pressed together. For a gassho bow place your hands in gassho position and bow from the hips.
Buddhadharma	The teachings of Buddha; the path or lived experience of Buddhism.	han	a flat wooden board that is struck with a mallet to signal the beginning of zazen. Originally it served to summon the monks from the fields and far reaches of the monastery. There are three sequences of hits, each one followed by a rolldown. Zen practice is to be seated in your place by the second rolldown.
chiden	one who takes care of the altars, cleaning the incensors, trimming the candles, tending the flowers, and making sure there are supplies available.	jukai	A formal ceremony in which a Zen student receives the precepts and a Buddhist name, and commits to following the Buddhist path
dharma	the teachings of Buddha. the path or way taught by Buddha, or the teachings of the enlightened ones who have followed Buddha.	karma	the traces or consequences of every thought, word, and action
doan	literally, one who takes care of the temple. In practice, the person who keeps the time and rings the bells to signal the beginning and end of zazen periods. The doan also lights candles and rings the bells for service.	kesa	the formal robe worn by a Zen priest, representative of Buddha's robe
dokusan/ daisan	one-on-one meeting with a Zen teacher to discuss practice. Different teachers have more or less formal meetings with students. Topics range widely from managing physical pain in zazen to integration between practice and daily life, techniques for developing awareness, koan study, and so on.	kinhin	walking meditation, most often between periods of zazen, sitting meditation. In kinhin, the left hand is folded into a fist with the thumb inside, pressed close to the solar plexus, and the right hand rests on top of it.
doshi	the Zen priest officiating at a service or ceremony.	koan	a story or saying, typically paradoxical or puzzling, used for teaching and practice, often to generate "great doubt," and to demonstrate the limitations of our conventional ways of thinking

kokyo	the person who announces and leads the chants during services	samsara	the world of suffering, delusion, old age, birth and death, and everyday phenomena, conditioned existence; an illusional experience masking ultimate reality
mudra	generally, any one of a number of special positions of the hands, held still. In zazen, the left hand is cradled in the lap with the right hand resting in it. The two thumbs are lightly touching, so that the hands form an oval. This position provides an alive, steady, and calm resting posture for the hands.	sangha	a community of Buddhist practitioners. Any group of people who practice regularly together, who share an aspiration to realize the awakened life, and who support each other in this aspiration.
mukugyo	a small wooden drum, often shaped like a fish, that is used to keep time for Japanese chants during services	seiza	a sitting position that can be used for meditation, during talks, while waiting for practice interviews, or eating oryoki. In seiza you sit upright in a kneeling position, sometimes supported by a zafu or a small bench.
oryoki	a formal meal that also serves as mindfulness practice in eating. Special bowls and utensils are used, food is formally served, and meal verses are chanted. Oryoki developed as an efficient and mindful way to serve and clean up after meals in monasteries with many monks.	sesshin	a period of intensive Zen practice, lasting anywhere from three days to a month or more. Zen practitioners come together in silence, doing zazen, eating, working, taking breaks, meeting with a teacher for practice discussion, listening to talks, and having services.
practice period	a period of time in which Zen practitioners have an opportunity to explore a deeper commitment or dedication to their practice, through attending sesshins or classes, more frequent participation in zazen and other sangha activities.	shashu	A formal position of the hands in which the left hand is folded into a fist with the thumb inside, pressed close to the solar plexus, and the right hand rests on top of it. This forms a quiet, steady posture. This position is used in kinhin and also when walking about in the Zendo or monastery.
rakusu	A small, symbolic version of Buddha's robe, sewn by a Zen student while undertaking formal precept study. A rakusu is worn around the neck, like a bib. On the back of the rakusu, the Zen teacher writes the student's Buddhist name and the date of the formal ceremony, jukai, when the student officially receives the precepts and commits to the Buddhist path. The teacher signs the rakusu and sometimes adds a verse or saying.	Soto, Soto Zen	One of two major branches of Zen; the other branch is Rinzai. Soto Zen is commonly held to have originated with the great Zen teacher, poet, and philosopher Dogen.
Rinzai, Rinzai Zen	One of two major branches of Zen; the other branch is Soto. Rinzai Zen is commonly held to have originated with Lin Chi, Rinzai in Japanese.	tokudo	literally, "home leaving." The formal ceremony in which a Zen priest is ordained.
samadhi	a state in deep meditation, marked by profound clarity, equanimity, awareness, and egolessness	zabuton	the large rectangular mat used for zazen, sitting meditation. The zafu—small round cushion—is placed on top of the zabuton
		zafu	the small cushion used in sitting meditation, most often round
		zazen	the practice of sitting meditation; still, silent, mindful awareness

- zen** historically, a form of Buddhism that originated in China, where it is called ch'an. Zen is distinguished by its emphasis on sitting meditation as the path to enlightenment, rather than the study of scriptures or practice of rituals. Zen is also marked by directness, curiosity, spontaneity, and immediate experience of the present moment. It is remarkably free of dogma or doctrine, and is fundamentally grounded in the practice of wisdom and compassion. Thus it is a practice, rather than a faith or a set of beliefs.
- zendo** the meditation hall; any room that is being used for zazen