

Outline for Class 5

Buddha Nature

The purpose of all dharma practice is to realize the highest potential of a human life — Buddhahood.

Buddhahood can be described as being a state of perfect wisdom and perfect compassion. It is based on the historical Buddha's accomplishment of this spiritual state, and on the teachings he gave so others could accomplish this state, as well.

During the historical Buddha's life, he taught extensively about the nature of the mind and the nature of our experience. The Buddha taught that each being has a mind that is distinct, and that the ultimate nature of this mind is limitless, clear and aware.

This innate limitlessness, clarity and awareness of the mind has since been called "Buddha Nature," and is said to have the qualities of absolute wisdom, goodness, sanity, and compassion.

The Three Veils

The job of each sentient being is to uncover this basic nature, which usually is hidden behind what are called the Three Veils: Afflictive Emotions, Habitual Patterns, and Conceptual Knowledge.

These veils are said to cover our basic nature much the way that clouds cover the sun. The sun is never itself affected by the clouds, but the sun's light can be temporarily obscured by them.

Afflictive Emotions cloud the mind by pulling us to and fro through strong waves of anger, attachment and bewilderment. Habitual Patterns obstruct our mind by forcing us to view ourselves and our world through a haze of prejudicial and self-defeating attitudes. The Veil of Conceptual Knowledge prevents us from experiencing our minds as limitless and vast by telling us our minds are limited and that we live in a limiting world that is solid, permanent, and cannot be changed.

So, just as clouds can block the sun's light, our basic nature can be obscured by conflicting emotions, habitual patterns, and a belief in a solid, real, and unchanging self and world.

So, how do we begin the process of uncovering our Buddha Nature?

Renouncing Negatives and Building Positives

In the Tibetan tradition, there are two basic themes to all dharma practice:

- Renouncing negatives.
- Building positives.

First, we must see that the Three Veils are what separate us from perfect Buddhahood. We must see how confusion holds us back from experiencing our mind and world as they really are — limitless, clear, and aware. This is what is meant by Renouncing Negatives.

Second, we must come to believe in the existence of our Buddha Nature, and must begin the practices that will free us from the prison of Samsara. This is what is meant by Building Positives.

Another way to describe this process is to recall the meaning of the Tibetan word for “Buddha,” SANG GYE.

SANG means “completely purified,” meaning that all of our veils and defilements have been removed. GYE means “greatly increased.” If you recall the Buddha’s first teachings — the Four Noble Truths — there is a connection here.

The First Noble Truth is the Truth of Suffering. The Buddha taught that, no matter how hard we try, we cannot escape the sufferings of life, because suffering is part of the underpinning of all cyclic existence, which he called *samsara*.

The Second Noble Truth is the Truth of the Cause of Suffering. The Buddha also taught that our misapprehension of ourselves and the subsequent clinging to this erroneous notion of “self” and “world” is the cause of suffering.

Under the heading of “Renouncing Negatives,” we begin our practice by recognizing these two truths through the process of contemplation. We contemplate these Noble Truths until we see (and are moved by) their truth, and are moved toward rejecting self-clinging and the world of samsara.

Contemplation is one of several types of meditation practiced in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. It is sometimes also called analytical meditation, because it uses intellectual analysis to bring us to a deeply felt understanding that we can then use to fuel our motivation for practice.

Next, we embrace the “Building of Positives” by contemplating the other two Noble Truths.

The Third Noble Truth is the Truth of the Cessation of Suffering. Because suffering has a cause, it also has a solution.

The Fourth Noble Truth is the Truth of the Path that Leads to the Cessation of Suffering. By rejecting self-clinging and the samsara it creates and by embracing selflessness and wisdom and compassion, we exchange the negative things in our life for positive things and remove the cause of suffering from our lives. Eventually, as we practice this path, we purify all of our negativities and become buddhas ourselves.

According to the Teachings of the Buddha, there are 8 parts to the Path that Leads to the Cessation of Suffering:

- Perfect view.
- Perfect thought.
- Perfect speech.
- Perfect action.
- Perfect livelihood.
- Perfect effort.
- Perfect memory.
- Perfect meditation.

Building Positive Aspirations through Thought and Word

Although we may not have this view just now, we can entertain the notion through increasing our positive aspirations. This can be done in many ways, but in the Buddhist tradition, words of aspiration are one of the most common.

Traditionally, Buddhists begin and end their practice periods with words that reflect the aspiration of the Buddha and align us with those aspirations, which hopefully will create the momentum for us to achieve those wishes in our lives.

A common aspiration prayer of the Mahayana tradition is called The Four Immeasurables. It is often recited at the beginning of Mahayana Buddhist practice sessions:

May all beings be happy and have the causes of happiness.

May they be free from sorrow and the causes of sorrow.

May they have that great happiness which is sorrowlessness.

May they come to rest in the great equanimity, which is free from attachments and aversions.

Buddhists traditionally end their practice sessions with a prayer of dedication. Here is an English translation of one such common prayer:

Through this virtue, may all beings gather the accumulations of merit and wisdom, and
May they attain the two supreme bodies of the Buddha which arise from merit and wisdom.

Here, “the two supreme bodies of the Buddha” refer to the states of mind and being that are part of the experience of Buddhahood — the so-called “mind-body” of perfect compassion and wisdom and the “manifestation-body” which communicates that compassion and wisdom to others. These two “bodies,” or aspects of being, are said to arise from the practices which accumulate merit (or, wholeness of body, speech, and mind) and wisdom (a non-conceptual experience and understanding of the true nature of all things).

Homework

Contemplate one of the Four Noble Truths once a day for a week as a way to build motivation for beginning your formal practice of dharma. How much time you spend in contemplation is up to you, but always remember to contemplate until you reach a deeply felt sense of understanding, and then rest your mind in the resolution to practice the dharma, the path that will lead you from negative to positive. That way, the contemplation is both effective and complete.

If you wish, and if it does not conflict with your current spiritual practice, you may begin your session of contemplation with the Prayer of the Four Immeasurables and end it with the Dedication of Merit Prayer.

Recommended Reading

The Torch of Certainty, by Jamgon Kongtrul, pp. 29–52

Handouts

“On Practice,” by Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche
Aspiration and Dedication of Merit Prayers