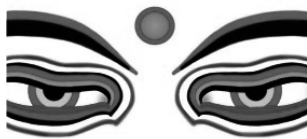


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What makes you not a Buddhist

Busakorn Watthanabut*



WHAT MAKES YOU *not* A BUDDHIST

DZONGSAR JAMYANG KHYENTSE

In essence, this book explains what a Buddhist really is, namely, someone who deeply understands the truth of impermanence and how our emotions can trap us in cycles of the suffering and the pain. It is a very important distillation of the core of Buddhist philosophy. Moreover,

this book revolves around clarifying the four truths and the typical teaching of the Buddha that mention as follows;

1. All compounded things are impermanent.
2. All emotions are pain.
3. All things have no inherent existence.
4. Nirvana is beyond concepts.

The book shows as deep Buddhist thought interspersed with a smattering of amusing Western cultural observations that really puts things into perspective. Dzongsar Khyentse is one of the most

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creative and innovative young Tibetan Buddhist lamas teaching. He intertwines the story of the Buddha into the exposition of the four seals. He describes briefly the life of the Buddha, and his path towards realization. He indicates that trade-offs are often made in order to appeal to a broader audience that would better understand what is being said. Although the words that are used do not capture the fullness of meaning behind the four seals, they are somewhat clearer to a Western audience. For instance, the second seal speaks of emotions being pain. This is often given as Dukkha (suffering) in the original Pali, and many Buddhist scholars have rendered this as all compounded things are suffering. The underlying intention here is to signify that all things, when grasped at or clung to, ultimately bring emotional suffering. Thus, what makes you not a Buddhist? This brief excerpt summarizes the substance of the teaching and the book as below;

- If you cannot accept that all compounded or fabricated things are impermanent, if you believe that there is some essential substance or concept that is permanent, then you are not a Buddhist.

- If you cannot accept that all emotions are pain, if you believe that actually some emotions are purely pleasurable, then you are not a Buddhist.

- If you cannot accept that all phenomena are illusory and empty, if you believe that certain things do exist inherently, then you are not a Buddhist.

- If you think that enlightenment exists within the spheres of time, space, and power then you are not a Buddhist.

Dzongsar Khyentse's objective is to present Buddhism simply

and approachably, communicating its basic premises and foundational stories in ways that are understandable to the Western world in particular. Toward this end, he spends a chapter on each of the four basics that are truths of Buddhism which he mentions in the introduction as follows: "In order to be a Buddhist, you must accept that all compounded phenomena are impermanent, all emotions are pain, all things have no inherent existence, and enlightenment is beyond concepts". Being a Buddhist is a matter of apprehending the inherent truth of these four ideas that because all things are made up of other things they can break down and are impermanent. When we recognize this impermanence, we realize that emotions which depend on impermanent things are what cause us the pain and the suffering. The other words, we acknowledge that all perceived things are illusory, and our final step is to emerge from all our concepts of good, bad, happiness, and unhappiness, into nirvana that is the consequence of transcending the illusion of the world.

This book is organized into four parts, with each seal taking chapter. The first chapter is denominated "Fabrication and Impermanence." We discover what the Buddha found after a long time of contemplation that every phenomenon and we perceive is the product of many things temporarily coming together to create the illusion of an independently existing phenomenon. This illusion is dissipated when we penetrate to the truth. All that arises ultimately passes away, and that everything is in a circumstance of continuous change. Believing it truly exists independently is the greatest deception. Meanwhile the parts have undergone a change. Their character has changed and then they have become something else and are compounded.

The second chapter is entitled, "Emotion and Pain." In this part, we could see what the Buddha uncovered concerning emotions and their relationship to suffering that all emotions are suffering because they involve clinging to an idea of self. The Buddha taught that all emotions are ways in which we identify with a sense of self whether those emotions are positive or negative. We tend to realize after those emotions that are positive and push away that is negative. However, we're realizing or pushing away, we're either trying to increase or protect ourselves. We're attached to a sense of self also. Siddhartha discovered that was the suffering root, it is our emotions that lead to suffering. In fact, they are suffering. All emotions are born from selfishness in the sense that they involve clinging to the self. Furthermore, he discovered that as real as they may seem, emotions are not an inherent part of one's being. Emotions arise when particular causes and conditions come together such as when you rush to think that someone is criticizing you, ignoring you, or depriving you of some gain, and then the corresponding emotions arise. While we accept those emotions, we buy into them. We have lost awareness and sanity and then we are worked up. Thus, Siddhartha found his solution of awareness. This sense of self is created at an early age, and we are taught to think that our body, feelings, perceptions, consciousness, thoughts, and actions are who we are. The misunderstanding then permeates everything we do and experience. All of these various emotions and their consequences come from misunderstanding, and this misunderstanding comes from one source, which is the root of all ignorance and clinging to the self. The self is just another misunderstanding. However, we generally create a notion of self, which

feels like a solid entity. We are conditioned to view this notion as consistent and real. We think that I am this form and we think, I have form, this is my body. We think that the form is me, I am tall or I dwell in this form, pointing at the chest. We do the same with feelings, perceptions, and actions. I have feelings, I am my perceptions but Siddhartha realized that there is no independent entity that qualifies as the self to be found anywhere, whether inside or outside the body. Like the optical illusion of a fire ring, the self is illusory. It is a fallacy, fundamentally flawed and ultimately nonexistent. But just as we can get carried away by the fire ring, we all get carried away by thinking that we are the self. When we look at our own bodies, feelings, perceptions, actions, and consciousness, we see that these are different elements of what we think of as me, but if we were to examine them, we would find that is me, it doesn't dwell in any of them. Clinging to the fallacy of the self is a ridiculous act of ignorance. It perpetuates ignorance, and it leads us to all kinds of pain and disappointment. Everything, we do in our lives depends on how we perceive ourselves, so if this perception is based on misunderstandings, which it inevitably is, then this misunderstanding permeates everything we do, see, and experience.

Another chapter is named, "Everything is Emptiness." Many Buddhist scholars have rendered this as all compounded things are non-self or empty of self. That is no compounded phenomena have any inherent existence. This follows quite naturally from the first seal and also from our modern physics which states that everything is in a state of continuous pouring. Dzongsar Khyentse also explains how Siddhartha was willing and able to see that all of our existence is

merely labels placed on phenomena that do not truly exist, and through that he experienced awakening. Even though, Siddhartha realized emptiness, emptiness was not manufactured by Siddhartha or anyone else. Emptiness is not the result of his revelation. Emptiness doesn't cancel out our daily experience. Siddhartha never said that something spectacular, better, purer, or more divine exists in place of what we perceive. He wasn't an anarchist refuting the appearance or function of worldly existence. He didn't say that there is no appearance of a rainbow or that there is no cup of tea. We can enjoy our experience, but just because we can experience something doesn't mean that it truly exists. Siddhartha simply suggested that we examine our experience and consider that it could be just a temporary illusion, like a daydream. Siddhartha completely understood that in the relative world. If he were to say anything at all, it would be to suggest that the tea is not as it seems; for instance, tea is shriveled leaves in hot water, yet some tea fanatics get carried away with the leaves and composing special mixes for them. It is not just a leaf in water. It was for this reason that some fifteen hundred years after Siddhartha taught that it is not the appearance that binds you but it is the attachment to the appearance that binds you.

The last chapter is named, "Nirvana is Beyond Concepts." This final seal is of particular interest, as it is not explicitly stated as one of the three characteristics of existence in the original Pali Suttas. Namely, Anicca, Dukkha, and Anatta correspond to the first three seals. However, this last seal can be seen to follow naturally from the first and third seals. All conditioned phenomena are impermanent, empty, and without inherent existence, then we cannot label things.

They truly exist like a rock, a tree and a cloud. All these things are actually processes, verbs, and not things. In fact, there are no things to speak out and that includes more complex processes such as you and me. Everything is process. This is also the realization of modern quantum physics even the tiniest detectable particles of matter are not permanently enduring and indivisible parts, but continuously moving and interacting fields of energy. In other words, there are no nouns, no real things, just labels signifying those apparent things as conveniences of language. And so it is with this thing we call Nirvana. It is beyond words, labels, and concepts, and like everything else, lies directly in the field of experience a state of mind. Yet because we understand this, we can talk about Nirvana as if it were a thing in order to facilitate communication as a matter of linguistic convention. When Siddhartha became enlightened, he became known as the Buddha which isn't a person's name. It is the label for a state of mind. The word of Buddha is defined as one quality with two aspects as accomplished one and awakened one. In other words, one who has purified defilements and one who has attained knowledge. Through his realization under the Bodhi tree, Buddha awoke from the dualistic state that is mired in concepts such as subject and object. He realized that nothing compounded can permanently exist. He realized that no emotion leads one to happiness if it stems from clinging to ego. He realized that there is no truly existing self and no truly existing phenomena to be perceived. And he realized that even enlightenment is beyond concepts.

These realizations are what we call that is Buddha's wisdom an awareness of the whole truth. In Buddhist texts, when these questions

are posed, the answer is usually that it's beyond our conception inexpressibly. Many people seem to have misunderstood this as a tricky way of not answering the question. But actually that is the answer. Our logic, language, and symbols are very limited and we cannot even fully express something worldly as the sense of relief. The words are inadequate to fully transmit the total experience of relief to another person. While we are caught in our current state, where only a limited amount of logic and language is used and where emotions still grip us, we can only imagine what it is like to be enlightened but sometimes with diligence and inferential logic, so we can get a good approximation. Using what we have, we can begin to see and accept that obscurations are due to causes and conditions that can be handled and ultimately cleansed. Imagining the absence of our defiled emotions and negativity is the first step to understanding the nature of enlightenment. As the Buddha said in the Prajnaparamita Sutra, all phenomena are like a dream and an illusion, even enlightenment is like a dream and an illusion. And if there is anything grander than enlightenment, that is like a dream and an illusion. His disciple, the great Nagarjuna, wrote that the Lord Buddha has not stated that after abandoning samsara there exist nirvana. The nonexistence of samsara is nirvana. A knife becomes sharp as the result of two exhaustions such as the exhaustion of the whetstone and the exhaustion of the metal. In the same way, enlightenment is the result of the exhaustion of defilements and the exhaustion of the antidote of the defilements. Ultimately one must abandon the path to enlightenment. If you still define yourself as a Buddhist, you are not a Buddha yet.

Dzongsar Khyentse has provided this book with a drop of much needed clarity in an age of confusion and information overload. In his exposition of the four truths, he has swept away much of the confusion surrounding the many schools of Buddhism. He has helped us to understand what is essential by relying on the original teachings, life, and experience of the Buddha. One can be, he concludes, a Buddhist in many ways and garbs, but the essence of Buddhism only comes to those honestly ready to accept in the end the termination of such superficial categories and transient definitions like you can change the cup, but the tea remains pure. The Buddha left us responsible, his disciple in this book teaches to be our own master.

Dzongsar Khyentse reminds us of our contradictions, seeking to pin down Buddhism rather than delving into the elusive message of emptiness beyond the many forms such a practice may embody after 2500 years and so many cultures and adaptations. Karma and especially rebirth get downplayed instead. We are told to regard ourselves as if cleaning a wineglass of accumulated imprints, temporary defilements that do not mar the glass itself, only bring it back to its original intended condition.

Buddhism takes on so many methods of revelation, how do those curious about it find the method right for them? Buddha compares this to the four seals being tea itself. Skills of making tea and ways to drink it have developed into rituals and ceremonies. Yet, the tea, he chides, should be appreciated, not the cup it's in or the ceremony surrounding its imbibing. He stresses the separation of the colorful trappings from the attractive void within. All are guilty. It's easy to be a hipster blaming others for greed, but even those smugly protesting.

The Buddhist practice of nonviolence is not merely submissiveness with a smile or meek thoughtfulness. The fundamental cause of violence is when one is fixated on an extreme idea, such as justice or morality. This fixation usually stems from a habit of buying into dualistic views, such as bad and good, ugly and beautiful, moral and immoral. One's inflexible self-righteousness takes up all the space that would allow empathy for others. Sanity is lost. Understanding that all these views or values are compounded and impermanent, as is the person who holds them, violence is averted. When you have no ego, no clinging to the self, there is never a reason to be violent. These notions are amazingly captured in one of the more well-known teachings of the Buddha that is the path and the vehicle is a temporary device that allows us to cross over to the other side like a raft that carries us across a turbulent river. It may even be uniquely tailored to our specific circumstances. However, once we've crossed over, we don't carry the raft on our backs having served its purpose which we throw it away.

Finally, the book does not allow for a lot of in-depth debate about assertion such as how a conventionally portrayed. Almighty God can be impermanent if his actions are an assemblage of beginnings and ends and in these stressful times. I did find his easy acceptance of less anxiety about how one in the world must worry about making a living a bit too detached from most of his reader's reality, but I do recognize that such a recognition that all things must pass. That does represent the core teaching of Buddhism.

Reference

Dzongsar Khyentse . (2010). **What makes you not a Buddhist**. New delhi : Timeless Studio.