

**Jim Bronson 2-17-2010**



## BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS IN UNEXPECTED PLACES – Part 2 of 4

*This four-part overview gives insight and inspiration from finding Buddha's 2500 year-old teachings in some possibly surprising aspects of our lives and culture. Images of Buddhism appear often now in print and on television (most notably with the worldwide work of the Dalai Lama), in poetry, fiction and non-fiction, and periodicals ("Buddhism In America" was a cover story in "Time" magazine.*

Jack Kornfield graduated from Dartmouth with a major in Asian Studies during the Vietnam Era. Seeking to escape a painful family upbringing, as well as the materialism and suffering he saw in Western culture, Jack joined the Peace Corps, and asked them to send him to a Buddhist country. Stationed in Thailand, he heard of a meditation master, Ajahn Chah, who welcomed Western students. After months of visiting Ajahn Chah's monastery, Jack took monastic vows.

*...the forest monastery received a stream of visitors. Every day, Ajahn Chah would sit on a wooden bench at the edge of a clearing and greet them all: local rice farmers and devout pilgrims, seekers and soldiers, young people, government ministers from the capital, and Western students. All brought their spiritual questions and conflicts, their sorrows, fears and aspirations. At one moment, Ajahn Chah would be gently holding the hand of a man whose young son had just died, at another laughing with a disillusioned shopkeeper at the arrogance of humanity... Ajahn Chah and other Buddhist masters like him are practitioners of a living psychology: one of the oldest and most well-developed systems of healing and understanding on the face of the earth. This psychology makes no distinction between worldly and spiritual problems. To Ajahn Chah, anxiety, trauma, financial problems, physical difficulties, struggles with meditation, ethical dilemmas and community conflicts were all forms of suffering to be treated with the medicine of Buddhist teaching.<sup>1</sup>*

The healing wisdom shown by Ajahn Chah exists as an ancient written tradition -- the Pali Canon. Pali was a trade language in India, and was understood by speakers of many dialects. It is thought that the Buddha's discourses were given in Pali, or something very similar to it.

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<sup>1</sup> From The Wise Heart, by Jack Kornfield, pp2-3

The Buddha lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> century Before the Christian Era (BCE), and taught for nearly 45 years; but none of the teachings were written down -- written language had not yet been invented in India.

While the Buddha was alive, he would spend about four months every year, reviewing and discussing his teachings with his followers. Immediately after his death, though, the Buddha's followers began to see disagreements among the monastics about what the proper path should be, and exactly what the Buddha taught. According to tradition, 500 Arahants (enlightened senior monks) gathered together in The First Buddhist Council three months after the Buddha's death, and started to capture their recollections of what he had taught.

Ananda, the Buddha's companion, had been present for most of the Buddha's talks. In a pre-literate society, accurate memory was the norm, and among those skilled practitioners, Ananda had a reputation for possessing an exceptional and prodigious memory. Ananda and other followers recited the talks of the Buddha, and the Council, which consisted of many who had attended the same talks, listened and corrected each other according to group memory. When agreement was reached on what the Buddha had actually said, each talk was memorized in Pali by a small group of monks. Each group memorizing a particular talk was responsible for keeping and teaching that talk, and this oral tradition preserved the Buddha's teachings. Periodically, these groups would get together and review the teachings to make sure that nothing had been forgotten or changed from the original

In 270 BCE, Ashoka, an Indian prince and fearsome warrior, was crowned emperor over the Magadha region in India. Initially known as Ashoka the Cruel, he began a bloody conquest of the entire Indian subcontinent. The city-state of Kalinga put up a particularly fierce defense, and the blood-thirsty Ashoka countered by assembling the largest army ever seen in India. He proceeded to plunder and destroy Kalinga, killing over 100,000 people. The day after the battle was over, Ashoka walked about the city, and seeing nothing but corpses and burned houses, he was overcome by the extent of the destruction. Asking himself, *"What have I done? If this is victory, what is defeat?"* Ashoka converted to Buddhism, began a campaign against violence throughout his kingdom, made Buddhism the state religion, and became known as Ashoka the Great.

Ashoka convened another Buddhist Council to strengthen the sangha and to begin carrying Buddhism to surrounding countries. Ashoka's son, Mahinda, traveled to Sri Lanka and converted the King and country to Buddhism. Some years after Ashoka's death, India and several surrounding countries were purged of Buddhism by Muslim invaders. Sri Lanka was one of the few places where the complete oral tradition had been preserved.

In 92 BCE, a famine in Sri Lanka caused concern that portions of the Buddha's teaching may be lost if the monks responsible for a particular section all died. Another Buddhist Council was held to deal with this

crisis, and as a result, a great project was organized to transcribe all of the oral tradition on palm leaves (although writing had been invented by then, paper had not).

The palm leaves were organized into three baskets (*pitaka*) – one for the monastic rules (the Vinaya), one for in-depth study (the Abhidhamma), and one for everyone (the Suttas). This collection became known as the three baskets (Tipitaka), or the Pali Canon, and tradition has it that the original oral content has been preserved virtually unchanged since the time of the Buddha.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British discovered and began to translate the Pali Canon into English. There were some concerns about the accuracy of the initial translations, but as Theravada monastics, fluent in both Pali and English, began new translations in the past few decades, based on an understanding of the Dhamma, the accuracy improved. Although the entire Pali Canon has not yet been translated into English, a large portion, and particularly the important sections, has been made available online.

Jack Kornfield notes:

*Like my teacher, Ajhan Chah, I've tried to convey the essence of these texts as a living, immediate, and practical psychology. I have become part of a generation of Buddhist elders that includes Pema Chödrön, Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, Thich Nhat Hanh, and others who have helped introduce Buddhist teachings in the West.*<sup>2</sup>

The fruit of these teachings appears in unexpected places, and America is apparently becoming “Buddhafied”. Time magazine published an article “Buddhism in America”<sup>3</sup> in which they state:

*Very early on, the American Buddhist trailblazers, particularly those working in Vipassana and Zen, made a vital break from Asian tradition: they opted against trying to replicate the Asian monastic system, where intense practice is left to the monks and the main devotion of laypeople is once-a-week temple offerings. "American people don't want to be monks and nuns," says Kornfield. "They want practices that transform the heart." The approach seemed to work: Kornfield's meditation seminars with Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg in Barre, Mass., and at Spirit Rock in California, turned out thousands of graduates. Zendos began spreading to Middle America, and when Chogyam Trungpa died in 1987 at age 47, a contingent of lay American-born Vajrayana Buddhists was able to perform the funeral liturgy along with Tibetans. (Last year Naropa Institute became a fully accredited college for "contemplative studies.")...*

*Some think meditation will constitute Buddhism's distinct contribution to American religious life. Different branches practice different varieties, but each begins with a simple awareness of breath*

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<sup>2</sup> Jack Kornfield, *The Wise Heart*, p4.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,987164,00.html>

*drawn in and let out. Fields notes that a near mechanical process that allows each individual to look inside him- or herself for the divine fits in particularly well with the democratic tendency of the faith here: "Americans have always been a do-it-yourself culture, and this is a do-it-yourself philosophy." Benedictine Sister Mary Margaret Funk, executive director of the International Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, goes considerably further. "Christianity and Judaism don't go deep enough in helping people live [spiritually] every day," she says. "What [American Buddhists] are doing, and it's kind of amazing, is taking a path of enlightenment into a lay culture without priests and temples and structures, and moving it right into daily practice for everyday life." Once established in Buddhism, she feels, the movement will spread to other faiths. "It's beneficial to all of us. It will go down in history as one of the best things that happened to civilization."*

Last week, three of the contributors to *Passing it On*<sup>4</sup> discussed their experiences in moving Buddhist teachings into their everyday life. Kari spoke of approaching target practice as a meditative practice such as described in Herrigel's *Zen and the Art of Archery*. Carla spoke of the benefits of teaching mindfulness in her Intensive Intervention class, and Dave shared his healing process for loss of a loved one.

Buddhism, or Buddhist concepts seem to be cropping up everywhere. Jim was presenting a workshop on meditation at a Unitarian Universal church, and was surprised see the Metta Meditation on the prayer guide:

*May I be safe  
May I be happy  
May I be healthy  
May I be content  
May I love myself completely  
And with great kindness  
Just as I am now  
No matter what happens*

*May you be safe  
May you be happy  
May you be healthy  
May you be content  
May you love yourself completely  
And with great kindness*

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/passing-it-on/>

*Just as you are now  
No matter what happens*

*May we be safe  
May we be happy  
May we be healthy  
May we be content  
May we love ourselves completely  
And with great kindness  
Just as we are now  
No matter what happens*

*May all beings be safe  
May all beings be happy  
May all beings be healthy  
May all beings be content  
May all beings love themselves completely  
And with great kindness  
Just as they are now  
No matter what happens*

In a guide to prevent Alcohol Abuse for Teens, Tip #9 was “Remain Alert.” If you go to Google and enter “Applying Buddhist Principles”, you will get 20,500 results. Next week, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and President Barack Obama are meeting, much to the great displeasure of China. These are signs of the changes in Western culture, in which Buddhist principles are being incorporated into daily life. As Sister Mary Margaret Funk observed, it’s beneficial to all of us.

A refuge is a place of shelter, protection, or safety. Buddhism recognizes three refuges:

- The Buddha, who demonstrates that the potential to become enlightened and free from suffering exists in all of us. There is no need to look outside of ourselves for salvation. As Jack Kornfield says “Be a light unto yourself.”
- The Dharma (Dhamma) -- teachings of the Buddha, or a virtuous path
- The Sangha – a community of practicing Buddhists.

These Three Refuges protect us from suffering and guide us to liberation. Also known as The Three Gems, or The Three Treasures, the Three Refuges are the core of Buddhist practice.

We concluded with the Three Refuges Chant:

**NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO**

Homage to the Blessed One,

**SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA**

The Perfected One, the Fully Enlightened One.

**NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO**

Homage to the Blessed One,

**SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA**

The Perfected One, the Fully Enlightened One.

**NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO**

Homage to the Blessed One,

**SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA**

The Perfected One, the Fully Enlightened One.

**BUDDHAM SARANAM GACCHAMI**

I go to the Buddha for refuge.

**DHAMMAM SARANAM GACCHAMI**

I go to the Dhamma for refuge.

**SANGHAM SARANAM GACCHAMI**

I go to the Sangha for refuge.

**DUTIYAMPI BUDDHAM SARANAM GACCHAMI**

A second time I go to the Buddha for refuge.

**DUTIYAMPI DHAMMAM SARANAM GACCHAMI**

A second time I go to the Dhamma for refuge.

**DUTIYAMPI SANGHAM SARANAM GACCHAMI**

A second time I go to the Sangha for refuge.

**TATIYAMPI BUDDHAM SARANAM GACCHAMI**

A third time I go to the Buddha for refuge.

**TATIYAMPI DHAMMAM SARANAM GACCHAMI**

A third time I go to the Dhamma for refuge.

**TATIYAMPI SANGHAM SARANAM GACCHAMI**

A third time I go to the Sangha for refuge.