

Buddha-carita – or Acts of the Buddha (by Ashvaghosha) WHGC (Fall 2012)

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Tradition has it that because of disputes among the various Buddhist groups, the king founded a monastery housing 500 monks and sponsored the 4th Buddhist council which was held at Jalandhar, in Punjab (though some say it was in Kashmir.) One consequence of the meeting was an agreement on an inclusive biography of the Buddha. The *Acts of the Buddha* was the result.

The Sanskrit poem was composed in a courtly, epic style known as *kavya* which facilitates memorization and recitation through the use of four-line stanzas composed of pairs of couplets. This form utilizes a certain rhythm.

Buddha-caritra is attributed to Ashvaghosha, although authorship is not certain. Ashvaghosha or "horse-voice" is himself included among the Noble Bodhisattvas = enlightened (bodhi) existence (sattva). Usually considered a native of Ayodhya in Central India, he may have been from Shravasti where Shakyamuni often preached. Asvaghosa was a convert to Buddhism.

Here is a useful web source with background and a very readable translation of the Cowell translation of the text: http://www.khandro.net/Acts_of_the_Buddha_toc.htm

The following is from WHGC website "Buddhism" (excerpted from Meyer and Fernandez Overview - Buddhism)

The Buddha: c.563-483BCE

- Born. Kapilavastu (or Lumini?), India (Himalayan foothills, area now in Nepal.)
- Name: Siddhattha Gautama ⇒ Sakyamuni ("Sage of the Sakyas", his clan) ⇒ The Buddha (a bodhisattva)
- Only founder of a major "religion" not claiming divinity or an encounter with a divinity -or even needing a divinity.
- Born into caste system. Belonged to Kshatriya (warrior) cast.
- Born in the same century as Confucius and Lao-Tsu. When he died Pericles was 47 years old and Socrates was 6 years old.

The Buddha's Teachings:

The Buddha saw the path that leads to the end of all suffering and to liberation, or Nirvana. This path is rooted in reason not faith. The main tenets are:

1. The Middle Way: avoid extremes of pleasure or hardship to achieve clear vision.

2. The Four Noble Truths (given by the Buddha in his first seminal sermon):

- Pain/suffering: Life is full of pain, sorrow, suffering (dukkha)
- The cause of pain is craving, or suffering due to attachment (tanha)
- To cease pain, cease craving; attachment can be overcome
- To cease craving/attachment, or to achieve non-attachment, follow the Noble Eight- fold Path

(*dharma*) to *Nirvana* (literally, “blowing out”)

3. The Noble Eightfold Path:

• Right views (wisdom)	• Right effort (concentration/meditation)
• Right intention “	• Right mindfulness “
• Right speech (morality)	• Right concentration “
• Right action “	
• Right livelihood “	

4. How it works: The aspirant gets a glimmer of wisdom, leading to a motivation to morality, leading to the beginning level of concentration, leading to a deepening of wisdom, leading to a strengthening of morality, leading to higher levels of concentration, and so on in an upward spiral until one reaches *Nirvana*.

5. The Four Virtues of Buddhism:

- Amity/friendliness
- Compassion
- Joy/gladness
- Equanimity

6. Buddhist morality consists of (among other things):

- Right action: abstaining from: taking life, taking what is not given; misconduct in pleasures; false speech; intoxicating drink. Formally, the Pancha Sila “commandments” are: 1) do not kill 2) do not steal 3) do not give way to adultery 4) do not lie 5) do not take intoxicants
 - Right speech: abstaining from telling lies, from backbiting, slander, and talk that may bring hatred, enmity, and disharmony; abstaining from harsh, rude, malicious language and from idle gossip
 - Right livelihood: abstain from making one's living through a profession that brings harm to others
- This moral conduct aims to promote a happy and harmonious life both for the individual and for society

7. Through meditation one contemplates the truths about nature and one's own being, and achieves detached consciousness/non-attachment. Meditation takes two paths: *samatha* and *vipassana*. The former means “tranquility” and involves paying attention to a single object, concept. The latter means “insight.” Passing the *samatha* stage allows the mind to focus on what it chooses.

8. Enlightenment is non-attachment and equanimity: no craving, therefore no suffering (or no *dukkha* - no sorrow, no “unsatisfactoriness”).

9. Most Buddhists believe in reincarnation: your good and bad actions are passed along (**karma**) to the next life. There is no such thing as “heaven,” rather the attainment of *nirvana* and thus the escape of continual cycle (*samsara*).

Samsara "continuous flow", is the repeating cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth (reincarnation). The goal of Buddhist is to escape this process, the achievement of which is called **moksha**.

10. Spiritual Agency: Each individual is responsible for his/her happiness; everyone can achieve enlightenment like the Buddha and realize Truth. No need for "faith" in a "God" or in some higher power external to yourself, only meditation/concentration ("reason?"). Trust yourself to know what's right and wrong by following the Eight-fold Path.

Some verses for discussion:

VI 18 *Do not think of mourning for me who am gone forth to leave sorrow behind; it is the thralls of passion, who are attached to desire, the causes of sorrow, for who thou shouldst mourn.*

VI 43 *Abandon this distress Chamda regarding thy separation from me, - change is inevitable in corporeal beings who are subject to different births.*

VII 19, 20 *The king's son, having heard this speech of the aesthetic, even though he saw no lofty truth in it, was not content, but gently uttered these thoughts to himself:*

The penance is full of pain and of many kinds, and the fruit of the penance is mainly heaven at its best, and all the worlds are subject to change; verily the labor of the hermitage is spent but for little gain.

VII 31 *The water which has been touched by the virtuous, - that is the spot. If you wish for a sacred spot on the earth; therefore I count as a place of pilgrimage only the virtues of a virtuous man, - water without doubt is only water.*

General questions for discussion:

- Buddhism has attracted many adherents in the West in recent decades. Possible reasons?
 1. Western sense of emptiness rigidity/sectarianism of mainstream Western religions?
 2. Western materialism leaves some with a sense of emptiness and desire for a more simple life of non-attachment?
 3. Buddhism's tolerance and non-violence to all other beings (not just "our neighbor") are attractive to some?
 4. Environmental consciousness has common points with Buddhism?
 5. Spiritual agency, through meditation, looking inward; self-centering?
- How can non-attachment/detachment alleviate pain/sorrow?
- Does non-attachment/detachment mean passivity or non-action?
- Can Buddhism thrive in a materialistic, violent culture like ours?
- Can Buddhist principles of tolerance, non-violence to all life (including the Earth), the Eightfold Path, the four virtues, etc., provide us with a truly viable alternative to a world of hatred, religious sectarianism and intolerance, etc? Is it a religion that we should or could all adopt?
- Is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy?

Some Comparisons for Discussion:

- Compare Buddhist teachings with the Tao. **Is dharma ("the way one should follow to fulfill one's true nature and carry out one's moral and social responsibilities" Is Nirvana like Tao?**
- Compare Buddhist teachings with Mencius.

- Compare Buddhist enlightenment with Plato's Allegory of the Cave.
- Compare Buddhist meditation and Western **Christian?** prayer.

Meditation exercise

A man once took a flower and without a word, held it up before the men seated in a circle around him. Each man in his turn looked at the flower, and then explained its meaning, its significance, all that it symbolized. The last man, however, seeing the flower, said nothing, only smiled. The man in the center then also smiled, and without a word handed him the flower.



Introduction

Buddhist meditation is a means to mental development. It deals particularly with the training of the mind. Because the mind is the forerunner and prime source of all actions, physical, verbal, or mental, it needs to be properly cultivated and developed. Buddhist meditation is mental development in the real sense of the term nirvana for it aims not only at temporary calm and tranquility of mind but at purifying the mind of defilements and negative influences such as sensual desire, lust, hatred, jealousy, envy, worry, ignorance, restlessness and indolence. It cultivates and brings to perfection such wholesome and positive qualities of mind as confidence, compassion, wisdom, energy, mindfulness, concentration and insight. Meditation is also the a practice through which the Dharma can be realized and the transcendent bliss of Nirvana experienced.

Meditation is essentially an experiential activity not a scholastic subject to be understood through books or secondhand information. It is not an escape from life or an evasion of responsibility. Even if the formal meditation practice may appear to the uninformed to be disconnected from real life, its inherent purpose deeply concerns our day-to-day existence and experience. Meditation means mindfulness and wisdom in what we do, speak, and think; it means greater awareness and higher ability in self-control. It is not, therefore, an irrelevant other-worldly practice meant only for monks and aesthetes, but is one of the most valuable practical skills there is for enhancing fulfillment in everyday life.

John Kabat-Zinn's [Wherever You Go, There You Are](#) is terrific for beginners.

The Meditation (Zazen technique)

1	<p>Get a zafu or small pillow. This is optional, depending on your preference.</p>	
2	<p>Get into position. The literal translation for zazen is "seated meditation". So, how you sit is very important. There are a few different positions used in zazen:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Burmese Position. This is the simplest position in which the legs are crossed with both knees resting flat on the floor. One ankle is in front of the other, not over. • The Half Lotus Position (Hankafuza). This is done by placing the left foot onto the right thigh and tucking the right leg under your left thigh. • The Full Lotus Position (Kekkafuza). This is by far the most stable of all positions. It is done by placing each foot onto the opposite thigh. • The Kneeling Position (Seiza). Kneel with your hips resting on your ankles. • The Chair Position. It's perfectly fine to sit on a chair but it's essential that you keep your back straight. • The Standing Position. This is helpful position, practiced in Korea and China, for people who cannot sit for long periods of time. Stand straight with your feet shoulder width apart. Your heels should be slightly closer together than your big toes. Lay your hands over your stomach, right hand over left. Don't lock your knees. 	
3	<p>Fold your hands in the cosmic mudra. This is done by placing your dominant hand faced palm up, holding your other hand also faced palm up. The thumbs touch lightly.</p>	
4	<p>Begin by clearing your mind and thinking of nothing but your breath. You can keep your eyes open, or half closed, or you can shut them completely.</p>	
5	<p>Count each inhalation and each exhalation, until you get to ten.</p>	
6	<p>Start again at one. If your mind wanders, which it will, <u>acknowledge the thought</u> and then continue back counting from one again.</p>	

7	<p>Continue this for about 15? minutes. When you are able to get to ten repeatedly without any intruding thoughts, it's time to start counting an inhalation and an exhalation as one rather than counting them separately. Eventually you will be able to just concentrate on the breath and abandon the counting. For this to happen you need to practice.</p>	
8	<p>Open your eyes and warm up your legs and arms, so as to increase your blood pressure to its normal rate.</p>	
9	<p>Meditate for 15 minutes for the first week and go up by 5 minutes each week until you reach 45 minutes to an hour, if you can. If you practice zazen regularly and gradually, your meditation sessions will be very relaxing and you will experience a wonderful stillness. Don't try to make your breath any special way, breath in any way that is natural.</p>	
10	<p>Explore the stillness. Zazen is more than quiet sitting and can lead to a profound uncovering of hidden awareness within us. This final step is achieved by exploring the stillness we create or discover within us through sitting. Take time to observe yourself and the world when sitting and afterward. Use all your senses.</p>	