

The Buddha Before Buddhism (5 of 5) Training

December 6, 2024

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Book of Eights, Training, Practice, Direct knowing, Sage, Virtue, Peace, Religion, Teachings, Doctrine, Clinging, Attachment,

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I am very happy to be here at IRC today with two of the present resident volunteers who are sitting here with us.

This is the concluding talk on the themes from this ancient Buddhist text. As I have mentioned, some scholars believe it's the oldest teaching in Buddhism, perhaps the Buddha's first teachings. In the appendix of the book I go into some of the reasons people think this and the evidence for that.

There are four themes that I've selected out of this, and perhaps these themes are things that are subjective to me, especially this last one we're going to do today.

So the first one is really clear in the text — it's repeated over and over again — this idea of not clinging to any kind of views, and not holding some religious views as being better, superior or ultimate than others. And thus, not getting involved in that comparison at all. It also speaks of not depending on any religious doctrine or beliefs, but rather depending on what we can know and see directly for ourselves.

This then leads to the second theme: not clinging to sensual desires. This is because we know and see the downside of that; we know and see for ourselves how we're limited by the attachment to sensual desires. So again, it's not because someone tells us there's a rule that you should let go of sensual desires, but it's to really have understood, seen and known for oneself that being caught in sensual desire is not beneficial, and it's actually better not to be caught in them. So, it's not a doctrine here that presents authority stating that this is what you should do, instead it's a teaching about developing your own capacity to know and see for yourself. And those two verbs, knowing and seeing, are the most common descriptions of the practice that is in this text.

Then the third theme was the descriptions of the sage. And those descriptions, like the example of not clinging or craving anything, might seem pretty far advanced and impossible to do. However, it is naturalistic. It is humanistic. It is something we can understand. We can understand that we have craving. We can understand those times when craving is not there. And so it's not tied to some kind of supernatural belief, ultimate state of mind, or altered state of consciousness. Again, it's dependent on what can be seen and known for oneself, even though it might seem pretty distant to have no craving or clinging at all.

The fourth and last theme is training, cultivating, and developing oneself. The remarkable thing about this is that in this text, it isn't so much that training is to get anywhere, but it is a training to be the goal. What I mean by this is that if the goal is non-craving, then the training to that goal is to stop craving. This is perhaps done in small pieces, gradually over time, so that the non-craving grows and develops until the full non-craving is experienced. This way, we're actually practicing the whole goal in each moment. If the goal is to be peaceful, to have a deep abiding sense of peace in our hearts, the way to train for that is to begin finding peace here, knowing and letting go into peace here.

So, there isn't a sharp distinction between the training and the goal of the training. It's like exercising to become stronger: you become stronger by doing the things that make you strong. If you need to become a strong walker so you can walk well, you begin walking. Thus, walking is the way to become a good walker. So, the goal is not such a distant one this way. It's not like we have to try for years to develop high levels of concentration or really sharp mindfulness or go into deep states of meditation. Those can all happen, and they might have their role at times, but here in this text the idea is to find the goal in the means; to practice the goal until the goal becomes

perfected in a sense. When it comes to not clinging to views and beliefs, it may be hard to do that but we practice that the best we can.

So, how do we practice this? Through this knowing and seeing. We know and see as we practice, as we train, and as we engage in our life. We can know and feel when something is not peaceful or when there is a lot of clinging going on. It is in that direct knowing of the downside of clinging and agitation that we understand the value of not continuing what leads to more of this.

So here the sage, the wise one, has all the information they need for doing this practice in themselves through their own abilities to know and see.

The Book of Eights focuses on fundamental personal and psychological transformations for which individuals are personally responsible.

"Train fully in your own release, train fully in your own liberation"

And then elsewhere it says,

A monastic should not seek peace from others.

The text provides no help from Gods or external forces. To many modern readers, this will be a less revolutionary message than it probably was in the Buddha's time. In focusing on cultivating behaviors and virtues, the Book of Eights rarely mentions specific techniques or practices. Stated differently, the text doesn't emphasize religious practices that can be seen as steps towards attaining the qualities of an ideal person. Furthermore, it explicitly and provocatively says that religious observances and practices in themselves are not adequate for becoming a person at peace. Rather, it encourages people to simply behave like an ideal sage.

Not to pretend or to act it out, but in this knowing and seeing to understand how in the moment we can act like a sage without clinging, even if clinging is close by or keeps reappearing.

So I'll read a couple more verses:

Those who say virtue is ultimate dedicate themselves to purity and religious observances. Only by training in this will there be purity, they say. Claiming to be skillful, they are faced with further becoming, further building up themselves in attachment. One who falls away from virtue and observances trembles at having failed at the task, and hopes for, longs for purity, as a poor far-off traveler hopes for, longs for home. But whoever has let go of all virtuous conduct and observances, as well as all actions blamable and blameless, and who has no wishes for purity or impurity, lives without indulging, not even taking up peace.

That's a radical message: You don't find the peace that the Buddha is looking for through virtuous conduct or religious practices, and neither do you find it by foregoing them. You don't find it by being blameless in your actions, but neither do you find it by doing things which are blamable. Neither are the way. This is not a teaching to just be free to do whatever you want, independent of whether you harm others or not. Instead, it's to not look for your peace in any of those things; that there's another possibility. Also, don't even hold on to peace or the idea of conjuring it. There's something else that is even more beneficial.

Then also problematic is, it says, *whoever depends on austerities wails for purity, not free from craving for becoming and not becoming. Longing comes from wanting, and with planning there is fear. But with no death and rebirth as a concern, how could one fear? What could one long for?*

Someone asked the Buddha:

That doctrine some say that is best, others say is inferior. As they all claim to be experts, which statement is true?

Buddha says:

They say their own doctrine is perfect. They say the doctrine of others is inferior. Quarreling so they dispute. Everyone saying their own opinion is true. But the true Brahman are not led by others when considering doctrines believed. They have therefore gone beyond disputes. Indeed, they see none of these doctrines as the best. They who are entrenched in teachings, who revere preconceived views, are not easy to train. Whatever they depend on, they say, is beautiful, is purity, is where they see truth. However, the true sages don't make things up. They don't follow views, religious views, doctrine, or bind themselves to knowledge. Knowing the many commonplace opinions, they are equanimous, thinking, "this is what others hold on to". Free of worldly ties, sages here don't follow any faction in a dispute. Peaceful among those not at peace, equanimous, thinking "that is what others hold on to". They don't hold on to anything. Having given up old attachments without forming new ones, they neither pursue desires nor get entrenched in doctrines. Free from viewpoints not clinging to the world, wise ones have no self-reproach. They are not an enemy to any doctrine. not forming opinions, not closed down, and not desirous. They are sages, wise ones, who have laid down their burden.

So, that's chapter 13 in this book, The Buddha Before Buddhism.

This has been an important book for me. I spent about 20 years on and off translating it. I first started translating it when I was in graduate school doing Buddhist studies. I did it when I had some extra time during a summer break and I was so fascinated by this book that, just for my own sake to understand it better, I started translating it and did a few of the chapters and then came back to it over time and spent a lot of time reflecting on it. I read a wonderful book by a scholar named Grace Burford. It was her doctoral dissertation on this book and that made a big impact on me and added to my love of this particular text. And now I share it with you.

Thank you very much for being part of this week and that I could share something that's been valuable for me, and in general doing this YouTube for almost five years now. I feel very fortunate to be able to share something that's so dear and deeply loved by me. I hope that it supports you in being a sage, and in relying on what you can know and see directly for yourself without recourse to holding on to religious beliefs, including Buddhist ones, including what I teach.

Thank you very much.