Buddhism is all Around Us

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I would like to begin my talk on Buddhist practice in everyday life with an example of a person who is far from ordinary. Her quest for enlightenment is something we would find hard to put into practice ourselves. I am referring to Tenzin Palmo, an English woman ordained in the Tibetan tradition. I will talk a bit about her life and her achievement, and then proceed on to my own search for knowledge and understanding of the Dhamma. I hope that this will encourage other regular participants of the forum to present their views on Buddhism. I will talk a great deal about my teachers, the books I have read and what I believe is the most significant part of the Buddha’s teaching. Finally, I hope to show by some examples, of how I practice the Buddha’s teaching in everyday life.

To begin with Tenzin Palmo, I must first mention Vicki Mackenzie, a feature writer well known in England and Australia. She beautifully tells the story of the Tibetan nun, who was born Diane Perry, the daughter of a fishmonger from London’s East End. Like most young Londoners she was fond of dancing and dressing up. But to people in her family it soon became evident that Diane was also drawn to rather unworldly things, in particular Buddhism. It was in the 60s when she met a group of Lamas who attended university in England and spread Buddhist wisdom in the West. As a consequence, her encounter with Buddhism, in particular Tibetan Buddhism in her native England encouraged her to search for the truth proclaimed by the Buddha.

The story is told how she agonized over all the choices open to her for many months. In the process she even gave up the idea of marriage to a very kind and loving man from Japan, and at last arrived in India to begin her quest for truth. Suddenly, in 1976 Diane cut herself off from the rest of the world and went to live in a remote cave 13,200 feet up in the Himalayas. Her goal was to attain enlightenment as a woman. Here
she spent 12 years of her life in intense Buddhist Meditation, at night she slept in a traditional three-foot square Tibetan meditation box. She carried out her daily chores, grew her own food, and once when supply of grains and pulses from the lower valleys was hampered because of snow, almost faced starvation; indeed she lived through extremely cold winters and had to guard herself from attacks by wild animals and avalanches. She might have spent the rest of her life in the Himalayas, in her self imposed vow of silence had it not been for the Indian immigration authorities who summoned her down to the plains to settle the issue of her overstay in India. Although she had been happy in her solitude, but once forced to break her silence, she could not go back to the cave.

As the book by Mackenzie, Cave in the Snow sums up: *In 1988 she emerged from a cave with a vision to build a convent in northern India dedicated to helping women to achieve spiritual excellence. From living as a mendicant on 50 a year, she became a globetrotting fundraiser, talking to thousands of people from the fount of her profound wisdom. As such, Tenzin Palmo had come full circle: being of the world, leaving it, and returning once more to help it.*

Tenzin Palmo’s feat is extraordinary and not so easy to emulate, however there are less formal means of practicing Buddhism. At the most her example shows the extent to which the teachings of Lord Buddha hold sway over the hearts of minds of people in the West. Most of them come in touch with Buddhism through the monks who disseminate the Doctrine, whether they are from Tibet, Japan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos or Vietnam. This East West encounter is by no means new. Western scholars and their translation and commentaries of ancient Indian books have spread the rich philosophies of the sub-continent, including Buddhism for ages. Today there are less formal means of spreading Buddhism, which should not be ignored, such as art, literature, film and television. These can be very effective channels of imparting Buddhist knowledge, for it to become more tangible and have a longer lasting impact. Some of you will remember the presenter on a previous forum, Mr. Martin Seeger from Germany. He told his audience in a
Dhamma Talk presented at Samphraya Temple in Bangkok that his first and most impressive memory of Buddhism was a speech delivered by the Dalai Lama on German television. He was deeply touched by the Dalai Lama’s loving kindness and infinite wisdom. Ever since, Seeger has not only engaged in research on Buddhism, but also ordained in Thailand as a Buddhist monk for a period of time. “I cannot say that I am unhappy or suffering. Neither am I so poor that I have no way out of life, but I took the yellow robe, because I strongly believe that Buddhism has no meaning unless one has strong faith in the teachings of the Buddha and practices them,” he told his audience, many of them monks. Seeger said he was working towards his doctorate degree on Buddhism.

Everyone who steps into the Headquarters of the World Buddhist University has some knowledge of Buddha’s teachings. That is what draws our audiences here. Here we exchange views and experiences. One talk I found very enlightening was on Buddhism in the United States. The speaker, the previous director of the Sunday Forum, Dr. Alan Lopez, explained that at meetings in America, everyone seemed to have a different agenda and all brought with them their own brand of Buddhism. Some wanted to meditate, other wanted to read and do research, most of them wanted answers to their questions, but few looked for salvation. This I would say is natural because we are at various stages of learning and practicing Buddhism. In fact, we may hold different views on what Buddhism is, but then again, this is part of becoming a buddha or one who knows. I would like to give an example.

A friend of mine was known to meditate regularly. He often complained that his meditation did not give him the desired result. He consoled himself that in his next life he would continue to practice meditation. So I asked him what he wanted to achieve by meditation to which he replied that he wanted to know who or what he would be in his next life. With my inborn, stolid German sense of reality, I asked him if he truly believed that there was a soul and he would be reborn. He was aghast that I could ask such a question. He told me, “You are not a Buddhist if you don’t believe in rebirth.” Now it was my turn to be
worried about my brand of Buddhism. I immediately went to consult one of the most revered monks in Thailand, telling him the story and asking who was right. The reverend monk replied: “The purpose of the Dhamma and its practice is to overcome suffering. The recognition that there is suffering, the understanding of what the causes of suffering are and how to arrive at the cessation of suffering through the Eightfold Path will lead to Nirvana.” Never had the message of the Buddha came to me with such clarity.

I have read a great number of books, titles I do not remember now. But the understanding of the Dhamma does not come through reading. Experience can often be conveyed through non-verbal means and images. Until today I will never forget the sight of a group of Thai monks in their yellow robes waiting every morning at a particular bus stop in the city of Bombay. They were students on their way to college. Their lively chatter and smiling faces brought home to me the happiness derived from leading a wholesome life. I came across the same image in the novel Heat and Dust by Ruth Prawer Jhabwalla. I was surprised to read the ending of the novel where the heroine mused over true happiness at the sight of monks going up their mountain retreat, carrying food, chatting happily and laughing.

I arrived here in Thailand in 1967 with the intention to study the Dhamma. At that time there were very few English speaking Thai people, leave alone monks explaining the Dhamma. At this point, however, I would like to mention some of the books I read and found useful. Since I do not read Thai, leave alone Pali, I relied much on a book entitled The Buddha and His Dhamma, by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, a modern Indian who interprets the Buddhist canon by emphasizing the inherent differences between Buddhism and Hinduism. The other book, Buddhist Outlook on Daily Life by Nina van Gorkom is my meditation manual. In the late sixties, Nina van Gorkom gave regular talks on Buddhism broadcast by Radio Thailand, and I was an avid listener. It is only after I had learned enough Thai, that sermons on radio and television helped me to understand Buddhism much better.
Even today, what strikes me as the most important part of the Buddhist canon are the Four Noble Truths expounded by the Buddha in a very systematic and easy way to understand: Suffering, the causes of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the Noble Eightfold Path or the Path leading to Nirvana. Some of my friends have called the Buddha’s teaching simplistic. One in particular, horrified that I was converting to Buddhism warned me that Buddhism had no answer to the mysteries of life. I bravely encountered that I was studying Dhamma to find out if this was true. The teachings of the Buddha have been bought closer to many people in Thailand through the Venerable Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. (The meaning of his names is “The One who serves the Buddha” or “Slave of the Buddha”). Like a good teacher, the Venerable Buddhadasa kept things simple. He was a true minimalist. In a discourse entitled “The True Nature of Things” he explained the significance of the Four Noble Truths thus:

Essentially the Buddha’s teaching as we have it in the Tipitaka is nothing but the knowledge of “what is what” or the nature of things - just that. Do keep to this definition. It is an adequate one and it is well to bear it in mind while one is in the course of practicing. We shall now demonstrate the validity of this definition by considering as an example the Four Noble Truths. The First Noble Truth, which points out that all things are suffering (all things cause suffering), tells us precisely what things are like. But we fail to realize that all things are a source of suffering and so we desire those things. If we recognized them as a source of suffering, not worth desiring, not worth grasping at and clinging to, not worth at teaching ourselves to, we would be sure not to desire them. The Second Noble Truth points out that desire is the cause of suffering. People still don’t know, don’t see, don’t understand, that desires are the cause of suffering. They all desire this, that, and the other, simply because they don’t understand the nature of desire. The Third Noble Truth points out that deliverance, freedom from suffering, Nirvana, consists in the complete extinguishing of desire. People don’t realize at all that Nirvana is something that may be attained at any time or place that that it can be arrived at as soon as desire has been completely extinguished. They are not interested in Nirvana because they don’t know what it is.
The Fourth Noble Truth is called the Path and constitutes the method for extinguishing desire. No one understands it as a method for extinguishing desire. No one is interested in the desire-extinguishing Noble Eightfold Path. People don’t recognize it as their very point of support, their foothold something which they ought to be most actively reinforcing. They are not interested in the Buddha’s Noble Path, which happens to be the most excellent and precious thing in the entire mass of human knowledge, in this world or any other. This is a most horrifying piece of ignorance. We can see, then that the Four Noble Truths are information telling us clearly just “what is what.”

The Noble Eightfold Path, again, is a clear instruction of how to proceed in the practice of the Dhamma by keeping to the Right View, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. John Bullitt in a tract posted on his website entitled “What is Theravada Buddhism?” explains, “despite the stepwise structure of the eightfold path, progress on the path does not follow a simple linear trajectory. Rather, development of each aspect of the eightfold path fosters the refinement and strengthening of others, leading the practitioner ever upwards in a continuing spiral of spiritual maturity that leads, step by step, towards Awakening.”

An amusing story is told by Sumetho Bhikkhu when he was practicing meditation under the Venerable Ajahn Cha at Wat Par Nanachat. The American monk, after many days of practice began to feel that his meditation was yielding wonderful results, which he measured by the fact that he could sit in complete peace and happiness, extending loving kindness even to the plentiful mosquitoes that were biting him. Sometime later, when he had to visit the Immigration authorities for extension of his stay in Thailand, he was surprised at his sudden anger that broke out over a minor obstacle with the officials. He then knew that he still had a long way to go in his practice. Perhaps, immigration authorities in any country are a real acid test whether one has progressed on the path to Nirvana.
The Venerable Buddhadasa was a great advocate of Insight Meditation. Again, the World Buddhist University has on its website his entire discourse on “Insight, by the Nature Method.” If one is to practice Insight Meditation successfully, one must learn to look into oneself. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu maintains that our natural concentration is normally enough for such reflection, and that it can be done any place, anytime. My experience is that I can meditate in a crowded bus, standing in a long line, or while doing chores like cooking or washing dishes. Nina van Gorkom’s book is helpful here. She speaks of our “cittas” or mental states and explains thus:

Many Thais listen to lectures about Abhidhamma, not only those who were educated at a college or the university, but those who did not receive a higher education as well. I heard of cases in which the study of different cittas helped people to lead a more wholesome life. I heard of someone who was at first inclined to have feelings of revenge towards other people, and who gradually was able to overcome those feelings, in understanding what those feelings were. Many Thais know about the realities taught in the Abhidhamma, and they know how to apply their knowledge in daily life. Foreigners usually do not hear about this, because nobody speaks to foreigners about Abhidhamma.

I heard at least one person in the audience once use the term chitta, when speaking about the deep knowledge of psychology that characterizes the Buddha’s teaching. But Nina van Gorkom finds that the English translation of the term citta as mental state or state of mind is not really adequate, because it could imply that citta is something that stays, that does not change. She explains that no citta stays for even a second. In her words, “each citta that rises falls away immediately, to be succeeded by the next cittas. Cittas determine one’s one life and the life of other people, they condition the actions one performs in life.” It is important to understand one’s cittas, because there are both unwholesome mental states and wholesome mental states that a realities of daily life. She maintains that having knowledge of one’s cittas can change a person’s life.
Three simple lines, often called the Chief of All Teachings, summarize the heart of Buddhism as: Avoid evil, Do good, Purify the mind. Most practicing Buddhists are satisfied that they strictly follow the adage. They accumulate good deeds, and purify their minds. But in reality the big question remains how does one purify one’s mind? The words of the Venerable Buddhadasa Bhikkhu in his discourse, “The True Nature of Things” throw perhaps more light on what it means.

We have seen that we have to know the nature of things. We also have to know how to practice in order to fit in with the nature of things. There is another teaching in the texts, known as the Chief of all Teachings. It consists of three brief points: “Avoid evil, do good, purify the mind”. This is the principle of the practice. Knowing all things as impermanent, worthless, and not our property, and so not worth clinging to, not worth becoming infatuated with, we have to act appropriately and cautiously with respect to them, and that is to avoid evil. It implies not to break with accepted moral standards and to give up excessive craving and attachment. On the other hand, one is to do good, good as has come to be understood by wise people. These two are simply stages in morality. The third, which tells us to make the mind completely pure of every kind of contaminating element, is straight Buddhism. It tells us to make the mind free. As long as the mind is not yet free from the domination by things, it cannot be a clean, pure mind. Mental freedom must come from the most profound knowledge of the “what is what.” As long as one lacks this knowledge, one is bound to go on mindlessly liking or disliking things in one way or another. As long as one cannot remain unmoved by things, one can hardly be called free. Basically we human beings are subject to just two kinds of emotional states: liking and disliking (which correspond to pleasant and unpleasant mental feeling). We fall slaves to our moods and have no real freedom simply because we don’t know the true nature of moods or “what is what.” Liking has the characteristic of seizing on things and taking them over; disliking has the characteristic of pushing things away and getting rid of them. As long as these two kinds of emotional states exist, the mind is not yet free. As long as it is still carelessly liking and disliking this, that, and the other, there is no way it can be purified and freed from the
tyranny of things. For this very reason, this highest teaching of Buddhism condemns grasping and clinging to things attractive and repulsive, ultimately condemning even attachment to good and evil. When the mind has been purified of these two emotional reactions, it will become independent of things.

This is a message we can try to understand, perhaps not overnight, but slowly as we go on with our daily life. I will refrain from summarizing any of the ideas I have conveyed and leave things open for discussion. But to end I would like to read a poem.

MASTER TAKES A DISCIPLE

“Teach me how to meditate, O Master
So that I can see things, understand life.
Oh, for that blissful state. Teach me, O Master.”

“Go and wash the plates.”

Among pots and pans and greasy plates,
The pupil bides his time. His chores done
He waits to see the Master.

“Teach me how to meditate, O Master
So I can understand, see things.
Teach me, O Master.”

“Go and wash the plates.”

And he washes the plates, the pans
And the pots and wonders when
It will be time to ask the Master
To teach him how to meditate
So that he can understand
See things, attain Enlightenment.
“Go and wash the plates.”

Plates, pots and pans. Pans, pots
And plates and he contemplates
How he would approach the Master
To teach him how to meditate
That he can understand and see
Things, maybe attain Enlightenment.
And among the thoughts of the Buddha
He suddenly notices the hungry dogs,
Feeds them from a vessel, he cleans
The mess, and sweeps the yard,
He waters the plants, and cleans the hut,
He wipes the floor and spreads the mat
To sink gratefully to sleep and then
The Master stands at his feet.

“Tomorrow I shall teach you
How to meditate so that you can
Understand and see things as they are.”