Early Buddhist Life

In January of each year I have to figure out what topics to cover in the new year. Over the last few weeks I have decided to spend a few weeks talking about the history of what we call “Buddhism”—the word itself doesn’t reflect what the people of Asia call the practice—the term is a European construct. The name is derived from the Pali word *bodhi*, which means *being awakened*. He did not use that word himself; after his Awakening, he referred to himself in the third person as the *Tathagata* (tah-tah-gah-tah), translated as *mastery of suchness*, or *thus gone*. According to Thanissaro, the historical Buddha had a different notion about what he taught, terming it Dhamma Vinaya:

Dhamma-Vinaya was the Buddha’s own name for the religion he founded. Dhamma—the truth—is what he discovered and pointed out as advice for all who want to gain release from suffering. Vinaya—discipline—is what he formulated as rules, ideals, and standards of behavior for those of his followers who go forth from home life to take up the quest for release in greater earnestness. Although this book deals primarily with discipline, we should note at the outset that total training in the Buddha’s path requires that Dhamma and Vinaya function together. In theory they may be separate, but in the person who practices them they merge as qualities developed in the mind and character.

“Gotamī, the qualities of which you may know, ‘These qualities lead to dispassion, not to passion; to being unfettered and not to being fettered; to shedding and not to accumulating; to modesty and not to self-aggrandizement; to contentment and not to discontent; to seclusion and not to entanglement; to aroused energy and not to laziness; to being unburdensome and not to being burdensome’: You may definitely hold, ‘This is the Dhamma, this is the Vinaya, this is the Teacher’s instruction.’”—Cv.X.5

I plan to review Buddhist history at various stages over several talks, the delineation of which I am not yet clear. This talk will focus on the life of the Buddha and the circumstances of people during his time on the planet. I want to explore what I can discover online regarding the cultural stresses of the time and the sort of socio-political Wisdom he had to exhibit in order for his teachings to endure past his lifetime. I also want to talk about the concepts and terms he used—those that were in place in the context of the dominant Brahman religious culture and how he repurposed them to suit the radically different insights he realized and taught to his followers. We can’t be sure of when he lived, but I found this in the New World Encyclopedia online: “A majority of twentieth-century historians date his lifetime from 563 B.C.E. to 483 B.C.E.”. There are others who place his birth about 100 years later.

His name before the Awakening experience was Siddhattha Gotama (or Siddhartha Gautama in Sanskrit). Siddhattha is translated as “One who achieves his goal” and, according to Wikipedia, Gotama is translated as “Going towards the light” and was bestowed on him as an infant by his aunt and stepmother Mahapajapati Gotami, who was also the first Buddhist nun. He was born into the Kshatriya Clan in a small tribal republic called Shakya in what is now Southern Nepal. His father was “chairman of the board” of governors of this small political organization. His clan was responsible for governance and military concerns, but the culture of that particular area apparently was not militaristic, as the town, Kapilavatthu, where he grew up, was overrun by a neighboring kingship and destroyed during the Buddha’s lifetime.

**Cultural Conditions**

There was a dynamic tension between two different cultural norms for several hundred years before and after his life—the Vedic culture of the Brahmans and the Sramana (shrah-mah-nah) culture. The Sramana culture emerged from the indigenous tribal culture that had been predominant on the Indian subcontinent for thousands of years until the nomadic Aryan culture emigrated from near the Caucasus mountains to the west perhaps around 2000 BCE, believing in religious teachings that were likely influenced by early Greek culture and with gods that manifested exaggerated human traits. As their migration eastwards occurred, the influence of various cultures became known as the Aryans and produced religious teachings known as the Vedas. The name of the current country of Iran is derived from the term.

The Vedic culture became dominant in the area around 1200 BCE. This religious tradition involved worshipping of various gods such as Brahman, who was the over-arching god, Indra, the warrior god and Agni, the fire god, among others. There was a clan division system called Varni, which included the Brahmins, who memorized and ritualized the Vedic teachings, the ksatriya (shah-tree-yahs), who were the warrior clan, the Vaishyas, who were merchants, and the lowest clan, the Shudras, who were craftsmen, farmers and other laborers. This was part of a pre-Hindu culture which later developed the caste system.

The Vedic doctrine involved ritual sacrifice and adherence to culture norms to appease the gods, creating beneficial karmic results. It is assumed Siddhattha, as a child and young adult, was taught the Vedic doctrine by Brahman priests and was led to belief that his duty was to adhere to the social structures of the Kshatriya clan and make the appropriate sacrifices and participate in the Brahman rituals, eventually becoming a leader of that particular political entity. Apparently he was not satisfied with that approach to the human condition, but preoccupied with the suffering of humanity and more drawn to the Sramana practitioners.

The Sramana culture included various practices that preceded the Aryans, such as meditation, austerity, and contemplation of the concepts included in the Vedic teachings and could be perceived as reformers. There were various groups that existed at the time of Siddhattha and the Pali Canon, the collection of teachings attributed to him and his followers, lists several that he lived with and learned from after leaving his home when he was 29, having met the primary karmic responsibility to his clan when he fathered a son, becoming a sannyasin, a person who renounces family and clan life to pursue spiritual aspirations.

The various Sramana teachers presented several views regarding the underpinnings of life experience—nihilism, fatalism, materialism, and so on, all of them countering the Vedic tradition. According to the Canon, he learned from each of these teachers how to cultivate jhana states of meditative awareness and was encouraged by each to remain with that group to become the leader eventually; this was politically astute on the part of these teachers, as Siddhattha was politically educated and connected. According to the Canon, he refused these invitations, still seeking the ultimate understanding, moksha, liberation from samsara, the seemingly endless cycle of birth and death.

We can infer from what happened after he left these teachers that their influence created a sense of the variability of understanding of reality that critiqued the Vedic teachings—he was free to come up with his own rendering, not relying on given concepts or understandings. I believe this set the stage for the revolutionary reformation of religious understanding and meditative practice that he instigated. Previously, the way to cultivate liberating karma was to follow the Vedic teachings as presented by the Brahmin priests assiduously, making the right sacrifices and sustaining the clan norms that were established. Moksha was determined by adherence to these rituals in order to appease the gods, who would then allow one to “move up the ladder” of liberation.

His teachings pointed to an ethic that was more individual, emphasizing that virtue to kindness, honesty, compassion and generosity were the social norms, not clan loyalty. These ethical orientations, combined with deep meditative skill, revealed a subjective reality organized around overcoming Dukkha by direct experiential awareness of Anicca (ah-nee-chah, the transitory nature of subjective experience), revealing Anatta (ah-nah-tah, the absence of an enduring/autonomous self). Direct realization of these phenomena of the mind would provide moksha, liberation from samsara, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. This placed responsibility for liberation from Dukkha on the individual rather than the gods, a revolutionary concept, even in contemporary culture.

**Countercultural Aspects of the Buddha’s Teaching**

All of what we know about Buddhism and the culture from which it emerged at this level is conjecture, through increasingly informed and astute scholarship. The inferences are useful in providing thoughtful ways to apply what can be inferred to current life circumstances, a topic that will be explored in a few weeks, focusing on how Buddhism is operating in the West.

His Awakening experience was, I believe, the most profound insight into human personality structures and processes—arguably the first true psychology of personality in human history. The story about the experience as presented in the Pali Canon is couched in language and concepts that were adaptations of what was currently believed in that era. All the insights that have emerged from the Dharma, the doctrine of his teachings, over the subsequent centuries, are couched in terms that were relevant to the cultures into which they were introduced. I hope to discuss those developments that extended over centuries, in the next few weeks.

Talking about the Awakening experience requires some contemporary psychological concepts. The word *Nirvana* within classic Buddhist terms, synonymous with moksha, is *that which occurs after the fuel of craving and clinging has burned out*. It is assumed that the Buddha meant this to contradict the Vedic Fire Rituals, which required a sacred flame to be kept burning eternally to connect with the liberation potential emanating from the fire god Agni. The Buddha’s Awakening is literally purely experiential and conceptually unexplainable but has the characteristic of total relinquishment of identification with any subjective experience as constituting an enduring self that is not subject to interdependence within an environmental context. It is a quality of attention that has no subject/object characteristic.

After his Awakening experience, the Buddha was confronted with the dilemma regarding how to convey his indescribable insights to those around him. There are numerous interpersonal exchanges described in the Canon; my interest is in describing some of the concepts and terminology he used. He repurposed terms and concepts that were previously referenced differently in the Brahman culture. Here are some examples:

Dukkha: This concept is usually translated as *suffering*; I personally prefer *distress and confusion*, with *distress* focused on *the relentlessly driven urgency of craving* and *confusion* to *the inherent tension between the fabrication of the mind and the actual reality of circumstance*. The origin of the word is related to a typical experience of the more primitive ways of transportation available in those days as reflected by Joseph Goldstein in “Mindfulness”, on page 289:

The word [*dukkha*] is made up of the prefix *du* and the root *kha*. *Du* means “bad” or “difficult.” *Kha* means “empty.” “Empty,” here, refers to several things—some specific, others more general. One of the specific meanings refers to the empty axle hole of a wheel. If the axle fits badly into the center hole, we get a very bumpy ride. This is a good analogy for our ride through saṃsāra. On my first trip to Burma, a group of friends and I went up-country to visit Mahāsi Sayadaw’s home temple. We made part of the journey in an oxcart, and it was undoubtedly similar to modes of transportation in the Buddha’s time. This extremely bumpy journey was a very visceral example of *dukkha*, the first noble truth. In more general philosophical terms, “empty” means devoid of permanence and devoid of a self that can control or command phenomena. Here we begin to get a sense of other, more inclusive meanings of the term *dukkha*. Words like unsatisfying, unreliable, uneaseful, and stressful all convey universal aspects of our experience.

As mentioned regarding Dukkha, *craving* is a drive that is the distressful component in the process. The next term more fully describes this phenomenon.

Tanha: The literal translation of this term is *thirst*, but it has the additional connotation of *desire* or *craving*. Normally, thirst is the consequence of dehydration; when we drink enough water, we are no longer thirsty. The intention conveyed by the Buddha is an *unquenchable* thirst. This has interesting connotations regarding current research regarding addiction. A part of the brain, the nucleus accumbens, is associated with organizing behaviors that are associated with acting to reduce stress, either through acquiring something pleasant/nutritive or through avoiding something unpleasant/painful. With addiction, there is a desire to avoid something unpleasant (withdrawal or exposure to some stressful experience), habitually linked with acquiring a pleasant experience to mask the unpleasant stress (either a substance or some emotionally distracting or numbing behavior). This process eventually causes the nucleus accumbens to “get stuck in the on position”, simply put, which disables the ability of the executive functions of the brain to function effectively.

Upadana: This is translated as *clinging* or *attachment* and, when combined with craving, produces Dukkha. The original meaning of the term is *fuel* or *sustenance*, and this is an example of how the Buddha repurposed Brahman concepts and practices. Upadana described the sacred fuel that the Brahman priests used to keep the sacrificial fires burning to appease the god Agni. The Buddha taught that any sort of belief was clinging, that is, attachment to the view that one’s liberation from Dukkha resulted from sacrifice to Agni and following the clan rules associated with this god. In his rendering, liberation from Dukkha involves renouncing any attachment to the belief that there is an enduring/autonomous self.

Anicca: This is typically translated as impermanence, and physics backs this up (unknown in those days). This was a revolutionary discovery on the part of the Buddha. I think it is better understood when realizing that what is being investigated is the transient nature of subjective experience. There is a binding process in the brain that blends various neural processes in such a way that we experience a flow of “selfing”, fabricated through the memories we acquire over a lifetime. This indicates the next revolutionary insight discovered by the Buddha:

Anatta: This is translated as non-self, which can be baffling when the selfing process is so normal. Anatta really addresses the absence of an enduring/autonomous self. Anicca realizes that the self is transient. This misperception leads to the assumption that there is a core personality that is set apart from the rest of the world. This is countered by what is termed in psychology “interpersonal attachment”, which realizes that we are co-creating each other in relationship, which in Buddhist psychology is termed “interdependence” or “interbeing”. The only way a personality can form is in relationship.

The Four Noble Truths: This is another revolutionary concept created by the Buddha, perhaps the most basic and most familiar of Buddhist principles:

1. Dukkha is an inevitable part of life. Dukkha is experienced physically through illness, injury, or simply getting old.
2. The cause of dukkha is tanha/upadana, craving and clinging
3. There is liberation from Dukkha, in terms of stress reduction, but ultimately in terms of the Awakening experience, which occurs more frequently among humanity than might be supposed.
4. The Noble Eightfold Path.

Dhamma Vinaya in the Buddha’s Lifetime

We assume that the Buddha lived to the age of eighty after his Awakening, developing the group of his followers called the Sangha. This was quite an accomplishment in those days. I don’t think he intended or believed that he was creating a religion that would be so enduring or popular, in India, China, or Indochina, and that it would become institutionalized. After all, he was trying to de-institutionalize the Brahman religion. He refused to name a successor. He created what is called the Vinaya code, the ethical listings that would create a foundation for practice as he was confronted with various interpersonal conflicts that emerged as larger groups of monks and nuns lived together, to provide ethical and practice protocols for the system he created to produce the results intended.

There were more followers who did not renounce the householder life than those who took the robes, and the chief of those was Anathapindika (ah-nah-thah-pihn-dee-kah). The Pali Canon reports that he purchased what became the monastery the Buddha most frequented by covering the ground with gold coins, provided provisions and housing for the resident monks, and he was the chief representative of the Buddha to the lay community.

The Buddha had to contend with significant social conflict during his life as a leader of a monastic community; this is where his early life training in diplomacy was important. Several of the local kings were aggressive in attacking and overcoming nearby organized political entities, and this included Kapilavashtu, where Siddhattha grew up. These conquering rulers were also reportedly followers of the Buddha’s teachings, and several suttas describe his interactions with various royal families in the region. The political and cultural tensions would have been challenging for the Buddha, but apparently he managed to maintain and grow the Sangha even so.

The Buddha was also not a vegetarian. The Vinaya required monks to accept whatever food and other sustaining articles from whoever was generous enough to provide them, and this acceptance stated that monks or nuns could not specifically ask for animal products but must accept them in order to provide good karmic results for those who were being generous. The Buddha’s death was caused by intestinal disease caused by tainted meat that he willingly ate, advising those with him to not eat the meat as it was toxic.

We can assume the Buddha and most of his followers were illiterate, even though literacy was present in those days. The royal line that he was born in to could get people who could write if they needed to. Most writing was either for religious or commercial purposes. Therefore all his teachings had to be memorized and passed on from teacher to student, and this was not beneficial in retaining the original teachings that he actually uttered. This sort of transmission created the system that lasts to this day that requires memorizing and chanting the suttas on a regular basis, based on what has been passed down through previous generations. It wasn’t until nearly 1,000 years later that the teachings began being written down. In that sense it is remarkable that there was significant consistency among the various Sanghas that developed over the generations. The talk next week will focus on the development of the two remaining schools, the Theravada and Mahayana, along with the branching off of Chan, Zen and Vajrayana (Tibetan) Buddhism.