Steve

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Buddhism Plain and Simple

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PENGUIN BOOKS

Contents

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Steve Hagen is a Zen priest, a long-time teacher of Buddhism and the author of *How the World Can be the Way It Is*.

He began studying Buddhism in 1967, and in 1975 became a student of Zen master Dainin Katagiri, the author of *Returning to Silence: ZenPractice in Daily Life*. He was ordained a Zen priest in 1979. Hagen later studied with a number of other teachers in Asia and Europe. In 1989 he received Dharma Transmission (endorsement to teach) from Katagiri Roshi.

Steve Hagen lives in Minneapolis, where he lectures, teaches meditation, and leads retreats at the Dharma Field Meditation and Learning Center. He is currently working on several books and has recently edited *You Have toSay Something* (Shambhala 1998), a collection of Dharma talks by Katagiri Roshi.

With gratitude I dedicate this book to all beings.

Introduction

AS THE CURRENT MILLENNIUM COMES TO a close, most of us have lost faith in our ancient storybook versions of the world. With the development of science, many of us have come to see the universe as an inconceivably strange, vast, complex, impersonal, multi-dimensional, and perhaps meaningless realm of mind and matter.

We may feel forced to deal with this loss of faith by going to one of two wretched extremes. Either we blind ourselves to our predicament and attempt to escape via drugs or alcohol or our careers or any of innumerable belief systems, or we face the woeful prospect that we're intelligent creatures living in a meaningless world.

Many of us act as though we could find fulfillment if only we possessed enough money, enough security, enough respect, enough love, enough faith, enough education, enough power, enough peace, enough knowledge, enough … something.

There are others among us, however, who don't (or can't) buy into this. They sense that real security is impossible to attain. For they know that even if we could manage to accumulate all we desire, it will be inevitably taken from us by death. Our mortality looms above us, as terrifying as it is certain. We seem utterly stumped. How can we possibly find peace under these conditions?

Not only do we feel imprisoned by our ignorance, we seem

doomed to remain that way. As Yang Chu, the fourth century b.c.e. Chinese philosopher put it:

> We move through the world in a narrow groove, preoccupied with the petty things we see and hear, brooding over our prejudices, passing by the joys of life without even knowing that we have missed anything. Never for a moment do we taste the heady wine of freedom. We are as truly imprisoned as if we lay at the bottom of a dungeon, heaped with chains.

What is the basic human problem that no apparent remedy will cure? What is our existence all about? How can we ever possibly comprehend the whole of it? And yet isn't knowledge of the Whole—knowledge that's not relative, or dependent on changing conditions—precisely what would be required to free us from the doubts and dilemmas that cause us so much pain and anxiety?

We long to be free from our confusion and discontent, not to have to live out our lives chained helplessly to uncertainty and fear. Yet we often do not realize that it's precisely our confused state of mind that binds us.

There is a way to move beyond this ignorance, pessimism, and confusion, and to experience—rather than comprehend—Reality as a Whole. This experience is not based on any conception or belief; it is direct perception itself. It's *seeing* before signs appear, before ideas sprout, before falling into thought.

It's called enlightenment. It's nothing more or less than *seeing* things as they are rather than as we wish or believe them to be.

This liberation of mind—this direct awareness of Reality as a Whole—is fully accessible to anyone willing to attend to their actual experience.

Twenty-five hundred years ago in India a man named Gautama experienced this liberation. He devoted the remainder of his life to teaching others how to experience the same freedom of mind.

After he awakened from the crippling ignorance that kept him from knowing what was actually going on, he became known as the Buddha—the “awakened one.”

When the Buddha was asked to sum up his teaching in a single word, he said, “awareness.” This is a book about awareness. Not awareness of something in particular, but awareness itself—being awake, alert, in touch with what is actually happening. It’s about examining and exploring the most basic questions of life. It’s about relying on the immediate experience of this present moment. It’s not about belief, doctrine, formula, or tradition. It’s about freedom of mind.

The Buddha learned to see directly into the nature of experience. As a result of his teaching and his life, a new religion arose and spread throughout the world. In the process, like all religions, Buddhism accumulated (and generated) a variety of beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, and practices. As it spread from country to country, it acquired a wide variety of cultural trappings: special clothes and hats, statues, incense, gongs, bells, whistles—even peculiar architectural forms, icons, and symbols. This book leaves all that behind.

Rituals, ceremonies, prayers, and special outfits are inevitable, but they do not—they cannot—express the heart of what the Buddha taught. In fact, all too often, such things get in the way. They veil the simple wisdom of the Buddha’s words, and distract us from it.

This is a major problem, and not just for those of us raised in the West. It is not easy to know where Buddhism ends and Asian culture begins, or to distinguish the original and authentic teachings of the Buddha from what was added later by people with

less acute insight. As a result, many Americans and Europeans genuinely believe that Buddhism is about worshipping Buddha, or bowing and wearing robes, or working oneself into a trance, or coming up with answers to bewildering riddles, or past and future incarnations.

Buddhism is not about these beliefs and practices. The observations and insights of the Buddha are plain, practical, and eminently down-to-earth. They deal exclusively with *here* and *now*, not with theory, speculation, or belief in some far-off time or place. Because these teachings remain focused on this moment—even as you read this—they remain relevant, and of profound value, to every culture and every person who investigates them seriously. It is to these uncluttered, original insights and observations that this book returns.

This book is divided into three parts. In Part One, we'll focus on the primary teachings of the Buddha, which he called the four truths of existence. In Part Two, we'll focus in greater detail on the fourth of these truths. Here the Buddha lays out a path—a practical and effective way of life—by which we can understand and deal with the world as we find it. And in Part Three, we'll look more closely still to magnify the first two aspects of this path. These two aspects comprise the wisdom teachings of the Buddha, those that deal with human intent and awareness.

For people investigating Buddhism for the first time, *Buddhism Plain and Simple* offers a clear, straightforward look at the wisdom and guidance of an enlightened teacher who lived some 2500 years ago but whose teachings remain as vital and penetrating today as ever. For people already familiar with Buddhism, including long-time practitioners, this book provides a long-needed overview of Buddhism's essentials, free of the fetters and cultural trappings that have accumulated over twenty-five centuries. For

every person with a desire to see deeply into the nature of existence, it is a call to awakening.

The Journey Into Now

THE MAN KNOWN TO US AS BUDDHA lived in northern India (present-day Nepal) in the sixth century B.C.E. Originally named Gautama, he was the only son of a wealthy king who ruled a small country. As a boy and adolescent, Gautama lived a pampered and sheltered life in his father's palace. His father made sure that Gautama received the best of everything: the finest clothes, the best education, and plenty of servants to do his bidding.

Gautama's life was so sheltered, in fact, that he knew nothing of sickness, death, or human suffering until, as a young adult, he heard about death from a servant. Suddenly, for the first time, he was confronted with the reality that human life inevitably entails illness, old age, and death. He was unable to deny or put aside this newfound knowledge, which soon began to trouble him more and more. What was the point of human life, he asked himself, if it was so transient, so uncertain, and so filled with suffering?

The question haunted him until he could no longer enjoy the passing pleasures of his life of luxury. He decided to leave his family's home and relinquish his chance to become king, for he had come to see power and wealth as a veneer over a life that had sorrow and loss at its foundation. He chose instead to devote his time and energy to finding a way to extricate himself from the universal despair that seemed to form the very ground of human existence.

For six years he wandered the valley of the Ganges River,

learning the various systems and practices of the great religious teachers of his day. Though he was a good student who quickly mastered whatever he was taught, he found nothing in these teachings and practices that satisfied him, nothing that dispelled the deep sorrow that filled his heart and mind. So he left the teachers and went his own way.

And then, while seated under a tree, Gautama experienced enlightenment. At last he thoroughly understood the human problem, its origin, its ramifications, and its solution.

From then on he was known as the Buddha, which means “the awakened one.” For the next forty-five years he taught the way of enlightenment to men and women, nobles and peasants, the learned and the illiterate, the moral and the base, without making the slightest distinction among them. His teaching of liberation from human suffering and despair is universal, and to this day it remains open to anyone who examines it, understands it, and puts it to the test.

One day, soon after the Buddha’s enlightenment, a man saw the Buddha walking toward him. The man had not heard of the Buddha, but he could see that there was something different about the man who was approaching, so he was moved to ask, “Are you a god?”

The Buddha answered, “No.”

“You’re a magician, then? A sorcerer? A wizard?”

“No.”

“Are you some kind of celestial being? An angel, perhaps?”

Again the Buddha said, “No.”

“Well, then, what are you?”

The Buddha replied, “I am awake.”

The Buddha never considered himself to be something other than a human being—only someone who was fully awake. He never claimed to be a god, or to be inspired by God, or to have access to any occult or supernatural power. He attributed his realization and understanding solely to human endeavor and human ability.

We call Gautama "the Buddha," but many other buddhas, many other awakened human beings, exist, and have existed. And every buddha—past, present, and future—is a human being, not a god.

Buddha is not someone you pray to, or try to get something from. Nor is a buddha someone you bow down to. A buddha is simply a person who is awake—nothing more or less.

Buddhism is not a belief system. It's not about accepting certain tenets or believing a set of claims or principles. In fact, it's quite the opposite. It's about examining the world clearly and carefully, about testing everything and every idea. Buddhism is about *seeing*. It's about knowing rather than believing or hoping or wishing. It's also about not being afraid to examine anything and everything, including our own personal agendas.

Not least of all, of course, we must examine the Buddha's teaching itself. The Buddha himself invited people on all occasions to test him. "Don't believe me because you see me as your teacher," he said. "Don't believe me because others do. And don't believe anything because you've read it in a book, either. Don't put your faith in reports, or tradition, or hearsay, or the authority of religious leaders or texts. Don't rely on mere logic, or inference, or appearances, or speculation."

The Buddha repeatedly emphasized the impossibility of ever arriving at Truth by giving up your own authority and following the

lights of others. Such a path will lead only to an opinion, whether your own or someone else's.

The Buddha encouraged people to "know for yourselves that certain things are unwholesome and wrong. And when you do, then give them up. And when you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome and good, then accept them and follow them."

The message is always to examine and *see* for yourself. When you *see* for yourself what is true—and that's really the only way that you can genuinely know anything—then embrace it. Until then, just suspend judgment and criticism.

The point of Buddhism is to *just see*. That's all.

We cannot approach Buddhism, or begin any real inquiry into Truth, with any assumption or belief whatsoever. We must be willing to see things as they are, rather than as we hope, wish, or expect them to be.

Authentic Buddhism, therefore, begins with fact. It starts with perception—direct experience.

Real Buddhism is not really an "ism." It's a process, an awareness, an openness, a spirit of inquiry—not a belief system, or even (as we normally understand it) a religion. It is more accurate to call it "the teaching of the awakened," or the *buddha-dharma*. Since the focus of this book is on the teaching of the awakened and not on any sectarian presentation, from here on I will usually use the term "buddha-dharma" rather than "Buddhism."

The teaching of the Buddha does not take what is set down in writing too seriously. Buddhist writings (including this book) can be likened to a raft. A raft is a very handy thing to carry you across the water, from one shore to another. But once you've reached the

other shore, you no longer need the raft. Indeed, if you wish to continue your journey beyond the shore, you must leave the raft behind.

Our problem is that we tend to fall in love with the raft. Before long we think, “This has been a very good raft; it has served me well. I want to hang on to it and take it with me as I continue my journey.” But if we hang on to Buddhist teachings—or any teachings—they will ultimately become a hindrance. Buddhist teachings and writings can assist you, but you won’t find Truth in them, as if Truth somehow resided in the Buddha’s words. No words—Buddha’s, mine, or anyone else’s—can *see* for you. You must do that for yourself, as Buddha did while seated under a tree a hundred generations ago.

Buddha’s words can also be likened to a finger pointing at the moon. His teachings can point to Truth, but they cannot *be* Truth. Buddhas—people who are awake—can only point the way.

We cannot hold Truth with words. We can only *see* it, experience it, for ourselves.

If you point out the moon to a cat, she probably won’t look at the sky; she’ll come up and sniff your finger. In a similar fashion, it’s easy for us to become fascinated by a particular teaching, or teacher, or book, or system, or culture, or ritual. But the buddha-dharma—the teaching of the awakened—directs us to focus not on the pointing finger, but on the experience of Truth itself.

Buddhism is sometimes called a non-historical religion. In other words, it doesn’t tell a story of creation, or speculate that we’re heading toward a heaven or afterlife of some kind. Indeed, the

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Buddhism is sometimes called a non-historical religion. In other words, it doesn't tell a story of creation, or speculate that we're heading toward a heaven or afterlife of some kind. Indeed, the buddha-dharma does not speak of beginnings or ends at all. It's more a religion of middles; in fact, it is often called the middle way.

The buddha-dharma would have you start with what is given in your direct experience. It will not ask you to accept a belief, or to attempt to account for some presumed or imagined thing. The buddha-dharma does not ask you to accept particular explanations of how things are. Truth does not need any explanation. It only needs to be *seen*.

The Buddha said that the human condition is like that of a person shot with an arrow. It is both painful and urgent. But instead of

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The Human Situation

IMAGINE THAT YOU SEE PEOPLE SEATED AT a sumptuous banquet. Long tables piled high with delicacies are spread out before them. A dazzling and mouth-watering array of foods, perfectly prepared, is steaming and glistening and sizzling right in front of their eyes, easily within reach.

But the people seated at this feast aren't eating. In fact, their plates are empty. They haven't helped themselves to so much as a crumb. They've been seated at this banquet for a long time now. And they're slowly and steadily starving to death.

They're starving not because they can't partake of the wonderful feast, or because eating is forbidden, or difficult, or harmful. They're starving because they don't realize that food is what they need. They don't recognize the sharp, urgent pains in their stomachs as hunger. They don't see that what they need to do, all they need to do, is enjoy the feast that's right in front of them.

This is our basic human situation. Most of us sense that something is amiss with our lives. But we haven't any idea what our problem really is, or what we should do about it. We may see —perhaps dimly—that the food is there before us, but we don't connect it to the pain inside us, even as that pain grows sharper and more fierce.

We long for something. We feel pain and loss. We suffer.

Everything we need to alleviate this dissatisfaction is right here before us. Yet we don't realize it.

According to the buddha-dharma, this sad state of affairs, this profound and ongoing dissatisfaction, is the first truth of existence. All the pain we bring to ourselves and others—the hatred, the warring, the groveling, the manipulation—is our own doing. It comes out of our own hearts and minds, out of our own confusion.

Furthermore, if we don't *see* exactly what the problem is, we're going to perpetuate it. We're going to teach our children our confusion, and we'll go on, generation after generation, doing more of the same to ourselves and to each other.

When the Buddha looked honestly into his own heart and mind, he realized this, just as countless others have realized it since. Each of these people saw for themselves that their suffering, and the means to stop it, lay within themselves.

This is not to say that we should expect to be free of problems, or that if only we behave properly things will go as we would like. No person's life—including Buddha's—ever is, was, or will be free of difficulty. The buddha-dharma does not promise to make our lives problem-free. Rather, it urges us to examine the nature of our problems, what they are and where they come from. The buddha-dharma is not an armchair philosophy. It isn't pipe dreaming. It's about getting down to basics and acting on them.

There is an old story about a man who came to see the Buddha because he had heard that the Buddha was a great teacher. Like all of us, he had some problems in his life, and he thought the Buddha might be able to help him straighten them out.

He told the Buddha that he was a farmer. "I like farming," he said, "but sometimes it doesn't rain enough, and my crops fail.

Last year we nearly starved. And sometimes it rains too much, so my yields aren't what I'd like them to be."

The Buddha patiently listened to the man.

"I'm married, too," said the man. "She's a good wife … I love her, in fact. But sometimes she nags me too much. And sometimes I get tired of her."

The Buddha listened quietly.

"I have kids," said the man. "Good kids, too … but sometimes they don't show me enough respect. And sometimes … "

The man went on like this, laying out all his difficulties and worries. Finally he wound down and waited for the Buddha to say the words that would put everything right for him.

Instead the Buddha said, "I can't help you."

"What do you mean?" said the astonished man.

"Everybody's got problems," said the Buddha. "In fact, we've all got eighty-three problems, each one of us. Eighty-three problems, and there's nothing you can do about it. If you work really hard on one of them, maybe you can fix it— but if you do, another one will pop right into its place. For example, you're going to lose your loved ones eventually. And you're going to die some day. Now there's a problem, and there's nothing you, or I, or anyone else can do about it."

The man became furious. "I thought you were a great teacher!" he shouted. "I thought you could help me! What good is your teaching, then?"

The Buddha said, "Well, maybe it will help you with the eighty-fourth problem."

"The eighty-*fourth* problem?" said the man. "What's the eighty-fourth problem?"

Said the Buddha, "You want to not have any problems."

We think we have to deal with our problems in a way that exterminates them, that distorts or denies their reality. But in doing so, we try to make Reality into something other than what it is. We try to rearrange and manipulate the world so that dogs will never bite, accidents will never happen, and the people we care about will never die. Even on the surface, the futility of such efforts should be obvious.

While I was working on this book, a good friend of mine died—suddenly, inexplicably, with no warning. He was laughing with friends only moments before. He simply walked across the lawn to his front steps, sat down, and died.

Rick was kind, generous, and well-loved by many. He had a happy, solid marriage and left behind a loving wife and three small children. He was 36 years old and, so far as he and anyone else knew, he was in excellent health.

For me, and for others who knew him, his death was very sad. Very shocking. Very unexpected. And very swift. I miss him greatly, and have shed tears with his family and the many friends who loved him.

This is human life. We cannot lose sight of it. Weeds will flourish, though we hate them and wish them gone; flowers will fall, though we love them and long for them to remain.

Human life is characterized by dissatisfaction. It's right here with us. This is the buddha-dharma's first truth of human life. How do we deal with this reality? Should we pretend—or hope—that what we love is not going to die? The awakened would answer with a decisive "no."

The buddha-dharma is grounded in Reality. It is not pie in the sky, or wishful thinking, or a denial of what human life is. There's no attempt to cover up, to gloss over, to reinterpret the facts.

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Imagine that you see people seated at a sumptuous banquet. Long tables piled high with delicacies are spread out before them. A dazzling and mouth-watering array of foods, perfectly prepared, is steaming and glistening and sizzling right in front of their eyes, easily within reach.

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