seeing clearly

a buddhist guide to life

NICOLAS BOMMARITO

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SERIES EDITOR FOREWORD

Several ancient philosophers held that the point of studying ethics was not just to learn about ethics—as one might learn about chemistry, astronomy, or history—but to become a better human being. They also recognized that this was not easy to do. In order for thinking about ethics to make a difference in our lives, they argued that our habits and inclinations needed to be educated right alongside our minds. They therefore claimed that what mattered to living well was not just what we thought but *how* we thought, and not just how we thought but how we emotionally responded to the world and to other people.

The books in this series highlight some of the transformative ideas that philosophers have had about these topics—about the good life, and the practices and ways of life that help us to pursue it. They tell us what various philosophers and traditions have taken to be most important in life, and what they have taken to be less important. They offer philosophical guidance about how to approach broad questions, such as how to structure our days, how to train our attention, and how to die with dignity. They also offer guidance about how to deal with the sort of everyday questions that are often neglected by scholars, but that make of the texture of our lives, such as how to deal with relationships gone wrong,

family disruptions, unexpected success, persistent anxiety, and an environment at risk.

Because the books are written by philosophers, they draw attention to the reasons and arguments that underlie these various claims—the particular visions of the world and of human nature that are at the root of these stances. The claims made in these books can therefore be contested, argued with, and found to be more or less plausible. While some answers will clearly compete with one another, other views will likely appear complementary. Thus a Confucian might well find that a particular practice or insight of say, Nietzsche's, helps to shed light on his or her way of living in the world, and vice versa. On the whole, the idea is that these great philosophers and traditions all have something to teach us about how to be more fully human, and more fully happy.

Above all, the series is dedicated to the idea that philosophy can be more than just an academic discipline—that is it can be, as it was for hundreds of years in the ancient world, a way of life. The hope is also that philosophy can enhance the ways of life we already feel pulled towards, and help us to engage with them more authentically and fully.

Stephen R. Grimm
Professor of Philosophy
Fordham University
September 2019

PREFACE

Buddhism is about you, your life, and how to get through it. It's about the problems you face and where they come from. It's about taking a long, hard look at the world and finding that it's *very* different from how it first seemed. The fundamental source of these problems, Buddhists say, is that the world is very different from how our ordinary experiences make it seem. You fix it by changing your outlook so it better matches the way things really are.

That's all pretty lofty. This book will discuss some pretty lofty ideas, but it will do so because they're important for understanding the practical guidance Buddhism offers about how to live a better life. In presenting these ideas, my aim isn't to sell you on a particular form of Buddhism or to convert you into a Buddhist. The important thing is for you to think over these ideas for yourself. If it makes sense, then accept it. If it doesn't, at least you'll have thought about new ideas about how to live and understand why you don't think they're right.

I'm also not here to hold up a particular flavor of Buddhism as "real" or "authentic." Cards on the table, I'm deeply skeptical of such judgments. I'm not promoting a particular teacher, sect, or community. Buddhism means very different things to different people around the world. It's more accurate to think of various

Buddhisms, different people in different times and places, who, despite a shared outlook, would still have plenty to disagree about.

Some of these agendas run deep and are impossible to avoid—for example, Buddhist texts often contain fantastical and supernatural aspects. Some Buddhists take these at face value. Others reinterpret or de-emphasize them. Personally, I'm not a fan of the supernatural and favor other ways of understanding such strands. At the same time, my aim here is to present a window into Buddhism *as a whole*, not merely a secularized, modernized, and sanitized version of it.

I want you to better understand Buddhism, to understand what sorts of things Buddhists do, what they think, and most importantly, *why*. Understanding here doesn't just mean knowing facts. It's okay to be curious about Buddhism because it's strange and different from what you're used to. But understanding it means that, eventually, it won't seem as strange anymore. So when you have contact with Buddhist ideas or practices, even if you don't accept them yourself, you can think, "Yeah, that's something a normal person would do. I get why they're doing that."

You can think of this book as a zoomed-out map of the Buddhist world and what it has to offer. It's a *big* world, so it'll cover a lot of territory. This means the landmarks in some neighborhoods won't appear and there won't be as much detail as on more localized maps. But, especially if you've never been there or if you've only visited a small part of it, it will get you familiar with the lay of the land and help you to find neighborhoods that you'll feel more at home in, or at least that you'd like to visit.

In introducing you to this world, I'll be speaking with two voices: I'll be both your guide and a fellow traveler. I will point

out important landmarks, even the ones I'm not personally fond of. I'll also explain how I've made sense of this world, my way of navigating it, and how I've made it meaningful.

In doing so, I speak as a philosophy professor who has spent much of his life studying Buddhist thought and practice in many places around the world. I'm not a lama, guru, roshi, or any other formal Buddhist master. My interpretation of Buddhism is one that I think makes sense, but it does not have the authority of any particular Buddhist institution. Everyone who writes about Buddhism presents their own take on it, and I'm no different. My take aims to be one that is not only philosophically and historically informed, but also beneficial for your life.

Buddhism in the West has a long history of people, often educated white guys like me, projecting all their hopes and dreams into it. This typically ends with some combination of disappointment, anger, denial, and cynicism. Some people feel that there simply *must* be completely pure and good versions of all their hopes and dreams *somewhere* in the world. And since the people and institutions in their neighborhood don't seem to fit the bill, their dreams must live in Japan or Tibet.

Buddhism is something that's been immensely beneficial and meaningful to people all over the world for thousands of years. It has been personally very important to me and my life. When someone is important to us, there's a temptation to overlook flaws ("Well, that's not who they *really* are!") and feel hostile to criticism ("How dare you say that about him!"). But people and institutions everywhere have the flaws that people and institutions always have. Just as idealizing a person is an unhealthy and unsustainable attitude, so is doing it for a culture or tradition. This isn't to say

that there's nothing wonderful or true or insightful in Buddhism, but you need to be careful of projecting what you're looking for as it can obscure the reality and variety of what's actually there.

What's there is a rich and interesting vision of what the world is like—the philosophy—and a wide range of tools and techniques to better navigate it—the practices. These aren't separate worlds but work together to help you better navigate and understand your life.

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Part I

Philosophy

1 | THE PROBLEM

You wake up every morning and you have to deal with what comes next. You interact with other people; some are great and others are complete assholes. Most can be both, depending on the day. You try to do things, big and small; sometimes it works out and sometimes it doesn't. Mostly it's mundane. Brush your teeth, catch up with an old friend, wait in line—regular stuff.

Some people happen to be lucky and, at their particular time and place, they have only the regular stuff, and dealing with it is easy. We should all be so lucky, but such luck doesn't often last. We start to lose things: our health, our status, our loved ones. Gradually or suddenly, these things vanish in the end, and when they do, no book anywhere can adequately describe the pain. It's usually such a loss that prompts reflection on this part of life. We only notice it when we lose a job or a friend, but it's the precarious situation we're in all of the time.

This is true in the good times too, but it's easier to ignore. You achieve a goal or have some good luck. But there's still a slight buzz just underneath the sound of celebration—a kind of anxiety that the success, whatever it is, is fleeting. You now have to protect against losing what you've won. People will expect you to replicate or even better it. For some achievements, you feel a target on your

back—people now have the goal of taking you down, of bettering you. Though it's not always apparent, each success brings with it new problems and new goals that pop up like weeds.

This isn't to say life is all bad, but even for the happiest of us, life always has these troubling aspects. One way of dealing with this fact is to ignore it. Leave the funeral thoughts for funerals. This is what most of us do most of the time. And it works too, except when it doesn't. But facing these facts doesn't have to lead to pessimism or despair. The person you love most in the world will die someday. This is a painful thought, but there are benefits to facing it rather than ignoring or denying it. Internalizing this fact can make you value each moment you spend with them, even the mundane moments spent waiting in line or having lunch. It can help you to enjoy the time you have together in full knowledge of how things are, without that faint buzz ringing in your ears.

Buddhism is about taking a long, hard look at the way things are. When we do this, some of what we find is harsh: People get sick. People die. People cheat, steal, and lie. We look out for our own. Things that we put together will, eventually, come apart. Rather than pretending things aren't that way or wishing and hoping that somehow things might be different, Buddhism offers a way to live at ease in full view of such facts. The world is the way it is, and we'd be better off examining it closely and living accordingly.

The basic insight of Buddhism is that the source of this fundamental problem is a mismatch between our most basic feeling about the world and how it really is. The painful experiences, the faint buzz of anxiety, they happen because our outlook on life has certain assumptions built into it that are out of step with reality. Think of someone who is paranoid and thinks everyone else is out

to get him. This outlook leads him to misconstrue kind words as threats and prevents him from becoming close to anyone. His outlook doesn't match up with reality, and so it causes a lot of anxiety and isolation. According to Buddhists, we're in a similar position except that the flaw in our outlook runs much deeper. Rather than making a mistake about other people and their motives, we make a mistake about the fundamental nature of ourselves and the world, a mistake that infects our entire outlook on life.

Buddhism is a method for dealing with what happens day in and day out. It's a strategy for dealing with the stuff that we're confronted with in life, both dramatic and ordinary. This isn't just a matter of changing what you *think* or *believe*, but also how you perceive, feel, and experience life. On the ground, how we respond to people and situations is not simply a matter of what we think (or what we *think* that we think). Our responses are a result of a more fundamental outlook we have on life that involves our deepest feelings about the world and how it works.

This is also true of the more ordinary outlooks people have. Lawyers don't just *know* a lot about what the laws are and how the courts work, but also experience things in legal terms. When the rest of us just see a set of icy stairs, they see a potential lawsuit. What will seem to many like just harsh words, they hear as slander or libel. Or think about someone you know who is optimistic. An optimistic person doesn't just believe that good things will happen but also perceives people and situations in a certain way. They *see* the glass as half full; they have fond *feelings* for a stranger they just met. Having an outlook means you carve up life in certain ways and relate to the world on certain terms.

You might think to yourself, why bother having an outlook at all? Seems like a hassle. But you already have one, whether you know it or not. Someone who thinks reflecting on life is a waste of time *has* an outlook on life, one that says not to reflect on things. We all have ways of responding to what life confronts us with. Saying, "I don't like whining about anxiety. I just put my head down and power through," *is* a way of responding to life and its problems. Given that you have one anyway, it's worth spending some time considering alternatives and trying to pick a good one.

Since the source of the problem is that our way of experiencing things is misaligned with the world, it is important to think and examine both our outlook and the world very carefully. Doctors have to closely examine a patient's body and some pretty disgusting symptoms to figure out what disease someone has, what caused it, and how to treat it. In the same way, we have to look closely at the world and some ugly features of it to figure out the source of the problem and how to solve it. In both cases, this involves a lot of trial and error, but luckily we don't have to start from scratch. Just as doctors today build on years of medical research and attempts to cure different ailments, Buddhists can draw on thousands of years of philosophy, psychology, and practical experience to help solve the problem.

2 | THE SOLUTION

The fundamental problem, our deep anxiety and insecurity, comes from a mismatch. The way we relate to the world is fundamentally misaligned with how it really is. Realigning our way of relating to the world is no simple task. It has two complementary aspects: philosophy and practice. As we'll see, this distinction isn't so clear-cut, but for now it's helpful to think of these two general strands in Buddhism.

Philosophy involves understanding the nature of the world and our minds. It involves careful examination, reasoning, and analysis of the world in general and ourselves in particular. It's the intellectual task of figuring out what there is, what it's like, and what to do about it.

Practice involves specific techniques to bring about a change in how we respond to the world. It aims at changing our mental habits and ways of experiencing life. Suppose you learned with complete certainty exactly how the world is, a flash of insight into the nature of all things. Following this revelation, you'd still be faced with the very difficult task of changing your old beliefs, feelings, and habits. Old habits die hard, and it's often not enough to simply *know* how the world is. Buddhist practice

involves specific techniques, concrete steps you can take that, over time, will help you to change not just your intellectual beliefs, but your entire outlook on life.

These two aspects can, and often are, discussed separately. This is no surprise given how monumental each task is; people sometimes devote their entire lives to only *one* philosophical question or Buddhist practice. Many people take up Buddhist practices without having thought much at all about the philosophical underpinnings. Others study Buddhist philosophy in detail without ever doing any Buddhist practices.

Nevertheless, these two aspects do inform each other. Philosophy helps to establish the aim of practice. Changing your responses to match how reality is means figuring out the nature of reality and your mental habits. Practice, on the other hand, can help you to have certain experiences which can, in turn, inform your ideas about how the world works. There are some things that only a skilled person can see. When a skilled mechanic looks at an engine or a skilled computer programmer looks at source code, they are able to see how things work precisely because they have practiced their craft for a long time. In the same way, Buddhist practices can help you to see things about the world that you couldn't before.

Suppose you decided that you want to live a healthier lifestyle. That would require knowing some facts, particularly facts about food and the human body. You'd also need to know what to do in light of those facts—what sorts of activities to do and how often, what kinds of foods to eat and how much. But knowing these facts is not enough. Just reading health journals and physiology textbooks won't make you a healthy person. You also have

to change your habitual ways of living. You have to actually eat the salads and get off the couch.

The more serious problem that Buddhism aims to solve is a bit like this. Solving it requires knowing some facts, fundamental facts about how the world is and how our minds work. This is the role of philosophy—to uncover how the world really is. But as with getting healthy, this isn't enough to eliminate the underlying problem. You have to take steps that change your usual way of relating to the world. This is the role of Buddhist practice. This is why Buddhist teachings, both philosophical and practical, are often likened to a lamp—they're supposed to illuminate things you couldn't see before and so help you to navigate the world better.

Unlike getting healthy, your current habits and ways of relating to the world that have to be reoriented are much deeper and more fundamental than changing how often you run or how many carbohydrates you eat each day. This realignment involves a more radical change in how you feel about yourself and your place in the world. Something like this happens when people have a crisis of identity. Some people who for years thought of themselves as a doctor or a punk or a loner come to realize that they can't stand seeing patients or hearing noisy rock bands or staying home on Friday nights. Sometimes this comes after years of unhappiness, or at least not feeling quite right. A mistaken feeling about who you are can cause a lot of misery and can take years to finally come around to. The kind of misconception Buddhism aims to fix is like this, except the mistake is not that you've had the wrong identity but that you have an identity at all.

The solution is radical in that it does not primarily aim to fix things *within* our misconceptions about reality but to attack such

misconceptions at their source. Think of someone having a nightmare. Things and events in an awful dream aren't real, but they are still incredibly upsetting. Rather than trying to comfort someone by accepting the reality of the dream ("So you showed up to the regional meeting naked and unprepared; at least it'll make for a good story!"), it is better to point out that the feelings are based on illusions ("Don't feel bad—there were no people laughing at you. None of that really happened!"). In the same way, Buddhism aims to cut off the thoughts and feelings that misrepresent the world at the roots.

This doesn't mean that you never have pleasant or unpleasant thoughts or feelings. It does mean that you recognize these for what they are and see clearly the ways they misrepresent reality. Even if you realize that you are dreaming, your dreams can still be pleasant or unpleasant. But once you get that it's only a dream, the experiences aren't quite the same because you know that the world they conjure up isn't real. Buddhism doesn't deny our experiences entirely, but it does point out that our everyday waking experiences trick us in important ways. The aim of Buddhist philosophy and practice is to change our minds so that we no longer fall for the trick.

"Why should *I* change?" you might find yourself thinking. Why not change the *world*? Consider a famous analogy by the Indian Buddhist philosopher Shantideva (pronounced *Shahn-tee-day-vuh*): It's really painful to walk around barefoot. The ground is hard and sharp and it cuts up your feet. One solution is to cover the entire earth in leather. Even if you managed to gather the leather, acquire all the land, and summon the manpower, it would be a massive undertaking. No more concrete roads, craggy mountains,

pebbly beaches. Sure your feet would be okay, but where would the food grow? Who's going to repair the leather when it's damaged? Where do you grow the grass to feed the cows for more leather? The problems multiply. And yet, with just the tiny amount of leather for a pair of sandals, you can walk anywhere. As grandmothers around the world have told us for centuries: You can't change the weather. Put on a sweater.

To be sure, we can change the world. But changing it in ways that get at the root of the problem, that eliminate the *source* of that faint buzz of anxiety that hovers around life—we can't do that. It's important to make the world better, but it's incredibly difficult. And some facts about reality we just can't change. Two and two make four. Water is wet. People die. These things aren't up to us, so the best method is to change our minds, not in ways that deny these truths but in ways that allow us to accept them and navigate through our lives accordingly.

This can all sound pretty difficult, and it is. And yet, there are reasons to be optimistic. If you're reading this you're already pretty fortunate. You were born as a human and didn't die from illness as an infant. Somebody, somewhere in your life, taught you how to look at a bunch of symbols and derive meaning from them. And you were smart enough to catch on! You're either wealthy enough to afford this book, fortunate enough to borrow it from a library or a friend, or clever enough to steal it without getting caught. You've been able to get enough food and water to survive up to this point. All this suggests that you're smart enough to reflect on your own thoughts, opinions, and feelings and motivated to do so in a way that makes life better. There's work to be done, but a lot of things have lined up to enable you to do it.

Of course, being in a position to do something is not the same as having done it. We're all in a position to make at least some progress in correcting the mismatch between our experience of the world and how it is. But there's a name for those who have actually done it: buddhas.

3 | THE BUDDHA

Buddha is not someone's name. It's a title, like president or doctor. This particular title refers to someone who has solved the problem and successfully changed their orientation to the world on a fundamental level. It literally means someone who has woken up. Someone who is dreaming mistakes their dream for reality, while a buddha is awake and sees things clearly.

There have been many buddhas. When we talk about *the* Buddha, we're referring to the historical Buddha, the one who lived in India and started what we call Buddhism. His name was Siddhartha Gautama (pronounced *Syd-har-thah Gow-tuh-muh*) and, being from the Shakya clan, he's often known as Shakyamuni Buddha. He's not the jolly fat man some people picture. That's a different figure (called Budai in Chinese or Hotei in Japanese) seen as granting good luck and often associated with the *next* buddha. (Yes, there will be buddhas in the future.)

The life of the historical Buddha is worth learning about for a few reasons. It is, of course, an important part of Buddhism and known by Buddhists all over the world. But it also serves as an example, a vision not only of someone who has solved the problem, but what the *process* of solving it looks like. As with many stories of important people, it is both biography and guidance—the story is especially important because of the lessons contained within it.

Where you begin telling the story of the Buddha's life depends a lot on your worldview. A traditional approach starts eons ago: A popular collection of stories in Asia called the *Jataka Tales* tells fables of the Buddha's lifetimes *before* he became the Buddha. They describe how he behaved when he was born as a rabbit, a king, an elephant, or a merchant. These stories typically involve him doing things of astounding selflessness—when he was an elephant, for example, he ran off a cliff so that a group of starving travelers could eat. There are hundreds of these stories, which draw on previously existing moral fables with various lessons; taken together they emphasize what an incredibly long and difficult road it is to become a buddha.

The story of the final life of the Buddha is one of the most told and retold stories in the world. It's the subject of countless works of art and literature and has numerous variants. The broad strokes, however, are fairly straightforward. He was born around 500 BCE to a rich and moderately powerful family in what is now Nepal. As the warrior son of a powerful man, his parents had very high hopes for him. He was predicted to become either a person with deep spiritual insight or a very powerful king. His parents preferred the latter so, to keep his life on track, they kept him secluded in the palace in relative luxury. But that would work for only so long. One day when he was in his late twenties, curiosity got the best of him and he decided to venture into the outside world. What he saw hit him hard and changed the course of his life.

It was a stark confrontation with the harsh realities that he had been sheltered from all his life. He saw people with serious illnesses. He saw decrepit people. He saw dead bodies. It was unsettling and disturbing. The story can seem a bit far-fetched: Could

anyone *really* avoid facing such facts until their late twenties? But similar experiences can be found today, too. Showing any young person from a rich family how people actually live in areas of extreme poverty would be a shock to say the least. Reminders that your loved ones are getting older, when they forget names or can't make it up the stairs, are more than a little unpleasant. Trips to the hospital are difficult for many because it's hard to be face-to-face with really sick people. The first time you watch a person die in front of you is a deeply traumatic experience.

When young Siddhartha saw these things, they hit him like a ton of bricks. But he also saw something else. At this time on the Indian subcontinent there was a movement of people questioning traditions and giving up ordinary life to try to find solutions to these problems. He saw a man who had done just that and he seemed calm and collected, unfazed by the shitshow going on around him. Seeing this opened for Siddhartha the possibility of a solution that did not involve hiding from harsh realities, but one that was possible while facing them directly.

After that, he couldn't go back to his life as it was. He had to find a way to solve the problem for himself. It wasn't easy though—he had a beautiful wife and a new son. Social, political, and familial forces pulled him to stay, but he had to find a solution, a way to deal with the way the world now looked to him. Late one night he slipped out of the palace, got rid of his expensive clothes, and set off in search of a teacher.

For several years he studied with different teachers, many with extreme methods. They wanted to fight fire with fire, to beat pain with more pain. If you deliberately went through a lot of pain and suffering, they thought, you could eventually rise above it and find

peace of mind. Others thought if you disengaged from the world in radical ways, by eating and drinking almost nothing, you could go beyond the problem; you'd be so disentangled from the world that its awfulness no longer touched you. Paintings and statues depicting Siddhartha during this period show a serious-looking skeletal figure, starved half to death (about as far from a laughing fat guy as you can get).

But he still felt that he hadn't solved the problem. Fed up, he sat down under a tree and resolved not to get up until he solved it once and for all. As you may have guessed, it was a long night. Traditional accounts describe fantastical events: A malicious demon tempts him away from his task with beautiful women; he recalls all of his many previous lives one by one; and finally, he sees the entire cosmos all at once. Some Buddhists take this as literally true, a description of events as they really happened. Others understand it metaphorically, with each of the beautiful women, for example, representing psychological obstacles to solving the problem. Of course, these two ways of understanding the story don't rule each other out, but it is a split we will see again in how different people understand Buddhism.

At the end of all this, he figured out the solution, and so is called a buddha. He spent the next forty-five years or so traveling around northern India explaining his solution. As you might expect, the solution is complex and difficult to put simply. But he cleverly packaged the broad strokes of his solution by adapting the steps of medical diagnosis into a foundational model for Buddhism. These are commonly known as The Four Noble Truths, but if we're in a philosophical frame of mind we might call them The Four Reasonable Assumptions or The Four Astute Observations. They

are usually taken to be truths, but you might also see them as reasonable starting points for forming a worldview.

Think about what happens when you're sick and go to see a doctor. First you get a diagnosis: "You're having headaches and rashes because you have Lyme disease." Then the doctor tells you what the cause is: "You contracted it by being bitten by an infected tick." Then you get a prognosis: "But the good news is it's totally treatable!" And finally, if the prognosis is good, the doctor prescribes a remedy: "Take these antibiotics every day for the next month and you'll be fine."

The Buddha takes this structure and broadens its scope. Rather than treating a particular physical ailment, he applies it to the fundamental problems of life. We have seen the diagnosis. We want security, health, peace, and happiness (and we want them to *last*) but the world doesn't cooperate and, sooner or later, we lose these things. But, like a disease, this too has a cause. The cause is that our visceral ways of experiencing things misrepresent how the world is; we have mental habits that obscure how things are. Some of these are obvious, like frustration, misery, and loneliness, while others are more subtle types of insecurity or anxiety.

Buddhist writing often spends a lot of ink describing and analyzing the nature and causes of the problem. This can make Buddhism seem pretty depressing and pessimistic. But this is only half the picture. It is, after all, important for doctors to spend a lot of time thinking about the various types of illness and their sources. It's true that flipping through medical textbooks can be pretty depressing. But doctors do this so they're better able to treat people and get them healthy. Similarly, it's important to keep in mind that when Buddhists focus on the problem and its causes,

it is in the service of better *solving* the problem by eliminating its causes.

Buddhism is optimistic about the prognosis. The terrible things Siddhartha saw on his trip out of the palace, the fundamental problem—all of it *is* solvable. This step is not discussed as much as the others. Some even think it is trivial: If you know that the problem has a cause then it must have a solution. But that's not true. A disease with a genetic cause might be totally untreatable. The world could have been made so that the causes of the problem are fixed and immovable; we could be both caused and fated to suffer. Buddhists, however, take a more optimistic view. A Buddhist is likely to point to the existence of buddhas; the evidence that the problem is solvable is that somebody actually solved it. But you can also take a more pragmatic view. If I have a disease, I want a doctor who is at least open to the idea that it's curable, because without that there's no chance of being cured.

Finally, the Buddha offers the details of the treatment. As with many treatments, it has several aspects. After all, doctors often don't just give medication but also recommend changes in diet, exercise, and sleep. Of course, it's not just *any* change in diet or exercise that will work. Sitting on the couch and eating nothing but hot dogs would also be a change, but it's not the right change. So the Buddha outlines the right way to make changes in various aspects of life (actually eight aspects, which is why this is sometimes called the Eightfold Path). The treatment includes outward changes, such as the right way to speak, work, and act. It also includes inner changes, involving the right way to change your motives, attention, and point of view.

After the Buddha passed away, his followers formed a community. Over the next 2,500 years Buddhism spread all over the world. In this time, people have developed new ideas (often under the guise of discovering old ones); they emphasize some ideas and quietly drop others; they develop and refine techniques relevant to their time and place. So, for example, some Buddhists think that the Buddha had *always* been a Buddha and only *pretended* to be a miserable prince as an instructive lesson. Others think of his life story as a mix of historical fact and instructive allegory. Still others think a particular version of the story is true to the letter. As we will see, Buddhism is a big tent with lots of room for disagreement. But Buddhists largely agree on the general framework: Our minds misrepresent how things are and we've got to wake up and make some changes. The story presents us with not only a diagnosis but also an example of what a successful treatment looks like.

4 | BUDDHISM AND REASON

The central aim of Buddhism is changing how you relate to yourself and the world. It's hard to overstate the depth, difficulty, and diversity of these changes. Rational reflection, thinking carefully about these issues, is an important tool in this process. The world is complex, and figuring out how it works is a task that sometimes requires careful thought and technical concepts.

Nevertheless, it's important not to see them as simply changes in what you *think*. Thinking differently is only one part of the required transformation; it also involves changes in how you feel, what you notice, and what you do. Focusing too much on what Buddhists *think* runs the risk of neglecting the other critical aspects of the solution that Buddhism provides.

Suppose you decided that you want to become a more relaxed person. Maybe you have a friend who is laid back and you want your outlook to be more like theirs. Simply adopting their beliefs is not going to be enough. It might help to *believe* that the traffic jam is no big deal, but your friend's relaxed outlook is much more than believing certain things—your friend doesn't just believe that the traffic jam isn't a big deal, they might hardly notice it. And if they do, they'll have a very different emotional response to it. The Buddhist solution is a bit like this: The problem doesn't get solved

by simply having certain beliefs but also involves recalibrating a wide range of your responses.

Solving the problem also involves seeing through certain illusions that our minds present. Sometimes an intellectual thought *can* help dispel an illusion. When a good magician performs a trick, it can really seem like a rabbit came from nowhere or that a person was made invisible. We might intellectually resist it, but it really does seem that way. But once someone explains how the trick is done, it no longer even seems that way. Coming to know how the trick works can dispel the illusion.

But other illusions are harder to shake in this way. Consider superstitions. A passionate sports fan might *know*, in an intellectual sense, that viewing an important game has no effect on the outcome. And yet they can still feel as if they don't watch the game, their team will lose. Even if someone *knows* that calling in to work and saying that their kids are sick won't affect their kids' health, they might be unable to shake the feeling that they'd be "tempting fate" if they used their kids' health as an excuse. Even though they don't believe in fate, the feeling that it's a bad idea still pulls on them.

Sometimes changing your beliefs through intellectual thought just isn't enough to alter your overall outlook. But that doesn't mean that abstract thinking or reasoning is completely useless or bad; it means that it's only *part* of solving the problem. One way to understand the role of abstract, philosophical thought is as a kind of technology. Ideas, concepts, and arguments are tools to help with the project of understanding the world better and so help to solve the problem. In the same way that you can use a hammer to build a chair or weights to get stronger, you can use abstract

thinking to help to see the world clearly. Of course, it's important not to confuse the tools with the goal. Hammers aren't chairs, weights aren't strength, and ideas aren't the solution. But they still help you do what you're trying to do. And like other tools, they can be used well or poorly. You can use a hammer to build a bad chair or even destroy one. In the same way, you can use ideas and concepts to obscure reality.

These tools are particularly useful for solving difficult and complex problems. You can take a short walk in your hometown without much thought; your feet just take you where you need to go. But taking a long trip to a new country requires some explicit planning ("Do I need a visa? Vaccinations? Which flight should I buy?"). A new program of diet and exercise is more likely to succeed if you spend some time beforehand thinking about what you'll do and why. The project of understanding reality and changing our mental orientation is even more complex, and it can benefit from careful examination of the facts about reality and what to do in light of them.

Many people think Buddhism is at odds with reflective, rational, or abstract thinking. Buddhism, for them, is something intuitive, emotional, and maybe even mystical. We have to be very careful here. As you might expect from a tradition whose history spans over 2,500 years and covers much of the globe, the Buddhist world is vast and includes many, many approaches. Like the Christian, Jewish, or Islamic traditions, Buddhism has both mystics and scholastics. More importantly, it's crucial to distinguish what Buddhism *is* from what we'd like it to be. We might find certain aspects more interesting and relevant, but that doesn't