

The Mystic Quest

Piercing the Veil of Conditioned Perception

An Introduction to Buddhist Techniques
of Mental Cultivation



by Anonymous Monkey

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of Mental Cultivation

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Special thanks to Guy Adams for his computer generated rendition of the 10 Ox Herding pictures of Zen Buddhism. These images illustrate 10 stages on the path to enlightenment and its conclusion, with the ox representing the mind. The pictures are titled:

- 1 Searching for the Ox
- 2 Seeing the Footprints
- 3 Seeing the Ox
- 4 Catching the Ox
- 5 Tending the Ox
- 6 Riding the Ox
- 7 Forgetting the Ox
- 8 Forgetting Ox and One's Self
- 9 Return to the Original Place
- 10 Entering the Marketplace

DEDICATION OF MERIT

May all Beings find the ease of compassion, the jewel of wisdom, the treasure of kindness, and the splendour of enlightenment. May the merit of this endeavour benefit all Beings. May it do honour to my teachers and the people of Thailand and Sri Lanka who supported me as a monk and gave me the opportunity to seek the wisdom of Dharma.

The well of spirituality is like an oasis in a vast desert, crisscrossed with the tracks of all the pilgrims that have sought its location. It is an oasis of cool fresh, life-giving water hidden amidst the dunes of artifice and illusion. As a person trying to help all seekers find that pool of infinite blessings, the saddest thing to know is that so many travelers get lost in the confusion of trails laid down by those that have gone before them. Paths there are that will take them safely through the desert, but many paths end only at the bleached bones of the unfortunate people who failed in their quest to find the oasis. How sad that so many mistook the vessel of religion to be the goal. Seeking the pool hidden in the vastness, their vessels held securely, they thought they would fill them yet died of thirst before ever finding their way. They never realized their vessels had always been full and they had only to drink from that which had always been in their own hands.

10 STAGES ON THE PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT



1



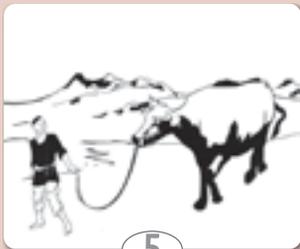
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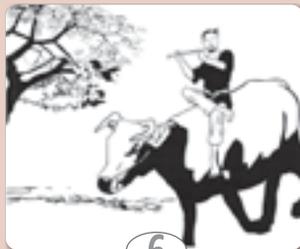
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10

The Mystic Quest

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Searching for the Ox



There are many reasons why people seek out philosophical and religious teachings. Some people are looking for knowledge and understanding while others might hope for redemption or salvation; to ease their sufferings or to fulfill a need to help others through service; some, of course, seek God and other kinds of religious experience. And still others see an opportunity to gain wealth and power by using and manipulating organized religions and peoples beliefs. To me, the real purpose of spiritual practice and religion is to feel better and to be better integrated within oneself and with the external world. The difference between religion and spiritual practice for me is that religion is more community oriented where the needs of the individual are placed at a lower priority than the welfare of the group. Spirituality is one's own pursuit and puts personal development to the fore which includes how we relate to others and the world. A group is just individuals and therefore is better served by bettering the individuals it's comprised of. I view Buddhist teachings as a guide to spirituality

and not as a religion telling people how to think or be. It really is about growing up psychologically, becoming wise (sensible) and not making a mess of our lives.

This work is not an attempt to convey Buddhism in any official sense. It is one person's encounter and just some of the aspects of Buddhism and other spiritual teachings that I have found helpful to know while engaged in the practice of meditation and mindfulness. My hope is that it will introduce some clarity to the subject as many people interested in Buddhism do not learn the meanings of important terms that are routinely rendered in English without explanations. These include words like suffering, desire, hatred, reincarnation, enlightenment, nirvana and Buddha. A Buddhist-English dictionary can be useful for learning to understand the teaching in a deeper way. Theravada Buddhism is the source for most of the information presented in this work. My exposure to Tibetan practices is limited and I have not had the good fortune to study with the Zen tradition. The three main divisions of Buddhism are Theravada, Tibetan and Chan (Chinese and Zen). They are very different in appearance but all rest on the same basic teachings of the man known as the Buddha.

One of the most important things I have gleaned from my studies is that Buddhism is not to be believed. Not being based on faith, it is to be investigated and known experientially for oneself. It is a rediscovery of what the Buddha experienced to profoundly alter his perception of reality. It is possible to completely ignore all the teachings especially a literal interpretation of the mythology which has a psychological function. Buddhism is likened to someone pointing at the moon. When we get too caught up in all the teachings, the trappings of cultural expressions, the rules, customs and history, we are in danger of missing the moon. It is the sight of the moon and the effects that produces within the perceiver that is the point of all the teachings. Inner awakening is an important element in developing a way of being that is especially user friendly.

The Buddha's stated purpose in teaching people was to help them overcome the tendency to occasion suffering for themselves and others through the unskillful use of their thought, speech and actions. Just how that is accomplished needs to vary according to place and circumstance. Basic ethical principles of not doing harm are what are focused on rather than inflexible rules since cultural norms differ so

widely. We can in some ways measure our progress along the path of spirituality simply by how we feel after having done spiritual practices compared to how we felt before starting the practice. If practice is done properly, allowing for the swings of positive and negative moods and feelings that can arise through daily life and introspective exercises, it will be seen over time (sometimes quite short) that there are changes in how we typically feel and respond to the things in life. Comparing ourselves to others is not wise. If you feel you must judge yourself then compare how you are now to how you were before trying to make a difference by practicing.

It is fair to say that spiritual practice is about gaining knowledge but I disagree with many people about the nature of that knowledge. The Buddha left many questions unanswered like whether or not he would reincarnate, whether the world was infinite or finite and where in the body was the seat of consciousness, the head or the heart. About death the Buddha was silent. Enlightenment is not omniscience. About the states of consciousness attained through meditation it was said that even the Buddha's words failed him. And God was left for people to work out for themselves. His view was that a person perceived a God or not in their experience of the Self (the non-self, *anatta*) and enlightenment according to their temperament. He never told people what to see just how to look. Open the mind, undercut conditioned perception and thinking (cultural conditioning) and create within ourselves a "bubble" that fashions a way of perceiving more amendable to peaceful living and development.

The bubble is all the constructs and axioms we use to interpret our perception of reality. Because we believe reality to be a certain way we see it that way often even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Language profoundly shapes our interpretation of things. Yet language cannot encompass all of reality so Buddhist practice seeks to transcend it through stilling the mind. Sit, look and learn by observing. Creating a mind at peace is central to that endeavor and a wonderful feature of bubble-making is that the wall-paper we paste on the inside need not be true. The mind reacts to what is before it whether true or not. It is of course helpful and probably prudent to keep the bubble as real as possible where we need it to interact with the world. However, our existential mythology can be anything that gives us pleasure or meaning. I know of no religion that

is not at some level a collection of fantastical stories in which cultural and psychological truths, histories and fables are imbedded. Any can be used by a Buddhist because Buddhism does not offer ultimate answers to life's questions. Many Buddhists also practice other religions. In Sri Lanka, the Hindu gods are worshiped in the Buddhist temples with some monks being trained as Hindu priests.

My preceptor, the monk that officiated at my ordination, was the senior monk on the island of Phuket, Thailand. He had become a monk as a child and studied in India where he learned English. At the age of 86, his summation of the Buddha's position regarding God was the Buddha did not teach 'no God' but rather no God concept. The same applies to the concept of the self where it is not seen as a real independent entity. Concepts blind the mind as much as they have the capacity to clarify things. Having a concept of the self can be self-limiting as well as forming a reference point around which suffering can arise. A pain in the leg is not just a physical pain but becomes psychological as well once it is termed "my" pain. The suffering is augmented by being of two kinds. The Buddha sought to impart the knowledge of how to eliminate the mental anguish that accompanies physical pain. Learning mental tricks for optimal mental functioning and enjoyment is a natural by-product of seeking to not create unnecessary suffering for oneself and others. Wisdom is its own reward as it leads to peace and ease in the form of freedom from *dukkha*.

Dukkha is the Buddhist term that is usually translated as suffering but is really a particular idea of suffering. This term includes what is considered happiness and all the positive states we typically experience in life. Happiness is viewed as "suffering" because it contains the seeds of its opposite within it. Neither it nor any other emotion is permanent. It cannot be maintained and its loss is perceived as unhappiness. The kind of happiness we are talking about is also often based on outside events and conditions. The kind of happiness sought through spiritual practice is based on the state of our inner selves. By fortifying ourselves from within we gain the ability to deal more effectively with life's difficulties. In effect, what could be called happiness (the lack of suffering) becomes easier to gain and maintain. This seems a natural consequence of reaching psychological maturity where clear, logical reasoning instead of rationalizations may predominate and guide one's actions and interactions with the world.

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