

1. *Three Essential Practices*

Turn toward. Relax into. Savor peace.

These three attitudes and essential practices – turning toward, relaxing into, and savoring peace – give Buddhism its distinctive flavor. The Buddha adapted his instructions to fit the gifts and vulnerabilities



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of his followers, but most of the practices he taught have these three elements in common.

Context

The Buddha first articulated the three practices in his talk to his old meditation buddies — the five ascetics — in the deer park in Sarnath not long after his awakening (see pp. *xvii–xxxii*). He began by introducing them to his concept of the middle way. Then he went on to describe these practices. They have been passed down to us as the “Four Noble Truths.” Most Buddhist scholars and teachers agree that they are the foundation of Buddhism. But titling them “Four Noble Truths” can be misleading.

First, the “Four Noble Truths” aren’t “Truths” with a capital “T.” They aren’t declarations about ultimate reality. They are simple observations about ordinary life – things like, “we all hurt from time to time,” and “ease feels better than uptightness.”

Second, they aren’t noble. In *Pāli*, the original language of the *suttas* (discourses), the word “noble” doesn’t refer to the truths/observations but to the mind of a person who engages them wisely. Each observation has a practice associated with it.

These practices ennoble or uplift the person. The teacher and scholar Stephen Batchelor refers to them as “The Four Ennobling Truths” to shift the emphasis from the observations to the way we engage them.

And finally, there aren’t four. The supposed fourth is the Eightfold Path. That’s not a truth or an observation but a useful checklist. It’s a construct. If we practice the first three wisely and get stuck, the checklist gives eight areas we can reflect upon to help fine-tune our meditation.

In the West, religion is usually defined by sets of beliefs, statements of faith, or metaphysical manifestos about ultimate reality. The Buddha was not interested in such views. He was interested in how we engage our experience.

Early Western translators did not understand this about Buddhism. They elevated the mundane observations to capital “T” Truths and skipped lightly over the practices associated with each.

However, the three practices are the foundation of the Buddha’s meditation instructions and the common elements that appear over and over in his various teachings.

To understand the three practices, it helps to understand three Pāli words — *dukkha*, *taṇhā*, and *nirodha*. And it helps to understand three practices — understanding, abandoning, and realizing. The Buddha said, “Dukkha is to be understood. Taṇhā is to be abandoned. Nirodha is to be realized.”

Let’s look at each.

Understanding Dukkha

The first practice is understanding *dukkha*.

Dukkha is a Pāli term most often translated as “suffering” or “dissatisfaction.” Leigh Brasington, a scholar and teacher, translates it as “bummer.”⁸ The Buddha didn’t say that life is

⁸ His website, <http://www.leighb.com>, contains a fun and illuminating discussion of this translation.

suffering or that life is a bummer — only that it has bummers. Anyone never been bummed out? Anyone never suffered? It's not a profound observation. There is nothing noble about bellyaches, abscessed teeth, broken bones, broken hearts, disappointment, grief, loss, anxiety, or bummers of any kind.

To fully understand someone, we have to do more than diagnose them or draw an intellectual conclusion. We have to know the person empathetically and intimately from the inside. We have to know how they tick, what motivates them, how they see the world, what frightens them, what they aspire to.

To fully understand ourselves, we need the same kind of empathy for ourselves.

Similarly, the Buddha said that to awaken we must fully understand the nature of suffering, dissatisfaction, and bummers. Arms-length analysis is not enough. We have to know how suffering feels, what makes it tick, how it arises, how it moves, how it passes away. It's not helpful to get wrapped up in the stories and concepts behind the bummers. But it helps to see their processes.

We'll never find this deep knowledge if we're running away or trying to shield ourselves from dukkha. We must experience it intimately without resistance.

The five ascetics had been trying to rise above the waves of suffering or push suffering below the waves like a beach ball that would pop back up when they relaxed. The Buddha said, "Turn toward the bummers. Relax into them. Let go of your ideas and see anew. Dive in until you know their true nature. You must fully understand."

When we engage dukkha openly this way, we come to see how suffering arises and passes. And we see that the experience of suffering is rooted in *taṇhā*. This brings us to the second of the three practices.

Abandoning Taṇhā

The Buddha said, "The origin of the experience of suffering is taṇhā. Taṇhā must be abandoned."

Tañhā is a preverbal, precognitive, instinctual tightening. When we are about to step off the sidewalk and notice a car coming our way, the body tightens. We don't think about it, contemplate it, or decide to stiffen. It just happens. When we see something delicious, the body and mind tightens slightly to prepare to move toward it. We may not notice the tightening because our focus is on the treat out there and because the inner tightening can be subtle.

The tightening is not willful — it's not something we decide to do. It may be followed by thoughts and decisions. But tañhā itself is a preverbal, preconceptual, complex reflex. This tightening is the root of a sense of self — identifying various phenomena as a part of "me" or belonging to "myself."

Tañhā is often translated as "craving." It can be large and powerful, like a junkie with darting eyes and trembling hands craving her next fix. But it can also be as subtle as an inclination, as wispy as a soft yearning, as quiet as a worry, as light as a fantasy. Sitting in meditation we sometimes feel the mind-heart lean subtly toward or away from an idea, image, feeling, or experience. When we're bored, we may feel the mind thicken into a fog. These are different flavors of tañhā.

When we fully understand dukkha, we see that it arises out of tañhā: suffering arises out of tension.

Taking this on faith, recognizing this in our own experience, or even fully understanding tañhā is not enough. It has to be abandoned: we relax physically, emotionally, and mentally.

Notice that we don't abandon the suffering; we don't try to walk away from it, rise above it, turn lemons into lemonade, push it under water, or grin and bear it. We understand the suffering and let it be what it is.

It is the tension that we abandon by softening. This does not always bring immediate relief. But without tension, the suffering runs out of fuel. When there is no more desire, aversion, or confusion, new suffering does not arise.

To say this succinctly, seeing the source of suffering is not uplifting. Relaxing into the tension is. The Buddha is not asking us to accept or verify an observation. He's inviting us to engage the observation by relaxing the physical, emotional, and mental tightness that gives fuel to so much difficulty.

Taṇhā is not something we accept. It is something we abandon. And when we do, we experience the third observation and its practice.

Nirodha

The Pāli term “nirodha” is usually translated as “cessation.” When we abandon the tension in taṇhā, it ceases. Taṇhā comes in three brands — desire, aversion, and delusion. Nirodha is often defined as the absence of these three.

This is accurate but not necessarily informative. It's like describing a lovely day as the absence of sandstorms or a wonderful camping trip as the absence of rape and pillage. The absence of greed, aversion, and delusion tells us what nirodha is not, but not what it is.

The experience of nirodha begins as pure awareness — awareness without tension or distortion. It's clear and perceptive. It has no agenda — it just sees things as they are. It doesn't judge or compare. It feels kind and loving. It's relaxed, soft, and spacious. It's uplifted and gently luminous. And it does nothing to draw attention to itself. Notice that each of the Six Rs resonates with a quality of pure awareness.⁹

Sitting under the rose apple tree, the young Gautama felt kind, loving, accepting, spacious, relaxed, uplifted, and

⁹ **Recognize** resonates with clear perception. **Release** or letting things be as they are resonates with awareness without an agenda or need to compare or judge. **Relax** implies a relaxed awareness. **Re-smile** generates uplifted qualities. **Return** is about returning to the practice of sending out luminous qualities. And **Repeat** suggests an awareness that is patient and has no need to make a fuss or draw attention to itself. See “Appendix A. The Six Rs and Five Ss Overview,” p. 287 for more details on the Six Rs. Also, the “Pure Awareness” section on p. 160 is helpful for comparing pure awareness and the Six Rs.

luminous (see pp. *xxv–xxviii*). When we experience this pure awareness, we realize that it's been here all along.

It's as if we're in a classroom of rowdy kids who are banging chairs, throwing erasers, yelling, and punching. Over in the corner someone is writing poetry. We don't notice her because of the hubbub.

Then one morning we arrive early to class. The room is empty except for the young poet. We talk quietly with her or sit silently as she composes. Gradually the other kids enter with their boom boxes and carrying on. Soon the room is back to cacophony.

However, now, even with all the noise, we can sense the poet because we know what she feels like.

Like the poet in the classroom, pure awareness is always with us. Without pure awareness beneath it, there would be no awareness of any kind. Distorted awareness is pure awareness covered with junk.

We can't create *nirodha* or pure awareness because it's already here. Anything we do to create it just adds tension and distortion. All we can do is relax into it. Relaxing allows the tightness to soften and the distortions to dissolve into pure awareness.

Here's a way to demonstrate pure awareness:

Hold up your forearm. Then let it relax and flop into your lap. ...

Now, do it again. But this time, as the arm relaxes, relax all your thoughts at the same time. ...

Do it again — just release all the contents of the mind as you release the arm. ...

Try it a third time.

Did you notice a moment when the mind was relatively free of content? The Tibetan *Mahāmudrā* tradition calls this "the natural mind." After a short time, maybe less than half a breath, the thoughts start up again. But for a moment, the mind has no

content, just pure awareness of awareness. This is a form of nirodha — awareness without tension or distortion.

Now, relax as you look around the room. As you notice various objects, see if you can feel that quiet, open space of pure awareness — the natural mind — behind your thoughts and perceptions. As you notice various thoughts and images in the mind, see if you can feel the awareness that holds them. It's like shifting your attention from clouds to the sky that holds them (see p. 77).

Pure awareness is not just an absence. It has a feel and texture of its own. As we know it more intimately, we can let the mind rest there in meditation. It can help guide our practice.

Realizing Nirodha

When we talk about realizing nirodha in this context, “realize” means “making it real” as in “making it known through direct experience.”

There are various depths of realizing nirodha. Some only show up in advanced practice. If you aren't familiar with them now, you can look forward to them as your meditation deepens. But I want to mention them all now for the sake of completeness.

Savoring

The lightest experience of nirodha comes from savoring quiet moments.

When we abandon tension, tension subsides. The remaining peacefulness may be so quiet that we don't notice it. The mind is drawn to tension. Nirodha has none. So awareness may slide right over it. Sitting in meditation or walking in the woodlands, sometimes my mind becomes soft and luminous without my knowing it. I'm more familiar with striving and figuring things out. Peacefulness doesn't jump up and down and wave its arms crying, “Notice me! Notice me!” Sometimes I'm oblivious to the glowing, lovely quiet.

The lightest nirodha comes from noticing the quiet and savoring it — not attaching or holding on to it, but relaxing and enjoying it. This helps us know it is real — we realize nirodha.

When our kids were growing up, my wife and I tried to keep them away from soda and other sugar as much as we could. But we didn't want them to develop a big complex about it. So once a week, they could have a small glass of soda. Usually it was on Saturday morning.

Damon, our youngest son, would look at the little glass of cola, smell it, take a tiny sip and let it swirl around on his tongue. He'd close his eyes and savor it as fully as he could while it lasted.

In the beginning, savoring nirodha means just absorbing the loveliness of the relative quiet.

Fading of Desire

As nirodha goes deeper, we begin to realize where it came from. Imagine we'd been hungering for something sweet all day. Finally we get a first bite of a mango or chocolate: "ah." The taste brings bliss — at least for a moment until we start hankering for a second bite.

The problem is that we may believe that happiness comes from getting what we want. The advertising industry preaches the philosophy of trying to get what we want and get rid of what we don't want.

But if we shift our attention from the chocolate or mango to the quality of awareness, we see that with that first bite, the hankering disappears. We no longer want it because we have it. Too often we confuse getting what we want with not wanting. So rather than savor that lovely state of mind, we focus on getting the next bite. Aversion and greed are back all too soon and bliss is gone.

So a deeper quality of nirodha comes from realizing that the happiness didn't come from a mango tree or a cocoa tree. It didn't come from "out there." It came from "in here" when the mind-heart abandoned the tension of liking and disliking.

Ever-Present Well-being

An even deeper realization comes from feeling the quiet happiness that is with us all the time. Like the poet in the noisy class, it's here to be experienced each moment we aren't distracted by the hubbub.

With this realization, we stop fighting the noisy kids and shift our attention to the ever-present quiet. We recognize the distractions, release them — let them be without holding on or pushing away — and relax into the background stillness enveloping us.

Sometimes this appears as a figure-background shift. Rather than sitting in our rumbling mind and looking at a distant peacefulness, we are sitting in the peacefulness seeing a distant rumbling. Rather than sitting in the rambunctious class looking out into the peaceful grounds outside, we are sitting outside, enjoying the trees and the sunlight while gazing in at the noisy classroom.

Gael Turnbull wrote a poem that hints at this deeper experience of nirodha:

*I remember once
in a far off country
it doesn't matter where
or even when
it had been a hot day
and a lot of work to be done
and I was tired
I stopped by the road
and walked across a field
and came to the shores of a lake
the sun was bright on the water
and I swam out from the shore
 into the deep cold water
 far out of my depth
 and forgot
 for a moment
 I forgot
where I had come from
where I was going
what I had done yesterday*

*what I had to do tomorrow
even my work
my home
my friends
even my name
 even my name
 alone in the deep water
 with the sky above
and whether that lake was a lake
or the shore of some great sea
or some lost tributary of time itself
for a moment
I looked through
I passed through
I had one glimpse
 as it happened
 one day in that far off country
 for a moment
 it was so¹⁰*



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Winking Out

Some have experienced a deeper form of nirodha where the mind becomes so relaxed that perception, feeling, and consciousness relax and fade. I call

¹⁰ Gael Turnbull, *There are Words: Collected Poems* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2006), 211-212.

it “winking out.”¹¹ This is a more advanced practice that arises on its own as our meditation deepens beyond the eighth *jhāna*, or eighth stage of practice.

The Buddha’s third essential practice includes savoring peacefulness, noticing the fading of desire, recognizing the well-being that is always with us, and winking out. These are what he meant by realizing *nirodha*.

Interwoven

These practices are closely woven together. Understanding *dukkha*, abandoning *taṇhā*, and realizing *nirodha* form a foundation for meditation. And they form an attitude toward all of life.

At its core Buddhism is not a practice, set of beliefs, code of conduct, or set of rituals. It has all of these. But in essence Buddhism is an attitude of turning toward whatever life brings our way, relaxing into it, and realizing the pure awareness that is always here.

There is one caveat: if we’re freaked out and upset, then looking at what’s going on through that disturbed, tense awareness doesn’t help. Whatever we see will be distorted by that tension. We have to turn toward life with a relaxed mind and open heart.

So, if the mind-heart is uptight and we can’t relax it, it’s wise to do whatever we can to help it settle and stabilize. This is where so many practices come from — different ways to stabilize the mind. Techniques range from koans, to breath awareness, to sending kindness, to contemplating the ephemeral nature of our lives and all we experience.

But it’s very important to realize that if all we do is stabilize the mind, that’s not enough. It is essential, but not sufficient by itself. The Burmese meditation master Sayadaw U Tejaniya says,

¹¹ In *Buddha’s Map* [2013], Chapter 20 I discuss the phenomenon of winking out in the context of meditation.

“If the awareness never comes off the object of awareness and turns to awareness itself, your meditation won’t go very far.”

So by all means, do what needs to be done to find a little relaxed, open, stable peace. Then use that wholesome awareness to look into what’s going on in meditation and life outside of meditation.

If we aren’t aware of the qualities of the mind-heart, we won’t realize the depths that are possible — the depths and heights that are here all the time just waiting to be savored.

These three essential practices are embedded throughout this *Meditator’s Field Guide*. Turning toward is fundamental to the section “Finding a Compass.” Relaxing into is fundamental to “Getting Our Selves Out of the Way.” Savoring peace is fundamental to “Glowing Like a Candle” and “Expanding Infinitely.” And all these practices help in “Cleaning Up Our Act.”

Related Chapters

How to Use This Field Guide, p. iii

How Buddhism Entered the World, p. xvii

2. Resilience, p. 15

14. Freeing the Cows: Observing, not Controlling, p. 77

35. Six Rs Tune-Up, p. 159

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