

Han de Wit & Jeroen Hopster

# Buddhism for Thinkers

In *Buddhism for Thinkers*, research psychologist and Buddhist teacher Han de Wit, and young philosopher and historian Jeroen Hopster compare Buddhist tradition and Western philosophy, and analyse both similarities and differences. One difference lies in the inner experience as a source of knowledge. In the West, this inner experience no longer plays a major role in science, whereas for Buddhists it remains important. This also makes Buddhism a source of inspiration for daily living.

'I view Buddhism as a reservoir of knowledge and wisdom from which you can draw a great deal of value.' – Jeroen Hopster

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Selected excerpts from

*Buddhism for Thinkers*

by Han de Wit & Jeroen Hopster

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By means of the intelligence that fully discerns phenomena,  
first comprehend the words of all teachings through learning,  
next seek an understanding of their meaning through reflection,  
and finally realise the meaning through meditation.

– Padmasambhava (eighth century CE)  
(Translation by Erik Pema Kunsang)

## *Epilogue*

You don't have to be a Buddhist to reap the rewards of Buddhist thought. Buddhist teaching is not an esoteric doctrine, the secrets of which are reserved for the initiated. Of course, as you get more familiar with Buddhist traditions, texts and practices, your understanding of the teachings also becomes more refined. As tennis players know, you don't develop a velvet touch from one day to the next: it takes years of physical practice. The same can be said about the Buddhist touch — except this practice is focused on the mind, not on the body.

In the west we often associate Buddhism with meditation. Our image of Southeast Asian countries with a Buddhist majority is predominantly one of temples and offerings to the Buddha. Buddhism is identified the world over with the Dalai Lama and the protracted conflict between Tibet and China. Buddhism has both political and religious dimensions, but can also be understood in sociological or historical terms. Is it a peaceable tradition? Is it a religion? We can only really address this kind of question after first answering another: which Buddhism are we talking about?

This book approaches the subject from a thinker's perspective. How would a philosopher regard Buddhist teaching? Which themes are addressed in Buddhist thinking and how do they relate to themes in western philosophy? What happens if we bring these ways of thinking in contact with each other? The purpose of this meeting is to show how Buddhist thought can augment the western mind.

## *Introduction*

There is usually no lack of introductions to Buddhism in bookshops. More often than not they can be found on the 'religion' or 'spirituality' shelves, and not in the 'philosophy' or 'psychology' section. We hope to change that with this book, by illustrating the intellectual value of a Buddhist perspective. After all, questions about knowledge, language, ethics and well-being have not only been addressed by the western philosophical tradition we are familiar with: Buddhist thinkers, too, have contemplated them for centuries.

We would like to extend our gratitude to our publisher Regine Dugardyn of Ten Have Publishers, who initiated this project. Buddhism for thinkers came about during conversations between Jeroen Hopster — a non-Buddhist philosopher — and psychologist Han de Wit. He has spent four decades studying the Buddhist way of thinking and practice, as a pupil of Chögyam Trungpa (1939-1987) and Sakyong Mipham (1962) and later also as a Buddhist teacher. This book is therefore written from an internal perspective: how does a Buddhist thinker view Buddhist thought?

Of course a single monolithic Buddhism does not exist, any more than a single Christianity or western philosophy. There are many Buddhist schools and movements, espousing different conceptions. One possible way of approaching Buddhist thinking is to compare the ideas of these various traditions (for instance the Theravada and Mahayana schools), or to explore their historical development. A historical or comparative approach is not, however, the purpose of this book. The question we would like to answer is which insights a contemporary thinker could take from Buddhist thought. What could a western philosopher or psychologist learn from a Buddhist perspective? Or, to use a term from chapter five: how can we use Buddhist insights as affordance for modern thinking? For both the Buddhist and western scientific and philosophical conceptions we put forward, we focus on specific themes we consider relevant for modern thinkers. What are the strong points of western and Buddhist traditions, and how can they learn from each other? That is the question the Buddhist and the western thinker will discuss with each other in this conversation.

## The art of living

### *Eastern thinking*

'Misconception on the windowsill' was the title of a recent article in a major Dutch newspaper. For years the Buddha has been an increasingly popular fixture in Dutch homes and front gardens, but many people do not really know exactly what they are putting in their home. A god? A sage? Buddhism has a reputation as a humanitarian tradition, which can give deeper insight into one's own mind. What is that reputation actually based on? What kind of self-insight are we talking about?

Philosophy makes a distinction between a 'western' and an 'eastern' tradition. This dichotomy is not completely clear-cut: since the time of the empire of Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE), which stretched from Greece to the Himalayas, ideas have been exchanged along this latitude. The expansion of European shipping greatly increased this exchange; and an 'eastern' philosophy of completely 'western' origin even developed in Europe in the nineteenth century. These days there hardly seems to be any separation between eastern and western thinking any more: it is as easy to read Plato (427-347 BCE) in a library in Beijing, as Mencius (372-289 BCE) in a library in Athens.

Moreover, the east-west dichotomy lacks subtlety. The eastern philosophical traditions of China and India came into existence independently of each other — and are based on very different assumptions. Arabic or Islamic philosophy, which is also sometimes considered eastern philosophy, was deeply influenced by Plato and Aristotle (384-322 BCE). Western philosophy, too, has many guises: empirical and rationalist, literary and analytical. The epithets east and west conceal a multiplicity of schools.

This also applies to Buddhism, which originated in India some five centuries before Christ, and soon developed into several schools. Buddhist thought gradually spread to Tibet, China, Southeast Asia and Japan, where it mixed with existing traditions and cultures. Isn't the real misconception presenting these schools as a single entity, by writing about Buddhism?

Perhaps western philosophy is a generalisation, just as the Buddhist way of thinking is. Yet generalisations are useful tools that help us organise our understanding of things. That certainly applies to any comparison between

western and Buddhist philosophical traditions: as well as their affinities, they also have specific differences. However fluid and comprehensive they may be, they do not encompass each other — not in their entirety in any case. Western thinking has traditionally concentrated on external empiricism, while Buddhist thinkers have focused instead on internal empiricism. The experiential world — as opposed to the outside world — is the principal subject of Buddhist research.

In this book we take Buddhism to mean the way of thinking of the various Buddhist traditions. This includes the theories and visions Buddhist teachers have passed down to their pupils for centuries. How have ideas taken shape in Buddhism about appearance and reality, blindness and clarity, knowledge and observation? As we will see, the Buddhist vision of human beings and society is some respects similar to our own philosophical, psychological and religious traditions, but it sometimes takes a different approach, which can complement and augment western thinking.

The misconception with which the chapter opened needs to be resolved. Once this has been settled, eastern insight does not have to be out of place in the western mind: the Buddha is well suited to our window sill.

### *Humanism*

Is Buddhism a religion, psychology or philosophy? It has characteristics of all three, but it does not always make sense of them in the way we are accustomed to. Buddhists conduct inquiry into the human mind and experience, but using meditation as their method, which is an unusual method in western psychology. Buddhism has a philosophical tradition, but there is a less strong emphasis on reason — clear thinking — than in western philosophy. The exercise of clear experience is at least as important.

And is it a religion? Western thinking has made a clear distinction between religion and philosophy since the Enlightenment. This distinction is less distinct in eastern thinking. Buddhists do spiritual exercises and many Buddhist cultures have a monastic tradition: Buddhism is similar to other religions in this respect. Yet if we want to qualify it as a religion, we have to make a distinction between religion and theism: the concept of god does not exist in the Buddhist way of thinking. There are no creation stories in the classic texts: it is a distinctive attribute of Buddhism that the Buddha rejects speculation about the beginning and end of the world. In contrast to the great world religions, Buddhism is a non-theistic tradition.

A more appropriate term for Buddhism's various guises is the art of living. This is based on philosophical insight, but also on psychological and emotional fruition; facets of life that we often separate from each other. The Buddhist vision includes all of these facets: it aims to bring the human being to fruition — not on an intellectual or spiritual plane, not within the family or the workplace, but in their entire humanness and humanity.

The philosophers of classical antiquity were also engaged in the art of living — and are therefore often called practical philosophers — as they firmly linked theoretical insight to everyday practice. Their conception of philosophy as a discipline encompassing the whole of life, is echoed in our time by 'public philosophers' like Joep Dohmen (1949) and Alain Botton (1969). According to Dohmen, a popular public philosopher in the Netherlands, both the classic and the modern versions of the art of living are about 'learning to discover the limits of reason, learning to interpret a complex situation, [...] learning how to deal with emotions, learning to relate to poverty, pain and death.' Like Buddhism, the art of living emphasises that these kinds of lessons cannot be reduced to a simple formula, but have to be discovered by a path of progressive insight, that are mastered through instruction and exercise.

It is common practice in academic culture to garner knowledge and wisdom

by means of intellectual exercise. Yet the art of living also attaches importance to forms of spiritual exercise, like meditation. In the west we associate meditation largely with religious ritual, but Buddhist thinkers see things differently. Meditation is not a religious custom for them, but rather an exercise in clear experience, a way of acquiring knowledge.

The experiential knowledge we can acquire through meditation, teaches us about how the mind functions and emotions work. Emotions give colour to our lives and energy to the mind, but can also hinder our development if they are solely focussed on satisfying our self-interest and therefore obstruct our communion with other people. Letting go of this kind of 'self-centred' emotions is the most important good in the Buddhist art of living. Liberating oneself from self-centred thoughts and emotions opens one's mind to the greater situation one is a part of and one will try to bring this situation to fruition. That is the way to achieve 'enlightenment'.

Therefore, liberation does not serve a higher order, but mankind itself; in this respect Buddhism diverges from the classic concept of religion. Buddhism is not a theistic, but rather a humanist world view, which — alongside reason — also uses meditation as a source of insight. The Buddha's lessons aim to develop a fearless attitude to human existence and a humane relationship with the world around you.

That is the core of the Buddhist art of life.

## **Expedient means**

### *Axial Age*

Three major philosophical traditions can be discerned historically: western philosophy, Indian philosophy and Chinese philosophy. These traditions came into existence independently of each other, but all in the same period — roughly half a millennium before Christ. The German philosopher and psychiatrist Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) named this era of radical innovations in religion and philosophy the 'axial period'. Monotheistic religions came into being in the Middle East, rationalist philosophy developed in Greece, China witnessed the emergence of Confucianism and Taoism, and Hinduism and Buddhism were born in India.

The function of religion changed in the axial period. There was widespread polytheism in earlier societies: each people had its own gods, who were both feared and at the same time regarded as allies in the fight against other peoples. Gods were guardians. As a people, you wanted to stay in their good graces, and tried to enlist the support of the strongest gods. Divine support enabled a people to vanquish other peoples. For that reason it was essential to perform liturgy meticulously: if you didn't do the correct sacrifices in the right way, you wouldn't be granted help from above. The relationship between a people and its gods resembled hierarchical family relations. Gods offered protection, and also corrected bad behaviour.

Unalloyed monotheism did not exist before the Axial Age. For instance, Yahweh was originally a mountain god — one of many gods. Over time one god grew more powerful than the others, as the sun god Ra in ancient Egypt and Zeus in Greek mythology had already done. Their power was the harbinger of monotheism: people gradually came to trust one almighty god — God — which surpassed the other gods in power and wisdom. This one God started to encompass all of reality and his anthropomorphic characteristics became less distinct. People began to relate to this God in a different way. Is God immanent or transcendent? Did he and he alone, create the universe? New questions arise which monotheistic religions try to answer.

Not only does the character of the supernatural change in the Axial Age, the focus also shifts from the mythological world to the world of mankind. The first systematic philosophical traditions come into existence in Greece, India and China.

The 'art of living' comes to fruition: people start taking an interest in their own nature and the question of how to develop it. They disconnect from their mythological outlook, and engage more emphatically with the question 'how to live'.

Siddhartha Gautama's teachings correspond with these developments. He was an itinerant teacher who lived at the foot of the Himalayas around the fifth century BCE, and achieved enlightenment during his life— becoming Buddha. The historical Buddha's insights were passed down orally, and recorded centuries later in many texts, called sutras. They form the basis of *Dharma*, Buddhist teaching.

### *No metaphysics*

Buddhist teaching does not have any immutable essence. Buddhist thinkers regard their instruction as an *upaya*, meaning 'expedient means'. The instruction does not derive its value from its veracity, but from its effectiveness and transformational power: this is what makes it worthwhile passing it on. As the Dalai Lama says: 'If you find the Buddha's lessons useful for you, apply them to your life. If you don't find them useful for you, leave them for what they are.'

The teaching is therefore a tool, not a transcendent truth. Admittedly, the history of Buddhism is one of recurrent tension between schools which advocate safeguarding the instrumental nature of the teachings and schools which endow them with a 'higher' meaning. There have been periods during which the Buddha seems to almost have been transformed into a deified spirit, which has died physically but continues to live spiritually. But each time critical counter-movements have come into existence, which have demonstrated that this causes the loss of the empirical viewpoint. Hadn't the historic Buddha himself renounced all metaphysics?

An example of the Buddha's anti-metaphysical thinking is the story he tells his pupil Malunkyaputta. Malunkyaputta complains that the Buddha never discusses the question of the beginning or end of the world, or the question of why there is suffering in the world. The Buddha responds that these questions are comparable with a man who has been shot in the back by a poisoned arrow asking:

'Why did this happen to me? Where did that arrow come from? Who shot it?' These questions are superfluous and will not help you, the Buddha tells his pupil: what really does matter is that the man removes the arrow from his back! You have to look for the cause — the 'what' — of suffering, and not its purpose, the 'why'.

The same applies to the idea that we are reincarnated for a particular purpose, for example, to perfect ourselves. This, too, is alien to Buddhism. Rather ask yourself the question: what are the consequences of the actions I am performing here and now? How do they affect my happiness in life and clear comprehension? These are questions you can answer. Whoever tries to understand reality in terms of its purpose, commits the same error as the man with the arrow in his back: they are looking for reasons and purposes rather than causes. According to the Buddha it is better not to preoccupy yourself with previous lives and reincarnation. You can only have a view about these issues when you have achieved full 'awakening'; as long as you have not, it is fruitless to speculate about them.

### *Two objections*

A critic may object. 'What about the concept of 'karma'? Doesn't it presuppose that good fortune or adversity that befalls me is the result of what I did in previous lives?' While Buddhists do use the concept of karma, it is not the same as karma in Hinduism and some new age movements. The Buddhist concept of karma is not based on the idea of an 'I', a soul or reincarnated entity with some kind of predestination. We, as human beings, are able to build up mental patterns in our current life that are beneficial or harmful in this existence — and in the lives that may follow. Therefore, Karma is not based on the past, but is focused on the present and future.

'But,' returns the critic, 'does Buddhist teaching really claim to be nothing more than an expedient means? A teaching without dogma, without an unwavering doctrine of faith and without religious rituals?' That ideal is not always reflected in practice on the ground. Take Buddhist monasteries: these institutions were specifically founded to preserve the teachings. They often have strict hierarchies and monastic disciplines, which bear much resemblance to the rules of Benedictine and Cistercian orders. Or take the prayer wheels and *stupas* — buildings in which the relics of Buddhist saints are interned — you can find in Buddhist countries; they are comparable to rosaries and Marian churches in Christian cultures. Seen from an anthropological perspective, Buddhist cultures certainly do have dogmatic and ritualistic characteristics.

In the west these rituals — particularly monasticism — are often regarded as the core of Buddhism; beautiful monk clothes and exotic scenes are highly telegenic. This image is biased, however. Modern Buddhist scholars distinguish three types of Buddhists: monks, ascetic yogis and lay Buddhists. Yogis who meditate ascetically and lay Buddhists, who practice Buddhism in society, are no less important for the development of Buddhist thought than the monks. Ultimately, meditation — the exercise at the foundation of Buddhist insight — is not dictated by monastic rules, but by a personal experience everyone can master.

In short, Buddhist cultures have indisputably dogmatic, religious and ritual dimensions, but they are not paramount in the Buddhist philosophical tradition. This book has not been written from an anthropological perspective, but from a philosophical one: which elements of Buddhist thought are interesting and potentially enriching for western thinkers? One of the most intriguing insights of Buddhist thinking is the rejection of all dogmas and ultimate truths — including those of Buddhism itself.

### *Causes, not purposes*

There are many different forms and techniques of meditation, including exercises which Buddhist thinkers consider essential to acquire philosophical and psychological insight. How does the human mind work? What is the nature of confusion, of blindness and clear comprehension, and of an awakened state? According to Buddhists, meditation helps answer such questions.

We also find 'meditations' in western philosophy. In 1641 René Descartes (1596-1650) published his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, subtitled *In which the existence of God and the immortality of the soul are demonstrated*. There are certain similarities between Descartes' meditations and Buddhist meditation: both are individual exercises in which all certainties are questioned. The method of exercise is, however, very different: whilst Descartes relies solely on reason in his meditations, the Buddhist relies entirely on experience. The result of this introspection is also very distinct: Descartes ultimately finds undeniable evidence for the existence of God and the immortal soul, whilst the Buddhist reaches the contrary insight that immortal gods and souls do not exist.

Buddhist practice also differs from Christian spirituality, not having any focus on transcendent objectives like communing with a higher power. When Buddhism does speak of purposes, they are always human intentions. It is futile to look for a supernatural purpose for human existence, to ask 'the why questions' about human life. Take the question as to whether suffering in the world is good for anything. What is the 'point' of suffering? The Buddha remained silent on this point. It is more useful to ask the 'what questions' about the causes of suffering: after all, we can do something about that!

The same applies to karma: we must not interpret it as a metaphysical principle, an essential characteristic of reality, as if there is an absolute balance between good and evil that the world will automatically rectify. That idea is purely speculative. Of course, those who do good will probably encounter good, and those who do harm will usually pay for it. Yet we should not interpret this as an absolute principle: the world is not 'automatically' fair.

'What goes up, must come down' is a typically Buddhist way of looking at existence. If you walk into a wall, it hurts. Not because the wall wants to punish for your carelessness, but because that is just how the world is. If you're careless with matches and start a fire, you will learn to be more cautious in future. It is not the case that a higher power looked at you and thought: 'I should teach him/her to be more careful next time; I'll start a fire!'

The word purpose is related to human perception: people act intentionally in

order to accomplish the purposes they want to achieve. As soon as you project that human concept on reality, then sooner or later you will add a God to it, who has a purpose for his creation. A creation that evolves, for instance as the French theologian Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) suggested, towards the Omega Point, the moment that mankind is redeemed by Christ.

No such higher level exists in Buddhist thinking. Purposes are the causes of our behaviour, but not of the world. 'Does reality have a purpose?' is a question to which you cannot give a sensible answer. The historic Buddha refused to do so: he did not want to comment on speculation about the beginning or the end of the universe, nor about the question as to whether or not we continue to live after our physical death. According to the Buddha, such questions are pointless for developing our art of living.

*PRESS ON BUDDHISM FOR THINKERS!*

'An interesting analysis of Buddhism, resulting in a clear explanation of the Eastern way of thinking.' – VOLZIN