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FOREWORD

Buddhism is like a tree that is constantly growing and adapting to the new lands and cultures it is brought to. For the Buddha's teachings to stay healthy and vibrant, we must constantly renew and update them so they remain relevant and effective for the increasingly diverse communities that practice them. Zen underlines the importance of skillfulness in bringing students to a deeper understanding of awakening. In this book, with its engaging and accessible question-and-answer format, Zenju Earthlyn brings the Buddha's teachings alive in a fresh and powerful voice born from her own fully lived experience of transformation.

Zenju Earthlyn helps us all to realize that the past and future are here in the present moment. The secret of transformation is in the way we take care of this very moment. To promote the work of transformation, we should practice with a Sangha, a community in which everyone has the intention to learn and practice. But good intentions are not enough. We need to learn the art of forming a harmonious community which can give people a feeling of confidence.

In her humble, authentic, and down-to-earth style, Zenju Earthlyn is a true spiritual friend, a generous and fearless agent of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Beloved Community,

helping to build the Beloved Sangha by opening her arms and heart wide for many people to touch the healing wisdom of the Buddha. We can all practice like her, as cells in the larger body of our communities, helping others touch peace through our own practice of understanding and compassion.

—THICH NHAT HANH
Plum Village, France, 2011

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS BUDDHISM?

I hope you are well today. As I continue to follow the path, I encounter many people who have never been introduced to the teachings of Buddha and who become curious about Buddhist practice. There is even more curiosity when they see that my skin is black and that I clearly have African ancestry. Many have asked, “How did you come to an ancient Asian practice, such as Buddhism, as an African American person?”

First, it is important to say there is no country called Asia and that the terms *Asia* and *Asian* encompass many Eastern countries and many diverse people from those countries. That being said, I can clearly say that Buddha’s teachings came from the ancient dirt of India all the way to my doorstep in contemporary California USA. Specifically, what brought me to the path of Buddha is the same thing that brings many folks to any spiritual practice: suffering and needing a place to heal.

On the other hand, I did not choose Buddha's path as much as I had been chosen by it. At first, I didn't see myself as practicing Buddhism or anything else from India, China, or Japan. To say out loud that I was practicing Buddhism felt like separating myself from my Christian upbringing and from other black people. In the beginning, I just had this secret: I was doing something different.

I didn't go out of the way to find Buddha's path. His teachings met me at the door of my own suffering. And when they came knocking over twenty years ago, I actually ran the other way. I was afraid of something so new and different from the black church I was raised in or the Yoruba African religion that I had been called to in my younger days. I told the Buddhist teachers that I did not have any room in my life for chanting, sitting down after work, or altars that were Japanese.

Still, the teachers didn't go away, bringing me candles, special Japanese incense that I had never seen before, and books to read. I had met my match. They were more stubborn than I could ever imagine. But it wasn't their persistence that kept me still long enough to invite the teachings in. I never sent the teachers away because I recognized the innate kindness and compassion in the words of Buddha that they shared. I recognized the teachings about compassion and wisdom as something I had been yearning to hear. I was dying inside, so to speak, and found vitality in chanting and meditation. Then I heard the voice of God,

the love that God represents, in the teachings of Buddha. I was hooked.

Once, my youngest sister asked, “What does Buddhism have to do with black people?”

Although Shakyamuni Buddha’s teachings came from the earth of ancient India, I knew, in the moment my sister asked the question, that the teachings had everything to do with me and with every other suffering living being. Of course, she wanted to know how did I come to such a strange journey, when she knew me as a devout Christian, a courageous warrior of the black civil rights movement, and a dedicated Pan-Africanist. She knew me with my Afro hairdo, African headwraps, and African jewelry. She knew the sister who read aloud poetry by black poets such as Langston Hughes, Nikki Giovanni, the Last Poets, Margaret Walker, and Gwendolyn Brooks. I was speaking to her through the words of the poets about our experiences as young black women.

Later, after living with her question a bit longer, I began to see that the answer was as large as an elephant and that I had touched only its tail when I attempted to answer my sister’s profound question with, “Because it works.” I believe my sister’s question was about her need to heal from not having been universally loved as a dark-skinned, loving woman. She knew that her question was an inquiry about my own life. She needed to know how would I help black people by being a Zen Buddhist priest. In the moment she asked, I couldn’t find a way to convey to her that much of

what I experienced in being black was much like what the Buddha taught.

I understood his teachings because I was raised with poor people, much like the ones Buddha saw when he left the temple. I was taught generosity without the notion of gain because it was not expected that everyone *could* give in return. I was taught compassion for having slave ancestry. I held a sense of spiritual equanimity while experiencing discrimination. My family and those around us lived with a communal sense in which everyone and everything was related—something that is called interbeing in the mindfulness community. Generosity, compassion, equanimity, and interbeingness were all essential to our survival. It was the way we embodied harmony. Buddha’s message to me was about healing and regaining a sense of belonging within the community of living beings into which I was born. Being on the path of Buddha was a way of experiencing, as Charles Johnson, an African American Buddhist teacher and author puts it, “a long-deferred peace.” To follow the ancient teachings of Buddha was to be life affirming. On the path of Buddha’s teachings, I returned, through chanting and meditation, to that place within that had not been touched by the suffering of hatred. In following the path of Buddha, I began to peel off the masks that covered my original face. In the practice of Buddha’s love, I eventually became aware of my life in all of its difficult and glorious moments.

In the end, I know the teachings of Buddha go beyond Buddha, beyond the shape of things as they appear. There is no way to point to Buddhism and say, “There it is.” Yet I

find myself cuddling up to a *sense* of it just when the roar of life seems too loud.

For these reasons, I decided to offer this book to those who want to learn something about Buddhism. By no means have I covered the vastness of Buddha's teachings here. A myriad of books by numerous teachers, both Eastern and Western, offer a more thorough explanation of the teachings. It is important to say here that I am at the beginning of my journey as Zen priest, and I am referred to as a novice in our lineage. Therefore, what I share in this book derives from my direct experience of the practice as a student and as a dharma sister for more than twenty years. With the assistance of several dharma-transmitted Zen teachers, I created this offering to help clarify some aspects of Buddhism.

First, I would like to say that Buddha's teachings are similar to all other ancient teachings. His core teachings were much like those of Jesus, Mohammed, Sojourner Truth, White Buffalo Woman (who brought the *Chanupa*, or sacred pipe, to the Lakota), many unnamed indigenous medicine people, and other sages of old. They are similar in the sense that they address our connection to each other and ways to mend that connection when we cannot remember the relationship of all things.

Many ask, "What is Buddhism?" before they ask, "Who is Buddha?" The word *Buddhism* is only a name conjured up—centuries after Buddha's life—to capture all that Buddha taught. So though people ask, "What is Buddhism?" they might get a more accurate response if they asked, "Who was Buddha and what did Buddha teach?"



QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

❧ Who was Buddha and what did he teach?

The word *Buddha* is Sanskrit meaning “the awakened one,” a person who has been released from the world of cyclic existence (*samsara*) and attained liberation from desire. A Buddha realizes that desire is an indication of one’s dissatisfaction. Recognizing dissatisfaction can become an open gate to the path of liberation. Buddha experienced such dissatisfaction with life before he began his quest for enlightenment.

There were many who carried the name *Buddha* before the one popular Buddha was born. Shakyamuni Buddha, born Siddhartha Gautama in Kapilavatsu, India, was the one popular Buddha we speak of today. He was born into the Shakyamuni tribe and thus given the name Shakyamuni Buddha, meaning “the awakened one of the Shakyamuni tribe.” His father was King Suddhodana. His mother, Mayadevi, known as the Great Mother, died seven days after his birth,

so his aunt Mahapajapati raised him. He lived as a wealthy, protected prince, married a woman of royalty named Yasodhara, and had a son, named Rahula.

Once he became aware of all the suffering that had been hidden from him, including old age, sickness, birth, and death, he left his family's palace. He went to many teachers to understand this suffering, and they taught him various lessons about ending suffering. He excelled with all of his teachers, to the point that they asked him to become a teacher. However, Buddha refused their invitations to teach, feeling he had not yet been fully awakened to the condition of suffering. He continued his journey.



Fortunately, Buddha was a dreamer. His first teachings came from a succession of five dreams. Finally, after sitting among the trees in the forest, he became a lamp unto himself and was enlightened to what he called the Four Noble Truths of Suffering. These truths are:

1. There is suffering.
2. There is a cause for suffering.
3. There is cessation of suffering.
4. There is a path leading to the end of suffering, called the Eightfold Path.

☞ Can you tell me more about the Four Noble Truths of Suffering?

There is suffering (*dukkha*). *Dukkha* means suffering. This first truth brings awareness to the universal law that we all suffer in some way. Physical suffering is called *dukkha dukkha*, when there is pain or disease in the body. Mental and emotional suffering is called *samsara dukkha*, in which there is dissatisfaction or anguish or a thirst for pleasure, power, and prosperity. Also, this kind of suffering includes seeing one's individual existence or having notions of being separate from all things and being. Spiritual suffering is called *viparinama dukkha*, which is resisting change, not understanding that all things are impermanent.

There is a cause for suffering (*ṣamudaya*). *Samudaya* means the arising of suffering. This second truth addresses the origin, roots, nature, or creation of suffering. We are invited as practitioners to explore our suffering so that we can touch the root of it. The root can take on the nature of clinging to desires, ideas, expectations, and attachment to who we think we are in this lifetime.

There is cessation of suffering (*nirodha*). *Nirodha* means “cessation,” to end suffering. After becoming aware of the root of suffering, we are encouraged in the practice to cease an engagement with the things that cause suffering. More specifically, we are taught to be aware of our actions through body, mind, and speech.

There is a path leading to the end of suffering (*maggā*). *Maggā* means “path,” and in this case, it is the path of awakening. There is a path out of suffering, a path that can shift our tendency from suffering toward liberation. It is commonly called the Noble Eightfold Path. The path includes Right View or understanding, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

The word *right* has been used as a translation of the Pali word *ṣamma*, which appears in Buddha’s original sermon (or *sūtras*, meaning “teachings,” as they are commonly called). *Ṣamma* has also been translated to mean “perfect” or “complete.” However, it literally stands for the quietude of *citta*, or mind upon itself. The entire path is *ṣamma*; every aspect of the path has *ṣamma*. One’s whole life is *ṣamma*. The complete

or perfect knowing of the whole series of each moment of our lives is *jamma*. Therefore, for the sake of avoiding a sense of right and wrong or confusing this path with rules, I prefer to use the word *complete* in the place of *right*. *Complete* refers to doing what is beneficial to living an awakened life, living in a way that does not cause suffering. The path aligns with actions of the body, speech, and heart-mind.

The ancient Eightfold Path espoused by Shakyamuni Buddha invites us to take a vow to awaken to life as we are living it or to awaken to suffering. It is a vow so expansive it includes awakening to not only our own suffering, but also the suffering of others. It is a vow that is not meant to be an achievement we boast about with our friends, but an inexhaustible commitment to embrace the path, despite our being weary.

Walking the Eightfold Path is a vow to break through things that have obstructed our liberation such as the constant yearning for pleasure, power, and prosperity. It is a path that has to do with being vigilant *and* one in which the fragility, vulnerability, and soft centers of our hearts are revealed in the transformation and evolution of life.

Yet this path cannot be taught, as it is wisdom that must surface within. You can only bring it alive with the actions of your life. You cannot just memorize it or find techniques of liberated speaking and behaving. The path can only be engaged by your living of it. It can only be engaged as an awakening of your own doing. The path is difficult to grasp because it goes against our instincts to intellectually figure it out first rather than living it. We might say,

“I don’t want to do this until I know what it is.” We might say, “Prove that this will work when all else has failed.” We are stymied by our instinct to doubt its legitimacy. For these reasons, there exist practices such as meditation and sacred time, like vision quests, to help pry open the closed doors of our lives.

At first glance, the teachings on the Four Noble Truths appear simple, but to understand how suffering arises and ceases can take a lifetime. For further reading on these teachings, I suggest *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teachings* by the renowned Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh.

Would you say Buddha experienced a vision quest?

I like to say Buddha experienced a vision quest when he went into the world to seek answers to his questions on suffering. Also, I like to say Buddha met his ancestors in his five dreams and received teachings. But followers of Buddha would not speak of his journey in terms of a vision quest. And rarely do we hear about Buddha’s teachings emerging through lucid dreams.

Imagine Buddha committing himself to sitting among a forest of trees. Imagine spiritual teachers training him to see beyond the physical realms of life. These teachers taught him how to live on little food in the forest, how to survive the harsh climate with very little clothing, and how to attain deep, altered states of consciousness and to surrender to the spirit of nature. Just as shamans in indigenous cultures prepare for a holy life as teachers and healers, Buddha prepared

for his initiation, his near-death experience, and his ultimate illumination on the suffering of living beings.

According to his sermons, his quest for understanding centered around these questions: What are these things of suffering I am subject to in life? What were these things of suffering that existed before my birth?

This spiritual curiosity is what moved Buddha to leave home. He did the difficult action of leaving behind his family for a time to enter into a state of meditation in which the sacred mysteries of life would surface from within. He shaved his head and wrapped himself in a saffron-colored cloth to indicate to others that he was taking up a spiritual quest, an odyssey of sorts. Joined by five other monks, he went into the forest, among the trees, and there each one found a place alone where the inner voice would be awakened and the state of the unborn revealed. In the forest he would open to his own suffering, which had been hidden from him all his life.

It was in the wilderness that Buddha would begin to experience lucid dreams and have visions of liberation from suffering. The remote jungle was hard to endure; seclusion was hard to embrace, and isolation was difficult to enjoy. Buddha experienced the same fear as any of us would in such a situation. In his own words, he reveals that he was afraid:

But there are the specially holy nights of the half moons of the fourteenth and fifteenth, and the quarter moon of the eighth; suppose I spent those nights in such awe-inspiring abodes as

orchard shrines, woodland shrines and tree shrines, which make the hair stand up—perhaps I should encounter that fear and dread? And later [on one of those holy nights] . . . a deer would approach me, or a peacock would knock off a branch . . . Surely this is the fear and dread coming . . . And while I walked, the fear and dread came upon me, but I neither stood nor sat nor lay down till I had subdued the fear and dread.

Yet Buddha remained in the forest, working to not be overwhelmed by his fear and dread. He spent time doing all kinds of things to gain power over his mind. What came to him was the idea of clenching his teeth and pressing his tongue against the roof of his mouth to constrain his mind. It was recorded that he said, “Sweat ran from my armpits while I did so.” Then he decided to practice meditation without breathing. And when he did this, he is recorded saying, “Violent winds racked my head, as if a strong man were splitting my head open with a sharp sword.”

He had exhausted himself with painful efforts to gain power over his mind when he decided one final renunciation—to cut off food or have very little food. And he made this decision after having been in the forest for quite some time. Finally, he reached an extreme emaciated state. He said, “My limbs became like the jointed segments of vine stems or bamboo stems, because of eating so little. My backside became like a camel’s hoof; the projections on my spine stood forth like corded beads, my ribs jutted out as gaunt as the crazy rafters of an old roofless barn . . . If I touched my belly skin, I encountered my backbone too.

If I tried to ease my body by rubbing my limbs with my hands, the hair, rotted at its roots, fell away from my body as I rubbed.”

Soon after this near-death experience from not eating enough food, Buddha realized austerity was not the way to enlightenment. To be enlightened, he needed his body because it was his body, his life, from which awakening would occur. He was offered milk from a young girl who saw him, and soon after he began to eat solid food.

Upon Buddha’s release of austere approaches and techniques of gaining *power over* his mind, he allowed his mind to settle upon itself in a quiet way. It was then that the teachings of the earth surfaced through his bones. Five dreams appeared to him as he continued his practice of deep, meditative absorption.

First he dreamed that the great earth was his couch, the Himalayan Mountains his pillow. His left hand lay in the eastern ocean, his right hand lay in the western ocean, and his feet lay in the southern ocean. This dream informed him of full enlightenment to come.

In the second dream, a creeping animal (presumed to be a snake) grew up out of his navel and stood touching the clouds. There are statues of Buddha with a snake climbing his body that represents this dream. This second dream, in particular, was said to be a premonition of the Four Noble Truths. He would come to call the emergence of these initial teachings *Turning the Wheel of Dharma*, symbolizing a circular path to liberation from suffering. It was the second dream that would give rise to his shamanic voice.

His third dream of four birds of different colors turning white foretold that he would have followers on his path, dressed in white, who would take refuge in his teachings. In some Buddhist traditions, white is worn by followers in the initial steps toward full ordination.

His fourth dream revealed that when his teachings were heard, the four castes—the warrior-nobles, the Brahmin priests, the burgesses, and the plebians (possibly like the Dalits today)—would see his teachings as truth and be delivered from the caste system. Yet still today, many have not heard his teachings, and if they have, they have refused to accept them as truth.

His fifth dream warned him of greed or delusion in regard to the gifts that would be bestowed upon him, such as food, housing, medicine, and robes. Only Buddha would know of his own greed and delusion. However, in modern times, this dream can serve as a warning to all who receive gifts for their teachings.

In the end, Buddha was a man with all the frailties of any human being. He answered a call to sit in the woods and watch his own past dissolve. He saw his own death, and his death became a twilight filled with teachings.

At the end of seven days, Buddha rose from his concentration at the root of the Bodhi Tree, enlightened to the nature of suffering. He then moved from the root of the Bodhi Tree to the root of the Ajapala Nigrodha Tree, and finally to the root of the Banyan Tree.

The sacrifice of nearly dying brought forth in Buddha an awakening to the idea that our bodies and the heart-minds

that guide them can bring us into relationship with all living beings (including the earth). If we are not aligned with nature, it can separate us, destroying the fabric that holds us together. When we lose the importance of our relationships, we suffer, and society suffers. Our deepest wisdom is also lost. We grow hungry for ourselves as peacemakers.

☯ Can we be enlightened?

Fortunately, in revealing the Four Noble Truths, Buddha's own enlightenment became ours. We can all enter the vast state of awakened consciousness. The wisdom we all have is in our own experience of initiation and transformation.



The initiation into enlightenment begins with our own willingness to not only speak of our suffering, but also to understand it as a condition we share as living beings. In my practice, I learned how suffering emerged when I clung to suffering as my personal story when others are involved in the same painful circumstances. I began to ask questions, as Buddha did on his quest. Then I left my palace of the comfort zone, the familiar, and dared myself to go into unknown territory. I wrote:

She walks through the gate,
Heavy footed,
Gazing out from the darkness of skin,
Seeing no church pews,
She sits chanting,
Why have I come without knowing whose house I have
entered?

Once I found my place in the world of chanting and sitting meditation, I allowed my body to settle on suffering of any kind—not reenergizing the suffering, but settling on it long enough to turn the stone into soft earth. After some time, I began to feel myself as expansive as the earth, and I acknowledged suffering as part of my life, no longer recoiling from it. In this acknowledgment, I was not on a quest to gain a vision, but on a quest in which a vision of my life might arise on its own. With the acknowledgment of suffering and the practice of complete connection of all things comes enlightenment.

A mental or theoretical investigation of enlightenment will lead directly to confusion. Enlightenment arises without you knowing. You ask, “How will I know?” That is the mystery of this practice. There are no exact formulas that lead to results.

What I will say again is that when Buddha became enlightened, we all became awakened to the truth of suffering. However, our fears and desires hinder us from experiencing such awakening. The practice of chanting and meditation arouses this hidden enlightenment, reminding us of our original nature, which is untouched by suffering. We can chant and meditate through many indigenous traditions, including a myriad of Eastern traditions: Tibetan Buddhism, Shambhala, Zen, Shingon, Jodo Shin, Nichiren, Chinese Ch’an, Theravada, Insight Meditation, T’ai chi, Chi kung (Qigong), vedantic and yogic practices, and so forth. As we journey into these traditions, we can be buddha—that is, we can be awakened. (In our tradition, we use *buddha*—lowercase—to refer to ourselves.)

You can see how the word *Buddhism* is too simple a word for the complexity of Buddha’s teachings and approaches to learning and practicing them.

☞ Why do Buddhists talk about suffering and not joy?

Many say that Buddhists talk about suffering more than they do about joy or love. This may have some truth, because Buddha’s first message to the world was about suffering. He did not say, “If you do this, you will have joy.” He