

Buddhism and Zen: Medicines for a Wholesome Life

According to tradition, the historical Buddha (“buddha” means “awakened one”) was born in Nepal to a wealthy, powerful family in the sixth century BCE. As a young man he abandoned his life of pleasure and comfort to seek salvation for human suffering. After exploring various meditative and ascetic practices, he set out on his own. After an extended period of profound contemplation, he became enlightened, realizing to the core of his being his inherent interconnectedness with all life and the responsibilities it brings.

Buddha grasped that the fundamental cause of human suffering is self-centered craving, which takes shape as deluded clinging, seeking and avoiding. This craving prevents us from realizing and actualizing our true inherent nature, manifested in a wholesome lifestyle.

Buddha saw not only the cause of suffering but how we can be liberated from it. And over the remaining 45 years of his life, he devoted himself to teaching the followers who gathered around him, employing methods that suited various people and their particular spiritual ailments. As Buddhism spread, it took various forms and evolved to suit different cultures.

In a deeper sense, these Buddhist practices or traditions – all streams of one great river – represent varied kinds of “medicines” that suit different types of people and their inclinations. The medicines include sutra study, codes of ethical behaviour, concentration, insight, meditation, veneration and invocation. Zen emphasizes self-realization – realization of the “true self” – through a simple but concentrated practice of contemplation and actualization. This true self, the root of our being, is inherently healthy. The deeper we take root, the more enlightened and content our life becomes.

Known in India originally as Dhyāna, the principles of Zen practice were introduced to China in the fifth century CE by Bodhidharma, a direct dharma heir of the historical Buddha. In China, where it became known as Chán, the practice took hold and blossomed, and from there spread to Vietnam as Thiền, Korea as Seon, and Japan as Zen. Today it is practiced worldwide and by people of all ethnic and religious backgrounds.