

The basic Buddhist teachings of **dukkha** -- the **suffering** of conditioned, impermanent existence -- are as follows (systematically given in the Noble Fourfold Truth):

1) There is **“no self”** (anatman, anatta) or soul if conceived as a separate and permanent reality (rejects the concept of Atman).

Indeed, the very cause of suffering is such ignorance -- the false view that permanent and separate realities exist. This refers to a false belief in an eternal self-same “soul” or in the permanence of **“dharmas”** or conditioned things. The basic assumptions here are:

2) All things (dharmas, dhammas) are characterized by **impermanence** since they are in reality a functional unity comprised of interdependent and dynamic aggregates (that are themselves aggregates...). This is opposed to the substance or essentialist view (e.g., of Hinduism) which sees ultimate reality as possessing a self-same and unchanging identity. This view, to the degree that it is conditioned by **attachment** or “clinging”, e.g. to the self and to things as if they were substantial and permanent (Atman), brings about suffering when there is transformation (which is the true nature of reality). It also allows the process of **reincarnation** to continue since liberation from this pattern (of dukkha) has not yet been achieved.

3) **Nirvana** (nibbana) is a state of **enlightenment** free from suffering which results from removing the causes and conditions of suffering...by removing the source of dukkha, which is selfish desire, e.g., the ignorant and false view that things are permanent and separate...

THE BUDDHIST THEME: EXISTENCE AS PROCESS

Buddhism has been called the **Middle Way** philosophy because all things, including one’s self, in truth find their reality somewhere in between permanent being (Hindu essentialism) and absolute nonbeing (Materialist innihilationism). The true nature of reality can not be rightly understood in terms of this distinction or any other. It is simply not reducible to a dualistic conceptual framework generated, for example, by a substance or essentialist view of the world. According to Buddhist principles, this awesome reality that each and every one of us is an inseparable part of can not be adequately captured by concepts, since they are *abstractions* of reality and so do not reveal the way it really is. “Ultimate Reality” can only be “seen” when we abandon our ordinary ways of knowing. Truth is not a product of the mind; it is an unmediated spiritual experience (or awakening) rooted in full awareness. Concepts make things appear permanent (as objects or souls), and become straightjackets for understanding the true or “pure” nature of reality which lies beyond discursive thought. The “truth” (which is fourfold) is a way to become free from the trouble (dukkha) created by our tendency to desire such permanence. So we must learn how to experience the world in a new way -- one free from the illusion that the “twin barbs” of dichotomous thought allow us to know reality as it is. To consider a case in point, a Buddhist would not say that reality is *changing* if we take change only to apply to the “material world”, a concept that is distinguished from the spirit that animates it. On the other hand, reality is not *unchanging* either, if we mean that it has a separate and unconditioned “essence”. The point is that *thoughts* objectify things in this manner; they are just projections of the mind that generate the illusion of permanence, making reality look like it consists of permanent and separate beings and things. Conceptual “opposites” become false dichotomies in trying to capture the true nature of reality which is dynamic, unpredictable, and ultimately “free” (nibbana). This freedom does not entail independence from conditions; it means that the utterly *interdependent* nature of reality is seen for what it is: as a process of spiritual awakening. So the goal of Buddhism is to cultivate this path -- a way of life that leads to freedom from false

views and attachments. One becomes liberated from suffering by establishing the virtues of wisdom, moral conduct, and spiritual discipline in the world, which is done by following the Noble Eightfold Path or “Middle Way”. The goal of Buddhism is largely practical then, to cultivate good **karma** or a lifestyle that allows us to realize our “Buddha Nature” or total interconnectedness with all things. This path will allow our “original” and “pure” nature to flow freely -- that is, free from the suffering which results from attachment to, or desire for permanent, separate existence.

SOME MAIN PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS that the Buddha would never ask

One group of problems pertains to the self:

- 1) If there is no self (only aggregates or attachment groups), then who experiences dukkha and who experiences nirvana?
- 2) Put another way, if consciousness, even when pure, is impermanent, then what reason is there to think that the same person who at one time experiences dukkha can, at another time, experience nirvana?
- 3) If existence is simply the interrelated functioning of the groups of existence, without a self (or nature in the sense of having an unchanging and permanent essence), then what holds these groups together and gives them their continuity? At least, must it not be presupposed that there is a “unifying element” in consciousness, and how is this different from an unchanging and permanent (self-identical) consciousness or Self?
- 4) How, in face of the denial of a self that can be reborn, can rebirth occur?
- 5) If a self is denied, then in what sense can moral responsibility be ascribed to a person?

Another group of problems pertains to the “truth of conditioned existence” (dhammapada):

- 1) If things are said to lack permanence (or are actually transitory processes), then are not the things themselves denied (there is “no-thing”)? If not, why not?
- 2) If all things lack an abiding quality that would give them a separate and distinct “reality”, then in what sense is the perfected existence of the Buddha to be considered real?
- 3) How can there be causes and effects if nothing is really separate and distinct? How can karma exist when Eternal Mind -- or what is Ultimately Real -- entails a “dynamic unity” resulting from the total inter-penetration of all things.
- 4) If only karmic effects are reborn, bundles of desire (attachments) that keep the cycle of samsara going, then what happens to that consciousness free from dukkha (the enlightened who experience nirvana) when the cycle of samsara is broken and the body then dies?

A third group of problems concerns knowledge:

- 1) How, if the ultimate reality of both self and things is denied, can there be knowledge? And without knowledge, how can the ignorance that causes dukkha to be overcome?
- 2) If the knowledge that is said to destroy ignorance is immediate, non-dual knowledge, then what role can conceptual knowledge play in overcoming ignorance?
- 3) If conceptual knowledge is regarded as incapable of grasping the true way of “Being”, then is it completely irrelevant to insight and spiritual transformation?
- 4) If conceptual knowledge is relevant, how is it relevant and what is the relation between conceptual understanding and the meditative knowledge (spiritual awareness) that liberates one from dukkha?