

# Early Buddhism

*(Dhammapada & Questions of King Milinda)*



## Themes

- Life is suffering.
  - An ideal life is a life without suffering.
- Nature of the Self: *Anatman*
  - There is no persistent self
- Ethical Living Predominates
  - The road to nirvana is the Noble Eightfold Path

## Young Buddha Confronts Suffering

- Young Buddha witnessed suffering and sought to solve this human problem
- He saw that craving things leads to suffering
- He realized that one's view of one's self is the origin of craving
- A correct view of the self will release one from craving and suffering.

## Noble Fourfold Truth

1. The truth of the nature of suffering
2. The truth of the origin of suffering
3. The truth about eliminating suffering
4. The truth that the path to eliminating suffering is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path

## First Noble Truth

- Life is suffering
  - *Dukkha*: suffering understood as the inability to live well in a world which is constantly changing
- Three levels of *dukkha*:
  - Suffering arising from pain and sorrow resulting from birth, sickness, death, presence of the unpleasant, absence of the pleasant, unsatisfied desires, etc.
  - Suffering arising from the resistance to a changing world
  - Suffering arising from the attachment to the image of a self as unchanging and permanent

## What Is Suffering?

- Suffering is not just pain or physical discomfort
- Suffering appears to be the psychological distress caused by a state of affairs (loss, pain, etc.) being other than what one desires and to which one is attached
  1. Suffering arises because one is attached to something
  2. Suffering arises because one identifies with something and thinks it important or essential to oneself
  3. Suffering arises when one craves something that one cannot possibly possess (e.g., persistent self, immortality)

## Second Noble Truth

- Craving (*trishna*) creates the conditions for suffering
- Suffering arises from craving things one cannot have or trying to avoid what one cannot avoid
  - One craves to be a persistent, unchanging self
  - One craves the immortality of this persistent, unchanging self

## Cravings and the Future

- Cravings are focused on the future and attaining things at some point in the future
  - Humans tend to think that how things are now is not how things should be
- In craving things, one loses the present and living in the present
  - Living in the present and appreciation for the present results from the elimination of cravings

## Third Noble Truth

- If craving is the cause of suffering and the cause of craving is a false view of the self, then a correct view of the self will release one from suffering.
- Eliminating suffering by extinguishing craving is *nirvana*
  - *Nirvana* means extinguished
- *Nirvana* is the extinguishing of the craving for a persistent self
  - Craving for a persistent self conflicts with the reality of the self as "interdependent arising"

## Loss of Cravings

- To avoid suffering, Buddha thinks one must lose all one's cravings
  - One must lose both selfish and unselfish cravings
    - Even altruistic desires can cause suffering
- What are the results of losing one's cravings?
  - One would be cool and detached, never upset, express no concerns for oneself, or anxious about oneself
  - Loss of craving will bring about an openness to life and people
    - There will be a positive feeling or positive contentment in one's demeanor

## Argument of First–Third Noble Truths

1. If one assumes there is a persistent self, then one assumes one's cravings arise from this self.
  2. If one assumes that one's cravings arise from one's persistent self, then one becomes attached to one's cravings and treats them as important.
    - 2a. To crave x is to be attached to x such that failure to get (or keep) x causes suffering.
    - 2b. No person can always fulfill or maintain one's cravings.
  3. Becoming attached to one's cravings and treating them as important is the cause of suffering.
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4. Hence, assuming there is a persistent self causes suffering.

## You Are What You Think

- "Our life is shaped by our mind; we become what we think."
- Who we are results from our thoughts and our thinking
- *Anatman*: there is no *atman*
  - There is no unchanging, "true" self underneath the layers of one's personality and thoughts
- The self is nothing other than a system of thoughts
  - In Hume's terms, the self is a bundle of perceptions
- *Interdependent arising* is the nature of existence: interdependent arising means that everything is constantly changing, nothing is permanent, nothing exists separately or by itself

## Buddha's View of the Person

- There is no permanent, persistent, independently existing Self
- What constitutes a person? A person in the interrelated functions of ever-changing processes.
- The self is interdependent arising resulting from the following processes:
  1. Physical processes
  2. Mental processes
    - Sensation: pleasant and unpleasant feelings
    - Perception: processes producing the material of sensation
    - Forces of the will: volition to act
    - Consciousness: awareness of external and internal objects in awareness

## Lack of Individuality

- **Upanishads:** Since there are no individual selves because atman is Brahman, there is no individuality
  - Personality traits that appear to individuate selves are an illusion
- **Buddhism:** Since there is no self to make one's thoughts one's own, one's system of thought is one's by chance and accident
  - Since everyone else's system of thoughts by which they identify themselves also result from accident and chance, there is no individuating self to create a boundary distinguishing individuals
    - Another's suffering could have been one's own
    - Another's good fortune could have been one's own
    - All we have is each other and nothing else

## Anti-Individualistic Argument

1. If distinct individuals existed, then there must be some Self which provides a differentiating boundary between individuals.
  2. If there were a Self providing a differentiating boundary between individuals, then one would expect each individual's traits and system of thought to be determined by this Self.
  3. Each individual's traits and system of thought is undetermined and a result of chance and accident.
  4. There is no Self which provides a differentiating boundary between individuals.
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5. Therefore, it's not the case that distinct individuals exist.

## Recognizing Individuals While Maintaining Anti-Individualism

- Self as chariot
  - Nagasena asks King Milinda, "What is a chariot?"
    - The chariot is not any one of its parts, but the collection of parts
    - "Chariot" simply refers to this collection, but nothing over and above this collection
    - The collection is organized and causally connected, but there is chariot

## Ramifications of *Anatman*

- The self or personal identity is an illusion
- The "self" is a bundle of perceptions, thoughts, psychic elements, and nothing more
- The "self" is never static—new thoughts and experiences give rise to a new "self"
- The "self" is a result of fortuitous forces

## Continuity of Self

- If the self is always changing, then what makes one the same person throughout one's life?
  - The body is continuous and houses the mind and bundle of perceptions
  - The mind is continuous as long as memories and personality traits persist
    - There might be psychic continuity of a different sort, namely a continuous chain of psychic events

## Reincarnation

- If there is no self, then how can the "self" survive death? How is reincarnation possible?
  - **Upanishads:** Atman can be tracked from one life to another since it is part of the unchanging ultimate reality, Brahman
  - **Buddhism:** analogy of the flame--the flame from one lamp lights the flame in another lamp
    - Is it the same flame in both lamps?
      - Yes: there is causal continuity of the flame between the lamps
      - No: there is no sense in which the flames are ever the same from one moment to the next
    - Kupperman notes that the philosophical Buddhist knows there is no atman and thus no self that is reincarnated, but at the same time does not directly reject reincarnation

## Early Buddhist Ethics

- Two Ethical Tracks:
  - **Ethically Good Life:** Specified living a life similar to most ethical systems in civilized societies
    - One addition is that taking any life (including nonhuman animals) is prohibited
  - **Enlightenment Ethics:** One who pursues enlightenment must be altruistic
    - exhibit a gentle warmth toward everyone
    - treat everyone's interests as equally important and worthy of moral consideration
      - there is no preference for family, friends, or any other attachments over the interests of strangers

## Enlightenment & The Eightfold Path

- The Eightfold Path is the Buddhist guide to life
    - Right view
    - Right intention
    - Right speech
    - Right action
    - Right livelihood
    - Right effort
    - Right mindfulness
    - Right concentration
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| Wisdom            |
| Ethical Behavior  |
| Mental Discipline |

## Eightfold Path

- Eightfold Path is a guide to eliminating ignorance and desires that leads to suffering
  - It focuses on three general areas: wisdom, ethical conduct, mental discipline
  - Each path should be pursued simultaneously in order to achieve a completely integrated life in seeing life as it really is (suffering) and how to overcome suffering, purifying one's actions and thoughts, and building the mental skills necessary to live and act appropriately
- The paths are interrelated and mutually supporting
  - Mental discipline is required for moral conduct and wisdom; wisdom provides understanding of human nature and generates the love and compassion of moral conduct; moral conduct aids in the development of wisdom and mental discipline.

## Wisdom

- **Right View:** seeing things as they really are (interdependent arisings) through intellectual processes (lower level understanding) and direct insight (higher level understanding that is beyond concepts and theories)
- **Right Intention:** intention to free oneself from all cravings, hatred, and violence arising from a mistaken notion of self and to pursue love and compassion

## Moral Conduct

- **Right Speech:** avoidance of speech that hurts oneself or others (lying, slander, rudeness, gossip) and pursuit of speech that benefits oneself and others (truthfulness, kindness, purposeful talk)
- **Right Action:** avoidance of actions that harm (killing, stealing, etc.) and pursuit of actions that promote well-being of others and oneself
- **Right Livelihood:** pursuit of livelihoods that are consistent with Right Speech and Right Action and avoid professions/pursuit of professions that are in conflict because they are treacherous, fraudulent, or unethical

## Mental Discipline

- **Right Effort:** preventing and/or ridding one's mind of unwholesome or evil thoughts and creating and/or maintaining states of mind that are wholesome and good
- **Right Mindfulness:** being mentally aware and attentive to all one's mental and physical activities
- **Right Concentration:** develop penetrating concentration that creates understanding and total awareness

## Concerns with Buddhism

- **Life is boring:** many might see Buddhism demanding that one give up all excitement in living the ideal life. But, the Buddhist sees the benefit of giving up pleasures and excitements leads to joy, contentment, and bliss
- **Give up on love:** on the one hand Buddhism does demand that one give up passionate or erotic love, but it does allow for universal love that is less intense and causes less suffering
- **Buddhist altruism goes against human nature:** Buddhists would stress that "raw" human nature is full of contradictions and problems. Buddhism endorses moving beyond this "first stage" of human nature.