

An Overview of Buddhism

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This short essay is intended to give a brief introduction to Buddhism. It will discuss the way Buddhists perceive the world, the four main teachings of the Buddha, the Buddhist view of the self, the relationship between this self and the various ways in which it responds to the world, the Buddhist path and the final goal.

The Three Marks of Existence

Buddhism has been described as a very pragmatic religion. It does not indulge in metaphysical speculation about first causes; there is no theology, no worship of a deity or deification of the Buddha. Buddhism takes a very straightforward look at our human condition; nothing is based on wishful thinking, at all. Everything that the Buddha taught was based on his own observation of the way things are. Everything that he taught can be verified by our own observation of the way things are.

If we look at our life, very simply, in a straightforward way, we see that it is marked with frustration and pain. This is because we attempt to secure our relationship with the "world out there", by solidifying our experiences in some concrete way. For example, we might have dinner with someone we admire very much, everything goes just right, and when we get home later we begin to fantasise about all the things we can do with our new-found friend, places we can go etc. We are going through the process of trying to cement our relationship. Perhaps, the next time we see our friend, she/he has a headache and is curt with us; we feel snubbed, hurt, all our plans go out the window. The problem is that the "world out there" is constantly changing, everything is impermanent and it is impossible to make a permanent relationship with anything, at all.

If we examine the notion of impermanence closely and honestly, we see that it is all-pervading, everything is marked by impermanence. We might posit an eternal consciousness principle, or higher self, but if we examine our consciousness closely we see that it is made up of temporary mental processes and events. We see that our "higher self" is speculative at best and imaginary to begin with. We have invented the idea to secure ourselves, to cement our relationship, once again. Because of this we feel uneasy and anxious, even at the best of times. It is only when we completely abandon clinging that we feel any relief from our queasiness.

These three things: pain, impermanence and egolessness are known as the three marks of existence.

The Four Noble Truths

The first sermon that the Buddha preached after his enlightenment was about the four noble truths. The first noble truth is that life is frustrating and painful. In fact, if we are honest with ourselves, there are times when it is downright miserable. Things may be fine with us, at the moment, but, if we look around, we see other people in the most appalling condition, children starving, terrorism, hatred, wars, intolerance, people being tortured and we get a sort of queasy feeling whenever we think about the world situation in even the most casual way. We, ourselves, will some day grow old, get sick and eventually die. No matter how we try to avoid it, some day we are going to die. Even though we try to avoid thinking about it, there are constant reminders that it is true.

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The second noble truth is that suffering has a cause. We suffer because we are constantly struggling to survive. We are constantly trying to prove our existence. We may be extremely humble and self-deprecating, but even that is an attempt to define ourselves. We are defined by our humility. The harder we struggle to establish ourselves and our relationships, the more painful our experience becomes.

The third noble truth is that the cause of suffering can be ended. Our struggle to survive, our effort to prove ourselves and solidify our relationships is unnecessary. We, and the world, can get along quite comfortably without all our unnecessary posturing. We could just be a simple, direct and straight-forward person. We could form a simple relationship with our world, our coffee, spouse and friend. We do this by abandoning our expectations about how we think things should be.

This is the fourth noble truth: the way, or path to end the cause of suffering. The central theme of this way is meditation. Meditation, here, means the practice of mindfulness/awareness, shamata/vipashyana in Sanskrit. We practice being mindful of all the things that we use to torture ourselves with. We become mindful by abandoning our expectations about the way we think things should be and, out of our mindfulness, we begin to develop awareness about the way things really are. We begin to develop the insight that things are really quite simple, that we can handle ourselves, and our relationships, very well as soon as we stop being so manipulative and complex.

The Five Skandhas

The Buddhist doctrine of egolessness seems to be a bit confusing to westerners. I think this is because there is some confusion as to what is meant by ego. Ego, in the Buddhist sense, is quite different from the Freudian ego. The Buddhist ego is a collection of mental events classified into five categories, called skandhas, loosely translated as bundles, or heaps.

If we were to borrow a western expression, we could say that "in the beginning" things were going along quite well. At some point, however, there was a loss of confidence in the way things were going. There was a kind of primordial panic which produced confusion about what was happening. Rather than acknowledging this loss of confidence, there was an identification with the panic and confusion. Ego began to form. This is known as the first skandha, the skandha of form.

After the identification with confusion, ego begins to explore how it feels about the formation of this experience. If we like the experience, we try to draw it in. If we dislike it, we try to push it away, or destroy it. If we feel neutral about it, we just ignore it. The way we feel about the experience is called the skandha of form; what we try to do about it is known as the skandha of impulse/perception.

The next stage is to try to identify, or label the experience. If we can put it into a category, we can manipulate it better. Then we would have a whole bag of tricks to use on it. This is the skandha of concept. The final step in the birth of ego, is called the skandha of consciousness. Ego begins to churn thoughts and emotions around and around. This makes ego feel solid and real. The churning around and around is called samsara -- literally, to whirl about. The way ego feels about its situation (skandha of feeling) determines which of the six realms of existence it creates for itself.

The Six Realms

If ego decides it likes the situation, it begins to churn up all sorts of ways to possess it. A craving to consume

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the situation arises and we long to satisfy that craving. Once we do, a ghost of that craving carries over and we look around for something else to consume. We get into the habitual pattern of becoming consumer oriented. Perhaps we order a piece of software for our computer. We play with it for awhile, until the novelty wears out, and then we look around for the next piece of software that has the magic glow of not being possessed yet. Soon we haven't even got the shrink wrap off the current package when we start looking for the next one. Owning the software and using it doesn't seem to be as important as wanting it, looking forward to its arrival. This is known as the hungry ghost realm where we have made an occupation out of craving. We can never find satisfaction, it is like drinking salt water to quench our thirst.

Another realm is the animal realm, or having the mind like that of an animal. Here we find security by making certain that everything is totally predictable. We only buy blue chip stock, never take a chance and never look at new possibilities. The thought of new possibilities frightens us and we look with scorn at anyone who suggests anything innovative. This realm is characterised by ignorance. We put on blinders and only look straight ahead, never to the right or left.

The hell realm is characterised by acute aggression. We build a wall of anger between ourselves and our experience. Everything irritates us, even the most innocuous, and innocent statement drives us mad with anger. The heat of our anger is reflected back on us and sends us into a frenzy to escape from our torture, which in turn causes us to fight even harder and get even angrier. The whole thing builds on itself until we don't even know if we're fighting with someone else or ourselves. We are so busy fighting that we can't find an alternative to fighting; the possibility of alternative never even occurs to us.

These are the three lower realms. One of the three higher realms is called the jealous god realm. This pattern of existence is characterised by acute paranoia. We are always concerned with "making it". Everything is seen from a competitive point of view. We are always trying to score points, and trying to prevent others from scoring on us. If someone achieves something special we become determined to out do them. We never trust anyone; we "know" they're trying to slip one past us. If someone tries to help us, we try to figure out their angle. If someone doesn't try to help us, they are being uncooperative, and we make a note to ourselves that we will get even later. "Don't get mad, get even," that's our motto.

At some point we might hear about spirituality. We might hear about the possibility of meditation techniques, imported from some eastern religion, or mystical western one, that will make our minds peaceful and absorb us into a universal harmony. We begin to meditate and perform certain rituals and we find ourselves absorbed into infinite space and blissful states of existence. Everything sparkles with love and light; we become godlike beings. We become proud of our godlike powers of meditative absorption. We might even dwell in the realm of infinite space where thoughts seldom arise to bother us. We ignore everything that doesn't confirm our godhood. We have manufactured the god realm, the highest of the six realms of existence. The problem is, that we have manufactured it. We begin to relax and no longer feel the need to maintain our exalted state. Eventually a small sliver of doubt occurs. Have we really made it? At first we are able to smooth over the question, but eventually the doubt begins to occur more and more frequently and soon we begin to struggle to regain our supreme confidence. As soon as we begin to struggle, we fall back into the lower realms and begin the whole process over and over; from god realm to jealous god realm to animal realm to hungry ghost realm to hell realm. At some point we begin to wonder if there isn't some sort of alternative to our habitual way of dealing with the world. This is the human realm.

The human realm is the only one in which liberation from the six states of existence is possible. The human realm is characterised by doubt and inquisitiveness and the longing for something better. We are not as absorbed by the all consuming preoccupations of the other states of being. We begin to wonder whether it is possible to relate to the world as simple, dignified human beings.

The Eightfold Path

The path to liberation from these miserable states of being, as taught by the Buddha, has eight points and is known as the eightfold path. The first point is called right view -- the right way to view the world. Wrong view occurs when we impose our expectations onto things; expectations about how we hope things will be, or about how we are afraid things might be. Right view occurs when we see things simply, as they are. It is an open and accommodating attitude. We abandon hope and fear and take joy in a simple straight-forward approach to life.

The second point of the path is called right intention. It proceeds from right view. If we are able to abandon our expectations, our hopes and fears, we no longer need to be manipulative. We don't have to try to con situations into our preconceived notions of how they should be. We work with what is. Our intentions are pure.

The third aspect of the path is right speech. Once our intentions are pure, we no longer have to be embarrassed about our speech. Since we aren't trying to manipulate people, we don't have to be hesitant about what we say, nor do we need to try bluff our way through a conversation with any sort of phoney confidence. We say what needs to be said, very simply in a genuine way.

The fourth point on the path, right discipline, involves a kind of renunciation. We need to give up our tendency to complicate issues. We practice simplicity. We have a simple straight-forward relationship with our dinner, our job, our house and our family. We give up all the unnecessary and frivolous complications that we usually try to cloud our relationships with.

Right livelihood is the fifth step on the path. It is only natural and right that we should earn our living. Often, many of us don't particularly enjoy our jobs. We can't wait to get home from work and begrudge the amount of time that our job takes away from our enjoyment of the good life. Perhaps, we might wish we had a more glamorous job. We don't feel that our job in a factory or office is in keeping with the image we want to project. The truth is, that we should be glad of our job, whatever it is. We should form a simple relationship with it. We need to perform it properly, with attention to detail.

The sixth aspect of the path is right effort. Wrong effort is struggle. We often approach a spiritual discipline as though we need to conquer our evil side and promote our good side. We are locked in combat with ourselves and try to obliterate the tiniest negative tendency. Right effort doesn't involve struggle at all. When we see things as they are, we can work with them, gently and without any kind of aggression whatsoever.

Right mindfulness, the seventh step, involves precision and clarity. We are mindful of the tiniest details of our experience. We are mindful of the way we talk, the way we perform our jobs, our posture, our attitude toward our friends and family, every detail.

Right concentration, or absorption is the eighth point of the path. Usually we are absorbed in absentmindedness. Our minds are completely captivated by all sorts of entertainment and speculations. Right absorption means that we are completely absorbed in oneness, in things as they are. This can only happen if we have some sort of discipline, such as sitting meditation. We might even say that without the discipline of sitting meditation, we can't walk the eightfold path at all. Sitting meditation cuts through our absentmindedness. It provides a space or gap in our preoccupation with ourselves.

The Goal

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Most people have heard of nirvana. It has become equated with a sort of eastern version of heaven. Actually, nirvana simply means cessation. It is the cessation of passion, aggression and ignorance; the cessation of the struggle to prove our existence to the world, to survive. We don't have to struggle to survive after all. We have already survived. We survive now; the struggle was just an extra complication that we added to our lives because we had lost our confidence in the way things are. We no longer need to manipulate things as they are into things as we would like them to be.