

Buddhism - Worldview

The basic orientation of Buddhism is expressed in the Four Noble Truths (see separate PDF). We crave, and cling to impermanent states, and things that cannot be satisfied (dukkha). This keeps us caught in an endless cycle of repeated rebirth, dukkha, and dying (samsara). But there is a way to liberation from this endless cycle to the state of nirvana by following the Noble Eightfold Path (see separate PDF).

In Buddhism, dukkha is one of the three marks of existence, along with impermanence, and non-self (anatta). Buddhism, like other major Indian religions, asserts that everything is impermanent, but, unlike them, also asserts that there is no permanent self or soul in living being (anatta). The ignorance or misperception that anything is permanent or that there is self in any being is considered a wrong understanding, and the primary source of clinging, and dukkha.



The cycle or rebirth

Samsara means “wandering” or “world” with the connotation of cyclic, circuitous change. It is considered to be dukkha, unsatisfactory, and painful, perpetuated by desire, and ignorance, and the resulting karma. Liberation from this cycle of existence (nirvana) has been the foundation, and the most important historical justification of Buddhism.

Buddhist texts assert that rebirth can occur in six realms of existence: three good realms (heavenly, demi-god, human), and three evil realms (animal, hungry ghosts, hell). These realms, and more are explained in a separate PDF called Wheel of Life. Samsara ends if a person attains nirvana, the “blowing out” of the afflictions through insight into impermanence, and “non-self”.

Rebirth refers to a process whereby beings go through a succession of lifetimes as one of many possible forms of sentient life, each running from conception to death. In Buddhist thought, this rebirth does not involve a soul or any fixed substance because the Buddhist no-self doctrine (anatta) rejects the concepts of a permanent self or an unchanging, eternal soul as found in other religions.

The Buddhist traditions have disagreed on what it is in a person that is reborn, as well as how quickly the rebirth occurs after death. Some traditions say it is its personality (pudgala), others state it's a person's consciousness (vijnana). But **the quality of one's rebirth** depends on the merit or demerit gained by one's karma (i.e. actions) as well as that accrued on one's behalf by a family member. Buddhism also developed a complex cosmology to explain the various realms or planes of rebirth.

Karma is a concept of action, work or deed, and its effect or consequences. The term more specifically refers to a principle of cause, and effect, wherein individual's intent, and actions (cause) influence their future (effect).

Karma drives samsara, the endless cycle of suffering, and rebirth for each being. Good, skilful deeds (kusala) as well as bad, unskilful deeds (akusala) produce “seeds” in the unconscious receptacle that mature later, either in this life or in a subsequent rebirth. A central aspect of Buddhist theory of karma is that intent (cetane) matters, and is essential to bring about a consequence, a “fruit” (phala) or “result” (vipaka). However, good or bad karma accumulates even if there is no physical action, and just having ill or good thoughts creates karmic seeds. Thus, actions of body, speech or mind all lead to karmic seeds. In the Buddhist traditions, life aspects affected by the law of karma in past and current births of a being include the form of rebirth, realm of rebirth, social class, character, and major circumstances of a lifetime. It operates like the laws of physics, without external interventions, on every being in all six realms of existence.

Another notable aspect of the karma theory in Buddhism is merit transfer. A person accumulates merit not only through intentions, and ethical living, but also is able to gain merit from others by exchanging goods, and services, such as through charity to monks or nuns (dana). Further, a person can transfer one's own good karma to living family members, and ancestors.

Liberation

The cessation of the mental states that cloud the mind, and manifest in unwholesome actions (kleshas), and the attainment of nirvana with which the cycle of rebirth ends, has been the primary key goal of the Buddhist path for monastic life since the time of Lord Buddha.

Nirvana literally means “blowing out, quenching, becoming extinguished”. In early Buddhist texts, it is the state of restraint, and self-control that leads to the “blowing out”, and the ending of the cycles of sufferings associated with rebirths, and re-deaths.

While Buddhism considers the liberation from samsara as the ultimate spiritual goal, in traditional practice, the primary focus of a vast majority of lay Buddhists has been to seek, and accumulate merit through good deeds, donations to monks, and various Buddhist rituals in order to gain better rebirths rather than nirvana.

Dependent arising

“Dependent arising”, or “dependent origination” (pratityasamutpada) is the Buddhist theory to explain the nature, and relations of being, becoming, existence, and ultimate reality. Buddhism asserts that there is nothing independent, except the state of nirvana.

Buddhism applies this theory of dependent arising to explain origination of endless cycles of dukkha, and rebirth through twelve links (twelve nidanas). It states that because ignorance (avidya) exists, karmic formations (samskara) exist. Because Samskaras exist, therefore consciousness (vijnana) exists. And in a similar manner, it links the sentient body (namarupa), our six senses (sadayatana), sensory stimulation (sparsa), feeling (vedana), craving (tanha), grasping (upadana), becoming (bhava), birth (jati), as well as old age, death, sorrow, and pain (jaramarana). By breaking the circuitous links of the twelve links, Buddhism asserts that liberation from these endless cycles of rebirth, and dukkha can be attained.

Not-Self – Emptiness

A related doctrine in Buddhism is that of not-self (anatta in Pali or anatman in Sanskrit). It is the view that there is no unchanging, permanent self, soul or essence in phenomena. Lord Buddha generally argues for this view by analysing the person through five aggregates, means the five material, and mental factors that take part in the rise of craving, and clinging. He then explains that none of these five components of personality can be permanent or absolute. This can be read in Buddhist discourses.

“Emptiness” or “voidness” (sunnata in Pali or sunyata in Sanskrit) is a related concept with many different interpretations throughout the various forms of Buddhism. In early Buddhism, it was commonly stated that all five aggregates are void, hollow, coreless. Similarly, in Theravada Buddhism, it often means that the five aggregates are empty of a self. In Mahayana Buddhism, emptiness is a central concept.

The Three Jewels

All forms of Buddhism revere, and take spiritual refuge in the three jewels (triratna): The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

- The Buddha: While all varieties of Buddhism revere Lord Buddha, and Buddhahood, they have different views on what these are. Regardless of their interpretation, the concept of Lord Buddha is central to all forms of Buddhism.
- In Buddhism, the Dharma refers to the teachings of Lord Buddha. While his teachings reflect the true nature of reality, it is not a belief to be clung to. It is seen more as a pragmatic teaching to put into practice, like a raft which is for crossing over to nirvana but not for holding on to. It also refers to the universal law, and cosmic order which that teaching both reveals, and relies upon. It is an everlasting principle which applies to all beings, and worlds. In that sense, it is also the ultimate truth, and reality about the universe, it is thus “the way that things really are”.
- The Sangha refers to the monastic community of monks, and nuns who follow Lord Buddha’s monastic discipline which was “designed to shape the Sangha as an idea community, with the optimum conditions for spiritual growth”.