

THE SUFFERING OF SELF

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If someone asked you to summarize the teachings of the Buddha, what would you say? For most Buddhists, probably the first thing that would come to mind is the four noble (or “ennobling”) truths: *dukkha*, its causes, its cessation (better known as nirvana), and the eightfold path that leads to cessation. Shakyamuni Buddha himself is believed to have emphasized those four truths in his first dharma talk, and those of us who teach Buddhism find them quite helpful, because all his other teachings can be included somewhere within them.

Nevertheless, there is nothing exclusively or distinctively Buddhist about any of the four noble truths.

Buddhism has its own take on them, of course, but in their basic form the four noble truths are common to many Indian religious traditions. *Dukkha* is where many of those spiritual paths begin, including Jainism and Sankhya-Yoga; there is wide agreement that the cause of *dukkha* is craving, and that liberation from craving is possible; and they all include some sort of way to realize that liberation. Yoga, for example, has a path with seven limbs, which is quite similar to Buddhism’s eightfold path.

So what is truly distinctive about Buddhist teaching? How does it differ from other religious traditions that also explain the world and our role within it? No other spiritual path focuses so sharply on the intrinsic connection between *dukkha* and our delusive sense of self. They are not only related: for Buddhism the self *is* dukkha.

Although *dukkha* is usually translated as “suffering,” that is too narrow. The point of *dukkha* is that even those who are wealthy and healthy experience a basic dissatisfaction, a dis-ease, which continually festers. That we find life dissatisfactory, one damn problem after another, is not accidental, because it is the nature of the unawakened sense-of-self to be bothered about something.

Pali Buddhism distinguishes three basic types of *dukkha*. Everything we usually identify as physical and mental suffering – including being separated from those we want to be with, and being stuck with those we don’t want to be with (the Buddha had a sense of humor!) – is included in the first type.

The second type is the *dukkha* due to impermanence: the realization that, although I might be enjoying an ice-cream cone right now, it will soon be finished.

The best example of this type is awareness of mortality, which haunts our appreciation of life. Knowing that death is inevitable casts a shadow that usually hinders our ability to live fully now.

The third type of *dukkha* is more difficult to understand because it is connected with the delusion of self. It is *dukkha* due to *sankhara* “conditioned states,” which is sometimes taken as a reference to the ripening of past karma. More generally, however, *sankhara* refers to the constructedness of all our experience, including the experience of self. When looked at from the other side, another term for this constructedness is *anatta* “nonself.” There is no unconditioned self within our constructed sense of self, and this is the source of our deepest *dukkha*, our worst anguish.

This anguished sense of being a self that is separate from the world I am in is illusory – in fact, it is our most dangerous delusion. Here we can benefit from what is now a truism in contemporary psychology, which has also realized that the sense of self is a psychological-social-linguistic construct. *Psychological*, because the ego-self is a product of mental conditioning. *Social*, because a sense of self develops due to social interaction with other constructed selves. *Linguistic*, because acquiring a sense of self involves learning to use certain names and pronouns such as *I*, *me*, *mine*, *myself*, words which creates the illusion that there must be some *thing* being referred to. If the word “cup” refers to this thing I’m drinking coffee out of, then “I” must refer to something too, right? Wrong: this one of the ways language misleads us, by pointing to something that isn’t there to be found.

Yet Buddhism differs from most of modern psychology in two important ways. First, Buddhism emphasizes that there is always something uncomfortable about our constructed sense of self. Much of contemporary psychotherapy is concerned with helping us become “well-adjusted.” The ego-self needs to be repaired so it can fit into society and we can play our social roles better. Buddhism isn’t about helping us become well-adjusted. A socially well-adjusted ego-self is still a sick ego-self, for there remains something problematical about it. It is still infected by *dukkha*.

This suggests the other way that Buddhism differs from modern psychology. Buddhism agrees that the sense of self can be reconstructed, and that it needs to be reconstructed, but it emphasizes even more that the sense of self needs to be *deconstructed*, to realize its true empty nature. Awakening to our constructedness is the only real solution to our most fundamental anxiety. Ironically, the problem and its solution both depend upon the same fact: a constructed sense of self is not a real self. Not being a real self, however, is also what enables the sense of self to be deconstructed and reconstructed. And that is what the spiritual path is about.

But why is a constructed sense of self so uncomfortable? “My” sense of self is composed of mostly habitual ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking and acting. That’s all. Those impermanent processes interact with other and give rise to a conditioned sense of being a self that is separate from other selves and things. If you strip away those psychological and physical processes, it’s like peeling off the layers of an onion. When you get to the end, nothing is left. There’s no hard seed or anything else at the core, once the last few thin layers have been peeled away. And what’s wrong with that? *Nothing*. The basic problem is, we don’t like being nothing. A gaping hole at one’s core is quite distressing. *Nothing* means there’s no thing to identify with or cling to. Another way to say it is that my nothing-ness means my constructed sense of self is ungrounded, so is haunted by a basic sense of unreality and insecurity.

Intellectually, this situation is not easy to understand, but I suspect that most of us actually have some innate awareness of the problem. In fact, if our sense of self is truly empty in this way, we *must* have some basic awareness of this problem – yet it’s a very uncomfortable awareness, because we don’t understand it or know what to do about it. I think this is one of the great secrets of life: each of us individually experiences this sense of unreality as the feeling that “something is wrong with me.” Growing up is learning to pretend along with everyone else that I’m okay, you’re okay. A lot of social interaction is about reassuring each other and ourselves that we’re all really okay even though inside we feel that we’re not. When we look at other people from the outside, they seem quite solid and real to us, yet each of us feels deep inside that something is not right – something is wrong at the core.

Here another modern psychological idea is helpful: repression. Although Freud’s legacy has become quite controversial, his concept of repression, and “the return of the repressed,” remains very important. Repression happens when I become aware of something uncomfortable that I don’t want to deal with, so it is “pushed away” from consciousness. Freud believed that our main repression is sexual desires. Existential psychology shifts the focus to death: our inability to cope with mortality, the fact that our lives will come to an end, and we don’t know when – maybe soon. For Buddhism, however, fear of death focuses on what will happen in the *future*, while there is a more basic problem that we experience right *now*: this uncomfortable sense of unreality at our core, which we don’t know how to deal with. Naturally enough, we learn to ignore or repress it, but that doesn’t resolve the problem. The difficulty with repression is that it doesn’t work. What has been repressed returns to consciousness one way or another, in a disguised or distorted fashion. This “return of the repressed” is thus a *symptom* of the original awareness that we didn’t want to deal with.

How does our repressed sense of unreality return to consciousness? As a feeling that there is something missing or lacking in my life. What is it that's lacking? How I understand that depends upon the kind of person I am, and the kind of society I live in. The sense that something is wrong with me is too amorphous. It needs to be given more specific form if I'm to do something about it, and that form usually depends upon how I have been raised. In modern developed (or "economized") societies such as the United States, I am likely to understand my lack as not enough money – regardless of how much money I already have. Money is important to us not only because we can buy anything with it, but also because it has become a kind of collective *reality symbol*. The more money you get, the more real you become! That's the way we tend to think, anyway. (When a wealthy person arrives somewhere his or her presence is acknowledged much more than the arrival of a "nobody.") Because money doesn't really end *dukkha* -- it can't fill up the bottomless hole at my core – this way of thinking often becomes a trap. You're a multi-millionaire but still feel like something is wrong with your life? Obviously you don't have enough money yet.

Another example is fame. If I am known by lots and lots of people, then I must be real, right? Yet the attention of other people, who are haunted by their own sense of lack, can't fill up our own sense of lack. If you think that fame is what will make you real, you can never be famous enough.

This understanding of *anatta* gives us some insight into karma, especially the Buddha's take on it, which emphasized the role of motivations and intentions. If my sense of self is actually composed of habitual ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking and behaving, then karma isn't something I have, it's what I *am*. The important point is that I change my karma by changing who "I" am: by reconstructing my habitual ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking and behaving. The problematical motivations that cause so much trouble for myself and for others – greed, ill will and delusion, the three unwholesome roots – need to be transformed into their more positive counterparts that work to reduce *dukkha*: generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom.

Whether or not you believe in karma as something magical, as an objective moral law of the universe, on a more psychological level karma is about how certain habitual ways of thinking and acting tend to create certain types of situations. If I'm motivated by greed, ill will and delusion, then I need to be manipulative, which alienates other people and also makes me feel more separate from them. Ironically, I'm busy trying to defend and promote the interests of something that doesn't exist: my self. (It's because the sense of self is not a real self that it feels so vulnerable, always in need of defense and support.) Yet acting in that way reinforces my delusive sense of self. When I'm motivated by generosity and loving-kindness, however, I can relax and open up, be less

defensive. Again, other people tend to respond in the same way, which works to reduce *dukkha* for all of us.

Transforming our karma in this way is very important, yet it is not the only goal or the main goal of Buddhist practice. Most fundamentally, Buddhism is about awakening, which means realizing something about the constructedness of the sense of self and the nothing at its core. If changing karma involves *re*constructing the sense of self, *de*constructing the sense of self involves directly experiencing its emptiness. Usually that void at our core is so uncomfortable that we try to evade it, by identifying with something else that might give us stability and security. Another way to say it is that we keep trying to fill up that hole, yet it's a bottomless pit. Nothing that we can ever grasp or achieve can end our sense of lack.

So what happens when we don't run away from that hole at our core? That's what we are doing when we meditate: we are "letting go" of all the physical and mental activity that distracts us from our emptiness. Instead, we just sit with it and as it. It's not that easy to do, because the hole gives us such a feeling of insecurity, ungroundedness, unreality. Meditation is uncomfortable, especially at the beginning, because in our daily lives we are used to taking evasive action. So we tend to take evasive action when we meditate too: we fantasize, make plans, feel sorry for ourselves ...

But if I can learn to not run away, to stay with those uncomfortable feelings, to become friendly with them, then something can happen to that core – and to me, insofar as that hole is what "I" really am. The curious thing about my emptiness is that it is not really a problem. The problem is that we think it's a problem. It's our ways of trying to escape it that make it into a problem.

Some Buddhist sutras talk about *paravrtti*, a "turning around" that transforms the festering hole at my core into a life-healing flow which springs up spontaneously from I-know-not-where. Instead of being experienced as a sense of lack, the empty core becomes a place where there is now awareness of something other than, greater than, my usual sense of self. I can never grasp that "greater than," I can never understand what it is – and I do not need to, because I am an expression of it. My role is to manifest it.

So our emptiness has two sides: the negative, problematic aspect is a sense of lack. The other aspect is being in touch with, and a part of, something greater than my sense of self – or greater than I usually understand myself to be. Significantly, the original Buddhist term usually translated as emptiness (Pali *shunnata*, Sanskrit *shunyata*) actually has this double-sided meaning. It derives from the root *shu*, which means

“swollen” in both senses: not only the swollenness of a blown-up balloon but also the swollenness of an expectant woman, pregnant with possibility. So a more accurate translation of *sunyata* would be: emptiness/fullness, which describes quite well the experience of our own spiritual emptiness, both the problem and the solution.

These two ways of experiencing our emptiness are not mutually exclusive. I think many of us go back and forth, usually bothered by our sense of lack, but also occasionally experiencing our emptiness more positively as a source of spontaneity and creativity, like athletes do when they are “in the zone.” The point isn’t to get rid of the self: that’s not possible, for there is no self and never has been. Nor do we want to get rid of the sense of self: that would be a very unpleasant type of mental retardation. Rather, what we work toward is a more permeable, less dualistic sense of self, more aware of, and more comfortable with, its empty constructedness.

The two aspects of the spiritual path, deconstructing and reconstructing one’s sense of self, are obviously related and reinforce each other. Meditation is letting-go, getting back to the emptiness/fullness at our core, and this practice also helps to reconstruct the sense of self, most obviously by helping us be more mindful in daily life. The two processes assist each other indefinitely. As the Japanese proverb says, even the Buddha is only halfway there. Buddhist practice is about deepening the samadhi that rests in one’s empty core, while we also keep working to reconstruct ourselves into self-less compassionate beings devoted to the welfare and awakening of everyone.

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