

Buddhism, the Self, and Nirvana

I. Three Marks of Existence

- A. Impermanence (Anicca): Nothing in our experience is enduring.
- B. No Self (Anatta): There is no enduring self.
- C. Suffering (Dukkha): Lack of satisfaction in life is an essential feature of the human experience.

II. The Four Noble Truths

- A. Life is suffering (Dukkha).
- B. The craving (tanha) for identity and permanence is the source of dukkha.
- C. The cessation of craving dissolves dukkha.
- D. The cessation of craving is associated with the practice(s) contained within the eightfold path: right view, right purpose, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.
- E. The connection between the eightfold path and cessation of craving may be understood in at least one of two ways. (1) Engaging in the practices brings about cessation of craving. (2) The practices are an expression and sustaining of the cessation of craving.
- F. It would appear that non-attachment *as such* is the source cessation of craving. To the extent that the practices embody this attitude, we may say either that the practices produce cessation of craving or that the attitude of non-attachment, at the heart of each practice, produces cessation of craving.
- G. Many Buddhists would emphasize that craving is not dissolved by any kind of direct effort to eliminate it. Hence, we should not aim at eliminating suffering as some kind of goal. In this way, the eightfold path can be seen as a set of practices that shift the focus away from ending suffering to that which contains the power to end. The cessation of suffering can be seen as the by-product of action, rather than as its goal.

III. Self and No Self

- A. Buddhism teaches anatta (no self).
- B. When we explore what the self might be, we will posit either the body (rupa) or the mind (nama) – (feelings/sensations, perceptions, dispositions, or I-ness consciousness). None of these is permanent. Therefore, there is no permanent self.

- C. The Buddha's reasoning is based on his empirical theory of knowledge, that is, the view that we can only know what we experience. We only experience nama-rupa. But nama-rupa is changing. So we cannot know any permanent self.
- D. The No-Self teaching is subject to two variations. First, technically speaking, the Buddhas' empiricism would only justify the claim that we cannot affirm an enduring self, not that we are justified in denying its existence. Second, even the denial of an enduring self may be compatible with the affirmation of a true self. Many Buddhists insist on interpreting "no self" as no *individual* self, no enduring subject-object duality. This is compatible with the pure, content-less awareness itself as enduring. This view, often found in Mahayana Buddhism, is compatible with (indeed seems to be very similar to) the Advaita Vedantin interpretation of Atman.

IV. Nirvana and Sunyata

- A. Nirvana (lit. "to be blown out") is the cessation of suffering (lack of satisfaction) and therefore the cessation of the attachments that give rise to suffering.
- B. Nirvana is not a heavenly individual existence after death.
- C. It is realizable here while alive on earth through living without the craving for identity and permanence. The Buddha spoke of Nirvana in this sense as nirvana "with remainder," for as karma remains one continues living in the body as residual karma burns out. Nirvana after death is called nirvana "without remainder," for there is no more remaining karma and thus no fuel for samsara.
- D. Sunyata (emptiness) refers to the no-thingness of existence. Reality does not consist of objects or things. "Things" are based on concepts and categories of the human mind. They are mental constructs, not actually existing, independent realities "out there" in the world. This emptiness is compatible with consciousness or awareness, for according to Advaita Vedanta, pure consciousness is awareness, which is the potentiality for name and form.
- E. Nirvanic and Sunyatic experiences are similar to, if not a species of, monistic experience. They involve the dissolution of a false ego, which perceives itself as a limited, separate self. These are states of consciousness that involve a dissociation from the five aggregates (body, senses, perception, dispositions, and individual ego). Unlike advaita, many Buddhists refuse to give this state any positive description, though the Buddha did on occasion speak of Nirvana as blissful (ananda), presumably because the emptiness is paradoxically satisfying or filling once the belief in enduring, independently existing thing is dissolved.