

The Buddhist Ethos

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What Buddhists believe

Gautama Śākyamuni, who would become known as the Buddha or ‘the Enlightened One’, probably lived in the fifth century B.C. Early Buddhism set its face against the notions of the *brahman* and *ātman* that we saw in the previous chapter. Buddhists think that there are no enduring, substantial realities (*anātman/anattā*), no essences and no fundamental principle. Buddhism teaches the essential temporality of beings (*kṣaṇika-vāda*). Things as well as times are always changing. Nothing really lasts. But there is no deeper, or higher, level of reality that is the background to or substrate of change. Everything is impersonal. There are no immutable natures and no universal properties running through reality as a whole.

The Buddha thought that the Brahminical ritual religion was pointless and rejected the authority of the Vedic scriptures on which it was founded.¹ He said that the belief that advantages are to be acquired by ritual practices is an expression of the unhealthy way of being, one that is aflame with greed, hatred and delusion. Brahmins, from their pedestal at the summit of the

social hierarchy, maintain that the system of castes is a natural fact. From this point of view, one's social and one's biological identity are the same. One's caste status dictates one's morality (*sva-dharma*). The Buddha held that the caste system is nothing other than a set of social arrangements.² The Buddhist outlook is atheistic in that it denies that the cosmos has a single source, sustaining cause or goal.³ If it has a reason for being and an explanation for its dispositions, it is just so that sentient beings may experience the fruits of their karmas.

Buddhists and Brahmins recognize that we are people who remain similar over time and whose futures are conditioned by our deliberate and intentional decisions and actions. They differ about whether a basic principle of identity (*ātman*) is required to explain the coherence and continuity of such persons. We might depict the Buddhist as arguing that psychological continuity is enough for personal identity. The Brahmin position is that psychological continuity presupposes personal identity and therefore cannot constitute it.⁴ On several grounds, the Brahmins assert and the Buddhists reject the need for a permanent and stable inner principle in human beings:

It unifies the manifold of experiences both through time and in the present.

It explains and justifies egocentric concerns.

It explains the phenomena of memory and recognition.

It is the bearer of our determinate identity.

It underwrites the possibility of one's post-mortem survival.

It serves as the bearer of individual *karma* across lives.

But the disagreement between the Buddhists and Brahmins goes deeper than questions about personal identity. That dispute occurs in the context of much broader opposition that may be described in terms of two contrasting philosophical outlooks: on the one hand, a substance ontology according to which enduring entities are the basic constituents of the worlds, and on the other, an ontology that accords primacy to ephemeral and insubstantial processes and events (*nairātmya* – non-substantiality). If the meaning of substance encompasses both independence of everything else and enduring identity, the *anattā* doctrine is the view that there are no substances. We ordinarily suppose that there are substances because our world view is infected by ignorance (*avidyā/avijjā*). This is ignorance about the world's ontological structure. We interpret what is impermanent (*anitya/anicca*) as if it were permanent and substantial. We think in terms

of change in terms of the loss or gain of properties by persisting entities defined by a core essence that remains unchanged. Buddhists deny that there is anything that basically remains the same, that there are any permanent stable identities at any level (*nairātmya-vāda*). There are no real universals or kinds, no essences constituting enduring objects, no eternal sounds or meanings. There are only sequences and clusters of momentary events (*kṣaṇika-vāda*). Whereas the Brahminical metaphysic posits Being or substance as prior to and underlying the sphere of beings and becoming, Buddhists say that there are just ephemeral beings in a flux that is really impersonal.

The Buddhist outlook is often summarized in the ‘Three Jewels’:

Everything is Unsatisfactory (*duḥkha/dukkha*).

Everything is Impermanent (*anitya/anicca*).

Everything is Insubstantial (*anātman/anattā*).

Buddhist philosophers typically reduce anything that is conventionally considered as a stable substance to a stream or sequence of occurrences. The Buddhist claims that thoughts purporting to be about persisting entities that may undergo qualitative changes without loss of identity can be reductively analysed into descriptions couched in terms of sequences of instantaneous or momentary events. They reject any categorical distinction between enduring substrates and properties of which they are the bearers. Rather, they understand the world to consist of temporary collocations of basic factors (*dharma*), which may be material, kinetic or mental. What is experienced as individual personality is understood as a causally explicable flux of mental and physical occurrences. What makes for the continuity of a person’s life is just the occurrence of a series of suitably interconnected physical and mental events. What is called ‘self’ or ‘soul’ is not a substantial enduring entity distinct from the contents of experiences, but a construction, convenient but mistaken, out of those momentary events. The Buddhist maintains that the human subject is an essentially temporal (*kṣaṇika*) succession of phases that has somehow imputed an enduring nature to itself.

The denial that we are permanent selves or souls, selfish concern with which is the source of all our woe, follows from the global rejection of substance, from the denial that there are any enduring realities. The anti-substance view denies that reality is constituted by stable and reliable structures grounded in a single source. It denies that either the totality or individual human lives have any intelligible purpose or meaning outside

themselves. There is no God who has a purpose for the world and for human lives. This may sound negative, but that was not the intention. Rather, understanding life in these terms is held to be liberating. Much that one had worried about does not really matter. One will not live forever. We do not matter nearly as much as we think we do. In fact, in the long run we do not matter at all. Perhaps it enables people to 'let go', escape from the burdens of self-concern and enjoy life while they can. Above all, it is meant to empty our heart of hatred, greed and bitterness and to engender a spirit of compassion, friendliness and generosity.

Gautama Śākyamuni, who became known as the Buddha or Enlightened One, was born into a royal family in the far north-east of the Indian sub-continent. Like many others at the time, he became disillusioned with the frustrations, superficialities and conventional expectations of normal social life. Renouncing society and the ritual religion with its eye on future benefits, he 'went from home to homelessness'.⁵ He tried to live as an ascetic, practising severe austerities, in the manner of contemporaneous Jaina renouncers, with a view to acquiring spiritual insight. Finding that this did not work but only made him ill, he espoused the 'middle way' – a path of morality and meditation, between comfort and asceticism. The doctrine is also understood as the middle way between eternalism and nihilism. The former says that identity is permanent. The latter holds that universal impermanence and non-substantiality entail chaos and thus preclude ethical consequentiality. The Buddhists thought that eternalism was amoral in that the soul that it wrongly posits would in any case be independent of our moral agency. Nihilism just denies that there are bearers of moral responsibility and recipients of consequences. Avoiding all these extremes, Buddhists think that a morally significant stream of information and dispositions (*saṃskāras*) continues after the death of what has been considered as a person. To the question of whether the one who is born is the same as the one who dies, the tradition replies that it is neither the same nor different. The stream's future is not the future of that very person. Still, we should care about the stream's future and strive for its amelioration in the interests of general well-being. In short, it is better that there be more happiness than suffering, and we should all aim for that overall state of affairs regardless of the fact that we individual centres of agency and experience will not survive death.

Gautama was called 'the Buddha', meaning 'the Enlightened One' because he discovered the truths (called '*dhamma*' in the Pāli language) about the cosmos. The Buddha's teachings and spiritual journey are reported in the

collections of discourses found in the Sutta-piṭaka of the Pāli Canon of scriptures. After centuries of development by oral transmission, the Pāli Canon was committed to writing in Sri Lanka during the reign of King Vaṭṭagāmaṇi (97–77 B.C.) at the Council of Ālokavihāra. These are the scriptures recognized as authoritative by all Buddhists, whether belonging to the Theravāda traditions found in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand and Cambodia, or to the Mahāyāna ones belonging to parts of India (until the twelfth century A.D.), Tibet, China and Japan. Of the differences between the two families (many of which are cultural), one might mention that the Mahāyānists ascribe quasi-divine status to the many Buddhas and accept texts additional to the Pāli Canon as authorities. It is sometimes argued that some of the alleged doctrinal differences – for example, the Mahāyānists emphasize compassion and insight, worship the Buddhas, and hold that the path to enlightenment is long and difficult – are not really differences at all but belong to the shared heritage.

The Four Noble Truths

The basic principles of the Buddha's teachings are expressed in the 'Four Noble Truths':

- 1 All mental and physical phenomena are unsatisfactory (*duḥkha/dukkha*).
- 2 Unsatisfactoriness has a cause.
- 3 There is an end to suffering, called *nirvāṇa* (*nibbāna*).
- 4 There is a path leading to *nirvāṇa*.

In more detail:

1 All mental and physical phenomena are unsatisfactory (*duḥkha/dukkha*)

Pain and suffering, frustration and disappointment characterize the eternal round of existences, the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*).

Everything is unsatisfactory because all conditioned phenomena, including human lives, are impermanent (*anicca*) and insubstantial (*anattā*). In truth, there are no enduring essences or identities. The world

is an impersonal process of events, in which everything is changing all the time.

Selfhood is a fiction that the fluxes of thoughts and desires conventionally called persons superimpose upon themselves. We are just as conditioned, that is to say – variable products of an interplay of forces – as the objects in the world about us.

Attempts to cling to what are in reality impermanent objects, states of affairs and relationships are bound to end in suffering.

The renouncers (*samnyāsins*) who composed the Upaniṣads thought that the key to release from rebirth (deathlessness) is the realization or recognition that there is a stable principle within oneself that is nothing other than the first principle (the *brahman*) ‘behind’ the cosmos. The Buddha taught that enlightenment and freedom arose from the realization that there is no such stable inner reality either at the heart of the cosmos or of the individual. There is neither a centre nor a basis. The ephemeral and insubstantial realities in which we participate are all that there is. And we too are ephemeral and insubstantial beings. The beliefs that we are substantial entities and that we really matter are mistaken.

2 Unsatisfactoriness has a cause

In fact, there are two root causes: ‘thirst’, a metaphor for desire and attachment, and ignorance of the way things really are.

Unenlightened actions are motivated by the fires of greed, hatred and delusion. We are burning with egocentric desires and ambitions for the future. Bundles of selfish energies, we are acquisitive, intent on possession. We seek to extend our sphere of influence, to dominate and control people and events. We are averse to anything that gets in our way. We are deluded in our beliefs that there are substantial beings that really persist.

What is sometimes called ‘The doctrine of interdependent origination’ (*pratītya-samutpāda*) is first and foremost presented as an account of how the whole mass of suffering comes about. The doctrine is expressed as a cycle of twelve factors, without beginning or end, because there is no first cause – the world is brute fact.

The theory is a purely naturalistic explanation: there is no reference to supernatural or other-worldly factors.

There is neither a designer nor design; there is no *telos*, final cause or purpose.

The process is impersonal: there are no references to selves or persons. The theory is intended to show that the experience of continuity within subjectless streams of experiences, bundles of selfish energies cohering as fields of forces, does not require an internal principle or soul but results from the co-operation of twelve factors.

It is a natural fact that actions and experiences occur in streams.⁶

The twelve spokes in the wheel

- 1 Ignorance (*avidyā/avijjā*) [the selfish, unenlightened way of living – the failure to realize that we are just aspects of a process that will inevitably be experienced as unsatisfactory]
conditioning/leading to
- 2 Inherited dispositions, characteristics, the self-centred ‘mindset’ (*saṃskāra/saṅkhāra*)
conditioning/leading to
- 3 Cognitions or sensory perceptions (*viññāna*) [i.e. one’s character {2} conditions how one perceives]
conditioning/leading to
- 4 Name and form (*nāma-rūpa*) [‘name’ covers sensation, thoughts, volition, perceptions; ‘form’ means body]
conditioning/leading to
- 5 Six kinds of sense-based experiences (*ṣaḍ-āyatana*)
conditioning/leading to
- 6 Sensory contacts with the external environment (*sparsa/phassa*)
conditioning/leading to
- 7 Feelings of pleasure and pain (*vedanā*)
conditioning/leading to
- 8 Thirst/desires (*tṛṣṇa/tanhā*) for more experiences
conditioning/leading to
- 9 Appropriation or grasping (*upādāna*): [clinging to sense-based pleasures; clinging to dogmas and views; clinging to religious rituals and vows; clinging to the belief that one is an enduring soul]
conditioning/leading to
- 10 The process of becoming (*bhāva*): [the momentum within a stream]
conditioning/leading to
- 11 Rebirth
conditioning/leading to
- 12 Aging, death and sorrow ... leading to unenlightenment (1)

3 There is an end to suffering, called *nirvāṇa* (*nibbāna*)

‘Nirvāṇa’ means ‘blowing out’. Specifically, it is the end of unsatisfactory existence through the extinction of the fires of greed, hatred and delusion that generate rebirth-causing actions.... It means a tranquil and detached way of being in the world, untroubled by selfish concerns and acquisitiveness. Nirvana is the pacification of the greedy and aggressive self-perpetuating stream of experiences that has mistakenly superimposed a persisting identity on itself.

This is what early Buddhism meant by ‘enlightenment’. It is nothing other than comprehension of the Four Noble Truths and their enactment in one’s life. *Nirvāṇa* is a way of being in this world, rather than a supernatural realm of heaven.

As Richard Gombrich has pointed out, the use of the metaphor of fire in respect of greed, hatred and delusion is no accident. Indeed, it is more specific than the idea that everyone is burning with desires that only generate more experiences and more desires. It alludes to the three fires which the Brahminical householder was obliged to keep burning and which symbolized his life, responsibilities and attachments as a social being.⁷ It represents the endless repetitions that characterize the life of the householder. The tradition is reluctant to say anything positive about *nirvāṇa* as a post-mortem state. Whatever it involves, there are no persons to experience it. The earlier tradition sees it as the extinction of greed, hatred and delusion and the end of the afflictions (ignorance, selfishness, desire for sensory gratifications, obsessive attachments and an exalted opinion of oneself).

4 There is a path to the cessation of suffering: The eightfold path of morality and meditation

The Four Noble Truths are the key to enlightenment, the eradication of self-interested motivations and oppressive emotions. But hearing the truth is not enough. It has to be acted upon, and this is where the path of morality and meditation comes in. The emphasis is on self-control, kindness and tranquillity. The goal is a ‘decentring’, a reversal of the predicament of *homo incurvatus in se*, via the cultivation of virtues or worthwhile dispositions of

character and motivation. Fundamentally, I do not exist in any sense that matters, but it is still possible to improve this present stream by replacing anger, jealousy, greed, carelessness and sloth with equanimity, compassion, friendliness and generosity. The eightfold path is said to consist in right views, right thoughts, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Right views and thoughts are mind-purifying wisdom or insight into the fleeting and unsatisfactory nature of existence; right speech, action and livelihood are moral conduct; and right effort, mindfulness and concentration are understood as meditation.

Buddhists insist that virtue is necessary for the cultivation of meditation and insight. It is the intention (*cetanā*), more generally the attitude, with which an action is performed that is held to determine its moral quality. Moral conduct involves deliberate abstention from murder, theft, sexual promiscuity, alcohol and drugs, false and malicious speech, slander, harsh words, frivolous talk, covetousness, malice and false views. Right livelihood would preclude such occupations as arms-trading, dealing in drugs and alcohol, and butchering animals. Meditative concentration (*samādhi*) is the achievement of tranquillity through avoidance of distractions and by controlling the senses. Emphasis is placed upon mindfulness or exercising control through constant self-awareness of one's physical, mental and emotional states.

The path is the 'middle way' between the self-indulgent and ascetic lives, neither of which lead to release from the desire-fuelled series of existences. What is needed is the elimination of the basic defects of greed, hatred and delusion.

We saw that the Buddha insisted that it is the intention (*cetanā*) with which an action is performed that determines its moral quality and thus its consequences in the stream to which it belongs. He tells his followers to cultivate attitudes of non-violence, honesty, friendliness, gentleness, compassion and generosity. The right sorts of actions will follow. He did not provide a rulebook stipulating particular types of ethical actions (although his followers did for the monks) or an ethical theory. There are some basic principles: do not kill, do not steal, do not tell lies or indulge in malicious gossip, avoid sexual misdemeanours and intoxicating substances. These are universal – not caste-specific – in that they have moral application to everyone: I do not want to be assaulted and can reasonably conclude that no other sane person wants to be. There is a trend of thought running through Hinduism that there may be ways of acting that do not generate *karma*. Representative here is the idea, promoted in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, that since it

is deliberately purposive actions that generate *karma*, actions done for their own or duty's sake without a view to the advantage of the agent will not generate *karma*. The Buddha thought that sentient beings could not escape from *karma*. The eightfold path recognizes this. It is sometimes argued that the outlook is consequentialist, holding that it is overall states of affairs that have moral value. Indeed, the Buddhist path aims to promote general happiness. Everyone accepts that some patterns of behaviour have better overall consequences than others. The view is that although the future of the stream that is your life is not your future, you still have reason to care about its future, as well as that of all other streams.

Moral conduct attenuates afflictions (*kleśa*) that prey upon the mind. These weaknesses are familiar ones: ignorance in the sense of indulging oneself in self-serving fantasies and believing whatever it suits one to believe; the sheer selfishness that sees itself as the centre of the world; desire for sensory gratifications; neurotic obsessions that divert attention from what matters; and an exalted opinion of one's significance in the scheme of things. The texts catalogue other impediments to spiritual progress, two of which we shall mention briefly. There is attachment to rituals, central to the Brahminical way of life, and vows, the latter being personal undertakings and commitments such as the harsh austerities that Gautama had found useless. I think that the word '*kāma*' often moralistically translated as 'lust' or 'sensual desires' was probably more specific and refers to those rituals performed by Brahmins that will yield benefits in this world for those patronizing them. The Buddha thought that all ritual performances were at heart self-interested, not to say a waste of time and effort.

The texts are rich in descriptions of and prescriptions for meditational practices, aiming at the control and finally the cessation of discursive mental activities. The Buddha described his path to enlightenment as an ascent through a hierarchy of four stages of meditations (*dhyāna*) which, far from involving ascetic rigours, are pleasant experiences:

Then indeed, having eaten enough, having got my strength back, free from desires, free from unhelpful matters, I reached the first stage that is accompanied by thought and reflection, which is produced by discrimination and consists of joyful happiness, and remained there. But this pleasant state did not put my mind at rest.

Stilling thought and reflection, I reached the second stage that is inner tranquillity, a focusing of the mind on one point, free from thought and reflection, consisting of joyful happiness that is born of concentration, and remained there. But this pleasant state ...

I reached the third stage when I became detached from joy, indifferent to pleasures and pains, attentively mindful and knew no physical pleasures. But this ...

From abandoning bliss and abandoning pain and thanks to the disappearance of cheerfulness and depression, I reached the fourth stage that is beyond pleasures and pains, the quintessence of equanimity and attentiveness. But this ... [Majjhima Nikāya 1.247].

This is a typical account of meditation involving successive stages. It did not put his mind at rest because it stopped short of revealing the fundamental truth that our experiences are unsatisfactory because we fail to realize that there are really no individual identities and that everything is impermanent.

Meditation also has a positive goal, that is to say, the cultivation of the helpful (*kuśala*) states called the *Brahma-Vihāras*: friendliness, compassion, joy and equanimity. There is also what is called ‘meditation on the four infinities’ that aims at the suppression of imagination and conceptual thinking. There is a fourfold hierarchy of stages: the stage of the infinity of space, the stage of the infinity of perception, the stage of nothingness and the stage beyond conceptualization and non-conceptualization. Dwelling on notions of the infinite emphasizes the limits of conceptual thought and undermines confidence in the capacity of our minds to grasp the nature of reality. I take what is called meditation on no-thingness to refer to a state in which one is not focused on anything in particular: a reflex of the realization that there are no individual identities.⁸

Finally, morality and meditation are not understood instrumentally, as means to something different. Their complete realization is what enlightenment means. That is the *nirvāṇa* accomplished by the Buddhas. The person who successfully follows the Buddhist path is liberated while still alive.

Anattā: No substance; no soul; no self that really matters

The early Buddhists denied that there is anything *essential* to one's life. If everything is always changing, there are no fixed identities or natures. It is natural fact that a life is a series of phases of mental and physical events. A phase is a period of psychological continuity. We are just successive phases upon which a specious enduring identity is somehow superimposed. Thence arises the illusion of personal endurance.

There are, however, no personal substances. There is nothing that owns its experiences. Rather, each discrete and momentary perception is the perceiver; each discrete and momentary thought is the thinker; a feeling is what feels pleasure and pain; a memory is the rememberer. There is a life history, but no subject of that history. Put another way: there is no difference between you and your life. The Buddha and his followers denied the need for the postulation of an unchanging transcendental factor that unifies one's experiences. There is no reason to posit something that serves as a vehicle of *karma* through lives since the continuity of action and consequence is a purely natural occurrence. As Alex Watson has put it, 'Thus the Self disappears by being deconstructed both diachronically and synchronically. It is deconstructed diachronically into a plurality of distinct momentary phases; and synchronically in that even the momentary phases are not unitary because they consist of five separate constituents. *This model stresses not only the transitory and insubstantial, but also the impersonal nature of our existence. The idea of a person acting and experiencing is replaced with that of an impersonal stream of transitory mental and physical events.*'⁹ [my emphasis]

The occasionally canvassed suggestion that the Buddha accepted that there is a substantial soul as a further fact separate from the interactions of the five *skandhas* may safely be dismissed. In the first place, there is no textual support. Secondly, Buddhism would not have been constituted as a distinct religious movement had its originators propounded a substance ontology. The rejection of essentialism and adoption of process ontology precludes the belief that we are souls.¹⁰

One view found in the Upaniṣads is that the key to the meaning of life and ultimate well-being is the realization that what one is essentially is the same as the innermost principle of the cosmos.

The nature (*ātman*) that is free from evils, free from old age and death, from sorrow, from hunger and thirst, whose desires and intentions are ever realised, that is what is to be discovered, that is what is to be understood. When someone discovers that nature and understands it, he obtains all worlds and all his desires are fulfilled.

The text continues to say that this nature, discovery of which delivers all worlds and the satisfaction of every desire, is to be found within: it is 'this person that appears in the eye ... that is immortal, that is free from fear, that is the *brahman*.'¹¹

The Buddha thought that the mentality to which such thinking belongs is basically self-interested. The belief that one is a persisting entity with a specific set of interests generates anxiety, narrow-mindedness, acquisitiveness and antagonism – in other words, everything that is meant by the familiar formula ‘greed, hatred and delusion.’ He resists views like this by denying that there is such a thing as the soul: all we can say is that there are temporal streams of experiences and ethical consequentiality.

If what we call the person is the stream of thoughts, who is thinking them? The Buddhist view is that intrinsically self-aware subjectless thoughts are thinking themselves, as well as each other. They do not need illumination by consciousness belonging to a persisting subject. They form a continuous entity by knowing their immediate predecessors and successors. William James illuminatingly characterized an atomistic ‘no-self theory’ as follows: ‘Each pulse of cognitive consciousness, each thought, dies away and is replaced by another. The other, among the things it knows, knows its own predecessor ... saying: “Thou art mine, and part of the same self with me.” Each later thought, knowing and including thus the thoughts which went before, is the final receptacle of all that they contain and own. Each Thought is thus born an owner, and dies unowned, transmitting whatever it realized as its Self to its own later proprietor.’¹²

The early Buddhist tradition reductively analysed what we understand as persons into processes consisting of five components (*skandhas*):

- 1 Body (*rūpa*).
- 2 Sensation, and feelings of pleasure and pain (*vedanā*).
- 3 Sense-based perceptions of objects (*viññāna*). This is apprehension of particulars.¹³
- 4 Conceptual thoughts (*saṃjñā*) [thinking *that* a given object is blue or that blue is a colour]. This is apprehension of generalities.
- 5 Inherited dispositions of character, acts of will, mindset and habits (*saṃskāra*).

Feelings, perceptions, thoughts and volitions are all momentary events. It is noteworthy that there is no mention of consciousness purely as such. Indeed, they do not recognize what is sometimes called ‘the unity of consciousness’ since the notion that there is a singularity called consciousness is at home in a soul theory.

Neither singly nor collectively do these transitory factors constitute an enduring identity. There is no permanent self or person over and above

the components. There is nothing that 'owns' successively occurring experiences.

The interactions of the *skandhas* produce the illusion that one is a subject looking out on the world from a privileged point of view. They generate an epiphenomenal sense of continuing selfhood, but that sense is ephemeral and insubstantial. Although it occurs, it is not really significant. But some things matter: virtues like honesty, kindness, self-control, generosity and compassion.

It is held that there is continuity of events within a stream because one event causes the origination of its successor. A taste sensation may engender a feeling of pleasure, and each may be registered by distinct thoughts. This complex may engender in the future a memory that causes a desire for the repetition of the initial pleasurable experience.

The genesis of the illusion of enduring selfhood, the appearance of unity among rapidly successive inner events, is also explained by reference to the self-revealing nature of individual perceptions, feeling, thoughts and volitions comprising a mental field. At any given moment, one's mental state is self-aware. This self-awareness of each is readily confused with that of the subsequent event. In short, they blend together and the amalgam experiences itself as a continuing reality.

It is apparent from the Pāli Canon that views about what humans really are were as multifarious during the Buddha's time as they are today. When fear of death perturbs the human spirit, we look for something to hold on to that will exist in the future. Some may think of 'a self' in personal terms as a complex of experiences that just lasts for a while. Others may believe that there is as a transcendental subject that is untouched by worldly life and destined to exist for ever. The mainstream Buddhist view is that the belief that there is some sort of lasting self is one of the varieties of grasping that only lead to distress.

The term 'person' is seen as a convenient shorthand expression for talking about a causally connected sequence of events. We unenlightened beings may make the mistake of supposing that what is merely a manner of speaking designates an enduring substance, an inner controller, an irreducible subject of experiences looking out on the world from a privileged perspective. For the Buddha, attachment to this misconception only leads to unhappiness. Buddhist praxis aims to eliminate the mistake. Belief that one is really 'a soul' leads to anxious self-concern, narrowness of vision, defensiveness and antagonism to others who are seen as barriers to the expansion of the ego. Such is the fuel of the perpetuation of the process of rebirth. If the Upaniṣadic

thinkers thought that the soul was ungraspable, beyond language, so subtle as to be undetectable, the Buddha went further. There isn't anything there. We have here a radical solution to the problem of human selfishness: there is no 'self' to worry about. This goes beyond the rejection of Brahminical notions of transcendental soul. It extends to the everyday assumption that there is a unique personal essence or ego at the centre of an arena of action and concern. And take the more modest view that although the centre is nothing more than an ephemeral epiphenomenon of the experiential flux, it still matters and is worth protecting and promoting. All these beliefs, say the Buddhists, are forms of selfishness, and they too are fatal to our chances of happiness.

An early and popular scripture, the Snake Sutta in the Majjhima Nikāya, describes the familiar pathology in terms of a series of identifications that are instances of grasping or appropriation (*upādāna*):

The unenlightened person regards the body as his, as what he is, as his nature. He regards feelings as his, as what he is, as his nature. He regards perceptions as his, as what he is, as his nature. He regards thoughts as his, as what he is, as his nature. He regards volitions and habits as his, as what he is, as his nature. He regards what he has seen, heard, known, experienced, pursued and considered as his, as what he is, as his nature.

And there is the attitude, 'The world and the soul are the same, and after death this is what I shall be – permanent, enduring, eternal, immutable and I shall exist like that forever.' This view he regards as his, as what he is, as his nature.... But the enlightened person does not think in these terms and so is not anxious about something that does not exist.¹⁴

The point seems to be that identifying anything finite and transient, such as a stream of embodied experiences, as a persisting personal identity (an obstacle to enlightenment called '*sat-kāya-dṛṣṭi*') is bound to lead to unhappiness and anxiety. Thoughts and feelings just happen. In reality there is no one to whom they happen. There is just a 'bundle of perceptions'. The more sophisticated understanding of oneself as a transcendental subject, really exempt from worldly life and destined to exist forever, only leads to worry too. Will it really continue? The enlightened person does not think in terms of either of these egocentric frameworks, and that is the key to living without anxiety, without obsessive self-concern. The key to enlightenment and happiness is not just altruism, but the realization that there is neither soul nor a substantial ego that might justify one's selfish concerns.

The radical nature of the vision should not be underestimated. Returning to the Snake Sutta:

When someone who does not have the view that the world and the soul are the same, and that after death he will be permanent, enduring, eternal, immutable and that he will exist like that for ever hears the Buddha's teaching about the abandonment of theories, opinions and attachment to them, the teaching that aims at the suppression of clinging obsessive attachments, the relinquishing of possessions, the end of craving, the cultivation of dispassion and the extinction of greed, hatred and delusion – he does not fear, 'I shall be annihilated. I shall be destroyed. I shall no longer exist.' He is not distressed and confused. He is not anxious about something that does not exist.¹⁵

A work called the Questions of King Milinda relates a dialogue about the no-self doctrine between Menander, the Greek king of Bactria (c.165–130 B.C.) in what is now Afghanistan, and a Buddhist monk called Nāgasena.¹⁶ The text appears to be directed against a 'personalist' trend in early Buddhism according to which there emerges from the interactions of the five constituents of personality (*skandhas*) a persisting individual who is reborn.

The monk says that he is called 'Nāgasena' but that is only a name, a label, a conventional usage. It does not follow that there is a personal entity. The King replies that in that case Nāgasena lacks parents, teachers and superiors in the monastic order. It also rules out agency and moral responsibility. At this point, Nāgasena introduces the simile of the chariot. The chariot looks like a unitary whole entity, but on reflection we see that it is a mere assemblage of parts – wheels, axle and chassis. The word 'chariot' is a label, a conventional designation for what is in fact a collection. If the chariot is dismantled, we have collection of parts but no one thing that we could call the chariot. Still, it conveys us from A to B.

Analogously the name 'Nāgasena' is a conventional designation for a construct out of the five constituents of personality. No person is found, as opposed to being constructed. But the series of interactive components suffices as a vehicle of *karma* across lives.

There is no further fact over and above the fleeting components of the stream of experiences. Nevertheless, there is sufficient continuity within the stream for us to make sense of agency and moral responsibility. The Buddhist position is that moral responsibility does not depend on a permanent self that is the subject of experiences and who will enjoy future consequences.

If we are to be happy, we should be concerned about the future, even though it is not the future of my self.

The tradition has it that the Buddha deliberately left a number of questions unanswered.¹⁷ They include whether or not the world is eternal, whether or not the world is infinite, whether self and body are the same and whether or not enlightened beings (Buddhas) exist after death (a question that can be seen as making the mistaken assumption that there are entities with determinate identities).

In refusing to answer such questions, the Buddha cannot be saying that he does not know, for the Buddhas are omniscient. Rather, he is saying that there is nothing to know. From the Buddhist point of view, such questions reflect a resistance to the disturbing teachings of momentariness and the non-substantiality of beings.

One Buddhist tradition says that thinking about such matters is not conducive to the ending of suffering and enlightenment. One cannot lead a spiritual life by virtue of believing that the world is eternal or infinite in space and time! Another view is that the questions are themselves unanswerable because they are posed in categories that are themselves distorting. The questions about the cosmos presuppose that it is such that we are in a position to view it as a single whole and that past, present and future are divisions within a single temporal framework. It is difficult to formulate the question about whether the cosmos has a finite age.

Above all, the problem is that the questions reflect a search for intellectual certainty and conviction, an attempt to comprehend and perhaps control. They imply that an absolute conception of reality, an Olympian perspective or a totally objective grasp of truth, is accessible to us. The Buddha's position seems to be that it is not the case that such a perspective is available, but even if it were, it would not help us along the path to enlightenment.

A much-quoted traditional formulation distinguishes broadly between four Buddhist philosophical positions:

The Vaibhāṣikas say that there are realities external to minds and that they are directly perceptible.

The Sautrāntikas say that there are realities external to minds and that they are inferable from the occurrence of mental representations.

The Yogācāras deny that there are any realities external to minds.

The Mādhyamikas deny that there are any intrinsic natures.

The next chapters will consider each of these four schools of thought.

Further reading

Bechert and Gombrich (1984) is a collection of essays covering all forms of Buddhism and is beautifully illustrated.

Rupert Gethin's *Foundations of Buddhism* is comprehensive. It is now supplementary to his invaluable *Sayings of the Buddha*. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, is a classic, written from a Theravādin point of view. Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons*, is indispensable for early Buddhist (Theravādin) representations of persons. Richard Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began*, puts many things in context. Edward Conze's *Buddhist Scriptures* is a useful collection that contains the Questions of King Milinda.

Bronkhorst (2000) contains translations of much original material and connects early Buddhism with the Jaina renunciatory tradition. For the latter, Jaini (1979) and Dundas (1992) are fundamental contributions.

Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, provides plenty of food for thought. The same author's *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy* is an exhaustive discussion of Eastern and Western reductionist accounts of selves. Chapter 5 of Paul Williams, *Altruism and Reality*, is, to say the least, stimulating.

Questions for discussion and investigation

1. Can reductionism about persons make sense of human life?
2. If personal identity is an illusion, what is making the mistake in the first place?

Notes

1. Gombrich (1992) and (1996). See also Norman (1991).
2. v. Eltschinger (2012).
3. It is also atheistic in the sense that Buddhists do not think that the absence of God is grounds for regret.

4. Neither seriously entertains a physicalist account. The facts that the body dies and is burned rule out continuity across different lives and thereby undermine belief in *karma*.
5. The phrase is from the Pāli Canon.
6. DN II 56-64: SN II 2-4.
7. v. Gombrich (1996), pp. 65–72.
8. Bronkhorst (2000), pp. 78–95.
9. Watson (2006), pp. 56–7.
10. 'He rejected entirely the use of the word in the old animistic sense. He retained it in a personal sense, in the meaning of "oneself, himself" &c. And though, of course he acknowledged the reality of the emotional and intellectual dispositions, he refused absolutely to look upon them as a unity.' See T. W. Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha Pt I*, p. 189. The translated literature is replete with formulations to the effect that 'x is/are not the self'. This leads some to suppose that the Buddha believed that there is a Self that we variously misidentify with thoughts, perceptions or the body. The formulations in question usually mean 'thoughts are insubstantial', 'feelings are insubstantial', 'physical states are insubstantial' (*anātmānaḥ*).
11. Chāndogya Upaniṣad 8.7.1ff.
12. *The Principles of Psychology*, Volume I, p. 339.
13. *Viṣayaṃ prati vijñaptir upalabdhim vijñāna skandha iti ucyate* (AKBh 11.6-8). The *vijñāna skandha* is called cognition or awareness of an object.
14. Majjhima Nikāya, I 135. Gethin (2008), p. 161.
15. Majjhima Nikāya, N I 137. Gethin (2008), p. 163.
16. *Milinda's Questions*, trans. I. B. Horner, London PTs (1963–64).
17. Collins (1982), pp. 131–7.