

What is Buddhism? Part 2

The Dharma talk on August 12th was by Robert Cusick, following up on his August 5 discussion on the guide, “*What is Buddhism?*”

(<http://www.abhayagiri.org/index.php/main/book/1437/>)

[All quotes in the annotated notes below, unless otherwise indicated, are from “*What is Buddhism?*”]

The Buddha taught that there is no essential or permanent core to a living being that could be considered one’s true self or soul. What appears to be an individual person is actually a changing process of mental and physical qualities combining temporarily in a particular way. Through possessive attachment, the mind identifies with part or all of this process, and this gives rise to the sense of self, ‘me’ and ‘mine’. In fact, all phenomena, animate or inanimate, are dependently arisen from causes and conditions. In a constant state of flux, all things are empty of independent inherent existence and the entirety of reality is a continuous flow of interconnected, causally conditioned events arising and passing away in the present moment.

One of the things that we discover through deep meditation is that physical phenomena are not as we normally perceive them. If we examine the body under a microscope, it does not appear the same as it does to the unaided eye. Changing our point of view changes our perception, but not the reality. Our perceptions are illusions.

We cling to the idea of a permanent self, or soul. We think because we think we know what we are, that we know who we are. I look at my thumb, and think it’s a part of what makes me be me, but if I lost my thumb, would I no longer be me? Of course not; I am not my thumb. Our bodies are constantly changing-- skin cells flake off and are replaced; hair grows and is cut; a cut heals; I grow old; I get sick. Scientists tell us that every 15 years, every single cell in our body has been replaced with another cell. I am not my thumb; I am not my body.

We grasp what we think we know and claim it as truth. We build an identity that we believe in. This is all illusion. Deep meditation reveals to us that we are changing, we are in transit, that there is no permanent self. The things we think of as self are *anatta* or not-self.

This is not to say that there is no self, rather that the things we normally think of as “self” are not the self. Our “selves” are not our bodies, not our feelings, not our perceptions, not our ideas, and not our consciousness. All of these things are not self.

If a permanent self or a permanent soul is an illusion, how can there be rebirth?

Rebirth however, still occurs without a soul. Consider the simile of a candle burning low and about to go out. A new candle is then lit from the old one.

Though the old candle goes out, the new candle now burns brightly. What went across from the old candle to the new? There was a causal link, but no 'thing' went across. Similarly, there was a causal link between one's past and present life, but no soul went across.

Many people view Buddhism as a dire and depressing religion because it seems obsessed with suffering. There are several misconceptions in this view, one of which is that *dukkha*, the word often translated as "suffering" does not map exactly to the way we English speakers think of "suffering." *Dukkha* includes what we call "suffering", but more generally it means "dissatisfaction".

No single English word adequately captures the full depth, range, and subtlety of the crucial Pali term dukkha. Over the years, many translations of the word have been used ("stress," "unsatisfactoriness," "suffering," etc.). Each has its own merits in a given context. There is value in not letting oneself get too comfortable with any one particular translation of the word, since the entire thrust of Buddhist practice is the broadening and deepening of one's understanding of dukkha until its roots are finally exposed and eradicated once and for all. One helpful rule of thumb: as soon as you think you've found the single best translation for the word, think again: for no matter how you describe dukkha, it's always deeper, subtler, and more unsatisfactory than that.

<http://www.accesstoinight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca1/dukkha.html>

Clinging to the five aggregates (body, feeling, perceptions, opinions, and consciousness) as if they were ourselves, rather than not-self, causes *dukkha*. It means we don't have it right. For example, in the Sallatha Sutta,

"The Blessed One said, "When touched with a feeling of pain, the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person sorrows, grieves, & laments, beats his breast, becomes distraught. So he feels two pains, physical & mental. Just as if they were to shoot a man with an arrow and, right afterward, were to shoot him with another one, so that he would feel the pains of two arrows; in the same way, when touched with a feeling of pain, the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person sorrows, grieves, & laments, beats his breast, becomes distraught. So he feels two pains, physical & mental.

...

"Now, the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones, when touched with a feeling of pain, does not sorrow, grieve, or lament, does not beat his breast or become distraught. So he feels one pain: physical, but not mental. Just as if they were to shoot a man with an arrow and, right afterward, did not shoot him with another one, so that he would feel the pain of only one arrow. In the same way, when touched with a feeling of pain, the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones does not sorrow, grieve, or lament, does not beat his breast or become distraught. He feels one pain: physical, but not mental."

<http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn36/sn36.006.than.html>

The first arrow is “things as they are.” Not accepting the first arrow, becoming angry and distraught, grieving at the injustice, is the second arrow – a self-inflicted wound. Thinking we can control things, and make them be other than what they are, causes dukkha. What I think of as my “self” wants more of what the self likes, and less of what it is averse to.

The Buddha taught that it is precisely this deep misunderstanding, the illusion of a self, that is the root cause of all human suffering. The illusion of self manifests as the ego, and the natural unstoppable function of the ego is to control. Big egos want to control the world, average egos attempt to control their immediate surroundings of home, family and workplace, and all egos strive to control what they assume to be their own bodies and minds. This attempt to control leads to attraction and aversion which consequently proliferates to acquire possessions, manipulate others and exploit the environment.

Although the sense of self seeks its own happiness, its insatiable craving repeatedly produces discontent. As long as one identifies with something as oneself, the inevitable result is a lack of outer harmony or inner fulfillment. Only through sharp insight based on profound meditation can this mirage be clearly seen for what it truly is. Only then can one know perfect happiness.

Buddhism is the path of inquiry. Meditation provides a means of seeing clearly, an investigative tool of great power.

In the Kalama Sutta (see <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html>), the Buddha cautioned his followers not to take things for granted. “What is Buddhism?” explains:

The Buddha warned against blind faith and encouraged wise inquiry and tolerance. In one of his talks he pointed out the danger in basing one’s beliefs merely on the following criteria: hearsay, tradition, because many others say it is so, the authority of ancient scriptures, due to logical deduction, or out of respect for one’s teachers, elders or priests. Instead the traveler on the path of inquiry should maintain an open mind and thoroughly investigate his or her own experience of life. When one sees for oneself that a particular view or belief is both reasonable and in accordance with one’s experience, leading to happiness for both oneself and others, only then should that view be adopted. This standard of course applies to the Buddha’s own teachings. They should be looked into carefully, and examined with the clarity generated by meditation. As meditation deepens, direct insight into the nature of life grows. Only at this point do the teachings offer the bliss of liberation.

What is meditation? What is this tool that allows us to see things as they are?

Meditation refers to the mental activity of sustaining conscious awareness on one thing, perception, concept, process or sensation. This may be for example, the process of breathing, an external object, the concept and emotion of loving-kindness, the mental repetition of a meaningful word, or paying attention to a physical sensation. Meditation can be done in any posture, but the most common ones are sitting cross-legged and walking back and forth. As mindful awareness becomes increasingly continuous, the dispersed and distracted energy of the mind becomes more focused and clear. The act of sustaining awareness calms and soothes both the body and mind, while the focusing of attention energizes and brightens the mind. The deeper the meditation becomes, the more quiet, still and blissful one feels. This cleansed and purified awareness, developed through repeated training, yields extraordinary clarity of mind. One begins to see things as they truly are, beyond the limitations of conditioned perceptions and habitual thought patterns. As one sees clearly, wisdom is born, and thus serenity and insight form an inseparable pair that are gradually cultivated through meditation.

When we walked through the door tonight, our minds were filled with the day. After meditating and listening to the talk, everyone and everything in the room became noticeably quieter.

Our minds are habituated in our own habits of mind. Our illusions and thought patterns are so deep-seated, we may not even be aware of them. Mindfulness shows us what these habits are, and rubs our noses in them. With meditation, we become more aware and see more clearly. Wisdom is born and we gradually awaken.

Robert noted that with every year of practice, he has become more and more content with things being the way they are. When he first started meditating, he brought his own conceptions about meditation to the cushion with him. He felt that the “What is Buddhism?” guide would have helped tremendously in letting go of the preconceptions.

Meditation is about resting in pure awareness. Our job is not to stop thinking, but to become aware and recognize that we **are** thinking. Approach meditation with a sense of curiosity, rather than as a rigid set of instructions.

There are many ways to meditate. Some may work better than others for you – investigate. Maybe you should pay attention to the breath. When the mind leaves the breath, and wanders off, come back to the breath. Try it.

If some particular way doesn't work, don't get all depressed thinking you must be a big failure – “It works for Robert, why can't I do it?” Just be curious...play. When something doesn't work, think “isn't this interesting?” This doesn't work for me... isn't that interesting?

Feel what you are doing in your body. Whatever makes you quiet is your friend – note it and go on. Be present with it. As we sit here by the ocean, feel the release as the waves crash.

Don't fight your meditation – it is not a contest. If you try to win, you will lose. Thinking you are doing something wrong is a second arrow. The meditative mind cannot arise if there are disturbances in the mind. If there is disturbance, don't fight it, just note it. Noticing helps us let go. Use the body to know what's going on – it's a great tool. If you find yourself drifting – just notice that you are drifting – that's just as effective as noticing you are breathing.

Meditation is resting in awareness.