

# Buddhism

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## Four Noble Truths

1. Life is *dukkha* (it is “out of joint” or involves existential suffering). [see Smith, p. 144-8]

What is meant by “suffering”?

[W]e need to understand just what is meant here by ‘suffering’. And here is where the legend of the four sights [an old person, a sick person, a corpse, and a *śramana*] becomes relevant. What it tells us is that by this term Buddhists do not mean ordinary pain, such as what we feel when we are injured or sick. Instead they mean existential suffering – the frustration, alienation and despair that result from the realization of our own mortality. [Siderits 2007, p. 19]

Can belief in reincarnation help alleviate this suffering?

Seems not: “re-birth also entails re-death” (Siderits, p. 21). “What we are now faced with is the requirement that there be an endless succession of future lives in order to sustain the sense that the life I am now living has a point. But if this life gets its point from the next, and that from its successor, and so on, will this really work? [Siderits 2007, p. 21]

Can taking an anti-depressant pill work?

“Taking the pill would simply re-instill the illusion that conventional happiness is attainable in the long run” (Siderits 2007, p. 22).

2. *Dukkha* arises from *tanha* (craving; desire for private fulfillment). [Smith, p. 148-9]
3. The cure for *dukkha* is overcoming *tanha*. [Smith, p. 149]
4. The way to overcome *tanha* is to follow The Eightfold Path. [Smith, p. 149]

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## The Eightfold Path

1. Right Views
2. Right Intent
3. Right Speech
4. Right Conduct
5. Right Livelihood
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness: realize the truth of flux, impermanence, and no-self.

If we maintain a steady attention to our thoughts and feelings, we perceive that they swim in and out of our awareness, and are in no way permanent parts of us. We should witness all things non-reactively, especially our moods and emotions, neither condemning some nor holding on to others. A miscellany of other practices are recommended, some of which are these: The aspirant is to keep the mind in control of the senses and impulses, rather than being driven by them. Fearful and disgusting sights are to be meditated on until one no longer experiences aversion toward them. The entire world should be pervaded with thoughts of loving-kindness. [Smith, p. 157-8]

Every mental and physical state is in flux; none is solid and enduring. Even physical pain is a series of discrete sensations that can suddenly change. (4) The meditator realizes how little control we have over our minds and our physical sensations, and how little awareness we normally have of our reactions. (5) Most important, one begins to realize that there is nobody *behind* the mental/physical events, orchestrating them. [Smith, p. 159]

8. Right Concentration. “abolished the conventional dualistic tendency to think of a natural difference between the observer and the observed, the ‘I’ and the object” (Brannigan, p. 265).

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## No-Self: Empty Persons

Buddhists define “self” as the “essence of person—the one part whose continued existence is required for that person to continue to exist” (Siderits 2007, p. 32). Moreover, by this definition, they argue that there is no such thing as a self. Nobody has a self. We are selfless.

“The ultimate point about what are conventionally called persons is just that there is a causal series of impermanent skandhas” (Siderits 2007, p. 60).

The doctrine of no-self “represents the full and final truth,” whereas the doctrine of karma and rebirth “represents what ordinary people need to know in order to progress toward being able to grasp the full and final truth” (Siderits 2007, p. 58).

Understanding the Buddhist arguments that there are no selves requires understanding more terminology. Particularly, it requires understand the Buddhist “person-part” terminology. They came up with five categories of person-parts (*five skandhas*) (Siderits 2007, p. 35-6), as follows:

1. ***rūpa***: corporeal or physical
2. **feeling**: sensations of pleasure, pain, indifference
3. **perception**: mental events whereby one grasps the sensible characteristics of a perceptible object; e.g., seeing a patch of blue, hearing the sound of thunder
4. **volition**: mental forces responsible for bodily and mental activity: e.g., hunger, attentiveness, anger, jealousy
5. **consciousness**: awareness of physical and mental states

Buddhists hold that every person-part falls under at least one of these five person-part categories (*skandhas*); i.e., they accept the following *Exhaustiveness* principle: that “every constituent of persons is included in one or more of the five *skandhas*” (Siderits 2007, p. 37).

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## Argument from Impermanence

From Siderits 2007, p. 39 (which is itself a paraphrase from *The Questions of King Melinda*):

1. Rūpa is **impermanent**.
2. Sensation is **impermanent**.
3. Perception is **impermanent**.
4. Volition is **impermanent**.
5. Consciousness is **impermanent**.
6. If there was a self, it would be *permanent*.<sup>1</sup>
7. Exhaustiveness: every person-part falls under at least one of the five skandha categories.
8. So, there is no self.

**The ‘Hiding-in-the-Closet’ Objection:** Perhaps some members of the five *skandha* categories are permanent, and that, even though they don’t seem permanent, they are nevertheless hiding there all along, “in the closet”: e.g., perhaps “some desires continue to exist hidden away in a dark corner of the mind when not observed” (Siderits 2007, p. 43).

**Reply:** A given effect will arise when the right causal conditions obtain, but will not occur otherwise. Analogy with thermostats: “It’s not as if the signal for the furnace to go on waits in the thermostat’s closet until the room gets too cold” (Siderits 2007, p. 43).

Is this reply convincing? Buddhists prefer this causal story over the ‘in-the-closet’ theory because they accept what they call the principle of *Lightness* (the Eastern equivalent of *Ockham’s razor*). It is supposed to help one decide between competing explanations. It says: “given two competing theories, each of which is equally good at explaining and predicting the relevant phenomena, choose ... the theory that postulates the least number of unobserved entities” (Siderits 2007, p. 44).

E.g., Claim: sometimes there is no consciousness at all.

Reply: it existed in-the-closet.

Rebuttal: by Lightness, it didn’t exist in-the-closet. (See Siderits 2007, p. 45)

E.g., Buddha/Hume couldn’t find their selves; they just stumbled upon various mental events.  
So, they should, by Lightness, reject the existence of their *selves*. (Siderits 2007, p. 45)

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<sup>1</sup> Two options for what “permanent” can mean: never-ending throughout this life, or never-ending throughout both this life and afterlives (assuming one accepts the doctrine of *karma and rebirth*).

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## Argument from Control

From Siderits 2007, p. 46-7 (which is itself a paraphrase from *The Questions of King Melinda*):

1. I sometimes dislike and seek to change **rúpa**.
2. I sometimes dislike and seek to change **feeling**.
3. I sometimes dislike and seek to change **perception**.
4. I sometimes dislike and seek to change **volition**.
5. I sometimes dislike and seek to change **consciousness**.
6. If the self existed, it would be the part of the person that performs the executive function.
7. Exhaustiveness: If the self existed, it would be a member of at least one of the five *skandhas*.
8. So, if the self existed, it would perform the executive function on itself.
9. But nothing can perform the executive function on itself. [a knife can't cut itself, etc., p. 46]
10. So, there is no self.

**Objection:** Doesn't the conclusion contradict the premises? The premises use the word 'I', which seems to denote the self.

**Reply:** Take the word 'I' in a neutral way. Don't assume that it stands for a self. Just suppose it stands for whatever performs the executive function. It doesn't even have to be the same thing each time: that is, one might accept the 'shifting coalitions' strategy (see Siderits 2007, p. 49).

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## More Terminology

**Convenient designators:** In *The Questions of King Milinda*, Nagasena argues that ‘Nagasena’ is a convenient designator. A convenient designator is a useful fiction: e.g., a composite object, the average college student, or a person (Siderits 2007, p. 56).

**Mereological Reductionism:** View that a whole is nothing over and above the sum of its parts: e.g., car parts. Assembled-car way vs. strewn-across-the-battlefield way. We have a single word for when they're arranged in the first way because of our interest in transportation.

**Conventional Truth:** “A statement is **conventionally true** if and only if it is acceptable to common practice and consistently leads to successful practice” (Siderits 2007, p. 56). Sanskrit word ‘*samvrt*’, translated as ‘conventional’, but literally means ‘concealing’.

**Ultimate Truth:** “A statement is **ultimately true** if and only if it corresponds to the facts and neither asserts nor presupposes the existence of any conceptual fiction” (Siderits 2007, p. 56).

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## Ethics

4.1. To become enlightened in the Buddhist sense is to achieve nirvana. The Sanskrit term *nirvana* literally means 'extinction' or 'going out' (as when a fire is said to go out). The thing that gets extinguished is suffering. So, achieving nirvana amounts to extinguishing suffering.

What does extinguishing suffering amount to? Some Buddhists equate this extinction with the end of the series of rebirths (p. 27). Yet others deny this option on the grounds that talking about ending the series of rebirths would require talking about people, whereas the concept of a person is just a “convenient designator”: there are no people; there are just “person parts”. Moreover, “arhat” refers to the kind of person who has achieved nirvana; yet, strictly, the term “arhat” is a convenient designator and therefore no *ultimate* truths can be stated about arhats. Thus none of the following claims could be ultimately true, since they all take “the arhat” as the subject:

The arhat exists after death.

The arhat does not exist after death.

The arhat both exists and does not exist after death.

The arhat neither exists nor does not exist after death.

4.2. “Is the arhat someone who lives wholly in the present moment? This is a popular interpretation of Buddhist nirvana. But it is also a mistake” (p. 73).

Punctualism is the view that since there is no self, and the parts of the person are all impermanent, the true 'I' doesn't last very long: perhaps a day or a week, but maybe just an instant. Since they think this is the truth about us, Punctualists hold that we should stop putting so much effort into planning for and worrying about the future. Once we do this, they think we will learn to truly appreciate the here and now for what it is. We'll learn to live in the present, and our lives will be fuller and richer for it. [p. 74]

Problem: Punctualism can't be ultimately true, since it postulates *wholes*: P-people! Indeed, there is reason to think that Punctualism can't even be conventionally true; or at least, that it can't be as conventionally true as the popular alternative position that people live long. For, in so far as “successful practice” is defined as practice that brings pleasure and less pain, Punctualism cannot be as conventionally true as the view that people exist over long stretches of time, since the latter view is more apt to lead to daily tooth care, etc.

4.3. "We have now ruled out two views about what nirvana might be like: the view that it is ineffable, and the Punctualist view that it means living wholly in the present. Is there anything positive we can say?" (p. 76). "By now it should be clear why enlightenment brings about the cessation of existential suffering. In effect the Buddhist is saying that we experience such suffering because we take too seriously the useful fiction of the person" (p. 76). "We experience existential suffering when the fact of our transitoriness undermines the belief that our lives can have meaning" (p. 76). But since there is no self, there is no self whose life can lack meaning! So don't get nervous because you think your life lacks meaning due to its transitoriness. For there is no person, and therefore no person whose life lacks meaning.

Brainwashing: little kids don't identify much with past or future selves, and so they resist brushing their teeth. Yet we train them to think of certain past and future selves as being *them*. This sets the stage for existential suffering, as they might come to think as follows: *I, a character in the narrative, will die. Oh no! I will die!*

4.4. "Buddhism is atheist[ic] . . . So can Buddhism actually provide a foundation for morality? Can it give a satisfactory answer to the question, "Why should I be moral" (p. 78). "The Buddhist answer has three layers. Each layer answers the question of moral motivation in a way that is responsive to the abilities of people at a certain stage on the path to nirvana" (p. 78).

**Stage 1.** Reincarnation karma

**Stage 2.** To achieve nirvana, one must counteract the three poisons (greed, hatred, delusion).

**Stage 3.** If "you" have already achieved nirvana, there's the following argument (see also p. 81):

1. There are obligations to prevent suffering. [common assumption]
2. There are no persisting selves. [arguments from permanence and control]
3. So, there are no selfish obligations to prevent one's own future suffering. [2]
4. So, there are obligations to prevent suffering, none of which are selfish. [1, 3]



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## Parfit's Life-Transforming Experience

When Derek Parfit ceased believing in the existence of his *self*, he became less concerned about “his” future person parts, and more concerned about “other people's” future person parts.

When I believed that my existence was such a further fact, I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less. Other people are closer. I am less concerned about the rest of my life, and more concerned about the lives of other people. [p. 69]

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## Works Cited

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