

# Buddhism for the Modern Skeptic

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*First edition - v.1.1.0*

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# Introduction

This is the age of science. Men today have no utopia. They will not accept anything unless the results are good, concrete, vivid, personal and here-and-now. <sup>1</sup>

Looking at our daily lives, we are persistently confronted with the many stresses of modern life. Yet no matter how rapidly technology evolves, our pursuit of material wealth and status has failed to make significant inroads into the suffering that surrounds us.

No matter who we are, we are all subject to stress, sorrows, disappointments, fear, illness, aging, uncertainty, pain, separation from things we like and the association with things we dislike. These forms of suffering are experienced by each of us and our desire to remove this suffering remains as strong today as it was during the time of the Buddha over 2500 years ago. The big question which faces all of us is 'How can this relentless suffering be overcome?'

Disillusioned by the failings of materialism to bring lasting peace and happiness, people will often turn to spirituality and religion in search of answers to this important question. Unfortunately, many members of modern society now shy away from all forms of religion because of the dogmatism and scientific irrationality plaguing the theistic religions to which they have been exposed to in the past. As a result of the failure of materialism and theistic religions to provide relief from suffering, many intelligent and creative people have given up on finding a plausible solution to this problem and now resort to alcohol and drugs to numb themselves out of existence. The most desperate of all go one step further and take their own lives.

Despite being widely misunderstood in the Western world, there is a degree of recognition that Buddhism is a logical and rational religion, which requires no blind faith or subservience to higher beings or a God. To some people it is a religion, to others it is a philosophy or moral code - yet those who follow the Buddhist path for themselves agree that it should be understood first and foremost as a wise way of life.

It is because of these redeeming attributes that even those of a skeptical disposition, who place their faith primarily in science and rational fact, have come to investigate the ancient religion of Buddhism for themselves. On first inspection, it is tricky for a beginner to identify how to best approach Buddhism and test for themselves whether it is the solution they seek for their emotional malaise.

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<sup>1</sup> Sayagyi U Ba Khin (1968), The Essentials of Buddha-Dhamma in Practice, International Meditation Centre, Yangon, Myanmar. Available online at <http://www.ubakhin.com/ubakhin/ESSENTIA.html>

Should we superficially scratch the surface of Buddhism, we will observe aspects of a religion which do not appear as “logical and rational” as we were perhaps otherwise led to expect. The myriad celestial beings and excessively-limbed deities that grace Buddhist art may appear to some people as illogical remnants of a pre-historic age. Combine this imagery with devotional rituals, chanting and depictions of Buddhist cosmology, and the uninitiated spiritual seeker may well choose to flee before they have had a chance to understand and test the key Buddhist teachings for themselves.

The purpose of this text is to avoid such confusion by providing the modern spiritual seeker with an understanding of how Buddhism can be used to alleviate the mental suffering that each of us faces in our daily lives. In this respect this text is not unique, as there are many other texts which provide a more than competent beginner’s introduction to Buddhism. Where this text differs from most other introductory texts is that it makes no recourse whatsoever to claims or phenomena that you cannot test for yourself in a scientific fashion, here and now. Even key Buddhist concepts such as karma and nirvana will be presented in such a way that they can be understood and appreciated by means of logic and experience alone.

Furthermore, I do not intend to perform an elaborate song-and-dance act in order to tell you how wonderful and great Buddhism is. I’m fully aware that such hyperbole is of no value to the modern skeptic and could very well be seen negatively as an attempt to conceal something dubious about Buddhism and its teachings.

Unlike many religious leaders, the Buddha did not deter thorough and critical inspection of his teachings. The Buddha actually encouraged people as follows:

Don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, "This contemplative is our teacher."

When you know for yourselves that, "These qualities are unskillful; these qualities are blameworthy; these qualities are criticized by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to harm & to suffering" — then you should abandon them. <sup>2</sup>

Masters of the Ch’an tradition often quote a phrase, which translates as:

Small doubts result in small realization, only great doubts result in great realization. No doubt results in no realization.

Your intelligence should not be beaten into submission in order for Buddhism to make sense. In other words, when investigating Buddhism or

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<sup>2</sup> AN 3.65: Kalama Sutta – translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

any other religion, your doubts should not be suppressed. If a religion can not withstand such investigation and scrutiny, it is not worthy of your interest.

## A Method for Approaching Buddhist Concepts

There are some Buddhist concepts which may appear counter-intuitive to the modern skeptic. Some of these concepts, because of their very psychological or metaphysical nature, are extremely difficult to either prove or disprove in a traditional scientific fashion. Accordingly, certain topics will be put to one side whilst we address that which can be more easily validated in a logical, scientific manner.

Whilst we choose to put them aside for now, we must be careful not to dismiss these metaphysical concepts with rigid and preconceived assertions about whether they are true or false. Should we fail to progress with an open and inquiring mind, we may actually find the shackles of our unyielding views too strong to transcend, and severely limit our ability to reduce suffering.

For example, if a man were to climb a mountain and describe the landscape to you upon his return, there would be no way for you to test for yourself whether or not the view was indeed as he described, unless you decided to climb the mountain yourself. If you had a fixed view about whether his comments were true or false, despite having no direct evidence, there's a very good chance you would turn out to be wrong. Therefore, until we can prove or disprove these concepts for ourselves, we should remain truly agnostic and open minded to any evidence which may present itself in the future. The philosophy behind this uninhibited approach to study is detailed in the following Zen proverb:

A university professor went to visit a famous Zen master. While the master quietly served tea, the professor talked about Zen. The master poured the visitor's cup to the brim, and then kept pouring. The professor watched the overflowing cup until he could no longer restrain himself. "It's overfull! No more will go in!" the professor blurted. "You are like this cup," the master replied, "How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?" <sup>3</sup>

Admittedly, a selective presentation of the kind being undertaken here, could never hope to do complete justice to the depth of the Buddha's teachings, but it will give you the chance to test the basics of Buddhist philosophy and practice for yourself. You have the opportunity to experience first-hand whether or not the Buddha's teachings act in such a way as to diminish your suffering, and this is exactly the opportunity the

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<sup>3</sup> Sourced from <http://web.utah.edu/stc/tai-chi/stories.html>

Buddha wanted you to have when he spent the remainder of his enlightened life sharing his wisdom with those who wished to listen.

Once you are able to understand these teachings conceptually in your own time, you may experience the conviction required to pursue the Buddhist path in a more detailed and systematic manner in the future. However, even if you stop here at what is provided for you in this text, you may still be able to make significant inroads into leading a far more satisfying and peaceful existence.

## The Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths are the fundamental basis of the Buddha's teachings. All other teachings and doctrines throughout the different Buddhist traditions can be seen as an elaboration of this basic wisdom.

It is vital we take the time to investigate them thoroughly before we attempt to venture any deeper into the Buddha's teachings. Be mindful to not just blindly accept these Truths on face value. Rather, treat the Four Noble Truths as a series of hypotheses which can be tested against logic and your own personal experience.

### 1. Suffering

Now this, monks, is the Noble Truth of suffering: Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair are suffering; association with the unbeloved is suffering; separation from the loved is suffering; not getting what is wanted is suffering. In short, the five clinging-aggregates are suffering. <sup>4</sup>

Over the years, the First Noble Truth about suffering has been translated in a variety of ways. A commonly used, yet over-simplified mistranslation is that "life is suffering". Such a pessimistic translation does Buddhism no favours because the conscientious objector will rightly claim that there are also a lot of wonderful things that can be experienced in life too! We can all know the pleasures of joy, compassion, friendship, humour, love and happiness. The very fact we choose to go on living and do not commit suicide should be evidence enough that there is indeed happiness that is worth living for.

A far more practical rendering of the First Noble Truth is that 'suffering is inherent in all existence'. Despite the many wonders of life, there is no escaping the fact that we are faced at nearly every turn with different forms of suffering.

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<sup>4</sup> SN 56.11 - Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta – translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Even those amongst us who seem to live in ease and happiness cannot avoid the various sufferings inherent in existence. They too will experience disappointments, sickness and death. No matter how pleased we may feel with our lives at present, no one can reasonably say that they are not affected in one way or another by these various forms of suffering.

## 2. The Cause of Suffering

And this, monks, is the noble truth of the origination of suffering: the craving that makes for further becoming — accompanied by passion & delight, relishing now here & now there — i.e., craving for sensual pleasure, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming. <sup>5</sup>

We now move onto the Second Noble Truth, which will help us explain the disease that is causing our painful symptoms - craving.

Craving is the desire for stimulation in the forms of touch, taste, smell, sight, sound and stimulation of the mind. We can see this phenomenon for ourselves whilst we watch our minds flit from one thing to another as we undertake the relentless pursuit of sensory satisfaction. Whatever we believe will bring the greatest stimulation, is what we ultimately tend to crave.

All craving can be attributed to at least one of three underlying factors: Greed, Aversion and Ignorance. It is worthwhile here to distinguish between Desire and Craving, because in Buddhism there is nothing inherently wrong with desires or goals per se.

For example, I may have a desire to eliminate craving, and therefore choose to follow the Buddhist path. The desire leads to positive action and only causes suffering if it leads to craving based on greed ('I'm frustrated because I'm not enlightened yet), aversion ('I hate my faults') or delusion ('I'm too stupid to achieve my goal of enlightenment').

Let us now consider some examples of various cravings and how they cause suffering according to the Buddhist model of suffering. Examine for yourself whether you believe they are genuinely based on the unwholesome roots of greed, aversion and ignorance which underpin craving.

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### *Example 1: Craving for possessions*

When we crave ownership of possessions, we cause ourselves suffering as we long for what we do not have. Even if we come to own the possession that we desired, we can then experience further suffering as we worry about it being broken, lost or stolen in the future.

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<sup>5</sup> SN 56.11 - Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta – translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

It is for this reason that renunciation is such a key aspect of Buddhism. Renunciation does not mean we must throw away all our possessions, but rather that we should relate to external objects in a manner devoid of this unsatisfactory craving.

#### *Example 2: Craving for people*

Our relationships with other people are often tainted by Craving. This craving may take the form of sensual lust which manifests itself in the desire for sexual relationships.

Our cravings and attachment towards others will cause us distress when these people inevitably become sick or die, or when we are separated from them by time and space. As per the example of craving for possessions, we need not altogether abandon relationships with others, but we will be better equipped to avoid suffering if the relationships we have are based on genuine love or compassion, rather than selfish clinging.

#### *Example 3: Craving for existence*

Many of us would like to live forever and never fall ill. However, it is clearly evident that fulfilling this desire for eternal health and well-being is impossible. If we desperately crave good health, we bring additional suffering upon ourselves, which could be avoided if we were more accepting of the phenomena of sickness and death as a natural part of life. For those of us facing sickness and death with fear, the craving for existence can become even more acute and lead to intensified suffering and terror.

#### *Example 4: Craving for non-existence*

There are times in our lives that we would just simply prefer to blot out. We may embarrass ourselves in public and wish that the ground would swallow us whole. We may be trapped in a job we despise, or we may be obliged to attend a function or party that we would prefer not to attend. We may find ourselves impatiently watching the clock, waiting for the seconds, minutes and hours to pass slowly and painfully, until we are finally released from the drudgery of our existence. For some people, the craving for non-existence is so extreme, they simply find it easier to wipe themselves out of existence through drugs, alcohol, painkillers or suicide.

#### *Example 5: Craving for things to be different to how they are*

We often set high expectations for people and society. Accordingly, we find ourselves suffering when these expectations are not met. We may feel that society should be just, logical and fair, but when it is not, we experience sorrow at the state of the world. We may expect our friends to never be late for lunch appointments, that they should always remember our birthday, and always attend any functions that we choose to organise. When

reality deviates from our ideals we tend to suffer because we have based our happiness on external factors beyond our control.

*Example 6: Craving based on aversion or hatred*

If there are people or organisations we don't like, we may wish suffering or destruction upon them. Despite our vengeful desires, they may well continue merrily on their way, untainted by the hatred we feel towards them. Whether or not our hatred is appeased, this hatred is an awful feeling to experience and a person who is full of hatred is ultimately entangled in suffering.

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It is very important that we are able to distinguish the concept of 'suffering' from the everyday concept of physical pain, as they are not synonymous.

Imagine a marathon runner who has just won a marathon after years of intensive training. As you would expect, the runner is very pleased at this accomplishment and is feeling rather euphoric as a result. The muscles in the runner's legs may be physically aching after such exertion but the runner does not suffer as a result of these physical sensations. Indeed, it is quite possible that the muscular sensations are experienced by the runner as a 'badge of honour', or perceived as an integral part of the whole positive experience that comes from competing in and winning a marathon.

This example demonstrates that 'pain' and 'suffering' are not synonymous, and even if someone experiences the physical sensation of pain, it does not logically follow that they must also experience suffering as a result of the pain. Through this, we identify the key learning that suffering is a mental phenomenon and this insight is critical to gaining an understanding of the Buddha's teaching as a whole.

Looking back now at the Second Noble Truth, we should review the examples above and try to identify any forms of suffering which are **not** based on Greed, Aversion or Ignorance. If, after detailed investigation, we are unable to identify any such examples by either using the list above or via our own imagination, it is reasonable to conclude that the Second Noble Truth appears valid.



### 3. The Cessation of Suffering

And this, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: the remainderless fading & cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, & letting go of that very craving. <sup>6</sup>

Our analysis of the Second Noble Truth identified that Craving was the cause of Suffering. It should come then as no surprise that if you are able to remove the cause, you can also remove the effect. In other words, remove the Craving and you will remove the Suffering.

The ultimate goal of Buddhism, known as 'nirvana', is indeed the complete and final eradication of Suffering, achieved through the elimination of Craving. Nirvana then, as a state of mind, can be thought of as a mind that has been forever released from Suffering.

The Buddha advised that:

Mind precedes all mental states.  
Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. <sup>7</sup>

We can represent this famous statement using the following conceptual diagram.



It can be seen that if we wish to achieve positive mental states that are free from suffering, we have to learn to manage the components of this process efficiently in a manner that yields the best results.

In terms of managing the stream of sensory inputs that we experience, we should aim to avoid those which could trigger those cravings (e.g. advertisements, potential objects of lust) that have a tendency to tempt and arouse the mind. Likewise, it is possible to intentionally surround ourselves with positive stimuli or even use methods of visualisation to create our own sensory input.

Next, the mind needs to process these sensory inputs and manage them in a way which results in more agreeable mental states. In the Buddha's words:

Just as a fletcher straightens an arrow shaft,  
even so the discerning man straightens his mind —  
so fickle and unsteady, so difficult to guard. <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> SN 56.11 - Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta – translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

<sup>7</sup> Dhp I – The Pairs – Verse 1 – translated by Acharya Buddharakkhita

<sup>8</sup> Dhp III – Cittavagga – Verse 33 – translated by Acharya Buddharakkhita

There are literally volumes of Buddhist literature which address the interactions between the senses and the mind. The process of Dependent Origination looks at an enhanced twelve-step process for understanding these connections and the Abhidharma (or ‘higher teaching’) takes an even more reductionist and psychological approach to addressing the way our mind processes various inputs. (Both of these conceptual frameworks are far too detailed and complex for us to elaborate on here in this brief introduction to Buddhism.)

So, we now understand the challenge at hand of managing sense inputs and the mind and therefore seek a practical method that can be applied to achieve this goal. This brings us to the last of the Four Noble Truths - the way of practice commonly known as the Noble Eightfold Path.

#### 4. The Way to End Suffering

"And this, monks, is the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering: precisely this Noble Eightfold Path — right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. <sup>9</sup>

In reviewing the components of the Noble Eightfold Path, we should maintain our investigative rigour and aim to identify not only what actions were explicitly recommended by the Buddha, but also understand how each of them plays an important role in achieving a reduction of Craving, and in turn, contributes to a reduction in Suffering.

We will look at each of the eight steps separately.

##### i. Right View

Right View relates to having a correct understanding of the Four Noble Truths and understanding the relationship between craving and suffering. Right View begins with this conceptual framework and is strengthened as we experience the consequences of the Four Noble Truths personally in our daily lives.

One interesting point of note is that the concept of Right View only refers to views which have a bearing on Suffering. Right View is not concerned about mundane knowledge which is irrelevant to the elimination of Suffering. If we falsely believed that the sun was a flat disc or that spiders have ten legs, it would neither be ‘right view’ nor ‘wrong view’ with respect to the Noble Eightfold Path. As far as eliminating Suffering goes, such information is trivial and irrelevant.

##### ii. Right Intention

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<sup>9</sup> SN 56.11 - Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta – translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Right Intention is a commitment to undertake the necessary mental development and ethical behaviour required to reduce Suffering. It is a commitment towards taking steps which will eliminate Greed and Aversion from our thought processes, and prevent the emergence of Craving.

### **iii. Right Speech**

Right Speech is a standard of communication which avoids talk that is false, malicious or pointless. False speech spreads ignorance, malicious speech spreads hatred, and pointless speech is a distraction and a waste of everybody's time. It is therefore not difficult to see how Wrong Speech is counter-productive and disruptive to the mind.

### **iv. Right Action**

Right Action is a standard of action which avoids harming others through physical force or theft. This also includes the avoidance of all forms of sexual misconduct - at its worst, such as rape or paedophilia, but more likely to be experienced in the modern world as infidelity or sexual coercion. The aim of Right Action viewed in positive terms, is to be kind, compassionate and respectful to others so that not only do others benefit from our behaviour, but so we also prevent the arising of Greed and Aversion in our own minds.

### **v. Right Livelihood**

Right Livelihood means that one's means of financial support and way of life should be conducted in such a way as to make it compatible with the principles of Right Speech and Right Action. Trades which deal in stimulating Greed (e.g. gambling), Aversion (e.g. weapons trade), Ignorance (e.g. drug dealing, dispensing alcohol) or cause harm to others (e.g. criminal) serve only to cause suffering to those who participate in them as per the models of Suffering previously discussed.

### **vi. Right Effort**

As with anything in life, nothing can be achieved without proper application and effort. In the context of the Noble Eightfold Path, this means to be diligent in our efforts to prevent negative mind states, so that we can generate positive mind-states which are free of Suffering.

### **vii. Right Mindfulness**

Right Mindfulness means to see things clearly as they really are on a moment-to-moment basis without being overwhelmed and distracted by the myriad stimuli of life. When Greed arises, we should try to be aware of it and subdue it before it can develop into Craving. When Aversion arises, mindfulness will help us eradicate this negative emotion before it evolves into full-blown loathing and hatred.

### viii. Right Concentration

Right Concentration is the development of one-pointedness in mind, whereby all mental faculties are united and focused on a single object. The ability to focus on one object or task at a time, as developed through meditation, gives us better control of our minds and prevents the mind from continuously wandering off in search of stimulation. As the mind comes to a natural state of rest, it experiences a sense of tranquillity in the absence of Greed, Aversion and Ignorance.

With a concentrated and tranquil mind, it is easier to observe the arising and falling of mental and physical sensations, and for our conceptual knowledge of the Buddha's teachings to penetrate deeper into our subconsciousness, so that future thoughts are increasingly aligned with actions and speech that reduce suffering for us and others.

## Emptiness and Impermanence

One feature of Buddhism, which sets it apart from virtually all other religions, is the rejection of any inherent or intrinsic Self. The subtle doctrine of Emptiness, or "Not-Self", does not suggest that you do not exist at all - the Buddha explicitly rejected such nihilistic theories.

Rather, emptiness suggests that what we generally think of as our Self, is nothing more than the following five aggregates of clinging:

Form	Physical matter
Consciousness	The basic awareness of stimuli
Feeling	Experience of sensation (e.g. taste, touch, smell, hearing, sight, ideas)
Perception	Classification of these feelings
Mental Formations	All volitional thoughts, desire and emotions which arouse action, speech or subsequent thoughts

A key feature of the five aggregates is that each one of them arises and ultimately passes away. In other words, each of the five aggregates is impermanent - nothing lasts forever.

For years, scientists have informed us that the cells in the body die and regenerate throughout the duration of our lifespan. A specific form of consciousness arises as we become aware of a specific stimulus and fades once we lose focus of it. Mental formations rise and pass away with great rapidity as our minds process data and devise actions and speech based on these thought processes. What we think of as our 'self' is nothing more than an ongoing process and interaction of these aggregates.

The challenge the Buddha sets us, is to try to find a substantial, separate and distinct Self or ego, apart from these five aggregates. Should we wish to take up this challenge in earnest and test this hypothesis for ourselves, there are particular forms of Buddhist meditation, known as insight meditation, which focus specifically on observing the rise and fall of the five aggregates as the sum of all experience. Short of undertaking such meditative practices, it is possible through patient introspection to observe our experience in the search for an independent Self, which falls outside of the five classifications of impermanent phenomena.

If we are unable to find this Self apart from the aggregates, it is reasonable to accept that the Buddha's doctrine of Emptiness or 'Not-Self' is valid. It is interesting to think that if all we are is a continuous process of phenomena which rise and fall, then what is there within ourselves that we can safely grasp on to as our personal identity?

This talk of aggregates and negation of the ego-concept may seem rather abstract, but it does play several important roles in the reduction of Craving. Firstly, by dissolving the ego, we also dissolve the polar dichotomy between 'me' and 'everything else' and can start acting from a base of egolessness and equanimity. Without an ego to reinforce, Craving finds no root to take hold of and Suffering is not given the chance to arise. Rather, actions and speech become focused on activities which reduce suffering not just for the individual, but for friends, family and other members of society as well.

If we stop to think about this point, we really start to see clearly that it is selfishness alone making us think that our wants and needs are more important and significant than those of others. Contrast this ideology with the individualism promoted in modern society, which leads people to reinforce their ego and provide a firm foundation for Greed and Aversion, whilst having with little or no regard for the desires and welfare of others.

## Karma

The term karma translates literally as 'action', and can be viewed as a form of mental causality. Mental formations, which were reviewed in the previous section, constitute our thoughts and provide the basis for our actions and speech. Mental formations are said to produce good karma if they tend towards positive mind states and generate bad karma if they tend towards negative mind states.

Our mental continuum, which consists of the rise and fall of the four mind-based aggregates, is affected by karma in the sense that actions become habitual and that if we are prone to anger in the present, we are more likely to be angry in the future. We suffer in the present as we deal with our rage, and we suffer later because our behaviour becomes progressively ingrained within the mind. If we are prone to act out of generosity and

kindness in the present, we are less likely to act with egotistical motives in the future. Likewise, the remembrance of unwholesome acts performed is often the source of much regret, guilt, anxiety and deep-set emotional issues. It is the ongoing pursuit of the Noble Eightfold Path which promotes positive karma, and this good karma leads to less suffering.

The Buddha advised that when thinking about karma, we should think to ourselves that:

I am the owner of my action, heir to my actions, born of my actions,  
related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator.  
Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir. <sup>10</sup>

Once we remove the common misconception of karma being some kind of cosmic general ledger of good and evil, administered by a mysterious higher force, it comes to appear far more rational and acceptable to the modern skeptic than it would otherwise appear. Viewed in terms of causality, the natural law of karma needs no governance to act in the mental realm, just as the natural laws of gravity or inertia need no observation or management to perform their functions in the physical realm either.

Another useful way to view karma and our lives in general is to think of the analogy of a river. Over the years, new waters (mental formations and the remaining aggregates) flow through the river. As a result of the currents, the river-bed and river banks are gradually influenced, shaped and modified by the continued and repeated flow of the water over time. Just as the flowing water influences the subsequent shape of the river, karmic accumulations caused by mental volitions influence the subsequent shape of our future thought processes, and accordingly influence our future propensity to experience Craving and Suffering.

One interesting note about karma is that because it is based on mental formations rather than bodily actions, it is possible for example to step on an insect unwittingly and not accumulate any negative karma. Conversely, if someone became filled with hatred and attempted to shoot another person with a shotgun, whether or not they manage to hit their target, the mental formations which caused their murderous actions have created bad karma. If they are unfortunate enough to actually succeed in killing their enemy, they will have to live with this burden for the rest of their life. This bad karma will impact their mind-continuum in a way such that suffering could be experienced in both the present and the future.

In summary, we can see karma as a habitual shaping of the mind-process or 'force of habit', which can be positive or negative, dependent on whether or not those thoughts are conducive to the reduction of suffering.

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<sup>10</sup> AN 5.57: Upajjhatthana Sutta – translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

# Rebirth

Rebirth is indeed the bane of the modern skeptic! By its very nature, rebirth provides a near-impossible challenge, as it is an incredibly difficult hypothesis to either prove or disprove by scientific means. For the skeptic to satisfactorily identify for themselves whether there is some form of continuance after death is (short of dying and testing it out for oneself) virtually impossible. However, in instances where a claim cannot be personally verified, it must be conceded that blind skepticism is no more rational than blind faith. Thus we shall investigate the matter with eyes wide open and an open mind in order to build upon what we have discovered thus far.

In the Buddha's day there were a group of people known as the Kalamas who were left skeptical after having been approached by wanderers of different sects, each of whom would proclaim their own contradictory doctrines as being the truth. Realising that these contradictory teachings could not *all* be true, they also came to realise that they had no objective criteria by which they could assess the validity of these doctrines. The Buddha understood their position, and therefore did not try to force upon them the doctrine of rebirth as others may have done before him. Rather, he said this...

"Now, Kalamas, one who is a disciple of the noble ones — his mind thus free from hostility, free from ill will, undefiled, & pure — acquires ...assurances in the here-&-now:

"If there is a world after death, if there is the fruit of actions rightly & wrongly done, then this is the basis by which, with the break-up of the body, after death, I will reappear in a good destination, the heavenly world.' This is the first assurance he acquires.

"But if there is no world after death, if there is no fruit of actions rightly & wrongly done, then here in the present life I look after myself with ease — free from hostility, free from ill will, free from trouble.' This is the second assurance he acquires."<sup>11</sup>

We can see from this and our analysis to date that regardless of what happens after death, the Buddhist path delivers benefits that can be experienced in this lifetime. In a sense this is a good starting point and justification enough for following the Buddhist path, but still does nothing in itself to either prove or deny the validity of rebirth.

As detailed in the Apannaca Sutta<sup>12</sup>, the Buddha engaged in discussions with groups of householders on the subject of rebirth. Firstly he detailed the position of those who believed in karma and rebirth and the consequences

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<sup>11</sup> AN 3.65 – Kalama Sutta – translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

<sup>12</sup> Visible in its entirety at <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.060.than.html>

that this belief brought to their volitional actions. Believing that karma made in the past would eventually come to fruit, they were more determined to perform the kinds of wholesome actions outlined in the Kalama Sutta. Thus...

It can be expected that, shunning these three unskilful activities — bad bodily conduct, bad verbal conduct, bad mental conduct — they will adopt & practice these three skilful activities: good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, good mental conduct. Why is that? Because those venerable brahmans & contemplatives see in unskilful activities the drawbacks, the degradation, and the defilement; and in skilful activities the rewards of renunciation, resembling cleansing.<sup>13</sup>

As outlined in the Kalama Sutta, regardless of what occurred after death, during life they would be free from hostility, free from ill will and free from trouble, as an indirect consequence of their belief in karma and rebirth.

Afterwards the Buddha outlined the position of those who did not believe in karma or rebirth. Disbelieving in karma they did not believe they would necessarily come to bear the consequences of any unskilful actions performed. Disbelieving in rebirth, they also believed that the consequences of certain unskilful actions could be avoided through the complete annihilation of the individual at death, thereby reducing the incentive for mental purification. This world view, devoid of karma and rebirth, provided its adherents with much less incentive to perform wholesome skilful actions rooted in Wisdom, Generosity and Loving-kindness. Therefore...

It can be expected that, shunning these three skilful activities — good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, good mental conduct — they will adopt & practice these three unskilful activities: bad bodily conduct, bad verbal conduct, bad mental conduct. Why is that? Because those venerable brahmans & contemplatives do not see, in unskilful activities, the drawbacks, the degradation, and the defilement; nor in skilful activities the rewards of renunciation, resembling cleansing.<sup>14</sup>

Unwholesome actions, as demonstrated throughout this document, tend towards Suffering. Hence, this particular view is harmful to the individual even in this lifetime because it is not conducive to the alleviation or cessation of Suffering.

If rebirth is true, as the Buddha claimed it to be, the individual will in fact benefit doubly because not only will their wholesome actions bring benefit now, but they will also bring benefit in the future too.

Even if rebirth turns out to be false despite what the Buddha told us, there will still be benefits associated in this lifetime with taking rebirth as our working hypothesis. If it turned out to be false, could you justifiably feel

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<sup>13</sup> MN 60 – Apannaka Sutta – translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*



cheated or deceived because you were led to believe something that was wrong, despite the benefits? If so, what will you have been cheated of, what will you have actually lost?

Regardless of what you decide would be an appropriate response to such a circumstance, this life will have been well lived through the performance of wholesome actions. In conclusion, the ever pragmatic Buddha states...

"With regard to this, a wise person considers thus: 'If there is causality, then this venerable person — on the break-up of the body, after death — will reappear in the good destination, the heavenly world. Even if we didn't speak of causality, and there weren't the true statement of those venerable brahmans & contemplatives, this venerable person is still praised in the here-&-now by the wise as a person of good habits & right view: one who holds to a doctrine of causality. If there really is causality, then this venerable person has made a good throw twice, in that he is praised by the wise here-&-now; and in that — with the break-up of the body, after death — he will reappear in the good destination, the heavenly world. Thus this safe-bet teaching, when well grasped & adopted by him, covers both sides, and leaves behind the possibility of the unskillful.'<sup>15</sup>

## The Training Precepts and the Triple Gem

Returning again to the concept of Buddhism as a way of life, we see that Buddhists around the world adopt a set of training precepts to make their practice more successful. These precepts are not commandments such as those contained within theistic religions, but function as training practices that guide behaviour in ways that are conducive to ethical conduct and complement Buddhist practice.

In following the five basic precepts, Buddhists commit to refraining from:

- Destroying or harming other creatures
- Taking that which is not given
- Sexual misconduct
- Incorrect speech
- Taking intoxicating drinks and drugs which lead to carelessness

Relating these five precepts back to the purpose of Noble Eightfold Path, it is not difficult to see how they support the practitioner's endeavour to live a blameless existence which helps them reduce Greed, Hatred and Ignorance.

Likewise, Buddhists develop their practice not only through the written teachings of the Buddha, but also through respect for the Buddha himself,

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<sup>15</sup> ibid.

and for those who have followed his path. Known collectively as the Triple Gem, the Buddha, his teachings and his accomplished followers, provide practitioners with great inspiration and provide a wider perspective and framework for making progress along the Buddhist path.

## The Role of Meditation in Buddhist Practice

Meditation serves many purposes within Buddhist practice. At its most basic level, it can be used as a means of developing a sense of mental tranquillity and spaciousness. The practice of such meditation is available to people worldwide and effectively combats the stresses of daily life by allowing the mind to focus on a neutral object such as the breath.

Beyond this mainstream adaptation, Buddhists also use meditation as a training ground for the development of wholesome mental attributes. Meditation on positive attributes such as Compassion, Loving-kindness and Altruistic Joy can be used by someone who suffers from Aversion to become more caring and accepting of themselves and others. Meditations focused on generating peace and tranquillity can be used to develop deep levels of concentration and the benefits that come from having a focused mind.

The meditative process can also act as a mental laboratory for experiments that can generate insight into the five aggregates, Impermanence, Emptiness, Dependent Origination, the nature of the body and other subjects which ultimately assist in the eradication of craving.

In a calm meditative state, devoid of distractions, the subconscious can also absorb a lot of the insight which we can learn conceptually using our intelligence and rational mind. It is only when the Four Noble Truths penetrate to the very core of our existence that we can fully realise the ultimate goal of eliminating suffering, once and for all.

## Traditions within Buddhism

As Buddhism has spread across the globe, different traditions have arisen that have adapted and applied the Buddha's teachings in different ways. Each major tradition has its own scriptures, metaphysical superstructures and other nuances, but all of them each are agreed on the basic tenets of Buddhism such as the validity of the Four Noble Truths, Noble Eightfold Path, Impermanence, Emptiness/Not-Self and Karma.

When investigating the different traditions, it is worthwhile studying their practices and doctrines with the same fair but critical analysis that we have applied here. This is not done in an attempt to criticise or denigrate them, but rather, so we might better understand the causality of their practices, instead of being dissuaded by the fact that some may seem culturally foreign and mysterious.

When a spiritual seeker comes to understand the similarities among and differences between the different traditions, they become better equipped to identify which set of teachings resonate with them best, and are therefore more likely to find a tradition whose methods and practice best suit their background and temperament.

## Review

I hope that the above exposition and analysis has assisted you in gaining a basic understanding of the teachings of the Buddha. Even if you decide to take your investigations no further, you now understand the purpose of Buddhism and have a better appreciation of this peaceful religion which is embraced and practised by a billion people worldwide.

For readers who wish to learn more about Buddhism, I have included additional resources in the Appendix, which should help you to expand your knowledge of Buddhism and provide you with the tools to commence your spiritual journey, should you wish to do so.

“May all beings be happy  
and free from suffering”

# Appendices

## Further Investigations

The inquiring mind raises many questions, so it is likely you now have many questions about different aspects of Buddhism or about what the Buddha would say on various social, political, scientific, economic or religious issues.

Rather than pre-empt and answer your questions here, I have compiled a series of Internet-based resources which should be of assistance to you as you further your investigations into Buddhism.

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## Websites

### **Buddhanet**

<http://www.buddhanet.net/>

A Worldwide Buddhist information network containing an on-line learning library, guided meditations, a World Buddhist Directory to help you find your nearest Buddhist Centre and much more.

### **Access to Insight**

<http://www.accesstoinight.org/>

This site contains many translations of ancient Buddhist sutras, study guides, on-line books and essays.

### **The Tree Of Enlightenment**

<http://www.ecst.csuchico.edu/~dsantina/tree/>

This is an on-line book by Peter Della Santina, which provides an introduction to the major traditions of Buddhism.

### **Buddhist Answers**

<http://www.parami.org/buddhistanswers/>

Answers to frequently asked questions about the Buddha's identity, purpose and teachings.

### **Just Be Good**

<http://www.justbegood.net/>

A website introducing beginners to basic Buddhist concepts and with excellent guidance (particularly in the area of Buddhist morality) to help you get started.

### **Stephen Batchelor**

<http://www.stephenbatchelor.org/>

Website of the world's most famous Agnostic Buddhist, whose book 'Buddhism Without Beliefs', shows how anyone can follow the Buddhist path regardless of their background.

### **Friends of the Western Buddhist Order**

<http://fwbo.org/>

An international network dedicated to communicating Buddhist truths in ways appropriate to the modern world.

### **Dhamma Seed**

<http://www.dharmaseed.org/>

A collection of online MP3 talks aimed at the Western meditator

### **Aimwell**

<http://www.aimwell.org/>

Association for Insight Meditation

### **Vipassana Meditation**

<http://www.dhamma.org/>

Vipassana Meditation (i.e. insight meditation) as taught by S.N. Goenka and his assistant teachers in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin

### **Journal of Buddhist Ethics**

<http://www.buddhistethics.org/>

The first academic journal dedicated entirely to Buddhist ethics

### **Mind & Life Institute**

[http://www.mindandlife.org/hhdl.science\\_section.html](http://www.mindandlife.org/hhdl.science_section.html)

An independent, not-for-profit organisation devoted to establishing a mutually respectful working collaboration between modern science and Buddhism

### **Google Saffron: Theravada Search Engine**

<http://www.google.com/coop/cse?cx=005450833152705498271:hcbjbnmwso>

A Google-based search engine referencing over a hundred website specific to the Theravada Buddhist tradition

### **The Manual of Cosmic Order (by Ledi Sayadaw)**

<http://www.ubakhin.com/ledi/MANUAL04.html>

A detailed explanation of why karma is not the only force that determines what happens in the world. A useful (albeit complicated and wordy) resource for debunking myths about karma

## **Online Discussion Forums**

### **Dhamma Wheel**

<http://www.dhammadwheel.com/>

A Theravada-oriented discussion forum covering the full spectrum of Theravadin thought from the classical commentarial viewpoints through to modern interpretations of the Pali Suttas

### **Dharma Wheel**

<http://www.dharmawheel.net/>

A newly formed Buddhist discussion forum on the teachings of the Mahayana and the Vajrayana

### **Zen Forum International**

<http://www.zenforuminternational.org/>

A vibrant forum dedicated to exploring Zen Buddhism in both its traditional and modern forms

### **E-Sangha**

<http://www.e-sangha.com/>

E-Sangha is the world's largest online English-language Buddhist forum, containing many forums covering a diverse range of traditions and issues

## Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude goes to those who have reviewed this document in either the capacity of 'Buddhist' or 'Modern Skeptic'. If upon reading this document you have further suggestions for its improvement, please do not hesitate to e-mail [shravaka@gmail.com](mailto:shravaka@gmail.com)