

Buddhism

See also: [Real Buddhism?](#) and [Fundamentals of Buddhism](#)

The purpose of studying Buddhism is not to study Buddhism, but to study ourselves.

What is Buddhism?

"To avoid all evil, to cultivate good, and to purify one's mind—this is the teaching of the Buddhas" (*Dhammapada* 183). Avoiding evil and cultivating the good means to make our actions and speech non-harmful, and to establish wholesome qualities such as patience and compassion in our hearts. Purifying the mind refers to mental development, otherwise known as meditation. But before looking further into the Buddhist teachings we should take a moment to stop and consider: "*Why* should one avoid evil, cultivate the good and purify the mind?"

The Buddha Gotama once made the stirring declaration: "I teach only suffering *and the end of suffering.*" (*Majjhima Nikaya* 22, italics added.) The purpose of the Buddhist path is nothing more than this "end of suffering." It was for this reason, not to promote social harmony or fulfill the wishes of a higher being, that the Buddha taught his disciples to cultivate virtue and develop their minds.

Underpinning all the Buddhist teachings is the view that complete liberation from suffering is not a pipe dream, but a real possibility for *anyone*. And the benefits extend beyond the personal. Those who have freed their own minds are able to help others more effectively, and are incapable of causing intentional harm to any being, even an insect.

The aim of a Buddhist practitioner is not to unite with a higher power of any sort, but to purify his mind through meditation until it is free of desire, aversion and delusion. The mind that has been developed in this way will naturally let go of attachments. At that point one is said to undergo a transcendent experience, the supreme happiness called "Nibbana" ("Nirvana"). Nibbana is complete freedom from suffering.

Some people fear that giving up attachment makes a person uncaring and indifferent toward others. On the contrary—although one no longer *needs* others, true compassion for other beings increases the more one stops clinging to the illusory ego.

Although scholars may disagree about whether or not Buddhism is a religion, those who are looking for a way to improve their lives and alleviate suffering don't need to get entangled in theoretical debates. The point to understand is that Buddhism is in essence a *practice*, a method of mental training by which we cultivate morality, concentration and wisdom. It is meant to be lived, not just discussed or believed in.

Although many ethical systems stress the need to apply their doctrines to everyday situations, this is especially important in Buddhism since there is no question of a superior being intervening to redeem us or clear the path to heaven. Buddhist thought does not hold with the existence of a creator God or a savior (although some forms of the sect called "Mahayana" differ in this regard).

The idea of personal responsibility is central to the Buddhist teachings. The course of an individual's life, including the degree of happiness and peace he experiences, is ultimately determined by his own present and past actions, not by fate or any external power. The concept of fate, in fact, has no place in Buddhist thought.

The Buddha taught that no one can eliminate another person's suffering for him. Even the Buddha could not do that; he only showed the way. But with the teachings as a guide, each person is capable of liberating himself. That's why the Buddha urged his disciples to, "be a refuge unto yourselves."

Today there are two main schools of Buddhism, Theravada and Mahayana. Theravada Buddhism is followed primarily in southeast Asia, especially in Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Mahayana Buddhism is practiced mainly in China, Tibet and Japan.

As the oldest surviving branch of Buddhism, the Theravadan school is regarded by most scholars as being closest to the Buddha's original doctrine. The scriptures of Theravadan Buddhism were written in the ancient language called "Pali," and those early Buddhist texts are known as the *Pali Canon*. Our remarks here, and throughout this website, follow the Theravadan tradition.

In the remainder of this article we will outline the most important Theravadan Buddhist teachings.

As vast as the topic of Buddhism is, all the essential points are condensed in what are called the "Four Noble Truths" (*ariya sacca*). These are:

1. The truth of suffering (*dukkha*).
2. The truth of the origin of suffering (*tanha*).
3. The truth of the extinction of suffering (*nirodha*).
4. The truth of the Eightfold Path leading to the extinction of suffering (*magga*).

It is remarkable how much ground is covered in these four short lines. The Noble Truths describe the ultimate nature of all things in the universe, from conditioned phenomena to Nibbana (the "unconditioned" element, referred to in the third Noble Truth); they identify the cause of every form of unhappiness, from the slightest boredom to the greatest physical pain; they state what true freedom from suffering is, which is also genuine happiness; and, most important, they explain the method by which anyone can break free of suffering and attain the special happiness of Nibbana. In addition to these explicit teachings, many other important doctrines are implicit here, among them the teachings of nonself, rebirth and karma. These will be brought into our discussion as appropriate to help elucidate the Noble Truths.

If the Four Noble Truths are going to transform our lives they must be realized directly in a deep, personal epiphany, not just understood intellectually. In the rest of this article we will take a closer look at these Truths, one by one.

The First Noble Truth - Dukkha

The First Noble Truth states that all existence is *dukkha*. The Pali word "dukkha" refers to that which is inherently unsatisfactory because it is unstable and ever-changing. Things that are *dukkha* are unreliable and unsustainable—incapable of maintaining themselves in the same condition for long. "Dukkha" is usually translated as "suffering." Although that is an appropriate translation in many cases, it must be understood that *dukkha* is a characteristic not only of overtly painful feelings, but of the most *pleasant* feelings as well.

The gist of the First Noble Truth is that even the most blissful experiences are unsatisfactory in the end, since they inevitably change and disappear. It is said that pleasure is pleasant while it exists and unpleasant when it ceases, and that pain is unpleasant while it exists and pleasant when it ceases.

The Buddha taught that pleasure and pain form an inseparable unit, like the two sides of your hand. The palm of the hand cannot exist without the back. They come together. Likewise, pleasure and pain, which we usually think of as being opposites, are actually different sides of the same phenomenon. We cannot isolate pleasure, cannot enjoy pleasure in life without also experiencing its flipside—the unsatisfying state that arises when pleasure ends.

Unless we train ourselves to let go of attachment, therefore, the best we can achieve in life is a relative, intermittent happiness which sometimes alternates with outright pain. This is partly because our own minds, our bodies, and the external environment cannot truly be manipulated according to our will. We can't make these things stay the same or change simply because we want them to. No one, for example, can prevent his body from aging and eventually dying.

Even more troubling, the building blocks of existence, mind and matter, are themselves unsatisfactory by their very nature. Mental and material phenomena are so inherently unstable they are changing all the time, arising and dissolving from second to second (although we can't perceive this instability without training our attention through meditation practice). In reality they are nothing but empty appearances, without substance—and such illusions cannot be depended on for lasting happiness.

Whatever happiness we do experience is always vulnerable, because eventually it is going to alter and be lost. Because of this instability, every sensation in the changing process called "existence" falls short of providing complete contentment and is, ultimately, unsatisfying—*dukkha*. Although we may have occasional moments of great joy, they are fleeting, and our distress when they end is usually as great as the happiness. As Shakespeare put it, "Where joy most revels, grief doth most lament." Enduring, reliable happiness can only be found when we look beyond the changing conditions of mind and matter.

Although the first Noble Truth has been called pessimistic, scholars have pointed out that Buddhism is neither pessimistic nor optimistic, but realistic. It presents things just as they are, neither better nor worse. In fact, the Buddhist outlook is one of tremendous hope, since a solution to the problem of *dukkha* is given in the fourth Noble Truth, a solution which amounts to a guarantee: anyone who follows the Eightfold Path all the way will eventually arrive at the end of suffering.

A person driving across a bridge, a narrow bridge spanning a river, is bound to reach the other side, if only because there is no place to go but forward. The bridge has no intersections or turn-offs. A person could stop dead in the middle of the bridge, but as long as he keeps moving he'll get to the opposite bank of the river. In the same way, as long as we keep making effort on the Buddhist path, no matter how slowly, we're bound to reach the further shore, which is liberation from suffering.

Casual readers usually fail to notice how positive and hopeful the message of the Noble Truths is. But look at what these Truths say: complete freedom from *dukkha*, a happiness greater than we can imagine, is a real possibility. Best of all, there's a clear path leading to that happiness. Nibbana is not something to be obtained by luck or special dispensation but personal effort, the effort of following a proscribed course of action. And that's something anyone, whether male or female, can do.

Before hearing about the Noble Truths we weren't aware, even intellectually, that such a thing as Nibbana might exist. We can't be *certain* it is real until experiencing it ourselves, of course. But even so, the mere awareness of the possibility changes things, creating a new situation in the mind. And over time that possibility might affect the course of our entire lives.

Since we *are* aware of that possibility now—even if only from reading this article—we may decide that Nibbana sounds appealing and is worth making an effort to attain. But most of us are still content to trudge

along in dukkha, unsatisfactoriness. Instead of aiming for the highest happiness, the Buddha implied, we set our sights too low. (Is that the attitude of a pessimist?)

Another doctrine contained in the First Noble Truth—the most essential teaching of Buddhism, in fact—is that of *anatta*. "Anatta" is another Pali word, variously translated as "nonself," "not-self," "soullessness," "insubstantiality," "essencelessness," and "impersonality." Although not explicitly stated, anatta is implied in the First Noble Truth because dukkha is named; and where there is dukkha, unsatisfactoriness, there is also anatta, nonselfness.

The Buddha said that, contrary to what most people believe, no self exists anywhere in the universe, either within us or outside of us. Although it is a necessary linguistic convention to speak in terms of "me" and "you," in reality selfhood is nothing more than an imaginary construct, a great deception brought about and perpetuated by ignorance.

What we regard as a person is actually a process of continually-changing mental and physical components that arise and vanish very rapidly, to be replaced by new phenomena all the time. These five components are: the matter of the physical body, feelings, perceptions, volitions (and other mental formations), and consciousness.

None of these things alone constitutes an enduring self or ego, since each one is impermanent, even consciousness. Collectively they do not form a self, either, since they are no more than a group of separate elements. There is no alchemy that fuses them into a homogenous unit. Imagine a bicycle being disassembled, all the parts laid out on the ground. Where is the bicycle now? It does not exist. There are only separate pieces. "Bicycle" is just a name for an assemblage of parts, not something that has an indivisible identity. If it can be split up, it cannot be said to be a self. In the same way, the word "person" is just a designation for a group of mental and physical components, which in reality do not form an indivisible entity.

The Buddha taught that there is no autonomous ego standing apart from these five phenomena, no unchanging "I" that resides outside the process and orchestrates the different components. The process itself is all there is.

Many people find the teaching of nonself difficult to understand at first. But one way to approach it is to ask ourselves whether it is truly possible to be in complete control of things, even our own bodies and minds. It stands to reason, the Buddha taught, that if something is "me," or even a part of "me," we should be able to manipulate it according to our wishes, whereas things that don't belong to the self cannot be entirely controlled.

Most of us believe that our bodies belong to us, are part of our selves. But how much control do we have over the body, really? Sometimes we can make superficial changes, like trying a new hairstyle or losing weight, to make the body more attractive. But even those changes are possible only because, at the time, certain natural conditions happen to coincide with our desires. And there are many more aspects of the body about which that *isn't* the case.

For example, can we make the body taller with a wish? Or, in a snap of the fingers, change the body's bone structure, or command its DNA to change? Even if our lives depended on it, could we force our legs to run at fifty miles per hour? Can we tell a cut to stop bleeding, or make our cells stop needing oxygen—even for just a few minutes?

It would be useful indeed if we could stop needing oxygen at will, even for a very short time. But if, for example, we were eating dinner alone and a fish-bone got stuck in the throat, or if we found ourselves inside a smoke-filled building, or in any of a thousand other dangerous situations, we wouldn't be able to change this single condition of the body—its dependency on oxygen—even for a couple of minutes.

It's remarkable, when we think about it, that over the course of a lifetime there isn't a single window of even two or three seconds in which we have complete control over our physical body, not even when we're in mortal danger. And because of that we are always vulnerable; vulnerable to pain, injury, accident, and death. The Buddha wanted us to understand that there is not one moment of our lives in which that vulnerability goes away and the body is truly safe.

We may believe we are safe most of the time, but that's only because we haven't contemplated the true state of things. That doesn't mean we should become fearful and worry about things that may never happen; only that we should open our eyes to the real situation and stop identifying with the body as self. If we believe to be self something that we cannot control, then unhappiness is going to result. But if we gradually stop clinging to the body as something that truly belongs to us, our anxiety about it will decrease, and so will our suffering. Then even when illness and death come, we won't get upset. We'll still take proper care of the body, but in the mind we'll understand that it isn't "me" dying, only the body, which in truth isn't "me" or "mine."

But if the physical body is not the self, or a part of the self, surely the mind must be ours, must be our own? We can test this assumption by asking if we've ever had a thought we didn't want to have. For example, have we ever had an unkind or selfish thought about someone and then felt ashamed of it? If we are honest with ourselves we will realize the mind often has thoughts we don't want, thoughts that seem to intrude into consciousness on their own and make us feel uncomfortable. We wish the thoughts had not appeared and we want to get rid of them.

Sometimes the mind replays a painful event over and over again, even though we long for a switch to shut off the "broken record." To take another example, we may remember times when the mind was angry or racing and we wanted to calm it down, but it stayed very agitated anyway, despite our desires.

Some people wish they were more intelligent. Wouldn't it be something if we could say to the mind, "Mind, raise your IQ to 160 immediately," and the mind would oblige? But if the mind truly *were* self, it would have to obey—it would have to get smarter or calm down whenever we ordered it to do those things. If we told it not to have any bad or painful thoughts, then such thoughts would never arise.

The Buddha taught that the mind and body cannot be influenced by desire or willpower alone, and that is one aspect of the teaching of nonself. And if we cannot truly control those things nearest and dearest to us, our own bodies and minds, how much less control do we have over situations in general, which involve the external environment and the unpredictable behavior of other people?

According to the Buddhist teachings, at the deepest level of reality it is impossible to control or manipulate anything directly, whether internal or external, because all phenomena depend for their existence on specific causes or conditions. Some people may not understand what we mean by "conditions," so here is an illustration. Let's say a man is reading an article about a famous piece of music, Beethoven's "Piano Sonata No. 8 in C minor." Although the man has never actually heard the sonata, the article praises it so much that he wishes he could play it on the piano himself. But he'd never be able to play it straightaway, having never heard the sonata before, merely because he wanted to. It wouldn't matter how strong his willpower was. On the other hand, if he were to listen to the piece and practice it on the piano, putting in

hours of diligent effort, he might be able to perform it one day. But the performance would be a natural outcome of the time spent practicing, and not just the wish to perform the sonata.

Listening to and practicing the piece would be necessary conditions for playing it. And those conditions would in turn depend on many other conditions, such as having access to a functioning piano, having enough free time to practice, possessing all ten fingers, and so on. In a similar way, anything we can think of, anything we desire, depends on a unique set of conditions in order to exist or cease, and no one can change those requirements. The Buddha taught that this conditionality applies to everything in the universe.

The doctrines of nonself and conditionality are very closely related. These teachings should not be misunderstood to mean we are powerless, or that all outcomes are predestined. We can still bring about changes, even total transformations. If we couldn't, then why bother to train our minds by following the Buddhist teachings? But things can be changed only by establishing those causes from which the desired outcome arises inevitably, not by forcing it into existence through willpower.

The teaching of conditionality is most fully-developed in what is called the "doctrine of dependent origination." According to this teaching, every instance of suffering in the universe ultimately results from the same predictable, step-by-step process. Fortunately, this causal chain-reaction can be interrupted and even stopped forever in oneself by training the mind in meditation. This is not the place to examine this profound teaching in detail, however. For readers who want to delve into it more deeply, there are many excellent books on the subject.

Anatta, nonself, is the last of the three characteristics common to all things in the world. The other two characteristics are: dukkha (unsatisfactoriness or suffering) and anicca (impermanence). Dukkha we've already talked about, and impermanence was touched on when we spoke of the transient nature of mind and matter. These three characteristics are said to be different aspects of a single quality, like different facets of a gem. Although great thinkers through the ages have remarked on the suffering and impermanence of human existence (even though they may not have meant the same thing by those terms as the Buddha did), only the Buddha spoke of anatta.

We have spent much time discussing the doctrine of nonself because it is so fundamental to Buddhism that the Four Noble Truths and other important teachings cannot truly be understood without it. The following passage, which is very profound, summarizes nonself in terms of the Noble Truths:

"Mere suffering exists, no sufferer is found; The deeds are, but no doer of the deeds is there; Nibbana is, but not the man who enters it; The path is, but no traveler on it is seen."

— *Visuddhimagga*

Do not worry if these words seem incomprehensible now. We offer them as food for contemplation, and understanding will follow in the future.

The Second Noble Truth - Tanha

Now that we know something about dukkha—unsatisfactoriness—the next question is: where does dukkha come from? We might start by identifying where it does *not* come from. Although suffering often seems to originate externally, from the actions of another person, a force of nature, random accidents, or other

circumstances beyond our control, ultimately these external triggers are not the source of our unhappiness. In the deepest sense, the cause of dukkha lies within ourselves, although we cannot trace it back to the moment in which it all started.

But the fact that suffering comes from within instead of without is good news, because it means we can do something about it. Although the mind cannot be directly controlled, it *can* be trained over time. By training our minds in the appropriate way we can gradually eliminate the cause of suffering, and then suffering itself will stop arising. At that point, ultimate happiness will no longer be something we only dream about experiencing one day.

According to the Second Noble Truth, the cause of suffering is desire—literally, "thirst." Although other causes are also involved, desire or craving is the predominant one.

There are two ways in which desire causes suffering. The first way can be seen at almost any time if we pay close attention, because it happens all day long. As soon as we perceive something that we believe to be good, the mind desires and then clings to it. Clinging is the mental act of reaching toward something and grasping it. Whatever we cling to stays in the mind as an image or memory that we mentally build up and often become obsessed with. It is possible to cling to *anything*, whether a person, a physical object or an idea.

For example, let's say someone walks by a pastry shop and sees an apricot tart in the window. Having judged it to be something desirable, he can't stop thinking about the tart. Hours later he's still turning it over in his mind, wondering if the shop will be open when he gets off work, thinking about what he could serve the tart with, and so on. This is clinging. Clinging can be mild, medium or strong, even strong enough to incite violence.

There's nothing wrong with wanting to buy an apricot tart. But wouldn't it be better to buy it without agitating oneself in the process? Those who don't train their minds through meditation can't see clinging very clearly or realize how much it contributes to their unhappiness. But when we pay close attention to our mental states in the present moment, we see that grasping immediately puts the mind into an uncomfortable turmoil. We discover that the state of yearning, even in its mildest form, is unpleasant. Clinging is the very opposite of peace of mind. In addition, it sets us up for future disappointment if we are unable to obtain the desired object (and sometimes even if we are). The more we develop our minds, the more clearly we see the drawbacks of clinging and instinctively want to avoid it.

Through meditation we learn that if the mind can reach out and mentally grab something, it can also do the opposite, which is to retract and let go—or not grasp in the first place. This is not aversion, which tries to avoid or push things away, but just the centered, balanced state of refraining from clinging. If we train the mind to let go of grasping, then whenever it does let go we immediately feel more at ease and carefree.

As we learn to stop clinging to things, suffering diminishes and life in general feels much lighter and easier. We can still buy the pastry, but if it isn't available we aren't disappointed. This attitude can be applied to all aspects of life. Whenever there is something we want but cannot get—a certain job, a person, or anything else—we can prevent ourselves from suffering by not clinging to it. And if we take this approach even further and let go of clinging completely, even for a short time, it is possible to glimpse the happiness of Nibbana here and now. People who have had this experience can still lead active lives in the world, but they aren't disappointed when things don't go their way. The inevitable ups and downs of life cause them little or no suffering.

The mental agitation created by clinging is the first reason that desire is a cause of suffering. The second is that desire leads to renewed existence, with all the suffering that entails. As the Buddha explained, people were not put on this earth because God created them, but because past desire and ignorance caused each individual to be reborn with the particular mind and body he has now.

At this point we must introduce another idea that might be unfamiliar to some readers, that of rebirth. According to the Buddhist teachings, all beings are reborn into the world over and over again without end. From the Buddhist viewpoint, our present life is only one in a chain of countless births and deaths stretching back over aeons, and no one can say at what point this life-process began. The process continues indefinitely for each individual unless he eliminates desire and ignorance from his mind, which stops the "faring-on."

Each rebirth occurs according to laws of nature, whether we are aware of and consent to the process or not. Rebirth differs from reincarnation, however, because there is no unchanging soul or self which passes from one life to the next. Although the new "being" is not identical to the one from the previous existence, the two are causally linked. The new person, the Buddha taught, is neither exactly the same as, nor entirely different from, the previous one. The causal relationship between the two beings has traditionally been compared to the relation between a sound and its echo, a lamp and its light, an object and its image in a mirror, and a seal and the impression it makes in wax. Although a sound and its echo are not identical, the latter could not arise without the former. The same relation applies in the other examples, and so it is with the rebirth of beings.

Once reborn in the world we have to put up with many unsatisfactory situations and endure various degrees of suffering throughout our lifetime, which always culminates in illness and death. That is unavoidable. But if we could prevent birth from occurring, then no dukkha—no unsatisfactory state—could occur, either. The ultimate aim of the Buddhist is to stop the process of rebirth and realize Nibbana. Nibbana is said to be complete liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

The Buddhist teachings presume that the universe operates according to forces of cause and effect, not chance. The Buddha taught that these natural laws apply on all levels, from the wheeling of the planets to the splitting of a cell. They govern both external objects and the internal, subjective events of our own minds and bodies.

The way in which craving leads to suffering is one example of the cause and effect process. Whenever we desire and then cling to people, objects, feelings, sights, smells, tastes, and so on, we perform intentional actions in the effort to get what we want and avoid what we don't. The word "karma" in Buddhism does not mean fate, but simply these volitional actions. (Actions are not limited to what is done with the body. Our speech, and even thoughts accompanied by deliberate intention, are also considered actions).

Intentional actions are the generative force that causes beings to be reborn in various levels of existence, and these volitional deeds stem from desire. The actions may be wholesome, such as caring for the sick or volunteering at a charity organization, or unwholesome, such as stealing or committing adultery. Wholesome deeds lead to relatively happy states of existence, whereas unwholesome ones lead to unhappy, painful states.

But even if we could attain our personal version of the ideal life, that existence would still fall short of complete happiness. It would still involve some dukkha, unsatisfactoriness, because it could not last. It would depend on conditions of mind and matter, which are changeable and temporary. The happiness of Nibbana, the Buddha taught, is superior to the highest worldly happiness. That's why the aim of a Buddhist

is not simply rebirth in a more pleasant state of existence, but liberation from the birth-and-death process altogether.

A moment ago we mentioned the role of karma, volitional action, in the rebirth process, and this will be a good place to pause and look at some other aspects of karma that are important for an overall understanding of Buddhism. As human beings we know that many of our actions affect other people and the world around us, either for good or ill. That kind of effect from our deeds is easy to understand. But the Buddha was most concerned with the effects our good and bad deeds have on ourselves. Regardless of how one's actions affect others, everyone must experience the results of his *own* actions, like eating the ripe fruit of seeds he planted in the past.

The fruit of our actions is called "karma-result." We explained earlier that rebirth is one effect arising from volitional action, but the results of our past deeds can also be seen on a smaller scale in day-to-day experience. An illness, an accident, a good job offer, marriage—all of these events may be viewed as the fruits of past action.

People reap what they sow. If a person plants strawberry seeds, he'll have sweet berries to eat in the future. If he plants cocklebur seeds, he'll have only spiny, sharp burs. Strawberries can't come from cocklebur seeds, and burs can't come from strawberry seeds. In the same way, wholesome actions cannot yield unpleasant results for the person who does them, any more than unwholesome actions can yield pleasant results.

But according to the Buddhist teachings, the "fruit" of a particular deed might not ripen immediately, and the time of its ripening cannot be controlled. The result of an action might not appear until years afterward, or—and this is where rebirth comes in—even in another lifetime, making it very difficult to see the connection between a wholesome or unwholesome deed and its effect. It is impossible to know how large the time gap is in a particular case, because the effects do not come with little labels saying which action caused them. Because of that time gap, most people are ignorant about the results of their actions and so continue to perform deeds that bring them suffering.

But the gap between an action and its result helps to answer one of the perennial human questions, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" and vice-versa. The apparent unfairness of life can be explained when we take into account the longer timeline implied by rebirth. The Buddha said that if a good person experiences hardship, it is not due to chance or bad luck; he is experiencing the ripening fruit of an unwholesome action he performed in the past, often in a previous existence. But in the future—either later in this life or in a future lifetime—he will receive the fruit of the wholesome deeds he is performing now and enjoy great happiness. In the same way, someone who hurts others and yet is fortunate and prosperous is currently receiving the fruit of a past good action. The bad deeds he is committing now will bear fruit in the future, when he will have to undergo unpleasant experiences such as disease, poverty and so on.

The Buddha taught that the results of our good and bad deeds are not in any sense moral judgments, but simply the natural operation of cause-and-effect, which is impersonal. Once we understand karma and its result we can vastly improve our situation, because we will know what kind of "seeds" to plant in the present and which ones to avoid. As long as we have not yet realized Nibbana we will be reborn again in the world. For that reason we should perform wholesome actions so that we may enjoy mundane happiness until Nibbana is attained.

One last point should be made about karma before we move on: not *all* intentional deeds function as a cause for rebirth. In fact, some volitional actions help us to break free of the cycle of birth and death. These are the actions comprising the Eightfold path, which will be discussed when we get to the Fourth Noble Truth.

To return now to our main discussion of the Noble Truths, we will conclude this section by giving a summary of the Second Truth. Desire is the cause of suffering because: 1) Desire causes clinging, which immediately makes the mind uncomfortable. 2) Under the influence of desire, people cling to things and perform karma, intentional actions, in order to obtain them. Those actions produce rebirth, which in turn entails many types of suffering. Stuck in one flawed existence after another, beings fail to realize the freedom and ultimate happiness of Nibbana.

The Third Noble Truth - Nirodha

The Third Noble Truth is that of the cessation of dukkha. According to the Buddhist teachings it is possible for each one of us to become liberated from dukkha, from this conditioned existence with all its danger, trouble and suffering. The Buddha said, "Verily, there is an Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed. If there were not this Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed, escape from the world of the born, the originated, the created, the formed, would not be possible" (Ud.VIII.3).

The Pali word "nirodha" means "extinction," and in this context it is synonymous with "Nibbana." What is extinguished in Nibbana? The mental impurities of desire, aversion and delusion, and with them all suffering.

Nibbana should not be misunderstood as being a physical place, a kind of heaven. Buddhist cosmology describes many realms, including heavens and hells, but existence in all of those spheres is temporary. Nibbana, on the other hand, is permanent.

Called "the greatest bliss" in the *Collection of Middle-Length Discourses*, Nibbana is the summum bonum of the Buddhist path. It was this goal that the Buddha urged his disciples to work toward with diligence. Even though the Buddha is gone, it is said that Nibbana is still within reach, and we don't have to wait until after death to see it. The wise tell us that the contact with Nibbana is right here at the mind, the mind of each one of us.

Nibbana is often described as emptiness—empty of any attachment to anything whatsoever, void of any "I-making" or belief in self. But Nibbana is not the annihilation of the self, since no self exists in the first place.

Nibbana must be personally experienced in order to be comprehended. The Noble Ones who have seen Nibbana tell us it is very difficult to describe because there is nothing to compare it to. And whatever description one tries to fashion in words will automatically be false in some regard, since Nibbana is entirely free of mental and physical constructs of any kind, being the total absence of formations.

Still, we have to resort to language even here for a conceptual understanding, and one important synonym for Nibbana is "the deathless," the special element in which no birth, death or change occurs. The meditation teacher Upasika Kee Nanayon said, "There's no sense of self there, but what *is* there is... the undying property—free from birth, aging, illness, and death." And she added, "This Deathlessness is the true marvel the Buddha discovered and taught to awaken us."

Nibbana is often spoken of as freedom. Other synonyms offered in the *Pali Canon* are: unbinding, peace, safety, the far shore, the sublime, the wonderful, the amazing, the subtle, the unaging, the stable, the undisintegrating, the unailing, the unafflicted, the shelter, the island, and the refuge. "There's nothing by which you can label it," Upasika Kee said, "but it's something that you can pierce through to see—that is, by piercing through... craving and attachment into the state of mind that is pure, bright, and silent. This is the only thing that's important." When asked how Nibbana compared to the most pleasant worldly experience, the meditation teacher Achan Sobin Namto replied, "a hundred times better, a thousand times better."

Nibbana is called the "highest happiness," but happiness of an entirely different type than what we are used to. For example, take this exchange between the Buddha's chief disciple, Sariputta, and Udayi. Sariputta declared: "Oh friend! Nibbana is happiness! Nibbana is happiness!" Udayi asked, "But, friend Sariputta, what happiness can there be if there is no sensation?" Sariputta replied, "*That there is no sensation is itself happiness.*"

The Fourth Noble Truth - Magga

Having heard of this special refuge, Nibbana, how can we actually attain it? By cultivating the Eightfold Path, which is the Fourth Noble Truth.

The Eightfold path consists of developing the following wholesome behaviors and states of mind: right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, right understanding, and right thought. They don't have to be cultivated one by one in a particular order. Several factors, or all of them, are usually developed simultaneously. (For more information on the individual path-factors, please click on the link, [The Noble Eightfold Path](#)).

These eight factors fall into three broad categories: morality, concentration, and wisdom. Morality is an essential foundation for mental development. A person who wishes to follow the Buddhist path should abide by the Five Precepts, which are vows to refrain from the following unwholesome actions: 1) killing, 2) stealing, 3) sexual misconduct, 4) lying and harmful speech, and 5) taking intoxicants or recreational drugs. Those who are unable to follow the fifth precept yet can work toward it gradually, trying to exercise moderation in the meantime. To follow these precepts is to avoid evil and cultivate the good.

Concentration means to focus the mind so that it is no longer completely wayward, jumping here and there like a monkey. And "wisdom" refers to seeing that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and devoid of self. When this insight is clear enough it leads to the culmination of the Path, which is a personal realization of the Four Noble Truths.

Concentration and wisdom may be developed through the practice of insight meditation (*vipassana-bhavana*), also called "vipassana" and "mindfulness meditation." The practice of mindfulness is the true heart of Buddhism, and it is indispensable for realizing Nibbana. Although a full explanation of mindfulness would take much more space than we have here, put simply, "mindfulness" means to keep one's awareness in the present moment in a special, precise way instead of thinking about the past or the future.

A vipassana meditator observes his own mind and body with nonjudgmental, impartial attention. He is aware of thoughts, feelings and bare sense-impressions as they appear and then pass away in the immediate present. Although other types of meditation existed before the Buddha's time, it was the Buddha

who discovered and systematized the practice of mindfulness. For those who don't cultivate mindfulness, the Buddhist teachings remain abstract and sterile—only empty shells of the truth.

The method for practicing insight meditation is described in the "Four Foundations of Mindfulness Discourse" ("Satipatthana Sutta"), which states: "This is the only way, O Bhikkhus, for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the destruction of suffering and grief, for reaching the right path, for the attainment of Nibbana, namely, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness." The Four Foundations are: 1) the body, 2) feelings, 3) consciousness and 4) a mixed group which includes emotions, sights, sounds, smells, touches and tastes. The meditator observes these phenomena as they arise and then disappear naturally.

To develop mindfulness, concentration and wisdom through meditation is to purify the mind. That means eliminating delusion so that reality may be seen clearly, like wiping the dust from a mirror so one's face can be seen. And what is the reality seen when the dust is gone? That all phenomena are not-self.

The entire Eightfold Path is designed to help people let go of the wrong view of self. Over time the Buddhist practitioner gradually stops clinging to "his" body and mind until he sees that in the past he made a mistake in taking them to be his self. They are not, and never were, his own. They are merely natural phenomena, impersonal and ownerless, not self or things that belong to an "I." He realizes that the same is true of all other beings and objects in the world. When seeing nonself clearly, he automatically lets go of desire and clinging. When desire is momentarily absent, Nibbana appears.

According to the teachings, experiencing Nibbana even for a single moment brings about a permanent change called "awakening." Because the wrong view of self has been removed, the different kinds of mental suffering—all of which ultimately stem from clinging to a self—are greatly reduced and eventually disappear altogether. In addition, a person who has had this experience cannot continue being reborn in the world indefinitely. Once having entered the "stream" to Nibbana, he can take rebirth no more than seven times. (Those who have had the most profound realization will not be reborn at all.) After the last existence he is said to attain Nibbana permanently, without ever coming back to the world (but again, it should be understood that in reality there is no self who "enters" Nibbana). At that point all the pains and discomfort that stem from having a physical body are done away with forever. That is how eradicating desire removes the entire mass of suffering, both mental and physical.

Many words have been used to describe the Eightfold Path, and they are helpful for a theoretical understanding. But the true Buddhist Path is found within, not outside of ourselves or in books. We don't have to look for it, because it is right here—just this body and mind. The body is called "rupa" in Pali. The mind is called "nama." These two things, rupa and nama, are the genuine Path. No matter where we go, the mind and body are there, too. We take them along and can't escape them. That's why the Buddhist teachings can be practiced anywhere, at any time.

When first learning about Buddhism we may feel overwhelmed by the amount of information available. But it's not necessary to read and study a lot. What we really need to study is ourselves. The practice itself doesn't have to be complicated. Actually, the practice of mindfulness is so simple that it almost defies description. All we have to do is keep bringing our attention back to the present moment, over and over again. No matter what we experience within this body-and-mind—whether a thought, feeling, touch, sight, sound, smell or taste—we should be aware of it in the present, and then let it go. "Know and let go" is the Buddhist path in a nutshell. Or we can summarize it even more briefly: don't cling. It all comes down to that. Don't cling to *anything*.

Truth transcends ritual, language and labels. The Buddha said, "He who sees the Dhamma (ultimate Truth) sees me. He who sees me sees the Dhamma." Whether he calls himself a "Buddhist" or not, anyone who cultivates the good and purifies his mind until nonself is truly clear will understand how to be free from all suffering.