

## **Chapter 4: Pantheistic/Panentheistic Philosophy**

**Overview:** How do you define God? The next two chapters focus on different ways of defining a higher power or force, if there is one. In this chapter we will first focus on pantheism, the idea that God is identical with the universe. We will look at ancient Roman philosophers, called Stoics, who believed that we can achieve peace by harmonizing our behavior with God (or what they call the logos). Next, we will look at panentheism, the idea that God is within us. The Buddha represents this view, suggesting that we can access God (what he calls Buddha nature) largely through meditation and a proper understanding of reality.

**Major Ideas:** After reading the material in this chapter and hearing the lectures, you should understand the following major ideas in depth, but other parts of the reading may appear on the assessment (besides names and dates).

*Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius*

Stoicism

The Logos

Disinterestedness

Control vs. Influence

*The Buddha*

The Four Noble Truths

Interconnectedness/Impermanence

No Self (Anatta)

Buddha Nature

Karma and Reincarnation

## **Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius**

We already learned about some of the ways in which the ancient Greeks influenced today's world, but there was also a direct influence on the culture that took power in that region after the Greeks: Rome. Ancient Rome is a great source of mystery and wonder in the Western world, and films from *Spartacus* to *Gladiator* immortalize aspects of the culture.

It is sometimes hard to separate ancient Greece and Rome, as both cultures shared so many similarities. In fact, sometimes we refer to it all together as *Greco-Roman culture*. Christianity itself developed in a Greco-Roman context while Rome was the dominant power. The first Bibles (including the Old *and* New Testament) were actually written in Greek, since Greek was still the dominant language in the region. It's true that the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic, but it was translated to Greek to produce the full Bible we know today. In the present day, of course, you can find translations of the Bible in many languages.

However, Christianity was not the only belief system that took hold in ancient Rome—Stoicism was another one. Although Stoicism flourished in ancient Rome, it was actually started in ancient Greece by a man named Zeno of Citium (334-262 b.c.e.). Zeno had discussions with students and others at a famous *stoa*, or a large porch-like structure with columns. Hence he and his followers became known as *sto-ics*, or men of the porch.

### **The Origins of Stoicism**

Before we get into Stoicism proper, it will help to consider other Greco-Roman philosophies that contributed to the development of Stoicism. First, we must look at *Hedonism*, basically the view that individual pleasure is always good and should be sought. An ancient Greek who represented this view was Aristippus (430-350 b.c.e.); he thought that we should live life in pursuit of pleasure with no guilt or apology.

But is there a difference between higher intellectual and emotional pleasures, versus lower physical, bodily pleasures? For example, is eating a delicious pie a more worthy experience than the emotional feeling of love for another person? Aristippus argued that physical pleasures, being the most intense, are superior. Another thinker, Epicurus (341-270 b.c.e.) disagreed, arguing that intellectual pleasures like peace of mind are more valuable than crude, physical pleasures. As we will see, Epicurus' view in particular had an influence on Stoicism.

But Stoicism also has its roots in another philosophy that originated in ancient Greece: *Cynicism*. Cynicism was founded by a guy named Antisthenes (455-360 b.c.e.) but was famously defended by Diogenes (412-323 b.c.e.). Cynics back then, as they do today, rejected civilization and its customs. And they despised people who took civilization too seriously. For example, a Cynic would laugh at a Wall Street lawyer trying to rise to the top of the industry, or a YouTuber trying to get millions of followers. Do you really need wealth and popularity to be happy, the Cynic asks, just because that's what society tells you? Cynics of this time generally believed that a life of luxury was needlessly complicated, choosing instead to live simple lives guided by rational control of one's thoughts and actions as well as distance from society. Diogenes, for example, was known to live in a barrel, rarely bathed, and sometimes urinated in the street. He even supposedly told Alexander the Great (arguably the most powerful man in the world at the time) to move and stop blocking his sunlight! While the early Cynics made some legitimate, thoughtful criticisms of society, later Cynics often had the reputation of being so arrogant and hostile as to be useless.

As should be obvious, Cynics and Hedons in ancient Rome generally did not see eye to eye. Hedons sought pleasure within society, and Cynics sought austerity away from society. Stoicism, as we'll see, was a complete rejection of Hedonism, and a partial rejection of Cynicism. Cynics, for example, greatly admired Socrates as someone who had seriously challenged social norms (recall Socrates' trial, where he was charged with speaking against the state Gods and corrupting the youth).

**Table 4.** Diogenes and Alexander the Great<sup>1</sup>



Stoics agreed on the virtuous character of Socrates, and they agreed that one should live a rationally-guided life not explicitly in pursuit of pleasure. However, Stoics did not agree with the Cynics' full rejection of society.

## **Stoicism**

To be clear, *Stoicism* is the belief that through reason and self control we can deal with any situation the external world presents to us. It's not the external world that's the problem; it's us, our *internal* world. By internal world I mean our thoughts, emotions, beliefs, wills. It would be strange if you had not experienced a stressful, boring situation, like waiting in

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from <https://c8.alamy.com/comp/JC5RJ1/alexander-the-great-visiting-diogenes-an-ancient-greek-philosopher-JC5RJ1.jpg>

line at the DMV, or sitting in traffic. How do you handle such situations? Do you start complaining and blaming the world, others, or even the universe itself? Not the Stoic. The Stoic fully appreciates that on a day to day basis, life will present him with situations he cannot control. Instead of trying to fight against them, the Stoic simply accepts things as they are. After all, can complaining about traffic ever really help the situation? Can it make the traffic end? Of course not.

Regardless of how you behave in the face of a difficult situation, the situation will remain as it is—and this is exactly the Stoics' point.

But to really understand Stoicism, it will help to look at perhaps the two most famous Stoics, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. Importantly, Epictetus was a slave, and Aurelius was an emperor. The fact that two people at opposite ends of the social ladder can still be Stoics illustrates the fact that Stoicism, like Cynicism, doesn't put much value in external things or accomplishments.

### **Epictetus the Slave**

Epictetus (50-130 c.e.) was eventually brought to Rome as a slave, though all the details of his life are not so clear. Apparently even as a slave he was an impressive person, because he was eventually brought to study with a powerful Stoic. However, he never forgot the fact that he was, indeed, a slave. He had no control over what was done to him. Maybe he would be transferred to a new place, deprived of food, or even tortured. Although he had no control over the external events in his life, he learned that he did have control over his internal life—his reactions to external events. Supposedly he was tortured so bad once that he developed a limp for the rest of his life. But he didn't complain or even worry about it for a second, for he had learned what he truly had control over—his mind and will.

Epictetus was freed from slavery later in his life, becoming a well known Stoic philosopher in his time and leading two thriving schools. He was known as a very charitable person who, consistent with Stoicism, lived quite modestly. Like Socrates, he wrote nothing down,

and what we have from him are notes from one of his most devoted students. Some of those notes were eventually made into a small pamphlet called *The Enchiridion*, meaning *manual*, which was often carried into battle by Roman soldiers.<sup>2</sup>

## **Marcus Aurelius the Emperor**

On the other side of the Stoic coin we have Marcus Aurelius Antonius (121-180 c.e.), a person whom some refer to as a true philosopher king, as envisioned by Plato. Aurelius was adopted by Emperor Hadrian (76-138 c.e.), eventually being chosen to rule as the next emperor over another adopted son. Once Aurelius was emperor he gave the other son a chance to be co-emperor, but Aurelius basically did all the work. I'm guessing you are familiar with the phrase "with great power comes great responsibility" and this was true in particular for Aurelius during this particular period of Rome. Aurelius not only had to resolve local disagreements between religious factions, but also attend to barbarian invasions.

While he was away on military campaigns, there were rumors that his wife took other lovers. There were even rumors that his one remaining son (four of them died) was not his own. One of his generals betrayed him. Despite all this, as a good Stoic should, Aurelius was unaffected, and even in some cases promoted his wife's supposed lovers because it was best for Rome! He was known to be one of the wisest and forgiving emperors.

He died alone on a military campaign. After all the day's duties were complete, he would retire to his tent, and write his reflections on life into a journal. When his men found him dead, they kept the journal, and it has since become one of the primary sources of Stoic wisdom called *The Meditations*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Epictetus. (2004). *Enchiridion*. T. Crawford (Ed.). New York: Dover.

<sup>3</sup> Aurelius, M. (1997). *The Meditations*. W. Kaufman (Ed.). New York: Dover.

## The Logos for Stoics

When we discussed the Presocratics we learned about their view of the logos as the source of everything, a rationally-ordered principle or force. We also learned that logos is a dynamic word, sometimes referring to speech, dialogue, and more. For the Stoics, the logos was a metaphysical force, a rational principle that gives rise to and sustains everything we observe, not unlike the view of some of the Presocratics. Recall that pantheism is the belief that God is identical with the universe, that God is all around us. The Stoics' view of the logos (their version of God) is pantheistic in this sense.

However, the Stoics took it further than the Presocratics. The Stoics believed that the world is *determined* by logos. Recall that determinism is generally the view that the present moment is fixed based on the past and laws of nature. However, the Stoics didn't yet have the concept of *the laws of nature* so they instead claimed that the world is determined by logos, the ordering principle.

Because the universe is determined by the logos, the Stoic argues, it is completely pointless to ever wish that things are different than what they are. Now we can see why a Stoic reacts the way she does in traffic. After all, the traffic is merely a determined event, there was nothing you ever could have done to stop it.

However, Stoics argue that, while the external world is hopelessly controlled by the logos, we can still control our minds and wills. There seems to be a contradiction here, doesn't there? If we are determined, how can we have any sense of freedom? Well as we saw when we discussed determinism and freewill, the Stoic is advocating for a type of compatibilism: the idea that freedom and determinism can work together. Defenders of Stoicism also point out that Stoics are arguing for a way of life, rather than for an epistemological position. In other words, Stoics are more concerned with living our lives in serenity than with being conceptually consistent.

Stoics basically want you to see that as a human you are a small part of a greater whole: the logos, a rationally-guided plan. The only things you can truly control are your attitudes, beliefs, and reactions. Control only what you are capable of controlling. For the Stoic, everything happens for a reason, so nothing that happens can ever really be *bad*, since it's all part of the plan set into motion by the logos.

Do you believe in a divine plan from God? Some scholars have traced the emphasis on submission to God in Christianity to submission to the logos in Stoicism.<sup>4</sup> Although later Christian thinkers would reject Stoicism as a whole, there are some interesting similarities.

### **Disinterestedness**

Some Stoics had very strict guidance for how to live one's daily life, often suggesting periods of deep contemplation or even sophisticated rules for eating. We won't be able to get into all the details here, but we will touch on one core recommendation Stoics made for our everyday behavior, *disinterestedness*. When does an innocent discussion turn into a shouting match? Probably at the point when the people involved start taking things personally. Disinterestedness means that we are not attached to events and people personally. It means we make an effort to be detached, so we can see the truth. Because if we are attached, then we are emotional, and emotions can blind us from what's really going on.

Aurelius was disinterested when he promoted his wife's lovers. Epictetus was disinterested when he was crippled for life. Neither of these Stoics took it personally, they were not invested enough in external events to do that.

Although disinterestedness might appear to push us away from close ties to other people, a Stoic is indifferent only to their own ego and reactions to external events, not necessarily to others. In fact, Stoics argue that we are more likely to see ourselves as members of a community if we are

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<sup>4</sup> See the chapter on the stoics in: Soccio, D. S. (2010). *Archetypes of Wisdom* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.



disinterested, because we'll be more aware of what's really going on and what others truly need.

Buddhists, as we will see, share some views with the Stoics, including a sense of detachment. Buddhists usually argue that there are good and bad emotions. For example, even a Buddhist who suggests certain types of detachment would still think we should grieve over a lost loved one. Stoics do not generally disagree, and while it's true that Stoics see some emotions as vices (negative character traits), they also argue that emotions can sometimes serve a purpose. For both philosophies, a lot of it comes down to context. Are you getting emotional because, say, you spilled coffee on your shirt? Probably not a good idea if you care about your own intellectual and spiritual development. Or, are you getting emotional because a longstanding friendship just ended? Now that makes more sense from a Stoic and Buddhist perspective.

### **Control versus Influence**

Even ancient Stoics were aware of the apparent implications of some of their views. What's the point of living at all if we can only control our wills, but we can't control the external world around us? This implication is of course a problem with fate in general. If you believe in fate—that everything happens for a reason—how do you reconcile that with freewill, if you believe that you have it? A related concern is: if we can only control our minds and wills, as Stoics suggest, what about helping other people? Other people, after all, are simply external events to us and we can't control them anymore than we can control the existence of traffic. So why donate to charities? Or join the local chapter of Black Lives Matter to effect change?

Some Stoics might respond that charity efforts and political campaigns don't necessarily get at the root of the problem of human suffering, which is more internal/spiritual. Such efforts and campaigns generally address material concerns—often literally measured in dollars—not spiritual ones. Recall Epictetus, a *slave* who achieved a deeper state of

peace and wisdom than most millionaires despite his lot in life. Epictetus did not need anyone's material charity.

Yet, helping others and social justice are not necessarily incompatible with Stoicism. And Stoics addressed these implications by pointing to a difference between *control* and *influence*.

For the Stoic, we can influence the external world, even if we can't control it. You can influence your grade in a class by studying, but you can't control it—only your professor can control your grade. You can influence others' opinions by arguing your point of view, but you cannot control their opinions. Likewise, even if you can't control who gets elected, what wars are started, what natural disasters occur, how racist and prejudiced people are—you can still influence all of it by voting, donating money, joining causes, preaching acceptance, and so forth.

## The Buddha

The man who would become the Buddha (which translates as *the enlightened one* from Sanskrit) was born Siddhartha Guatama (560-480 b.c.e.) into a kingdom in what is now Nepal (a small country in between India and China). Being the son of a prince, Siddhartha had all the benefits of that lifestyle that you might imagine. He was able to practice any sport or game he desired. He displayed natural talent in almost every activity he engaged in. He was surrounded by wealth in many different forms. His family catered to his every need, as did servants. He could have any sort of food or drink he wanted, and any woman he wanted. As you might expect, all of this led him to Hedonism. He was sheltered from the outside world. His parents only allowed him to experience the pleasures of a rich life, never introducing him to true human suffering.

Despite his princely inheritance, Siddhartha felt early on that there was something missing from his life. He became bored of his existence of excess. He began to wander from his kingdom against the wishes of his parents, eventually coming across clear examples of suffering, including a sick and disabled person. This suffering had a profound impact on the young Buddha. Indeed, the idea that humans suffer would become a founding principle of Buddhism as the first noble truth, as we will see. However, the word in Sanskrit that is often translated into suffering is *dukkha*, and *dukkha* is a more dynamic word in Sanskrit than the word suffering is in English. In fact, some argue that *dukkha* is better translated as *unsatisfactoriness*. But more in this later.

The more Siddhartha pondered the fact of *dukkha*, the more he was taken with it. Seeing true suffering led him to question one of his servants about it, leading him to the conclusion that life itself is filled with *dukkha* up until death. He started asking deep questions which no one seemed able to answer. What is the point of living if all we do is suffer and die? Can true happiness even exist if life is nothing but *dukkha*? What's the use of being born at all?

The pleasures of his kingdom were no longer satisfying in light of this new perspective. Siddhartha went into a deep level of despair. Then one day while wandering outside the kingdom, he came upon an *ascetic*. An ascetic is a monk who lives a simple life, curbing all sexual and bodily desires in order to reach a serene state of mind. Siddhartha thought he had found the answer to his deep questions in the cool detachment and seeming lack of desire in the ascetic. Perhaps this is the way to truly escape the suffering of life, he thought. Maybe a life of strict discipline is what it takes.

That settled it. Siddhartha decided to completely cast away his princely existence and become an ascetic. He would travel far from his kingdom, seeking wise sages who might be able to answer his deep questions about life, suffering, happiness, and purpose.

Siddhartha traveled the world and met many wise teachers. He learned interesting and useful philosophies on life as well as effective methods of disciplining the body, but he found no answer to his deep questions.

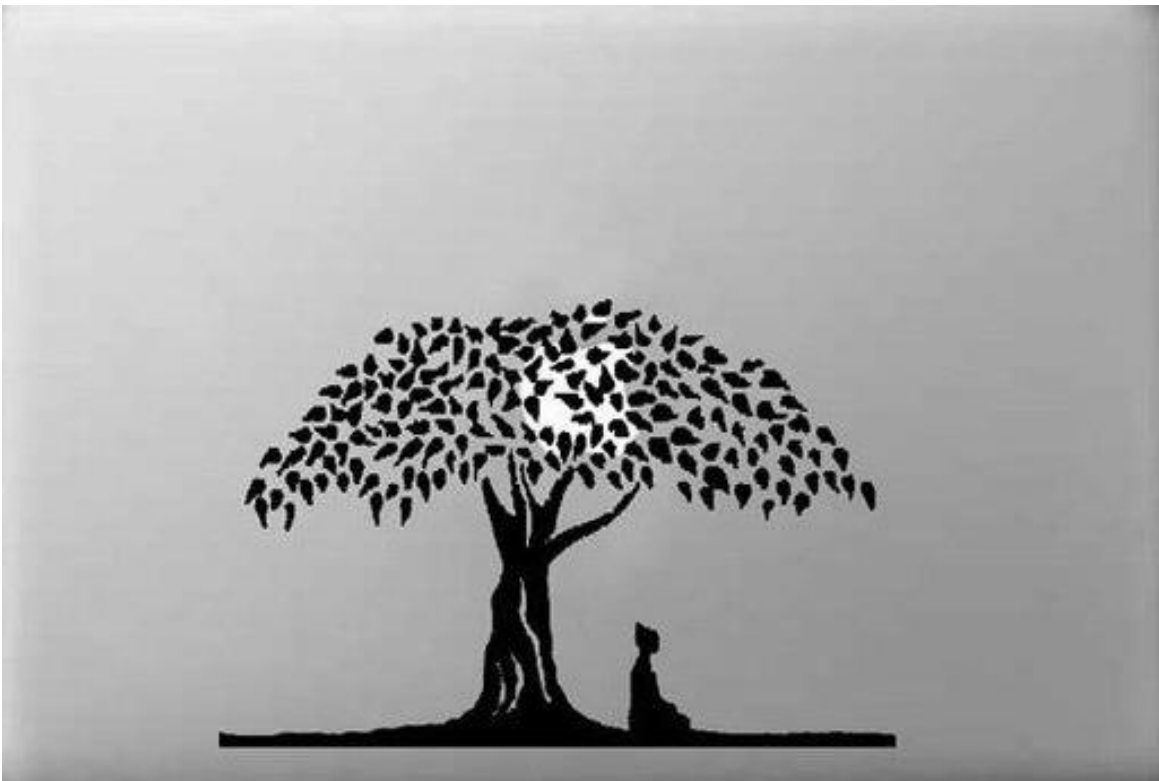
When he grew tired of hearing advice from ordinary sages, Siddhartha decided to settle down with a few others in a grove of trees near a village in India. For around six years he meditated, fasted, and concentrated on his deep questions. Despite conquering most of his physical appetites and learning to control his mind, Siddhartha still found no answers to his questions about life's meaning.

Claiming that he could feel his backbone through his stomach, he realized that he had nearly destroyed his body in his efforts to control it. He had exchanged one extreme (indulgence) for another (denial). This caused him to realize that nourishment for the body is important too, and that the life of the ascetic is seriously flawed. Like other thinkers, including Aristotle and Confucius, Siddhartha concluded that there must be a *middle path* between indulgence and denial.

Siddhartha's fellow monks were not impressed when he began to properly nourish himself, so he left to continue wandering. Once while

he was meditating under a fig tree, Siddhartha was given a bowl of rice milk by a woman who had a vision of the future Buddha. The legends differ here, but one says that Siddhartha used the milk to sustain him for 49 days. Eventually he bathed in a nearby stream, then sat back down under the tree, claiming that he would not move until his deep questions were answered, or he was dead. Finally during a full moon in May, 524 b.c.e. Siddhartha became enlightened, seeing the true nature of existence and humanity's relation to it. The tree is now known as *the Bodhi Tree* or the tree of wisdom. The original tree, of course, is no longer alive but there are other sacred fig trees throughout the Eastern world, some of which are said to be descended from seeds of the original.

**Table 5.** The Buddha Under the Bodhi Tree<sup>5</sup>



So what *is* enlightenment? Can it be described or put into words? Is it like the Tao, and beyond words to begin with? Can someone fake enlightenment? Enlightenment is often described as the consciousness a

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<sup>5</sup> Retrieved from <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/9b/72/f2/9b72f27e119cd3f2cd529255b6d93625.jpg>

person experiences after she has achieved *nirvana* or a state of no-thing, emptiness. Like the Tao, enlightenment is said to transcend words and ordinary experience. Complicating the matter is the fact that different sects of Buddhism can differ on how enlightenment works. Some Buddhists claim that enlightenment can be sudden, though this is very rare. But perhaps most sects argue that enlightenment is a process whereby one gradually loses their attachments and develops a deeper understanding of reality.

When Siddhartha Guatama became the Buddha under the Bodhi Tree, his vision of the true nature of reality would become the founding principles of Buddhism. Below are some of the core ideas from Buddhist philosophy.

### **The Four Noble Truths**

Like other belief systems, some of the principles of Buddhism differ from sect to sect. However, the four noble truths essentially remain unchanged. Here they are:

1. Life is dukkha (suffering/unsatisfactoriness)
2. The origin of dukkha is attachment, especially to the false self
3. Dukkha can be overcome
4. Dukkha can be overcome by following the eight-fold path

Notice that the first noble truth is about suffering, the aspect of life that Siddhartha struggled with that ultimately led him to become the Buddha. But as noted, dukkha goes beyond just physical suffering. What's important to note is that dukkha can refer to physical *and* mental suffering. If one has a broken leg, that would qualify as dukkha. But if even a corrupt politician feels depression, that is also dukkha. The Buddha himself had all his physical needs met as a prince, and yet he still felt that lack of satisfaction with life, the dukkha.

So what of the other three noble truths? The last three truths get us into Buddhist metaphysics, so to fully understand them we will have to go

through those ideas. But a few words can be said here. The second noble truth says we experience dukkha because we are attached. Sometimes Buddhists in the West are depicted as very humble people with few possessions. Indeed, Buddhists do argue that being attached to material things is bad in that it leads you away from enlightenment. However, the central source of attachment for a Buddhist is to our *self*. We believe our self to be a permanent thing, and this causes the most suffering of all. Our attachment to our self, for example, is one of the reasons we are afraid of death. The no self idea in Buddhism (called *anatta* in Sanskrit) is complicated, and will be addressed in more depth below.

The third noble truth is basically just reassurance that there is a way to overcome dukkha. And the fourth noble truth is complicated, and can differ quite a bit from one sect of Buddhism to another. Still, the fourth noble truth is usually said to be *the eight fold path*, which just gives us more strict instructions for putting our life on the road to enlightenment. Essentially, the eight fold path aims to achieve right understanding, purpose, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, awareness, and meditation. By *right* Buddhists mean in line with Buddhist metaphysics.

One core practice within Buddhism is *meditation*. Meditation practices differ greatly, but fundamentally a Buddhist meditates to see the true nature of reality, to see what the Buddha saw when he became enlightened.<sup>6</sup> For example, one type of meditation is mindfulness meditation, wherein a person simply tries to quiet his mind and be aware of whatever arises in his experience. Buddhists argue that when we quiet our minds in this way, there is no evidence of a permanent self. However, to see the truth of this point it can take time and dedication—perhaps even a lifetime.

Although the culmination of Buddhist practice seems like it might be apathy toward the world around us, Buddhists do not see it this way. In

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<sup>6</sup> For a nice summary of the benefits of mindfulness meditation see: Flaxman, G. & Flook, L. (n. d.) Brief summary of mindfulness meditation research. Retrieved from <http://marc.ucla.edu/workfiles/pdfs/MARC-mindfulness-research-summary.pdf>

fact, Buddhists argue that if one meditates and sees the true nature of reality, they will in fact become *more* compassionate. Another type of meditation that many Buddhists advocate is sometimes called *loving-kindness meditation*. This sort of meditation begins with the meditator focusing on someone she really loves, then someone she likes, then someone she is acquainted with, then someone she doesn't like, then someone she hates. Over time, the goal is to love the person you originally hated—in other words to develop true compassion for *all* beings.

### **Interconnectedness/Impermanence**

One of the great sources of dukkha for a Buddhist is that we falsely believe that the things we observe are fundamentally disconnected from other things. For example, I am distinct from you, and you are distinct from this textbook, and this text is distinct from a fly, and so forth. But for a Buddhist, those sorts of distinctions are *artificial*, meaning that at the deepest level, there is no distinction between one thing and another. Remember the appearance versus reality thing with the ancient Greeks? The Buddha is claiming that although things *appear* to be separate, in *reality* they are not.

So what is the reality? The reality is that all things are fundamentally interconnected and not separate from each other. What really is the boundary between your skin and the air around you? At the level of cells, the boundary is not all that clear. Although I may appear to be separate from the environment around me, I fundamentally depend on the environment for air, water, food, and more.

For the Buddhist, the universe is in flux, constantly changing. Life and death make up a dynamic process, but ultimately everything is part of a single unity. That is, each aspect of the universe is integrally connected with every other aspect.

The other half of this metaphysical view is *impermanence*. If everything is connected and constantly changing, then nothing is permanent. You



seem to be a permanent thing right now. You can press into your bones and they seem like hard, permanent things. And yet, you are constantly growing older, and your cells are constantly regenerating. In fact, your body is quite literally different now than it was when you were, say, five years old. When you really pay attention, the Buddhist argues, how can anything be said to be permanent?

The apathy objection to Buddhism mentioned earlier is often raised here as well: if we are just impermanent collections of cells, why does anything we do matter? What's the point? If I am an impermanent thing, then why don't I just jump in front of a train to let my cells "merge with the universe?"

Buddhists often respond to this sort of objection by referencing *the two-fold truth*, a metaphor to help us understand the two different levels of reality, often represented by a picture of a glacier above and below the water. At the superficial level of reality (above the water), we see things as permanent, with identities (*this* mountain is different from *that* mountain). But at the true level of reality (under the water) we see that everything is interconnected (*this* mountain is actually the same as *that* mountain).

Most of our lives are lived perceiving reality at the superficial level, according to Buddhism. We think that relationships are permanent, egos are real, material objects will last forever. But this is only true superficially, of course. If we could stop to perceive the true nature of reality we would realize that relationships will end, egos are a fiction, and material objects will eventually turn to dust.

Notice, however, that Buddhism does say that perceiving reality at the superficial level is often necessary—if you think a train coming at the level of true perception (impermanence) you might not worry about getting hit by it. But if you look at the train as a serious concern at the superficial level of reality, you probably won't get in its way.

## No Self (Anatta)

While it is a problem for a Buddhist to see *any* object as permanent, the most damaging object we falsely believe to be permanent is the *self*. If the world is constantly changing, and everything in it is impermanent, this means that your self is also impermanent. But what *is* the self? Although this seems to be a quite abstract question, it is often deeper than many people realize. In fact, the question is so deep that it has been asked by philosophers both East and West, as we will see.

For the Buddha, the self we typically identify as is largely a physical and psychological construction. In other words, the sense of being an *I*, of being an ego, is an illusion that results from the way our minds work, the way we've been socialized, and the literal structure of our bodies. As you grow up, you start being identified with certain characteristics. These characteristics may originate in a physical trait, but then get reinforced by others psychologically. For example, imagine a boy who is stronger than most other boys. Physically, he has the trait of being literally strong. But as people tell him that he is strong, this strength becomes a psychological trait he identifies with. And he begins to falsely believe that his strength is a permanent characteristic of who he is (his self). But for the Buddhist, this boy's strength is a construct, and nothing permanent. Both the psychological and physical aspects of his strength will be gone as he ages and eventually passes on. And *all* his traits will be gone once (just as is the case with all of us).

Although the Sanskrit term *anatta* is often translated as no self, a better translation might be *illusory self*. Buddhists are not saying that there is literally no self; they are saying that we have a false understanding of the self as something permanent. The self we typically identify with does exist, it's just not what we think it is.

And the illusion of self is especially persistent, which is why Buddhists target a true understanding of the self as an especially important part of their practice. For example, Buddhists argue that you can better see the illusion of self and all its incarnations during quiet meditation. As the

Western philosopher David Hume will also argue, when you look at your internal experience, there doesn't seem to be evidence of anything permanent. Instead, what we see when we introspect are merely thoughts and emotions, often mixed together or one occurring after the other. Where is the permanence here?

To make things worse, the illusion of self is reinforced by society. When people tell you that you are a strong person (or whatever), you often feel a sense of pride, consequently strengthening the false sense of self and leading you away from enlightenment. Because the false sense of self is so persistent, it can take effort and time to overcome.

We can now see the second noble truth in a clearer light. There is one main consequence to believing that the self is permanent when it's not: dukkha, suffering.

## **Buddha Nature**

So if you are not what you think you are (a permanent self), then what are you? Well, we know that, like just about everything, the self is not permanent, so in one sense you are a non-permanent thing. But the Buddha also said that there is something that unites us all called *Buddha nature*, or the seed of enlightenment, the conscious state that one experiences when enlightened. The Buddha himself realized his Buddha nature when he became enlightened, hoping to bring other conscious beings to the same level.

A divine quality is often attributed to Buddha nature, which is why in this sense Buddhism can be classified as *panentheistic*, the view that God is within us. The divine source within us is our Buddha nature, which we can access through the eight fold path. If Buddhism can be said to have an ultimate goal or end, it is to find the Buddha nature within.

Just to put the last two ideas in context, let's consider a common experience while meditating. If you do a mindfulness meditation where

you attempt to quiet your mind, you might experience a moment or two of total silence, then a longer period of time when you get lost in thought. This pattern might recur through the meditation, with most of your time being spent lost in thought. When you are lost in thought, you are being identified with the false self. But when you experience those moments of peace, that is your Buddha nature trying to shine forth.

Sometimes Buddha nature is referred to as your *true* self, what you really are deep down, as opposed to your false, psychologically and socially-constructed self. But then, is *this* self permanent? Didn't the Buddha say that *everything* is impermanent? Different Buddhists address this issue in different ways, but it is complicated. For example, some argue that Buddha nature is the only thing in the universe that is always present and accessible, so it is permanent in that sense. A discussion of karma and reincarnation will also shed light on this issue.

## **Karma and Reincarnation**

Perhaps the most well known idea from Buddhism in the Western world is *karma*, the moral law of cause and effect. Drawing from interconnectedness, karma suggests that every action we make has a consequence, a ripple effect on the rest of the universe. When we do good things in line with a true understanding of Buddhist metaphysics, we build up good karma. When we do bad things out of line with the metaphysics, we build up bad karma. And of course building up bad karma leads us away from enlightenment, from realizing our Buddha nature.

However, karma does not end when you die, since Buddhists generally believe in *reincarnation*. Reincarnation is the view that we go through many rebirths from generation to generation, taking our karma with us from existence to existence.

The cycle of life through which these rebirths occur, guided by karma, is called *samsara* in Sanskrit. As we pass through *samsara*, because we all have Buddha nature, we are all capable of turning ourselves around,

even murderers. Once a being becomes enlightened, she pulls herself out of samsara. However, Buddhists call a *Bodhisattva* one who postpones their total enlightenment to help other beings reach enlightenment as well.

Reincarnation is a complicated idea in Buddhism, but it is often described with a metaphor. When we die, our consciousness is like a candle going out. Only it never fully goes out, and starts up again once our consciousness is placed in a new body. Which new body we inhabit depends on the karma we have built up in this life and past lives. This *consciousness* is our Buddha nature, and it is in this sense that Buddha nature can be seen as the one permanent thing discussed in Buddhist metaphysics. The impermanent self dies with our bodies, but our Buddha nature remains.

Buddhists also generally believe that there are six realms into which we can be reborn (early Buddhists texts suggest five, putting the Gods and Demigods realms, see below, into one). Here they are:

- Gods
- Demigods (or titans)
- Humans
- Animals
- Hungry ghosts
- Hell

Depending on our karma, Buddhists suggest that we are reincarnated into one of these realms. If our actions are generally done with the right motivations, we will be reincarnated in one of the first three realms. However, we will still be stuck in samsara, even as Gods, since there is still some sense of ego (false self) in these three. Although the Gods and Demigods live in good circumstances (beautiful palaces and sensual pleasure), they are still blinded by pride and lack of empathy for other beings. And in particular, the Demigods are competitive with both the Gods and humans.

Even worse is to be born into one of the last three realms, which are generally reserved for those whose actions are motivated by pure hate and/or misunderstanding. Most Buddhists see the animal realm as limited by pursuit of base pleasures and avoidance of pain. The realm of Hungry Ghosts is one of intense craving—beings without physical form, depicted with huge stomachs and small mouths, who are always thirsty and hungry. The realm of Hell is reserved for those who've committed terrible actions like murder or rape, its inhabitants experiencing various forms of torture. However, unlike the concept of Hell in Abrahamic traditions, Buddhists believe that after a being has experienced Hell, she can reincarnate into a higher realm.

The human realm is unique in that, according to Buddhists, it is the only realm from which one can escape the entire cycle of samsara, realize his true Buddha nature, and reach enlightenment.

Some modern Buddhist teachers interpret these realms not as literal places, but as different stages of torment our minds can go through to keep us away from enlightenment.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Goodman, Charles. (2017). Ethics in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism. In E. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-indian-buddhism/>