

Buddhist Concepts: No-self, Co-Dependent Origination and Nirvana

No-self and Co-Dependent Origination

The concept of nirvana is linked to the teaching of no-self and co-dependent origination, so we will start there. Buddhism teaches that existence inevitably means suffering, both physical and mental. It explains that we suffer because we are ignorant of Reality. What is Reality? It is the truth that everything in our day-to-day experience is impermanent, in constant flux. We suffer because we are attached to our illusion that transitory things have some essential permanence--we are attached to them as they manifest in a given moment. Then they change, as they must and will, and we suffer disappointment, loss, anxiety, or other modes of being.

At the core of this illusion of permanence is the illusion of a permanent self. Our attachment to our "self" makes us sad when we get sick, age, or go through difficult times, all because we want things to stay as they are. Our attachment to "self" is also at the heart of all the world's evil. People think that they need to act in "self"-interest, and so they protect themselves, or acquire for themselves, or attack others for themselves. Mahayanists teach that the false dichotomy between self and other impedes the development of compassion for all living beings.

OK, so if there is no self, what is it that is reincarnated? Buddhists have broken down our experience--our pragmatic, everyday reality--into component parts. What are these components? The idea of the components of the physical body "recycling" through various lifetimes is easy to understand. Buddhists, however, have also broken down the component parts of human psychology. Together--the physical and psychological components--are the Five Skandhas (Aggregates). The Five Skandhas are Form (Matter), Feeling (aka Sensation), Perception, Mental Formations, and Consciousness. Rahula has a detailed explanation of the Skandhas:

Form includes our five physical senses and their corresponding objects in the external world (e.g. the eye and things that can be seen, and so on with the ear, nose, tongue, and skin).

Feeling includes all our sensations, experienced through contact of physical and mental organs with the external world (e.g. the sensation experience through contact of the eye, etc. with visible forms and the mind with "mind-objects" or thoughts and ideas)—there are 6 of these.

Perception is the recognition of the Feeling aggregates—there are 6, one for each of the senses.

Mental Formations are all volitional activities. Sensing and perceiving do not include volition. However, actions such as attention, will, confidence, energy, concentration, wisdom, hate, and so on are volitional mental activities. There are 52 such activities. It is these which create karma.

Consciousness This is a reaction or response. Its basis is one of the 6 senses; its object is one of the 6 corresponding external phenomena. Visual consciousness has the eye as its basis and a visible form as its object. Thus there are 6 kinds of consciousness.

Buddhism claims that our experience of the world arises from the Five Skandas. Buddhism also claims that with the karma created by volition (Mental Formations) comes a kind of momentum that carries into future lives. The Five Skandas make up a provisional self (provisional because there is no part of it that is not subject to change). There is a sense (really an illusion) of continuity (think of the analogy of frames from a movie) but the truth is that there is change in each instant. Moreover, each component is contingent (conditional) on other things. No one of them stands by itself, unchanging; there is nothing that could be identified as a permanent soul.

“There is no unmoving mover behind the movement. It is only movement. It is not correct to say that life is moving, but life is movement itself. In other words, there is no thinker behind the thought. Thought itself is the thinker.” (Rahula, 26)

Meditation

Meditation is the means to truly knowing the impermanence of things. Essentially, one progresses through the 5 skandhas, observing their transitory nature. At the beginning, this means observing the body (Form), usually starting with breathing. When a meditator becomes adept at meditation, she achieves the dhyana, states of meditative bliss. Although these are important milestones in the quest for enlightenment, they, too, are forms of the skandhas. Therefore, the meditator turns her focus on the process of experiencing meditative bliss. She becomes aware of the impermanence of the subtle pleasure of dhyanas, and then aware of the impermanence of the insights arising from those reflections. Thus the Buddhist applies the theory of impermanence to every level of experience—to the most subtle forms of the five skandhas—to ensure total non-attachment.

Nirvana

Nirvana is achieved with the cessation of desire and attachments and of ignorance.

Nirvana is utterly different from experiences that can be assessed in terms of the Skandas because it alone is unconditioned, that is, independent of other causes.

It is the unborn, the ungrown, the unconditioned. It cannot be annihilation because there is no self to annihilate.

It is Absolute Freedom—freedom from all evil, freedom from craving, hatred and ignorance, freedom from all terms of duality, relativity, time and space.

It is neither negative nor positive because negative and positive are positions relative to each other, and nirvana is beyond relativity and duality.

“It is incorrect to think that Nirvana is the natural result of the extinction of craving. Nirvana is not the result of anything. If it would be a result, then it would be an effect produced by a cause. It would be produced and conditioned. Nirvana is neither cause nor effect. It is beyond cause and effect. Truth is not a result or an effect. It is not produced like a mystic, spiritual, mental state such as dhyana or samadhi. TRUTH IS. NIRVANA IS. The only thing you can do is to see it, to realize it. There is a path leading to the realization of Nirvana. But Nirvana is not the result of this path. You may get to the mountain along a path, but the mountain is not the result, not the effect of the path. You may see a light, but the light is not the result of your eyesight.” (Rahula, 40—my source for this whole section)

Why is it difficult (or worse) to describe nirvana?

1. Language is created and used to express things and ideas experienced by their sense organs and their mind. Nirvana, as a supramundane category, must by necessity transcend the power of words.

“Therefore there cannot be words to express that experience, just as the fish had no words in his vocabulary to express the nature of the solid land. The tortoise told his friend the fish that he (the tortoise) just returned to the lake after a walk on the land. ‘Of course’ the fish said, ‘You mean swimming.’ The tortoise tried to explain that one couldn’t swim on the land, that it was solid, and that one walked on it. But the fish insisted that there could be nothing like it, that it must be liquid like his lake, with waves and that one must be able to dive and swim there.” (Rahula, 35)

2. Nirvana can only be known after strenuous efforts in meditation—and remember that meditation is NOT what you think.

“Nirvana is beyond logic and reasoning. However much we may engage, often as a vain intellectual pastime, in highly speculative discussions regarding Nirvana or Ultimate Truth or Reality, we shall never understand it that way. A child in the kindergarten should not quarrel about the theory of relativity. Instead, if he follows his studies patiently and diligently he one day may understand it. Nirvana is ‘to be realized by the wise within themselves.’ If we follow the Path patiently and with diligence, train and purify ourselves earnestly, and attain the necessary spiritual development, we may one day realize it within ourselves—without taxing ourselves with puzzling and high-sounding words.” (Rahula, 43-44)

For the sake of simplicity, I’ve limited my examples and quotes to Rahula, who is speaking from the Theravadin tradition. Mahayanists elaborate on these ideas and change the rules a little with emptiness and Buddha-nature doctrines. However, there is fundamental agreement among all the schools that it is the mind that creates the illusion of reality and permanence. (Walpola Rahula, What the Buddha Taught, NY: Grove Press, 1974.)