



Buddhism 101 Week 2

What Buddhists Believe

There are a lot of misconceptions about what Buddhists believe and what they're trying to accomplish. Many people think it's a pessimistic and nihilist philosophy that claims that life is nothing but suffering or that nothing actually exists. As we've already seen in our Week 1 material, nothing could be further from the truth.

Still, let's explore some of the basic tenets of Buddhism a little further.

The Four Seals

First of all, there are four basic ideas that are shared by all Buddhists. These can be used to determine if a particular doctrine or system is actually Buddhist or not. These ideas are called The Four Seals and they are as follows:

1. All conditioned phenomena are impermanent
2. All polluted phenomena are of the nature of being unsatisfactory
3. All phenomena are empty of self
4. Nirvana is peace

If we look closely at these four statements we're hard pressed to find anything depressing at all. There may be some harsh realities that we often find difficult to accept (i.e. impermanence) but essentially the message of the Buddha was quite optimistic. Yes, we suffer, but there's a reason for it. And what's more we can address that cause with a method for solving the problem. Once we do that there is actually hope that we can become ultimately free of all suffering once and for all.

The Three Types of Suffering (or Unsatisfactoriness)

Many people will say, “The Buddha said all life is suffering. But that’s not true in my life. I experience lots of happiness and even joy.” This is why the translation of the word dukka into “suffering” is not always the best choice. “Unsatisfactoriness” actually more clearly expresses the meaning of the Sanskrit term. For convenience, we can still use the word “suffering”, but we need to be clear that it goes much deeper than gross experiences of pain and misery.

1. The Suffering of Suffering. This refers to gross suffering such as sickness, pain, parting and loss, old age, and death.
2. The Suffering of Change. Here we begin to address the hypothetical objection above. Yes, we do experience happiness and pleasure in life but ultimately these experiences do not last.
3. The All Pervasive Suffering of Conditioned Existence. No matter what we are experiencing while in samsara, whether it seems good, bad, or neutral, due to the fact that we are engaged in subject-object grasping, we are always creating the causes for future suffering.

From Rigpa Wiki: The suffering of being conditioned refers to all experience that is bound up with the ordinary psycho-physical aggregates, or [skandhas](#). No matter whether we are experiencing temporary pleasure or suffering, or even a neutral state, we are always setting ourselves up for future suffering. Why? Because our present [skandhas](#) are direct causes for our future skandhas, which will be the supports for suffering in the future.

Going for Refuge

“Typically, we become a Buddhist when we decide to take Refuge in the Three Jewels and when we generate bodhicitta, which is known as compassion, the altruistic mind, or our good heart.”

~ His Holiness The Dalai Lama

Once we’ve taken some time to reflect on the Four Noble Truths, the Four Seals, and the nature and causes of suffering, we may come to the conclusion that the way we’ve been living and viewing life is not going to bring us ultimate happiness. We may even begin to see that the ordinary way of doing things is actually a kind of trap or even a prison. From that kind of certainty, we are then motivated to get out of that prison.

But we can't do this alone. We need help, guidance, and inspiration. Therefore, we look to objects and beings that we are reasonably certain can lead us out of suffering and towards ultimate liberation. These objects are known as the Three Jewels

1. The Buddha. This can refer to the historical Buddha Shakyamuni Buddha, or more generally to the principle of fully awakened mind.
2. The Dharma. These are the words of the Buddha, the method he detailed that leads one to enlightenment.
3. The Sangha. In the context of Refuge, this means all those beings who have followed the Buddhist path and attained liberation for themselves.

So how can we be sure that the Three Jewels are reliable objects of refuge? We have to examine that for ourselves. We can read books, go to teachings, and, most importantly, ask questions. Only when we are certain that the Buddhist path is right for us should we then take it up as our own.

After that, there is a formal Refuge ceremony-where one recites vows and promises in front of a qualified preceptor-that we can participate in. But the true wish to go for refuge has to come from the heart.