



The Buddhist worldview

From *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side

Buddhists see the world very differently. The world most of us consider to be real is the world of sense experience – what we can see, hear, smell, taste and touch either directly or through the use of scientific instruments such as telescopes or microscopes. If we can't perceive something in such a way then either we infer it must exist for logical reasons, or we conclude that it is non-existent. It must simply stem from the imagination, from hallucination or from delusion.

The worldview of all Indian religions is vaster than this because it is not centred around human beings and what human beings know or don't know. It presents us with a much bigger picture of an infinite cosmos containing countless world systems, each containing many different forms of life. This means that, for Buddhists, the world is not limited to the type of beings we are familiar with, such as human beings and animals, but also contains forms of life that we cannot perceive with our normal senses. Buddhists believe that some types of being exist without a physical body, for example.

Buddhists do not merely describe this immense universe and all its inhabitants, they also explain why different beings are born in a particular realm and have particular characteristics. This explanation is possible because of a correlation between our mental state and the world we live in. Rupert Gethin¹ calls this "the principle of the equivalence of cosmology and psychology". The universe is not just a map of different realms of existence but also of every type of possible experience. Karma and rebirth enable this to function, so each being is reborn into a particular situation according to his/her karma and its corresponding mental disposition.

The Buddhist worldview recognises a spiritual dimension to the universe which manifests as two distinct types of existence called *samsara* and *nirvana*. Samsara refers to 'the cycle of conditioned existence' also called 'the round of rebirth,' where all beings are subject to birth and death, and where life is characterised by suffering. Nirvana is the opposite of this; it is unconditioned. It is a form of existence where suffering is completely eliminated, and which is characterised by peace. For Buddhists, then, there are enlightened beings in the world who are not subject to conditioned existence; they include buddhas and bodhisattvas.

When the Buddha taught the first Noble Truth (dukkha) he was making people aware of the nature of *samsara*, and of the fact that suffering exists. When the Buddha taught the third Noble Truth (cessation) he explained that this suffering can be brought to an end, and that true peace and happiness are possible. The whole purpose of Buddhism is to free us from *samsara* and enable us to attain *nirvana*. This is what Buddhism is all about: indeed, a buddha is someone who has gone beyond the cycle of life and death, and who is free from suffering.

¹ Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p.119.



This last point is crucial to understand the way Buddhists have developed their worldview. It is only because the Buddha became enlightened and was free of samsara that he was able fully to comprehend it. When we are immersed in samsara we are unable to see it for what it is because we are part of the problem. It is only when we are outside the cycle of life and death that we have sufficient perspective to be able to see samsara as a whole. So the Buddhist framework of samsara and nirvana arises directly from the enlightened understanding of the Buddha, and cannot be fathomed completely by the ordinary human mind. The cosmos taken as a whole is beyond the limitations of human understanding; if we don't know certain things about it this could be because we actually *can't* know them as long as we are limited by our senses and our defiled human mind. Buddhists, therefore, would not always say that if we can't perceive something with our senses it doesn't exist; instead, they might say that the limitations of the human mind prevent us from being able to say for certain whether something that is imperceptible exists or not. The only way out of this impasse is to transform our minds and deepen our understanding. Knowledge is determined by the kind of mind that knows.

Samsara

One image that is often used to illustrate samsara is that of an ocean: many Buddhist scriptures and prayers talk about 'the ocean of samsara' or 'the ocean of suffering'. The process of freeing ourselves from this is often called 'crossing the ocean of existence' which means crossing over from the near shore (of samsara) which is fraught with dangers of all kinds, and reaching the far shore (of nirvana) which is safe and free from danger.

Literally, the Sanskrit word *samsara* means 'wandering on', which conveys the idea of a process that is long and aimless. We 'wander' endlessly from life to life, and from rebirth to rebirth, trying to find a permanent home where we can feel at ease and secure; and trying to find a lasting experience of happiness. However, because we are all bound to die sooner or later, whatever kind of existence we have it will not bring us the security we are looking for, and we will then be reborn somewhere else.

The idea of samsara also relates to the quality of experience we have when we feel that life is pointless. Sometimes we just see our life as a routine, we might feel like cogs in a wheel or trapped on an endless treadmill. We think that life is meaningless, that all our efforts are like running on the same spot getting nowhere. We want to break out of our situation, or of our own personality even, yet we don't know how. At such times we experience the nature of samsaric existence and have a taste of the third type of suffering presented in the first Noble Truth, the suffering of conditioned existence.

The Buddha taught that as long as we remain in samsara our search for happiness is futile because we have not understood why we suffer and what happiness depends upon. In the second Noble Truth he explained that the factors that produce suffering are mental defilements like ignorance, craving and aggression, together with the actions they bring about while the factors that produce happiness are the opposites of these, that is, positive emotions based on love and compassion leading to virtuous actions. So rather than looking for happiness in external life situations we should look at our own minds and transform our harmful tendencies. When we do that, we will be able to create the happiness we long for.



Discussion

How do you see the world? How do you conceive of different universes and different types of being?

Think about the way the world and beings are described in *Lord of the Rings* or *Star Trek*, and so on. Do you think this is just wild imagination or might it reflect the truth in some way?



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