


Lecture 6
Early Indian Buddhism

A Story

- Three princes – Mahaveda, Mahapranada, and Mahasattva -- walking through a park
- They wander into a thicket of bamboo
- and find a tigress surrounded by five cubs – all exhausted and weak
- What will they do?



A Story

"For the weal of the world I wish to win enlightenment, incomparably wonderful. From deep compassion I now give away my body, so hard to quit, unshaken in my mind. That enlightenment I shall now gain, in which nothing hurts and nothing harms, and which the Jina's sons have praised. Thus I shall cross to the Beyond of the fearful ocean of becoming which fills the triple world."

- There are some remarks about the tigress's predicament
- Mahasattva sends his brothers away
- Out of compassion, he throws himself in front of the tigress
- The tigress is too weak to move; she does nothing
- But that's not the end of the story...

A Story

- The prince had no sword with him
- So he cut his throat with a sharp piece of bamboo and fell down near the tigress
- She ate everything except the bones ... yum!
- Mahasattva was the Buddha (in one of his lives)



A Story

- The story contains elements from Indian philosophy
 - path of pleasure (kama) vs. path of joy
 - samsara & moksha
- But there are also new elements
 - focus on compassion
 - the idea of enlightenment
- and a puzzle
 - Why not acquire animals other than himself to feed to the tigress?

Names of the Buddha

- Siddharta Gotama
 - born *circa* 485 BCE
 - prince in Shakya clan
- Shakyamuni
 - "the prophetic sage of the Shakyas"
- Tathagata
 - "He who has fully come through"
- Buddha
 - "the awakened one"



Life & Times of the Buddha

- Raised in Hindu culture
- Shares many presuppositions of Indian philosophy
 - e.g. samsara & moksha
- But altered them to fit results of his critique of Indian philosophy
- Propheted to become a great leader
- Sheltered as a youth
- Three excursions and three visions
- Meets a religious ascetic
- Finds **nirvana** = "extinction"

Four Noble Truths

1. Ordinary human life is characterized by and permeated with **dukkha**
 - things don't "fit"
 - life is full of anxiety and unsatisfactoriness
 - "annoying bumps on the road of life"
 - impermanence



Four Noble Truths

2. The cause of dukkha is **trishna**
 - "craving thirst"
 - our desire for things to be other than they are
 - not wanting what we have & wanting what we don't have
 - *NB*: not every desire is a cause of dukkha



"through craving, clinging is conditioned; through clinging, the process of becoming is conditioned, rebirth is conditioned; through rebirth are conditioned old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. Thus arises the whole mass of suffering in the future."

–*Samyutta Nikaya*

Four Noble Truths

3. To treat the symptom definitively, eliminate its cause.
- cessation of dukkha = **nirvana** ("blowing out")



"when craving ceases, clinging ceases; when clinging ceases, the process of becoming ceases, rebirth ceases; when rebirth ceases, old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair cease. Thus the entire mass of suffering ceases."

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Four Noble Truths

4. The way to attain nirvana is to follow the **Noble Eightfold Path**
- 8-step method for reprogramming oneself
 - NOT to be accepted on faith



"First establish yourself in the way, Then teach others, And so defeat sorrow.

To straighten the crooked, you must first do a harder thing - straighten yourself.

You are your only master. Who else? Subdue yourself, and discover your master."

- Dhammapada

Noble Eightfold Path

1) Correct Knowledge

- Be aware of your problem.
- Realize the true nature of reality.
 - Everything is fleeting
 - Nothing is permanent

Do not form views in the world through either knowledge, virtuous conduct, or religious observances. Likewise, avoid thinking of oneself as being either superior, inferior, or equal to others.

The wise let go of the "self" and being free of attachment they depend not on knowledge. Nor do they dispute opinions or fix upon any view.

For those who have no wishes for either extreme of becoming or non-becoming, here or in another existence, there is no conflict with the views held by others.

They do not form the least notion in regard to views seen, heard, or thought out. How could one influence these wise ones who do not grasp at any views?

-Sutta-Nipata

Noble Eightfold Path

2) Correct Aspiration

- Aspire to fix your problem.
- Follow the therapy.

3) Correct Speech

- Speak in ways that do not encourage trishna.
 - Avoid lies, gossip, harsh language, vain talk, ...
 - Use speech to unite others, speak gentle words, speak what is useful, speak at the right time, ...

Noble Eightfold Path

4) Correct Behavior

- Act in ways that do not encourage trishna.

Do not pay attention to those things which, when dwelt upon, give rise to sorrow or increase existing sorrow. Do not dwell upon those things that are unfit for attention. Attend to those things that are fit for attention.

Live without wanting, with the senses restrained. There are no causes of sorrow or vexation for one who does not become lost in sense experience.

Use food for neither amusement or intoxication or for the sake of physical beauty and attractiveness, but only for the endurance and continuance of the body, for ending discomfort, and for assisting the holy life.

Use one's resting place only for protection from cold or heat or insects, wind, sun, creeping things, dangers, and for enjoying retreat.

Use medicines only for protection from arisen afflictions and for the benefit of good health.

Bear cold and thirst, hunger and insects, win, sun and creeping things. Endure ill-spoken, unwelcome words. Bear bodily feelings that are painful, racking, sharp, piercing, disagreeable, and distressing. Then these things cannot cause sorrow or vexation.

Avoid wild elephants, wild horses, wild dogs, snakes, stumps, bramble patches. Avoid sitting on unsuitable seats, wandering to unsuitable resorts, associating with bad friends.

Do not tolerate an arisen thought of sensual desire -- abandon it, remove it, do away with it, and it ends. Do not tolerate an arisen thought of good ill or of cruelty. Do not tolerate an arisen evil, or unwholesome states -- abandon them, release them, do away with them, and them.

Develop mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, tranquility, concentration, and level-headedness.

-adapted from the Majjhima Nikaya

Noble Eightfold Path

- 5) Correct **Livelihood**
 - Choose a job that doesn't encourage trishna (if you can).
 - Be honorable, helpful, useful.
- 6) Correct **Effort**
 - Make the effort to sustain your vow.
- 7) Correct **Mindfulness**
 - Be mindful / aware.
 - Keep your consciousness alive to the present moment.
- 8) Correct **Concentration**
 - Meditate in order to identify habits that lead to trishna.

Where's the *Philosophy*?

- The Four Noble Truths are like psychotherapy ...
 - ... but it is at odds with the *Upanishads*
- This generates debates ...
 - ... and debates lead to reflections on the "philosophical underpinnings" of Buddhism ...
 - ... mainly about the nature of the "self"
 - But the underpinnings need not be understood in order for the therapy to work.

A man approached the Blessed One and wanted to have all his philosophical questions answered before he would practice.

In response, the Buddha said, "It is as if a man had been wounded by a poison arrow and when attended to by a physician were to say: 'I will not allow you to remove this arrow until I have learned the caste, the age, the occupation, the birthplace, and the motivation of the person who wounded me.' That man would die before having learned all this. In exactly the same way, anyone who should say 'I will not follow the teaching of the Blessed One until the Blessed One has explained all the multiform truths of the world' -- that person would die before the Buddha had explained all this."

-adapted from the *Majjhima Nikaya* 3.72

Buddhist Understanding of the Self

1. There is no self that is independent of connections to the rest of the world.
 - The self is ...
 - *Practical Upshot*: Don't act as if we are separate from everyone (and everything) else. [Correct Behavior]
 - *NOT* a denial of the existence of a self
 - *Aside*: Incompatible with existentialist understanding of the self

Buddhist Understanding of the Self

2. **Anatman:** there is no *Atman*.

- *Nothing is permanent: there is only ...*
- Processes are ...
 - Importance of Correct Speech
- No immutable soul, no *Atman*, and no God

What, monks, is totality? It is just the eye with the objects of sight, the ear with the objects of hearing, the nose with the objects of smell, the body with the objects of touch, and the mind with the objects of cognition. This, monks, is called totality.

Now, if anyone were to say: "Aside from this explanation of totality, I will preach another totality", that person would be speaking empty words, and being questioned would not be able to answer. Why is this? Because that person is talking about something outside of possible knowledge.

-from the *Samyutta Nikaya*

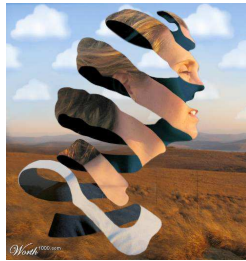
Thus shall ye think of all this fleeting world: a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, a flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.

-from the *Diamond Sutra*

Buddhist Understanding of the Self

3. What there is, is **pratitya samutpada**.

- "dependent origination" or (better) "conditioned coproduction"
- Everything is an interdependent process: nothing occurs independently of conditioning factors
- Everything is change: there is nothing that *undergoes* change



Buddhist Understanding of the Self

4. Everything appears just how it is: fluctuant.

- We never experience ...
- Our problems are due to desiring permanence ...
- Hence: our problems are due to ...
- So: ...

All things conditioned are unstable, impermanent, fragile in essence, as an unbaked pot, like something borrowed or a city founded on sand -- they last a short while only.

They are invariably destroyed, like plaster washed off in the rains, like the sandy bank of a river -- they are conditioned, and their true nature is frail.

They are like the flame of a lamp, which suddenly rises and soon goes out. They have no power of endurance, like the wind or like foam -- unsubstantial, essentially feeble.

The sage knows the beginning and end of consciousness, its production and passing away -- the sage knows that it came from nowhere and returns to nowhere, and is empty of reality, like a conjuring trick.

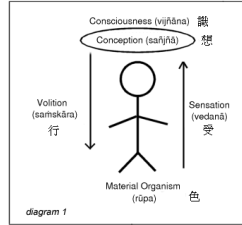
The sage knows what is true reality, and sees all conditioned things as empty and powerless.

-adapted from the *Lalitavistara*

Buddhist Understanding of the Self

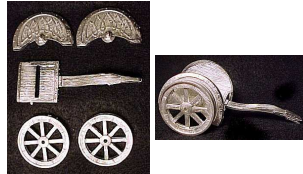
5. Experiences are the result of an overlapping of five processes called **skandhas** (heaps).

- Material composition
- Sensation
- Perception
- **Samskara** (mental tendencies)
- Discriminating Consciousness



Skandhas and the Self

- The five skandhas give rise to one's self.
 - Analogy: A chariot is the pieces of a chariot all put together
 - Likewise: ...



There is no self residing in the body and mind, but the cooperation of the conformations produces what people call a person. Paradoxical though it may seem: There is a path to walk on, there is walking being done, but there is no traveler. There are deeds being done, but there is no doer. There is blowing of the air, but there is no wind that does the blowing. The thought of self is an error and all existences are as hollow as the plantain tree and as empty as twirling water bubbles.

-adapted from the *Vissuddhimagga*

Skandhas and the Self

- There is no "real you" that exists apart from what you do
- Our names do not correspond to anything permanent
- The difference between "you" and "someone else" is arbitrary
 - whence the value of compassion

We are what we think.
 All that we are arises with our thoughts.
 With our thoughts we make the world.
 Speak or act with an impure mind and
 trouble will follow you as the wheel
 follows the ox that draws the cart.
 - Dhammapada

Samskara and Dukkha

6. Dukkha arises because ...

- The world presents itself as it really is
- Hence, any misperception must be due to ...
- Since the root of our problems is ..., we require therapy in order to ...

Ignorance depends on action; action depends on consciousness; consciousness depends on name and form; name and form depend on the six sense spheres; the six sense spheres depend on contact; contact depends on feeling; feeling depends on attachment; attachment depends on grasping; grasping depends on existence; existence depends on birth; birth depends on aging and death.

Suffering, despair, misery, grief, and sorrow depend on aging and death.

In this way the whole mass of suffering arises. But due to the complete eradication and cessation of ignorance comes a cessation of karmas and so forth. This is the cessation of the whole mass of suffering.

-from the *Samyutta Nikaya* 3.90

Contra Atman

- 1) If the self is merely a collection of processes (like a chariot is a collection of chariot parts), then ...
- 2) And there is no experience of anything permanent in the world: not in dreamless sleep, or in meditation, or ...
- 3) So, there is no need to postulate the existence of an unchanging *Atman*.

Readings for next time:

Kupperman, Chapter 2

Journal 1 due next Thursday: one entry on *Upanishads*, one on *Bhagavad Gita*, one on Buddhism
