

Buddhism for Beginners

To understand Buddhism, it is important to understand the concept of Monism – one of the great ‘theories of everything’. Monism is not the same as monotheism. Monotheism is the belief in one God, but Monism is the belief in one *One*, a total unity that is the ground of everything. That is very different. If you believe in one God, then you have God and *not* God, but if you believe in one *One*, then you have only unity, or *All is One*.

Monism is an ancient worldview. It probably came about when people looked around at the world and felt a strong sense of unity. There is one earth, one sky, one sun, one moon, one human race, one cycle of day and night, one cycle of four seasons. At the same time, people saw diversity. They saw differences. The unities they witnessed were stable and dependable, but the diversities they witnessed were unstable and undependable. Monism argues that the original perfection is a perfect, changeless, eternal unity. We suffer because we have forgotten this original unity and live in an illusion of diversity. This illusion may seem very real to us, but it’s an illusion nevertheless. According to Monism, the solution to suffering is to remember and realize the perfect unity again.

All is One! is the bumper sticker of the New Age movement. It’s the great sound bite, the great evangelistic cry. *All is One*. If all is One, then you are God. You are the sun and the moon and the Milky Way and the whole universe. If all is One, then when you drink from a cup of water, you are God putting God into God. ‘All is One’ is so attractive because if everything is one, no one is going to disagree with anyone, no one will fight, no one will misunderstand, and no one will be lonely. All problems are solved if everything is one. You might sort of like this idea. If all is one, however, then you are me, and that might not be so attractive. If everything is one, relationships are evil because you only have relationships when you have the illusion of diversity. If everything is one, hatred is evil because hatred is a relationship, and love is also evil because love is a relationship.

Some people are inclined to protest against this line of reasoning because they don’t want to give up the idea of love or relationship. But Monism is an absolute worldview that encompasses everything, and so you can’t pick and choose to keep some parts of reality diverse or separate. Everything is one. Nothing is left out, nothing is divided, and everything is absolutely unified.

Experiencing Oneness

The idea that all is One has its roots in ancient versions of Monism. It is the foundation of Hinduism and Buddhism, the great monistic religions. Siddhartha Gautama meditated under the Bo tree for forty days and forty nights, and then he was enlightened. He opened his eyes and saw the planet Venus on the horizon. He knew he was enlightened, because he knew he was looking at himself. If all is One, I am the planet Venus. If all is One, you are God.

When I was a teenager doing Yoga and Buddhist meditation I had an unforgettable experience one afternoon. I experienced being the exact same size as the entire universe. The experience lasted about fifteen minutes and was very intense, although it could not have been very

transformative or else it would not have become a mere memory. For the deeply enlightened person this experience is a constant reality.

In Buddhism there are four spiritual laws, called *The Four Noble Truths*. The first noble truth is *the law of suffering*. The law of suffering is that everything suffers. Everybody, whether they are from the East or West, can agree with that.

The second noble truth is *the law of the cause of suffering*. The cause of suffering is desire. If you desire, you suffer. You are not at peace. Desire is caused by relationships. For instance, if I meet with you, if I speak with you, I desire that you will like me and understand me. But you might not. As a result, I suffer—maybe not terribly, but I do. But it's actually worse than that, because even if you *do* like me and *do* understand me, I will desire to keep being liked and keep being understood, and so I never really escape the desire or the suffering that it causes. According to Buddhism, every form of desire—whether to be liked, or to be rich, or to be smart, or to be beautiful—causes suffering.

The third noble truth is *the law of the stopping of suffering through the stopping of desire*. Let me give you an example of what this means. If I have a toothache, and I desire that the pain will stop, and it does not stop, I suffer. But if I have a toothache, and I do *not* desire that the pain will stop, and it does not stop, I do not suffer. I am free. You see, the pain is there, but if I realize that I *am* the pain, I don't suffer. My experience is not *I have pain*, but *Pain is*.

The fourth noble truth is an eight-step therapy program to accomplish the goal of stopping desire. The program has a special name, *the Eightfold Path*. Are you familiar with the twelve-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous for overcoming alcoholism? You may have heard of other step programs that lead to health and coping with various difficulties. The Eightfold Path that the Buddha came up with is probably the original step program. Notice also that *fold* is a better word than *step*. If you have steps, then you leave step one when you are on step two, but if you have folds, like folds in a piece of paper, your progress keeps adding and building on itself, until you have all eight folds.

The Eightfold Path begins with practical things, like the right way of seeing things, right thought or purpose, right action, right speech, right way of earning a living, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, and then it adds larger parts of reality like the supernatural, the awareness and consciousness, and then meditation and Buddha-consciousness. In her book, called *Three Ways of Asian Wisdom*, Nancy Wilson Ross describes the process like this: First, you must see clearly what is wrong. Then you must decide to be cured. Then you must act and speak so as to aim at being cured. Your livelihood must not interfere with your therapy. Your therapy must go forward steadily, as fast as possible, but not too fast. You must think about it constantly, and learn to contemplate with a deep mind.

The Cycle of Life

Realizing the absolute unity of all reality is a long process. Many people soon discover that it's not reasonable to expect that in your lifetime you would manage the whole process. At this point the doctrine of *reincarnation* becomes necessary. Reincarnation is the idea that after we die we are born into another life on earth, live again, die again, and then get reincarnated all over again. As we do, we work through our *karma*. Karma is like a law of cause and effect. Whatever we do in our lives produces effects that need to be re-balanced, and this re-balancing often occurs in another lifetime. For example, if we murder somebody in one lifetime, then in the next lifetime we ourselves might be murdered, or maybe we might devote ourselves to saving lives.

Reincarnation can go on for thousands of lifetimes. In the West we tend to regard it optimistically, maybe because we're positive by nature. We think, 'Ah, you get another chance! That's good! Maybe I'll be born a king next time!' But in Asia reincarnation is not regarded as a blessing. It's more like a curse to be born into a life of suffering over and over. The goal of Buddhism and also Hinduism is not to be reincarnated but to *stop* being reincarnated.

When a Christian tells Buddhists or Hindus that they need to be *born again* they will reply, 'Oh, I know—and again and again!' Being born again doesn't sound like good news to a Buddhist or Hindu.

There is a word that Buddhists and Hindus use to describe the illusion of reality. It is *maya*. Being caught in *maya* is like being stuck in a bad dream. The dream is painful, frightening and uncomfortable, but it's not real. What is the solution to a bad dream? You wake up. Awakening is the true realization of reality. It's also called *enlightenment*. It's waking from the nightmare of diversity and into the full realization of perfect unity. That is the gospel of Monism. That is the salvation of Monism. It's powerful, absolute, and deeply inviting. As a former Buddhist monk I can still appreciate this worldview and the strong attraction of it.

Meditation and Language

Methods are required to move toward salvation in Buddhism, Hinduism, and other Monist religions. The main method is called *meditation*. In the West, people sometimes think that meditation is concentrated thought. This is not what it means in the East. Rather, meditation is a method for the *stopping* of thought. Thinking must stop because thinking is analytic and relational. Thinking keeps us trapped in the web of *maya*, in the illusion of difference and diversity. It prevents us from realizing that if all is One then there are no relationships. There is only perfect unity.

Meditation doesn't have an agenda or logic about it. It is *being*. If you have a goal, you have a relationship with that goal. Meditation helps us not to have the goal but to *be* the goal. There are various ways of meditating, and many of them are quite therapeutic. If you follow various meditation practices regularly, you will feel more relaxed and focused, your stress levels will go down, your blood pressure will go down, the alpha waves in your brain will increase, your capacity to concentrate will increase, there will be more oxygen in your blood, your need for sleep may decrease, and you may live longer. Meditation is hard, but there are real benefits that come from it.

The people who practice it are not masochists. They are human beings like all other human beings. They want to be better and feel better. They want to make their lives better and healthier.

Aside from the practical benefits, the fundamental reason for practicing meditation is to achieve enlightenment. It takes many lifetimes to get to that point. Hinduism symbolizes the process of reincarnation as a wheel of birth and death that constantly turns—you are born into suffering and then you die, and then you are born into suffering and then you die. The purpose of meditation is to free yourself from the constant turning of this wheel.

Now, you don't become free by flying off the edge of the wheel, but by coming into the center. *Centering* is very important in meditation. Think about the center of a wheel or a car or bike. What is it? It is the axle. What is the center of the axle? It is a point. And what is a point? It is nothing. Even in physical reality, in the center of the center of the center, in between the

molecules and atoms and gluons and electrons and protons, is nothing. This nothing does not turn with the wheel. The nothing is free from the turning. When you reach this absolute nothing through your meditation you also realize the absolute everything. You have achieved absolute freedom. You are fully enlightened. You become everything when you become nothing.

One of the most common methods of meditation is *mantra*. Mantra involves the repetition of words that have a meaning, first repeating them aloud and then internally. With enough repetition, they become a vibration and transcend their meaning. They become finer and finer until you are vibrating along with every atom in the universe. All physical matter vibrates as electrons change orbits. When you realize that vibration, you unite your self with all physical matter in the cosmos, and you become one with the all. This idea is where the New Age movement gets the concept of 'good vibes'. Good vibes are the vibrations of salvation, the vibrations of the unity in all reality. The use of mantra is not worship, even though religious words are sometimes chosen. Worship involves a relationship and functions in diversity. The goal of mantra is to be relieved of diversity and relationships and to realize the unity of all. For this reason, the goal of mantra meditation is to destroy language, because all language involves relationships among different things. You have to destroy language to be saved and to achieve total unity.

There are a variety of mantras. A simple one, and one of the most common, involves repetition of the word *AUM*. I remember chanting it in a monastery. When you do it, you breathe three times per minute. You empty your lungs completely and you fill them completely. When you really get going, there seems to be no motion. You don't know whether you're inhaling or exhaling. You don't know whether there is sound or silence. All becomes one.

When I give my talks, I usually perform one or two AUMs in order to give people an idea of what it sounds like. A philosophy professor once came to me afterward and said, 'I felt something inside of me when you did the AUM, something really big. I want to understand it.' I told him, 'You can't understand it. Understanding it means having a relationship with it, and that's not what AUM is about. AUM is about becoming one with AUM.'

The whole text is *aum mane padme hum*, which means *hail to the jewel in the lotus*. Lotus blossoms grow in the mud under the water, and propagate by shoots. Certain species have no seeds with a long stem and emerge through the surface of the water. If you see a statue of Buddha, look at the base and you will see little lotus blossom petals. It's the lotus throne, and he has lotus feet. It's a very important image for Buddhism. The lotus blossom has hundreds of petals. If you separate the petals and come into the center of the lotus blossom, what is there? Nothing. That is the jewel in the lotus. The imagery is beautiful and powerful.

The Nothing of Zen

There are many kinds of Buddhism, such as Mahayana, Theravada, Tantric, Lamaistic, Nichiren Soshu, Pure Land School, and others. People from each kind of Buddhism will tell you, 'Our kind of Buddhism is the original true Buddhism.' We have the same situation in the West. There are many people who believe that God is a Lutheran, but we know He's a Baptist. Buddhists don't have problems that Christians don't have.

Earlier I said I am a former Buddhist monk, but actually I was a Zen Buddhist monk, and so I can tell you that Zen Buddhism *is* the original, true Buddhism. Zen really is special in some ways. The people who practice it believe in *Nothing*. They are not *Monists*, they are *Nonists*. But it's not a negative Nothing, it's a positive Nothing. Zen asks: If everything is reducible to One, then to

what is the One reducible? This question is similar to the one posed by existential philosophers when they ask: Why is there anything? Why is there existence?

Zen doesn't answer the question with words and logical conclusions. It answers with an experiential realization. Let me try to give you some idea of the Nothing of Zen. You or I might say, 'It's possible that it will rain tonight.' This possibility is real and it's nothing. You can't measure it, you can't weight it, you can't know what colour it is. It is nothing. In the same way, everything that is—every object, every thought, every emotion, every action—is possible. God is possible, the devil is possible, the earth is possible, you and I are possible—and all of these possibilities are nothing. Possibility is the mother of everything. Possibility, here, is not the same as probability. Probability is something you can describe and measure. Possibility is not. One of the deepest truths of Buddhism is *Buddha is possibility*. In Sanskrit we say he is *Tathata*, or suchness, or undifferentiated quality. The Shakyamuni Siddhartha Gautama is called the *Tathagata*, which means *the incarnation of undifferentiated quality*.

I used to study with a Zen master. He is now over one hundred years old and still teaching. He wrote one book called *Buddha is the Center of Gravity*. It's a fitting title for a book about Zen. Every object has a center of gravity. Your body, a truck, a boat, a building—everything. But can you describe the center of gravity? What colour is it? What shape is it? How much does it weigh? The center of gravity can't be described in such terms because it's only a theoretical point. In that sense, it's nothing. But it is essential. You can think of the Buddha as the essential nothing—or, to say it differently, as the essential central pregnant nothing.

In Zen, we say: If you see the Buddha, kill him. That means *if you have an idea that absolute reality is outside of yourself, you have to get rid of that idea*. You see, you cannot have any idea of the Buddha. You can't think of him as the fat guy painted gold in the Chinese restaurant. You can't think of him as one of the standing Buddhas or sitting Buddhas or lying Buddhas either, and not as one of the skinny Buddhas or young or old Buddhas. You must not see the Buddha. You must *be* the Buddha. And you must not *become* the Buddha, because you always *are* the Buddha. You must awaken and realize Buddha- nature. Then there is salvation.

I have given you a short Buddhist sermon. I don't know if any of you will be converted. I hope that you can understand the power and hope that underlies this worldview, and why healthy, intelligent people would devote themselves to it. They are not crazy. There are many lovely people who are committed to this idea of reality.

Another Theory of Everything

As Monists, Buddhists conclude that unity is good and diversity is not, and that unity is real and diversity is illusion. Christians have a different view – another theory of everything: Trinitarianism. They regard the original perfection, which is called God, as both perfectly unified and perfectly diversified.

We see a clear description of this reality in the Bible. God is perfectly unified as one God, and yet God is perfectly diversified in the three persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is unity and diversity in absolute reality. There is not one God who chooses to reveal Himself in three ways in order to create the appearance of diversity, and there are not three persons who choose to unite and cooperate in order to create the appearance of being unified.

Here is a proverb I made up to capture the essence of this reality: *God alone is God, and God is not alone*. You cannot make this statement about any other God or original perfection. You can

say *Buddha alone is Buddha*, but that is all. The rest is silence. You can say *Krishna alone is Krishna* and *Allah alone is Allah*, but the rest again is silence. If the God of the Bible wants to talk to somebody, He talks among Himself, because He is three persons. A God who wasn't diversified could not talk among Himself. He would have to create something else to talk with. He would require a creation in order to be personal, whereas the God of the Bible is intrinsically personal, independent of His creation. His creation does not complete Him but rather expresses Him.

If the original perfection is both unified and diversified, it means that when we experience unity in reality it shouldn't be a problem, and when we experience diversity in reality it shouldn't be a problem. In other words, unlike Monism, Trinitarianism does not regard diversity as the cause of suffering, and does not see the solution to suffering as involving a detachment from diversity. The Christian sees variation and contrast as a part of the original perfection, and therefore, as a normal part of reality itself.

The Bible's depiction of absolute reality is a totally other-centered God. This other-centeredness is the source of God's energy, for as each of the persons of God empties Himself once, He is filled twice by the others. This energy increases exponentially. It became so great that God could say *Let there be light!* and a universe was born. The Bible gives a name to this energy when it says *God is love*. It is an other-centered emptying and filling, a perpetual building up of energy. It is the energy of life. It is the foundation of all reality.

Conclusion

For Buddhists, the original perfection is a total perfect unity and we suffer because we have the illusion of diversity. Salvation is waking up and realizing that unity again. For Christians, the original perfection is a unity of three persons who are other-centered in a relational reality of love. We suffer because we have turned things around and have become self-centered dead people. Salvation is God coming into creation and giving Himself in order that people can receive the power to be re-created as other-centered living people.

What do you think? Where are you?

This article is based on an extract from Ellis Potter's book, *3 Theories of Everything* (Destinée Media, 2012). The book explores Monism, Dualism, and Trinitarianism – and listens to their deeply contrasting answers to questions of suffering, meaning, and identity.



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