

What can Buddhism do for me?¹

Why the Buddha needs to be human

As practitioners of the Buddha's teaching, it is vital for us to know that the Buddha is *human*, that he is neither a prophet of some higher being, nor some eternal cosmic being born of the imagination of some unawakened guru, nor the emotional projections of some zealous preacher. The Buddha is born a human, lives a most pleasurable life as a youth, has the best education, but is spiritually precocious and compassionate, even as a young person.

Even as a Bodhisattva, the Buddha was very sensitive to the world around him. Perhaps, his overprotective father ironically prepared him to be traumatized by the 4 signs.² Then again, he could have simply forgotten about those sights, and drowned himself in the pleasures waiting for him in his palaces. The point is that the Bodhisattva chose to heed the world's sufferings. In fact, we can say that, even as a young man, he had spiritually matured so that he just could not ignore the world's realities, especially its sufferings, which he deeply questioned.

If the Buddha were a God, he would be dependent on the adoration of devotees (a God dies when we do not worship him). Or, if he were some supreme miracle-worker, we would be helplessly dependent on him for succour and salvation. He was a human amongst humans, experiencing the world, both in its profound pleasures and extreme pains. He emerged all the wiser through awakening to true reality by himself and for us. As a human, he liberated himself beyond earth and heaven, transcending both the human and the divine.

The Buddha is like the captain of a ship named Dharma coursing through the troubled waters of samsara (cycle of rebirths and redeaths). We are the crew, and along our voyage, we save others thrown into the surging waves from shipwrecks and other disasters. As we learn the skills of keeping our vessel ship-shape, on an even keel and on course, we learn to run the ship better and move safely closer to port. In due course, we can become captains, if we choose to. Or, we can simply celebrate landing on firm ground and the security of home, called nirvana.

Asking the right questions

In other words, we can be buddhas but we can never become God.³ Emulating the Buddha, we first learn to live with the world, taking it as an on-going lesson. We learn to ask the right questions, in which lie the right answers. The worldly ask, "What do I get from Buddhism?" We ask, "**What do I let go of, to gain the Dharma?**" Religion asks, "What can Buddhism do for me?" We ask, "**What can I do for myself?**" "How can I help myself grow and awaken to true reality?"

¹ This Reflection is from [SD 49.8b](#) (12.2), a modern commentary on **the Mahā'padāna Sutta** (D 14).

² The 4 sights or signs (*nimitta*) are: an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a holy man: see **Mahā'padāna Sutta** (D 14, §§2.1-2.14), [SD 49.8a](#) + 8b (1.0.4.4).

³ "God" here, specifically refers to the theistic notion. If we take "God" as *brahmā* or brahmas (plural), esp the "highest of them," Mahā Brahṃā, it is possible for us to attain those states through an appropriately moral and devout life-style, as the Buddha-to-be has done many times. Mahā Brahṃā's lifespan is only a world-cycle (*kappa*) – he lives as long as his universe, so to speak. In other words, he is impermanent, too. Furthermore, there are numerous other kinds of divine beings more long-lived, subtle and glorious than Mahā Brahṃā. Conceptions of "God" who are eternal simply makes no sense, as whatever exists must do so in *time* (they have to be impermanent), unless it is merely an imaginative notion, esp as a religious ideology.

“How can I help others help themselves?” When we ask the right question, we have found the key to the right answer.

We can *become* buddhas because the Buddha is the Dharma, in the sense that he awakens through the Dharma, he lives the Dharma. By his “death” (technically, “final passing,” *parinibbāna*), he fully authenticates the Dharma to be universally true and timeless. If we understand and live this Dharma, we, too, can awaken. If we are the first to arise in a new epoch, we are called the Buddha. Those who awaken following the Buddha’s teaching are called arhats (*arahata*), those worthy of the Buddha Dharma in every good way.⁴

Acting on the answer

The liberating truth that the Buddha discovered is conveniently formulated for us as **the 4 noble truths** (*catu ariya, sacca*), or the truths of the noble ones. They are so called because they raise us up from our subhuman states by humanizing us, and then through our self-understanding, uplift us to divine levels and beyond, to nirvana. The truths also encompass the meaning and purpose of life for the sake of our spiritual cultivation and awakening.

The 1st noble truth is a statement of the reality of our existence—unsatisfactoriness pervades all things. As unawakened beings, our current state is unsatisfactory, we are victims of impermanence, and burdened by destructive selfishness. But this unsatisfactoriness has nothing to do with any kind of “original sin” or fundamental evil state. We are more like uncut diamonds or ugly ducklings who have yet to see our own goodness. Instead of looking at our natural goodness, we keep looking outside, running after what we see as “better” than we are, rejecting what we see as being “inferior,” or moving with a crowd of those we deem as being our “equals.”

These are all delusory projections. The world out there – despite all its truth and beauty – is neither good nor bad. Our thinking and projections make it so. This measuring and collecting habit is never complete, never fulfilling – like hunger or thirst. We are caught in an uphill stone-rolling of Sisyphus, and while at it, we even think we are doing great. But when we stop – because we have reached the peak of the hill, and the stone rolls down – we feel a sudden loss. We want the stone back.

We want to run after the rolling stone again. We are compelled to run after the heartless moving object: it gives us a purpose in life. But we are blind to what it’s all about: we have no idea of the meaning of life. This is fundamental ignorance (*avijjā*). We keep on running after our stone, not knowing what else to do, fearing some terrible disaster if we stop. This is called craving (*taṇhā*), or literally, a thirst for things. This is **the second noble truth**—the arising of unsatisfactoriness.

The meaning of life is right there in the world we create before us and live in—this is the 1st noble truth—and in our incessant running after things, without a moment of respite or peace, much less joy, in our lives. Any sense of satisfaction is only a momentary thought that we “got it” like a predator that has caught its prey. Then, we need to stalk and kill some more prey, over and again. That’s all the meaning there is to this life of craving—this is the 2nd noble truth.

⁴ See **Sambuddha Sutta** (S 22.58), [SD 49.10](#).

The 4th noble truth is an exhortation and invitation for us to walk the path of the noble ones, the eightfold path,⁵ to the ending of unsatisfactoriness or suffering.⁶ Since our problems originate and arise within ourselves, it is there that we must look and work. No amount of seeking outside would bring any satisfactory answer; no supplication to any external agency, not even an almighty God, can really succour us; much less running after the rolling stones of worldliness.

Attaining self-liberation

The 3rd noble truth is about the solution to our self-created and self-creating problems: we need to stop—like Aṅguli, māla stopping right in his tracks, and is thus liberated.⁷ In very simple worldly terms, this is nirvana, where all suffering ceases, and joy persists. This is **the 3rd noble truth**—the ending of unsatisfactoriness.

Even as we read these passages – if we, even for a moment, forget our self – there is just this reading, this knowing and unknowing, this rise and fall of consciousness – we momentarily have a glimpse of nirvana. All we need to do now is put in a bit more effort, to stop looking down at ourselves as a vile, sinful creature, but to look up and see the clouds parting, and before us, within us, a noble mountain unshakable by any wind from any direction.⁸

Since our problems arise from how we think and react to situations, it is best for us to look within for answers. To “look within” means to diligently exert oneself in, firstly, fully directing our sense-faculties and speech to remove all distractions, so that, secondly, we are able to calm and clear our mind to tap its goodness and genius. Religion tells us we are not good enough, we are evil sinners, we are incapable of helping ourselves, and so on. Spirituality tells us we are good enough to work at it ourselves; we should do it at once. For, who else can be our refuge and master, if not ourselves? (Dh 160, 380).⁹

The Buddha does not spoil us with empty promises of after-death heavenly delights, nor delude us with bribes of fabulous wealth and power in this life, nor threaten us with hell-fire, if we do not follow him. If we are to follow him, we must follow the Dharma – this is the supreme worship.¹⁰ We honour the Buddha best by practising the Dharma. It is in this spirit that the Buddha compassionately exhorts us:

⁵ The limbs of the noble eightfold path are right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*), right intention (*sammā saṅkappa*), right speech (*sammā vācā*), right action (*sammā kammantā*), right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*), right effort (*sammā vāyāma*), right mindfulness (*sammā sati*), and right mental stillness (*sammā samādhi*). See **Dhammacakkā Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11, §4), [SD 1.1](#).

⁶ The familiar 4 noble truths, arranged 1-2-3-4, is an expedient “teaching” model. The earliest version of **the 4 noble truths** is given as 1-2-4-3, ie, the “path” truth precedes the “goal” truth or nirvana. In practice, this is how we actually progress on the path. See **Mahā Saḷāyatanika S** (M 149, §11 etc) + SD 41.9 (2.4).

⁷ See **Aṅgulimāla Sutta** (M 86,5) + [SD 5.11](#) (2.2).

⁸ **Soṇa (Koliṅga) Sutta** (A 6.55/3:378), [SD 20.12](#). See also U 3.4/27 = Tha 651; cf Dh 81.

⁹ On Dh 160, see [SD 27.3](#)(3.1).

¹⁰ See **Mahā, parinibbāna Sutta** ([D 16,5.1-3](#)): + [SD 9 \(7.2\)](#).

You must make the effort. | The tathagatas (thus-come ones) only show the way.
Liberated are those who have gained the path, | who meditate, freed from Mara's¹¹ bonds.
(Dh 276), SD 45.8(4.3.1)

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¹¹ Māra (literally, “death”) is the personification of all that distracts us from doing good, becoming better or awakening to spiritual liberation.