

# BUDDHIST PSYCHOLOGY

This text is made up of edited selections from  
**Introduction to Buddhism.**

# PERSONALITY THEORIES

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## SIDDHARTHA GAUTAMA BUDDHA

[ 566 bc - 486 bc ]

### Biography

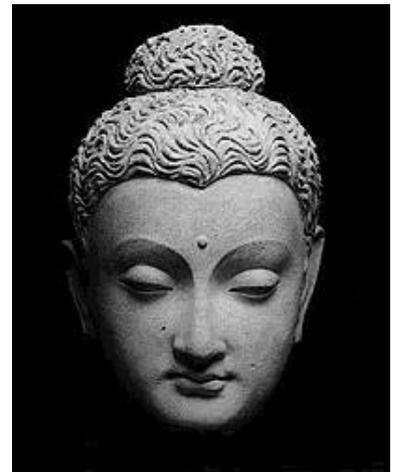
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There was a small country in what is now southern Nepal that was ruled by a clan called the Shakyas. The head of this clan, and the king of this country, was named Shuddodana Gautama.

His wife, Mahamaya, was expecting her first born. In the small town of Lumbini, she asked her handmaidens to assist her to a nearby grove of trees for privacy, where she gave birth to a son. She named him Siddhartha, which means "he who has attained his goals." Sadly, Mahamaya died only seven days after the birth. After that Siddhartha was raised by his mother's kind sister, Mahaprajapati.

When it came time for him to marry, he won the hand of Yashodhara, and they married when both were 16 years old.

Siddhartha was kept in one or another of their three palaces, and was prevented from experiencing much of what ordinary folk might consider quite commonplace. He was not permitted to see the elderly, the sickly, the dead, or anyone who had dedicated themselves to spiritual practices. Siddhartha grew increasingly restless and curious about the world beyond the palace walls and he finally demanded that he be permitted to see his people and his lands.



The king carefully arranged that Siddhartha should not see the kind of suffering that he feared would lead him to a religious life. But, inevitably, he saw old people, sick people, and even death. He asked his friend and squire Chandaka the meaning of all these things, and Chandaka informed him of the simple truths that Siddhartha should have known all along: That all of us get old, sick, and eventually die.

Siddhartha also saw an ascetic, a monk who had renounced all the pleasures of the flesh. The peaceful look on the monk's face would stay with Siddhartha for a long time to come. Later, he would say this about that time:

*When ignorant people see someone who is old, they are disgusted and horrified, even though they too will be old some day. I thought to myself: I don't want to be like the ignorant people. After that, I couldn't feel the usual intoxication with youth anymore.*

*When ignorant people see someone who is sick, they are disgusted and horrified, even though they too will be sick some day. I thought to myself: I don't want to be like the ignorant people. After that, I couldn't feel the usual intoxication with health anymore.*

*When ignorant people see someone who is dead, they are disgusted and horrified, even though they too will die some day. I thought to myself: I don't want to be like the ignorant people. After that, I couldn't feel the usual intoxication with life anymore.*

At the age of 29, Siddhartha came to realize that he could not be happy living as he had been. He wanted more than anything to discover how one might overcome suffering. After kissing his sleeping wife and newborn son Rahula goodbye, he snuck out of the palace and into the forests of northern India.

He then began to practice the austerities and self-mortifications practiced by a group of five ascetics. For six years, he practiced. The sincerity and intensity of his practice were so astounding that, before long, the five

ascetics became followers of Siddhartha. But the answers to his questions were not forthcoming. He redoubled his efforts, refusing food and water, until he was in a state of near death.

For six years, he practiced the ascetic life, eating only what he found on the ground, drinking only rain water, wearing nothing but a loin cloth. When the answers he was seeking wouldn't come to him, he tried even harder. But Siddhartha realized that these extreme practices were leading him nowhere, that in fact it might be better to find some middle way between the extremes of the life of luxury and the life of self-mortification.

Outside of the town of Bodh Gaya, Siddhartha decided that he would sit under a certain fig tree as long as it would take for the answers to the problem of suffering to come. He sat there for many days, first in deep concentration to clear his mind of all distractions, then in mindfulness meditation, opening himself up to the truth. On the full moon of May, with the rising of the morning star, Siddhartha finally understood the answer to the question of suffering and became the Buddha, which means "he who is awake."

At the deer park in Sarnath near Benares, about one hundred miles from Bodh Gaya, he preached his first sermon, which is called "setting the wheel of the teaching in motion." In it, he explained to the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The king of Magadha, having heard Buddha's words, granted him a monastery for use during the rainy season. This and other generous donations permitted the community of converts to continue their practice throughout the years, and gave many more people an opportunity to hear the teachings of the Buddha.

His aunt and wife asked to be permitted into the **Sangha**, or monastic community, which was originally composed only of men. The culture of the time ranked women far below men in importance, and at first it seemed that permitting women to enter the community would weaken it. But the Buddha relented, and his aunt and wife became the first Buddhist nuns.

The Buddha said that it didn't matter what a person's status in the world was, or what their background or wealth or nationality might be. All were capable of enlightenment, and all were welcome into the Sangha. The first ordained Buddhist monk, Upali, had been a barber, yet he was ranked higher than monks who had been kings, only because he had taken his vows earlier than they!

Buddha had achieved his enlightenment at the age of 35. He would teach the **Dharma** (the way) throughout northeast India for another 45 years. When the Buddha was 80 years old, he ate some spoiled food and became very ill. He went into a deep meditation under a grove of sala trees and died. His last words were...

*Impermanent are all created things;  
Strive on with awareness.*

Soon after Buddha's death, five hundred monks met at the first council at Rajagrhya, under the leadership of Kashyapa. Upali recited the monastic code (**Vinaya**) as he remembered it. Ananda, Buddha's cousin, friend, and favorite disciple – and a man of prodigious memory! – recited Buddha's lessons (the **Sutras**). The monks debated details and voted on final versions. These were then committed to memory by other monks, to be translated into the many languages of the Indian plains. It should be noted that Buddhism remained an oral tradition for over 200 years.

In the next few centuries, the original unity of Buddhism began to fragment. The most significant split occurred after the second council, held at Vaishali 100 years after the first. After debates between a more liberal group and traditionalists, the liberal group left and labeled themselves the Mahasangha – "the great sangha." They would eventually evolve into the **Mahayana** tradition of northern Asia. The traditionalists would become known as **Theravada** or "way of the elders," and be the tradition of Sri Lanka and most of southeast Asia.

## Theory

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Buddhism is an empirical philosophy. Buddha was very clear that we should judge the truth of any philosophy by its consequences. In the Kalama Sutra, he makes this particularly clear:

*It is proper for you... to doubt, to be uncertain.... Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, 'The monk is our teacher...'*

*What do you think...? Does **greed** appear in a man for his benefit or harm? Does **hate** appear in a man for his benefit or harm? Does **delusion** appear in a man for his benefit or harm?... being given to greed, hate, and delusion, and being overwhelmed and vanquished mentally by greed, hate, and delusion, this man takes life, steals, commits adultery, and tells lies; he prompts another too, to do likewise. Will that be long for his harm and ill?" ...*

*...when you yourselves know: 'These things are bad; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill,' abandon them.*

Buddhism is also a philosophy that is detached from theological considerations. Buddha, in fact, refused to answer questions concerning eternity and the afterlife. In the Kalama Sutra again, he notes how his philosophy helps whatever your beliefs about the afterlife may be:

*The disciple... who has a hate-free mind, a malice-free mind, an undefiled mind, and a purified mind, is one by whom **four solaces** are found here and now.*

*Suppose there is a hereafter and there is a fruit, result, of deeds done well or ill. Then it is possible that at the dissolution of the body after death, I shall arise in the heavenly world, which is possessed of the state of bliss. This is the first solace...*

*Suppose there is no hereafter and there is no fruit, no result, of deeds done well or ill. Yet in this world, here and now, free from hatred, free from malice, safe and sound, and happy, I keep myself. This is the second solace...*

*Suppose evil results befall an evil-doer. I, however, think of doing evil to no one. Then, how can ill results affect me who do no evil deed? This is the third solace...*

*Suppose evil results do not befall an evil-doer. Then I see myself purified in any case. This is the fourth solace...*

## The structure of the mind

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Buddhists describe the person as composed of five **skandhas** ("aggregates"):

1. **The body (rupa)**, including the sense organs.
2. **Sensations and feelings (vedana)**, coming out of contact between sense organs and objects.
3. **Perceptions and ideas (samjñā)**, especially manifest in our ability to recognize things and ideas.
4. **Mental acts (samskara)**, especially will power and attention.
5. **Basic consciousness (vijñāna)**.

The last four are called **naman**, name, meaning the psyche. **Namarupa** (name-form) is therefore the Buddhist term for the person, mental and physical, which is nevertheless *anatman*, without soul or essence.

Buddhism also differentiates among six "fields" (**ayatana**) for the five skandhas: sight, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and mind, as well as the objects of these six senses.

Mahayana Buddhism adds **alaya-vijñāna**, "storehouse" consciousness, to the skandhas. This is similar to Jung's idea of the collective unconscious. What is stored there are called **bijas** or seeds, which are inborn tendencies to perceive the world in a certain way and result from our karmic history. They combine with **manas** or ego to form the illusion that is ordinary existence. By quieting this ego and becoming less self-centered, your mind realizes the "emptiness" (**sunyata**) of all things. Then you have peace.

## **The Four Noble Truths**

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The **Four Noble Truths** sound like the basics of any theory with therapeutic roots:

**1. Life is suffering.** Life is at very least full of suffering, and it can easily be argued that suffering is an inevitable aspect of life. If I have senses, I can feel pain; if I have feelings, I can feel distress; if I have a capacity for love, I will have the capacity for grief. Such is life.

**Duhkha**, the Sanskrit word for suffering, is also translated as stress, anguish, and imperfection. Buddha wanted us to understand suffering as a foundation for improvement.

One key to understanding suffering is understanding **anitya**, which means that all things, including living things, our loved ones, and ourselves, are impermanent. Our peculiar position of being mortal and being aware of it is a major source of anxiety, but is also what makes our lives, and the choices we make, meaningful. Time becomes important only when there is only so much of it. Doing the right thing and loving someone only have meaning when you don't have an eternity to work with.

Another key concept is **anatman**, which means that all things – even we – have no "soul" or eternal substance. With no substance, nothing stands alone, and no one has a separate existence. We are all interconnected, not just with our human world, but with the universe.

**2. Suffering is due to attachment.** We might say that at least much of the suffering we experience comes out of ourselves, out of our desire to make pleasure, happiness, and love last forever and to make pain, distress, and grief disappear from life altogether.

We are not therefore to avoid all pleasure, happiness, and love. Nor are we to believe that all suffering comes only from ourselves. It's just not necessary, being shot once with an arrow, to shoot ourselves again, as the Buddha put it.

Attachment is one translation of the word **trishna**, which can also be translated as thirst, desire, lust, craving, or clinging. When we fail to recognize that all things are imperfect, impermanent, and insubstantial, we cling to them in the delusion that they are indeed perfect, permanent, and substantial, and that by clinging to them, we, too, will be perfect, permanent, and substantial.

Our lack of "essence" or preordained structure, our "nothingness," leads us to crave solidity. We are, you could say, whirlwinds who wish they were rocks. We cling to things in the hopes that they will provide us with a certain "weight." We try to turn our loved ones into things by demanding that they not change, or we try to change them into perfect partners, not realizing that a statue, though it may live forever, has no love to give us. We try to become immortal, whether by anxiety-driven belief in fairy-tales, or by making our children and grand-children into clones of ourselves, or by getting into the history books or onto the talk shows. We even cling to unhappy lives because change is too frightening.

Another aspect of attachment is **dvesha**, which means avoidance or hatred. To Buddha, hatred was every bit

as much an attachment as clinging. Only by giving those things which cause us pain permanence and substance do we give them the power to hurt us more. We wind up fearing, not that which can harm us, but our fears themselves.

The most frightening things we've seen in this century are the mass movements – the Nazis, the Red Guard, the Ku Klux Klan, terrorist groups, and on and on. The thought seems to be that, if I'm just a little puff of wind, maybe by joining others of my kind, I can be a part of a hurricane! Beyond these are all the petty movements – political ones, revolutionary ones, religious ones, antireligious ones, ones involving nothing more than a style or fashion. And hatred is the glue that holds them together.

A third aspect of attachment is **avidya**, meaning ignorance. At one level, it refers to the ignorance of these Four Noble Truths – not understanding the truth of imperfection and so on. At a deeper level, it also means "not seeing," i.e. not directly experiencing reality, but instead seeing our personal interpretation of it. More than that, we take our interpretation of reality as more real than reality itself!

In some sutras, Buddha adds one more aspect of attachment: **anxiety**. Fear, like hatred, ties us to the very things that hurt us.

**3. Suffering can be extinguished.** At least that suffering we add to the inevitable suffering of life can be extinguished. Or, if we want to be even more modest in our claims, suffering can at least be diminished.

With decades of practice, some monks are able to transcend even simple, direct, physical pain. I don't think, however, that us ordinary folk in our ordinary lives have the option of devoting those decades to such an extreme of practice. For most of us, therapy is a matter of specifically diminishing **mental** anguish rather than eliminating all pain.

**Nirvana** is the traditional name for the state of being (or non-being, if you prefer) wherein all clinging, and so all suffering, has been eliminated. It is often translated as "blowing out," with the idea that we eliminate self like we blow out a candle. Another interpretation is that nirvana is the blowing out a fire that threatens to overwhelm us, or even taking away the oxygen that keeps the fires burning. By "blowing out" clinging, hate, and ignorance, we "blow out" unnecessary suffering. Perhaps an even more useful translation for nirvana is freedom!

**4. And there is a way to extinguish suffering.** This is what all therapists believe – each in his or her own way. Buddha called it the Eightfold Path.

## **The Eightfold Path**

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The Eightfold Path is the equivalent of a therapy program, but one so general that it can apply to anyone. The first two segments of the path are referred to as **prajña**, meaning **wisdom**:

**Right view** – understanding the Four Noble Truths, especially the nature of all things as imperfect, impermanent, and insubstantial and our self-inflicted suffering as founded in clinging, hate, and ignorance.

**Right aspiration** – having the true desire, the dedication, to free oneself from attachment, hatefulness, and ignorance. The idea that improvement comes only when the sufferer takes the first step of aspiring to improvement is apparently 2500 years old.

Therapy is something neither the therapist nor the client takes lying down – if you will pardon the pun. The therapist must take an assertive role in helping the client become aware of the reality of his or her suffering and its roots. Likewise, the client must take an assertive role in working towards improvement – even though

it means facing the fears they've been working so hard to avoid, and especially facing the fear that they will "lose" themselves in the process.

The next three segments of the path provide more detailed guidance in the form of **moral precepts**, called **sila**:

**Right speech** – abstaining from lying, gossiping, and hurtful speech generally. Speech is often our ignorance made manifest, and is the most common way in which we harm others. Modern psychologists emphasize that one should above all stop lying to oneself. But Buddhism adds that by practicing being true to others, and one will find it increasingly difficult to be false to oneself.

**Right action** – behaving oneself, abstaining from actions that hurt others such as killing, stealing, and irresponsible sex. Traditionally, Buddhists speak of the five moral precepts, which are...

- Avoid harming others;
- Avoid taking what is not yours;
- Avoid harmful speech;
- Avoid irresponsible sex;
- Avoid drugs and alcohol.

A serious Buddhist may add five more:

- One simple meal a day, before noon:
- Avoid frivolous entertainments:
- Avoid self-adornment:
- Use a simple bed and seat:
- Avoid the use of money.

Monks and nuns living in monastic communities add over 100 more rules!

**Right livelihood** – making one's living in an honest, non-hurtful way. Here's one we don't talk about much in our society today. One can only wonder how much suffering comes out of the greedy, cut-throat, dishonest careers we often participate in. This by no means means we must all be monks: Imagine the good one can do as an honest, compassionate, hard-working business person, lawyer, or politician!

This is a good place to introduce another term associated with Buddhism: **karma**. Basically, karma refers to good and bad deeds and the consequences they bring. In some branches of Buddhism, karma has to do with what kind of reincarnation to expect. But other branches see it more simply as the negative (or positive) effects one's actions have on one's integrity. Beyond the effects of your selfish acts have on others, for example, each selfish act "darkens your soul," and makes happiness that much harder to find. On the other hand, each act of kindness, as the gypsies say, "comes back to you three times over." To put it simply, virtue is its own reward, and vice its own hell.

The last three segments of the path are the ones Buddhism is most famous for, and concern **samadhi** or meditation. For simple instructions, go to my page on meditation:

[ <http://www.ship.edu/%7Ecgboree/meditation.html> ]

**Right effort** – taking control of your mind and the contents thereof. Simple, direct practice is what it takes, the developing of good mental habits: When bad thoughts and impulses arise, they should be abandoned. This is done by watching the thought without attachment, recognizing it for what it is (no denial or repression!), and letting it dissipate. Good thoughts and impulses, on the other hand, should be nurtured and enacted. Make virtue a habit, as the stoics used to say.

**Right mindfulness** – mindfulness refers to a kind of meditation involving an acceptance of thoughts and perceptions, a "bare attention" to these events without attachment. This mindfulness is also extended to daily life. It becomes a way of developing a fuller, richer awareness of life, and a deterrent to our tendency to sleepwalk our way through life.

One of the most important moral precepts in Buddhism is the avoidance of consciousness-diminishing or altering substances – i.e. alcohol or drugs. This is because anything that makes you less than fully aware sends you in the opposite direction of improvement into deeper ignorance.

But there are other things besides drugs that diminish consciousness. Some people try to avoid life by disappearing into food or sexuality. Others disappear into work, mindless routine, or rigid, self-created rituals. Others still drown themselves in television and other entertainment.

We can also drown awareness in material things – fast cars, extravagant clothes, and so on. Shopping has itself become a way of avoiding life. Worst of all is the blending of materiality with entertainment. While monks and nuns avoid frivolous diversions and luxurious possessions, we surround ourselves with commercials, infomercials, and entire shopping networks, as if they were effective forms of "pain control!"

**Right concentration** – meditating in such a way as to empty our natures of attachments, avoidances, and ignorance, so that we may accept the imperfection, impermanence, and insubstantiality of life. This is usually thought of as the highest form of Buddhist meditation, and full practice of it is pretty much restricted to monks and nuns who have progressed considerably along the path.

But just like the earlier paths provide a foundation for later paths, later ones often support earlier ones. For example, a degree of "calm abiding" (**shamatha**), a version of concentration, is essential for developing mindfulness, and is taught to all beginning meditators. This is the counting of breaths or chanting of mantras most people have heard of. This quieting of the mind is, in fact, important to mindfulness, effort, all moral practice, and even the maintaining of view and aspiration. I believe that this simple form of meditation is the best place for those who are suffering to begin – though once again, the rest of the eightfold path is essential for long-term improvement.

Most therapists know: Anxiety is the most common manifestation of psychological suffering. And when it's not anxiety, it's unresolved anger. And when it's not anger, it's pervasive sadness. All three of these can be toned down to a manageable level by simple meditation. Meditation will not eliminate these things – that requires wisdom and morality and the entire program – but it will give the sufferer a chance to acquire the wisdom, morality, etc!

## **Bodhisattvas**

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A Bodhisattvas are enlightened beings who have chosen not to leave the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, but rather to remain in **samsara** (this existence) until they can bring all of life into nirvana with them. Think of them as the Buddhist version of saints. In northern Buddhism, they believe we all should strive to become Bodhisattvas.

How can you tell a bodhisattva from ordinary beings? They will have four outstanding qualities, called the **Brahma Vihara**:

- Loving kindness to all creatures;
- Compassion for all who suffer;
- Sympathetic joy for all who are happy;
- And equanimity, a pervading calm.

In northern Buddhism, the Bodhisattva has achieved "emptiness," **sunyata**. What this means is that they have gone beyond the usual dualistic mind. You and I think in terms of "this and that," "you versus me," "us and them," "either-or" and so on. The enlightened person sees that all things blend into each other, we are all human, everything is one. We are "empty."

In one form of Zen Buddhism, there is a tradition that involves asking young monks and nuns unusual questions called **koans**. The monk or nun meditates on the koan in the hopes of achieving a breakthrough into nondualistic mind. These questions are designed to frustrate our usual way of thinking and perceiving the universe. The most famous of them is "what is the sound of one hand clapping?"

The question has no answer in the ordinary sense: Any sound would, of course, be incorrect, but then silence isn't really the answer either, because one hand clapping is not just silent, it is a Silent beyond silence. The dimension from silence to sound doesn't apply to something that cannot have either. It is like asking for the taste of blue or the smell of an E minor chord. If you like, you could say that the answer is emptiness.

The "answer" that the master is looking for from his students is some clear indication that they understand this emptiness. In Zen tradition, there are stories about how monks and nuns responded correctly (or incorrectly) to these questions, which stories then become new koans themselves. Some of these students respond by knocking over their master, by walking away, by putting their shoes on top of their heads, quoting Buddhist sayings, or remaining quiet. For all the apparent nonsense, their responses indicate their understanding.

Another koan is "if you speak, I will hit you; if you don't speak I will hit you." Perhaps you can see that there is no answer to this dilemma, no way out. But that means it is not a dilemma at all! There is no either-or. You will get hit. It is inevitable. And so it is nothing at all. You are totally free to do whatever it is you would do if you had never been confronted by the koan at all. The trick, of course, is to *show* that freedom. That's not so easy!

Buddhists have an expression: "**nirvana is samsara**." It means that the perfected life is this life. While there is much talk about great insights and amazing enlightenments and even paranormal events, what Buddhism is really all about is returning to this life, your very own little life, with a "new attitude." By being more calm, more aware, a nicer person morally, someone who has given up envy and greed and hatred and such, who understands that nothing is forever, that grief is the price we willingly pay for love.... this life becomes at very least bearable. We stop torturing ourselves and allow ourselves to enjoy what there is to enjoy. And there is a good deal to enjoy!

Buddhists often use the term "practice" for what they do. They encourage each other to "keep on practicing." Nobody is too terribly concerned if they aren't perfect – they don't expect that. As long as you pick yourself up and practice a little more. A good basis for therapy.