

What is Buddhism

By Michelle Wruck

People often ask me simple questions about Buddhism that I find tough to answer. Are Buddhists atheists? Is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy? Is Buddhism compatible with Western science? I have a Master's Degree in Eastern Intellectual History from St. John's Graduate Institute, where I developed a special interest in Buddhism. I spend all of my free time learning about, writing about, and practicing Buddhist practices and yet I still feel that the answers to these questions are not so straightforward. I spent some time writing about this and found that the more I looked into it, the more I realized that these questions are hard to answer because of the nature of Buddhism itself. I realized that there's nothing that isn't Buddhism. Buddhism is, sort of, everything.

There is a research facility in Britain called the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies that looked at every form of Buddhism that exists and they couldn't find a single thread that ran through all of them. Richard Gombrich discusses this study in his excellent book on the origins of Buddhism titled *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*. He reports that there was not one unifying teaching, practice, or lineage that connected all of forms of Buddhism.

There may be other traditions that share this anomaly but probably not many. For Buddhism, though, it makes sense.

To understand why it makes sense, it's enough to look at two things; the teaching called dependent-arising and the split between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism.

Dependent-arising is sometimes translated as emptiness, mutually-dependent arising, or interdependence. The original word was in Pali: *pratītyasamutpāda*. Essentially, it means that the only constant is change but it's worth looking at how this teaching came about; both how Buddha came to this understanding, and how it evolved from, and in response to, the spiritual teachings of his time.

It's worth noting that the information we have about Buddha is hear-say. He lived before written language, let alone cameras. Each Buddhist tradition has a different version of his story. The one that I will relate here comes from the texts of the Pali Canon, which are one of three of the principle spiritual texts of the Theravada tradition. It's necessary to start here because Mahayana and the traditions that grew from it are a response to Theravada. We have to know what they are responding to before we can understand their response.

So, with that caveat, the story is that when Buddha was born, there was a prophecy that he would become powerful in some way - either a powerful king or a great spiritual teacher. His father was hoping for a king and decided to lavish luxury upon him in an attempt to keep him from choosing a spiritual life. As with all attempts to control fate, his father's plan backfired. Siddhartha lived the first 18 or so years of his life in absolute luxury but when he accidentally saw an old man, he began to realize that there were some things about life he did not fully understand. A brief inquiry into the world outside the castle walls led him to understand one thing that shocked him - everyone will someday become sick and die, i.e. everyone suffers. The luxurious life his father provided for him in an attempt to keep him from spiritual seeking ends up becoming the proof that everyone suffers. If even he and his family cannot escape this fate, then no one can. Suffering, Buddha sees, is absolutely universal. He leaves the castle and begins his quest to find an end to suffering.

Buddha leaves the luxury of the princely life and walks into the midst of an Indian spiritual revival. In the time leading up to Buddha's birth, Indian society had been following the Vedic tradition for as long as anyone could remember. The Vedic tradition had been handed down since time immemorial. To this day, no one knows who wrote the Vedic texts; we just know that they are really really old.

The Vedas are filled with rituals and chants written in ancient Sanskrit. Understanding the words is not as important as reciting them correctly - with particular emphasis on accurate phonetic pronunciation. The belief is that by practicing the rituals and speaking the words exactly as they were meant to be spoken, you benefit yourself and the world. To this day, there are people whose lives are dedicated to the memorization and practice of these ancient rituals.

But people in the time of Buddha started looking for something else. They began to debate the utility and efficacy of the rituals. In this spirit of searching, many impeccably logical systems of thought were developed and the yogic traditions were born. This is the world Buddha discovered on his quest.

Primarily, he spent time with the yogis. The yogic traditions evolved many different teachers, each teaching a different set of meditations and practices but they all had a common understanding of the spiritual quest. They taught that there was a permanent self buried under layers of impermanence and that the reason we suffered was because we identified with the layers instead of the true self. If we could let go of ego identification, they taught, we would be left with our true self - the atman - a permanent, consistent, real self. There, we would find rest, spiritual emancipation and inner peace.

Buddha is said to have studied with all of the best teachers of the time, to have mastered their techniques, been recognized as a master himself, but to have been left still unsatisfied. He didn't find the end to suffering that he sought in the yogic tradition. He became an ascetic, starving himself for long periods of time and performing radical feats of self-deprivation in the hopes of finding an end to suffering. After many years, he still had not found an end to suffering and he was distraught.

Then he decided to give up striving. Someone gave him some food. He sat down under a tree and according to the Pali Canon announced that he would not move until either he had found an end to suffering or he died. Mara, "the evil-one" is said to have visited him, trying to get him to stop, but still he sat until he found an end to suffering and attained enlightenment.

Obviously there are many lessons in the story itself, the striving, the training, the commitment, the giving up, the middle way between asceticism and gluttony, etc. In more ways than one, the story of Buddha contains all of Buddhism, something I hope to write more about later. But another important part was an understanding of the nature of existence: *pratītyasamutpāda*, everything is "dependently arisen." Now, I want to look at this teaching because this is where it starts to become more obvious why Buddhism is, sort of, everything.

If there is an essential teaching of Buddhism, it's *pratītyasamutpāda*. Essentially, what it says is that you can look all you want for some part of yourself that is permanent but you're not going to find anything. Your emotions change, your mind changes, your body changes, your perceptions change. There is no part of your experience that does not change. In fact, it's not just that you will not find a permanent self, looking for permanence is actually part of what causes your suffering.

This is the real genius of Buddhism. Most spiritual traditions and many philosophers and philosophic systems understand and identify the problem of perpetual change. Most traditions respond to that problem by positing something that is permanent. For Aristotle it was "the

unmoved mover,” some thing or some one who started the whole thing going but themselves was not “moved” by anything else. Sometimes it’s a god. Brahman, for example, or the Christian God. In Western science, for a while, it was the atom.

Buddha never says, and in fact refuses to say, that there is nothing that is permanent. He simply points you back to your own experience and says, watch, pay attention, see that no part of your experience is permanent and then stop trying to make some part of it permanent because it’s that striving that is causing your suffering. Most traditions offer you a place to rest. Buddha’s response to our ache is quite different. He says, there is nowhere to rest; but you can find peace if you stop looking.

One of the ways that Buddha teaches *pratītyasamutpāda* is by showing us that what we experience now, what arises right now depends on what came before. His primary purpose is to show us how this relates to our own minds and emotions so that we can find an end to our own suffering. Because we desire permanence, we do all sorts of things to achieve it - we work to make money so that we can have a stable life-style. Once we have a minimum life-style stabilized, we see that it could be more stable if we owned more and we begin to acquire the means of production. Once we have a lot, we realize we are vulnerable and need to protect what we have so that we will always have access to it. We hire security details and in the end it always leads to war. This perpetual desire for permanence is like a fire burning in us and like any fire, it requires fuel. Buddha’s prescription to put an end to the suffering is 1. To understand that we cannot ever attain permanence and 2. To watch the desire for permanence arise in us without acting on it until that desire runs out.

It’s tough to build a dogmatic structure around a concept like *pratītyasamutpāda*. On what would be base such a structure? Buddha saw this and recommended that we abandon his teaching in order to attain enlightenment. In The Discourse on the Parable of the Water Snake, Buddha uses the example of a raft to explain how clinging to the teachings of Buddhism is also problematic. “The dhamma (teaching) is like a raft. Once you have used the raft for crossing over, abandon the raft... Abandon the dhamma,” he adds, “all the more what is not the dhamma.” (107-108 Holder)

It’s because of the simple truth of *pratītyasamutpāda* that I claim that Buddhism is everything. First, it illuminates the nature of our minds. Our minds searches for stability, somewhere to rest. That may be in an opinion, a methodology, faith in someone or something, or a practice of some kind. And yet, none of these things is permanent. The search itself will always disappoint you. What you can do with that, is let go of the search, or at least recognize it when it shows up and recognize it’s futility.

Second, it illuminates the nature of the world. Everything, everyone, every idea, everything is conditioned by change. What that means is that the lesson of *pratītyasamutpāda* is something that we are being taught over and over and over again throughout our lives. Every experience you have is an experience of *pratītyasamutpāda*. Whether we’re looking at our internal experience or the external world, *pratītyasamutpāda* underlies it all.

Third, it is allowed the various traditions of Buddhism to develop the wide spectrum of practices that we see today. This development began when the Pali Canon was written down, in the 1st century BCE. There was another book written at the same time, The Lotus Sutra, which seems to have been intended as a protection for the spirit of Buddhism, the teaching on *pratītyasamutpāda*. The authors seem to have been concerned that codifying the Pali Canon through written word somehow went against the basic tenant of Buddhism - perpetual change. The book they wrote, the Lotus Sutra, was designed to transmit the spirit of the teaching without giving the reader anything to cling to.

The history of how this came about is unclear. Most of what I've learned has come from Hirakawa Akira's account in *History of Indian Buddhism: from Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana*. Here's what I've pieced together.

After Buddha attained enlightenment, he began teaching other people how to attain enlightenment. These were people who were already practiced in meditation and many of them achieved enlightenment quickly. Eventually, Buddha began to attract followers and the teaching spread wide. At this point, it was decided that one man, whose name was Ananda, would follow Buddha everywhere and memorize the teachings that he gave. It might seem incredible to us that someone would even attempt such a feat but remember that these men were very practiced in memorization and discipline.

After Buddha died, Ananda gathered everyone together and recited all of the conversations, "the discourses," that he remembered. This was called the First Council and the stories that Ananda shared became The Pali Canon. Each discourse begins, "Thus have I heard," harkening back to this council.

What has always really struck me about this story is what comes next. After Ananda finished sharing the discourses, he went and practiced the teachings until he attained enlightenment. That is to say, Ananda had not attained enlightenment even though he had listened first-hand to every single teaching the Buddha gave. He still had to go, sit down, and practice. He had to let the "fires of desire" run their course. Enlightenment, then, is not an understanding alone, it is a mechanical practice, a training, that leads to a shift in your behavior and experience of life. In the Pali Canon we get the impression that understanding leads to meditation, improves understanding and moral character, which in turn improves meditation and so on.

Many years after the First Council, there was a Second Council and in it we can already see the seeds of *pratītyasamutpāda* taking root. When Buddha was alive, he gave very specific instructions on how to attain enlightenment. Dancing was forbidden, eating after noon was forbidden, working or owning anything other than your meditation mat and your begging bowl and whatever clothes you happen to have or be given, all of it was forbidden. Buddhism is often described as a "middle-way" because Buddha left the life of asceticism to find enlightenment but it's important to understand that the "middle" at that time was much closer to asceticism than the life that we live today.

During the Second Council there was a controversy around some of the monks who had begun using meditation mats with fringe. Older monks felt that this went against Buddha's teaching. A letter of the law vs. spirit of the law debate emerged. It was decided that mats should not have fringe, but who was going to police such a decision?

Buddhist traditions began moving in many directions without any conflict between them. Each practitioner did what he or she believed was best. Those who believed in concepts that gave rise to Mahayana easily practiced along-side to those who believed in the practices that would become known as the Theravada tradition. Things went on that way until the 1st century BCE, when someone decided to write the Pali Canon down.

We don't know how long it had been since Buddha was alive but we believe it was somewhere between the 6th and 4th century BCE. The Mahayana tradition claims that by the time the Pali Canon was written down, it was remembered by only one monk and that that monk was arrogant. They were concerned that the written Pali Canon would seem rigid and fail to transmit the spirit of Buddhism, so they wrote their own book, The Lotus Sutra.

The Lotus Sutra is by far one of the most interesting books you will ever read. It is dramatically different in both style and content from the Pali Canon. Just to give you a sense of what I mean, here is a short excerpt from each...

From the Pali Canon in The Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness:

What is the noble truth of the origin of suffering?

That craving which leads to rebirth, accompanied by pleasure and lust, finding delight in this or that, namely, craving for sensual pleasure, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming.

Where does such craving arise when it arises? Where is it established when it settles?

From whatever things in the world are enticing and agreeable, here such craving arises when it arises, and here it is established when it settles.

(Ibid, 54-55)

From the Lotus Sutra:

At that time the Buddha emitted a ray of light from the tuft of white hair between his eyebrows, one of his characteristic features, lighting up eighteen thousand worlds in the eastern direction. There was no place that the light did not penetrate, reaching downward as far as the Avichi hell and upward to the Akanishtha heaven.

From this world one could see the living beings in the six paths of existence in all of those other lands. One could likewise see the Buddhas present at that time in those other lands and could hear the sutra teachings which those Buddhas were expounding. At the same time one could see the monks, nuns, laymen, and lay women who had carried out religious practices and attained the way. One could also see the bodhisattvas and mahasattvas who, through various causes and conditions and various types of faith and understanding and in various forms and aspects, were carrying out the way of the bodhisattva. And one could also see the Buddhas who had entered parinirvana, and could also see how, after the Buddhas had entered parinirvana, towered adorned with the seven treasure were erected for the Buddha relics.

(6, Watson)

The Pali Canon is so dry and uninspiring that Holder often uses ellipsis rather than repeat the same phrases over and over again. The Lotus Sutra on the other hand... there's clearly something very different going on here. When I read these texts in graduate school, I couldn't help but wonder, What happened to Buddhism? What happened to the instruction? Why all the mystical stuff?

There are a number of important philosophical shifts that take place between the Pali Canon and the Lotus Sutra, which I hope to examine in another essay, but at the end of the day, what we see happening to Buddhism is simple, it's *pratītyasamutpāda*. The authors of the Lotus Sutra were concerned that writing down the Pali Canon would codify Buddhism in a way that would totally miss the point of Buddhism. The Lotus Sutra attempts to preserve it in the most genius ways.

First, they introduce the concept of *upaya*. *Upaya* translates to expedient means, which actually isn't that much clearer. Essentially, *upaya* means that your teaching doesn't have to be factually true in order to be true in an ultimate sense. The example they give is of a man whose house is on fire. The man's sons are inside the house but for some reason, they can't see the fire. The man runs in and tells them, 'The house is on fire! Get out!' but they don't listen. So the

man changes his tactic. He says, 'There are three chariots waiting for you outside, filled with jewels. Go get them.' He used expedient means to get them to do something that was beneficial for them. Even if what he told them wasn't entirely true, it was true in the sense that they did need to get out of the house.

What this means is that anything you do can be a Buddhist teaching. This new foundation gives rise the Zen tradition with it's koans and immediate enlightenment, to Pure Land Buddhism, which teaches that our only hope for enlightenment is to be born at the time of a Buddha, so we should mainly just pray for that to happen. It has given rise to Tibetan Buddhism, where the bodhisattvas who are reborn again and again take up leadership positions like the Dalai Lama. It has also given rise to some of the problematic characters who brought Buddhism to the United States in the 60's and 70's, all claiming to be using "expedient means" to help others awaken. If anything you do could be educational, how can we hold you accountable for the way you treat your students?

But the Lotus Sutra does do something to guard against this and this is the real genius that I see in this work. It does allow for any means of education, but it doesn't lose sight of the teaching itself. The real genius of Lotus Sutra is the way it preserves the teaching on *pratītyasamutpāda* without giving you anything to hold on to.

It does so by perpetually reference itself. It regularly promises that anyone who recites or honors the Lotus Sutra in some way will gain great spiritual benefit, even more benefit than if they honor Buddha. It also claims that if you speak ill of the Lotus Sutra, you will be gravely punished and never attain enlightenment. In fact, the Lotus Sutra references itself so much that the reader can't help but wonder... am I reading the Lotus Sutra or am I reading a book about the Lotus Sutra. When I finished reading it in graduate school, I believe I actually put it down and said out loud, "Wait... was that the Lotus Sutra... or..." I remember looking at the cover and thinking, it says it's The Lotus Sutra... is The Lotus Sutra just a commercial for itself?

After many years I realized that The Lotus Sutra is using *upaya* to show me *pratītyasamutpāda*. Enlightenment is not a thing, a static state of being. It is a recognition of perpetual change. If you are looking for enlightenment, you are looking for something that can't be found. You have the same feeling when you are reading The Lotus Sutra. You're looking for something, the Lotus Sutra, and asking yourself what is the "essence" of it in the same way that we look for the essence of our self. The Lotus Sutra has no essence just as you have no essence. The experience of reading the book is, in and of itself, the teaching. The authors of the Lotus Sutra know that the teaching of Buddha is not what's important - it's the truth that underlies the teaching that matters.

So, when people ask me what Buddhism is, or whether or not Buddhist are atheists, or whether Buddhism is a religion or a philosophy, I never know what to say. The foundation of Buddhism is so simple and so true that it itself is subject to it's own meaning. To me, Buddhism is just the teaching that we ache for constancy and that we find freedom from that ache when we realize that the only constancy is change. Because that is true, Buddhism itself is nothing and everything. Every moment of your life, every teacher you have, ever subject you study, is teaching you this one universal truth. So what I tell people is, Buddhism is everything.

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