

Slide 1:

What the Buddha Thought

How can we know if something we read or hear about Buddhism really reflects the Buddha's own teachings?

There are three tools you can use:

Slide 2:

1. When delivering his first teaching, Buddha said:

“There arose in me the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the insight, the illumination *concerning things not heard before.*”

Any doctrine that belongs to another, non-Buddhist tradition, or that was widely accepted prior to the Buddha's birth, should automatically be considered suspect.

Slide 3:

2. Genuine teachings of the Buddha display an astonishing level of internal consistency.

When you must choose between two statements or ideas, always choose the one that is most consistent with *everything else* the Buddha said and did.

Slide 4:

3. The Buddha was hesitant to teach at first:

“This Dhamma that I have attained is profound and hard to see, hard to discover... not attainable by mere ratiocination, subtle, for the wise to experience... If I taught this Dhamma others, would not understand me, and that would be wearying and troublesome for me.

Anything that seems too simple is probably an over-simplification, or an alien religious doctrine that has crept in.

But remember, the Buddha's thinking is *subtle* — it requires us to change our usual way of thinking and let go of some fundamental assumptions.

It is NOT *complicated*.

Intellectually convoluted doctrines are rationalizations that distort his teachings to fit other ideas.

Slide 5:

How the Buddha Taught

When studying the Buddha's teachings, it is easy to assume that he agreed with the religious beliefs of the people he was speaking to, simply because he didn't contradict them.

But quite often, rather than challenging the beliefs someone already held, he met them where they were and tried to guide them to a better, deeper understanding.

This is confusing when you are searching these teachings for absolute truths. They must always be interpreted in context, taking into account who he was talking to, and the point he was making at the time.

Slide 6:

What the Buddha Taught

What the Buddha taught, *in his own words*, was "Suffering, and the end of suffering."

He had no intention of establishing a religion, nor of teaching philosophy, cosmology, and metaphysics, and he said so repeatedly.

Slide 7:

The Four Noble Truths

The Truth about Suffering:

Pain is inevitable, but (with the proper mental training) suffering is optional.

The Truth about the Cause of Suffering:

Craving for things to be different than they are is the root cause of all suffering.

The Truth about the End of Suffering:

When Wisdom brings about the complete and permanent end of craving, there is also a complete and permanent end to suffering.

The Truth about the Path to the End of Suffering:

The Eightfold Path Leads to the End of Suffering.

Slide 8:

The Eightfold Path

The Wisdom that overcomes ignorance:

1. Right Understanding
2. Right Intention

The practice of Virtue that changes our conditioning:

3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood

The practice of Meditation that validates Truth through experience:

6. Right Effort
7. Right Concentration
8. Right Mindfulness

We learn what the Buddha thought from studying the Wisdom division of the Path.

Slide 9:

Dependent Arising I: The Universal Principle

When this is, that is.
When this arises, that arises.
When this isn't, that isn't.
When this ceases, that ceases.

Slide 10:

The Subtle Implications of Dependent Arising:

1. Nothing stands outside of cause and effect.
Therefore, anything that appears to be “supernatural” or “magic” only appears that way because we don't fully understand the causes. The laws of causality are never violated.
2. All that arises due to causes and conditions must also pass away.
Everything, therefore, is impermanent.
3. Anything that arises does so in dependence upon multiple causes and conditions.
Each individual thing or event is the nexus of a massive causal convergence.
4. Causes and effects always arise together.
The arising and passing away of separate “things” is an illusion. There is just a single, continuous process.
5. Everything, everywhere is causally interconnected.
Absolutely everything and everyone is an interpenetrating, inseparable part of a single, indivisible, causally interdependent whole, best conceived of as a process.

Slide 11:

The Nature of an Individual Person I Who, or what, am I?

The Aggregate of Consciousness (*Viññāṇa Khandha*)

I am conscious.

The entirety of my subjective existence has been a series of instances of consciousness.
In every instance of consciousness, I am “consciousness *of*” something.

When I examine these “objects of consciousness” I find six categories
— mental objects plus five kinds of physical sense objects —
corresponding to mind and body, to the mental and the physical (*nama* and *rupa*).

In a very real sense, “I am” this collection, this aggregate of conscious experiences.

Slide 12:

The Nature of an Individual Person II Who, or what, am I?

The Aggregate of Form (*Rupa Khandha*)

When I examine what I actually know about material objects of any kind, the world of form in general, including my own body, I find only sensations.

That part of myself that I experience as my body is another collection, an aggregate of sensations this time.

Slide 13:

The Nature of an Individual Person III Who, or what, am I?

The Aggregate of Perceptions (*Sanna Khandha*)

I now realize that all of the *material* objects I thought I was perceiving “out there” are actually *mental* objects my mind has concocted to account for sensations that I experience.

Another important part of what “I am” is yet another collection, an aggregate of mental constructs that I call perceptions.

Slide 14:

The Nature of an Individual Person IV Who, or what, am I?

The Aggregate of Feelings (*Vedana Khandha*)

Running as a constant theme throughout the continuing stream of my moment-to-moment conscious experiences are pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings.

“I am,” in part, this aggregate of feelings that accompanies every other kind of experience I have.

Slide 15:

The Nature of an Individual Person V Who, or what, am I?

The Aggregate of Mental Formations (*Sankhara Khandha*)

When I reflect on it, my mind is constantly producing a whole variety of other mental objects like concepts, ideas, thoughts, memories, fantasies, projections about the future and emotions.

I realize there are also many other mental formations operating in the background — all of my accumulated loves and hates, desires and aversions, worries, hopes and fears, the intentions that drive my behavior, and everything else I might describe as my “personality.”

In other words, a very important part of who “I am” is this other great collection, this aggregate of mental formations.

Slide 16:

The Nature of an Individual Person - The Five Aggregates:

	Consciousness	
Feelings	Perceptions	Mental Formations
	Form	

Taken together as a whole, these Five Aggregates fully account for me as an individual person, mind and body, a psycho-physical entity active in the world.

Yet within them, I find nothing that I can legitimately claim as I, me, or mine — I have no power over these Five Aggregates that “I am.” In all of this, there is nothing to cling to as Self.

Yet I am unique.

In fact, each and every person, every such Collection of Aggregates in this or any other world, is totally unique, completely special, and exquisitely precious.

Slide 17:

The Three Characteristics

The ignorance that the Buddha identified at the root of craving is ignorance of three particular facts that characterize human existence. These Three Characteristics are:

- Impermanence (*anicca* in Pali and *anitya* in Sanskrit)
- Dissatisfaction (*dukkha* in Pali and *duhkha* in Sanskrit)
- No-Self (*anatta* in Pali and *anatman* in Sanskrit)

The Wisdom that eradicates ignorance and overcomes delusion comes from Insight into these Three Characteristics.

Slide 18:

Impermanence

Impermanence refers to the fact that all conditioned things are in a constant state of flux.

In reality, there are no “things” at all.
Not even temporarily existing “things” that briefly come into being and then pass away again.
Ultimately, there is *only* flux.

This does not mean that “nothing exists.”
It means, rather, that there is only pure process.
This is the middle way of the Buddha that avoids extreme views such as “all exists” and “nothing exists.”

Slide 19:

No-Self

No-Self is the denial that there is some individual essence to a person, a true *Self*, or *Atta*, or *Atman*.

There is, of course, the unique and constantly changing complex of mental and physical phenomena, the mind and body that we ordinarily identify as a person.

But there is no single, separate, enduring entity apart from that — no Self to survive or be annihilated at death — because *no such Self exists now, ever has existed, or ever could exist*.

The very essence of Self is duality and separateness, so *to be a Self is to be separate*.
Yet absolutely everything and everyone, including an individual person, is an interpenetrating, inseparable part of a *single, indivisible, causally interdependent whole*.

There is no room in this wholistic view of reality for separate processes that come to an end independently of the whole.

Slide 20:

Emptiness

All “things,” including the Self, are Empty of self-existence, and Empty of self-nature.

Slide 21:

Emptiness of Self-existence

“**All things are Empty of self-existence**” means the “existence” of separate “things” depends not only upon causes and conditions, but upon the *perceiving mind* as a cause as well.

That does NOT mean that “*nothing* exists outside of the mind.”

There is an Ultimate Reality that we are a part of, and that is the source of our sensory experience.
It is just that we cannot know that Ultimate Reality *in itself*.

Slide 22:

Emptiness of Self-nature

In each instance in which the mind imposes thingness, it takes the information provided by the sense organs and organizes and labels it in a way that makes it meaningful to the mind.

That meaningfulness is then the perceived “nature” of the thing.

This is what it means to say that “**all things are Empty of self-nature.**”

The mind creates its own reality, and imputes a nature to that reality.

This does not mean that Ultimate Reality has no self-nature of its own.

It simply means that the nature of Ultimate Reality is not what it appears to the mind to be.

Slide 23:

Dissatisfaction

Dissatisfaction refers to the fact that life, by its very nature, is difficult, flawed, and imperfect. Deep, lasting satisfaction, true happiness, complete freedom from suffering can never be achieved so long as we misunderstand the nature of human experience and the true nature of reality.

That which is impermanent, fabricated by the mind, and devoid of any self-nature of being what it appears to be can never bring happiness.

So long as the mind posits the objects of experience as real in themselves, grasping to them as sources of happiness or seeking to avoid them as the cause of suffering, the result will be dissatisfaction.

The fact of Dependent Arising means that all attempts to control what happens to us are doomed to fail.

It is only by transcending our nature through the Wisdom that Insight brings, and by abandoning the delusion that leads to craving, that we can ever find true and lasting happiness.

Slide 24:

Karma I

Although the word karma literally means “action,” by the time of the Buddha it had come to mean, very specifically, an action that produced *moral consequences for the doer of the action*.

The Buddha very famously redefined karma, saying:

“Intention I tell you is kamma. Intending, one does kamma by way of body, speech, and mind.”

By redefining karma in this way, the Buddha moved both karma and its consequences out of the material realm and into the mental realm.

This allows actions and their consequences to obey the laws of material causality according to Dependent Arising, and refocuses karma and its consequences as an inner process.

Slide 25:

Karma II

Acts motivated by ignorance, desire and aversion rebound upon you by strengthening ignorance and craving, making you *more* vulnerable to suffering in the future *no matter what happens to you*. Conversely, acts motivated by unselfishness, harmlessness, generosity and loving kindness rebound upon you by making you *less* vulnerable to suffering and *more* prone to happiness, *no matter what happens to you*. It's as simple as that.

Good karma in the form of good intentions moves us in the direction of Nirvana and liberation and away from suffering.

Bad karma in the form of bad intentions moves us towards Samsara and increased suffering.
This is the law of karma taught by the Buddha.

Slide 26:

Dependent Arising II: The Twelve Links

Following the formula, “when there is this, there is that,” these twelve are:

When there is

1. **Ignorance**, there are

2. **Mental Formations**

When there are Mental Formations, there is

3. **Consciousness**.

When there is Consciousness, there is

4. **The Mind and Body of an Individual Person** also known as the Five Aggregates.

When there is Mind and Body, there are

5. **The Six Sense Bases**.

When there are Senses, there is

6. **Contact**.

When there is Contact, there is

7. **Feeling**.

When there is Feeling, there is

8. **Craving**.

When there is Craving, there is

9. **Clinging**.

When there is Clinging, there is

10. **Becoming**.

When there is Becoming, there is

11. **Birth**, the coming-to-be or coming-forth of an Individual Person.

When there is Birth, there is

12. **Aging, Death, and this Entire Mass of Suffering**.

Slide 27:

The Meaning of the Twelve Links

Links five through ten describe a cycle that repeats itself over and over again throughout every day of our lives:

The action produced by becoming results in the generation of new sense objects, physical or mental, resulting in **Contact, Feeling, Craving, Clinging**, and a return to **Becoming**, which then leads back to **Contact** once again.

Through repeating cycles, individual conscious events get woven together to become episodes in a day in the life of the “person” born from this causal process.

Slide 28:

Rebirth and Reincarnation

Once again, the Buddha had taken a popular notion, the endless cycle of reincarnation in this case, and redefined it, shifting it from the material plane to the mental.

The cycle of rebirth driven by the Links of Dependent Arising describes the continuous process by which craving and the delusion of being a separate Self in a world of Other results in suffering.

If, when reading the Suttas, you understand that “rebirth” refers to this process of Dependent Arising rather than to reincarnation, everything else the Buddha says will make much more sense.

Slide 29:

The Purpose of the Twelve Links

The most important purpose of this formulation is to show how the cycle can be broken. By working on our intentions in order to change our karma, we change the nature of the link called **Becoming**.

With each new “rebirth” we are less ignorant and the link of **Craving** is weakened.

Study and practice brings Tranquility and Insight, which generates powerful Equanimity that further weakens **Craving**.

Eventually the link of **Craving** is broken.

With the cessation of **Craving** comes the cessation of **Clinging**.

With the cessation of **Clinging** comes the cessation of **Becoming**.

With the cessation of **Becoming** comes the cessation of **Rebirth**.

With the cessation of **Rebirth**, the **Entire Mass of Suffering** comes to an end.