THERE CAN BE AN END TO SUFFERING
ESCAPE FROM THE ETERNAL CYCLE
IN CONTEXT

KEY SOURCE
Buddha's first sermon, The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of the Dhamma, and subsequent teachings

WHEN AND WHERE
6th century BCE, India

BEFORE
From prehistory: Suffering is often regarded as a punishment from the gods.

From 700 BCE: Hindus see suffering as the inescapable result of karma factors in past or present lives.

AFTER
3rd century BCE: The Mauryan emperor Asoka takes practical and political steps to minimize suffering by promoting Buddhist values.

2nd century BCE: Nagarjuna argues that dissatisfaction with life may be overcome by recognizing the insubstantial, changing nature of the self.

The central aim of Buddha’s teaching—the dhamma—is to overcome suffering. Everything that does not contribute to this aim is considered irrelevant. The ideas of Buddhism are not to be taken as ends in themselves, nor are they the result of dispassionate speculation about the nature of the world. They are observations about life and principles that are to be put into practice.

The Noble Truths

The Buddhist dhamma starts with four statements, known as the “Four Noble Truths”, which give an overview of the human problem of suffering and solutions for it. The Truths, which are believed to be the subject of the Buddha’s first sermon following his enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree, revolve around this issue.

The first of Buddha’s Four Noble Truths is dukkha, the truth of suffering. This is the idea that all life involves suffering, which lies at the heart of Buddhist teachings, and was the revelation that began Siddhartha Gautama’s long search for truth. Human life, Buddha said, is fragile and always vulnerable. What is more, life is characterized by suffering. The nature of this suffering is very broad, meaning not necessarily intense pain, but also lesser, more widespread feelings of dissatisfaction. It may be the emotional suffering caused by the death of a loved one, an enduring sense that life is somehow pointless or empty, or simply a feeling of being stuck in an unpleasant situation, such as a traffic jam. Dukkha is the feeling that arises in situations that cause stress, discomfort, or dissatisfaction. It makes us feel that we want to be somewhere, or even someone else.

Buddha thought that the search for happiness leads people in the wrong direction. Individuals crave things—sensual pleasure, wealth, power, material possessions—in the hope that these things will make them happy. But the falsity of this thought lies behind samadaya, the Second Noble Truth: that the origin of suffering is craving. Tanha, the Buddhist term for this craving, indicates people’s attempts to hold on to what they like, imagining that if only they could have a certain thing and keep it, all their problems would be solved. Tanha can be translated as “thirst,” suggesting how natural and essential this craving seems to us. Buddha argued that even so, this craving is counterproductive, leading only to more suffering and unhappiness.

According to Buddha, this craving for things goes beyond material objects and the wish for power—it includes the need to cling to particular views and ideas, rules, and observations, which is equally harmful. In this way, Buddhism takes a radically different view from the majority of religions, which tend to regard people’s acceptance of doctrines and religious observances as essential to salvation. While Buddha did not say that such beliefs are harmful in themselves, he warned against clinging to them in the assumption that they will automatically help in the path to overcome suffering.

Finding nirvana

For Buddhists, everything arises from existing conditions. This means that something must cause suffering, and if that cause is removed, suffering will cease. The Second Noble Truth identifies craving as the cause—so Buddha said that if the craving were to stop, the suffering would cease.

The Third Noble Truth, nirodha (the cessation of suffering and the causes of suffering), refers to the absence of craving. Putting an end to craving does not involve stopping life’s normal activities.

Buddha himself carried on teaching for 45 years after his enlightenment, and was subject to all the usual problems that afflict human beings. Rather, it refers to a state in which a person understands and deals with life, without the emotional need to cling to it or be other than it is. With the Third Noble Truth, come a point of peace called, in Sanskrit, nirvana. This is a state beyond craving or desire for anything or anyone. It is not the same as extinction; Buddha was critical of those who tried to escape reality by craving annihilation.

People are often moved to tears at funerals and other sad events, but Buddhists regard such suffering as deriving from a mistaken wish to hold on to something or someone.

Rather, the triple fires of greed, hatred, and illusion—three characteristics that perpetuate human suffering—are “blown out” like a candle. In other words, by letting go of destructive craving, the mind is liberated from suffering and unhappiness. This leads to a state of engaged happiness: a form of happiness that results from good moral conduct.

Unlike everything else, nirvana is not thought to be the result of cause and effect, but stands beyond oroutside it. It is said to be permanent and unchanging; whereas everything in the world around us, and we ourselves, are temporary and have arisen because of certain conditions. nirvana is an unconditioned, uncaused state and is therefore an absolute truth for Buddhists. This blissful state of being is accessible to us on earth and in our lifetimes. Unlike most religions, which encourage people to live a moral life in the present in order to attain happiness in a world beyond this one, Buddhist says that a true end to suffering is possible immediately, in this world.

Buddha himself attained a state of nirvana at the age of 35, and through his teachings sought to show others how to reach this enlightenment. The Fourth Noble Truth describes “the path that leads to the end of suffering.” This is magga, the Middle Way, also known as the “Noble Eightfold Path.”
The Noble Eightfold Path

The path to the cessation of suffering is set out as a path of eight steps. However, these need not be taken sequentially as they are eight principles, rather than actions, that allow Buddhists to overcome craving and achieve happiness. The Noble Eightfold Path deals with the three basic aspects of the Buddhist life: wisdom (in the first two steps), virtue (in the next three), and concentration (in the final three).

Material goods, such as shoes may be advertised as "mismatched" items, in an attempt to create a desire or craving in us. This desire, which can never be fully satisfied, leads to suffering.

because a mere understanding of the teaching (without also adopting an intention to act on it) is of no use.

Steps three, four, and five of the path offer practical moral guidelines. Buddhist morality is not about rules to be obeyed, but about creating conditions that facilitate the path towards enlightenment. Step three states that we must use "right speech," avoid telling lies, speaking harshly or cruelly, and listen to or spreading purposeless chatter and malicious gossip. Instead, we must cultivate the opposite: truthful, positive, kindly, and purposeful speech.

Step four says that we must take "right action" by following the five moral "precepts": not to destroy life, not to steal, not to misappropriate the senses, not to lie, and not to clout the mind with intoxicants (the last is of particular importance for those who are engaging in the mental training that forms the final part of the path). The fifth step also supports an ethical approach, suggesting that we must pursue a "right livelihood." This is the requirement to earn a living in a way that does not go against Buddhist moral principles.

Cultivating right mind

The last three steps advise on how to carry out the right mental training for reaching nirvana. Step six says that "right effort" should be applied. This requires a person to be conscious of and set aside negative or harmful thoughts as they arise, replacing them with their positive equivalent. So, for example, at the beginning of the Dhammapada (the "Verses of the Dharma"), the Buddha says that those who resist the actions of others, or bend upon courage sustained in the past, will never become free of hate. Right effort eliminates the erroneous intention to break the cycle of resentment and negative response.

The seventh step tells us to pursue "right mindfulness." It is all too easy for our minds to become distracted, fitting from one thing to another. An important step in mental discipline is to be fully aware of the present moment and to allow the mind to be quietly focused on just one thing. This is seen in meditation techniques such as "mindfulness of breathing" or "just sitting," which generally form the starting point for training in Buddhist meditation.

The final, eighth, step on the path encourages us to apply "right concentration." The practice of concentration is a crucial aspect of following the Buddhist dharma. This step recognizes that control of the mind is central to being able to overcome suffering, since what is being addressed is not physical pain or death itself, but the sense of existential angst that can accompany them. In "insight" meditation, a person may calmly and deliberately contemplate those things that most people try to avoid thinking about, such as death. In a meditation on meta, or love, positive thoughts are cultivated towards others, from people we love to those we naturally find most difficult. This exercise encourages benevolence and the development of a more positive set of mental qualities.
If hurt, anger, and delusion are given up, man aims neither at his own ruin, nor at the ruin of others... and he experiences no mental pain and grief. Thus is nirvana visible in this life.  

Anguttara Nikaya

The Noble Eightfold Path offers a programme of self-development. However, Buddhism does not have a set of commands or doctrines to be accepted; instead, it suggests a way to live that will ease suffering. Different people will concentrate on different aspects of the path, depending on their circumstances. In addition, the path itself is not a straight route that begins at step one and ends at step eight. It is not considered necessary to deal with any one of the steps before moving on to another step. The three main aspects of understanding, morality, and meditation may be used to reinforce one another. Some steps, however, such as those that deal with ethical issues, may be important in setting up the conditions in our lives in which meditation can become truly effective.

The Wheel of Life

A key feature of Buddha's teaching is "interconnectedness" (pp. 330–335): the idea that everything arises because of pre-existing causes and conditions. The Buddhist path is therefore one that works always with context; it aims to create the conditions that allow anger and suffering to be replaced by contentment and happiness. This means that if we look at the chain of causes and effects of events in our lives, we can look for the links that might be changed so that our lives can take a different course. If it were not possible to choose differently and alter the outcomes of situations, people's fates and their every action would be absolutely determined, with no escape from suffering. So, although Buddhism takes from Hinduism the idea of karma (that actions have consequences), it does not accept this in any rigid or mechanical sense. There is always an element of choice in our actions. The Buddhist view of actions and consequences is presented in graphic form in the "Wheel of Life", a complex piece of iconography that depicts suffering and possible ways to overcome it. Everything within the wheel represents the world of suffering—a world of endless rebirth in which all beings are trapped as a consequence of their karmic actions. The wheel itself is held within the jaws of a fearsome demon, who represents death.

In the centre of the wheel are three creatures—a cow, a monkey, and a pig—that represent the three poisons: greed, hatred, and ignorance. Buddha saw these as the starting point or root of the "unhospitable" life and thus of human suffering. Surrounding them is a circle filled with human beings either descending or ascending, who pass by a series of realms depicted in the next circle. These realms are those of humans, animals, gods, and demons (soul-like beings constantly doing battle, hungry ghosts, and hell—the lowest of states). The implication is that people can move from one realm to another. It is from the human realm that they may escape to a happier state of existence through the teachings of Buddha.

For those seeking to understand the process by which Buddhists can achieve this—by overcoming suffering—it is the outermost wheel that is the most important. The twelve nidanas, or stages, in the outer wheel give graphic expression to the interconnectedness that is central to Buddhist teaching. They feature people and buildings, from a blind man (who represents a starting point in total spiritual ignorance) to a house with five windows (representing the mind and senses). There is a crucial opportunity offered between the seventh and eighth nidanas, which show a man with an arrow in his eye (representing feelings of pain) and a woman offering a man a drink (feeling that craving is needed). It is this link—the pain or pleasure that comes from contact with the world and the resulting craving—that is critical. If the link holds, the process of re-becoming (samsara) continues forever. If it can be broken, there is the possibility of escape from the cycle of existence and suffering.

The breaking of the link signals a return to the starting point of Buddha's route to the end of suffering: the ability to engage with life without allowing that experience to generate the craving that arises from attachment and disappointment. And to set up the conditions to help break that nidana link, people should follow the Noble Eightfold Path. Through taking action they may find nirvana. According to Buddhism, there is no god to save humanity, so what people need to cultivate is wisdom rather than faith.