

Buddhism notes
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Dharma

The term “dharma” has several different meanings, including:

1) Ontological:

- a) transcendental reality
- b) order of the universe
- c) objective data (see below)
- d) trait, quality, property, characteristic of something

2) Life conduct:

moral law, righteousness, virtue, right behavior, duty, religious practice

3) Doctrinal:

Dharmic facts in 1) and 2) interpreted as Buddha’s teachings: doctrine, scripture, etc.

Dharmas as objective factors in all reality. All experience is composed of dharmas, which are multiple, momentary, impersonal, and mutually conditioned events.

To discern these objective dharmas, we must engage in practices that let us:

- 1) differentiate (analyze apparently unified persons into elementary dharmic events)
- 2) depersonalize (eliminate all references to I, mine, and other “ownership” terms)
- 3) evaluate dharmic descriptions as being superior to common sense descriptions

Crucial: Difference between conventional/relative truth and ultimate truth.

According to Buddhism, every thing or event can be seen from two perspectives (see the wave-particle duality in modern physics):

1) spatially, in respect to itself (i.e., as a separate thing) --a thing is nothing more than the totality of the parts (“dharmas”) into which it can be divided. House, dog, person, etc., are useful fictions which pretend to be solid, coherent substances, but which in fact are collections of dharmas/phenomena. There is no enduring substance “underneath” dharmas/phenomena.

2) dynamically, in relation to other things (i.e., as a dynamic event)--nothing moves by its own power; all phenomena arise because they are conditioned by an infinity of other phenomena (dharmas).

The Five Skandhas

The following five skandhas (heaps, baskets, collections) contain the various dharmas that constitute all of human experience.

1) **form and matter** (nama-rupa)--body, physiological-domain, what’s left over after subtracting all emotional and mental dharmas.

2) **feeling** (vedana): pleasant, unpleasant, neutral

3) **perception** (samjna), which involves contact between sense organ and sensed phenomenon

Perception involves:

Six senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, touching, mental activity

Twelve spheres:

sight and things seen

hearing and things heard (etc.)

Eighteen dhatus:

(the twelve spheres, plus consciousness of each of them)

4) **volitional impulses and drives** (samskaras)--help generate sense of self; desiring, grasping, etc.

5) **consciousness** (vijnana)

1) sheer awareness needed for feeling, perception, impulses (vijnana)

2) thinking as related to object, what we call "thought" (citta)

3) sixth sense organ (manas). Takes the least from outside and does the most constructing of experience.

Consciousness as manas has four functions:

a) receptor organ sensitive to

other mind objects (feelings, perceptions, impulses)

subtle or invisible mental forms

Nirvana, in some ways

b) organizes and unifies data from other senses (turns them into "objects")

c) intellection (reasoning, judging, planning, imagining)

d) distinguishes self from not-self, thereby generating illusion of selfhood

e) Consciousness or Mind can also mean the most inward aspect of the human, pure objectless awareness, no-thought, absolute "spirit," beyond thought and non-thought, cessation of perception and feeling. This seems close to Nirvana. How to distinguish it from mere stupor?

Mental and volitional acts are the ones that really determine wholesome or unwholesome karma.

Anatman: The No-Self Doctrine

According to the Buddhist doctrine of anatman (Sanskrit) or anatta (Pali), the "self" is an illusion composed of countless impersonal phenomena ("dharmas") that are themselves completely impersonal. The following outlines the Buddhist examination of the illusory self and the impersonal dharmas that give rise to this illusion.

Five functions of the self. Buddhism denies first two and explains next three alternatively.

1) Self owns and appropriates. False. Craving is not owned, but instead just happens.

2) Self is permanent factor underlying various states. But no such "self" is there.

3) Self acts and initiates. Action (karma) occurs, but skandhas do this, not a "self"

4) Self is subject that knows and sees. There is knowing, but no knower.

5) Self distinguishes one person from another. Useful fiction. Continuity of self is attributable to apparent continuity of consciousness (fifth skandha)

Regarding the self, Buddhism recommends the Middle Way beyond the ideas of existence (“eternalism” heresy) and non-existence (“nihilism” heresy) of self.

Problems with idea of anatman include:

- 1) moral--If there is no self, who acts and who is responsible for actions?
- 2) rebirth--how can rebirth or transmigration happen if there is no one to be reborn?
- 3) continuity--how to explain the felt continuity of my own experience?
- 4) loving kindness (metta)--how to show loving kindness and compassion to conglomeration of impersonal and insubstantial phenomena (dhammas)?

Buddhist tried to explain continuity of self in various ways:

Continuity in THIS life:

1) string of pearls metaphor--Consecutive experiences are like a string of pearls that look connected, but that lack any string holding them together

2) there is a “person” (pudgala), a concept pushed by the Pudgalavadins) that arises and co-exists with the psycho-physical skandhas (collections of dhammas or phenomena), but has its own structural unity. Pudgala is neither identical with dhammas nor separate from them.

Fire is to wood as person is to dhammas. True “self” is transcendental, and can’t be understood in terms of usual categories.

3) chariot example—“chariot” is but a name dependent on the parts of the chariot, but there is no chariot over and above the parts.

4) possession skandha--There is a sixth skandha that holds together or possesses the dhammas constituting the other five skandhas.

Continuity with what arises in the NEXT life:

1) Candle flame example (In using one candle to light another, the same flame ignites the new candle, and hence is both the same and not-the-same as the original flame.)

2) Volitional acts (fourth skandha) can suffuse subsequent (impersonal) dhammas so much that they are influenced by previous dhammas. No substance is carried over, but the volitional effect (karma) influences how next skandha sequence is organized. CLINGING or GRASPING is the volitional element that has largest effect on subsequent sequence of skandhas (i.e., the newly born human).

Middle path between eternalism and annihilationism.

Who is reborn is not me, but then again is also not not me, neither identity nor difference. Death is a peculiar sort of change, but not all that different from what happens in our own lifetime! How does Jill at 3 relate to Jill at 75? She is neither the same nor wholly different. Similarly, the person who comes into being AFTER Jill dies, the person who is constituted in part from the volitional skandhas at work in Jill, will be neither the same as nor different from Jill.

arise **decay and death**, wherein suffering consists