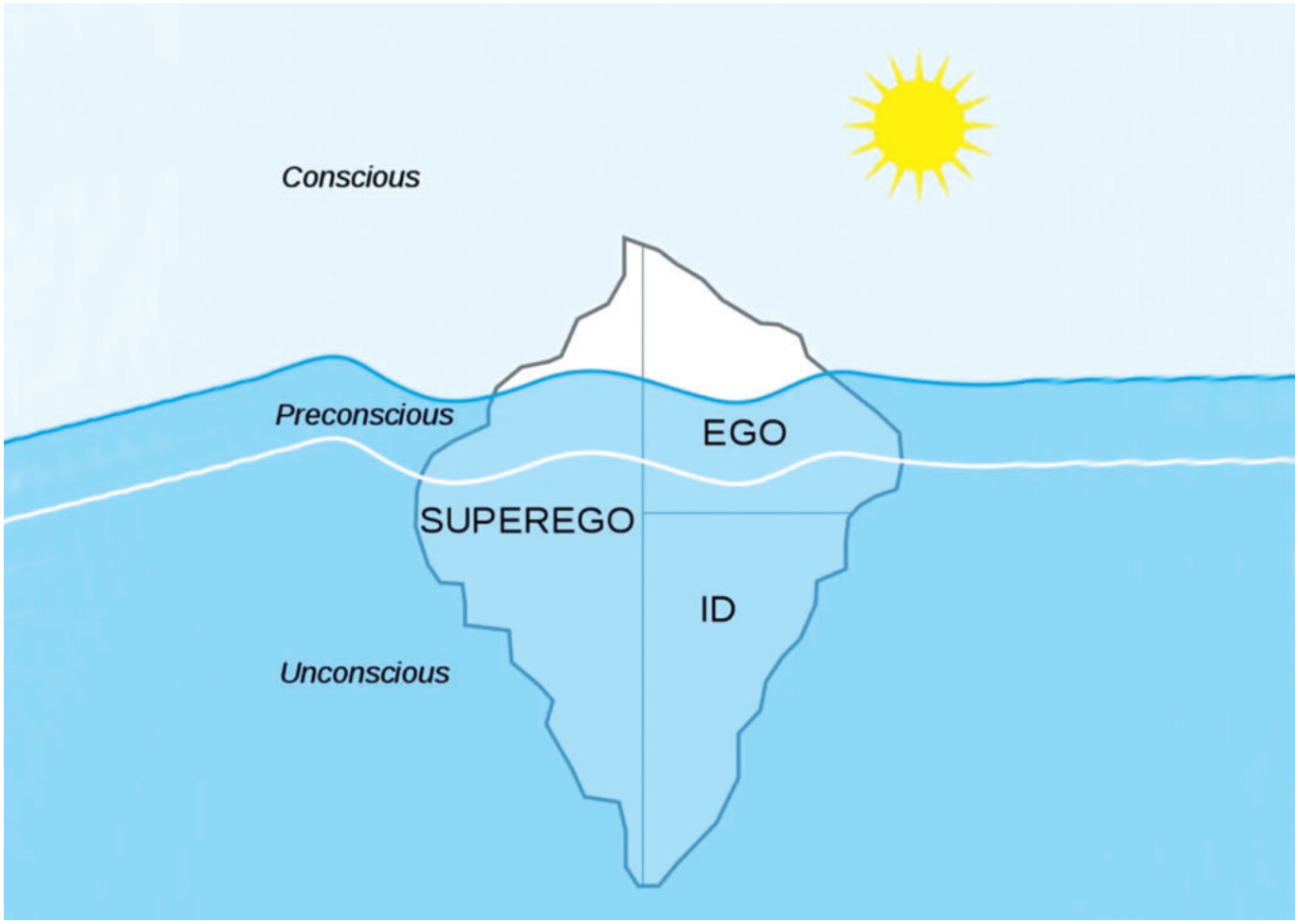
What is Buddhism?

Posted on



Buddhism encompasses a religion, a philosophy, a psychology, and a path toward wisdom and mental tranquility. Generally, religion is understood as a belief system that includes rituals practiced by its followers. According to Wikipedia, “Philosophy (‘love of wisdom’ in Ancient Greek) is a systematic study of fundamental questions concerning topics such as existence, reason, knowledge, value, and language. It involves rational and critical inquiry that reflects on its methods and assumptions.”

Pure philosophy seeks an understanding of the world, life, and nature that is free from myth. Consequently, philosophers are individuals who strive to gain knowledge about nature, the world, and the essence of human beings, including the mind, behavior, and their capacities. As such, anyone can become a philosopher by pursuing knowledge of reality with an open mind.

Psychology is deeply rooted in Western philosophy, which laid its foundational principles. The origins of philosophy trace back to Greek society, with Socrates (circa 470-399 BC) recognized as its founder and an early moral philosopher. Socrates' teachings are primarily known through dialogues written by his students, like Plato and Xenophon, who used a question-and-answer format. This approach gave rise to the Socratic dialogue genre. Reconstructing Socrates' ideas is challenging due to contradictory accounts of his life, a situation known as the Socratic problem. Importantly, he did not document his teachings, so our understanding relies on his students' works.

Over the decades, psychology has evolved through Western philosophy to address the trauma experienced by victims of Western wars. This evolution has occurred in several stages, which can be categorized into four main periods: the primitive period, the pre-classical period, the pre-modern period, and the modern period. In contemporary times, modern psychology is understood through six key theories: Psychoanalysis, Behaviorism, Gestalt Psychology, Cognitive Psychology, Social Learning Theory, and Humanistic and Existential Theory.

Regarding Buddhism, I would like to briefly explain a few of its schools. The world was significantly impacted when psychologist and medical doctor Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) discovered the concept of the unconscious mind. His analysis categorizes the mind into three parts: the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious, which correspond to the Ego, Super-Ego, and Id. This model is often likened to an iceberg, with most of its mass submerged beneath the surface. In contrast, Buddhism divides the mind into two parts: the conscious and the unconscious (based on the 'Internet Encyclopedia of Psychology').

William James (1842-1910), an American philosopher and psychologist, offers insights about the mind that resonate with Buddhist teachings.

He states, "We now begin our study of the mind from within. Most books start with sensations, as the simplest mental facts, and proceed synthetically, constructing each higher stage from those below it. Consciousness, from our birth, is a teeming

multiplicity of objects and relations, and what we call simple sensations are results of discriminative attention, often pushed to a very high degree.”

James believes that sensations are fundamental experiences and are merely assumptions. He emphasizes that some form of thinking is always taking place. To better understand these ‘thoughts,’ we can examine his quotations. He notes that as psychologists, “the first fact is that thinking of some sort is always going on,” and he uses the term ‘thinking’ to describe every form of consciousness. William James illustrates this concept by providing a metaphor for the mind. “If we could express in English the phrase ‘it thinks,’ just as we say ‘it rains’ or ‘it blows,’ we would be articulating the fact in the simplest way possible and with minimal assumptions. However, since we cannot, we must simply say that thought occurs.” He has introduced ‘five characteristics of thought’:

1. Every thought tends to be part of a personal consciousness.

2. Within each personal consciousness, thought is always changing.

3. Within each personal consciousness, thought is sensibly continuous.

4. It always appears to deal with objects independent of itself.

5. It is interested in some parts of these objects to the exclusion of other, and welcomes or rejects-chooses from among them, in a word-all the while. “ -(The Principles of Psychology.)

Through these insightful explanations, he has illustrated the mind in a way that closely aligns with Buddhist philosophy. To understand the essence of Buddhism, it is advisable to refer to scholarly essays and public discussions on the subject. One valuable resource is Wikipedia, which highlights important facts about Buddhism from its inception.

“Buddhism, also known as Buddhadharm and Dharmavinaya, is an Indian religion and philosophical tradition based on teachings attributed to the Buddha, a wandering teacher who lived in the sixth or fifth century BCE. According to tradition, the Buddha instructed his followers in a path on development which leads to awakening and full liberation from dukkha (lit. ‘suffering, unease’). He regarded this path as a Middle Way between extremes such as ascetism or sensual indulgence. Teaching that dukkha arises alongside attachment or clinging, the Buddha advised

meditation practices and ethical precepts rooted in non-harming. Widely observed teachings include the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the doctrines of dependent origination, karma, and the three marks of existence. The three marks of existence are three characteristics (Pali: tilakkhana,) of all existence and beings, namely anicca (impermanence), dukkha (suffering or unsatisfactory, unease), and anatta (without a lasting essence)."

The five precepts are fundamental ethical guidelines essential for leading a moral and meaningful life without causing harm to others. If everyone in the world upheld even the first precept—abstaining from harm to living beings—we could save countless lives and preserve immense wealth worldwide.

The second precept urges you to consider whether it is justifiable to acquire wealth through deception rather than earning it through honest means. The third precept highlights that pursuing excessive pleasure can be detrimental to both oneself and society as a whole.

The fourth precept emphasizes that without honesty in speech, one cannot engage in fraud, and both lead to greater harm. Finally, by abstaining from intoxicating drinks, you can prevent more than thirty health issues, including physical ailments, mental illnesses, and social problems. For example, an article titled "How many people died in Sri Lanka consuming alcohol?" reports that about 65 deaths occur each day due to alcohol-related causes, totaling approximately 23,000 deaths annually. Additionally, Sri Lanka faces an annual burden of 237 billion rupees due to health issues stemming from alcohol consumption. These examples highlight the importance of the five precepts in fostering a healthier and more ethical society. Firstly, by understanding the Four Noble Truths, one can lead a good life by following the Noble Eightfold Path. This path is divided into three parts: Wisdom (Paññā), Moral Virtues (Sīla), and Meditation (Samādhi).

I. Wisdom:

Right View: Understanding key Buddhist principles such as karma, rebirth, and the Four Noble Truths.

Right Intention: Embracing renunciation, non-ill will, and compassion.

II. Moral Virtues:

Right Speech: Engaging in truthful communication and avoiding rude or harmful speech.

Right Action: Abstaining from killing or injuring any living being, refraining from taking what is not given, and avoiding sensual misconduct.

Right Livelihood: Choosing a profession that does not cause suffering to sentient beings, and avoiding occupations that involve cheating, harming, or killing.

Right Effort: Preventing unwholesome states that can disrupt meditation.

III. Meditation:

Right Mindfulness: Being fully present and aware of what you are doing.

Right Concentration: Practicing correct meditation or focus.

Fulfilling even a few of these eight aspects is vital for a balanced life. Achieving more is remarkable. I'll end with a quote from a Shaolin monk's video.

"Okay, what is Buddhism? It begins with the Four Noble Truths. The first truth is that the life we are living is connected with suffering. If you disagree, then Buddhism may not be for you, and that is where your journey ends. The second truth posits that suffering has causes: greed, hate, and ignorance. Greed drives us to desire the unattainable, hate fosters aversion to what we have, and ignorance blinds us to our actions' consequences. By diminishing these roots, we can alleviate suffering."

Ven Diyapattugama Revatha Thero (B.A., M.A., M.Phil.)
Expert Psychological Counselor and Meditation Instructor
Siriwardhanarama Buddha Dhamma College
Mano¯daya Meditation Center
Siriwardhanaramaya, Temple Lane, Kollupitiya
sirirevathad@gmail.com
dhammavedi.com



Ven Diyapattugama Revatha Thero, Chief Incumbent of the Siriwardhanaramaya Temple, Kollupitiya.