



PART 2

CORE CONCEPTS

What You'll Learn: *In this section, you'll learn about some of the key concepts that run throughout Buddhist ideas and teachings, such as suffering, impermanence, and enlightenment. Understanding the ideas at the core of Buddhism will give you deeper insight into how we can best use them to live peacefully and with compassion for all. Understanding these basic concepts will help you as you explore Buddhism through this book and beyond.*

The Buddha became a great teacher after he became enlightened. But what is enlightenment? Can anyone become enlightened?

Enlightenment is the ultimate goal of all Buddhist teachings and practices, and the Buddha taught that anyone—that means you!—can realize enlightenment. That’s what Buddhist teachings and practices are for—to help regular people like you and me along the path to that goal. The Buddhist conception of enlightenment isn’t intellectual. It’s experiential. It’s kind of like being a parent: If I went back in time and tried to explain to my younger self what it feels like to be a dad, nothing I could say would adequately convey it. I couldn’t imagine what it would feel like to be a dad until I actually became one. In the same way, you cannot truly know what it’s like to be enlightened unless you’ve realized enlightenment. Having said that, there are some ways to describe enlightenment that point us in the direction of what the experience is like. The Buddha said that “just as the great ocean has one taste, the taste of salt, so also this teaching and discipline has one taste, the taste of liberation” (Udāna 5.5). To be enlightened is to be liberated from our habitual reactivity, freed from our perceptions and ideas in order to see reality as it is without wanting it to be different.

I would go further and say that enlightenment is also freedom from wanting to be enlightened. Any notion we have about what enlightenment is can get in the way of actually experiencing it. Put another way, enlightenment isn't something you get or find; it's something you rediscover—a state of being that has always been in you but that has been covered with made-up stories and false concepts. Buddhism teaches that enlightenment is our true nature. It's not something we can become, because it's something we already are. We just have to realize it.

What about the word *awakening*? Is it different from *enlightenment*?

Some people, including some Buddhists, use both words to refer to essentially the same thing, but I see them as being slightly different. I think of enlightenment as the experience and understanding of reality just as it is, without the influence of the concepts, ideas, and beliefs that so often muddy our perception of it. Awakening, on the other hand, is the process by which this new way of seeing life begins to unfold. I see awakening as a path with several stages and levels, while the final, radical shift in perspective is the moment of enlightenment.

This idea is conveyed by a famous koan (a paradoxical statement that Zen Buddhists meditate on) that says you can enter this state of awakening only through a gateless gate. This is a seemingly simple but rather profound teaching: As long as you think there is a gate, you will not be able to enter the awakened state. You enter it by realizing there is no gate; you've been in that awakened state all along. You arrive there by realizing there is no "there" there. The only thing keeping you from seeing this is the mistaken belief that you were ever outside a gate in the first place. In a way, you become awakened the moment you realize you don't need to *become* awakened—everything you need to know is already present within you.

What does Buddhism teach about good and evil?

From the Buddhist perspective, good and evil are not inherent forces out in the universe; instead, they're internal states of mind. Buddhism teaches us to look inward. There we can find the source of all the good things we say, think, and do, and likewise discover that we ourselves—our own minds—are the source of any evil. This understanding gives us a greater sense of responsibility over our own thoughts, words, and actions.

Rather than thinking of evil as an external agent acting upon us, Buddhism teaches that greed, hatred, and ignorance are the sources of what we typically think of as “evil.” In Buddhism, these three qualities are called “the three poisons” or “the three fires.” The challenge the three poisons pose in our lives is that they drive us to look outside of ourselves to try to achieve happiness or avoid suffering. Because external things, like money, fame, or power, can't bring us lasting joy or contentment, we're setting ourselves up to experience unnecessary suffering by chasing after them. Material things can be nice to have for a time, but the happiness and fulfillment we seek is not found in external sources.

Why does Buddhism consider ignorance to be a poison? What's wrong with not knowing things?

From the Buddhist perspective, calling ignorance a poison is specifically referring to a lack of understanding about the nature of reality. So, for example, when we perceive things to be permanent and independent from other things, this blinds us from seeing things as they truly are: impermanent and interdependent. This misconception fuels our suffering.

The most dangerous manifestation of ignorance is the belief in a permanent self that exists independent of other people and the rest of the world. Clinging to this false, or ignorant, sense of self and wanting to protect it give rise to greed and hatred. Ignorance is a poison because it prevents us from seeing things as they are, which is necessary to reach enlightenment. The antidote to ignorance is wisdom about the nature of both reality and the self.

*As a water bead
on a lotus leaf,
as water on a red lily,
does not adhere,
so the sage
does not adhere
to the seen,
the heard,
or the sensed.*

**THE BUDDHA,
THE SUTTA NIPATA**

Why is greed considered to be a poison? Is it wrong to desire things like good food or a nice car?

Greed is the mental state we experience when we want to get more of what we want, whenever possible, at whatever cost to others. It's one of the three poisons because of the effect it has on our minds. We often believe the misguided notion that if we could just get the things we want—money, fame, power—they would somehow finally give us the happiness we seek and ensure we'd no longer experience suffering. Greed is not just about material things, though. We also tend to want to change other people to get more things, like attention or affection. We mistakenly think that once we change others, we'll find lasting happiness.

A skillful way of dealing with the poison of greed is to try to understand it. We start that process by looking at the things we desire and asking ourselves, "Why?" Why do I feel such a strong desire to have this thing or that person? Why do I feel the need to achieve this or that? It's not that there's anything inherently wrong with the feeling of desire; it's that we can become blinded by it, especially when we don't have a thorough understanding of the intent or causes behind why we feel what we feel. Simply following our desires without taking time to understand them can lead to destructive behavior and mental confusion, which is why greed is considered a poison.

Why is hatred considered to be a poison? Is it wrong to ever feel hate?

Hatred is what we feel when we want to harm anyone or anything that stands in the way of getting what we want—anyone or anything that poses, or seems to pose, some kind of threat to us. Buddhism teaches that hatred is a poison because it can so easily consume all our time and energy. It can't just be removed from us; in order to be free from the bonds of hatred, we have to practice a different way of perceiving what happens to us.

From the Buddhist perspective, letting go of hatred is not a moral issue. The problem with hatred isn't whether it's morally right or wrong. Clinging to hatred is simply an unwise action because it creates unnecessary suffering for ourselves and others. As a mental state, hatred affects the emotional well-being of the person doing the hating more than the person being hated. So it's not *wrong* to feel hatred; in fact, it's natural to feel this emotion from time to time. It is, however, wise to try to understand why we feel it. What other emotions might be hidden underneath the hatred? Are feelings of sadness, loneliness, or vulnerability in some way causing the emotion of hatred to arise? Rather than evading the painful truth of how we feel, Buddhism encourages us to embrace the reality of our feelings, including any feelings of hatred we might be experiencing. We strive to understand the causes and conditions that allow the feeling of hatred to arise, turning inward for understanding rather than acting on destructive impulses.

EVERYDAY BUDDHISM

Making Moments of Awareness

What are moments of awareness, and how can you create them? Let me describe an example from my own life. I sometimes work as a substitute school-bus driver. There's a window of about 15 minutes between the time I drop off the high school students and the time I need to head back out to start picking up the elementary school students. I usually use that time to practice meditation.

One morning, during that window, I started my practice by asking myself two questions: "Where am I?" and "What am I doing?" These questions may seem simple, but it can be tricky to focus on them. It seems like no matter where we are or what we're doing, we're always thinking of somewhere or something else. Those two questions often help me think deeply about where I am, anchoring me to the present moment.

In this instance, I was sitting on the school bus. There were many other places I could be, but that happened to be where I was. Once I was feeling present in the moment, I asked myself a third question: "What did it take for this moment to arise?" In my mind, I began exploring the possible people and processes that had allowed the moment to exist just the way it was. I looked at the radio that I use to communicate with the school and the other bus drivers. I looked at the mirror, thinking about the materials and labor that went into it. I looked at the rivets in the ceiling

of the bus and the different panels and buttons, and I thought about how they all connected. This process went on and on, stretching across moments. I started to think about everything taking place across town just before I headed out to start picking up students. Kids were waking up—that required alarm clocks or smartphones. Parents were drinking coffee—where did that coffee come from? I was thinking about coffee farmers and their crops when suddenly I noticed how all these incredibly complex processes that had been in motion for a very long time were now about to culminate with my driving up to a child's house and opening the school-bus door so the child could climb on.

I think of moments like these as moments of awareness. From a Buddhist perspective, these moments allow us to make contact, even if only briefly, with reality as it is, as opposed to the stories and chatter in our heads that we're usually tuned into. Not only that, but moments of awareness evoke a tremendous sense of gratitude and awe, and they can be experienced anywhere at any time. You can try this yourself by asking, "Where am I? What am I doing? What did it take for this moment to arise?"

Some religions teach that people are inherently bad and that they must overcome that badness by following a specific set of beliefs or practices. From the Buddhist perspective, are people inherently good or bad?

From the Buddhist perspective, people are neither inherently good nor inherently bad, but we all have the potential to connect with an inner kindness and compassion known as Buddha-nature. The main idea here is that we're hardwired as social creatures to be kind and loving to each other. From the moment we're born, we depend entirely on the kindness and compassion of others, like the parents or caretakers who keep us alive. But over time, our minds become conditioned by beliefs and concepts that we acquire from our families and society. We learn about concepts like self and other, us and them, right and wrong, good and bad—concepts that divide our perception of the world and ourselves into separate categories. Such dichotomizing concepts can cover up our Buddha-nature, that inborn state of kindness, compassion, and interconnectedness with others and the world.