

WJEC AS Unit 1D: An Introduction to Buddhism - Knowledge Organiser:

Theme 2B The Nature of Ultimate Reality – Pratityasamutpada, karma and rebirth

Key concepts

- Pratityasamutpada can be understood as 'dependent origination', which means that every cause has an effect in an unending cycle. Existence and time are therefore cyclic rather than linear, and there is no original starting point.
- Karma (action) refers to human activity in the human realm where every action has consequences. This can be expressed in a variety of ways, e.g. as we reap so shall we sow. Good actions gain good consequences and evil actions gain evil consequences, if not in this life then in the next rebirth.
- Rebirth (punabhava) means that unless a person has achieved parinirvana (passed over to nirvana at death) they remain in samsara (the wheel of existence/life, the endless round of birth, death, rebirth). Nagasena answered the question of whether at rebirth the person is the same or different to what they were before by saying that they are both: the same and different as, for example, the baby who becomes an adult is the same person but different.

- The bhavachakra (the wheel of existence) depicts samsara with elaborate iconography (images/symbols). Yama - the god of impermanence and death - holds the wheel and at the centre of the wheel are the three poisons/fires of ignorance (the pig), greed (the cockerel) and hatred (the snake).
- The outer circle shows Pratityasamutpada in symbolic form through a series of images, such as the house with six windows representing the six senses and two men in a boat representing a person's mind and matter.
- The next circle shows the six realms of rebirth: (1) the human realm, which is the highest since here most spiritual progress can be made; (2) the animal realm where beings have limited consciousness; (3) the hell realm where beings suffer but not for eternity; (4) the Preta (hungry ghost) realm where beings are reborn, who because of greed and hatred, can never be satisfied; (5) the asura (demi-god) realm where beings are reborn wanting always to be reborn in the next realm which is (6) the deva (god) realm where beings live without suffering but not for ever. Outside of the wheel, the Buddha points to liberation from samsara.

- Chapter one of the Dhammapada is 'The Pairs' and refers to how the pure/impure mind controls a person's actions so that with negative actions, suffering follows as a wheel follows the ox's foot, and with positive actions, happiness follows as a person's shadow always follows them.

- Chapter nine is 'Evil'. It describes how the karmic seed of intentional good/wholesome and evil/unwholesome actions always ripens. Thus, the former should be accumulated, and the latter avoided. Conquering the three poisons (ignorance, greed and hatred) is crucial in accumulation of karma.

- In the Parable of the Poisoned Arrow, the Buddha tells of how a man wounded with a poisoned arrow refuses to have the arrow removed until a variety of irrelevant questions are answered such as who shot it, what feathers were used, what wood was used, etc. The Buddha explained that the man would die before all his questions were answered.
- By analogy, the Buddha explains that time should not be wasted on metaphysical/cosmological questions about God, the soul and the universe, these are avyakata (unanswered questions). Instead, a person should focus on removing the three poisons, accumulating good karma, removing dukkha and following the Eightfold Path in order to achieve nirvana.

Key quotes

'We... are responsible for our own deeds, happiness and misery.... We are the architects of our own fate... we ourselves are our own kamma.' (Narada Thera)

'Kamma determines the sphere of rebirth, wholesome actions bringing rebirth in higher forms, unwholesome actions rebirth in lower forms.' (Bhikkhu Bodhi)

'It could be that the universe operates on a 'need to know' basis and that what, religiously, we need to know is soteriological rather than metaphysical.' (Hick)

Key words

punabhava	parinirvana	Preta	asura	
bhavachakra	avyakata	karma	deva	Pratityasamutpada

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

Some focus on whether a cyclic or linear approach is more logical regarding time.

Others focus on the extent to which cause and effect govern everything in life and the universe; is cause and effect a law of nature?

Key questions

To what extent are metaphysical questions important to gain understanding of God, the soul and the universe?

How are the six realms of rebirth to be understood - literally or metaphorically?