

Book Summary: *What the Buddha Taught*

Walpola Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught*¹ was originally published in 1959 and stands as a highly-regarded and influential introduction to the fundamental tenets of Theravada Buddhism, which Rahula presents as the original, orthodox tradition. Directed toward the “educated and intelligent general reader” with little or no background in the subject, the book strives to provide a faithful and accurate account of the Buddha's actual words as preserved in the Pali texts of the *Tipitaka*.

Rahula asserts that the essential and fundamental doctrines are the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Five Aggregates, Karma, Rebirth, Conditioned Genesis, *Anatta* (no-soul), and Mindfulness. He quotes the Buddha as declaring that there was no esoteric doctrine in his teachings—nothing hidden in the 'closed fist of the teacher'—a stance that promoted a new freedom of thought and tolerance that has proven to be rare in the history of religions.

The Four Noble Truths form the cornerstone of the teaching:

1. *Dukkha* (Suffering/Dissatisfaction): The acknowledgment that all existence involves *dukkha*, which encompasses not only physical and emotional pain but also a general dissatisfaction or imperfection that arises due to *anicca* (impermanence), such as aging and death.
2. *Samudaya* (The Arising of Suffering): The true cause of *dukkha* is *tanha* (craving) and attachment to people and things. This attachment is rooted in our ignorance of Ultimate

Reality and our resistance to inevitable change. Crucially, these attachments keep us tethered to the endless cycle of rebirth, *samsara*, according to our karma.

3. *Nirodha* (The Cessation of Suffering): The revelation that the endless cycles of suffering can be absolved by the realization of Nirvana, the state where desire or thirst is fully extinguished. Rahula notes that the Buddha's entire doctrine leads to this peace, happiness, and the attainment of Nirvana, and was not intended merely to "satisfy intellectual curiosity."
4. *Magga* (The Path to the Cessation of Suffering): The pathway to achieve Nirvana is the Noble Eightfold Path.

Rahula explains that the Noble Eightfold Path is systematically organized into three categories: Prajna, Sila, and Samadhi. *Prajna* (Wisdom) comprises Right View (understanding of the Four Noble Truths) and Right Intention (commitment to non-violence, compassion, and renunciation). *Sila* (Virtue/Ethical Conduct) includes Right Speech (speaking only verities), Right Action (proper conduct), and Right Livelihood (earning a living without harming others). Samadhi (Concentration/Mental Discipline) encompasses Right Effort (in meditative thought), Right Mindfulness (monitoring one's Five Aggregates—form, feeling, perception, mind, consciousness), and Right Concentration (focusing the mind effectively through meditation).

Rahula's work forcefully presents the unique Buddhist teaching of *Anatta*. He states, "According to Buddhism, the absolute truth is that there is nothing absolute in the world, that everything is relative, conditioned and impermanent...there is no Self, Soul or Atman within or without." (p.39) Rahula further argues that "man has created God" and that we conceived the

idea of an “immortal Soul or Atman” for our own protection, safety, and self-preservation. Furthermore, Rahula insists that Buddhism rejects the idea of an “unmoving mover behind the movement” (referencing the Aristotelian concept), asserting instead that consciousness depends on the Five Aggregates and cannot exist independently of them. (p.25)

The Buddha, who became enlightened under the Bodhi Tree, the Tree of Wisdom (which can be seen as a type of *axis mundi*), taught that “every man has within himself the potentiality of becoming a Buddha, if he so wills it and endeavors.” (p.1) He taught all classes of men and women, stressing that man’s emancipation depends on his own realization of Truth, and not on the benevolent grace of any external power. This emphasis on self-reliance and intelligence contrasts with the intolerant Brahmanic orthodoxy of the time; Buddhism invited seekers to “come and see” without pressure to believe. This critical inquiry leads to *Saddha*, which is not faith, but rather “the confidence born out of conviction.”

The ultimate goal for Buddhists is to become an Arahant, a Fully Enlightened One, by working out one’s own liberation. This message of tolerance and non-violence was famously championed by the Buddhist Emperor Asoka of India in the 3rd century B.C., who declared that one should honor not only one’s own religion but those of others as well, and that violence under any pretext was against the Buddha’s teachings. Rahula, therefore, frames the teachings not as a set of dogmas, but as a practical and rational philosophy directed toward the attainment of Nirvana.

1. Rahula, Walpola. *What the Buddha Taught*. Grove Press, 2017.

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