

# On “The Buddha” - A PBS Movie By David Grubin

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## REFLECTIONS

The Buddha was born seven days before the queen died. Son of a king, raised in a palace, this person was called Siddhartha. He was delicately brought up as a child. He lived a life with every desire fulfilled. One day he leaves the palace and sees suffering like the old man. He feels stimulated from this trip and wants to go on more trips. The next trip he sees a corpse. He realizes he will become old and die as well. What made the Buddha think the way he did? If The Buddha is a fictional storytelling, what does the protagonist represent?

The perspective of this story makes me believe that this is an autobiography of some ideal for a some culture. Maybe the ideal of the Buddhism-Asian-India Culture is to be a person who is not affected by desire and to escape the cycle of ‘infinite re-spawning’ called reincarnation.

Yoga is one attempt at ‘taming the mind’ because if you are one-hundred percent convinced you will be reborn then the main idea is you need to spend all your time and energy on breaking free of this reincarnation infinite while loop since reincarnation is seen as a bad idea for some reason. If you are a programming it would be as if your life would be reborn on a conditional statement such as “while cycle is not broken, bring this life form back to reality in another body.” This reminds me of the movie The Matrix where Neo is breaking out of the simulation. Buddhism could just be a very primal version of the Matrix Trilogy simulation theory plot. At 33:40, the speaker said “if you punished the body enough then you could ‘transcend’ limitations the body had on the laws of physics.” This is similar to the Matrix movie where Neo learns to manipulate time and space as if the universe is a sandbox game.

What compels Buddhists to meditate uninterrupted for 16 waking hours? What exactly makes them one-hundred percent convinced that they will be reborn? Did something happen in ancient history, some piece of critical data, that mankind has lost which explains why reincarnation is true?

The Buddha, punishing his body very much to escape the infinite re-birthing of his life, realizes one day that the deaths of small insects from fields being plowed hurt his compassionate soul very much. Are these stories a reflection of one person’s autobiography or the fictional ideal

of a culture? Can the story hold both qualities? Could this story be the autobiography of a realized real-life cultural ideal? If the story of the Buddha is of a real-life person, it still begs to question of what evidences that life consists of cycles called reincarnation. How complex is life in this context? Does the Buddha see people as a collection of quarks and atoms or does the Buddha see consciousness as being in every piece of matter where even grains of sand has some degree of consciousness.

Let us assume whatever evidence supports reincarnation if there is any, that such evidence is able to convince a vast majority of Eastern culture that life is a cyclical venture that you can escape by practicing meditation or yoga. So we have these practitioners of Buddhism who sit still for long periods of time with the goal of escaping this cycle of lives and these lives are full of suffering. Is the imagination of the mind the tool they expect to be the key to escaping reincarnation? Or is the imagination of the mind one key of many doors required to escape reincarnation? Could this escaping of reincarnation be realized in real life. What is the plan of Buddhists to convince me to practice like them if they can not explain why they think reincarnation exists?

The Buddha’s first attempt at teaching somebody failed because The Buddha was ordinary. The Buddha said to the first person he attempted to teach “I am my own guru.” What made the Buddha such a good salesman of his ideas and what made the ideas so persuasive that people were willing to pay real money to listen to the Buddha teach them his practice aimed at escaping reincarnation. He uses the analogy that a sitar is tuned not too tight and not too loose to achieve music. Music is also commonly used in advertisements since it could be hypothesized that information related to some tonal harmony makes the information more likely to be remembered.

The Noble 8th Fold Path is a set of instructions that Buddha wrote for his disciples. Did these instruction explain how to be ones own guru? Caste systems were irrelevant to the Buddha which made him an outcast at the lowest level of the Caste system yet people still followed him.

The first Sangha was a radical institution that welcomed everyone regardless of social status or gender<sup>[1:15:40]</sup>. Women particularly benefited from this development since everyday life was quite harsh from what their poems suggested.

The Buddha taught bliss and nirvana through the practice of meditation. “Nirvana is used to refer to the extinction of desire, hatred, and ignorance and, ultimately, of suffering and rebirth<sup>[2]</sup>.” The Buddha also taught how to understand one's own thoughts by paying attention to them. In another story, The Buddha says “I control my mind like riding a racing horse.”

On one hand the Buddha is quite anti-science by telling people he is his own guru. On the other hand, the Buddha is pro-science by sharing his observations and explaining to others how to replicate his processes to replicate his results. Telling people one is their own guru may sound arrogant as any scientifically-sound person would be engaged in peer-reviewed research. How can you peer-review and keep radical notions in check if one only listens to themselves. On the contrary, how can radical innovations come to fruition if people are not allowed to go into deep meditative isolation for the purpose of “controlling the mind like riding a racing horse.”

Where are the peer-reviewed studies that support the hypothesis that when one dies they are reincarnated as any form of life that forms the main idea of Buddhism?

At 1:29:30 in the film there are stories told of people leaving the teachings of Buddha because the Buddha has not told them if there is in fact life after death. The Buddha responds by saying that they do not need to know this. The Buddha says suffering causes the question: “Is there life after death.” This last statement is understandable because if one asks such a question then they must have some amount of desire to escape their current life or maybe hold some aspirations and imagine a better life. Suffering must then be the cause for the desire to escape life.

The story makes more sense to me by viewing the story as an autobiography from The Buddha's point of view who was a person who had been born into religious dogma and wanted to escape this dogmatic programming by ‘waking up’ and observing the nuances of life and nature.

Reflecting on the story more, I think The Buddha wanted to escape the propaganda and dogma which he observed had rooted from the desire of people. Was there a culture or religion previous to Buddhism that emphasized reincarnation greatly? In my previous paper “On Hinduism”, we found some statements where the people of

Hinduism were being forced to convert to Islam in the 1400s which propelled the modern Hindu Nationalist Movement. Could a similar traumatic experience be the reason The Buddha holds such a distaste for being reborn?

I do not remember in the telling of the story any explanation as to why The Buddha did not desire reincarnation. If one believes in reincarnation then would life not be more optimistic than a life believing you will not be born again? Maybe the Buddha had nothing against believing in reincarnation but more about something against desire itself. Through this repulsive behavior against desire itself, what observations did The Buddha make that made him not desire desires? Is the Buddha saying it is morally bad to have desires?

Is The Buddha be a fictional autobiographical story where the goal is to entice the human race to propagate the ideas that lead to observations of nature, becoming more consciously self-aware, and becoming a true individual - one who “controls the mind like riding a racing horse.”

If The Buddha sees the mind as a vehicle that can increase velocity and acceleration while also having some steering to the left or right, does this then hold a deeper truth about the mind? If the mind is a vehicle then what does the map look like? In this context are you steering from neuron to neuron in a network of billions of neurons or are you steering the direction of your desire. Is desire the most influential feature of our ‘monkey brain’ system called the cerebellum? “In humans, the cerebellum plays an important role in motor control<sup>[0]</sup>.” Was The Buddha trying to tame the cerebellum like it was a racing horse by practicing stillness for extended periods of time?

## REFERENCES

[0] Wolf U, Rapoport MJ, Schweizer TA (2009). "Evaluating the affective component of the cerebellar cognitive affective syndrome". *Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*. 21 (3): 245–53. doi:10.1176/jnp.2009.21.3.245. PMID 19776302

[1] <http://www.pbs.org/thebuddha/>

[2] <https://www.britannica.com/topic/nirvana-religion>