

**What is Real: Buddhist Themes in *The Matrix***

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*Temple, Icon, and Deity in India*

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## Introduction

*“I can only show you the door. You must walk through.”*

*-Morpheus, The Matrix*

Buddhism is one of the most ancient surviving religions in the world today. Founded circa 580 B.C.E., followers of the teachings of Gautama Buddha have spread the word throughout the Middle East, into China and Japan, and even into the west. Millions of people all over the world believe in the Middle Way of Gautama, and the Four Noble Truths that form the basis of Buddhist thought. Over the years, many writers, historians, and filmmakers have attempted to present these teachings in light of the modern era, digestible to the everyday viewer. The latest, and perhaps most successful in terms of presentation and commercial earnings, is the 1999 film *The Matrix*. The film serves as a modern Buddhist parable, presenting many of the core tenets of Buddhist philosophy in a way digestible to modern viewers, with the central character of Neo functioning as an example of the Buddhist journey towards enlightenment. This paper will explore Buddhist themes in the film, examining how it functions as a Buddhist parable, which Buddhist teachings it attempts to get across, how it presents Buddhist themes, and where it fails to represent Buddhist dharma and why. It will examine the presentation of Buddhist dharma throughout the film, and explore specific Buddhist themes, specifically those related to illusion, impermanence, the film’s handling of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, Pratityasamutpada, Anatman, and in what ways the character of Neo displays the qualities of a Buddha on his journey to enlightenment.

## A Primer on Buddhist Belief

*“Don’t try to bend the spoon. That’s impossible. Instead, only try to realize the truth.”*

*“The truth?”*

*“That there is no spoon. Then you will realize that it is not the spoon that bends, but only your mind.”*

*-Buddhist boy and Neo, The Matrix*

In order to understand the Buddhist themes in *The Matrix*, it is first necessary to look at the themes we will be exploring. The root beliefs in Buddhism are spelled out in the concepts of the illusion of self and the doctrine of Anatman, the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the cause/effect concept of Pratītyasamutpāda, or “Dependent Arising.” First, we must examine the life of Siddhartha Gautama in order to understand how he came to find enlightenment and in this way better understand the journey of Neo in *The Matrix*.

Siddhartha was born a prince in India, circa 563 B.C.E. When a seer told his father that Siddhartha would become a great holy man who would solve the problem of death, but would not be king, his father vowed that Siddhartha would never know death or suffering, and so would have no cause to give up his kingship. The young prince lived the entirety of his young life surrounded by pleasure, youth, and beauty, but eventually came to question what it was like outside the palace. Despite his father’s best efforts to hide the infirm and elderly, when the young Siddhartha went out into the world to meet his subjects, he saw an old man, a sick boy, and a funeral ceremony, and discovered the existence of pain, sickness, and death. He was so troubled by these things that he vowed to find a way to stop the cycle of death and re-death, known as *samsara*, and left his inheritance behind to seek answers.<sup>1</sup>

After living for years as an ascetic and not finding what he wanted, Siddhartha found enlightenment while meditating beneath a tree now known as the Bodhi Tree. As he approached enlightenment, Siddhartha was tempted and assaulted by the demon Mara, but drove away the desire and pain of the sensual world, and achieved liberation from *samsara*. His enlightenment led him to understanding of the Four Noble Truths, and the middle way that could deliver one

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<sup>1</sup> Various. “Gautama Buddha – Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia” <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gautama\\_Buddha](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gautama_Buddha)>

from *dukkha*, the nature of the physical world, and *samsara*. Because he had such compassion for mankind, Siddhartha (now the Buddha), spread his teachings to others.<sup>2</sup>

In Walpola Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught*, the Four Noble Truths that form the basis of all Buddhist thought are summarized in a very simple manner (bracketed text has been added by the author of this paper):

“The First Noble Truth is *Dukkha*, the nature of life, its suffering, its sorrows and joys, its imperfection and unsatisfactoriness, its impermanence and insubstantiality. With regard to this, our function is to understand it as a fact, clearly and completely (*pariññeya*).

“The Second Noble Truth [*Samudaya*] is the Origin of *dukkha*, which is desire, ‘thirst’, accompanied by all other passions, defilements, and impurities. A mere understanding of this fact is not sufficient. Here our function is to discard it, to destroy and eradicate it (*pahātabba*).

“The Third Noble Truth [*Nirodha*] is the Cessation of *dukkha*, Nirvana, the Absolute Truth, the Ultimate Reality. Here our function is to realize it. (*sacchikātabba*)

“The Fourth Noble Truth [*Magga*] is the Path leading to the realization of Nirvana. A mere knowledge of the Path, however complete, will not do. In this case, our function is to follow it and keep to it (*bhāvetabba*).”<sup>3</sup>

In brief, the Four Noble Truths break down to say that all life is suffering and impermanence, that suffering is caused by attachment and desire, that there is an escape or liberation from suffering, and that the teachings of the Buddha are the means to discover that enlightenment, called Nirvana.

The “Path” spoken of by Rahula is called alternately the Noble Eightfold Path, and the “Middle Way.” At its core is the concept that a Buddhist should neither overindulge in sensual pleasures, nor engage in complete self-denial. Satisfaction and liberation cannot be found at either extreme. Buddhists are not to be apart from the world, but are also not to be gluttonous.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974) p. 50

All things must be sought in balance, and above all, the Buddhist must be free from attachments.<sup>4</sup>

The accomplishment of this can be realized through eight basic philosophies of life: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Through right view, the Buddhist recognizes that *dukkha* is the nature of the physical world, and seeks to develop a state of mind conducive to the wisdom that can lead to enlightenment. In right intention, the Buddhist gives up the modes of thought, the selfish attachments that lead to further suffering for both him and others. With right speech, the Buddhist always seeks to be truthful, kind, and compassionate in the things she says. The complement to right speech, right action means that the Buddhist always acts to help others, and never does anything to cause harm or destruction to others. Right livelihood means the Buddhist always seeks to be kind, honest, and charitable in her business dealings with others. Right effort means avoiding sloth and apathy, and always remaining alert and conscious of one's state of mind and its counterpart, right mindfulness, means being aware of the state of the world around. Finally, right concentration encourages the seeker of enlightenment to be free of distraction and dullness of mind and maintain focus at all times, allowing him to gain true insight and understanding that can lead to the Ultimate Truth, which is freedom from attachment and the illusion of the self.<sup>5</sup>

The major achievement of one who walks the middle path is the realization that the material world, and particularly the idea of the self, is illusion. There is no self, no unchanging and eternal soul. The concept of the illusory self is called *anatman*. In order to achieve enlightenment, the Buddhist must come to the understanding that there is no Self, that all things,

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<sup>4</sup> Rahula, What the Buddha Taught (New York: Grove Press, 1974) p. 45-50

<sup>5</sup> Landaw and Bodian, Buddhism for Dummies (New Jersey: Wiley Publishers, 2003) p. 68-70.

even people, even the stones on the ground, are impermanent, and indeed change from second to second in the same manner that when one looks at a flowing river, the water he sees the first time he looks, ten seconds later is no longer the same water; the first water has flowed past, melded and swirled with other water, and in fact no longer exists as it did before. This is impermanence in a nutshell.<sup>6</sup>

Tied to the idea of impermanence is the concept of Dependent Arising, or *Pratityasamutpada*. Dependent Arising is the idea that any phenomenon, sensation, action, object, or condition exists only because of some other phenomenon, action, object, etc. In brief, it is the doctrine of cause-and-effect, that all things are dependent upon other things. Dependent Arising is the explanation of the Buddhist notion of Karma, that every action has a reaction. The goal of Buddhism, unlike other Indian religions, is not to garner “good” or “bad” Karma, though certainly a Buddhist would recognize that good karma is more desirable than bad. Rather, a Buddhist seeks to be free from karma altogether.<sup>7</sup> By achieving such freedom, one is liberated from Dependent Arising, and in so being liberated, realizes *anatman*. Again, the path to achieve this is found in understanding of the Four Noble Truths and the middle way.

By following this path the Buddhist will be on the way to enlightenment, though as with all things in Buddhism, the path is only a path. It is not a guarantee of enlightenment, which only comes when the one who walks the path is ready to receive it. As Morpheus says to Neo, “I can only show you the door. You must walk through.” So, too, is the teaching of Buddha only the

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<sup>6</sup> Various. “Pratitya-Samutpada—Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia (Series on Buddhism)”  
<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pratityasamutpada>>

<sup>7</sup> Various. “Karma—Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia (Series on Buddhism)”  
<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karma#Buddhism>>

door. It's up to each individual student to enter, for every person has to make their own choice and decide for themselves what truth is Truth for them.<sup>8</sup>

### **Buddhist Themes in *The Matrix***

*"Remember that all I am offering is the truth. Nothing more."*

*-Morpheus, The Matrix*

*The Matrix* is a 1999 science fiction film, written and directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski. The main character of the film is Neo, a computer hacker who lives a double-life. During the day he is Thomas Anderson, a software programmer who pays his taxes and "help[s] your landlady take out her garbage."<sup>9</sup> At night he is Neo, a hacker who desperately searches for an answer to a question that haunts him: what is the Matrix? The answer to this question comes through a legendary fellow hacker named Morpheus, who shows Neo that the Matrix is in fact the world in which he lives, the world of 1999. The Matrix is a computer-generated simulation used to enslave humanity while an empire of machines in the distant future drain humans for power. Neo's awakening to this future world is bleak, traumatic, and painful. But with Morpheus's guidance and teaching, along with the advice of a mysterious woman known as the Oracle, and hunted by the sentient program Agent Smith, Neo learns the truth: that inside the Matrix, everything is illusion, and through freedom from his attachments to the world he knew, he can remake that world to set humanity free from the bonds that bind them, awakening the world one person at a time.

*The Matrix* is a veritable cornucopia of philosophical principles, from Gnostic Christian to existential to Upanishadic to Brahmanic Hindu, and the trick to seeing the Buddhist themes (or any other philosophical themes, for that matter) in it is separating these ideas from the myriad

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<sup>8</sup> Rahula, What the Buddha Taught (New York: Grove Press, 1974) p. 54-56

<sup>9</sup> Wachowski and Wachowski, *The Matrix*. (Ultimate Matrix Collection, Disc 1, 2004)

other concepts explored in the film.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that Neo does not represent Gautama himself, but that his is a tale of another Buddha whose story somewhat parallels that of Siddhartha. It is also important to note that the film clearly deems some concepts more important than others, and in this manner, fails in some respects to be a true and complete Buddhist parable: for example, while we certainly see examples of right intention, right mindfulness, right speech, and other aspects of the middle path throughout the film, near the end is a scene wherein Neo and Trinity (another “monk” in Morpheus’s flock), in an effort to rescue Morpheus from Agent Smith, blast their way through a high-security building, leaving a trail of dead bodies in their wake. While this makes for a great action sequence, it certainly defies the Buddhist ideal of Right Action.

Where the film succeeds in spades, however, is the presentation of the idea of *dukkha* and illusion. Neo’s awakening from the Matrix into the real world symbolizes not the enlightenment of a Buddha, but the realization that existence is suffering and impermanence. The real world of the future is one that is dark and cold, and indeed is suffering incarnate, where the vast majority of humanity is kept in a permanent dream-state in the Matrix while those who have awakened are hunted and killed relentlessly by the machines, both in and out of the Matrix. Even the Matrix itself is a representation of this idea. As Agent Smith says, “Did you know that the first Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world? Where none suffered, where everyone would be happy. It was a disaster...I believe that, as a species, human beings define their reality through suffering and misery.”<sup>11</sup>

Agent Smith functions as a stand-in for the demon Mara. The first time Neo meets him, Agent Smith offers Neo a chance to “clear the slate” of his various hacker crimes by helping the

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<sup>10</sup> Oreck, Josh, *Return to Source: Philosophy and the Matrix* (Ultimate Matrix Collection, Disc 8), 2004

<sup>11</sup> Wachowski and Wachowski, *The Matrix* (Matrix Ultimate Collection, Disc 1, 2004).



Agents catch Morpheus, “a known terrorist.” For anyone facing decades of imprisonment, this would be a great temptation, and Neo’s first victory comes when he refuses the offer. After this, Smith becomes a threat, hunting Neo and Morpheus to kill them and destroy humanity, ensuring that mankind never reaches the awakened state that would topple the machines’ control. In the end, when Neo finally defeats Smith, we see Neo standing bathed in a halo of light, much like popular images of the Buddha, with his halo representing the inner light of wisdom and enlightenment.

Before this can happen, however, Neo must come to an understanding of the truth of reality. Neo’s instruction on the road to enlightenment begins with Morpheus, whose name is taken from the Greek god of dreams, a fact that should not be overlooked when examining the idea of illusion and impermanence. Morpheus acts as a Bodhisattva, one on the very edge of enlightenment, who chooses to hold back from enlightenment out of compassion for others. Until all have achieved enlightenment, the bodhisattva believes, his work on earth is not yet done.<sup>12</sup> In Morpheus’s case, what has been holding him back is a quest to find the One, the true Buddha of the *Matrix* world; he believes Neo to be that potential Buddha. Morpheus sets Neo on the path to enlightenment, promising to show Neo the truth, no matter how difficult it must be, but gently admonishing Neo that in the end, it is he who must free his own mind and “walk through” the door.<sup>13</sup>

Neo continues to gain lessons in impermanence, suffering, and the illusory self throughout the movie. When at one point he questions what it means that he has illusory memories of life in the Matrix, Trinity tells him, “the Matrix can’t tell you who you are.” Later, he is forced to watch two of his close companions, Apoc and Switch, die meaninglessly because of a traitor

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<sup>12</sup> Landaw and Bodian, *Buddhism for Dummies* (New Jersey: Wiley Publishing, 2003), p. 20

<sup>13</sup> Oreck, Josh, *Return to Source: Philosophy and the Matrix* (Ultimate Matrix Collection, Disc 8), 2004

who can't handle the suffering of the real world. This traitor, Cypher, chooses to turn his back on the Path and re-enter the cycle of *samsara* by having his body re-inserted into the Matrix. "I think," he says, "That the Matrix can be more real than this world. Here all I do is pull a plug, but there, you have to watch Apoc die."<sup>14</sup>

The key phrase, uttered by a Buddhist boy in the home of the Oracle, "there is no spoon," becomes Neo's gateway to liberation. As he gradually comes to understand the truth of the Matrix, that it is fully an illusion, he learns to shape the simulation to his own purposes. "There is no spoon" becomes a metaphor for the freeing of his mind from illusion and craving. He is able, through his compassion and willingness to self-sacrifice, to let go of his attachment to the world within the Matrix and achieve complete liberation and gains a higher state of awareness than any other human in history. He is, as Morpheus calls him, "The One."

Thus, by the end of the film, Neo has come to the realization that the world is impermanent and illusory, as is the Self. He sees that his attachments to the world and life he once knew are the root of this suffering and he has learned that there is an escape from this suffering: letting go of those attachments and realizing that his conception of the world around is merely an illusion. He becomes so free, in fact, that even Dependent Arising fails to affect him any more. Gravity itself has no hold on Neo, because he is now utterly free from karma. Through his compassion for humanity, he decides to teach others, saying, "I'm going to show these people...A world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries. A world where anything is possible."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Wachowski and Wachowski, *The Matrix* (Matrix Ultimate Collection, disc 1, 2004)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

“Then, Bhikkus, I address you now: Transient are conditioned things. Try to accomplish your aim with diligence.’

“These were the last words of the Tathāgata”<sup>16</sup>

*The Matrix* in many ways serves as a Buddhist parable, demonstrating the journey of one man, Neo, on the road to enlightenment. Though its presentation is overly-literal and somewhat blatant at times, the film succeeds in illustrating some of the main ideas of Buddhist thought. Certainly it fails in other areas, particularly in the presentation of certain aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path, but rarely does any parable illustrate every concept of a given faith; rather, parables are stories that seek to explain specific points of focus. In *The Matrix*, these ideas are those of the illusory self, of the nature and liberation from suffering and attachment, and freedom from karmic dependency.

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<sup>16</sup> Rahula, quoting *Suttas, What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), p.138

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