Right Knowledge & Right Liberation

In

Early Buddhism

Myths
&
misconceptions

Misconception 1

Nibbāna is a type of consciousness

Misconception:

“Infinite, all-pervasive consciousness […] does not depend on any sense objects, and hence it is unconditioned by them and operates unhindered.

Nirvāṇa consciousness thus constitutes the infinite realization free from all conditioning.”

“Any kind of consciousness at all—past, future, or present; internal or external; coarse or fine; inferior or superior; far or near: this is called the aggregate of consciousness.”

(MN 109, Sujato)

“... any kind of consciousness at all—past, future, or present; internal or external; coarse or fine; inferior or superior; far or near: *all* consciousness …”

(SN 56.11, Sujato)

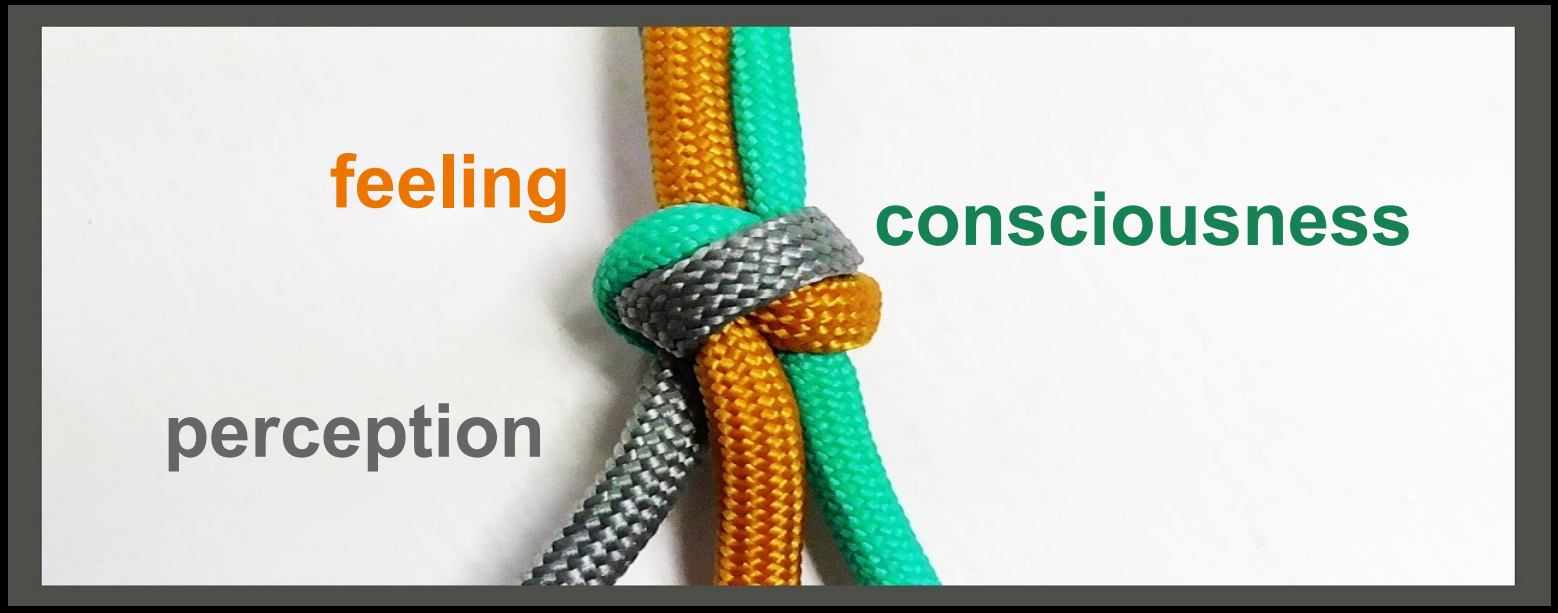
Then the Buddha, picking up a little bit of dirt under his fingernail, addressed that mendicant:

“There’s not even this much of any consciousness that’s permanent, everlasting, eternal, imperishable, and will last forever and ever.”

(SN 22.97, Sujato)

[Sāriputta:] “Feeling, perception, and consciousness—these things are mixed, not separate. And you can never completely dissect them so as to describe the difference between them.”

(MN43, Sujato)



Misconception 1

~~Nibbāna is a type of consciousness~~

Misconception 2

Nibbāna is mind or a state of mind (*citta*)

Modern scholars: Rune Johansson

"The new, transformed state of *citta is* Nibbāna …"

"But when an Arahant dies … the 'stillness' and 'emptiness' of the *citta* makes it survive, free and anonymous …"

Modern forest monk

"The Citta by its very nature is *amataṃ* - Undying …

Once *paññā* has totally shattered and cleared the *kilesa*s away, the Citta will be transformed into the state of purity … How can it vanish? … this one is the genuine *amataṃ* (the Undying). Immortal by way of purity … This is the real and true substance or essence which is in the midst of our *khandha ...*

The *kilesa*s (defilements) can't destroy the Citta … This nature is unassailable, absolute and permanent. It cannot be annihilated."

Brahmanism/Vedanta

“Satcitananda is an epithet and description for the subjective experience of the ultimate unchanging reality, called Brahman, in certain branches of Hindu philosophy, especially Vedanta.” Wikipedia

Buddhist eternalism vs. Vedanta

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Mind and consciousness are not different

> “That which is called 'mind' (*citta*) or 'sentience' (*mano*) or 'consciousness' (*viññāṇa*): that self is permanent, everlasting, eternal, imperishable, remaining the same for all eternity. ...
>
> The Realized One understands this: ‘If you hold on to and attach to [this view] it leads to such and such a destiny in the next life.” (DN1)

The mind depends on name and form

> “The mind (*citta*) originates from name and form (*nāmarūpa*).
>
> When name and form cease, the mind ends.” (SN47.42)

The mind disappears when the *arahant* dies

> "When a mendicant's mind (*citta*) is rightly freed … The mind remains unaffected. It is steady, imperturbable, and he observes its disappearance." (AN6.55)

The mind disappears when the *arahant* dies

"There is no doubt you'll perish, mind (*citta*)."
(Theragāthā.1147)

Misconception 2

~~Nibbāna is mind or a state of mind (*citta*)~~

Misconception 3

Extinguished fires keep existing

Misconception:

"An expiring flame does not really go out, but returns into the primitive, pure, invisible state"

"The Buddha's audience in ancient India would generally have thought of an extinguished fire as going back into a non-manifested state."

"This view that … fire in a latent state is immortal & omnipresent occurs also in the Upaniṣads."

The Buddhist view on fire (1)

[Nandaka:] “Suppose someone was to say: ‘While this oil lamp is burning, the oil, wick, and flame are all impermanent and perishable. But the light is permanent, lasting, eternal, and imperishable.’ Would they be speaking rightly?”

“No, sir. Why is that? Because that oil lamp’s oil, wick, and flame are all impermanent and perishable, let alone the light.” (MN 146, Sujato)

The Buddhist view on fires (2)

“A fire that burns dependent on logs is called a log fire. A fire on twigs as a twig fire … a grass fire … a cow-dung fire … a husk fire … a rubbish fire.

[…]

Do you see that when that fuel ceases, what has come to be is liable to cease?”

“Yes, sir.” (MN 38, Sujato)

The Buddhist view on fire (3)

"… the exterior fire element flares up. It burns up villages … until it reaches a green field … where it's extinguished (*nibbāyati*) for lack of fuel. …

So for all its great age, the fire element will be revealed as impermanent, liable to end, vanish, and perish."

(MN 28, Sujato)

The Buddhist view on fires (4)

“‘This is peaceful; this is sublime—that is, the stilling of all activities, the letting go of all attachments, the ending of craving, cessation, extinguishment (*nibbāna*).’

This is called the perception of cessation.”

(AN 10.60, Sujato)

The Buddhist view on fires (5)

The Blessed One said to the monks: “It is just as if a person's turban is burning with fire, what could help him? […]

Although one might still forget about one's turban burning, one should extinguish, abandon, eradicate, and bring to cease the thriving fire of impermanence.”

(SĀ 175, Anālayo)

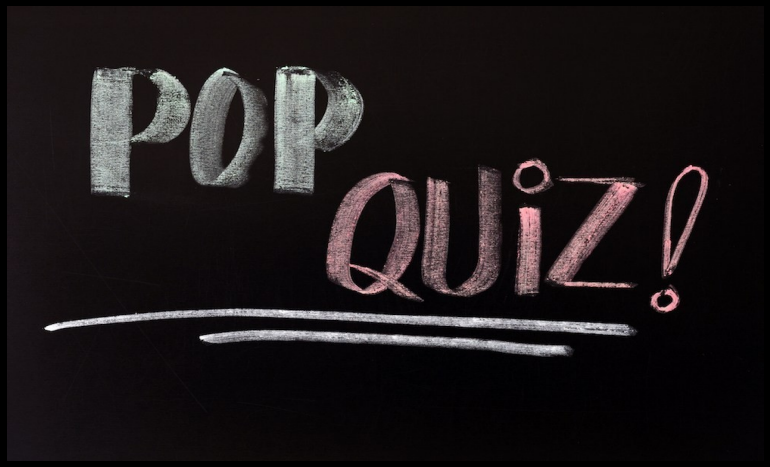
Extinguishment at enlightenment

"There are these three fires. What three? The fires of greed, hate, and delusion."

"They speak of this thing called 'extinguishment'. What is extinguishment?"

"The ending of greed, hate, and delusion."

(Iti 93; SN 38.1, Sujato)



Are desire, anger, and delusion in a "primitive, pure, invisible state"*?*

Parinibbāna: Final extinguishment (1)

"There are two kinds (*dhātus*) of extinguishment.

1) The kind of extinguishment which leaves a remnant [the five aggregates]
2) The kind of extinguishment which leaves no remnant. …

Leaving no remnant, after this life,
is where existence completely ceases."

(Iti 44, suttas.github.io)

"Extinguishment is the cessation of existence."

(AN 10.7, Sunyo)

Parinibbāna: Final extinguishment (2)

“[At death] Cundaka accomplished total cessation. He was gone, like a flame that has been extinguished.”

(DĀ 2, Shohei Ichimura)

Misconception 3

Misconception 4

Nibbāna is annihilation

Annihilation vs. cessation

“Though I speak and explain like this, certain ascetics and brahmins misrepresent me with the false, hollow, lying, untruthful claim:

‘The ascetic Gotama is an exterminator. He advocates the annihilation, eradication, and obliteration of an existing being.’

I have been falsely misrepresented as being what I am not, and saying what I do not say.

In the past, as today, what I describe is (just) suffering and the cessation of suffering.” (MN22)

Annihilation vs. cessation

“This is the best of the convictions of outsiders, that is: ‘I might not be, and it might not be mine. I will not be, and it will not be mine.’

When someone has such a view, you can expect that they will be repulsed by continued existence, and they will not be repulsed by the cessation of continued existence.”
(AN10.29)

Annihilation vs. cessation

It's just suffering that ceases:

“… you’ll have no doubt or uncertainty that what arises is just suffering arising, and what ceases is just suffering ceasing. Your knowledge about this is independent of others.

This is how right view is defined.” (SN12.15)

Annihilation vs. cessation

"But it's only suffering that comes to be,
lasts a while, then disappears.
Nothing but suffering comes to be,
nothing but suffering ceases."
(SN5.10)

Annihilation vs. cessation

Oxford dictionary definition of annihilation:

1. complete destruction or obliteration.
    - total defeat.

Annihilation vs. cessation

If you have a stomach ache that comes to an end, what do you call that ending?

Annihilation or cessation?

In the same way, because Nibbāna is just the end of suffering, it is cessation, not annihilation.

Misconception 4

~~Nibbāna is annihilation~~

HAVE
A
BREAK
MACCHIATO
MACCHIATO

Misconception 5

The “bare” aggregates aren’t suffering

Misconception:

“The five aggregates … are not suffering in themselves but, … they lead to suffering when untrained beings, through ignorance and wrong view, cling to them.”

“Mendicants, you should give up desire for what is suffering. And what is suffering? Form, feeling, perception, choices, and consciousness.”

(SN 22.140, Sujato)

“There is no suffering like the aggregates.”

(Dhp 202, Sujato)

The five aggregates are almost always said to be “grasping” aggregates. The term “grasping” (*upādāna*) has a complex and multi-layered relation to the basic term.

- The aggregates are the subject of grasping …
- [They are] active participants in the process of grasping …
- …
- And finally, they are the product of grasping in the sense that attachments in past lives have given rise to the aggregates in this life.

— Sujato, Guide to Linked Discourses

“But Reverend Sāriputta, what things should a perfected one rationally apply the mind to?”

“Reverend Koṭṭhita, a perfected one (*arahant*) should also rationally apply the mind to the five grasping aggregates as impermanent, as suffering, …”

(SN 22.122, Sujato)

“For a mendicant with defilements ended it is in line with the teaching to answer:

‘Knowing that form … feeling … perception … choices … consciousness is powerless, fading, and unreliable … that is how I know and see regarding these five grasping aggregates so that my mind is freed from defilements *by not grasping*.’”

(MN 112, Sujato)

“And what is the noble truth of suffering?
You should say: ‘The five grasping aggregates’.
That is: form, feeling, perception, choices, and consciousness.”

(SN 56.13, Sujato)

“And what is the noble truth of suffering?
You should say: ‘The six interior sense fields’.
What six? The sense fields of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind.”

(SN 56.14, Sujato)

Misconception 5

~~The "bare" aggregates aren't suffering~~

Misconception 6

Suffering stops at enlightenment

Misconception:

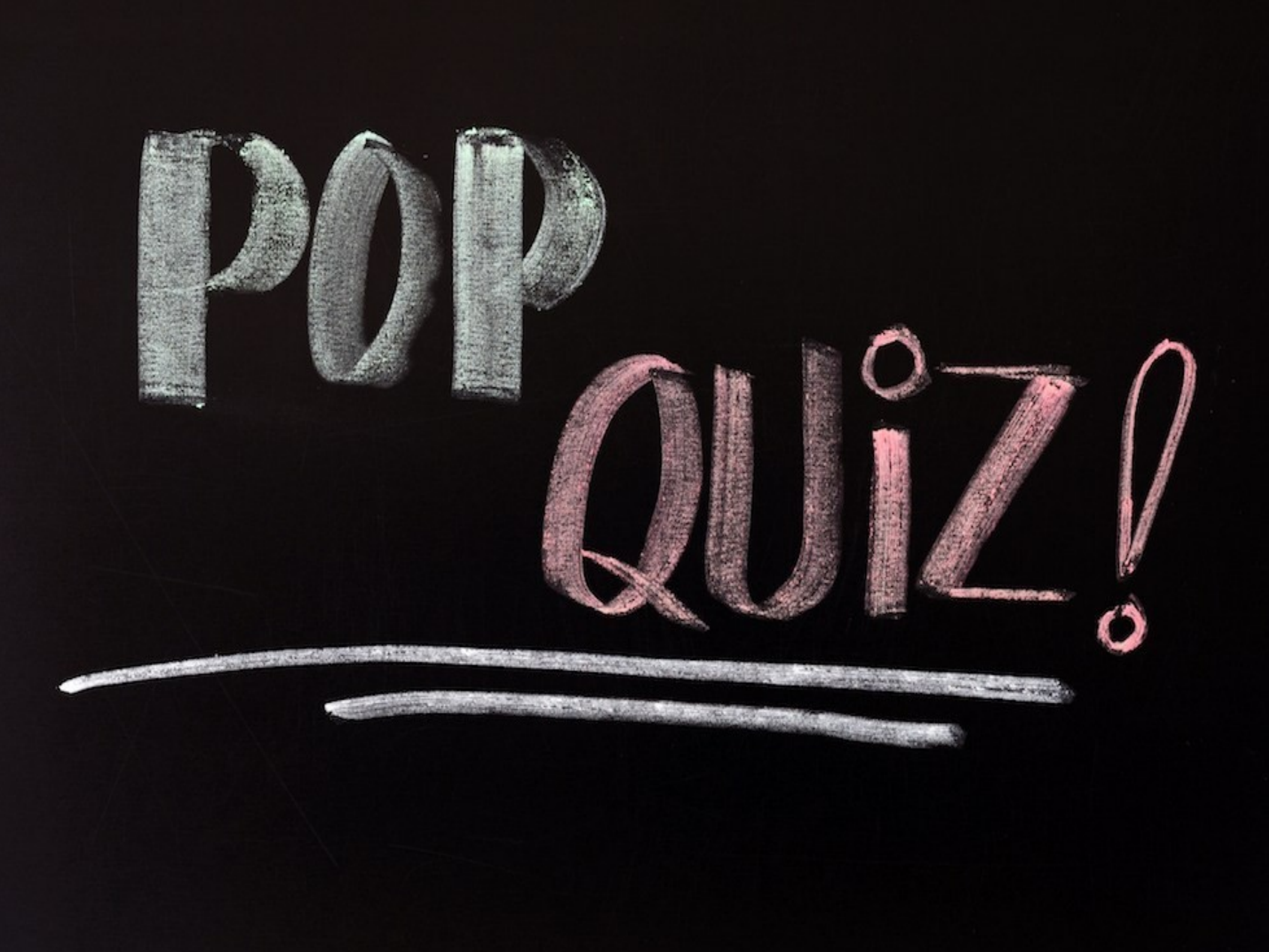
“Do enlightened beings suffer? No, they do not suffer, they just experience things as they are.”

“But what is suffering? …

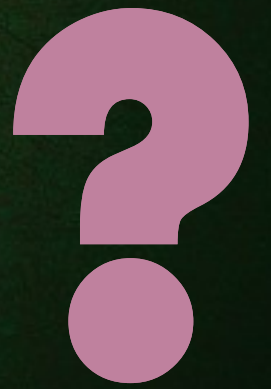
Rebirth is suffering; old age is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and distress are suffering; …

In brief, the five grasping aggregates [or ‘taken up aggregates’] are suffering.”

(MN 9, Sujato)


POP
Quiz!

Did the Buddha get sick,
grow old, and die?



“At one time the Buddha was staying near Rājagaha, in the Bamboo Grove, the squirrels’ feeding ground. Now at that time he was sick, suffering, gravely ill.”

(SN 46.16, Sujato)

“The Buddha’s foot had been cut by a splinter. The Buddha was stricken by harrowing pains; physical feelings that were painful (*dukkha*), sharp, severe, acute, unpleasant, and disagreeable.”

(SN 4.13, Sujato)

Venerable Ānanda … said to the Buddha: '… the complexion of your skin is no longer pure and bright. Your limbs are flaccid and wrinkled, and your body is stooped. …'

"That's how it is, Ānanda. When young you're liable to grow old; when healthy you're liable to get sick; and when alive you're liable to die. …

> Even if you live for a hundred years,
> you'll still end up dying.
> Death spares no-one,
> but crushes all underfoot."

(SN 48.41, Sujato)

The two arrows

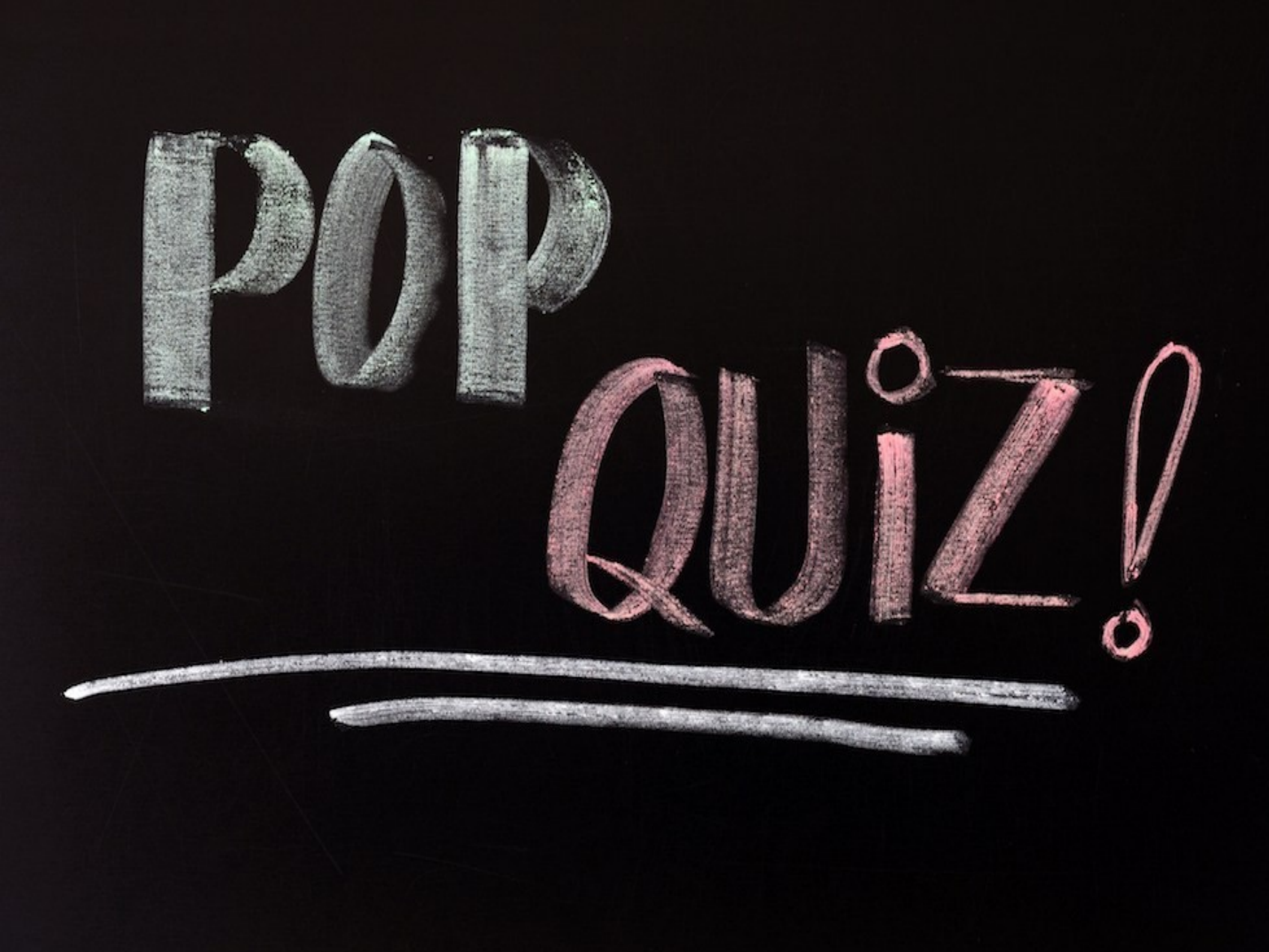
"When [enlightened] learned noble disciples feel a painful sensation, they won't sorrow, mourn, or grief, or cry beating their chest, all confused. They feel only one painful sensation: a bodily one, not a mental one.

It's like a man struck by an arrow, but then not struck again by a second one. He feels the pain of only one arrow."

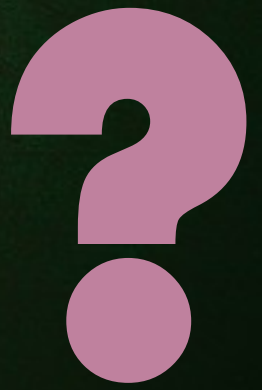
(SN 36.6, Sunyo)

"There are three kinds of suffering. What three?
1) The suffering of pain, (*dukkha-dukkha*)
2) the suffering of what's created, (*saṅkhāra-dukkha*)
3) and the suffering of change. (*vipariṇāma-dukkha*)"

(SN 45.165, Sunyo)


POP
Quiz!

Did the Buddha still have, form, feeling, perception, will, and consciousness?



“[Noble ones] truly understand form … feeling … perception … choices … consciousness—which is suffering—as suffering.

They truly understand that form … feeling … perception … choices … consciousness *will* disappear.”

(SN 22.55, Sujato)

BONUS misconception:

"The Buddha never said that 'life is suffering,' just that there is suffering in life."

"All states of existence are impermanent, suffering, and perishable."

(AN 4.185, Sunyo)

"Whatever states of existence there are—everywhere, all over—they are all temporary, suffering, and bound to change."

(Ud 3.10, Sunyo)

Misconception 6

~~Suffering stops at enlightenment~~

Misconception 7

Nibbāna is a deathless state

Is Nibbāna a “state”?

“Now at that time the Buddha was educating, encouraging, firing up, and inspiring the monks with a Dhamma talk about extinguishment (*nibbāna*).

…

Is Nibbāna a “state”?

“There is, mendicants, an unborn (*ajāta*), unproduced (*abhūta*), unmade (*akata*), and unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*).
If there were no unborn, unproduced, unmade, and unconditioned, then you would find no escape here from the born, produced, made, and conditioned.
But since there is an unborn, unproduced, unmade, and unconditioned, an escape is found from the born, produced, made, and conditioned.”
(Udāna 8.3)

Is Nibbāna a "state"?

"... the epithets *amata* and *ajāta* ... when they are applied to *nibbāna* [indicate] the absence of birth and death. […]
I have suggested that the correct translation for *amatapadaṁ* is 'the state where there is no death'
and we can translate the other epithets in a similar way: 'where there is no birth' (*ajāta*), 'where there is no old age' (*ajara*), 'which is not a place of rebirth' (*agati*), 'where nothing has come into existence' (*abhūta*), 'where there is nothing made' (*akata*)." (K.R. Norman)

Is Nibbāna a “state”?

“It’s when someone who is themselves liable to be reborn (*jāti*), understanding the drawbacks in being liable to be reborn, seeks the unborn (*ajāta*) supreme sanctuary from the yoke, extinguishment (*nibbāna*).

Is Nibbāna a "state"?

"Themselves liable to grow old (*jarā*) ... they seek the unaging (*ajarā) ...*
Themselves liable to fall sick (*byādhi*) ... they seek the unailing (*abyādhi*) ...
Themselves liable to die (*maraṇa*) ... they seek the deathless (*amata*)
Themselves liable to sorrow (*soka*) ... they seek the sorrowless (*asoka*)
Themselves liable to become corrupted (*saṅkilesa*) ... they seek the uncorrupted (*asaṅkiliṭṭha*) ... extinguishment (*nibbāna*)."
(MN26)

A more meaningful translation?

"There is, mendicants, a freedom from the born (*ajāta*), a freedom from the produced (*abhūta*), a freedom from the made (*akata*), and a freedom from the conditioned (*asaṅkhata*).
If there were no freedom from these things, there would be no escape from them. But since there is a freedom from these things, there is an escape from them."
(Udāna 8.3)

Misconception 7

~~Nibbāna is a deathless state~~

Misconception 8

All knowledge comes from immediate seeing

There is also inferential knowledge

“A noble disciple has purified and cleansed these two knowledges—knowledge of the present phenomena, and inferential knowledge (*anvaye ñāṇaṃ*).

There is also inferential knowledge

“Whatever ascetics and brahmins in the future will directly know old age and death, their origin, their cessation, and the practice that leads to their cessation, all of them will directly know these things in exactly the same way that I do now. This is their inferential knowledge (*anvaye ñāṇa*).”
(SN12.33)

See you next week!