

Go: The Study of Buddhist Ideals

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from *The American Go Journal* Volume 24:1 Winter 1990

Some of the earliest known references to go describe it as some sort of divination vehicle in China (about 4,000 years ago). Around 1100 AD in Japan, the Shogun began sponsoring top level go players to live in the court and play and teach. These early “professionals” were required to become Buddhist monks, in order to place them in a category worthy of sponsorship.

A close evaluation of go indicates that it is a natural object of study for followers of Buddhism, as it embraces the founding principles of Buddhist theory. Go instills Buddhist values and wisdom upon its practitioners as subtly as tying knots, or counting breaths.

Go portrays Buddhist concepts in many ways. Each piece has the same value and may be used in the same way. The pieces are placed on the board and may not move unless they are captured (killed) and thus removed from the board. This represents the individual's entrapment in life. There is no way to escape the cycle of suffering except death (or enlightenment; which we shall discuss later). The pieces are granted temporary life merely by being placed on the board (birth). However, just as a new-born baby needs the protection of its parents and people need to form communities in order to manage the challenges of nature, so too the go pieces must form communities in order to ensure survival. Any single piece will eventually become captured if kept isolated from a friendly community. (“Friendly” is designated by color, white or black, depending on the contestant.) In fact, a *minimum* of six pieces is necessary to ensure a safe community. And these six pieces must have a *correct relationship* in order to make a “living group” otherwise all six will be captured. Extremely large communities may succumb to capture if they are flawed by incorrect relationships. In other words, the community must practice “right thinking” in order to survive. Merely coming together will not ensure safety. However, the greater the number of the community the less impact there is from improper thought in terms of basic survival. As the community grows, more subtle measures than mere survival are reflected by “right thinking.” But ultimately, the communities which reflect the most correct thought (relative to natural law) will also be the most prosperous.

The learning process for one who studies go resembles the life process itself. Because the rules of the game are so simple, almost anyone can learn them and thus begin to play. Life provides the same opportunity - anyone by virtue of being born may “play.” However, there are myriad levels of potential for growth. The process of mind which occurs during go playing reflects the 17 “thought moment steps” used to describe the thought process in Buddhist theory:

The first stage represents the past — in particular, the knowledge we bring which will help us during the game. Even if we are learning the rules for the first

time we bring something from the past (e.g. ability to concentrate, patience, lust, greed, selfishness, etc.)

The second stage is that of the continually vibrating present. In go this is viewed as “state of mind.” The ideal state is one of peaceful composure and detachment. But we often bring a much more anxious state to our game. Each play of the game represents the third stage or “arrest of *bhavanga*.” In a sense it is only our opponent's move which creates this stage as a new thought is brought into our mind.

The fourth stage opens the sense door of mind/emotional consciousness.

The fifth stage is all our senses being opened. Our whole body takes in the effect of our opponent's move.

The sixth stage is the receiving consciousness. This is the synthesis of each sense consciousness and our resulting perception. The seventh stage begins the investigation, the search for meaning.

The eighth stage is determining. We evaluate the results of our investigation and establish what we “think.”

Stages 9-15 are impulsion, or acting on the object of our determination (ie: thus our karma is created as we make our next move.)

Stages 16 and 17 entail registering our decision, which produces a new “past” for us.

The experience of playing easily becomes a meditation, even for the beginner. And the road to improvement is a process of killing the same enemies opposed by the Buddha: greed, desire, attachment.

The matrix of 361 intersections fills with stones, in unique patterns that have their own special qualities and relationships. Then the board is wiped clean and the process begins anew. Each new game may be considered the re-birth of a personality on the karmic wheel of life.

The basic teaching of the Buddha, that everything changes, is one of the most dramatic lessons taught in go. Each move creates a new reality for the universe of the game. And although one is emotionally bonded to the development of one's own pieces (or intent) there is an inescapable bond to the pieces of one's opponent (or opposite intent). Therefore, one learns that the birth of desire creates the opposite of that desire. These two opposites remain entwined throughout the life of the game.

Within the finite period of play there is a harmony, or middle path, to be found. Finding this path is the ultimate goal of each player. This is the key to success. Any deviation from this path is error or *dukkha*: suffering. The one who stays most closely to this path wins. There is no trick to winning in this game. No elements of chance factor into victory. Victory is a direct reflection of each contestant's ability to stay on the path. In fact, this aspect is so important that a built-in handicap system ensures that players of differing abilities always compete on equal terms.

As long as one remains on the middle path, no bad karma (aji) is generated. However, once one slips off the path one's opponent is provided with new prosperity. The natural law of the game illustrates that if one reaches too far (because of lust or greed), or if one's reach is too short (because of fear or laziness), then one's opponent is handed the reward. And herein lies the interesting aspect of the game as a practice toward enlightenment. One must learn to kill the enemies of greed, desire, and ignorance in order to stay on the middle path. The key to this is learning the "law"(s) of the game and practicing "right thinking" (ie: holding steadfast to the law).

The way we ultimately hold to the law is through understanding the four Noble Truths:

Suffering (error) is all that exists because any deviation from the middle path is disharmonious.

The cause of suffering is desire. Desire pushes and drags us from the middle path creating suffering.

Suffering can cease if we kill all our "enemies", remain detached and no longer create karmic forces.

The middle path is the enlightened truth.

When we play go from enlightenment (the middle path) we have no attachment to the moves being played. Therefore, we feel as though nothing is happening. Nothing is being created. The life continuum remains undisturbed!