

Buddhism: The Religion of the East

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Abstract: *Amongst all the major living religions of the world, Buddhism is the second oldest only next to Hinduism. It is more than 6000 years old whereas Buddhism belongs to the Pre-Aryan Race (5500 to 3800 years old). The Buddhist literature was taken from the Pali-leaf manuscripts because everything about Buddhism is written in the Pali language about which we know very little. It is all the effort of H. C. Warren who has been capable to translate the passages from the Buddhist sacred Book from the original Pali into English.*

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The Three Baskets

Buddhism

As we know the Bible is divided into two Testaments (the old and the new) The old one recorded the life and teaching of Jesus along with Moses. The New Testament is the first part of the Christian Bible which deals with the creation of man and Satan, the evils of the society, the prominent saints besides the miracles performed by Jesus, whereas the Buddhistic canon has three main divisions called the "Baskets". (in Pali Pitaka) and therefore, Buddhistic Bible consequently is called the three Baskets (Ti-Pitaka) The Vinaya, Sutta and Abhidhamma-Pitaka as analyzed below:

The first Pitaka has been copied and published by Oldenberg and a translation of a large part of it has appeared in the 'Sacred Books of the East'. This Pitaka gives the various rules and ordinances to be observed by the Buddhistic order and is therefore called the 'Discipline Basket' (the Vinaya Pitaka). The works of this Pitaka are five in number. The second Pitaka is called the Sutta Pitaka which can be termed as "Sermon Basket". It consists of a large number of sermons and discourses in prose and were delivered by the Buddha himself. Its work consists of nineteen in number. The third and the last Pitaka is the "Metaphysical Basket" known as 'Abhidhamma Pitaka' in Pali and consists of seven in number.

There is a lot of similarity between Christ and Buddha. Christ taught his disciples through different sermons and miracles. Similarly Buddha also has taught his disciples through questions and answers (though not by miracles) Secondly, there is no book codified showing the teaching of Christ except the discourses through which he preached to his disciples.

Birth of Buddha

Before we discuss the teachings of Buddha it is necessary to discuss a few lines of the birth of Buddha as enumerated in the Jataka stories.

The Buddha was a Hindu, born not far away from the Ganges and during his long ministry wandered about from place to place very much as did Christ in Judea and Galilee. And just as Christ once left his native country and

went to Egypt, so The Buddha is said by native authorities to have paid a couple of visits to Ceylon; but as there is no proof we can simply say that it is only mythical.

The date of Gotama Buddha is considered to be the sixth century before Christ. It is believed that he lived to this eighteenth year and the time of death is given by scholars as about 480 Bc. There are several birth stories given in the Jataka stories and are said to be five hundred and fifty. But how far these stories are there are all doubtful. We do not have any authenticity on this point.

Buddhism as we know, that though it sowed its seed in India, it gradually spread over Nepal, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, China, Indonesia and other islands making it almost the first inter missionary religion in the world.

Spread of Buddhism

The man who founded Buddhism did not preach any form of worship, did not recognize any personal deity, did not reply to metaphysical questions, but was worshipped and glorified by innumerable disciples the concrete proofs we have being the great number of Buddhist temples spread over the whole of Asia. What was then the secret of the spread of Buddhism? The simplest answer would be 'its practical this worldly attitude'.

Buddha's entire life was a life of research based practical wisdom. In his youth the sight of an old man bowed down by years, a corpse, and a diseased led him think that life was full of sufferings, and he was troubled. The sight of a wandering monk or a mendicant possibly indicated to him the way to find a remedy. To find an answer to the cause of suffering and bring about its cessation, at the age of twenty nine he left his princely robe, bade farewell to his sleeping wife and son and wandered from place to place. He came in contact with the great scholars. Atama, Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, who taught him the stages of meditation and philosophical speculation but that did not help him. He practiced severe austerities, but that too proved futile. He became desperate to achieve enlightenment. Ultimately seated himself under a Bo-tree, he fixed his mind towards his goal and after some weeks of deep meditation he found the answer to the mystery of suffering and was enlightened. He attained Nirvana, the highest stage of positive bliss or pure consciousness, a state free from suffering through his own intellectual

power.

It was during this period Mara, Buddhist Lord of the senses who repeatedly tempted Buddha Gautam. When Buddha seated under the Bodhi tree at Bodhgaya to await enlightenment, the evil Mara appeared in the guise of a messenger claiming that a rival usurped the family throne. After sending a storm of live coals, take him feet up and head down and throw him into a heated iron kettle that is blazing, flaming and glowing. Then though he experienced badly from physical torture but he does not die because his wickedness remains unexhausted.

Finding no other way, the guardians of hell throw him into the chiefest of hells which has been explained beautifully in these lines -

“Symmetrical and square in shape, Four-gated into parts laid off.

Of iron is its bounding wall, An iron roof does close it in;
And of its of glowing iron floor The light with daggling
brilliancy

Spreads for a hundred leagues around, And ever and for a
abides”.

Thus, we can conclude that perhaps no other religions of the world have depicted such graphically of hell though all world religions have described about hell and its torturous path. This is because of the vastness of Buddhistic literature and nothing else.

Fundamental Teachings

The fundamental teachings of the Buddha are (i) The Four Noble Truths and the Eight-fold paths of suffering (ii) Karma and Rebirth (iii) Nirvana the end of suffering (iv) Meditation and concentration (v) God and the world (vi) The way to become a Buddha.

Besides these he has dwelt at length about ignorance, consciousness, desire, attachment, wisdom, summum bonum of life and hailing the saints superior to gods. In the Anguttara Nikaya (111.37) it has been early explained that the saints were superior to gods because a saint who has lost all depravity, who has led the holy life, who has done what it behooved him to do, who has laid aside the burden, who has achieved the supreme good, who has destroyed every letter that binds him to existence, who is free from passion, hatred and infatuation and is released by perfect knowledge, such a priest is released from birth, old age, death, sorrow and lamentation misery, grief and despair. In short, he is released from misery and therefore is superior to Gods.¹

Also he has explained about Death's messengers and a graphic details of the chiefest of hells.

The four noble truths

The four noble truths: that there is suffering, there is a cause of suffering, there is cessation of suffering, and there is a path which leads to the cessation of suffering,

propounded by Buddha formed the genesis of Buddhistic philosophy. In fact, these truths which Buddha discovered a new from his spiritual experience, may be called universal truths because they can be readily seen by all men at all times. There is no denying the fact that life is full of suffering. But for a few roses it would simply be a bed of thorns. Birth is painful, death is painful, union with what is unpleasant is painful and painful is the separation from the pleasant. Besides these there is sorrow, lamentation, grief, despair, unfulfilled wishes, unattainable wishes and so on.

1. H. C. Warren, Buddhism in Translation, (Cambridge mass: Harward U953) PP 122-123

The second noble truth deals with the cause of suffering. According to Buddhism the suffering-laden quality of existence is conditioned by craving (trnsa) and ignorance (abidya). Related causes are sub-divided into twelve and are known as the dwadasa-nidana or twelve links, one leading to the next. Suffering is due to birth, which arose from desire to be born, which in turn arose from cognition, sense contact, previous enjoyment of sense objects, mental changing to those objects and so on. Desire, according to the Buddha, is the root cause of all suffering. He himself had thirsted for his own salvation but was defeated, and immediately after gaining enlightenment realized that at that very moment he was without any desire.

The third noble truth is the cessation of suffering. It is the complete fading out and cessation of desire, a giving up, a loosening of hold, a relinquishment and a non-adhesion. This is the stage of Nirvana. It is the state where all earthly desires vanish, all passions come to an end It is the complete control of the senses. In it the chain of causation is broken and there is no rebirth. In the different passages of the Milinda Panha, (“Questions of King Milinda”), it is described as a kind of existence devoid of egoity, a timeless existence full of confidence, peace, calm, bliss, happiness, delicacy, purity and freshness”. In it there is no trace of self-consciousness. “The individual consciousness centres into a state where all relative existence is dissolved. It is the silent beyond, by words indescribable. In one sense it is self-extinction, in another, absolute freedom. It is the fading of the star in the brilliant rise of the sun, of the melting of the white cloud in the summer air. To the followers of later Mahayana, “to think that Nirvana is annihilation is a wicked heresy”.¹

The fourth noble truth prescribes the path to attain the cessation of suffering. The path is eightfold. Its aspects are to have right views, right resolves, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. The path is difficult, no doubt, but can be achieved through purity of mind and body and by repeated practice. These are the practical means towards a noble end. But modern man, with few exceptions, is not ready to trod the blessed path. In this materialistic age people have become too engrossed in earthly desires and dishonest means.

1. S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy, Vol 1. London,

George Allen Unwin Ltd 1923 - P 450

Having right views, conduct, speech, livelihood, mindfulness and efforts do not find a place in their hearts. There is moral degeneration. People have lost purity of heart, and body. But the path taught by the Buddha can at least act as a reminder, an eyeopener, to those who want to achieve profound peace and happiness in their lives.

Karma and Rebirth

Buddhism, as we know, incorporates the doctrine of Karma which explains the presence of inequalities in the world. It is a fact of common experience that all men are not placed equally in life. In the Milinda Panha, Nagasena has said:

It is through a difference in their karma that men are not all alike. [From the results of previous causes] some men are long-lived and some short-lived, some healthy and some sickly, some handsome and some ugly, some powerful and some weak, some rich and some poor, some of high degree and some of low degree, some wise and some foolish.¹

It has been explained through an analogy that just as all trees are not alike because of the differences in the seeds, so different karmas snatch away equality from men in different respects. Thus in Buddhism the law of Karma operates as the law of justice and retribution. This law links together the past, present and the future. It is a basic tenet of Buddhism that successive lives and rebirths are linked by a chain of natural causation. Even after death, the actions do not fade completely away, but remain in their seed form of potential energy.

Buddhism does not uphold the idea of an unchangeable or eternal conscious ego, agent or self. The ego or self is just a name for a number of interconnected facts or elements. So, while there is rebirth, there is no transmigration of any permanent ego from one life to another. In the Milinda Panha, Nagasena has thus explained.

What is born is not any transmigrating principle; It is name and form that is born in the next existence.

1. Buddhism in Translations

[But] it is not the same name and form that is born in the next existence: but with this name and form he does a deed it may be good or it may be wicked, and by reason of [it] another name and form is born into the next existence.

Names and forms in different lives are rising up and dying out in accordance with the law of moral causation or karma. The effect is different from the cause, although dependent on it. Causation is a series of different happenings; the succeeding event in the series depends on the preceding ones. It is due to the origin and passing out of the preceding event that the succeeding event arises. In other words, in the series of events, actions happening earlier determine the subsequent others. This is the theory called pratyasamutpada-vada due to which even without

admitting a permanent self, the Buddhists accept the theory of karma and rebirth. In fact, it is held, we are in the vortex of births and rebirths due to our ignorance regarding the nature of the world and of our own internal framework. Due to our age-old superstitions, we suffer from a false belief that we are everlasting and unchangeable consciousness in essence. If we can ever realize that we are nothing but a momentary aggregation of the live skandhas (elements of personality).¹ We shall get free from births and deaths. It is this notion 'I' which becomes the cause of rebirth. Desire and attachment to objects rests on the notion of 'I' the continuity of rebirths does not end. The intimate relation between Karma (done under the spell of desire—vasana, atmadrest, klesa and rebirth) is basic to Buddhist philosophy. Ignorance produces (Karma forces in the seed state) and become fixed in the individual mind-stuff (consciousness of vijñana). These become the base for emergence of a new life. The new life again comes in contact with the external world, grows in feeling and emotion, and performs actions which again cause the origin of another life. The cycle goes on in an uninterrupted series.

Some Theravādin believe that the new birth takes place immediately after death, whereas others say there is an intermediate state before rebirth known as the state of gandharva. Due to Karma this intermediate being, possessing supernatural vision, together with an unimpeded capacity for going through space, arises. It lives on exhalations. After a period it reaches a place where it can be born (either as male or female) according to its karma.

1. Skandhas or elements of personality (a) corporeality or form (rupa), (b) sensation or (trsna), (c) perception or (samajna), (d) moral formations (samskaras) and (e) consciousness (vijñana)

As soon as the new being is formed in the mother's womb, from it, it vanishes. Thus we find that the multi coloured worldly experiences of the living being are determined by actions springing from desire. Actions being of a mixed good and bad character, every being must go through the experiences of both desirable and undesirable effects.

God and the World

Buddhism is a religion in which we do not find place for God. As we have seen above, Buddha believed in the chain of causation, in relation between cause and effect, and was not ready to accept God as an uncaused cause. All the arguments for God's existence, such as the ontological, and teleological, fail as proofs. Man is born out of his own deeds and the need of a divine author does not arise. Moreover, this world which is full of imperfections could not have been created by a perfect God. Sufferings of the beings are due to karma. A God, however perfect he might be, cannot relieve beings of their sufferings. Thus Buddha didn't preach the necessity of worship. His conscience was deeply shocked when he saw how worship incorporated cruel rites of animal sacrifice, acts which bind man still more tightly in the

bonds of samsara. Compassion to beings, not cruelty, leads to freedom. Therefore he taught that man should rely upon his own right-efforts to free himself, not on mystery rites or priestly intercession. In fact, his last words were: "And now, brethren, I take my leave of you: all the constituents of being are transitory: work out your salvation with diligence. Buddha realized that the only way to remove the haunting fear of the gods, the threatened torments of the future and the corruption of the human spirit, inclined to buy the good-will of gods by flattery and praise, was to destroy the gods once for all".¹ There is only cause and effect, which is derived from the past. The universe has evolved and its evolution is based upon the materials of a previous universe. In the future also other universes would come up. The cycle of evolution and involution moves on and on.

The way to become a Buddha

The Mahasi Sayadaw, in his introduction to a lecture delivered at New Delhi during the Buddha Jayanti Celebration from twenty fourth to twenty-ninth November, nineteen fifty-six, suggested that anybody can become a Buddha if he practices to perfection the way to become a Buddha.

1. Indian Philosophy-453

The way consists of three parts, namely: (a) Parami or perfection in the cultivation of certain virtues: (b) Cariya or habitual behaviour: and (c) Caga or renunciation.

The Paramis are ten: Perfection of benevolence and absence of greed, perfection of moral discipline, of renunciation, of wisdom, of self-effort, of forbearance, of being truthful, of love and goodwill towards all beings, and perfection of equanimity and balance of mind.

There are three kinds of habitual behaviour: acting for the benefit of all beings, for the welfare of oneself and community and practicing for the attainment of enlightenment.

There are five kinds of renunciation of worldly possessions: of offspring, of wife, of limbs and sense organs, and of one's life.

All these are in reality the practical roads which lead to salvation. As such, anybody who practices them to become enlightened can be a Buddha too, in this very life.

Conduct, Concentration and Wisdom

The Buddha, at length has discussed some vital points in course of his teachings. By conduct is indicated the advent of three fold knowledge. For the virtuous conduct one acquires the three fold knowledge but gets no further. By concentration is meant the advent of six high atoms and gets no further. By wisdom is indicated the advent of the four analytical seasonless and in no other way. By conduct again is indicated the means of escape from the lower states of existence by concentration the avoidance of the extreme called self-torture. By wisdom is indicated the adoption of the middle course of conduct. By conduct,

again is indicated the means of escape from the lower states of existence, by concentration, the means of escape from the realm of sexual pleasure, by wisdom the means of escape from every form of existence. By conduct is indicated the abandonment of the corruptions through the cultivation of their opposing virtues; by concentration the abandonment of the corruptions through their avoidance; by wisdom, the abandonment of corruption through their extirpation. By conduct again, is indicated the hostility to corrupt acts; by concentration the hostility to corrupt propensities. By conduct is again indicated the purification from the corruption of bad practices; by concentration the purification from the corruption of desire; by wisdom the purification from the corruption of heresy.

H. C, Warren very clearly explained the differences between the three disciplines of conduct, concentration and wisdom. In a nut shell we can very simply say that the advent of threefold knowledge is the avoidance of the two extremes and the avoidance of the threefold abandonment of corruption and the three hostilities, the purification from three corruptions and the attainment of conversion and of other degrees of sanctification. The Visuddhi Magga (Chap III) has clearly states that concentration is an intentness of meritorious thoughts where passion is also abandoned. To say that all living religions of the world in their own way has dwelt upon concentration, conducts and wisdom to explain about our inner life. Actually, speaking we are ignorant about all these because of want of knowledge. The Visuddha Magga (Chap III) has clearly explained the Sutta-Pitaka. Want of knowledge concerning misery, the origin of misery, the path leading to the cessation of misery, want of knowledge concerning anteriority and posteriority, definite dependence and the elements of being sprung from dependence.

Attachment and Desire

Besides the above the Vissudhi - Magga (Chap xvii) also makes it clear that on desire depends attachment. Attachment is described as the tenacity of desire. The following are the four attachments; the attachment of sensual pleasure, the attachment of heresy, the attachment of fanatical conduct, the attachment of the assertion of an Ego. Amongst the four, the attachment of sensual pleasure is the most important one. Sensual craving, passion, delight, desire, affection, torments, infatuation cleaving towards worldly objects.

Sensual Pleasure

On one occasion, when the Blessed One was dwelling at Savatthi in Jetavana monastery in Anathapindikas Park and having put on his tunic in the morning, and taken his bowl and his robes, entered savatthi for alms, then a great number of priests where venerable Ananda was staying wanted to have a doctrinal discourse from the mouth of the blessed one so when he returned from begging after breakfast, he addressed the venerable Ananda on several topics and spoke about the five sensual pleasure. "Forms perceivable by the eye, delightful, pleasant charming, lovely, accompanied with sensual pleasures and exciting

passion; sounds perceivable by the ear odors perceivable by the nose, tastes perceivable by the tongue things tangible perceivable by the body, delightful, pleasant, charming, lovely accompanied with sensual pleasure and exciting passion.”

Death's Messengers

Explaining about the three death messengers (as translated from the Anguttara Nikaya (iii 35), the Buddha said to the priests that if one does evil with his body, voice, and mind, he arrives after the dissolution of the body, after death, at a place of punishment, a place of suffering, perdition, hell. Then, O Priests the guardians of hell seize him by the arms at every point, and they show him to the Yama, the ruler of death saying,

“Sire, the man who did not do his duty to his friends, to his parents to the monks, or to the Brahmins, nor did he honour his elders among his kinsfolk, let your majesty inflict punishment upon him.”

Then, after considering all the points, king Yama said to the priests O man! Through thoughtfulness you failed to act nobly with the body, voice and mind. Verily, it shall be done with you, O man, in accordance with your thoughtlessness. You failed to act nobly with the body voice and mind. Verily, it shall be done with you, O man, in accordance with your thoughtlessness. And it was not your mother who did this wickedness, nor was it your father, nor your brother nor your sister, nor your friends, companies, relations and kinsfolk nor the deities, monks and Brahmins, but it was you yourself who did the wickedness and you alone shall feel its consequences”.¹ Then O priests, when king Yama has questioned, sounded, and addressed him touching the third of death messengers, he becomes silent.

Because of such conduct the guardians of hell infliction him the torture called the five fold pinion, they force a heated iron stake through his hands, his feet also and the middle of his breast. There, he experiences grievous, sharp and bitter pains, but he does not die so long that wickedness is unexhausted. Then O priests, the guardians of hell lay him down, and hack him with axes, place him feet up, head down, and hack him with hatches, harness him to a chariot, and they make him forward go back over ground that is blazing, flaming and glowing mountain rain, rocks and ashes and darkness to frighten away the gods who had gathered, he challenged Gautam's rights.

1. H. C. Warren, Buddhism in Translation-P 255
2. Ibid - P 257

To set beneath the tree and sent his three daughters Trsna, Rati and Raga (thirst, desire and delight) to seduce Gautam but to no avail. After the Buddha achieved enlightenment, Mara pressed him to any attempt to preach but the Gods successfully persuaded him to preach the law.¹ Thus Buddha showed to the world that a person can experience unconditional spiritual freedom in this very life and can live thereafter on a high place of beatitude. This was his practical achievement. Had he spent his time on

metaphysical theories about God, the world and soul, he would never have become a Buddha, he therefore did not teach any system of philosophy or metaphysics because he felt that mere theorizing would not suffice in any way to annihilate suffering.

His critics charged him for his anti-speculative attitude, as he did not try to satisfy their metaphysical questions. Rather his answer to them was that theories and dogmas were often contradictory and did not profit anyone. In the Majjhima Nikaya Sutta sixty three, dealing with the questions which tend not to edification, the blessed one spoke to the venerable Mahinkyaputta in the following way:

The religious life does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal or not eternal; on whether it is finite or not; on whether the soul and the body are identical, on whether the saint exists after death or does not exist, but there still remains birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, miseries, grief and despair for the extinction of which in the present life I am prescribing ... [the way]

Further, I have not elucidated this because this profits not, nor has to do with the fundamentals of religion, nor tends to aversion, absence of passion, cessation of suffering, quiescence, the supernatural faculties, supreme wisdom and Nirvana.⁷

Thus spoke the blessed one, and delighted the venerable Matunkyputta applauded the speech of the Blessed one.²

1. Britannica Ready Reference Encyclopedic abes Vol vi/P 167
2. Buddhism in Translations (1953) PP - 121-122