

The Practical Philosophy of Buddha

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Abstract: *The sixth century B. C. saw the birth of one of the greatest living religions of the world in the Indian sub-continent-Buddhism, its preacher being the Siddhartha, popularly known as “The Buddha” or the Enlightened One. Buddha was born around 563 BCE in Lumbini, Nepal and died around 483 BCE in Kushi Nagar (India). He was 80. Buddhism sowed its seed in India and gradually spread over Nepal, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, China, Japan, Indonesia and other lands, making it almost the first international missionary religion of the world. 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-world attitude’.*

Keywords: Buddha, karma, four noble truths, the way to become a Buddha, names and forms indifferent lives

1. Research Methods

The wondering monk, who travelled from one part of India to another to get peace at last found peace and tranquility under the BO Tree at Bodh Gaya which is perhaps one of the highest temples in the world ruled by the Tibetan Lamas. There are other temples at Cambodia, Thailand, Japan etc. which as thronged by visitors all over the world and no researchers can out date him today.

2. Life of Research

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 person led him to think that life was full of suffering, and he was troubled. The sight of a mendicant or wandering monk 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-Alara 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, seating 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. 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 plane of beatitude. This was his practical achievement. Had he spent his time dwelling on metaphysical theories about God, the world, and soul, and indulged in preaching these, 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 Malunkyaputta 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, not tends to aversion, absence of passion, cessation of suffering, quiescence, the supernatural, faculties, supreme wisdom and Nirvana.¹

It is very clear that Buddha rejected all the theoretical questions and all speculative enquiries that did not touch upon his exclusive practical purpose of getting rid of suffering. This forms the kernel of his teachings. He felt that theoretical speculations terminated only in a blind alley, a cave or gorge of views, only involving the inexperienced mortal still deeper in suffering.

3. 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 Buddhist philosophy. In fact, these truths which Buddha discovered anew from his spiritual experience, may be called universal truths because they can be readily seen by all men at all times. There is not 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.

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

(avidya). Related causes are sub-divided into twelve and are known as the dwadasanidana 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 clinging 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 enters 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, or 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'²

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 tread the blessed path. In this materialistic age people have become too engrossed in earthly desires and dishonest means. 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.

4.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.³

It has been explained through an analogy that just as all trees are not alike because of the differences in the seeds, so different karma-s 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. [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 ones. This is the theory called praptyasamutpada-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 even realize that we are nothing but a momentary aggregation of the five skandhas (elements of personality),⁴ 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' and so long as there remains this notion of 'I' the continuity of rebirths does not end. The intimate relation between karma (done under the spell of desire vasana, klesa and atmadrsti) and rebirth is basic to Buddhist philosophy. Ignorance produces samskaras (karmic forces in the seed state) and become fixed in the individual mind-stuff (consciousness or 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 Theravadins believe that the new birth takes place immediately after death, whereas others say there is an intermediate stage before rebirth known as the stage 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. As soon as the new being is formed in the mother's womb, from it, it vanishes. Thus, we find that the multicoloured 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.

5. Summary

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 goodwill of gods by flattery and praise, was to destroy the gods once for all. 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.

6. Conclusion

The way to become a Buddha

The Mahasi Sayadaw, in his introduction to a lecture delivered at New Delhi during the Buddha Jayanti Celebrations 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. 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 *Parami*-s 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.

References

- [1] H. C. Warren, *Buddhism in Translations*, (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1953) PP.121-22.
- [2] S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy Vol. I*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1923) P.450.
- [3] *Buddhism in Translations*, P.215
- [4] *Skandhas or elements of personality*: (a) corpo-reality or form (*rupa*), (b) sensation (*vedana*), (c) perception (*samjna*), (d) mental formations (*samskaras*), and (e) consciousness (*vijnana*).
- [5] *Indian Philosophy* P.453.