



PHILOSOPHY OF BUDDHISM: AN OVERVIEW

DR. RAVI SANKAR K.

Ph. D. From

University of Hyderabad
(TELANGANA) INDIA

ABSTRACT

During the second half of the first millennium B.C people's minds were stirred up by the issues related to religion and salvation. There was an intense social, political, economic and religious upheaval. As a consequence, the then contemporary society witnessed many new religious philosophies, out of which Buddhism was one. The preachings of those new religious schools were targeted towards 'Man and his well-being'. In the light of the above discussion, the current paper elaborates the core philosophy of Buddhism in a lucid manner.

INTRODUCTION

There was an intense social, political, economic and religious upheaval, taking place in north-eastern India around the second half of the first millennium B.C. As a sequel to that ongoing process, alike many other new philosophies, Buddhism too, arose to provide a religious solace to the people, who were in much discontentment against the existing social set up.

Throughout the Pali canonical literature, there is no connected biography of Buddha, who is said to be the founder of Buddhism. Interspersed with the canonical texts on the doctrine and discipline of Buddhism, however, there are a number of episodes describing the master's ancestry, birth, infancy, youth, renunciation, austerities, enlightenment and nirvana. The same is the case even with the oldest part of the Sanskrit canonsⁱ. Out of these catered evidence, in the later Pali commentaries and chronicles as well as in the Sanskrit *Mahavastu*ⁱⁱ and *Lalitavistara*,ⁱⁱⁱ complete biographies of the Buddha were given.

About his ancestry, a folk-lore type story from *Ambattasutta* of *Diganikaya*, informs that; he belonged to a Sakyan clan. The *Mahapadanisutta* of *Diganikaya* and the *Buddhavamsa*, do mention the names of Gautama's father and mother along with his birth place. Regarding his renunciation, austerities and enlightenment different texts give different versions. For example *Ariya-pariyesana Sutta* (discourse of the noble quest) of the *Majjhima Nikaya*,

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informs that, he himself, at first, pursued what was subject to rebirth, decay and rest and then when reflected on their vanities, he was led to pursue the consummate peace of Nirvana, which is free from birth, death, decay, disease, sorrow and impurity. Contrary to the above, a passage from *Anguttanikaya* narrates a different version, where it is said that Buddha used to lead a luxurious life inside the royal household having three lotus pools and three palaces (one for the cold, one for the hot and one for the rainy season) for himself.^{iv} Siddhartha Gotama lived a life of luxuries and comforts in royal palace for twenty nine years. He was not exposed to the outer world until all these years. When he attained the age of twenty nine, tradition records that, Devas felt that it was the right time for him to turn to spiritualism and so they created an instinct in him to visit the park. On his way to the park, he coincidentally met with poignant reflections of old age, sickness and death. From then, the elation in his life disappeared. Later on, in the *Nidanakatha* this legend was further developed to give it a concrete shape, where the sight of a contemplating hermit was added to the earlier three poignant reflections.^v

After encountering all these adversaries of life, Buddha resolved to gain freedom from all such poignant adversaries of life. He was impressed by the sight and the words of a mendicant, whom he came across.

*Nara-pungava janma-mrtyu bhithah sramanah
Pravrajitosmi moksa-hetoh^{vi}
I am a sramana, an ascetic, who in fear of birth
and death have left home life to gain liberation*

Buddha deemed the highest goal of life to be the stage which is free from old age, fear, decease, birth, death and anxieties as well as absence of continues renewal of activity.

*Pade tu yasminn na jara na bhir na run na janma
Naivoparamo na cadhayah
Tam eva manye purusartham uttamam na vidyate
Yatra punah punah kriya^{vii}*

In quest of the highest goal Buddha renounced the worldly life in the mid-night, on one full moon-night of *Ashada*, when everyone was asleep; he abandoned all his attachments and retired to forest. This incident is known as *Mahabiniskramana* or the great renunciation. In quest of his spiritual knowledge he first met Alara kalama and later Uddaka Ramaputta for spiritual guidance. Dissatisfied with them, he went to Senanigrma in Urvela and practised severe penance for six years along with five mendicants. Later on he realised that extreme

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austerities were not essential for attaining spiritual knowledge, left those mendicants and sat under a Banyan tree, called Ajapala Nigrodha. After forty nine days of meditation he attained the enlightenment and from then on wards he was called as the Buddha. After his enlightenment he wished to deliver his first sermon to his earlier teacher Alara kalama and Uddaka Rama Putta but through his divine eye he found that those two were dead. Then he preferred to deliver his first sermon to his earlier five companions and on his way to the park in Saranath he met two laymen Tappasu and Bhallika, who had an opportunity to listen Buddha. He reached Deer park in Saranath and delivered his first sermon to them, which is known as *Dhamma-chakka-Pavattana* (Sanskrit: Dharma-chakra- Pravarthan), putting the wheel of Dhamma in motion. From then onwards he kept on wandering from place to place to awaken as many people as he can. Only in rainy season he and his followers used to take rest, which is popularly called *Vassa*. On one day in his tireless journey, he was offered a pork meat by a smith as a meal. This made him sick and he slowly proceeded to Kusinagara and there he had his last breath, popularly called as *Mahaparinibbana*.

Philosophy of Buddhism:

The philosophy of Buddhism, in a very general sense, is basically about Man and his emancipation. It proposes the way to get rid of the cycle of birth and death. Buddha said that all phenomenal existence is said to have three interlocking characteristics: impermanence, suffering and lack of soul or essence. Under the theory of Anattavada ('no-soul doctrine'), he taught that beings have no soul and no abiding essence. Once it is realized, then the question of getting rid of a soul will never occur because one has never had one. According to him an individual is composed of five components like body, feelings (of pleasure or pain), perception, volitions (including unconscious and inherited drives) and consciousness. Each in turn is not the self, for it is impermanent and so ultimately unsatisfactory. This analysis of the person into physical and mental components is exhaustive and hence there is no room for 'soul' or 'self' as a separate entity^{viii}. Buddhism is a religion of kindness, humanity and equality. While the religion of the Vedas allowed animal sacrifice to propitiate the gods, Buddhism set its face against such sacrifices; on the contrary it waged a merciless campaign against this practice. Buddhism, as a humanist force, profoundly affected religious and moral ideas in its time, and acted as a powerful catalytic factor in transforming existing social conditions.

Social component of Buddhism:

Buddhism denounced all claims to superiority on the ground of birth as the Brahmins claimed. It denounced all social distinctions between man and man, and declared that it was karma, the action of man, that determined the eminence or lowness of an individual.

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The followers of Buddha did not all belong to the higher classes, but also included the people from lower classes. Another feature of great sociological significance in Buddhism was the fact that it threw open the doors of organised religious life to women and men alike. It is said that the Buddha was at first unwilling to admit women into the religious organisation of the Sangha. However, when Ananda approached him on behalf of Mahapajapati Goutami, he finally agreed. At the same time, he laid down certain conditions which seem to imply the subservience of women to me. In his day, this was a great step forward and in religious life women enjoyed the same right of access to the highest position that of *Arhantship*, for instance, as it was recognised that women could also be as learned and wise as men. In this connection, the names of distinguished nuns like Khema, Patacara and Dhammadinna may be mentioned. Outside the Sangha women like Sujata, Visakha and Samavati all achieved position of eminence in different spheres. Even courtesans like Amrapali were not denied opportunities to embrace the religious life. In the Theri-Gatha also women like Uppalavanna, Subha, Kisa, Gauthami and Soma are referred to as having renounced the world out of unhappiness with life in general. They accepted a life of devotion in order to overcome mundane suffering.

Man, the Supreme Being:

The entire doctrine of Buddhism is based on the man, who is composed of five aggregates (skandhas) of physical and mental factors like *Rupa* (form), *Samjna* (name), *Vedana* (sensation), *Vijnana* (consciousness) and *Sankara* (disposition) and his emancipation. The position of man is supreme in Buddhism. Man is his own master and there is nothing like any other supreme being^{ix}. He asked his disciples to take refuge in them, instead of seeking refuge in others. Buddha asked every individual to strive for his own emancipation, as he has the power to liberate himself from all bondages through his own intelligence and personal effort. Everyone should do their work, where in the *thatagatha* would only show the path of liberation (Nirvana). But, one should tread the path oneself. It is on this principle that the Buddha gave freedom to his disciples. In fact, in the Mahaparinibhanasutta, the Buddha says that he never thought of controlling the Sangha, nor did he want them to depend on him. It is clear that he attributed all his realization, attainments and achievements to human endeavours and human intelligence. The freedom of thought allowed by the Buddha is unheard of elsewhere in the history of the religions. This freedom is necessary because, Buddha believed that man's emancipation depends on his realization of truth but not on the benevolent grace of a god or any eternal power as a reward for his obedient good behaviour.

Buddha was primarily an ethical teacher and reformer, not a metaphysician. Buddha never entertained the metaphysical questions like whether the soul was different from the body, whether it survived death, whether the world is finite or infinite, eternal or non-eternal. For

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him discussing a problem for the solution of which there is no proper evidence, will lead to different partial views like the conflicting one-sided accounts of an elephant by different blind persons who touch its different parts^x. Buddha in one of his discourses, *Brahmajala Sutta*, viewed all such metaphysical theories advanced by earlier thinkers as inadequate, since they were based on uncertain sense-experiences, cravings hopes and fears. Engaging oneself in such a discussion will never take him to the final destination of Arahantship, but rather drown him in to more problems. Buddha, while avoiding the metaphysical questions on one side and on the other, he shed a light on the most important questions of sorrow, its origin, its cessation and the path leading to its cessation. This is what is called the four noble truths enumerated by Buddha and this forms the core of the Buddha's enlightenment.

Throughout his teachings there is neither esoteric doctrine nor any thing hidden in the closed fist of the teacher. It was more or less an ethical character in which abstruse enquiries about god and soul were not encouraged. For him there is nothing like an enduring self in the man. He believed in the law of karma, operating in this life and in the next. According to him every effect is caused and every cause has an effect. So every individual is the maker of his own destiny. We are born again and again to reap the fruits of our karma. If an individual is free from sins, he is born no more. To get rid of the chain of birth and death, he put forward a path known as '*Dhamma*'. However, it is difficult, to surmise which, if any, among the many doctrines attributed by tradition to the founder are veritably his. In fact most would agree that the nucleus of Sakyamuni's teachings is in the "first sermon," especially in the doctrine of Four Noble Truths, but a host of other doctrinal statements such as the principle of conditioned arising (*pratitya-samutpada*) and the analysis of the human personality into its constituent parts (*skandhas*, etc.); compete for the central position throughout the history of Buddhism in India and beyond^{xi}.

The Four Noble Truths are considered to be the first sermon delivered by Buddha to his five disciples, after his enlightenment.^{xii} In this sermon he preached the four realities of life, explained how the mankind, due to ignorant of these truths, are entangled with the world and even showed the path to come out of it. The Four Noble Truths; that is to say, the Noble Truth of suffering, Noble Truth of cessation of suffering, the Noble Truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering.^{xiii} There are many kinds of sufferings, such as *intrinsic suffering* related to the bodily and mental pains; *suffering in change* caused due to the shift from the pleasant feelings to the unpleasant. Equanimous feelings and remaining formations of three plains are called *suffering due to formation* because they are oppressed by rise and fall. The bodily and mental afflictions such as earache, headache, fever born of lust, fever born of heat, etc., are called *concealed sufferings*. The affliction produced by the thirty two tortures, is called *exposed suffering*.^{xiv}



Buddhist believes that every effect has a cause and nothing can be uncaused. Likewise suffering also arises due to craving and ignorance. Craving is three fold such as craving for sensuous pleasures, craving for existence and craving for wealth. Alike a doctor giving prescription after diagnosing the disease, even the suffering can be put to an end, since its cause is known. This cessation of suffering is termed as the third noble truth. It can be cured by following the noble eight fold path. The path leading to *nibbana* (Sanskrit: *nirvana*) is termed as the fourth noble truth. In fact the path prescribed by Buddha to attain Nibbana is the eight fold path (*Arya astangika magga*).

The components of the eight fold path in sequence is right vision, right determination, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right meditation. This is again grouped into three categories, *Sila* (virtue), *Samadhi* (meditation), and *Panya* (wisdom). Right determination, right speech, right action, right livelihood and right effort fall under the category of *Sila* (virtue). Right meditation falls under the category of *Samadhi* (meditation). Right vision and right mindfulness fall under the category of *Panya* (wisdom).

While explaining the suffering, Buddhism put forward the three characteristics (*tilakkana*) of the universe. Suffering must be seen as the background of impermanence, for Buddhism describes suffering as: “all things are impermanence (*anitya*), all things are suffering and sorrow (*dukkha*), and all the elements are being no self (*anatman*)”.^{xv}In the same manner, while explaining the origin of suffering Buddhist put forward the doctrine of dependant origination (*Paticca-samuppada-naya*) which consists of a cycle of twelve factors. Desires which may be positive or negative are the obstacles for liberation and are the root cause of all evil. In order to get liberation, first of all one has to realise the true nature of reality, for which the Buddha put forward *Pattichasamuppada* (the theory of Dependent Origination). This is a complex formulation twelve different factors in a chain, one leading to the other. The theory of dependent origination is elucidated in the second noble truth while explaining the cause of suffering. This theory explains that in the empirical world everything is relative, conditional, dependant, subject to birth and death and therefore impermanent^{xvi}. It is relative because every cause has an effect and vice versa. As it is relative, it is neither absolutely real (subjected to death) nor absolutely unreal (for it appears to arise). Buddha puts ignorance as the root cause of all suffering.

1. Ignorance (*avidya*)
2. Impressions of karmic forces (*samskara*)
3. Initial consciousness of the embryo (*vijnana*)
4. Psycho-physical organism (*nama-rupa*)
5. Six sense organs including mind (*sadayatana*)
6. Sense-object-contact (*sparsha*)

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7. Sense-experience (*vedana*)
8. Thirst for sense enjoyment (*trsna*)
9. Clinging to this enjoyment (*upadana*)
10. Will to be born (*bhava*)
11. Birth or rebirth (*jati*)
12. Old age and death (*jara-marana*)

The first two are related to the past life, the last two to the future life and the rest to the present life. It is a vicious circle of causation. It does not end with death, but in fact it is a beginning of new life. It can be put to an end only by killing ignorance, the root cause of all suffering. Similarly ignorance can be destroyed only through right realisation of things that can be acquired by right knowledge.

CONCLUSION:

The philosophy of Buddhism was not bound by any geographical barriers. It continued its spread across India and beyond. As it continued to spread, there arose many sectarian differences within the Buddhist order not only on the points of monastic discipline but also on the doctrinal grounds as well and soon led to dissension in the Sangha.

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ⁱ U. N. Ghoshal, 'Studies in Early Buddhist Historiography', No.2, Vol. XVII, *The Indian Historical Quarterly*, June, 1941.

ⁱⁱ *Mahavastu* (Sanskrit for "Great Event" or "Great Story") is a text of the Lokottaravadins. It contains the rules (*vinaya*) of the Sangha; written in Pali, Prakrit and Sanskrit. It is written in two forms, both in prose and poetry and is believed to have been composed between the 2nd century BCE and 4th century CE.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Lalitavistara*, describing the biography of the master fall under Mahayana division. It is a compilation of various works by different author and is roughly dated to 3rd century A.D.

^{iv} U. N. Ghoshal, *Op.Cit.*



^v U. N. Ghoshal, *Op.Cit.*

^{vi} Asvaghosa: Buddhacarita, cited in V. P. Bapat (ed), *2500 Years of Buddhism*, The Publications division, Government of India, New Delhi, 1956. P.VI.

^{vii} Ibid, p. X.

^{viii} Richard F. Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from ancient Benaras to modern Colombo*, Routledge, London, 2006. P.63.

^{ix} Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Grove Press, New York, 1959. P.3.

^x Satischandra Chatterjee and Dhirendramohan Datta, *An introduction to Indian philosophy*, university of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1968. P.117

^{xi} Mircea Eliade (ed), *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York. P.355.

^{xii} Ibid, p.540.

^{xiii} Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosha, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, translated by Bhikkhu Nanamoli, Taipei, Taiwan, 1956. P.562.

^{xiv} Ibid, p.568.

^{xv} Mircea Eliade (ed), *Op.cit.* p. 541.

^{xvi} Chandradhar Sharma, *A critical survey of Indian philosophy*, Motilalbanarsidass publishers, Delhi, 2003.p.73