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Aspects of Buddhism

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by

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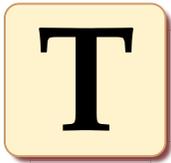
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Aspects of Buddhism

A Word to the Reader



oday we are living in an age of science—an age where man is inclined to accept the truth of anything by observation and experiment rather than by mere belief.

With the recent advances of science, man is becoming more and more rationalistic in his outlook and blind belief is fast disappearing.

Science in general has been somewhat of a threat to religion. This threat has been levelled against religious conceptions of man and the universe from the time of Copernicus, Galileo, and Bruno (17th century) who were instrumental in altering erroneous notions of the universe. The theory of evolution and modern psychology went against the accepted religious conception of man and his mind recorded in 'Sacred Writings'.

Has Buddhism suffered the same fate? Does modern science look unkindly at Buddhism? Whatever the critics of Buddhism may say, the dispassionate reader

of early Buddhism will realise that the basic principles of Buddhism are in harmony with the findings of science and not opposed to them in any way.

“Early Buddhism emphasises the importance of the scientific outlook in dealing with the problems of morality and religion. Its specific ‘dogmas’ are said to be capable of verification. And its general account of the nature of man and the universe is one that accords with the findings of science rather than being at variance with them.

“There is of course no theory of biological evolution as such mentioned in the Buddhist texts, but man and society as well as worlds are pictured as changing and evolving in accordance with causal laws.

“Then, in psychology, we find early Buddhism regarding man as a psycho-physical unit whose ‘psyche’ is not a changeless soul but a dynamic continuum, composed of a conscious mind as well as an unconscious in which is stored the residue of emotionally charged memories going back to childhood as well as into past lives. Such a mind is said to be impelled to act under the influence of three types of desires—the desire for sense-gratification (*kāma-taṇhā*), the desire for self-preservation (*bhava-taṇhā*) and the desire for destruction (*vibhava-taṇhā*). Except for the belief in rebirth, this conception of the

mind sounds very modern, and one cannot also fail to observe the parallel between the threefold desire in Buddhism and the Freudian conceptions of the *eros*, *libido*, and *thanatos*." [1]

It must be mentioned that the Buddhist way of life, the Buddhist method of grasping the highest truth, awakening from ignorance to full knowledge, does not depend on mere academic intellectual development—on science—but on the adoption of a practical teaching that leads the follower to enlightenment and final deliverance. The Buddha was more concerned with beings than with inanimate nature. His sole object was to unravel the mystery of existence so far as the being is concerned and thereby to solve the problem of becoming. This he did by comprehending in all their fullness the Four Noble Truths, the eternal verities of life. This knowledge of the truths he tried to impart to those who sought it, and never forced it upon others. He never compelled people to follow him, for compulsion and coercion were alien to his method of teaching. He did not encourage his disciples to believe him blindly, but wished them to investigate his teaching which invited the seeker to 'come and see' (*ehipassiko*). It is seeing and understanding, and not blind believing, that the Buddha approves. To understand the world within, one must develop the inner faculties, one's mind.

Today, there is ceaseless work going on in all directions to improve the world. Scientists are pursuing their methods and experiments with undiminished vigour and determination. Modern discoveries and methods of communications and contact have produced startling results. All these improvements, though they have their benefits and advantages, are entirely material and external in nature. The scientist has brought the external world under his sway, and seems to promise that he can turn his world into a paradise. But man cannot yet control his mind, despite all the achievements of science. Within this conflux of mind and body of man, however, there are unexplored marvels to occupy men of science for many years.

The students of Buddhism who are not inclined to read large volumes on the Buddha and his teaching, may, perhaps, find this booklet agreeable and useful. Those, however, bent on a comprehensive and detailed study of Buddhism, may read, 'The Buddha's Ancient Path' [\[2\]](#) by the present author.

The Buddha

The Buddha, the founder of the great religion called Buddhism, lived in North India in the 6th century before Christ. Siddhattha (Siddhartha in Sanskrit) was his personal name. Gotama or Gautama was his family name. His father, Suddhodana, ruled over the land of the Sakyans at Kapilavatthu in the Nepal frontier. Mahāmāyā, princess of the Koliyas, was Suddhodana's queen. She gave birth to her only child, Siddhattha, in the Lumbini grove. Lumbini or Rummindei, the name by which it is now locally known, is a hundred miles north of Varanasi (Benares) and within sight of the snow-capped Himalayas. At this memorable spot is where the prince, the future Buddha, was born. Emperor Asoka of India, 316 years after the event, erected a mighty pillar which is still to be seen.

According to the custom of the time, at the early age of sixteen, the prince was married to a beautiful princess named Yasodharā who was of the same age as the prince. Lacking none of the good things of life, he lived knowing not of woe. But with the advance of age and maturity, the prince began to glimpse the woes of the world. The more he came into contact with the world outside his palace walls, the more convinced he became that the world was lacking in true happiness.

Then, at the age of 29, in the flower of youthful

manhood, on the day Princess Yasodhara gave birth to his only son, Rāhula, he left the palace. Giving up a crown that held the promise of power and glory, and in the guise of an ascetic, he retreated into forest solitude to seek a solution for the problem of life, in quest of the supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna. This was the great renunciation.

Dedicating his life to the noble task of discovering a remedy for life's universal ills, he sought guidance from famous religious teachers hoping that they, masters of meditation, would show him the way to deliverance. But their range of knowledge, their ambit of spiritual experience, was insufficient to grant him what he earnestly sought. He was not satisfied with anything short of supreme enlightenment. He left them again in search of the still unknown. Five other ascetics who admired his determined effort joined him.

There was, and still is, a belief in India among many of her ascetics that purification and final deliverance from ill could be achieved by rigorous self-mortification, and the ascetic Gotama decided to test the truth of it. He began a determined struggle to subdue his body, in the hope that his mind, set free from the shackles of the body, might be able to soar to the heights of liberation. Most zealous was he in these practices. He lived on leaves and roots, on a steadily

reduced pittance of food. The utter paucity of nourishment left him a physical wreck.

“Rigorous have I been in my ascetic discipline. Rigorous have I been beyond all others. Like wasted, withered reeds became all my limbs...”. In such words as these, in later years, having attained full enlightenment, did the Buddha give his disciples an awe inspiring description of his early penances. [3]

Struggling thus for six long years, he came to death’s very door, but he found himself no nearer to his goal. The utter futility of self-mortification became abundantly clear to him by his own experience; his experiment for enlightenment had failed. But, undeterred, his still active mind searched for new paths to the cherished goal. He gave up self-mortification and extreme fasting and partook of normal food. Now his five companions left him disappointed; for they thought that he had given up the effort to a life of abundance.

Nevertheless, with firm determination and complete faith in his own purity and strength, unaided by any teacher, accompanied by none, the Bodhisatta (as he is known before he attained enlightenment) resolved to make his final quest in complete solitude. Cross-legged he sat under a tree, which later became known as the Bodhi tree or the ‘Tree of Enlightenment’, on the

bank of the river Nerañjarā, at Gaya (now known as Buddha-Gaya), 'a pleasant spot soothing to the senses and stimulating to the mind.'

Applying himself to 'Mindfulness on in-and out breathing' (*ānāpānasati*), the Bodhisatta Gotama entered upon and dwelt in the four meditative absorptions (*jhāna*, Sanskrit, *dhyāna*) by gradual stages. While thus seated in meditation he understood as it really is the Four Truths: 1. this is suffering or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), 2. this is the arising of suffering, 3. this is the cessation of suffering. 4. this is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. He understood as it really is: these are taints (*āsavas*), this is the arising of the taints, this is the path leading to the cessation of the taints.

Thus did Siddhattha Gotama, on a full moon of May, at the age of 35, attain Supreme Enlightenment by comprehending in all their fullness the Four Noble Truths, the Eternal Verities, and become the Buddha, the Enlightened One.

Two months after his Enlightenment, the Buddha made up his mind to communicate the Dhamma, the truth, he had realised, to his former friends, the five ascetics. Knowing that they were living at Vārānasi (Benares), in the Deer Park at Isipatana (modern Saranath) still steeped in the unmeaning rigours of

extreme asceticism, he left Gayā for distant Vārānasi, India's holy city, walking by stages a distance of 150 miles. There at the Deer Park he rejoined them.

Now, on the full moon day of July, the Master addressed the five ascetics: "Monks, these two extremes ought not to be cultivated by the recluse, by one gone forth from the house-life. What two? Sensual indulgence and self-mortification, which lead to no good. The middle way, monks, understood by the Tathāgata, the Perfect One, after he had avoided the extremes, gives vision, knowledge, and leads to calm, realisation, enlightenment, Nibbāna. And what, monks, is that middle way? It is this Noble Eightfold Path, namely:

Right understanding,
Right thought,
Right speech,
Right action,
Right livelihood,
Right effort,
Right mindfulness, and
Right concentration." [4]

Thus did the Enlightened One proclaim the Dhamma and set in motion the matchless 'Wheel of Truth' (*anuttaraṃ dhammacakkaṃ*).

When the number of followers increased up to sixty, the Buddha addressed them and said: 'Go now and wander for the welfare and happiness of many, out of compassion for the world. Let not two of you proceed in the same direction. Proclaim the Dhamma that is excellent in the beginning, excellent in its progress, excellent in the end, possessed of meaning and the letter and utterly perfect.' [5] Thus did the Buddha commence his sublime mission which lasted to the end of his life. With his disciples he walked the highways and by-ways of India enfolding all within the aura of his boundless compassion and wisdom.

The Buddha made no distinction of caste, clan or class when communicating the Dhamma. Men and women from different walks of life—the poor and the needy, the lowliest and the lost, the literate and the illiterate, aristocrats, brahmins, outcasts, princes and paupers, saints and criminals—listened to him who showed the path to peace and enlightenment.

Since he was one who always acted in conformity with what he preached, his acts were always dominated by the four Sublime States (*brahma vihāra*) namely: unbounded loving kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), equanimity (*upekkhā*). [6]

The Buddha never encouraged animosity and strife.

Addressing the disciples he once said: 'I quarrel not with the world, monks, it is the world that quarrels with me. An exponent of the Dhamma, doctrine, quarrels not with anyone in the world.' [7]

Though the Order of the Sangha, the ordained disciples, began its career with only sixty disciples, it expanded into thousands. As a result of the increasing number of monks, monasteries came into being and in later times, monastic Indian Universities, like Nālandā and Vikramasilā, became cultural centres which gradually influenced the whole of Asia, and through it, the mental life of mankind.

After a successful ministry of 45 years the Buddha passed away at the age of 80 at Kusinārā (in modern Uttara Pradesh about 120 miles north-east of Vārānasi) with a final admonition to his followers:

“Subject to constant change are all conditioned things. Strive on with heedfulness.”

Buddhism penetrated into many a land and is today the religion of over 600 million, more than one fifth of the world's population. Today Buddhism is found in Sri Lanka (Ceylon), Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Nepal, Tibet, China, Japan, Mongolia, Korea, Taiwan, in some parts of India, Chittagong in Pakistan, Malaya and in some parts of Indonesia. Several Western countries with a Buddhist Sangha are

now qualifying themselves to be included in this list.

Buddhism made rapid strides chiefly due to its intrinsic worth and its appeal to the reasoning mind, but there were other factors that accelerated its progress; never did the messengers of the Dhamma (*dhamma-dūta*) use any iniquitous methods in spreading the doctrine. The only weapon they wielded was that of universal love and compassion. Furthermore, Buddhism penetrated to these countries peaceably without disturbing the creeds that were already in existence. Buddhism was thus able to diffuse itself through a great variety of cultures throughout the world.

Some Salient Characteristics of the Buddha

One of the noteworthy characteristics that distinguishes the Buddha from all other religious teachers is that he was a human being with no connection whatsoever with a God or any other 'supernatural' being. He was neither a God, nor an

incarnation of God, nor any mythological figure. He was a man, but a superman, an extraordinary man (*acchhariya manussa*). He was beyond the human state inwardly, though living the life of a human being outwardly. Just as he is for this reason called a unique being, man par-excellence (*purisuttama*).

Depending on his own unremitting energy, unaided by any teacher, human or divine, he achieved the highest mental and intellectual attainment, reached the acme of purity, and was perfect in the best qualities of human nature. He was an embodiment of compassion and wisdom, which became the guiding principles in his Dispensation (*sāsana*).

Through personal experience, he understood the supremacy of man. The Buddha never claimed to be a saviour who endeavoured to save 'souls' by means of a revealed religion. Through his own perseverance and understanding, he proved that infinite possibilities are latent in man and that it must be man's endeavour to develop and unfold these possibilities. He proved by his own experience that enlightenment and deliverance lie absolutely and entirely in man's hand. Being an exponent of the strenuous life, by precept and example, the Buddha encouraged his disciples to cultivate self-reliance. [8]

It was also the Buddha who, for the first time in the

world's history, taught that deliverance could be attained independently of an external agency. That deliverance from suffering, conflicts of life or unsatisfactoriness, must be wrought out and fashioned by each one for himself upon the anvil of his own actions. The Buddha warns his disciples against shifting the burden to an external agency, (a saviour, a God or Brahma), directs them to the ways of discrimination and research, and urges them to get busy with the real task of developing their inner forces and qualities. He says: 'I have directed you towards deliverance. The Dhamma, the Truth, is to be self-realised.' [9]

The Enlightened Ones, the men who saw truth, are the true helpers, but Buddhists do not pray to them. They only revere the revealers of Truth for having pointed out the path to true happiness and deliverance. Deliverance is what one must secure for oneself. Buddhist monks are not priests who perform rites and sacrifices. They do not administer sacraments and pronounce absolution. A Buddhist monk cannot, and does not, stand as an intermediary between man and 'supernatural' powers. For Buddhism teaches that each individual is solely responsible for his own liberation. Hence there is no need to win the favour of a mediating priest. 'You yourselves should strive on; the Buddhas only show the path.' [10] The path is the

same Ancient Path trodden and pointed out by the Enlightened Ones of all ages. It is the Noble Eightfold Path leading to Enlightenment and the highest security, Nirvana.

Another distinguishing characteristic is that the Buddha never preserved his supreme knowledge for himself alone. To the Buddha such a wish is utterly inconceivable. Perfect Enlightenment, the discovery and realisation of the Four Noble Truths (Buddhahood), is not the prerogative of a single being chosen by Divine Providence, nor is it a unique and unrepeatable event in human history. It is an achievement open to anyone who earnestly strives for perfect purity and true wisdom, and with inflexible will cultivates the Noble Eightfold Path.

When communicating the doctrine (Dhamma) to his disciples, the Buddha made no distinction whatsoever amongst them; for these were not specially chosen favourite disciples. There is not even an indication that the Master entrusted the Dispensation (*sāsana*) to any particular disciple before he passed away. He did not appoint anyone as his successor. In this connection, it is interesting to note that the Buddha made clear to his disciples, before he passed away, that he never thought of controlling the Order of monks, the Sangha. Addressing the monks who assembled round his death-bed the Master said:

“The Doctrine and the Discipline (*dhamma vinaya*) which I have set forth and laid down for you, let them after I am gone be the teacher to you.” [11] Even during his life time it was the Dhamma-vinaya (Doctrine and Discipline) that controlled and guided the monks.

Characteristic, again, is the Buddha’s method of teaching the Dhamma. He disapproved of those who professed to have ‘secret doctrine’ saying, ‘secrecy is the hallmark of false doctrine.’ In his own words, ‘the Dhamma proclaimed by the Tathāgata, the Perfect One, shines when revealed and not when hidden.’ [12] Addressing the Venerable Ānanda, the personal attendant of the Master, the Buddha said: ‘I have taught the Dhamma, Ānanda, without making any distinction between exoteric and esoteric doctrine, for in respect of the Truth, Ānanda, the Tathāgata has no such thing as the ‘closed fist’ of a teacher who hides some essential knowledge from the pupil.” [13]

He declared the Dhamma freely and equally to all. He kept nothing back and never wished to extract from his disciples blind and submissive faith in him and his teaching. He insisted on discriminative examination and intelligent inquiry. In no uncertain terms did he urge critical investigation when he addressed the inquiring Kālāmas in a discourse [14] that has been rightly called ‘the first charter of free

thought.'

Buddhism

What the Buddha taught is popularly known as Buddhism. Some prefer to call it religion, others call it a philosophy, still others think of it as both religion and philosophy. It may, however, be correct to call it a 'Way of Life'. But that does not mean that Buddhism is nothing more than an ethical code. Far from it. It is a way of moral, spiritual and intellectual training leading to complete freedom of mind. The Buddha himself called his teaching 'Dhamma-vinaya', the Doctrine and Discipline.

Those who wish to call Buddhism a religion may bear in mind that it is not 'Action or conduct indicating belief in, reverence for, and desire to please, a divine ruling power; the exercise or practice of rites or observances implying this . . . recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, and worship.' [15]

Those who prefer to call Buddhism a philosophy

may note that it is not mere, 'love of, nor inducing the search after, wisdom'. Buddhism also advocates the search for truth. But it is no mere speculative reasoning, a theoretical structure, a mere acquiring and storing of knowledge. It is an encouragement of a practical application of the teaching that leads the follower to dispassion, enlightenment and final deliverance.

The Buddha emphasises the practical aspect of his teaching, the application of knowledge to life—looking into life and not merely at it. Wisdom gained by understanding and development of the qualities of the mind and heart is wisdom par-excellence. It is saving knowledge, and not mere speculation, logic or specious reasoning. It is not mere theoretical understanding that matters. For the Buddha, the entire teaching is just the realisation of the unsatisfactory nature of all phenomenal existence or conflicts of life (*dukkha*) and the cultivation of the path leading away from this unsatisfactoriness. This is his philosophy. His sole intention and aim was to explain it all in detail. The problem of suffering or unsatisfactoriness, the universal fact of life, and to make people feel its full force and to convince them of it.

Though we call the teaching of the Buddha 'Buddhism', thus including it among the 'isms' and 'ologies', it does not really matter what we label it.

Call it religion, philosophy, Buddhism or by any other name you like. These labels are of little significance to one who goes in search of truth and deliverance. The Buddha has definitely told us what he explains and what he does not explain.

What the Buddha Taught

Once the Buddha was living at Kosambi (near Allahabad) in a Siṃsapa Grove. Then, gathering a few siṃsapa leaves in his hand, the Buddha addressed the monks:

“What do you think, monks, which is greater in quantity, the handful of siṃsapa leaves gathered by me, or what is in the forest overhead?”

“Not many, trifling, Venerable Sir, are the leaves in the handful gathered by the Blessed One, many are the leaves in the forest overhead.”

“Even so, monks, many are the things I have fully realised, but not declared unto you; few are the things I have declared unto you. And

why, monks, have I not declared these? They, monks, are indeed, not useful, are not essential to the life of purity, they do not lead to disgust, to dispassion, to cessation, to tranquillity, to full understanding, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna. That is why, monks, they are not declared by me.

And what is it, monks, that I have declared? This is suffering—this have I declared. This is the arising of suffering—this have I declared.

This is the cessation of suffering—this have I declared.

This is the path leading to the cessation of suffering—this have I declared.

And why monks, have I declared these truths? They are indeed useful, are essential to the life of purity, they lead to disgust, to dispassion, to cessation, to tranquillity, to full understanding, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna. That is why, monks, they are declared by me." [16]

Thus spoke the Buddha.

To understand this unequivocal utterance is to understand the entire teaching of the Buddha. It

would appear that what can be called the discovery of a Buddha, is just these Four Truths. The rest are logical developments and more detailed explanations of the Four Noble Truths. This is the typical teaching of the Buddhas of all ages. [17] The supremacy of the Four Truths in the teaching of the Buddha becomes abundantly clear from the message of the Simṣapa Grove as from the message of the Deer Park at Benares.

All the four truths are associated with the so-called being. They are not to be found in the external world. Referring to these Truths, the Buddha says in another context; 'In this very body, a fathom in length, with its consciousness and perception, I declare are the world, its arising, its cessation and the path that leads to the cessation of the world.' [18]

Limited space prevents one from discussing the four truths in detail. In brief, the first noble truth, suffering or unsatisfactoriness, which is known as dukkha in the Pali language, is used in more than one sense in the early Buddhist scriptures. It is used in the psychological sense, physical sense and in the philosophical sense, according to the context.

To those who try to see things as they really are, the concept of dukkha is no insignificant thing. It is the keystone in Buddhist thought. To ignore this essential

concept is to ignore the remaining three truths. The importance of knowing dukkha is seen in these words of the Buddha: 'He who sees dukkha sees also the arising, the ceasing, and the path leading to the ceasing of dukkha.' To one who denies dukkha, a path leading to deliverance from dukkha is meaningless.

We must also bear in mind that the recognition of dukkha as a universal fact, however, is not a denial of pleasure or happiness. The Buddha, the Lord over dukkha, never denied happiness in life when he spoke of the universality of dukkha. In the text, *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, there is a long enumeration of the happinesses that beings are capable of enjoying.

To those who view the sentient world from the correct angle, that is with dispassionate discernment, one thing becomes abundantly clear: there is only one problem in the world—that of dukkha, unsatisfactoriness. All other problems, known and unknown, are included in this one which is universal. If anything becomes a problem, there is bound to be unsatisfactoriness, or if we like, conflict—conflict between our desires and the facts of life. And naturally man's every endeavour is to solve the problem, in other words, to remove unsatisfactoriness, to control conflict—which is pain, a wretched state of mind.

Can you call this pessimism or label the Buddha as a pessimist? As a matter of fact, Buddhism is neither pessimism nor optimism. Buddhism tries to show the realistic view of life and the world. The Buddha's teaching is a message radiating joy and hope and not a defeatist philosophy of pessimism.

In the second truth, the Buddha explains the cause of this dukkha, unsatisfactoriness. As there is, in Buddhist thought, no arbitrary creator who controls the destinies of man, Buddhism does not attribute dukkha, or its arising, to an external agency, to a 'supernatural' power, but seeks it in the innermost recesses of man himself. It is craving, backed by ignorance, the crowning corruption of all our madness, that brings about unsatisfactoriness. This most powerful force, craving or thirst, keeps existence going. Life depends on the desires of life. Craving is the propeller of not only the present existence, but past and future existence too. Craving, however, is not regarded as the First Cause with a capital 'F' and 'C'. Craving, like all other things, physical or mental, is also conditioned, interdependent and relative. Hence, it can cease.

The third truth is cessation of this dukkha. In the words of the Buddha, it is 'the complete cessation of (*nirodha*), giving up (*cāga*), abandoning (*paṭinissagga*), release (*mutti*), and detachment (*anālayo*) from that

very craving. [19] Complete cessation of craving implies Nibbāna, the *summum bonum* or the Highest Happiness spoken of in Buddhism. But it is not something merely to be theorised about, but realised. Though the sentient being experiences the unsatisfactory nature of life, and knows first-hand what suffering is, what defilements are, and what it is to crave, he surely knows not what the total extirpation of defilements is, because he has not experienced it. If ever he does, he will know through self-realisation, what it is to be without defilements, what Nibbāna, or reality is, what true happiness is.

The fourth truth is the path leading to the cessation of craving. It is the Noble Eightfold Path:

1 Right Understanding	Wisdom Group (<i>paññā</i>)
2 Right Thought	
3 Right Speech	Virtue Group (<i>sīla</i>)
4 Right Action	
5 Right Livelihood	
6 Right Effort	Concentration Group (<i>samādhi</i>)
7 Right Mindfulness	
8 Right Concentration	

The Eightfold Path is arranged in accordance with the three groups: virtue, concentration and wisdom. These

three are not isolated divisions, but integral parts of the Path. This idea is crystallised in the clear admonition of the Buddhas of all ages:

The giving up of all evil,
The cultivation of the good,
The cleansing of one's mind,
This is the Buddhas' teaching. [20]

Dukkha, suffering, is the dire disease. It is to be known and not ignored. Craving, the cause, is to be removed. The Eightfold Path is to be practised, to be cultivated, for it is the remedy. With the knowledge of suffering, with the removal of craving, through the practice of the Path, Nibbāna's realisation is ensured. In this connection the Buddha's reply to Sela, the brahmin, who doubted the Master's enlightenment is interesting:

'I know what should be known. What should
Be cultivated I have cultivated.
What should be abandoned that have I let go.
Hence, O brahmin, I am Buddha, the Awakened
One. [21]

The Doctrine of Karma

There are two other principal teachings of the Buddha that a student of Buddhism ought to be acquainted with. They are *kamma* (*karma*) and rebirth or repeated existence. These are two principal tenets of Hinduism too, but there they are permeated with the notion of Self or Soul (*Ātman*) which Buddhism categorically denies.

Karma is the law of moral causation. Basically it is volition. 'Volition, O monks, I declare is *kamma*' is Buddha's definition. Volition, which is will, a force, is a factor of the mind. *Karma* is the action or seed. The effect or fruit is known as *kamma-vipāka*. Volitions may be good or ill, so actions may be wholesome or unwholesome, according to their results. This endless play of action and reaction, cause and effect, seed and fruit, continues in perpetual motion, and this is becoming (*bhava*), a continually changing process of the psycho-physical phenomena of existence.

Having willed, man acts (through body, speech and mind), and actions bring about reactions. Craving gives rise to deed; deed produces results; results, in turn, bring about new desires, new craving. This process of cause and effect, actions and reactions, is natural law. It is a law in itself, with no need for a law-giver. An eternal agency, or power, or God that punishes the ill deeds, and rewards the good deeds, has no place in Buddhist thought. Man is always

changing, either for good or for ill. This changing is unavoidable and depends entirely on his own will, his own action, and on nothing else. This is merely the universal natural law of the conservation of energy extended to the moral domain.

The world seems to be imperfect and ill balanced. Amongst us human beings, let alone the animal kingdom, we see some born in misery, sunk in deep distress and supremely unhappy; others are born into a state of abundance and happiness, enjoy a life of luxury and know nothing of the world's woe. Again, a chosen few are gifted with keen intellect and great mental capacity, while many are steeped in ignorance. How is it that some of us are blessed with health, beauty and friends, while others are pitiful weaklings, destitute and lonely? How is it that some are born to enjoy long life while others pass away in the full bloom of youth? Why are some blessed with affluence, fame and recognition, while others are utterly neglected? These are intricate problems that demand a solution.

If we inquire we will find that these wide differences are not the work of an external agency, or a superhuman being with understanding and compassion, but are due to our own actions and reactions. We are responsible for our deeds whether good or ill. We make our karma. A Buddhist who

understands the operation of the law of karma would say:

“According to the seed that’s sown
So is the fruit ye reap therefrom.
The doer of good will gather good,
The doer of evil, evil reaps.
Sown is the seed and planted well,
Thou shalt enjoy the fruit thereof.” [22]

Here, however, we must understand that the Buddhist doctrine of karma is not fatalism, is not a philosophical doctrine to the effect that human action is not free but necessarily determined by motives which are regarded as external forces acting upon the will or predetermined by God. The Buddha neither subscribed to the theory that all things are unalterably fixed; that all things happen by inevitable necessity, that is Strict Determinism (*niyati-vāda*); nor did he uphold the theory of Complete Indeterminism (*adhicca-samuppanna*):

The Doctrine of Rebirth

According to Buddhism there is no life after death, or

life before birth, independent of karma or volitional actions. Karma is the corollary of rebirth; rebirth, on the other hand, is the corollary of karma.

Man today is the result of millions of repetitions of thoughts and acts. He is not ready-made; he becomes and is still becoming. His character is predetermined by his own choice. The thought, the act, which he chooses -that, by habit, he becomes.

Birth precedes death, and death, on the other hand, precedes birth, and the pair thus accompany each other in bewildering succession. Still, there is no Soul or Self or fixed entity that passes from birth to birth. Though man comprises a psycho-physical unit of mind and matter, the 'psyche' or mind is not a Soul or a Self, in the sense of an enduring entity, something ready-made and permanent. It is a force, a dynamic continuum capable of storing up memories not only of this life but also past lives. To the scientist, matter is energy in a state of stress, change without real substance. To the psychologist, the 'psyche' is no more a fixed entity. When the Buddha emphatically stressed that the so called 'being' or 'individual' is but a combination of physical and mental forces or energies, a change with continuity, did he not antedate modern science and modern psychology by twenty-five centuries?

This change of continuity, this psychophysical process, which is patent to us in this life, does not cease at death, but continues incessantly. It is the dynamic mind-flux that is termed as karmic-energy, will, thirst, desire or craving. This mighty force, this will to live, keeps life going. According to Buddhism, it is not only human life, but the entire sentient world that is drawn by this tremendous force—this mind [23] with its mental factors, good or ill.

Man's Deliverance

Man's passions are disturbing. The lust or craving of blinded beings has brought about hatred and all other sufferings. The enemy of the whole world is lust; through which all evils come to living beings. This lust, when obstructed by some cause, is transformed into wrath and man falls into the net which he himself has made of his passion for pleasure, like the spider into its own web. [24] People both in the East and West seem to have become more and more materially-minded, and, as they have almost ignored the mental realm—the world within—they seem to be lop-sided and even ill-disposed. Slogans and political

propaganda seem to mould man's mind, and life seems to be mechanical; man has become a puppet controlled by others.

Modern man seems to be enmeshed in all sorts of ideas, views, opinions and ideologies both wise and foolish, he is film-fed, television minded and radio-trained. Today, what is presented by the newspapers, radio, television, some novels and pictures, by certain literature on sex psychology and by sex-ridden films tend to confuse man and turn him from the path of rectitude and understanding. Today, more than at any other time, right understanding, calm and compassion are needed to guide mankind through the turmoil of life, to 'straighten the restless mind as a fletcher straightens his shaft', [25] and to make it conform to justice and rectitude.

Refraining from intoxicants and becoming heedful, establishing himself in patience and purity, the wise man trains his mind. A calm attitude preserved at all times bespeaks a man of culture. It is not too hard a task for a man to be calm when all things around him are favourable, but to be composed of mind in the midst of unfavourable circumstances is hard. It is this difficult thing that is worth doing. For by such control one builds strength of character. Psychological changes come very slowly. It is through training in quiet contemplation that a quiet mind is achieved. Can

we also achieve it? Lord Horder's answer is interesting: . . . "The answer is 'Yes'. But how? Well, not by doing 'some great thing'. 'Why were the saints saints?' someone asked. And the answer came: 'Because they were cheerful when it was difficult to be cheerful and patient when it was difficult to be patient. They pushed on when they wanted to stand still, and kept silent when they wanted to talk.' That was all. So simple, but so difficult. A matter of mental hygiene..." [26]

No amount of logic and argument on the perfecting of life leads us to our desired goal. No amount of speculation brings us near to our aim. We should learn to tame our fickle mind; for control of mind is the key to happiness. It is the force behind all true achievement. The movements of a person void of control are purposeless and unsettled. A certain aloofness, therefore, from the business of life and withdrawal into the silence is helpful in contacting the power within and overcoming the weakness and limitations of ordinary experience.

For an understanding of the world within, science may not be of much help to us. Ultimate truth cannot be found in science. For that we need the guidance, the instruction, of a competent and genuine seer whose clarity of vision and depth of insight penetrate into the deepest recesses of life and cognize the true nature

that underlies all appearances. The Buddha is such a seer, and his path to deliverance is open to all genuine followers. It is different from other paths to 'salvation', for the Buddha teaches that each individual, whether layman or monk, is solely responsible for his own liberation.

The path pointed out by the Buddha for man's moral and mental development is the Noble Eightfold Path which is Buddhism in practice. [27] This when carefully and fully cultivated lifts man from lower to higher levels of mental life; leads him from darkness to light; from passion to dispassion, from turmoil to tranquillity.

Our attempts to reach purity and peace, are at times, not crowned with success. But failure does not matter so long as we are sincere in our attempts, pure in our motives, and strive again and again without stopping. The Buddha says, 'like the skilful smith who blows away the dross in gold bit by bit, man must try to purge his life of impurities.' [28] A child learns to stand and walk gradually and with difficulty. So too have all great ones, in the march to perfection, moved from stage to stage through repeated failure to final success.

To put aside each ill of old,
To leave no noble deed undone;

To cleanse the mind, in these behold,
The teachings of the Enlightened One. [29]

May All Living Beings Be Well and Happy!

Notes

1. Dr. K. N. Jayatilleke, *Buddhism and Science*, Wheel No. 3, Buddhist Publication Society. [\[Back\]](#)
2. Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka. [\[Back\]](#)
3. See Bodhi Leaves, No. 7, *Master's Quest for Light* by R. Abeysekera, Buddhist Publication Society. [\[Back\]](#)
4. Vinaya I 10. Saṃyutta V 420. [\[Back\]](#)
5. Vinaya Mahāvagga. [\[Back\]](#)
6. See *Four Sublime States*, by Nyanaponika Thera. Wheel No. 6, Buddhist Publication Society [\[Back\]](#)
7. Saṃyutta III 138. [\[Back\]](#)
8. Dhammapada, v. 160. [\[Back\]](#)
9. Majjhima, Sutta No. 38. [\[Back\]](#)
10. Dhammapada v. 276. [\[Back\]](#)
11. Dīgha, Sutta No. 16. [\[Back\]](#)
12. Aṅguttara-N. I. [\[Back\]](#)
13. Dīgha Sutta No. 16. [\[Back\]](#)
14. See Wheel No. 8, *Kālāma Sutta* translated by Soma

Thera, Buddhist Publication Society. [\[Back\]](#)

5. *The Short Oxford English Dictionary*, 1954, under the word Religion. [\[Back\]](#)
6. Saṃyutta, V 437. [\[Back\]](#)
7. Vinaya Mahāvagga, II 48. [\[Back\]](#)
8. Aṅguttara II 48. [\[Back\]](#)
9. Samyutta, v. 421. [\[Back\]](#)
10. Dhammapada v. 183. [\[Back\]](#)
11. Sutta Nipata, 558. [\[Back\]](#)
12. Saṃyutta, I 227, *The Kindred Sayings*, i. p. 293. [\[Back\]](#)
13. A II 177. [\[Back\]](#)
14. Dhammapada, v. 347. [\[Back\]](#)
15. Dhammapada, v. 33. [\[Back\]](#)
16. *The Hygiene of a Quiet Mind*. Trueman Wood Lecture delivered before the Royal Society of Arts, 1938. [\[Back\]](#)
17. See above p. 29. [\[Back\]](#)
18. Dhammapada, v. 239. [\[Back\]](#)
19. Dhammapada, v. 18. [\[Back\]](#)

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