

BUDDHISM
FOR
Beginners

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INTRODUCTION

Buddhism originated as an alternative tradition to the excessive importance given to rituals and sacrifices in Vedic tradition. It was also a reaction to the gross neglect of the social problems of the time, as well as a revolt against the hegemony of the Brahmins in the society.

The main causes for the emergence of Buddhism are:

Social: A Brahmin centered, caste based, hierarchical set up was prevalent in the society. The authority to interpret the scriptures was vested with the Brahmin. Temples, which were the centres of social life, were controlled by them. Laws of pollution were strictly imposed upon the people of the lower caste. Tribes and Dravidians were out of the caste structure.

Economic: Agriculture and cattle rearing were the main source of wealth and livelihood for the people. Brahmins found out ways and means to exploit the lower sections in the society. Kings were made to perform yagas, yajnas, and digvijayas through which the Brahmins benefited a lot. The ordinary people had to contribute a major portion of their income to the kings, Brahmins, and temples.

Religious: Mode of worship, rituals, and religious ceremonies were interpreted by the Brahmins to suit their interest. The Vedas, Aranyakas, Mimamsas and Upanishads were written to perpetuate the hegemony of the Brahmins. Metaphysical speculations were at their zenith, which was the prerogative of the educated class. Exploitation by the higher castes and the suffering of the ordinary people continued unabated.

It was a time of two extremes: the Vedic, Upanisadic belief in the Absolute supported

by sacrifices, rituals (yajnas) and the materialistic philosophy of the Charvaka. Buddha avoided and negated the extremes, and at the same time integrated the positive elements of these two systems. He negated the existence of the soul and the Absolute, but he accepted the belief in the law of karma and the possibility of attaining liberation. His main concern was the welfare of the ordinary people. Though Buddha himself wrote nothing, the early writings were in the Pali and Sanskrit languages. Buddhist scripture is known as Tripitaka (Sanskrit) or Tipitaka (Pali), Three Baskets or Three Traditions. They are vinaya (Discipline), Sutta (Discourse), and Abhidhamma (Doctrinal Elaboration). Buddha was not interested in speculative or theoretical analysis of phenomena, but he was concerned about finding out practical solutions to problems in life. The influence of the early Upanishads is clear in the teachings of Buddha. Compassion and love were the predominant characteristics of Buddha. Charity was the basis of the Buddhist religion.

Buddhist spirituality has four stages ahimsa (not harming), maitre (loving kindness), dana (giving), and karuna (compassion).

LIFE OF BUDDHA

Gautama or Siddhartha (566-486 B.C), who later came to be known as the Buddha or 'The Enlightened One', was born into a wealthy Kshatriya family, in Lumbini, at the foothills of Nepal. Gautama's father Shudhodana, a Kshatriya of the Sakya clan, was the king of Kapilavastu (present day Nepal), and his mother was Mahamaya. She had a dream, while on her way to her parents' home, that a white elephant entered her womb, and later Gautama was born at Lumbini. A white elephant is an important symbol for Buddhists even today. On the fifth day of the child's birth, 108 Brahmins were invited for the naming ceremony, and he was given the name Siddhartha (Siddha- achieved,

arthagoal; one who achieved his goal). Many predicted that Siddhartha would become either a great king or a great sage. On the seventh day his mother died, and his father married his mother's sister, named Mahaprajapati Gautami. She brought up Siddhartha with love and affection. Gradually, he was called after his stepmother, 'Gautamiputra' (son of Gautami) or 'Gautama' (go-cow/bull, the best; the best cow or bull). The child was delicately nurtured and brought up in palatial luxury. At the age of sixteen, Siddhartha married his cousin, Yasodhara.

At the age of twenty nine, while he was travelling out of the palace, he had four encounters which left a lasting impact on him. He saw an old decrepit man, a sick man, a corpse in a funeral procession, and a peaceful and serene ascetic wandering alone. The first three sights disturbed him, whereas the fourth one gave him hope and peace. After a son, named Rahula (meaning rope or fetter)

was born to him, one night he left home and wandered around for many years. He studied yoga and meditation from two hermits - Udraka Ramaputhra and Alara Kalama. For some time he practised severe asceticism,

realized that it did not help him. Finally, he sat down at the bottom of the Bodhi tree. At the age of 35, during meditation under the Bodhi tree (the tree of wisdom), on the bank of the river Neranjara at Bodhi-Gaya (near Gaya in modern Bihar), Gotama (Gautama) attained Enlightenment. In the beginning, he was reluctant to share his experiences with any one for fear of being misunderstood. Gradually, he changed his mind and delivered his first sermon to a group of five ascetics (who were old colleagues) in the Deer Park at Sarnath, near Varanasi. After this, he taught all kinds of people till the end of his life, irrespective of their caste, religion, or status in society. After preaching and teaching for many years, Buddha attained Nirvana at the age of eighty at Kushinagara in eastern Uttar

Pradesh. Buddha was the only religious founder who did not make any super natural claim. He was simple and humane. Whatever he achieved could be attained by any human person. Every person has the inner potency to become an enlightened one, through constant meditation and a disciplined life. He founded the religion of Buddhism after he attained true wisdom under the Bodhi tree at Bodhgaya. In his first public address at the Sarnath Deer Park in Benares, Buddha spoke of the four noble truths, which are, (i) the world is full of suffering (ii) suffering is caused by desire (iii) suffering can be removed (iv) in order to remove suffering one has to overcome desire.

FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The Buddha was least interested in metaphysical discourses or dogmas. He was concerned about ethical living, applicable to all sections of people - kings, princes, Brahmans, people of low caste, masters, servants, monks, ordinary people, etc. He taught about the nobility of a religion. The four Noble Truths are the essence of the Buddha's teachings, which he explained in his first sermon to his old colleagues at Isipattana. These noble truths are explained in detail later, in other early Buddhist scriptures.

1. *Dukkha*: there is 'Suffering' in the world.
2. *Samudaya*: the arising or origin of 'Suffering'.
3. *Nirodha*: the cessation of 'Suffering'.

4. *Magga*: there is a path leading to the end of 'Suffering'.

The First Noble Truth: Dukkha

The term Dukkha, usually translated as 'suffering', does not communicate the full implication of the word as used in the Buddhist scriptures. Because of the misleading and unsatisfactory translation of the term, many people consider Buddhism as pessimistic. But in fact, Buddhism objectively regards a world of reality (*yathabhutam*), and suggests ways and means to attain peace, happiness, and tranquility. The word *dukkha* has a deeper meaning like 'imperfection', 'impermanence', and 'emptiness', in addition to the ordinary meanings of suffering, pain, sorrow, misery, etc. Though the Buddha presented *dukkha* as one of the four noble truths, he did not negate happiness in life. He accepted both material and spiritual happiness. Three factors are important with regard to life and enjoyment of sense

pleasures; they are attraction or attachment, dissatisfaction, and freedom or liberation. Desire is the cause of suffering; desire leads to the means for satisfaction; and satisfaction leads to pleasure or pain, and disappointment. The cycle of birth and death is a necessary outcome of desire. The concept of *dukkha* can be understood from three aspects:

1. *dukkha* as ordinary suffering (*dukkha-dukkha*): birth, sickness, old age, death, separation from the beloved, grief, distress, etc.,

2. *dukkha* as produced by change (*viparinama-dukkha*): vicissitudes in life,

a happy or a pleasant feeling that will change sooner or later and then produces pain, suffering or unhappiness.

3. *dukkha* as conditioned states (*samkhara-dukkha*): A being or an individual has five aggregates of attachments.

The five aggregates are the following: a) The aggregates of matter (*rupakkhandha*) are the first aggregate. The four basic elements of the universe, their derivatives, the sense organs and their corresponding objects in the external world are included in the aggregate matter. b) The second one is the aggregate of sensations (*vedanakkhandha*) and is six in number. The sensation we obtain through our senses and mind are included in this category. In Buddhism, unlike in other traditions, the mind is considered as a sense faculty or organ and not as spirit. c) The third one is aggregate of perceptions (*sannakkhandha*) and is six in number in relation to the six internal faculties. d) The fourth one is the aggregate of mental formations (*sankharakkhandha*) which include all volitional activities, both good and bad. e) The fifth is the aggregate of consciousness (*vinnanakkhandha*), based on

the six internal faculties and their corresponding objects in the world. Consciousness is not spirit in Buddhist philosophy. These five aggregates together constitute the being; there is no other realist behind these aggregates to experience dukkha. Though the first noble truth is dukkha, statues of the Buddha always present a serene, calm, compassionate, and smiling face.

The Second Noble Truth, *Samudaya*: The Arising Of *Dukkha*

The oft repeated explanation of the second noble truth is: 'It is 'thirst' which produces re-existence and re-becoming, and which is bound with passionate greed. It finds fresh delight, now here and now there, namely, 1. Thirst for sense-pleasures, 2. Thirst for existence and becoming and 3. Thirst for nonexistence. The 'thirst', desire, or craving manifested in different forms in human life give rise to suffering and continuity of life. But

desire, though the immediate and all-pervading cause, cannot be considered as the first cause, because everything is relative and inter-dependent. 'Thirst' (tanha) depends on sensation, and sensation depends on contact for its origination; hence it is a circle that goes on and on, which is known as 'dependent origination' (paticcasammupaada). Most of the economic, political, social, and ethnic problems are rooted in the interest of a person or a group or a nation.

The Theory of *Karma*

Thirst as a cause for re-existence, and re-becoming is closely connected with the theory of Karma and rebirth. Four factors are involved in the existence and continuity of being. They are, i) ordinary material food, ii) contact of the sense organs with the external world, iii) consciousness, and iv) mental volition or will. Mental volition is karma; it is the root cause of existence. Mental volition (centan) is the desire to love, to re-exist, to

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