



## BUDDHISM: RELIGION OR DHAMMA

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### Abstract

*What the Buddha contributed to mankind was to console us by helping us to realize how all our problems arise and how to face them. Praying to external forces may lead to temporary solutions and provide transient moments of peace. But it is just like taking two painkillers when you have a headache. After three hours the pain will come back because the headache is not the sickness but merely its symptom. Those who understand are in a position to remove the cause of suffering. The Buddha's teaching gives us that understanding.*



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### Introduction

In the academic study of religion the phenomenon in history the term religion can be considered in its different aspects as an inner experience, as an theology, or intellectual formulation of doctrine, as a basis of source of ethics and as an element in culture. Different scholars have different views and opinions of its nature and meaning. But the system of education by means of which human beings may train themselves, first to make desirable changes in their own personalities and in society, and second, to heighten consciousness and so establish more adequate relations between themselves and the universe of which they are parts.

The Buddha message as a religion of life: "keeping away from all evil deeds, cultivation of life by doing good deeds and purification of mind from mental impurities." For our purposes, religion may be defined in a very broad sense a body of moral and philosophical teachings and the acceptance with confidence of such teachings. In this sense, Buddhism is a philosophy not a religion.

### Beginnings

In the days before organised religions began, people did not have adequate knowledge and they could not understand the real nature of this life and what would happen to them after

their deaths. They could not understand even the causes of natural phenomena and natural occurrences. According to their limited understanding, they suspected there must be certain unknown forces which created all these pleasant or unpleasant things. Eventually they began to notice that there is energy behind the forces of nature which they called 'shakti'. They experienced an inexplicable sense of awe and dread towards these powers which they felt could harm them in some way. They therefore felt that these powers must be placated and used to protect or at least to leave them alone. Not trusting to ability to talk to these forces in ordinary language, they thought it would be more effective to mine their messages. Finally the actions to enlist the favour of these forces became ritualized into forms of worship. Some people were identified as having special powers to communicate with these forces and they enjoyed great power in the group. Thus developed concepts such as humanism, human responsibilities and human values such as honesty, kindness, compassion, patience, tolerance, devotion, unity and harmony. Truly, religion was the result of the fusion of moral behaviour and belief in the supernatural.

### **Concept of god**

We could say that man created religion and later introduced the concept of a god into religion. An American philosopher, Prof. Whitehead, once stated that originally man created god and later god created man. What he meant was that the concept of god was created by man and later this concept was transformed into divinity.

### **Renunciation**

Buddha studied under various religious teachers and learnt everything they had to teach but was unable to discover how to end suffering. He spent many years pondering this question. Finally at the age of 29 he seriously contemplated on old age, sickness, death, and freedom through renunciation, and decided that without giving up his worldly preoccupations and his responsibilities and pleasures it would be impossible for him to find the answer. That it was he had to leave the palace in what is known as "the great renunciation". After struggling for six years, which represented the culmination of endless life cycles of cultivation and struggle for spiritual development, he finally gained enlightenment and understood the secret of our suffering.

### **Did the Buddha make any promise?**

The Buddha did not promise heavenly bliss and rewards to those who called themselves his followers nor did he promise salvation to those who had faith in him. To him religion was not a bargain but a noble way of life to gain enlightenment and salvation. The Buddha did not want followers with blind faith; he wanted human beings to think and understand. Buddhism

is a noble path to living where humanism, equality, justice and peace reign supreme. Revengefulness, animosity, condemnation and resentment are alien to the Teaching.

The world is indebted to the Buddha for the rise of rationalism as a protest against the superstitions of religion. It is he who emancipated man from the thralldom of the priests. It is he who first showed the way to free man from the coils of hypocrisy and religious dictatorship.

During the Buddha's time no religion practice was considered higher than the rites, rituals and sacrifice of living beings to the gods, but to the Buddha no practise could be more humiliating or degrading to man. A sacrifice is nothing more than bribery; and salvation which any self respecting man would care to get.

### **Religious terminology**

But in introducing his doctrine, the Buddha did use the existing religious terms current in India at the time because in this way he would be on familiar ground with his listeners. They would grasp what he was alluding to and then he could proceed to develop his original ideas from his common ground.

Dhamma, karma, nirvana, moksha, niraya, samsara, atma are some words which were common to all religious groups during his time. But in his teaching the Buddha gave very rational and unique meanings and interpretations to those existing religious terms.

### **Dhamma**

According to ancient belief the god promised to appear from time to time to protect this dharma by taking different incarnations. The Buddha did not accept that any god could have given doctrines and commandments and religious laws. The Buddha used the word dhamma to describe his entire teachings. Dhamma needs that which goals up, upholds, supports.

The Buddha taught the dhamma to help us escape the suffering caused by existence and to prevent us from degrading human dignity and descending into lower states such as hell, animal, the spirit or ghost or devil realms. The dhamma introduced by the Buddha holds and supports us, and free us from the misery of these realms.

The dhamma is not an extraordinary law created by or given by anyone. Our body itself is dhamma. Our mind itself is dhamma, the whole universe is dhamma. By understanding the nature of the physical body and the nature of the mind and worldly conditions we realize the dhamma. The Buddha taught us to understand the nature of our existence rationally in a realistic way. It concerns the life, here and now, of each sentient being and thus interrelatedly of all existence.

## **Karma**

Let us take another example, the word karma (or kamma). It simply means action. If a person commits a bad karma it will be impossible for that person to escape from its bad effect. Somehow or other he or she must face the consequences that will follow. According to ancient belief there is a god to operate the effect of this karma. God punishes according to once bad karma, god rewards according to once good karma. The Buddha did not accept this belief. He said there is no being or force which handles the operation of the effect of karma. Karma itself will yield the result, as a neutral operation of the law of cause and effect. He said we can avoid and, in some cases, even overcome the effect of karma if we act wisely. Other religions teach that god can negate the effect of karma through forgiveness if the followers worship and pray and sacrifice. But the Buddha teaches that we have to effect our salvation by our own effort and mental purity.

The Buddha taught that what man needs for his happiness is not a religion or a mass of theories but an understanding of the cosmic nature of the universe and its complete operation according to the law of cause and effect. Until this fact is fully understood, man's understanding of life and existence will remain imperfect and faulty.

## **Nirvana**

The Buddha never claimed to have created the religion. What he discovered was the universal truth of the real nature of existence. In fact some religious terms were already well known in India at that time. But the Buddha's uniqueness is that he took existing concepts and gave them very refined meanings and much deeper significance.

For example, before the Buddha's time, "nirvana" simply meant peace or extinction. NI means "no" VANA means "craving": no more craving, no more attachment and no more selfishness. We cannot experience nirvana because we have craving, attachment and selfishness.

The real purpose of our lives should be to purify our clouded, deluded, misled minds and free ourselves from worries and disturbances. So long as we spend our time constantly solving problems, always looking over our shoulders, always wondering what to do next, we can never be at peace.

## **Develop the mind**

The Buddha's advice is that we should be free from these distractions if we want to experience bliss. This release must however be obtained by our own effort and come from within ourselves. We cannot gain salvation from a god or the Buddha or from heaven. We cannot get ultimate freedom through external agents. Supernatural beings cannot help us to

gain wisdom and final liberation no matter how much we worship them or praise them through penances, charms, mantras, incantations and invocations and animal sacrifices.

The Buddha advised his followers to cultivate and develop the latent power within them and showed them how to make the best use of their will power and intelligence without being slaves to an unknown being to find eternal happiness. Without blaming anybody else, Buddhism also teaches that man is responsible for his own action.

### **The Buddha's method**

The Buddha's technique of teaching was different from that of others. He never gave prepared "public talks" or "lectures". He always decided on a topic based on an immediate incident or observation. One of the marks of the Buddha's genius and his skill as a teacher was his well tried pedagogical practise of proceeding from the "known to the unknown".

In this way, he gave due credit to human beings to think freely, by using their common sense. He did not introduce a religion to be practised slavishly out of fear and craving for any worldly gain.

According to the Buddha a beautiful thought and word which is not followed by corresponding action is like a bright flower that has no scent and will bear no fruit.

The eightfold path introduced by the Buddha is a planned course of inward culture and progress. By merely resorting to external worship, ceremonies and prayers, one can never make progress in righteousness and inner development. Mere prayer for salvation, the Buddha says is like "asking the farther bank of a river to come over so that one may get to the other side without personal effort."

### **Self-discovery**

The Buddha never claimed anything like receiving knowledge from outside sources. Throughout his ministry he always asserted that his listeners were free to question him and challenge his teachings so that they could personally realize the truth. He said, "come and see." He did not say. "come and believe."

Whenever he spoke anything, it was because he personally tested the validity of the saying for himself as an ordinary human being. He claimed no divinity. He understood everything because he knew how he had to suffer so many previous births for all the bad deeds he had committed through ignorance. He had learned the hard way. He advised his followers through his own experience. He had done tremendous service to mankind by practising and observing the great PARAMIS over countless lifetimes and finally experienced the supreme bliss. We have to ask ourselves which is more reliable, the testimony of one who claims to have heard it from someone else who is always invisible.

### **Freedom of thought**

The Buddha's advice was not to depend on theories, on cults and gurus. In fact, at all times we must remain masters of ourselves through self reliance. We must never surrender our dignity or freewill. The Buddha strongly advocated the doctrine of self reliance, purity, courtesy, enlightenment, peace and universal love. He stressed the need for understanding because without it, psychic insight leading to wisdom cannot be obtained. He says "if you wish to see the end of your suffering and fear, develop discipline, compassion and wisdom." We must always allow our minds the freedom to think and understand without depending on external influence.

This is why he said that wisdom arose in him at his enlightenment. Wisdom is latent in all of us. We only need to provide the right conditions for it to arise. From the intellectual and philosophical content of Buddhism has arisen the freedom of thought, freedom of inquiry.

The approach of Buddhism is one of seeing and understanding- it is a scientific attitude of mind. Fundamental philosophical doctrines taught in Buddhism are being more and more corroborated by new scientific discoveries. Buddhism advocates self-confidence, self-restraint, self-reliance and self-purification to the individual in society. a strong feature of Buddhism is the importance it attaches to democratic ideals.

### **Impartiality**

Those who depend on others ideas are second class human beings. Donot accept or believe anything that is taught as religious practise and at the same time don't reject it outright either. Certain things that we accept as true, we may later discover to be untrue after all. Conversely, we may be forced to admit that certain things that we rejected at first may be true after all. That is why the Buddha has advised us to wait for a timer and study, think observe investigate before we decide whether to accept or to reject it. We must give a chance for the mind to think and understand whether it is true or not.

### **Faith**

Mere faith is meaningless because faith must be tempered with the understanding that comes from training the mind. The main purpose of a religion must be to show a follower how to use his knowledge with critical understanding to maximize his sense of well-being and self-fulfilment. No matter how much knowledge we have, if we do not uproot defilements and doubt in our minds, we will remain in an unhappy state. When we attain the highest state of purity we completely uproot our craving, anger, delusion and establish total equanimity of the mind. The Buddha tried to open our minds to understand things perfectly without developing fanatical religious beliefs and discrimination.

### **Heresy**

Another reason why the teaching of the Buddha does not fall into the category of an established religion is that there is no room for “heresy” in its system. A heresy is something that challenges the “word of god.” The Buddha freely invited both his followers and his opponents to challenge his teachings from every possible angle so that there would be no room for any type of doubt, true to his injunctions his followers have argued about his doctrines and even founded different schools of Buddhism according to their understanding, without violence or bloodshed. In fact that the famous Buddhist university of Nalanda, followers of Theravada and Mahayana schools of Buddhism lived together and studied and debated their different points of view in perfect harmony. The Buddha taught that if anyone really believed that he knew the truth, then he should not be afraid to have it challenged, because the truth will always win. Rational thinking and the importance of inviting criticism are paramount in Buddhism.

### **Science**

The test of a religious teaching is in its conformity with the findings of science and the attraction it casts on the minds of persons possessed of acute intelligence. Some religions have experienced a measure of discomfort, as science unfolds its discoveries. As a result certain modifications or re interpretations of their scriptures have become necessary. In this respect Buddhism, the rational teaching of the enlightenment one, faces no such embarrassment, as its basic principles are in close harmony with the findings of science.

The doctrine of Buddha dhamma stands today, as unaffected by the march of time and the expansion of knowledge as when it was first enunciated. No matter to what lengths increased scientific knowledge can extend man’s mental horizon, within the framework of the dhamma there is room for the acceptance and assimilation of further discovery. This is because Buddhism does not rely for its appeal upon limited concepts of primitive minds nor for its power upon the negation of thought.

### **Miracles**

The Buddha himself expounded this view: to him miracles were not in themselves to be regarded as demonstration of truth, but showed only a mastery of little known powers that may be developed by some people. It did not necessarily follow that their possessor was an enlightenment or divine being.

This being so, the Buddha not only taught his followers to be wary in the exercise of any miraculous powers they might acquire, but also warned others not to be unduly impressed by such exhibitions. Thus, whereas other religions exploit their miraculous elements to the

greatest possible extent in order to convince the masses, Buddhism treats all such things as of very minor importance and irrelevant to the real task of spiritual development and emancipation. According to the Buddha the highest miracle is the conversion of an ignorant man to become a wise man.

### **Ethics and society**

In the dhamma of the Buddha is to be found a comprehensive system of ethics and a transcendental metaphysics embracing a sublime psychology. It satisfies all temperaments. To the simple minded it offers a code of morality, a gorgeous worship and even a hope of life in heaven, to the earnest devotee, a system of pure thoughts, a lofty philosophy and moral teachings that lead to enlightenment and liberation from all sufferings. But the basic doctrine is the self purification of man. Spiritual progress is impossible for him who does not lead a life of purity and compassion. beyond the personal level and the emancipation of the individual, Buddhism recognises the family as a unit of society and nation. Buddhism provides a simple code of morality- as contained in the Sigalovada Sutra- the practice of which will strengthen the solidarity of a community. It maintains the right education between its family members, employers and employees.

Such a teaching has the well beings of all members of a society as its aim and provides for diligent practice of friendly action which is the mark of a truly social being.

### **Morality**

Buddhist morality is based on freedom and understanding. Because morality grew out of society's need for self preservation, it must necessarily adapt itself to changing times and circumstances. Morality is therefore relative. In fact there cannot be any morality or ethical concept if it is grounded in compulsion or interference from any agent outside the individual himself.

In respect to the social and moral code, the German philosopher, Prof. Marxmuller has said, "Buddhist moral code taken by itself is one of the most perfect which the world has ever known."

On this point all testimonies from hostile and friendly quarters agree; philosophers there may have been, religious preachers, subtle metaphysicists, disputants there may have been, but where shall we find such an incarnation of love, love that knows no distinction of caste and creed or colour, a love that overflowed even the bounds of humanity, that embraced the whole of sentient beings in its sweep, a love that embodied the gospel of universal loving kindness and non injury.



Furthermost, prof. rhydsvids observed that the study of Buddhism should be considered a necessary part of any ethical course and should not be dismissed in a page or two but receive its due recognition in the historical perspective of ethical evolution.

### **Economic development**

Within a Buddhist framework, the possibility of economic development on a dynamic and meaningful basis is receiving greater attention in the more affluent as well as in the developing countries. Modern development theory has failed to grapple with the increasing environmental and social problems in most developed societies and Buddhism offers a way out of this impasse.

The Buddha and his disciples taught the people the value of earning wealth and the importance of economic development for their well being and happiness. In the Kutadanta Sutra the Buddha also expounded that crimes such as stealing could not be stopped by punishment.

- Economic security (attisukha)
- Enjoyment of wealth (bhogasukha)
- Freedom from debts (ananasukha)
- Leading a faultless life (anavajjasukha)

These are four kinds of happiness for a layman.

Buddhism teaches that a country should be governed in accordance with the ten duties of the king (dasa raja dhamma), namely:

1. Liberality (dana)
2. Morality (sila)
3. Giving everything for the good of the people (pariccaga)
4. Honesty and integrity (ajjava)
5. Kindness and gentleness (madduva)
6. Austerity in habits (tapa)
7. Freedom from hatred, ill will, enmity (akkodha)
8. Non violence (avihimsa)
9. Patience, forbearance, tolerance, understanding (khanti)
10. Non opposition, non obstruction (avirodha)

In the way the Buddha and his disciples taught such important ideas pertaining to health, sanitation, earning wealth, mutual relationships, well being of society and righteous government- all for the good of the people.

## **Government**

Even the parliamentary system of today bears strong resemblance to the practices known in Buddhism. As the Marquess of Zetland, a former viceroy of India, reveals: "It is indeed to the Buddhist books that we have to turn for an account of the manner in which the affairs of the early examples of representative self government institutions were conducted. And it may come as a surprise to many to learn that in the assemblies of Buddhists in India 2500 years and more ago are to be found the rudiments of our own parliamentary practice of the present day. The dignity of the assembly was preserved by the appointment of a special officer- the embryo of Mr. Speaker in our house of commons. A member initiating business did so in the form of a motion which was then open to discussion. In some cases, this was done once only, in others three times, thus anticipating the practice of parliament in regarding that a bill be read a third time before it becomes law. If discussion disclosed a difference of opinion the matter was decided upon by the vote of the majority, the voting being by ballot."

## **Happiness**

This is not a religion for people just to follow but to learn, understand, and to practise to gain experience and bliss. In Buddhist bhavsa there are three characteristics of impermanence (anicca), dissatisfaction (dukkha), and insubstantiality (anatta). The whole of the universe shares these characteristics. No power can arrest the process of change which is present from the moment we are born, and therein lies the cause of suffering. We need little else to convince us about the root problems of suffering.

The Buddha teaches us to contemplate on these matters so that we will understand and remove the source of our unhappiness. Sir Edwin Arnold describes the Buddha in this way, in his poem "light of asia."

"this is the blossom on our human tree  
Which opens in many a myriad years  
But opened, fills the world  
With wisdom's scent  
And love's dropped honey."

## **Impermanence and death**

Health is not permanent. When we prepare ourselves wisely for decay, ageing, sickness and finally death, it will not be nearly as difficult to bear. Understanding that these are worldly conditions which everyone has to face, we can bear any suffering with fortitude. This is the strength, the refuge that the Buddha promises. These are those who gumble and cry when

misfortune hits them. This is nothing but lack of understanding. Moaning about it will not make the suffering go away.

To avoid the pain that misfortune can bring we must strengthen our minds through understanding. There is nothing or nobody who can escape the natural process of coming to an end. There has to be an end. We need not be afraid of this perfectly natural phenomenon.

If we follow the teachings of the Buddha we will not be upset at the prospect of separating from loved ones, property and wealth. This does not mean Buddhist must not experience worldly pleasure. We must follow the middle path. We can gain pleasures in moderation, without violating moral principles, without becoming slaves to them but with the understanding that this must not hinder spiritual development.

### **Conclusion**

The Buddha was a great and effective teacher and physician. He constantly reminded his followers that his only aim was to teach people how to understand the nature of suffering or unsatisfactoriness and how to eradicate it. He promised happiness in this very life for those who follow his noble method with determination and right understanding.

The Buddha did not advise his disciples to go and convert people who would otherwise go to hell. Rather he advised them to show the world what is right and what is wrong and to be good and to do good, to encourage men to come and see for themselves the truth that he taught.

According to Buddhists, even those who have no religion but who live in dignity, with compassion and goodwill can go to heaven, that is, experience happiness. When we are happy and contented we are in heaven. When we suffer physically or mentally we are in hell. There is no need to wait to die to experience either of these states.

The Buddha message of goodwill and understanding to all beings is a universal message. The world today needs this noble message more than ever before in the history of humankind. Buddhism is not a religion. It is a dhamma and uniqueness of Buddhist dhamma is exposition of the absolute truth which will show man how to live in peace and harmony with his fellow beings.

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