

Aide Memoire L08

Aspects of Buddhism

Buddhism is a system of religion and philosophy founded by Gautama Buddha in India in the 6thC BCE. It is a non-theistic religion, in that it does not concentrate on the worship of a god. As a system of philosophy it does not elaborate a specific theory of the physical world, but aims at the solution of ethical problems as a step towards the elimination of pain.

It originated as a monastic movement within the dominant Hindu tradition of the day; Buddhism quickly developed in a distinctive direction. The Buddha not only rejected significant aspects of Hindu philosophy, but also challenged the authority of the priesthood, denied the validity of the Vedic scriptures,ⁱ and rejected the sacrificial cult based on them. Moreover, he opened his movement to members of all castes, denying that a person's spiritual worth is a matter of birth.

A fundamental tenet of Buddha's thinking was that the only thing of which man can be certain is conscious experience. Yet the degree of reality of such experience and its duration and effectiveness is subject to doubt, as is man's responsibility. For though Buddhism affirms that man's good and evil actions, freely performed do secretly shape the destiny that awaits him in this and future lives, it denies the existence of a permanent self.ⁱⁱ Buddhism thus maintains the original

ⁱ The Vedic comprise a huge collection of material and spiritual knowledge. written down about 5000 years ago though the date is disputed,

ⁱⁱ Self is for ever changing as it progresses through life physically and spiritually

Indian doctrine of transmigrationⁱⁱⁱ but this is not the rebirth of a permanent and changeless soul, but of an ever changing and ever-evolving bundle of characteristics. Thus unlike Hinduism its next incarnation is not dependent on how the previous life was lived.

Gautama Buddha's analysis of the human condition is set out in the *Four Noble Beliefs* and the precepts for human conduct he enumerated in *The Noble Eightfold Path*

THE FOUR NOBLE BELIEFS

These form the core of the Buddha's enlightenment and they are:

1. *Life means suffering.* To live means to suffer, because human nature is not perfect and neither is the world. During a person's lifetime, he/she inevitably has to endure physical suffering such as pain, sickness, injury, tiredness, old age, and eventually death; and endure psychological suffering like sadness, fear, frustration, disappointment, and depression. Although there are different degrees of suffering and there are also positive experiences in life perceived as the opposite of suffering, such as ease, comfort and happiness, life in its totality is imperfect and incomplete, because the world is subject to impermanence. This means people are never able to keep permanently what they strive for, and just as happy moments pass by, everyone will pass away.

2. *The origin of suffering is attachment* i.e. human attachment to transience and the ignorance thereof. Ignorance is the lack of understanding of how the human mind is attached to impermanence such as the pursuit of wealth and prestige, and the striving for fame and popularity pursued with desire, passion and, ardour. Because these objects of human attachment are transient,

ⁱⁱⁱ the supposed passage of the dead person's soul into another body at or after death

their loss is inevitable, thus suffering will necessarily follow. Objects of attachment also include the idea of a "self" which is a delusion, because there is no abiding self. What is called "self" is just an imagined entity, and humans are merely a part of the ceaseless evolution of the universe.

3. *The cessation of suffering is attainable.* It can be attained through *nirodha*. Nirodha means the unmaking of sensual craving and conceptual attachment. It expresses the idea that suffering can be ended by attaining *dispassion*.^{iv} Nirodha extinguishes all forms of clinging and attachment. This means that suffering can be overcome through human activity, simply by removing the cause of suffering. Attaining and perfecting dispassion is a process of many levels that ultimately results in the state of *Nirvana*. Nirvana means freedom from all worries, troubles, complexes, fabrications and ideas. Nirvana is not comprehensible for those who have not attained it.

4. *The path to the cessation of suffering.* There is a path to the end of suffering - a gradual path of self-improvement, which is described in more detail in the *Eightfold Path*. It is the middle way between the two extremes of excessive self-indulgence (hedonism) and excessive self-mortification (asceticism); and it leads to the end of the cycle of rebirth. The latter quality discerns it from other paths which are merely "*wandering on the wheel of becoming*", because these do not have a final object. The path to the end of suffering can extend over many lifetimes, throughout which every individual rebirth is subject to *karmic conditioning*.^v Craving, ignorance, delusions, and its effects will disappear gradually, as progress is made on the path to *Nirvana*

^{iv} the state of not being influenced by emotion or personal feelings

^v a process by which a person's nature is shaped by their moral actions

THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH

It describes the way to the end of suffering, as it was laid out by Siddhartha Gautama. It is a practical guideline to ethical and mental development with the goal of freeing the individual from attachments and delusions; and it finally leads to understanding the truth about all things. Together with the *Four Noble Truths* it constitutes the gist of Buddhism. Great emphasis is put on the practical aspect, because it is only through practice that one can attain a higher level of existence and finally reach *Nirvana*. The eight aspects of the path are not to be understood as a sequence of single steps, instead they are highly interdependent principles that have to be seen in relationship with each other

1. *Right view* is the beginning and the end of the path, it simply means to see and to understand things as they really are and to realise the *Four Noble Truth*. As such, right view is the cognitive aspect of wisdom. It means to see things through, to grasp the impermanent and imperfect nature of worldly objects and ideas, and to understand the *law of karma*^{vi} and karmic conditioning. *Right view* is not necessarily an intellectual capacity, just as wisdom is not just a matter of intelligence. Instead, *right view* is attained, sustained, and enhanced through all capacities of mind. It begins with the intuitive insight that all beings are subject to suffering and it ends with complete

^{vi} For every event that occurs, there will follow another event whose existence was caused by the first, and this second event will be pleasant or unpleasant according as its cause was skilful or unskilful. A skilful event is one that is not accompanied by craving, resistance or delusions; an unskilful event is one that is accompanied by any one of those things.

understanding of the true nature of all things. Since an individual's view of the world forms his/her thoughts and actions, *right view* yields right thoughts and right actions.

2. ***Right Intention:*** While *right view* refers to the cognitive aspect of wisdom, *right intention* refers to the volitional aspect, i.e. the kind of mental energy that controls human actions. Right intention can be described best as commitment to ethical and mental self-improvement. Buddha distinguishes three types of right intentions: a. *the intention of renunciation*, which means resistance to the pull of desire, b. *the intention of good will*, meaning resistance to feelings of anger and aversion, and c. *the intention of harmlessness*, meaning not to think or act cruelly, violently, or aggressively and to develop compassion.
3. ***Right speech*** is the first principle of ethical conduct in the eightfold path. Ethical conduct is viewed as a guideline to moral discipline, which supports the other principles of the path. This aspect is not self-sufficient, however\ essential, because mental purification can only be achieved through the cultivation of ethical conduct. The importance of speech in the context of Buddhist ethics is obvious: words can break or save lives, make enemies or friends, start war or create peace. Buddha explained right speech as follows: a. *to abstain from false speech*, especially not to tell deliberate lies and not to speak deceitfully, b. *to abstain from slanderous speech* and not to use words maliciously against others, c *to abstain from harsh words* that offend or hurt others, and 4. *to abstain from idle chatter* that lacks purpose or depth. Positively phrased, this means to tell the truth, to speak friendly, warm, and gently and to talk only when necessary

4. **Right Action** is the second ethical principle. It involves the body as the natural means of expression, as it refers to deeds that involve bodily actions. Unwholesome actions lead to unsound states of mind, while wholesome actions lead to sound states of mind. Again, the principle is explained in terms of abstinence: *right action* means **a.** *to abstain from harming sentient beings*, especially to abstain from taking life (including suicide) and doing harm intentionally or delinquently, **b.** *to abstain from taking what is not given*, which includes stealing, robbery, fraud, deceitfulness, and dishonesty, and **c.** *to abstain from sexual misconduct*. Positively formulated, *right action* means to act kindly and compassionately, to be honest, to respect the belongings of others, and to keep sexual relationships harmless to others.
5. **Right livelihood** means that one should earn one's living in a righteous way and that wealth should be gained legally and peacefully. The Buddha mentions four specific activities that harm other beings and that one should avoid for this reason: **a.** *dealing in weapons*, **b.** *dealing in living beings* (including raising animals for slaughter as well as slave trade and prostitution), **c.** *working in meat production and butchery*, and **d.** *selling intoxicants and poisons*, such as alcohol and drugs. Furthermore any other occupation that would violate the principles of right speech and right action should be avoided.
6. **Right effort** can be seen as a prerequisite for the other principles of the path. Without effort, which is in itself an act of will, nothing can be achieved, whereas misguided effort distracts the mind from its task, and confusion will be the consequence. Mental energy is the force behind *right effort* however it can fuel good or bad traits such as desire, envy, aggression, and violence

or god traits such as self-discipline, honesty, benevolence, and kindness. *Right effort* is detailed in four types of endeavours that rank in ascending order of perfection: **a.** *to prevent the arising of unwholesome traits* **b.** *to abandon unwholesome traits that have already arisen*, **c.** *to arouse wholesome traits that have not yet arisen*, and **d.** *to maintain and perfect wholesome traits already arisen*

7. ***Right mindfulness*** is the controlled and perfected faculty of cognition. It is the mental ability to see things as they are, with clear consciousness. Usually, the cognitive process begins with an impression induced by perception, or by a thought, but then it does not stay with the mere impression. Instead, humans almost always conceptualise sense impressions and thoughts immediately. These are interpreted and set in relation to other thoughts and experiences, which naturally go beyond the original impression. The mind then posits concepts, joins concepts into constructs, and weaves those constructs into complex interpretative schemes. This process occur only half consciously, and as a result things are often seen as obscured. Whereas *Right mindfulness* is anchored in clear perception for it enables humans to be aware of the process of conceptualisation in a way that he/she actively observes and controls the way their thoughts go. Buddha accounted for this as the four foundations of mindfulness: **a.** *Contemplation of the body*, **b.** *Contemplation of feeling (repulsive, attractive, or neutral)*, **c.** *Contemplation of the state of mind* and **d.** *Contemplation of the phenomena*.
8. ***Right Concentration*** This eighth principle of the path refers to the development of a mental force that occurs in natural consciousness, although at a relatively low level of intensity, namely concentration. Concentration in this context is where all

mental faculties are unified and directed onto one particular object. *Right concentration* for the purpose of the *eightfold path* means wholesome concentration, i.e. concentration on wholesome thoughts and actions. The Buddhist method of choice to develop *right concentration* is through the practice of meditation. The meditating mind focuses on a selected object. It first directs itself onto it, then sustains concentration, and finally intensifies concentration step by step. Through this practice it becomes natural to apply elevated levels concentration also in everyday situations.

Whilst Gautama Buddha's analysis and precepts continued to be accepted by the adherents they added a whole set of accretions e.g.

- There have been 13 Buddha before Guatuma,
- In time his teaching will fade which will necessitate a new Buddha to revitalise the teaching
- The Buddha needs immortal assistants *Bodhisattavas* who are Buddhas in the making.

The various sects and schools of thought within Buddhism can be grouped under two main streams, into which it split in its first century of existence. The stream of the '*Little Vehicle*' (**Hinayana**) at the present day is the predominant religion in Ceylon, Burma, and Indochina. It represents the more purely ascetic and philosophical wing of Buddhism. The sects of the '*Great Vehicle*' (**Mahayana**) are predominant in China and Japan; they have tended rather to develop the religious and mystical aspects of Buddhism.

In India it was a dying religion by the 7th C CE and was later almost completely suppressed by Moslem invasions from the 9th to 15th centuries.