

The End of Suffering in Buddhism



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*Buddha head by Neerja Sharma
(Inspired by Wikipedia)*

We have all read about how prince Siddhartha who saw suffering for the first time when he left the palace. He saw a sick person, an old man, a corpse and a mendicant. He found the last person at peace with himself. The son of the Shakya chief Suddhodana and Mahamaya was married to Yashodhara and had a son named Rahul. He wanted to know the cause of dukkha or human suffering.[Irfan Habib, *The Age of Iron and Religious Revolutions 200ff*] His quest for annihilation of dukkha began with renunciation of the regal pleasures of the palace . Therefore, the Buddhist concept of dharma is not only considered a philosophy but a path of liberation from sorrow. There is the famous story of Kisa Gautami, a young woman married to a rich merchant. All of a sudden her one year old son fell sick and died. She

was grief stricken and went from house to house to revive her dead child. A follower of Buddhism suggested that she should meet the Buddha himself. She followed his advice (www.buddha.net). When she met the Sakyamuni as Buddha is known, he asked her to get a few mustard seeds from a house which which had not known death. She could not find any such household which had not known of a dead person. She realised that the Buddha wanted her to understand that death would come to everyone and was a part of life itself. She became a follower of Buddha (translated from Pali by Thanissaro Bhiku @2006) dharma.talks.org). The Pali canons relate this story in the *Mulasarvastavadin*. According to this story Patanchara who was expecting a baby and returning to her parent's

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home with her husband and first child. A storm broke out. Patacara asked her husband to build a shelter with wood and sticks. Her husband was bitten by a snake and died. She gave birth to a baby and was returning to her parent's home in rough weather with two small children. A hawk carried away the new born baby. The first child was washed away by the river's torrential currents. When she returned to her parent's house, she saw that their house had been burnt down and her parents were on their funeral pyre. She was grief stricken and lost her mental balance as she roamed around half-naked when she came in touch with Buddha. Both the legends are associated with death, grief and eventually following the path to be free from pain or dukkha. Then she exclaimed,

I've gazed in the mirror of Dhamma,

I've cut out the arrow,

put down the burden,

done the task.

I, Kisa Gotami Theri

my heart well released,

have said this (translated from Pali by Thanissro Bhikku. Access to Insight (BCBS Edition), 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstonight.org/tipilakaorg/kn/thig10.01.html>

The Buddha believed that life was always changing (K.M.Shrimali, The Religious Enterprise, Vol I, 299 ff). There is only ignorance and nothing is permanent. Buddhism gives importance to the different phases of transformation and results which follow. Buddha does not refer to immortality as such. Yet the aim of life is nibbana, which completes the entire process. (ibid 299). The earliest version of Buddhism is in the Sutta Pitaka which contains the five Nikayas which define perhaps the earliest teachings of the Buddha. He persuaded his followers to cleanse themselves of ignorance, thirst and attachment. This was part of what is known as Aryasatya the Noble Truth. First is that samsara is full of sadness or dukkha. Second, attachment is the cause of sorrow or samudaya. Third there is a path to end this. This path is known as the marga. This can be achieved by following the Eightfold Path or the ashtangika marga. They are right speech, right action, right means of livelihood, right exertion, right mindedness, right meditation, right resolution and right point of view, (Majumdar, R. C. The Age Imperial Unity, Bombay, 1968, 800 ff). The first three would lead to control over the body, next three over chitta or the mind and the last two over the intellect chitta.

The concept of Nirvana is considered very hard to define but is the ultimate aim of Buddhism to attain liberation from birth. This has been described in the aripariyesana as Suttas ajara, that which does not decay is free from disease or avyadhi Amrita or death, ashoka free from sorrow and free from impurity or avyakrita. Yet it is a stage of peace. Buddha did not discuss the question of soul as he did not consider it as of value for ultimate salvation. He believed in the law of hetu pratyaya which are like sea waves or the law of causes and conditions. This can be realised by only those who are inclined spiritually and can understand the truth.

Perhaps more abstract and difficult to understand is the concept of Nirvana. It is the absence of desire or the quest for rebirth. This has been described in the aripariyesana sutta as that which is ajara, does not decay, avyadhi or free from illness, or death, that is, amrita. It can not be compared and its anuttara and is yogakshema or the highest goal in life. The Nikayas do not define Nirvanas avyakrita or intermediate. Yet stray references consider it as a blissful state of eternal peace.

The main tenet of the Eight fold path is the Dharmachakrapravartana Sutra which is the first sermon of the Buddha given at Sarnath to his earliest disciples. It is based on the Middle Path or madhyama pratipada. The Buddha did not believe in extreme penance nor luxury. A monk was expected to live on bare food, clothing and shelter and concentrate on his goal towards life. In his second discourse he emphasized on five major principles, that is anatma without self, advita or impermanence and dukkha or that which is not desirable. He is vimukta or an arhat who is perfect and free from happiness or sadness. This can be reflected in the Tripitakas.

Therefore by following the correct path and thinking in the right manner, one can put an end to the life's suffering. He believed in impermanence of life. Desire is because of ignorance, which leads to karma or action and rebirth. This can be realized by seeking truth and knowledge or jnana. Early Buddhism did not believe in prayers or sacrifices. While attaining mahaparinirvana or while dying he asked his followers to be 'lamps unto themselves'. Karma through right living and thinking would lead to salvation. The Buddha emphasized on ahimsa or non-violence as a means of relief from suffering. He gave importance to rationality, reason and human mind (Shrimali, K.M. The Religious Enterprise: Studies in Early Indian Religions, 2022, 296).

Buddhism has stressed on ahimsa or non-injury to animals (Jha, D.N. Ancient India: In Historical Outline, 1998, 73). Yet moderation was to be observed. The early Pali texts are not in favour of sacrifices. The Suttanipata clearly states that cattle confer us with food, beauty and happiness or annada, sukhada and vanada. In the Suttanipata

agriculture and cattle rearing are considered important. It says that cattle must be protected as they are like mother, father, brother and kinsmen. An important duty of householder is gorakka, is to protect cattle. (Sharma, R. S. Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India, 1983).

Therefore, Buddhism emerged as a major ideology which aimed at relieving mankind of suffering by acknowledging the Four Noble Truth and following the Eightfold path of giving up desire and greed. Through compassion, truthfulness society would benefit. Proper action like not killing or stealing, earning by honest means and pure thoughts, awareness and meditation would help attain the supreme goal or nirvana (Ibid). There is more emphasis on rationality, reason, impermanence, transition and practical consequence (op.cit, Shrimali, The Religious Enterprise etc. 298-299). There were many changes within Buddhism itself, but basic message is clearly based on ahimsa and a broad outlook on the problems of life, particularly suffering.



*Sketch by Sonali Kumari, NCWEB
Inspired by Buddha in Tian Tan, Hong Kong*

Some Prominent Buddhist Structures



Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh



Thimpu, Bhutan



Enchey Monestry, Sikkam Gantok





Vishwa Shanti Stupa, Delhi



Gyaraspur, Madhya Pradesh



Boudhanath, Kathmandu



Penang, Malaysia



Penang, Malaysia

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