

EVIL AND SUFFERING IN BUDDHISM

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Central to the Buddha's Realization and his subsequent Teaching of the Dhamma is the Problem of Suffering and the way to escape it. The Buddha taught that man is responsible for his own suffering. No other religious teaching has so clearly denied the existence of an external force which is responsible for the unsatisfactoriness of human existence. The author of this article summarizes this central teaching of Buddhism in a manner which can be understood by a new student of the teachings. Ed.

The Buddhist approach to the problem of human suffering is purely practical. Quite boldly and honestly, it acknowledges the burning fact of reality that man is in the grip of constant suffering. Then in a perfectly scientific spirit it diagnoses the cause of suffering. And finally it points out ways and means so that man can effectively get rid of this bond of suffering. This practical approach finds full expression in the four noble truths propounded by Lord Buddha:-

- (1) The noble truth concerning the nature of suffering,
- (2) The noble truth concerning the origin of suffering,
- (3) The noble truth concerning the removal of suffering, and
- (4) The noble truth concerning the path leading to the removal of suffering.

As a matter of fact, there is no scope in Buddhism for that type of theoretical approach to the problem which is generally characteristic of the theistic religions like Judaism and Christianity. Buddhism is clearly not a theistic religion and therefore no such question arises here as to why there is evil even in spite of an omnipotent benevolent creator god behind the world. It is a humanistic religion and therefore a perfectly humanistic approach to the problem of human suffering is quite natural. Its main concern is to save human beings from the infinite chain of suffering to which they are bound. Buddha always indicated that his aim was practical and he never liked being dragged into theoretical questions. A practical, humanistic approach to the problem of suffering is, therefore bound up with the very attitude of Lord Buddha towards

the problems of human life. They were not to be analysed and discussed theoretically, rather they were to be solved practically.

Buddha's First Noble Truth is concerned with the nature of human suffering. Human life as a whole is full of suffering. Birth, disease, old age and death constitute the nature of human suffering. Everywhere and at all stages of life, therefore, there is suffering. But this suffering is not uncaused. Buddha's belief in the theory of dependent origination makes him able to trace back the origin of suffering finally in Ignorance through a twelve-linked chain, in which every consequent is dependent of its origin on the adjoining antecedent. The first (or, in a sense, the last) link in the chain is suffering itself in the nature of old age, death, etc. The cause of this is taking birth. If one does not take birth at all, there is no question of his being a victim of all sorts of suffering. So, birth is the nearest and most obvious cause of suffering.

But the question is, why one takes birth at all; what the cause of birth is. The cause of birth according to the Buddha, is the will to be born. Unless one has the will to be born, he is not born. So birth is due to an inherent urge, a drive for that. But from where does this urge or drive come in? What is the cause of becoming? The cause of becoming is, one's clinging to the sensory enjoyments. This clinging, again, is due to thirst for such enjoyment. This thirst is due to actual sense-enjoyment, which in its turn, is due to sense-object contact. How, again does this contact becomes possible? Clearly, it could not have been possible, unless the six sense-organs (including the mind) would have been there. So the cause of contact is the six senses. The cause of the six senses is the psycho-physical organism. This organism is again due to initial consciousness of the embryo. This consciousness is due to the forces generated by the past karmas, which again are finally due to ignorance. Thus ignorance is at the root of all human sufferings. Suffering, therefore, even in spite of being real, is in one sense, a fact of our own creation. The world, being exactly as it is, will not be a cause for our suffering, if we are above ignorance. If ignorance does not blur our vision, we will not perform actions with a sense of thirst for sense-enjoyment i.e. we will not perform attached actions. And if we do not perform such actions, karmic samskaras will not be produced (Non-attached actions do not produce samskaras) and hence no cause for taking birth will be there and consequently, there will be no suffering. All human sufferings are due to man's own lack of knowledge regarding the real nature of things. All things of the world are fleeting and momentary. Nothing is permanent. So, having desire for them, is a sheer foolishness. Nothing in the world is permanent. This clinging to or thirst for anything in the world is a sheer foolishness and cause of suffering. In a sense, man himself is responsible for all his sufferings. There is a state of existence, which is free from all kinds of suffering, and that state is called **Nirvana**. Only this **Nirvana**, which is a state

of complete cessation of all sufferings, is eternal. The nature of this **Nirvana** is contained in the third noble truth of the Buddha. This **Nirvana** is not a fiction or dream. There are concrete ways of attaining it and the ways are contained in the fourth noble truth propounded by the Buddha. The eightfold path, which is a path lying in between extreme indulgence and extreme asceticism, would lead to this state of **Nirvana**, if sincerely and honestly followed.

Evil and suffering, thus according to Buddhism, are the products of human ignorance. Moral evils are all the direct results of attached, egoistic human actions and the various natural evils (sufferings) are also indirect consequences of these very actions. If one understands the real nature of things and does not perform such actions, the world remaining as it is, he will not be affected by it, **Nirvana** is possible in this very life. What is required is to be free from all sorts of passions and desires. So, the world itself is not a place of unqualified suffering. What makes it full of evil and suffering is our own ignorance and various passions generated thereby.

Life after Death

Like all other religions, Buddhism also believes that human life does not end with the physical death, it has a story even beyond death. But what is that story? In short, that story according to Buddhism is the story of either rebirth or **Nirvana**. Buddhist eschatology, therefore, is more or less the same as that of Hinduism, barring, of course, the ideas of heaven and hell which we sometimes find associated with the latter. According to Buddhism, as according to Hinduism, man, after the death of his present body, has to assume another body in accordance with his deeds in the present life. But only the doers of attached actions have to be reborn by assuming another body. Those who perform actions without attachment have not to take rebirth. They attain **Nirvana**, a status or a state of being which is purely spiritual and which is free from all sorts of sufferings of the physical life. According to the Buddha, whatever actions one performs with a sense of attachment generate forces (Samskaras) which cause rebirth. But actions performed without attachment are like fried seeds which do not generate any plant. Consequently, there is no question of rebirth.

Thus, we see that the Buddhist eschatology is very simple, straightforward and unambiguous. There is no mention of heaven or hell here. Everything is non-mythical. Actions done with passion generate a force which causes a man to take another life so as to reap the consequences of his actions. If he does not perform such actions and leads a selfless life, he is liberated from the chain of birth and rebirth. Thus man's after-life is strictly governed by a self-regulated

Moral Law. There is no deity here who will judge the good and bad actions of man so as to either reward him or punish him accordingly.