

THE QUINTESSENCE OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS

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In the holy city of Benares, on the full-moon day of July (Asalha) the Buddha opened His first discourse — The Discourse on Setting in motion the Wheel of the Doctrine (**Dhammacakkappavattana — Sutta**) by exhorting His first five disciples to avoid the extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification. “Sensual indulgence is low, coarse, vulgar, ignoble, unprofitable and self-mortification is painful, ignoble and unprofitable” he said. Because the former retards one’s spiritual progress and the latter weakens one’s intellect.

Both of these erroneous doctrines of extremes were actually propounded by two religious groups at the time: the one, materialist, and therefore supporting hedonism, the other believing in a transcendental self or soul bound to a material body which should be annihilated by severe ascetic practices in order to release the true self.

The Buddha himself put into practice both these doctrines before His Enlightenment; the first, when he was a prince in his Father’s palace before he renounced the world; the second, as an ascetic in the Uruvela forest prior to His Enlightenment. Hence, He realised their futility and discovered that only self-conquest in moderation leads to the ultimate goal — **Nibbana**.

Avoiding the two extremes the Buddha, therefore asked His followers to take the Middle Way which opens the eyes and bestows understanding, which leads to peace of mind, to the higher wisdom, to full enlightenment, in fact, according to the four Noble Truths, (I) life is subject to sorrow (**dukkha**), (II) this sorrow is caused by ignorance which results in desire - attachment (**samudaya**), (III) this sorrow can be eliminated by the elimination of desire — attachment (**nirodha**), (IV) the path to eliminate desire - attachment (**magga**).

Dukkha means not merely suffering, pain or misery, but includes all other factors of an unsatisfactory nature, namely: decay, death, desire, hunger, thirst, impermanence, insubstantiality, and the like.

This truth is easily realised by anyone who can think soberly and dispassionately. It can be easily understood, too, due to its grossness and to the fact that it can be seen everywhere around us. For this latter reason, the Buddha made it the first Noble **Truth**.

It cannot be denied that where there is sensibility, there also is **dukkha**. Infatuation with transient pleasures prevent us from seeing things as they truly are but pain is an experience which results in a feeling of dissatisfaction. All activities whether good or bad, stem from this feeling. Indeed, if the truth were known, it often happens that some great sorrow precedes a noble event. Witness for example, the Great Renunciation. Here we have Prince Siddhattha only leaving his opulent surroundings after having been confronted with four significant sights; an old man, a diseased man, a corpse and an ascetic. Hence, he left his palace to seek an escape from the ills of life, not only for himself but for the benefit of all succeeding generations.

It may be asked: “Why bother to attempt understanding **dukkha**?” The answer surely lies in the fact that Buddhism is not just a means of escaping **dukkha**. As relieving a patient from physical or mental pain only constitutes part of the process of rehabilitation, so likewise, in order to overcome **dukkha**, one must have first understood it.

Naturally, there are various types of **dukkha**. The **Dhammacakkappavattana** and **Satipatthana Suttas** enumerate the following: 1. birth 2. ageing 3. disease 4. death 5. sorrow 6. lamentation 7. pain 8. grief 9. despair 10. association with the unloved 11. separation from the loved 12. not to get what one wants. In short, the Buddha says: the five aggregates of existence as objects of clinging constitute **dukkha**.

Our very physical and mental faculties are equated with clinging, the desire for life. The five aggregates or grasping groups constitute an entire life which is entirely suffering. Hence, it has been truly said, that he who delights in life, delights in **dukkha**.

Early Western writers on Buddhism however, saw this philosophy of life as pessimistic in that it seemed to exhort people merely to brood over the miseries of life. In fact it is neither pessimistic nor optimistic but realistic. Had the Buddha simply declared the first and second Noble Truths He could indeed have been called a pessimist but not only does He declare the third Noble Truth, that of suffering's cessation but He defines in detail how this is to be achieved namely by the fourth Noble Truth, in other words the Noble Eightfold Path through the development of which the end of suffering can be attained; this Path that leads to freedom from desire hence from dukkha.

In our examination of the first Noble Truth, we have seen the universality of suffering and uncovered its origin, namely, the Five Aggregates of Existence (material form, feeling, perception, volitional acts, consciousness). We have

also seen that suffering extends to all realms of life, whether of the sensuous, fine material or immaterial spheres.

These same aggregates are, of course, subject to the law of **anicca** — that of change or momentary decease and re-arising. However, this continuous change does not occur without a cause, according to Buddhism. (To theists this matter presents no problems, as they would put forward the hypothesis of a Creator God.)

In His first sermon the Buddha enumerated the causes of suffering: “the craving which causes rebirth, is accompanied by passionate pleasure, and takes delight in this and that object, namely sensuous craving, craving for existence and craving for annihilation.”

As will be noticed, therefore, **tanha** or craving is threefold:

1. sensuous craving, in order to satisfy the five senses;
2. craving for existence or continued becoming, in any of the spheres of sentient life;
3. craving for annihilation or non- becoming.

When connected with the false view of a self, **tanha** can be potent as witness these typical egoistic expressions: “my home”, “my family”, “my reputation”, “my career”, “my interests,” etc. etc. The main underlying theme is one of rank selfishness. Just as smoke rises from a fire, so likewise, **tanha** results from the formation of the five aggregates, which in turn have arisen from **tanha**.

Yet why is it that we continually crave? It is because we have not penetrated these aggregates in the light of the first Noble Truth: that they are unsatisfactory, in other words “**Dukkha**”. We are deluded into thinking that they constitute happiness and that they possess lasting qualities with which to satisfy our every want. That causes us to forget the suffering in life such as birth, decay, illness, death, association with the unloved, separation from the loved, not getting what one wants, in short, the five clinging aggregates themselves. Indeed these aggregates may be compared to a poisonous cake possessing not only an attractive exterior (in taste and smell) but also a deadly content. Greed, hate and delusion are as virulent as the toxic properties of the cake but man obstinately clings to them.

From the meanest worm to the highest divine being, these aggregates are their most prized possessions. Furthermore, not just content with them in their most

basic form, every effort is made to perfect their quality and function. Following life after life, like falling from the sky, anxious to find a foot-hold but never succeeding, man binds himself to existence in *perpetuum mobile*.

Whenever contact is made with external objects by use of the six senses, these are invariably seen as good, beautiful and of permanent duration. Such objects are wanted again and again, and one is forced to gratify the senses day and night in order to keep the aggregates satisfied. One labours to maintain life, but faces endless difficulties, not only in securing the basic necessities of life, but in acquiring the various wants (which are countless in the West) which are artificially created for the “average consumer”. When one seems to possess more than is enough, a mysterious longing presents itself for yet more commodities. For example, we can compare the attitude of Eastern women who have always been content with their sari to their Western counterparts who have a frantic desire to follow the constantly changing fashions.

However we are not always successful in our endeavours. Disappointment, frustration and mental instability cannot be discounted whilst we remain in the “rat- race”. Confronted with duties one cannot perform alone, marriage is most often resorted to, only to realise further obligations: to husband or wife, children, in-laws, etc. Now we are forced to satisfy their desires as well: we are further assailed by family quarrels, creditors and other allied evils.

All crime result from craving for wealth, power, position - in short - in the desire to be a step ahead of everyone else. However, as in times of war, it is inevitably the innocent or those wishing not to be involved, who are the victims in such a ruthless struggle to remain on top.

Now we must turn to a very difficult problem which requires our careful consideration and reflection: how does *tanha* cause future birth and *dukkha*?

The body is made up of four chief elements, namely, extension i.e. earth, cohesion i.e. water, radiation i.e. heat and cold, motion i.e. air.

There are also four subsidiary qualities:— colour, odour, taste, nutriment.

With regard to the mental faculty, we must admit that this operates indescribably quickly. For example, the simple act of raising one’s hand requires a lakh (100,000) of thought moments or more. Because each perceptible second follows on unnoticed, the majority of people regard the mind as either of an eternal nature or dying on the decease of the physical body, as with the extinguishing of a flame. Both these views are incorrect according to Buddhism.

On the occasion of anger, death etc. the mind becomes inactive or inoperative and the subsidiary qualities of that person disappear. If he has extinguished the flame of tanha, then the flame of the individual consciousness will be extinguished also. If this is not the case, however, then the desire for continued existence will persist as before.

The third Noble Truth is the cessation of Suffering. The Buddha said: “Now, this, O monks, is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering. It is the cessation without a remainder of craving or tanha (which has been described as the cause of suffering), the abandonment of it. The forsaking of it, release from it, non-attachment to it.”

“Nibbanam paranam sukham” (Dhammapada. XV.V. 204) Nibbana is the highest happiness. Therefore the highest aim of the Buddhist is the attainment of Nibbana. This constitutes the absolute cessation of all conditioned phenomena. “Monks, if one teaches Dhamma for the turning away from the material shape, from feeling, perception, the impulses, consciousness, for dispassion in regard to them, for their cessation, it is fitting to call him a monk who is a speaker of the Dhamma. If he is himself faring along for the turning away from material shape and so on, for dispassion in regard to them, for their cessation, it is fitting to call him a monk who is faring along in accordance with Dhamma. Monk, if he is freed by this turning away, by dispassion in regard to these things, by their cessation, it is fitting to call him a monk who has attained Nibbana here and now”.

By way of a simile, so long as the electric current is operating so long will the fan move; hence, when desire is stopped, life ceases. But it is foolish to ask what happens to someone upon his attainment of parinibbana (i.e. the case of someone who dies having first attained Nibbana), in the same way as one might ask what happens to the movement of the fan after it has stopped moving.

The goal in Buddhism corresponds to salvation, except that the former is not attained through the agency of another or outside being solely through one’s own efforts, if it is attained during one’s life-time, it is termed “Nibbana with aggregates”; if at death, then “Nibbana without aggregates.”

What happens to an arahant on death? It cannot be stressed strongly enough that he is not annihilated, which opponents put forward as the only logical answer. The argument devolves round the Buddhist view of self; no part of the individual can possibly be identified with a self or soul: hence one cannot speak of annihilation of the latter. In the West, however, many follow the theories of Plato and maintain that the soul is synonymous with consciousness, and that it is

this that is immutable and immortal. This view, which is denied by Buddhism, is very much akin to the “Hindu Atman” theory.

“Nibbana is a permanent state and to be experienced only by those who have attained thereto . . . To the question, “is there any consciousness in Nibbana?” the reply comes back, “Nothing else but the bliss of Nibbana.” This is the ultimate state and there is nothing beyond it.

“That monk of wisdom here, devoid of desire and passion, attains to deathlessness, peace, the unchanging state Nibbana”

One can put an end to sorrow by adopting and following the path (**magga**) — the Middle Way of which to the Buddhist is the philosophy of life itself. This Middle Way of self-conquest, which leads to the ultimate goal is eightfold, namely: (1) Right Understanding (2) Right Thought (3) Right Speech (4) Right Action (5) Right Livelihood (6) Right Effort (7) Right Mindfulness (8) Right Concentration.

(1) Right Understanding:

To begin treading the Path, we must see life as it is, in accordance with its three characteristics of *annicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*; we must possess a clear understanding of the nature of existence, of the moral law, of the factors and component elements that go to make up this **Samsara** or conditioned realm of life. In short, we must have the clear understanding of the Twelve **Nidanas**, or the Dependent Production and the Four Noble Truths. We should, therefore, make these the bases of our acceptance of the vicissitudes of life.

(2) Right Thought

This means that our mind should be pure, free from lust, ill-will, cruelty and the like. At the same time, we should be willing to relinquish anything that obstructs our onward march and unselfishly transfer the merit to all sentient beings. Three other steps follow upon and accompany the Right Thought, namely: Right Understanding (1st step), Right Effort (6th step), and Right Mindfulness (7th step).

(3) Right Speech.

By refraining from lying, backbiting, harsh talk, and idle gossip, we create a connecting link between thought and action. One, moreover, which is characterised by wisdom and kindness. Correct speech should not be unduly loud or excitable, not prompted by infatuation, ill-will or selfish interests; it should be free from dogmatic assertions and discrimination; finally, it should not be such as to inflame the passions, therefore, speech before open-air crowds should be avoided.

(4) Right Action

This generally consists in observing the Five Precepts which can be shown both in their negative and positive aspects:

- (I) Not to kill, but to practise love and harmlessness to all
- (II) Not to take that which is not given, but to practise charity and generosity.
- (III) Not to commit sexual misconduct, but to practise purity and self-control.
- (IV) Not to indulge in false speech, but to practise sincerity and honesty.
- (V) Not to partake of intoxicating drinks or drugs which cause heedlessness, but to practise restraint and mindfulness.

(5) Right Livelihood or Vocation.

The layman should only pursue an occupation that does not cause harm or injustice to other beings.

To practise deceit, treachery, sooth-saying, trickery, usury, are regarded as wrong living. The traditional trades from which the layman is debarred are: (i) dealing in arms, (ii) in living beings (iii) flesh (iv) in intoxicating drinks and (v) in poison. The professions of a soldier, fisherman, a hunter etc. are also included.

He should be free from acquisitiveness or any connections with dishonest money-making, legalised or otherwise, prostitution of any kind and should have a sense of service and duty in life. As the “homeless life” is the ideal state at which to aim, he should, although encumbered with family and business responsibilities, simplify his needs and devote more time to meditation.

(6) Right Effort

Self-perfection can be achieved by avoiding and rejecting ignoble qualities while acquiring and fostering noble qualities. This stage is, therefore, sub-divided into four parts:

- I. The effort to prevent the arising of evil which has not yet arisen.
- II. The effort to expel that evil which is already present.
- III. The effort to induce good which has not yet arisen.
- IV. The effort to cultivate that good which is already present.

By conscientiously practising the above, the lay-man will be enabled more easily to cultivate the higher spiritual ideals, the best known formulation of them being termed the Ten Perfections:

- (1) generosity (2) morality (3) renunciation (4) wisdom (5) energy (6) patience (7) honesty and truthfulness (8) determination (9) loving kindness and (10) equanimity.

(7) Right Mindfulness.

This implies a state of constant awareness with regard to the (i) body, (ii) feelings, (iii) mind, (iv) ideas engendered therein, mind being in effect, an additional sense. The development of this type of mindfulness is necessary to enable the practitioner not to be led astray by erroneous views. Thus, it is the culmination of the intellectual process which links up with intuitive process, namely **vipassana** or direct insight into things as they truly are. This step marks a further advance from the stage when things were known only by the differing features each displayed since here all such discrimination is discarded. Although things seem corporeal, good or bad, right or wrong, such attitudes as these only go to prove how the mind views things on an incomplete basis. The process of thought is only food for the intellect to enable the mind to diagnose the truth more clearly when those discriminations first appear. Hence, we should transcend the intellectual mind if we are to progress further and realise the true significance and relationship of all compound things.