
UNIT 4 THE PHILOSOPHY OF BUDDHISM

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4.0. OBJECTIVES

This unit, the philosophy of Buddhism, introduces the main philosophical notions of Buddhism. It gives a brief and comprehensive view about the central teachings of Lord Buddha and the rich philosophical implications applied on it by his followers. This study may help the students to develop a genuine taste for Buddhism and its philosophy, which would enable them to carry out more researches and study on it. Since Buddhist philosophy gives practical suggestions for a virtuous life, this study will help one to improve the quality of his or her life and the attitude towards his or her life.

4.1. INTRODUCTION

Buddhist philosophy and doctrines, based on the teachings of Gautama Buddha, give meaningful insights about reality and human existence. Buddha was primarily an ethical teacher rather than a philosopher. His central concern was to show man the way out of suffering and not one of constructing a philosophical theory. Therefore, Buddha's teaching lays great emphasis on the practical matters of conduct which lead to liberation. For Buddha, the root cause of suffering is ignorance and in order to eliminate suffering we need to know the nature of existence. Also, Buddha insisted that all those who accept his doctrines must accept it only after rigorous reflections and only after all doubts and perplexities are overcome. Here, the philosophical implications of Buddha's teaching must be taken into serious consideration.

The philosophical system of Buddhism does not assume a systematic form. We cannot make a sharp distinction between the philosophical, religious, and ethical notions of Buddhism. The reason behind it is that the philosophical notions were developed in the background of ethical and religious notions. We may find many overlapping ideas from the previous chapter 'Buddhism as Religion', such as the noble truths, the eightfold path, the doctrines of soul, the doctrine of karma, etc. All these imply profound philosophical insights as they imply great religious insights.

4.2. THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The four noble truths are the most important principles of Buddhism. We need to take into serious account these principles, whether we speak about Buddhism as a religion, or Buddhist

philosophy, or any other serious study on Buddhism. Here, only a brief description of the four noble truths is given, to start our study on the 'Philosophy of Buddhism.' The four noble truths are explained in detail in the chapter 'Buddhism as a Religion.' We may have to refer back to the portion there for more details. The four noble truths of Buddhism are as follows:

Life is Full of Suffering (*Dukkha*): According to the first noble truth all forms of existence are subject to suffering. For Buddha it is a universal truth. All known and unknown facts and forms of life are associated with suffering. Birth, sickness, old age, death, anxiety, desire, and despair, all such happenings and feelings are based on suffering. Buddhism recognizes suffering at three levels, such as the suffering we experience in our daily life, like, birth, sickness, old age, death, despair, pain, desire, etc. (*dukkah-dukkhatta*), suffering caused by the internal mental conditions and the activities of the sense organs (*samkara-dukkhatta*), and the suffering caused by the impermanence of objects and our relation to them (*viparinama-dukkhatta*).

Suffering has a Cause (*Dukkha samudaya*): Everything in this cosmos has a cause, and nothing exists and happens without a cause. If this is the case, suffering should also have a cause. Buddhism explains suffering through a chain of twelve causes and effects, commonly known as the Doctrine of Dependent Origination (*pratityasamutpada*). In the final analysis, the root of all miseries is desire (*Tanha*). Desire is all pervasive. Desire for possession, enjoyment, and a separate individual existence are some of the virulent forms of desire.

Cessation of Suffering (*Dukkha nirodha*): If suffering has a cause, the seeker has to destroy this cause to stop suffering. So desire has to be extinguished to stop suffering. Nirvana is the state of being without suffering. It is a state of supreme happiness and bliss.

Ways to Destroy Suffering (*Dukkha-nirodha-marga*): The ways to destroy suffering consists of the practice of the eightfold virtue, such as, Right View, Right Aspiration, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Awareness, and Right Concentration. In the practice of all these virtues one has to avoid extremes and follow the middle path.

4.3. THE EIGHTFOLD PATH IN BUDDHISM

The eightfold path is the practical application of the four noble truths. They are also closely connected to the fourth noble truth as a means to destroy suffering. Following are components of the eightfold path of Buddhism.

Right View (*Samyak-dristi*): It consists of the grasp and acceptance of the four noble truths, rejection of the fault doctrines, and avoidance of immorality resulting from covetousness, lying, violence, etc.

Right Aspirations (*Samyaka-sankalpa*): It implies thought on renunciation, thought on friendship and good will, and thoughts on non-harming.

Right Speech (*Samyak-vac*): It inspires one to speak truth primarily, and to speak gentle and soothing words for the benefit and wellbeing of others. It also promulgates one to avoid falsehood, slander, harsh words and gossip.

Right Conduct (*Samyak-karma*): The Buddha intends by right conduct the practice of five moral vows namely, non-violence (*ahimsa*), truthfulness (*satya*), non-stealing (*asteya*),

Right Livelihood (*Samyag ajiva*): It consists of the avoidance of a luxurious life and the acceptance of occupations which do not involve cruelty and injury to other living beings. The Buddha exhorts to avoid occupations like sale of alcohol, making and selling weapons, profession of the soldier, butcher, fisherman, etc.

Right Effort (*Samyak vyayama*): It includes the effort to avoid the rise of evil and false ideas in the mind, the effort to overcome evil and evil tendencies, the effort to acquire positive values like attention, energy, tranquility, equanimity, and concentration, and the effort to maintain the right conditions for a meritorious life.

Right Awareness (*Samyak Smrti*): It represents the awareness of the body (breathing positions, movements, impurities of the body, etc.), awareness of sensations (attentive to the feelings of oneself and of the other), awareness of thought and the awareness of the internal functions of the mind.

Right Concentration (*Samyak Samadhi*): The practice of one pointed contemplation leads the seeker to go beyond all sensations of pain and pleasure, and finally to full enlightenment. It happens in four levels. In the first level, through intense meditation the seeker concentrates the mind on truth and thereby enjoys great bliss. In the second level the seeker enters into supreme internal peace and tranquility. In the third level, the seeker becomes detached even from the inner bliss and tranquility. In the fourth level, the seeker is liberated even from this sensation of bliss and tranquility.

The first two of the eight-fold path, namely, right view and right resolve, are together called *Prajna*, because they are related to consciousness and knowledge. The third, fourth, and fifth, namely, right speech, right conduct, and right livelihood, are collectively known as *Sila*, because they deal with the correct and morally right way of living. The last three, namely, right effort, right awareness, and right concentration are collectively known as *Samadhi*, because they deal with meditation and contemplation.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space given below for your answer.

1. What are the three levels in which Buddhism recognizes suffering?

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2. What is the eightfold path Buddhism suggests, for overcoming suffering?

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3. Give a brief sketch of Samyak *Samadhi* (Right Concentration)?

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4.4. THE DOCTRINE OF DEPENDENT ORIGINATION (*PRATITYA-SAMUTPADA*)

The doctrine of dependent origination is central to Buddhist philosophy and is connected to the second noble truth - suffering has a cause (*Dukkha Samudaya*). According to Buddhism everything in this world has a cause. There is a cycle of twelve such causes and corresponding effects which governs the entire life of human beings. It is called *Bhavacakra*, the cycle of existence. This universal law works automatically without the help of any conscious guide. This doctrine is the main principle in Buddha's teachings. Other notions, such as the doctrine of *karma*, the theory of momentariness, and the theory of non-soul are based on this doctrine.

Pratitya-samutpada is a middle path between *sasvatvada* (the principle of eternity) and *uchedvada* (the principle of annihilation). According to *sasvatvada*, some things are eternal, uncaused, and independent. According to *uchedvada*, nothing remains after the destruction of things. By maintaining a middle way between both these principles, *pratitya-samutpada* holds that things have existence but they are not eternal and they are not annihilated completely.

The twelve links of *pratitya-samutpada* are as follows:

Ignorance (*Avidya*): Ignorance is caused by desire. It is the substratum of action and the basis of ego (*jivahood*). Ignorance causes the individual to think of himself as separate from the entire world. This leads to attachment to life and thus to suffering.

Predisposition (*Samskara*): *Samskara* is caused by ignorance. Predisposition means a disposition preceding to or preparing to certain activity. Also, it can be understood as the attitude and aptitude of the past *Karma*. *Samskara* is also known as fabrication. There are three types of fabrications namely bodily fabrications, verbal fabrications, and mental fabrications.

Consciousness (*Vijnana*): Consciousness is caused by predispositions. There are six types of consciousness, namely, eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, and intellect-consciousness.

Name and Form (*Namarupa*): It is the psycho-physical body in the womb of the mother caused by consciousness.

Sense Organs (*Sadayatana*): The sense organs are caused by name and form. There are six sense organs such as the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the skin, and the mind.

Contact (*Sparsa*): Contact with the object of enjoyment is caused by sense organs. Sometimes it is said that the eye is due to seeing and not that seeing is due to the eye, and similarly in the case of every organ.

Feeling or Sensation (*Vedana*): Feeling or sensation is caused by contact with the objects of enjoyment. Feeling or sensation is of six forms, such as, vision, hearing, olfactory (sensation), gustatory sensation, tactile sensation, and intellectual sensation (thought).

Craving (*Trsna*): The craving or thirst for enjoyment is caused by the actual experience or sensation of enjoyment. It is due to craving that a person blindly longs for worldly attachments. There are six forms of cravings, such as, cravings with respect to forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, and ideas.

Attachment or Clinging (*Upadana*): The clinging to sensory enjoyment is caused by the craving for such enjoyment. There are four types of clinging, namely, sensual clinging, view clinging, practice clinging, and self clinging.

Becoming (*Bhava*): It is the will to be born caused by clinging or attachment. It includes thoughts and actions which are responsible for rebirth. There are three kinds of becoming, such as sensual becoming, form becoming, and formless becoming.

Birth (*Jati*): Birth (also rebirth) is caused by becoming (*bhava*). The *jiva* is caught up in the wheel of the world and remains in it till it attains nirvana. It refers not just to birth at the beginning of a lifetime, but to birth as a new person, which is the acquisition of a new status or position.

Old Age and Death (*Jaramarana*): Old age and death are caused by birth. Rebirth causes the whole chain of the worldly sufferings. After a man is caught in the wheel of the world, diseases, old age, suffering, death, etc. recur.

The twelve links of the doctrine of dependent origination can be divided into three classes, namely, the past, the future, and the present. Ignorance and predisposition are due to the past life. Consciousness, name and form, sense organs, contact, feeling, craving, and clinging are connected to the present life. Finally, becoming, birth, and old age and death are of future life.

4.5. THE DOCTRINE OF MOMENTORINESS (*KSHANIKA-VADA*)

According to *kshanika-vada*, everything is momentary, relative, conditional, and dependent. It is also known as the doctrine of impermanence (*anityavada*). Buddhism teaches that the world and its objects are not permanent, but momentary. The universe is a constant chain of change. The basis of the Doctrine of Momentoriness is the Doctrine of the Dependent Origination. Every object comes into existence from an antecedent condition and gives rise to a consequent object. It is comparable to the flame of a lamp, where the flame is merely the continuity of successive flames. A flame exists only for a moment, but it gives rise to the next flame.

For Buddhists, the material world and its objects are not merely impermanent and transient, but they also exist only for a moment. This doctrine is ultimately to dissuade people from placing confidence in the world and persuade them to renounce it for the permanent status of *Nirvana*. It avoids two extremes: eternalism and nihilism. Thus, it is a middle path where the world is neither a being nor a non-being.

The Buddhist philosophers have given several arguments in support of the doctrine of momentoriness. Of these, the most important argument is known as *Arthakriyakaritra*, the argument from the power of generating action. According to this principle, whatever can produce

an effect has existence, and whatever cannot produce an effect has no existence. It means that as long as a thing has the power to produce an effect it has existence, and when it ceases to produce an effect, its existence also ceases. Again, one thing can produce only one effect. If at one time a thing produces an effect and at the next moment another effect or no effect, then the former thing ceases to exist.

4.6. THE DOCTRINE OF KARMA

The law of *karma* is that every event produces its effects, which in turn become causes for other effects, generating the *karmic* chain. The doctrine of dependent origination links *karmic* impressions from past existence and rebirth. These two links signify the proposition that the present existence of a man is dependent upon his past existence - the effect of his thoughts, words, and actions in the past life. Similarly the future existence is dependent on the present existence. According to the law of *karma*, our present and future are neither capricious nor unconditional, but are conditioned by our past and present.

4.7. THE DOCTRINE OF NON-SOUL (ANATTA)

The doctrine of non-soul (*anatta*) is another important philosophical notion of Buddhism which is a consequence of the doctrine of dependent origination. There is a belief in almost all the cultures and religions that there exists in man an eternal and permanent entity, variously known as the 'soul,' the 'self,' or the 'spirit.' According to Buddhism, one cannot become aware of an unchanging entity called 'soul' and all one can become aware of when one thinks of one's self or soul is a sensation, an impression, a perception, an image, a feeling, or an impulse. The Buddha analyses men into five groups (*skandhas*), namely, form (matter), feeling (pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral), perceptions (sight, smell, etc.), impulses (hate, greed, etc.) and consciousness. Anything a man thinks he is or he has, fall under one of these groups. The self or soul is simply an abbreviation for the aggregate of these *skandhas*, and not some entity over and above the aggregate. Thus there is no distinct substance known as the 'self' or 'soul.' There is a mistaken understanding that through the doctrine of *anatta* the Buddha denies man as a self or a soul. What he denies is the belief that there exists behind and beyond the *skandhas* a self or a soul which is permanent and unchanging. Buddha acknowledges the changing self, but rejects the unchanging substantial self. (For details refer to the title 'The Doctrine of No Soul (*Anatta*)' in the chapter 'Buddhism as a Religion')

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space given below for your answer.

1. *Pratitya-samutpada* is a middle path between *sasvatvada* (the principle of eternity) and *uchedvada* (the principle of annihilation). Explain.

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2. What is the central argument of Buddhism in supporting the doctrine of momentariness?

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 3. What did Buddha intend to communicate through the doctrine of non-soul (*anatta*)?

4.8. PHILOSOPHICAL SCHOOLS OF BUDDHISM

Since Buddha did not give answers to many of the vital philosophical issues, his followers tried to find answers to such questions. These attempts, in turn, gave rise to different philosophical directions and schools. The differences of opinion and doctrines emerged immediately after the death of Buddha. It is believed that there existed thirty such Buddhist philosophical schools. But only four of them survived and are traditionally known. They are as follows:

The Vaibhasika School: The *Vaibhasika* derives its name from its exclusive emphasis on a particular commentary, the *abhidhammamahavaibhasa* of Abhidhamma. In the true spirit of the doctrine of dependent origination, the *Vaibhasika* holds that reality is pure flux and change. This school belongs to Hinayana. The *Vaibhasika* speaks about the existence of the mental and the non-mental realities. It teaches that we can really know the external entities and the world outside. This notion is known as *bahya-pratyeka-vada*. This school holds onto pluralism, realism, and nominalism. According to *Vaibhasika*, the world is in reality as it appears to us. The ultimate constituents (*dharma*) of reality are the same as those which make up the world of our empirical experience. Since they hold that the *dharma* is ultimate and independent of our consciousness, *Vaibhasika* is realism. *Vaibhasika* is pluralism as it asserts *dharma* as distinct and irreducible. For *Vaibhasika*, the reality is particular and is devoid of any universal unchanging entities. Thus *Vaibhasika* can be considered as nominalism too.

The Sautrantika School: The name *Sautrantika*, derived from the fact that it gives greater importance to the authority of the *sutra-pitaka* of the Pali Canon. This school also belongs to Hinayana Buddhism. The *Sautrantika* subscribes both the mental and the non-mental reality. The important difference between both these schools is that while the *Vaibhasika* maintains direct perception of the external objects, the *Sautrantika* holds the inference from the perceptions which are representations of external objects.

The second important difference between the *Sautrantika* and *Vaibhasika* is that unlike the *Vaibhasika*, the *Sautrantika* distinguishes between the world as it appears to us (phenomena) and the world as it is in itself (*nomena*). Here *Sautrantika* denies the absolute, ultimate, and independent ontological status of *dharma*. Another point of disagreement between the *Sautrantika* and the *Vaibhasika* is concerned with the nature of the relation between successive point-instants of existence. For the *Vaibhasika* the past, present, and future are equally real. The reason is that the present, which is admittedly real, cannot be the effect of an unreal past and the cause of an unreal future. Contrary to this, the *Vaibhasika's* point is that the point-instant which

has no duration cannot causally bring about its succeeding point-instant. For, the cause and effect cannot be simultaneous.

The Yogacara School: This school belongs to Mahayana Buddhism. There are two different accounts of the origin of the name *Yogacara* of this school. According to one account, the followers of this school emphasized *yoga* (critical enquiry) along with *acara* (conduct). According to the other, the adherents of this school practiced *yoga* for the realization of the truth, that reality is of the nature of consciousness. The core of the doctrine of the *Yogacara* is that consciousness (mind) alone is ultimately real. Thus, external objects are regarded as unreal. For *Yogacara*, all internal and external objects are ideas of the mind. Thus, it is impossible to demonstrate the independent existence of external objects. The philosophers of this school are known as the advocates of consciousness (*vijnanavada*). *Yogacara* offers another argument to deny the independent existence of the external object, which seems to be a criticism to the *Sautrantika* and the *Vaibhasika*. It argues that if there is an object outside, it must be indivisible, partless, and atomic, or divisible and composite. If it is the former, it cannot be perceived since atoms are too minute. If it is composite, we cannot perceive all the parts and the sides of the object simultaneously. Thus, in either case the existence of the external objects is denied. Another important argument against the existence of the external objects is based on the doctrine of momentariness. The *Yogacara* points out that, since objects are not substances but duration-less point instants, it is difficult to understand how a momentary object can be the cause of consciousness. If it is the cause of consciousness, there must be a time lapse between the arising of the object and our consciousness of it.

The Madhaymika School: This school also belongs to Mahayana Buddhism. The literal meaning of the term *Madhaymika* is 'the farer of the Middle Way'. The *Madhaymika* avoids all the extremes, such as, eternalism and annihilationism, self and non-self, matter and spirit, unity and plurality, and identity and difference. The founder of this school is supposed to be Nagarjuna of the second century CE. Aryadeva, Candrakirti, Kumarajiva, and Santideva are the other prominent figures of this school. One of the most important insights of Nagarjuna is the origin and nature of philosophy and philosophical conflicts. For him, knowledge is the means by which man seeks to unite the self and the other. Knowledge is propositional, and propositions are constituted of concepts, and concepts refer names (*nama*) and forms (*rupa*). Hence, the reality which philosophers create in their knowledge is the reality of names and forms, and not reality as it is in itself.

The *Madhaymika* claims that concepts and conceptual systems are relative to each other. They cannot stand by themselves and generate truths. Consequently, no system can claim absolute truth and validity. The truth of each system can be relative and partial. Nagarjuna teaches that it is absurd to speak about reality as true or false. Reality simply is. The emptiness (*Sunyata*) of concepts does not entail the emptiness of the reality. What he means by *Sunyata* is not that reality is nonexistent or illusory, but only that it is devoid of any entities which we think. The *Madhaymika* claim that unlike the other three schools, their philosophy is very close to the teachings of Buddha. The notion of relativity and *sunyata* (emptiness) are none other than the doctrine of dependent origination which Buddha emphasized.

Nagarjuna brings the notion of two types of truths: the lower truth and higher truth. He calls the phenomenal truths as lower truth, since we cannot find any absolute truth in this world. All phenomenal truths are relative, conditioned, and valid within particular domains of our

perceptual-conceptual experience. The higher truth is beyond percepts and concepts, ineffable and defying all descriptions. It is absolute, supramundane, and unconditional. It is grasped through intuitive insights.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space given below for your answer.

1. How does the Sautrantika School differ from the Vaibhasika School, in considering the nature of the relation between successive point-instants of existence?

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2. What are the two reasons for adopting the term 'Yogacara' to Yogacara School?

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3. Why does Nagarjuna say that the reality which philosophers create in their knowledge is the reality of names and forms and not reality as it is in itself?

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4.9. LET US SUM UP

The aim of philosophy is to ultimately lead man to find the meaning of his life and existence. It is true to its core in the case of the philosophy of Buddhism. The four noble truths that Buddha proposes touch the very existence of humans, which leads one to understanding the sufferings and miseries of life, and to go beyond to attain nirvana, a perfect state of happiness and bliss. The eightfold path of Buddhism is moreover a daily guide for everyone to lead a virtuous life. The doctrine of *pratityasamutpada* is a reasonable description about the cycle of human life. The doctrine of momentariness has profound philosophical implications in the present scenario, where people chase the momentary pleasures of the world without realizing its impermanence. The doctrine of non-soul or more precisely the denial of a permanent soul would be a unique notion of Buddhist philosophy. Apart from all these, we find a logical sequence in the entire philosophy, where different ideas are mutually connected and related. The four noble truths are the basis of Buddha's teachings and from this follow all other notions such as the eightfold path, the doctrine of dependent origination, the doctrine of momentariness, the theories of karma, non-soul, rebirth, etc. The various theories of the different philosophical schools are a direct evidence to understand the richness of Buddhist philosophy, and how seriously the study on the teachings of Buddha is carried out. Even today, deeper and wider study is done on the various themes of this philosophy to explore the new horizons of the meaning it contains.

4.10. KEY WORDS

Anatta – The Buddhist doctrine of non-soul.

Dukkha – The Sanskrit term *dukkha* is almost translated as suffering. According to Buddha, life is full of suffering and the goal of human life is to get out of suffering by removing ignorance. The four noble truths of Buddhism are closely linked to the concept of *dukkha*.

Karma - *Karma* is categorized within the groups of causes in the chain of cause and effect, where it comprises the elements of action. Buddhism links *karma* directly to the motives behind an action.

Kshanika-vada – The Buddhist Doctrine of Momentariness.

Nirvana – The Buddha describes *nirvana* as the perfect peace of the state of mind that is free from craving, anger, and other afflicting states.

Skandhas - The aggregates or components that come together to make an individual.

Sunyata – Often translated as emptiness or void. According to Nagarjuna “The greatest wisdom is the so-called *Sunyata*.”

Pratitya-samutpada –The Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination

4.11. FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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