



Buddhism and its Relevance in Modern World

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism, as one of the four major religions in the world today, is an empiricistic and antimetaphysical religion. We can think of Buddhism in terms of three main categories - philosophy, science and religion. The Four Noble Truths contain the essence of the Buddha's teachings. It was these four principles that the Buddha came to understand during his meditation under the bodhi tree. Today in this scientifically and technologically developed global village, though there are many amenities, for easy living and pleasure, people are both physically and mentally not satisfied and do not have a feeling of security. Buddhism offers a few very simple and very efficacious methods to combat that. Buddhism has a role to play in our life and a role in which we, from the Buddha's birth land, have an important part to play.

KEYWORDS

Buddhism, Modern World, Nirvana and Noble Truths.

I: Introduction

Buddhism, as one of the four major religions in the world today, is an empiricistic and antimetaphysical religion. What the Buddha taught is not only for the 6th century B.C., but it is a timeless (akalika) teaching, surely it can be practised by the wise during 21st century as well and in many more centuries or millennia to come. Buddhism has a special role to play in the modern world because unlike many other religious traditions, Buddhism uniquely propounds the concept of interdependence which accords closely with the fundamental notions of modern science. Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama said, "The 20th century was a century of war and violence, now we all need to work to see that the 21st century is of peace and dialogue."

We can think of Buddhism in terms of three main categories - philosophy, science and religion. The religious part involves principles and practices that are of concern to Buddhism alone, but the Buddhist philosophy of interdependence as well as the Buddha science of mind and human emotions are of great benefit to everyone. The spiritual leader said while "modern science has developed a highly sophisticated understanding of the physical world, including the subtle workings of the body and the brain, Buddhist science on the other hand has devoted itself to first-person understanding of many aspects of emotions - areas that are still new to modern science".

II: Noble Truths of Buddhism

Wheel of Life overview The Bhavachakra, the Wheel of Life or Wheel of Becoming, is a mandala - a complex picture representing the Buddhist view of the universe. To Buddhists, existence is a cycle of life, death, rebirth and suffering that they seek to escape altogether. The Wheel is divided into five or six realms, or states, into which a material and mental phenomenon can be reborn. It is held by a demon. Around the rim are depicted the twelve stages of dependent origination. This gallery will explain the parts of the diagram.



Source: © Falk Kienas/iStockphoto

The Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths contain the essence of the Buddha's teachings. It was these four principles that the Buddha came to understand during his meditation under the bodhi tree.

1. The truth of suffering (Dukkha)
2. The truth of the origin of suffering (Samudāya)
3. The truth of the cessation of suffering (Nirodha)
4. The truth of the path to the cessation of suffering (Magga)

The Buddha is often compared to a physician. In the first two Noble Truths, He diagnosed the problem (suffering) and identified its cause. The third Noble Truth is the realisation that there is a cure. The fourth Noble Truth, in which the Buddha set out the Eightfold Path, is the prescription, the way to achieve a release from suffering.

Suffering (Dukkha)

Three obvious kinds of suffering correspond to the first three sights the Buddha saw on his first journey outside his palace: old age, sickness and death. But according to the Buddha, the problem of suffering goes much deeper. Life is not ideal and it frequently fails to live up to our expectations. Human beings are subject to desires and cravings, but even when we are able to satisfy these desires, the satisfaction is only temporary. Even when we are not suffering from outward causes like illness or bereavement, we are unfulfilled and unsatisfied. This is the truth of suffering. Buddha's teachings do not end with suffering; rather, they go on to tell us what we can do about it and how to end it.

The Second Noble Truth: Origin of suffering (Samudāya)

Our day-to-day troubles may seem to have easily identifiable causes: thirst, pain from an injury, sadness from the loss of a loved one. In the second of His Noble Truths, though, the Buddha claimed to have found the cause of all suffering - and it is much more deeply rooted than our immediate worries. The Buddha taught that the root of all suffering is desire, *tanhā*. This comes in three forms, which he described as the Three Roots of Evil, or the Three Fires, or the Three Poisons.

The Three Fires of hate, greed and ignorance, shown in a circle, each reinforcing the others. The following depicts the Three Fires:



Source: Falk Kienas, www.bbc.uk/religious

The three roots of evil

These are the three ultimate causes of suffering:

- Greed and desire, represented by a rooster
- Ignorance or delusion, represented by a pig
- Hatred and destructive urges, represented by a snake

Tanhā means craving or misplaced desire. Buddhists recognise that there can be positive desires, such as desire for enlightenment and good wishes for others. A neutral term for such desires is chanda.

The Fire Sermon

The Buddha taught more about suffering in the Fire Sermon, delivered to a thousand bhikkus (Buddhist monks). Burning implies burning with the fire of lust, hate and delusion. We can interpret it as burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, grieves and despairs.

The Third Noble Truth: Cessation of suffering (Nirodha)

The Buddha taught that the way to extinguish desire, which causes suffering, is to liberate oneself from attachment. This is the third Noble Truth - the possibility of liberation. The Buddha was a living example that this is possible in a human lifetime.

Nirvana

Nirvana means extinguishing. Attaining nirvana - reaching enlightenment - means extinguishing the three fires of greed, delusion and hatred. Someone who reaches nirvana does not immediately disappear to a heavenly realm. Nirvana is better understood as a state of mind that humans can reach. It is a state of profound spiritual joy, without negative emotions and fears.

The Fourth Noble Truth: Path to the cessation of suffering (Magga)

The final Noble Truth is the Buddha's prescription for the end of suffering. This is a set of principles called the Eightfold Path, the Middle Way: it avoids both indulgence and severe asceticism, neither of which the Buddha had found helpful in his search for enlightenment.

The wheel of the Dharma, the symbol of the Eightfold Path

The eight divisions

The eight stages are not to be taken in order, but rather support and reinforce each other:

1. Right Understanding - Sammā ditthi
 - o Accepting Buddhist teachings. (The Buddha never intended his followers to believe his teachings blindly, but to practice them and judge for themselves whether they were true.)

2. Right Intention - Sammā saṅkappa
 - o A commitment to cultivate the right attitudes.
3. Right Speech - Sammā vācā
 - o Speaking truthfully, avoiding slander, gossip and abusive speech.
4. Right Action - Sammā kammanta
 - o Behaving peacefully and harmoniously; refraining from stealing, killing and overindulgence in sensual pleasure.
5. Right Livelihood - Sammā ājīva
 - o Avoiding making a living in ways that cause harm, such as exploiting people or killing animals, or trading in intoxicants or weapons.
6. Right Effort - Sammā vāyāma
 - o Cultivating positive states of mind; freeing oneself from evil and unwholesome states and preventing them arising in future.
7. Right Mindfulness - Sammā sati
 - o Developing awareness of the body, sensations, feelings and states of mind.
8. Right Concentration - Sammā samādhi
 - o Developing the mental focus necessary for this awareness.

III: Relevance of Buddhism in Modern World

The eight stages can be grouped into Wisdom (right understanding and intention), Ethical Conduct (right speech, action and livelihood) and Meditation (right effort, mindfulness and concentration). The Buddha described the Eightfold Path as a means to enlightenment, like a raft for crossing a river.

The Buddha was one of those who were very conscious of the many effects of hatred. He had seen people ruining themselves as a result of hatred. Buddha believed that hatred never ceases by hatred. To the Buddha the only way to solve it is that one party must stop. Loving kindness, which is the cornerstone of Buddhism, has not been taken by the Buddha as merely a simple ethical principle. He had analysed the principle of loving kindness into sublime life.

The Buddha also preached Karuna – compassion: Compassion is more easily generated. When we see somebody in trouble, our heart moves towards that person and we rush to help him. Last of all comes the fourth aspect of loving kindness and that is total equanimity, Upekkha. We have no friends, no enemies, no one higher, and no one lower. We have absolutely no distinctions between one person and another, and are totally merged in a kind of unity with all beings, all things and all situations. So once you are able to live a life in which all these four characteristics govern your actions, there is no place for hatred, rivalry and competition. So this second principle of Sila looks after this set of troubles that we would have.

Another most significant aspect of the Buddha's preachings is Bhavana - meditation. Bhavana means the training of the mind. The word itself etymologically means development - a further development of the mind. The Buddha believed that everything emanates from the man's mind. And that reflects the first line of the first verse of the Dhammapada. A pure mind, a trained mind, a well-developed mind, a mind that can be controlled at will, a mind that does not go on to subjects that are conducive to tension and boredom, but keeps alert, keeps on developing itself, discovering itself and within itself the secret of life, the problems of life and the reality of life, is man's greatest treasure.

Today in this scientifically and technologically developed global village, though there are many amenities, for easy living and pleasure, people are both physically and mentally not satisfied and do not have a feeling of security. When the mind is satisfied that the person is free of physical danger, the mind produces an experience of safety. In the world today, there

are many multinational and multipurpose projects which are vast for the development of countries. But people are not satisfied with what they have. There is no contentment. Craving, grasping, arising and perishing are the main features in the world.

When one thinks of modern life one can think in terms of a great degree of optimism and an equal degree of pessimism. One can be so pleased that we live today at a time when there seems to be nothing that man cannot conquer, except few diseases and places in the universe, however the pessimistic aspect is that we have, in the process, lost something. Buddhism has an application today and has a place in modern life because of its timeless relevance, emanating from a set of eternal values.

IV: Conclusion

Modern developments have nothing to offer but insecurity and competitiveness as well as tensions and boredom associated with them. Buddhism offers a few very simple and efficacious methods to combat that. Buddhism has a role to play in our life and a role in which we, from the birth land of Buddha, have an important part to play. It is our responsibility to share our thinking, knowledge and experience, with as many as possible, so that ultimately we all see that the message of the Buddha continues to reach mankind in every nook and corner of the world.

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