

Buddhism: what is nirvana?



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Buddhism represents one of the greatest religions in the world. Its roots are traced back in India, and today it forms the major religion of countries such as Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar and Cambodia. Buddhists have also been found to occupy some areas in Europe including Asia, Australia and America. The major distinguishing feature of Buddhism is that, Buddhists never believe in God as with the other religions. Buddha is the figure from which they obtain and follow their religious teachings. Buddha is not recognized as a name. It stands for a title which carries the meaning of “the enlightened one”. All Buddhists have one main goal, to become enlightened just like Buddha and live free from all manner of desire. Buddhism came from the transformative experience of nirvana followed by his compassionate feeling of helping others realize nirvana by themselves (Ganeri, p. 3; Trainor, p. 66).

The teachings of Buddhism come from the experiences Buddha has while searching the truth about suffering and how it can be ended. Buddha had several lessons. The first lesson was known as the Four Noble truths. These teachings explained that the experiences of suffering is everyone`s in life. This suffering is as a result of people not being contented with what they have. According to the Second Noble truth, suffering is caused by desire. A term “trishna” is usually used and implies that all human beings yearn for a number of things. These include; food, power, sex and possessions. Buddha explains that all these are world troubles and are rooted deeply in desire. Desire is known to wrap the human mind distorting our understanding and leading us to desire-driven ways. Such ways tend to ensure human continued suffering and inevitable samara. Samara is likened to a flooding

river in the early texts of Buddha. This river sweeps away humanity to misery, death and rebirth. This flooding is as a result of submitting to desire. Buddha`s teachings are likened to a raft that can be used to take refuge, overcoming the water currents and reaching the other end. This is the offshore end which is safer and is likened to nirvana. It is argued in pali texts that desire is integral in the world and because of this its power managed to shape life on earth (Trainor, p. 66).

The Third Noble Truth highlights a terse reference to the Buddhists central focus on the spiritual causation. The cyclical cause pattern and the effect through which desire leads to intense suffering can be reversed. This will eventually be controlled leading to the possibilities of enlightenment and nirvana.

First humans were non-material beings and enjoyed blissful and long lives. One of them happened to taste the sweetest thing on earth, and the same thing today is being consumed by crave and desire. The other humans tasted the sweet thing and the radiance disappeared. Peoples` bodies became solid as plants and other edible materials appeared. Desire became so powerful such that creatures divided themselves into gender, initiated sex along with theft, lying, and harmful actions. All these characterize the world as we know it today. Buddhism gives careful analysis in the early texts which explained that the existence of desire will prevent one from reaching nirvana (Trainor, p. 66).

Philosophers in Buddhism divide desire into three kinds; for sensual pleasure, for rebirth and future rebirth. Early Buddhists found difficulties following the

idea of ending desire. For Buddhists, the body is to be respected and should maintain life. It should be cared for but not loved. Desire must also be eliminated without mutilating the body. Focus on desire makes plain Buddhists` emphasis on renunciation and detachment. Buddhists everyday life involves renunciation of the everyday world of desire in favor of the monastic community. Sangha settled for a refuge just for this (Harvey, p. 69). This would offer individuals a chance to lead a simple life and thus lose their desires. At the same time, the name of Buddha would be administered as “ good medicine” of his Dharma to sick humanity. Advanced stages in refuge lead to the desire to learn more of Buddha`s teachings. The desire to be enlightened was to be renounced so as to reach nirvana, the ultimate goal of all Buddhists (Trainor, p. 66). There is also another way of bringing the aspects of desire to an end. This is through following the lessons of the Noble Eightfold path. Buddha, from his experiences had realized that there is no happiness in great hardship or great luxury. Thus, he taught the Noble Eightfold path that is divided into eight parts (Ganeri, p. 6).

Right understanding is the first part and involves gaining as understanding of Buddha`s teachings. The second part is that of right intention. This part says that people should have compassion about others and always think about them in a very kind and generous way. Rights speech is the third part and teaches people not to tell lies, speak unkindly or swear. The fourth part is right action. People are taught not to steal, kill or perform actions that might upset or harm other people. The fifth part is right livelihood and teaches people to earn their living in ways that do not cause harm to others. Right effort represents the sixth part and teaches people to make the effort of

being compassionate and kind. The seventh part is that of right mindfulness, which involves being aware of your own thoughts and actions. Lastly, there is right concentration where people are taught to train their minds to be clear and calm always (Ganeri, p. 6).

Life`s purpose for most people, for example, in Thailand, is to get enough merit through acting and thinking in a better way. It is also understood that it takes several lives to reach the goal of nirvana. Buddhism as discussed already, arose from the transformation of Buddha`s experience of nirvana and his compassion to help other people realize nirvana by themselves. Buddhists` wise statements compare nirvana with fire extinction. Ancients Indians understand that extinguishing a flame releases the flame so that it returns to an agitated, diffuse and eternal state. Nirvana bears these associations, although it is most often believed to be ahead of all known states of existence (Trainor, p. 69).

Men and women realize nirvana through cultivation of wisdom (prajna). Prajna is the active capacity for discernment of the spiritual world, realizing the true nature of reality, which is described as something marked by suffering, impermanence, non-self and the three characteristics of existence. Complete development of prajna is vital to enlightenment. This is a view that has been shared by all Buddhists schools. Enlightenment, as a term, expresses how the fullness of prajna eliminates all aspects of ignorance and at the same time enabling the mind the see clearly, what reality is all about (Trainor, p. 70).

Enlightened individuals at their death enter parinirvana which means complete nirvana. This is an after death state and is beyond description as many texts put it. Nirvana has been discussed covering both its positive and negative sides; a realm where there exists no sun or moon, going or coming; an impersonal state transcending individuality. Basing on positive terms, nirvana is at times described as eternal, pure, tranquil and deathless. Philosophers in Buddhism are known to recognize nirvana as the only reality that is permanent in the cosmos. Nirvana is famously considered as indescribable. It is not as depicted erroneously by the early Western interpreters as “annihilation” meaning an extreme position rejected by the Buddha. An influential definition of nirvana used by the Mahayana tradition presents the famous dictum of the philosopher Nagarjuna. Practitioners in many of the existing traditions have endeavored with beauty and eloquence in expression of their experience and enlightenment (Trainor, p. 68).

According to Buddha's Noble eightfold path, the fourth noble truth offers the formula for getting rid of desire. The eight ideals described in the concept provide a “cure” for the continued cycle of rebirth, suffering and death.

These eight ideals are divided traditionally into three categories, which all mark the progressive path to nirvana. The three categories include; morality under right speech, right action and right livelihood; meditation under right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration; and lastly, the cultivation of prajna under right view and right thought. Buddha's definition of the Eightfold path rejected two ideas that are known to be central to the religions of the other world. The first idea is that there is no relationship or belief in the transcendent creator God. This God is the one who is known to

sustain the world and also people depend on him for salvation and security. The second idea is that of believing in an immortal soul. This idea is rejected as false consolation that is similarly unsupported by critical analysis. “ Soul,” just like “ God,” is described as a projection of the human mind that is desire-driven in the search for immortality and security (Trainor, p. 68).

Eightfold Path is emphasized by the Buddha as a practical guide that is goal-directed. He told his disciples to avoid engaging in mere intellectualism or idle speculations. There is one famous parable of, “ The Poison Arrow” which Buddha uses to describe a problem facing a man who has been hit by a poison-tipped arrow. The Buddha suggests about three questions which the man should possibly ask. The first question is if the man should inquire about the person who shot arrow and the second one about the wood type the arrow is made of. The third question is whether the shot was aimed low or higher. After analyzing a series of other similar scenarios, Buddha explains that only if the man practically addresses the mortal danger that is before him, through getting rid of the poison that would kill him, can he survive. Buddha cautioned his disciples about wasting their time on pointless philosophical inquiries; they will end up squandering their spiritual opportunities (Trainor, p. 71).

The path to nirvana has several classing stages. The first stage is that of stream-enterers who realize the illusion of the self and no longer doubt Buddha`s path. They thus expect more than seven rebirths before attaining nirvana. At an advanced stage, the devotee becomes a “ once returner”. He or she has a highly developed prajna, and this means that the person will experience further human life once. Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism

both consider Buddha as the highest form of being. Theravada traditions consider both the Buddha and arhat (the enlightened one) to have fully developed prajna (Trainor, p. 88). They also share the same realization of nirvana and pass into the parinirvana state (cessation of birth) (Harvey, p. 223).

Buddha taught his followers to be teachers and also to realize that they are different persons, each of whom bearing different status determined by their “ karma”. Depending on whether they are ordinary people, learners or adepts, each of them has to be instructed in a different way and led as required by Buddha`s path. Tradition puts emphasis on the opportunity of human birth that it should not be wasted regardless of the individual`s level. Life should thus not be wasted and instead, should be lived with a purpose. Buddhists have a hope of attaining nirvana in the current life they lead and if not, in their future rebirth (Trainor, p. 71).

Regarding the Four Noble truths, Buddha explains that if his vision of true knowledge failed to be fully and clearly understood, he stands not to have reached perfect enlightenment. To experience Nirvana, Buddhists should progress towards being more enlightened and gain a better understanding of the Four Noble Truth. This was to happen through meditation and critical reflection of what Buddhism is all about. Knowledge on the elements of the path, however, much sophisticated it appeared, was not sufficient. Following the path and polishing one`s understanding of each of the known elements will lead one to nirvana (Trainor, p. 71).

The Noble Eightfold Truth path presents the most vital summary of the Buddhist's practice. It is known to outline the necessary and progressive ways of realizing nirvana. The path is understood as the means of cultivating morality (shila) insight (prajna) and meditation (Samadhi) as has been stated. It stresses that progress in morality forms the foundation for the successful meditation. Successful meditation, on the other hand, serves the best platform for the development and perfection of wisdom or insight (Trainor, p. 72).

The stages of the Eightfold Path towards Nirvana underscore the practical emphasis of Buddhism as whether, in the goal of raising moral standards, good conduct, the society's material welfare or eliminating desire-driven behavior, cognition restructuring and in the end realizing enlightenment. Moral practices or shila which fall under right speech, right action and right livelihood represent the starting point Buddhist's path. A person cannot progress towards nirvana while lacking ethical integrity (Trainor, p. 72).

Regarding karma, a person cannot bear the balance of karma that warrants reaching the advanced stages of the path to nirvana while behaving in an immoral way. Morality of Buddhists, when stated positively, dictates the wisdom of cultivating compassion, discernment and detachment. The morality of Buddhists hinges on three areas of human behaviors. These include; speech, actions and livelihood. Right action as per a negative description means not to steal, kill or doing harm to others. These aspects of human behavior lead to negative karmic consequences poisoning the mind and thus predisposing a person to future immorality (Trainor, p. 72).

Meditation according to the Eightfold path refers to the right effort, right concentration and right mindfulness. The term meditation encompasses various techniques and traditions that work hand in hand with the mind. It is necessary for the development of the mind in terms of clarity of the mind, freedom from states of negativity, insights of conditioned reality that finally lead to nirvana. Meditation has its stem rooted in the experiences Buddha went through. Buddha`s meditation was directed by the itinerant teachers, the holy men he stayed with while he was in the forest. A practitioner of meditation following Buddha`s example may require a number of years of effort to master. He or she should also be guided by a mentor who is experienced so as to reach the advanced stages of meditation (Trainor, p. 72).

Meditation develops on mindfulness together with the two elements of concentration and insight. Right concentration according to the Eightfold Path, is also known as trance meditation (Samadhi), and it involves intense focus on one object of meditation. This leads one to a state of one-pointedness through which the duality of “ other” and “ self” is dissolved. Standing in the conditioned or the unconditioned is a notion in nirvana taken up by the Mahayana Buddhism. It is referred to as apratisthita-nirvana or the non-abiding nirvana. It is usually seen as different from the elements of nirvana discussed in the pali texts. This nirvana as discussed by gadjin Nagao is the nirvana attained by the Bodhisattvas. The basic idea here is that Bodhisattvas attain nirvana because of wisdom and with through compassion, and also a Buddhist has no intention of reaching nirvana after death (Harvey, p. 221).

Right view and right action are traditionally known as wisdom in Buddhism. They too culminate the means to nirvana. Right view is described as the thorough understanding of the Four Noble Truths while right thought is seen as a detachment from cruelty and hatred. These two aspects of human behavior are known to lead to enlightenment. Buddha`s teachings provide unique teachings of achieving this. The success of a person that is moving from morality to meditation is measured by the development of prajna (Trainor, p. 74).

Buddhism as a religion provides opportunities for other comparative studies with a diversified range of studies. Its emphasis on Middle way provides different guidelines for ethics and at the same time has allowed Buddhism as a religion to coexist with other differing beliefs, institutions and countries where it is practiced and customs. Its spirituals and moral teachings go parallel with other religions. The tenets of Christianity, as has been found by many scholars around the world have represented the subjects of close studies (Weeraperuma, p. 77).