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REVIEW ARTICLE

BUDDHISM: UNDERSTANDING ON SUFFERING

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism, one of the most ancient religions of the world. Upon returning from enlightenment, Buddha spent the rest of his long life preaching about his Four Noble Truths: 1) dukka, the reality of suffering, 2) samudaya, the arising or origin of dukka, 3) nirodha, the cessation of dukka, and 4) magga, the way leading to the cessation of dukka. Buddhism is evangelistic in nature because its followers believe that the Hindu unbroken cycle of existence, which is filled with suffering, can be broken after all. Suffering can be stopped; beings can be liberated from painful existence. This paper focuses on Buddhism's understanding of suffering. Having said that, it is not a comprehensive study of Buddhism. That is, it does not delve into every aspect of the religion and discuss all Buddhist doctrines extensively. In particular, this study attempts to answer to the following questions from the Buddhist perspective: 1) What is suffering? 2) What causes suffering? 3) What can one do to stop suffering? 4) How can one walk on the path toward liberation from suffering? The paper is designed to be both truthful and respectful. Upon completion, its prospective reader will hopefully go away with a clear understanding of suffering according to Buddhism. This paper focuses on Buddhism's understanding of suffering. Having said that, it is not a comprehensive study of Buddhism. That is, it does not delve into every aspect of the religion and discuss all Buddhist doctrines extensively. It does not offer a survey on the development of the religion over time or space. Rather, it takes a deep dive into the aspect of suffering, which is in fact right at the heart of the religion. It is hoped that once a prospective reader finishes reading the paper, he or she will know how Buddhists perceive suffering and how they deal with it in their daily lives.

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INTRODUCTION

The historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama according to tradition was born into an upper class ruling family as some part in the 6th century BCE in the area that is present day in Nepal, North of India. Allegedly at the age of twenty nine he left behind his wife, new born child and life of leisure and luxury in order to seek enlightenment. It has prophesized before his birth that he would either become a great spiritual leader or great ruler, his father in ruling attempted to shield Gautama from the pains of the world so that he would not be tempted to seek anything beyond the palace wall. However upon leaving the palace he within sickness, death, old age and spiritual seekers, sparking his interest in enlightenment. After practicing asceticism for six years, he attains enlightenment the age of thirty five while meditating under Bodhi Tree. The Buddha attained Nirvana or the ultimate state of awareness and knowing. Buddhism is a religion pretty centrally concerned with suffering. It never really stops studying the suffering of oneself and that of other people. These form a central focus of the religion, its practice and its philosophy.

One is encouraged to explore what suffering is, the various forms it comes in and their root causes. Though they can all be reduced to attractions and aversions based upon the illusion of real self, which desires certain things and is averse to others. The first teaching ever given by the Buddha was to five student monks in a deer park. The Buddha spoke of the Four Noble Truths he had discovered while struggling for enlightenment, these are the central teachings of Buddhism. It was the Buddha's first awareness that life brings with it illness, age, misery and death that lead him to search for a deeper understanding of how we live, and ways to end suffering.

What is suffering? (Dukka)

Buddhists define suffering from an experiential viewpoint. Buddhism essentially states that if you do not feel that you are suffering, then you are not. According to Buddhism, there are three aspects of suffering: ordinary suffering, suffering as produced by change and suffering as conditioned states (Bodhi *et al.*, 2000). The first aspect of suffering encompasses most sufferings commonsense to ordinary human beings. They include birth, old age, sickness, death, grief, lamentation and distress. These are physical and mental suffering. Lack of personal fulfillment is also suffering. While old age, sickness

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and death can be thought of as universal suffering in the sense that all people will inevitably experience them at some point in their lives, the rest are somewhat relative and definitely individual to the sufferer. The second aspect of suffering includes pleasant things that are subject to change. A moment of happiness or a pleasant condition in life demonstrates suffering as produced by change. When the pleasant things are no more, suffering comes as a result. However, it is noteworthy that Buddhism loudly preaches the doctrine of impermanence, which essentially says that everything is impermanent and subject to change, including happiness and pleasant conditions. The third and final aspect of suffering is much profound philosophically. It refers to the existence of human beings. Existence is suffering with birth as its beginning. Comprehending the third aspect of suffering is prerequisite to unlocking the Buddhist concept of ultimate liberation. Buddhists also define suffering from an individualistic viewpoint. While it does not deny the universality of suffering, it is much more concerned with the suffering felt by individual human beings. It is what one feels as opposed to what other people might feel; it is what one has done as opposed to what other people might have done; it is what one will do to get rid of suffering for oneself as opposed to what other people might help (Huber and Cheri, 2000).

Causes of suffering (Samudaya)

According to Buddhism, the root cause of suffering is craving and false views which make people greedy, selfish and attached to impermanent things. The most dangerous false view is the view about the self. Everybody tends to believe that there is an autonomous self within himself and it makes I am me and you are you. Buddhism believes firstly that there is no permanent self; that is, there is no 'I'. Everyone is "only a combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces or energies" (Lim *et al.*, 2003). There are no permanent souls. When one dies, he either vanishes into thin air or takes a re-birth in some form of existence based on his karma reading. Second, all things are so impermanent and therefore not worth attaching to. Buddhism teaches the doctrine of impermanence. "There is no permanent, unchanging substance, nothing passes from one moment to the next (Yamamoto and Isamu, 1982). According to Buddhism, nothing happens without a cause, and nothing leaves behind no consequences.

What to do to stop the suffering? (Nirodha)

Given the background in which he understands suffering, which is experiential and individualistic, and its cause, which is craving and ignorance, he unsurprisingly claims that suffering will cease at the moment craving and desire stops. Buddhism believes that craving and false views, which are the root cause of suffering as discussed previously, can be resolved with the mind. Once one understands the doctrine of impermanence and the doctrine of insubstantiality of the self, he will understand that there is no self to accumulate for and that things are so impermanent and ever-changing. This brings to two important decisions. First, it is foolish to spend life chasing after impermanent things (Buddhist Promoting Foundation, 1985). Second, these things are changing and disappearing quickly; they will not stay around for long and therefore one cannot

hold on to them anyway. All of this realization can be accomplished with the awareness of the mind, according to the teaching of Buddhism.

How to walk on path toward liberation from suffering?(Magga)

Buddha suggested the Eight-Fold Path to his followers. It is the responsibility of everybody to walk his own path in order to liberate himself. The Eight-Fold Path will lead Buddhist practitioners to the cessation of suffering. There are three aspects of the Eight-Fold Path: ethical conduct, mental discipline and wisdom (Mascaro and Juan, 1973). Ethical conduct is based on love and compassion for others. It includes three areas: Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. Mental discipline includes Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right concentration. It aims at suppressing evil and unwholesome states of the mind of the individual and promoting goodness which is already there in the mind. Wisdom includes Right Thought and Right Understanding. Right Thought refers to the thoughts of detachment and the ability to recognize and debunk false views. Right Understanding refers to the real understanding of things as they are and the ability to recognize the impermanent nature of all things. No one can walk the Eight-Fold Path on behalf of others.

Conclusion

Buddhists look inward to try to make sense of suffering, to identify its causes, to arrive at its solution and finally to derive a path to secure that solution. The Buddhist definition of suffering is totally experiential and utterly individualistic. It does not address the kind of suffering which does not seem to relate to human experience and emotion. It is true that Buddhism has a lot of wisdom to contribute the knowledge base of mankind. All should be brought to a realization that suffering is real. Like it or not, everyone will have to go through birth, old age, sickness and death. A lot of sufferings in the world would have been avoided if man stops and examines the motive of his actions. Suffering is real. Largely man made and therefore undeniable. It is caused by craving and delusions. The key to liberation involves understanding and to be awakened to the truth that there is no self to crave for and that everything is so impermanent that accumulation and attachment to anything is practically in vain. Eight-Fold Path prescribed by the Buddha will guide toward liberation from suffering.

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