



THE BUDDHA, HIS DHARMA AND THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Introduction

Buddhism is a religion that focuses on various traditions, beliefs, and spiritual practices that were based on the teachings of Siddharta Gautama or the “Buddha”. The founder of Buddhism, Gautama lived a life that was filled with turmoil and internal struggle. He escaped a life of privilege and wealth so that he could find the solution to existential suffering. In essence, Gautama’s experiences had a profound influence on the nature of Buddhist beliefs and practices. The common theme that emerges from the life of Gautama that suffering exists in the world while suffering has an origin and cessation.

Gautama encouraged to practice, meditation, and observation to counter negative thoughts and emotions. He advocated achieving unity of mind and body in order to overcome wickedness and temptation. Moreover, he believed in the concept of questioning beliefs and practising them before accepting them. The aim of this paper is to critically explore the extent to which Gautama’s experiences had an influence on the teachings, beliefs, and values of Buddhism. It will also identify to the extent that a Buddhist identity can be constructed despite the presence of multiple schools and sects. The paper will use a number of valid references in order to arrive at robust conclusions.

Experiences of Siddharta Gautama on Buddhist Beliefs and Practices

Gautama Buddha’s primary influence has been to promote good and abstain from evil while striving to purify the heart. Love, kindness, humanity, patience, wisdom, and compassion are the core traits of Buddhism. However, the primary concept has been that of harmlessness or ahimsa which is strongly correlated with that of compassion. The compassionate desire to prevent harm to anything in the world is the central tenet of Buddhism (Albahari, 2006).

Gautama was given the title “Buddha” which refers to being in a state of awakening. Buddhism asserts that there were many individuals who were given this title. Specifically, it refers to the individual who has identified the path towards nirvana and strives to end suffering. Moreover, the Buddha is considered to be any individual who disseminates the knowledge about ending suffering in the world (Gethin, 1998). Traditional accounts of Gautama assert that he was born in a privileged position with affluence and power. He suffered from an internal crisis regarding the nature of existential suffering. Subsequently, Gautama left his life and family to pursue the path of enlightenment and became a student of many ascetics (Gethin, 1998).

However, there was an internal schism inside him as the teachings of the ascetics proved to be unsatisfactory to satisfy his spiritual yearning. The use of insight and meditational practice assisted him in achieving a state of enlightenment that combated all forms of suffering. The remaining part of Buddha’s life was concerned with spreading these teachings to different parts of the world. Gautama’s experiences were a reaction to the state of dissatisfaction that existed in North India with respect to traditional religious practices (Ronkin, 2005).

The ritualism propagated by Brahmins of Hinduism was considered to be formalistic and devoid of any spiritual meaning for Gautama. Research states that such dissatisfaction appears not only in Gautama but also within Hindu traditions like Upanishads which assert that rebirth is influenced by the causal laws of karma (Ronkin, 2005). In other words, good actions will lead to pleasure while evil actions will cause negative implications for the individual. There was a struggle to explain how the endless cycle of rebirth and suffering could be ended in the Hindu traditions. Gautama’s assertion was that there was no concept of “I” or “mine” with non-self (anatman) being important for his followers. The concept of anatman is powerful because it involves the presence of a self that is transcendent in nature.

Consequently, Gautama's primary quest to find solution to that of existential suffering was that it was through good actions and beliefs that people would be liberated from the endless cycle of rebirth (Ronkin, 2005). Gautama's earlier experiences revolved around the notion of despair and disillusionment. His worries about temptation and wickedness meant that he was in a constant state of striving to find the answer to the question of existential suffering (Gombrich, 1996). He seeks to find a way to feel rejuvenated and regenerated. This means that it is only by following the right path that the spiritual struggle can be won. Buddha in essence teaches that it is through hard work and struggle that success can be attained within a short period of time. Buddha's concept was that suffering existed while it also had an origin and it could be ended. There was a path towards the cessation of suffering according to Buddha. The causes of suffering are traditionally outlined in Buddhism to be around twelve (Gowans, 2003).

However, some of these links have been identified as being a later compilation. Nevertheless, Buddha analyzed suffering by stating that it is a result of the psychophysical elements that seem to ignore the basic characteristics of sentient existence such as suffering and non-self. The interaction of the individual with the environment means that they will form attachments in the form of desire and aversion. Consequently, ignorance is strengthened in the context of sentient existence. The result is rebirth and the endless cycle of old age, disease, and death (Harvey, 1995). Gautama's life experiences were the key to escaping this vicious cycle by achieving the realization of the truth about sentient existence. This realization was considered to be a difficult task as desire and ignorance have become deeply entrenched in the minds of individuals.

Gautama found the path towards enlightenment through the use of various methods that would help to replace such habits with those that allowed individuals to have a broad view of the external environment. Training in meditation is also encouraged by Gautama as it helps the individual to

enhance their observation skills (Harvey, 1995). Philosophical rationality is a core essence of Buddhism which has been transmitted from Gautama who insisted that individuals should question every belief and practice on themselves. He was against the concept of blind faith as questioning and practice are parts of Buddhist beliefs. Gautama's experiences taught him that nothing is lost in the universe. This means that everything is transformed into something else (Gowans, 2003).

In essence, this is a major influence on the teachings of Buddhism as it means that animals or living things should not be killed or harmed by fellow human beings. Gautama's influence also enabled Buddhism to focus on the concept that everything changes whether it is animals, humans, plants, ideas, or anything. This is an important concept which means that Gautama's personal endeavours that sought to find wisdom and enlightenment constantly changed as he experienced different things and was able to find the path towards enlightenment (Gowans, 2003).

Buddhist Identity

Gautama considered himself to be a redeemed and regenerated person who was able to achieve the concept of enlightenment. He sought to accept the new nature which was all about striving to escape suffering by adhering to the Noble Eightfold Path. The Buddhist identity is about the inner strength of the followers of Buddhism. The concept of a Buddhist identity can be found in the various schools of thought prevalent in Buddhism such as the Theravada and Mahayana traditions. A central theme of all schools of Buddhism is the belief about Gautama as being the founder of the religion (Harvey, 2012).

Moreover, this means that Gautama is venerated as a compassionate, intelligent, tolerant, and wise leader who helped to outline the path towards living a life that was filled with esteem, grace, and tolerance. Another common element in the schools and sects of Buddhism is the goal of achieving

enlightenment and spirituality. The spiritual struggle is one that is filled with obstacles but it is eventually through faith and resilience that an individual is able to overcome them. A person's spiritual struggle would have overwhelmed him if they do not adequately practice restraint and patience (Murti, 2013).

The only way forward is to overcome the despair and agony that has a crushing impact on the soul. The message is clear that stubborn habits can be fought through an efficient and effective strategy. Additionally, it is by recognizing that actions can be influenced by anger and self-centeredness that individuals can hope to achieve understanding and love. Understanding the intentions of humans is important in Buddhism because they can either be positive or negative. It is important in realizing the negative intentions that the individual will be able to overcome problems in an efficient manner (Bapat, 2016). This deliverance is a special gift because it represents the triumph against existential suffering. It also increases the faith of the individuals.

It is with the right intentions and actions that individuals can improve their lives and create a better society.

The Middle way, dependent origination, Four Noble Truths, Noble Eightfold Path and the Three marks of existence are recognized by the Theravada and Mahayana traditions because they are concerned with organizing thoughts in a proper manner, developing observational abilities, and developing insight into the nature of humanity (Bapat, 2016). A Buddhist identity thus emerges where there are practical steps towards training and meditation that can help individuals to achieve liberation and enlightenment. In essence, the Buddhist identity is teaching that suffering power cannot be overcome without the ability to transform oneself from the narrow-minded thoughts and instincts. It is inevitably the ability of individuals to cultivate a life of attention, patience, and preservation which would lead to them putting the right efforts (Queen, 2012).

The body is considered to be a burden on the soul. The state of anxiety that exists has an impact on the soul. The sentence does not refer to being in a state of anxiety due to the burdens and calamities of life but due to the impact of sin and corruption. The evil morals and temptations are something that causes men to become liable to death. These evil actions and morals are something that causes humans to become like a filthy and stinking dead body. Consequently, the evil thoughts and actions seek to capture the mind and heart which creates dissatisfaction in the mind of the individuals (Lopez, 2009).

This does not mean that the Buddhist should be in despair and ignorance but they should express the ultimate desires of the soul which is to cultivate the right thoughts, observe through a broad perspective, and develop the ability to refrain from evil and promote good actions. This is a central theme of the different schools of Buddhism that helps to create a Buddhist identity. The current freedom is simply the first step in the road where greater things will come. Hence the deliverance is incomplete and partial according to Buddhism (Lopez, 2009).

Buddhists are to face the struggle against the evil temptations and actions. It is a continuous journey for individuals as they strive to attain spirituality and deliverance. The Buddhist identity asserts the development of the presence of mind so that awareness can be developed about physical processes and cognitive thoughts. The ability to remain focused is important because concentration helps the individual to contemplate on the reality of existence and to avoid the evil temptations and actions (Queen, 2012).

The common Buddhist identity provides an outline for the individuals so that they can live a life which is filled with truth and chastity. The mind represents the inner man who has been reinvigorated and renewed through patience and forbearance. The flesh is something that is

associated with the wicked actions that a human being does. Nature is imprinted in the mind which helps to regenerate and rejuvenate humans just like a newly born child (Queen, 2012).

The differences in Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism are reflected in some core concepts and practices. Theravada is considered to be rationalist and historical in nature. It does not have many rituals and rites because it places an emphasis on asceticism while withdrawing from worldly affairs in such a way that it helps the individual to focus on the meaning and purpose of life (Queen, 2012). In contrast, Mahayana focuses on rituals and mysticism while it also considers Buddhists to live in the external world. This is an important theme in Mahayana because living in the world is not considered to be a source of temptation because individuals can live completely moral and righteous lives while participating in the affairs of society.

Conclusion

Buddha, in essence, teaches that it is through hard work and struggle that success can be attained within a short period of time. Buddha's concept was that suffering existed while it also had an origin and it could be ended. There was a path towards the cessation of suffering according to Buddha. The causes of suffering are traditionally outlined in Buddhism to be around twelve. However, some of these links have been identified as being a later compilation. Nevertheless, Buddha analyzed suffering by stating that it is a result of the psychophysical elements that seem to ignore the basic characteristics of sentient existence such as suffering and non-self.

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