

Bauddh Religion and It's Cultural Heritage

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Introduction

Founder of Buddhism (Lord Buddha)

The word 'Buddha' is a title and not a name. It means 'one who is awake' in the sense of having 'woken up to reality'. Buddha, means 'the enlightened one'. And Gautam Buddha was one of the greatest religious teachers that the world has seen. His teachings expounded in Buddhism, are immensely popular in India ,Thailand ,Burma, China, Japan and other South Eastern Countries. The Buddha was born in 563 B.C. as Siddhartha to Shuddhodana the king of Kapilavastu in Nepal. His mother Mayadevi expired when he was just 7 days old and he was brought up by his stepmother Gautami. Siddhartha was made to lead a very sheltered life as the astrologers had predicted that he would give up worldly pleasures to follow a different path. The King wanted to avoid this at all costs and so did not let him out of the palace. He hoped that Siddhartha would one day become king. The royal family belonged to the Gautama Gothra of the Sakya clan of the solar race. Their kingdom Kapilvastu was between the Nepalese foothills and the river Raptu. The Shakayas were priestly-warriors, wealthy knights and landowners.

When Siddhartha had grown into an intelligent young man, he ventured out of his palace one day, and chanced on a few sights that changed the course of his life. During one of his few excursions, Siddhartha saw four things, which opened his eyes towards the harsh realities of life. He saw an old man suffering from the frailties of age, a sick man suffering from disease, a beggar suffering from hunger and he saw a dead body. All these events affected him immensely and Siddhartha finally came to the conclusion that nothing is permanent in life. The infirmities of old age, the pangs of hunger, the pain of sickness and end of life brought sufferings that he had never experienced. All these events in his life forced him to search for truth that eventually changed his life. This made Siddhartha very sad and he started to rethink his life and began to try to fathom the reason of existence. Seeing him so thoughtful, his father decided to get him married and get his mind off such serious topics. He was married to a beautiful princess called Yashodhara, who soon gave birth to a son whom they called Rahul.

Still could not understand the meaning of or reason for life and death. Despite this, Siddhartha found no happiness in materialistic pleasures and so left the palace in search of salvation - 'Moksh'.

He was only 29 years old. He roamed the country, meeting various sadhus and saints in his search for inner peace. He lived the life of a hermit and underwent rigorous 'tapasya' to achieve his purpose, but finally, one day he was very tired and so sat under the shade of a tree. He shut his eyes and was blessed with a divine light. This was the turning point, as he realized the truth is within every human being. The search outside was pointless. The tree under which he meditated came to be known as the 'Bodhi Tree', the tree of wisdom. And the place where this happened is still known as Bodh Gaya, now in north eastern part of India. It is believed that he attained nirvana on the day of the full moon in the month of Vaishakha. It became a great Holy Day for the Buddhists. It was also on this day Buddha gave his first sermon at Sarnath, also in the North Eastern India. This is why the Buddhists rotate the prayer wheels in the belief the prayers written on the wheels get dispersed on this day. The day when Prince Siddhartha became Gautam Buddha and again the day when he gave his first sermon at Sarnath.

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Soon after his enlightenment the Buddha preached to a small group of the curious and those who heard his words became his disciples. From then on the Buddha devoted the rest of his life to teaching those who sought his advice, his compassion, and his wisdom. The growth in the number of his disciples led to his establishment of the Sangha, the Buddhist monastic order. It was his disciples who passed along his teachings, by word of mouth, from generation to generation. Not until some considerable time after his death were the words of the Buddha recorded in written form. Finally Buddha liberated himself from the cycle of rebirth and achieved mahaparinirvana, also on the auspices of Vesak.

For 45 years, Buddha spread his message of a spiritual life. He did not believe in rituals but pointed to an Eightfold path towards salvation - that of right speech, understanding, determination, deeds, efforts, awareness, thinking and living. According to Buddhism, by following this path one could overcome desires, which were the root cause of grief and misery. Gautam Buddha established a new religion, which had no sects, classes or castes, that teaches the principle "Live and let live". It was Gautam Buddha, who taught Hindus of non-violence and eating vegetarian food. Hindus honoured Gautam Buddha and bestowed on him the title of 9th incarnation of Vishnu.

The Buddhist Sangha and Morality

Buddhism is unique among religions in a fundamental sense. It does not advocate invocation of any God. Salvation can be attained by controlling one's desire; as desire is the cause of suffering. The original Buddhism had neither God nor Devil. The emphasis was not on prayer but on controlling one's mind. In this sense it was more a worldly philosophy rather than a religion. But with the passage of time it acquired the nature of a religion complete with dogmas and rituals. Buddha's life-story is an eventful one. The most potent institution that Buddha established during his lifetime was the Sangha (monastic order) into which men were admitted irrespective of their caste. The members of the Sangha who were known as Bhikkus (beggars) had to lead a rigorous life devoid of all desires. Their daily needs were limited to those necessary for physical survival. Their only possessions were a begging bowl, yellow coloured loin cloth, a walking stick if necessary and a pair of sandals for the more delicate. They were to sustain themselves by the alms they received but were forbidden from expressly begging for alms. Alms were to be accepted if given willingly and if not the Bhikkus were to move on to the next house. Thus came into being a clergy, but which unlike its Hindu counterpart was not based on caste and which was oriented towards missionary activities rather than on the performance and upholding of rituals.

The break of Buddhism from other forms of worship that constituted Hinduism was almost complete in the lifetime of Buddha. This took the form of non-recognition of any personified Gods, spirits or the devil, and the near absence of rituals, repudiation of the caste system and the intense missionary activity of the monks which included rendering social service with the aim of alleviation of human suffering. Another significant aspect was that in the early stages all followers of Buddha were enrolled as members of the Sangha hence it was completely a missionary religion.

Relations Between Buddhism and Hinduism

Buddhism continued to grow steadily in the first few centuries after its birth. The reasons were its universal appeal, humane outlook, emphasis on missionary and social work and finally its peaceable methods that limited confrontation with the established local religions to a philosophical level. Thus even kings who patronised Hinduism did not feel it necessary to make a distinction between Hinduism and Buddhism in policy matters. Buddhism normally returned the sympathy of the ruling power by giving it a moral legitimacy amongst the lay

people. And although Brahmin orthodoxy did grudge the inroads made into it by the new faith there hardly ever was there active confrontation between the two faiths.

On the contrary there was an exchange of beliefs and attitudes between Hinduism and Buddhism. The Hindu insistence of vegetarianism and non-violence (Ahimsa) are borrowed from Buddhism. Hinduism in turn tried to absorb Buddhism within itself by making Buddha one of the incarnations of Vishnu. The growth of Buddhism received a tremendous boost in the 3rd century B.C.E. when Samrat Ashoka Maurya whose empire covered nearly the whole of India (including present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan) was converted to Buddhism.

Samrat Ashoka elevated Buddhism to the level of a state religion and sent missionaries not only to all parts of India but also to Sri Lanka, West Asia, Central Asia and China. In his days Buddhism is said to have spread in varying degrees up to Egypt and South-western Russia. Since the days of emperor Ashoka, Buddhist missionaries built majestic monasteries known as Viharas, Stupas and Chaityas. The simple ascetic character of Buddhism had received its first dent under the pampering effect of royal patronage. The religion continued to grow nevertheless. During the reign of Ashoka the third Religious Council was held at Pataliputra which was the capital of Ashoka's vast empire. But that Ashoka was not inimical to Hinduism is evident from one of the titles that he took viz. Deva-naam-priya (Beloved of the Gods).

After the fall of the Maurya Empire, Buddhism did not receive official patronage on a comparable scale for a long time. During the period after the Maurya Empire, India was beset with invasions from the Indo-Greeks, Kushanas, Parthia's etc. But most of these invaders acculturized themselves in a few years after their coming and many of their kings embraced either Buddhism or Hinduism. Prominent among them were, Menander (Milinda) who was an Indo-Greek and to whom is ascribed the Buddhist treatise called Milinda-Panho in which the king, posed certain questions to which answers were given by a Buddhist Sage called Nagasena. The next major royal patron of Buddhism was Kushana who was a Mongol king who ruled north India, Pakistan and Afghanistan in the 1st century B.C.E. In his reign) the fourth religious council was held at Jalandhara (Modern Jullundar in Indian Punjab). Now Buddhism had spread far and wide and had received royal patronage in varying degrees almost continuously from one king or another since Ashoka.

By the time the fourth religious council was held, the religion had vertically split up into two schools. One school had elevated Buddha to the status of a God and introduced worship of the Buddha's image (idol), it also evolved elaborate rituals which were derived largely from Hinduism, and gave up the rigorous ascetic life in monasteries, discarded Pall and accepted Sanskrit as the literary medium. These changes had far-reaching effects in narrowing the breach between Buddhism and Hinduism but at the cost of departing from the essence of the way of life that Buddha established. This school was called the Mahayana {Greater Vehicle) school or the northern school of Buddhism. On the other hand the Hinayana (Lesser Vehicle) school stuck to the original character of Buddhism with its emphasis on rigorous and simple living although idol worship gradually made its way into Hinayana also. This school is also known as Theravada (from Staieryavada i. e. principle of stability) is mainly prevalent in Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand.

Despite the split, Buddhism continued to grow steadily up to the reign of the Guptas. Since the reign of the Gupta kings (3rd and 4th centuries C.E.) the growth of Buddhism came to a standstill and gradually the decline set in. The reasons for this decline could be many but the principal one was to be the absence of royal patronage since the Gupta period, although there was no persecution either. The last known royal patron of Buddhism was Harsh Vardhana who ruled over a large part of northern India around the 7th century C.E. Harsha who was an ardent worshipper of the Hindu deity - Shiva, did not embrace Buddhism, but he extended many

favours to the religion. During his reign the fifth religious council was held at Prayaga (Allahabad).

No significant event took place thereafter in the history of Buddhism. But it is certain that upto the beginning of the Gupta period the religion was on its ascendance and its following in India was significant. From the Gupta period Hinduism seems to have undergone a revival, partly under the patronage of the Gupta kings. Buddhism then onwards was definitely on the decline. The intellectual onslaught of Brahmanic philosophers like Adi Shankaracharya seems to have had its toll in emasculating what was once a cohesive and vibrant way of life. Whatever the reasons, it is certain that the following of Buddhism declined sharply during and after the Gupta period.

It survived nominally as an intellectual tradition kept alive by the select monks who controlled the monastic universities like the one at Nalanda. These universities were highly respected as seats of learning and attracted students from abroad. Fa Hien, Huiyen Tsiang and I-Tsing who came from China were said to have studied at Nalanda and other centres of Buddhist learning. But from the 5th century Onwards, Buddhism declined as the religion of the masses. Its following seems to have been absorbed into Hinduism, although this could have also been the result not of formal conversion but of a gradual relapse of the Buddhist laity into the parent religion. The portrayal of Buddha as an incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu, and the absorption of many Hindu attitudes by Mahayana Buddhism, along with the absence of royal patronage to Buddhism (and the extension of this patronage to Hinduism during Gupta times) must have contributed to this effect. Whatever Buddhists that remained constituted elite who inhabited the Monasteries and rarely ventured out of them. Missionary activity was nearly absent.

The last fatal blow to this once virile religion came from a non-Indian impetus - the Muslim invasion of north India in the 12th century. The defeat of Prithviraj Chauhan and Jaichandra Gahadawal (Rathore) in 1192 and 1194 respectively by the Afghan raider, Mahmud Ghori opened up the Gangetic plains to the ruthless invader where the Buddhist (and Hindu) centres of learning were located. The destruction of monasteries and the slaughter of monks that followed the headlong rush, of the Muslim invaders, down the Ganges stilled the agony of this once glorious order into the silence of death.

Thus passed out of existence in the land of its birth a religion that touched the lives of millions of humans not only in India but in China, Japan, Korea and other countries of Central Asia and South-East Asia. Buddhism in India was to remain a dead religion until the 20th century.

Buddhism Resurrected in India in the 20th Century

In the mid 20th Century, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who was one of the architects of India's Constitution, gave Buddhism a fresh lease of life by embracing it a few years after India achieved independence. A significant number of members of those castes who were denied equal rights in the Hindu caste hierarchy also embraced Buddhism. Today an over-whelming proportion of Buddhists in India are these recent converts who term themselves as Nava-Baudha or Neo-Buddhists. A comparatively recent event of significance was the 6th religious council held at Rangoon in 1954 which came 1300 years after the 5th council held at, Prayaga in 643 C.E. in the reign of the last major pan-Indian emperor - Harsha Vardhana. The Rangoon council was also the first one to be held outside India.

Buddhism and Hinduism - Umbilical Marks

In the course of its eventful history Buddhism which began as a departure from the ritualism of the Hindu religion gradually adapted and absorbed many Hindu ideas and practices to the point that at times, the lines of distinction between the two religions (the parent and the

offspring) were blurred. The objective of Nirvana towards which every Buddhist is supposed to strive is undoubtedly an adaptation of the Hindu concept of Moksha. The difference is that for the attainment of Moksha righteous behaviour and the conformation of duties as assigned by the caste into which a person has been born is necessary, while for the attainment of Nirvana a person has to be free of all desires. But the essence of both concepts is the release from the cycle of re-birth. The daily life of the Buddhist Bhikkus (missionary ascetics) was evidently inspired by the concept and practice of Sanyasa which was the last phase of life a Hindu during which he was supposed to be free of all desires and to roam from place to place in search of spiritual enlightenment while spreading the gospel of righteousness among the people. The yellow coloured robes that the Buddhist Bhikkus donned were borrowed from the Saffron robes of the Hindu ascetic. Although as for the Buddhists the yellow colour was chosen to represent an autumn leaf which was once green but has inevitably turned yellow in conformation with the law that everything born has to decay and pass away.

Among the auxiliary Hindu practices which found their way into Buddhism, idol worship and the use of Sanskrit as the liturgical and scriptural language. The Buddhist conception of Buddha as a God and that in a later period after five thousand years when righteousness suffer an eclipse the Buddha will reappear on the earth. This Buddha who will be known as Maiterya will restore the rule of dhamma (law and religion). This idea implies belief in incarnations and re-incarnations on lines parallel to the Hindu concept of Kalki who, we are told, is to be the future incarnation of Lord Vishnu. But all said and done though Buddhism precariously came close to Hinduism it maintained its distinct entity unlike the Jaina religion whose proximity to Hinduism nearly made it a part of Hinduism. In its appeal Buddhism was not, like its parent religion Hinduism, restricted to India and Indians but spread far and wide.

Thus in Buddhism, India gave birth to a major international religion, while the Hindus continued their way. Buddhism was the world's first missionary religion and won its triumphs through missionary activity. The ancient Buddhist monks who carried the Master's message of peace, love and universal brotherhood were pioneers in such a mission in Human history. Buddhism is the only trans-national religion which has never preached malice against other faiths, nor have its followers ever indulged in a holy war against those of another faith. Buddhism has won its way by persuasion and never by the sword, nor has it ever used its position or power to compel conformity to its precepts. And whatever its defects, it has unquestionably done much to benefit the human race by introducing and perpetuating a higher standard of conduct in life. One is inclined to bow before the Buddha, not in homage to a deity but in recognition to a superior craftsman in the art of living.

Eightfold Path Of Buddhism

- Right view is the true understanding of the four noble truths.
- Right aspiration is the true desire to free oneself from attachment, ignorance, and hatefulness.
- Right speech involves abstaining from lying, gossiping, or hurtful talk.
- Right action involves abstaining from hurtful behaviours, such as killing, stealing, and careless sex.
- Right livelihood means making your living in such a way as to avoid dishonesty and hurting others, including animals.
- Right effort is a matter of exerting oneself in regards to the content of one's mind: Bad qualities should be abandoned and prevented from arising again; Good qualities should be enacted and nurtured.
- Right mindfulness is the focusing of one's attention on one's body, feelings, thoughts, and consciousness in such a way as to overcome craving, hatred, and ignorance.

- Right concentration is meditating in such a way as to progressively realize a true understanding of imperfection, impermanence, and non-separateness.

Buddhism:

In walking, just walk. In sitting, just sit. Above all, don't wobble.

Buddhism is a consciously directed journey on the path towards a rise above suffering. The achiever of this is called the Buddha — meaning 'the enlightened one'. It does not lay down the path. It suggests how to make the journey, what to look for, and assures that the journey indeed is a tough, demanding one. Buddhism is not a doctrine to which one can convert one's belief system and follow it unquestioningly. It is a truth to be realized by an individual in his own way and not via any prescribed, 'sworn-upon' method. Any rules, if at all, are meant to assist the people in earnestly striving for and attaining Buddhism.

There is no text endorsed by Gautama Buddha that lays down what Buddhism means, what it should mean, and what is the definite way to becoming a Buddha. Any knowledge related to this comes from the objective information (obviously difficult to get) about the life of Gautama Buddha and his recommendations to the people who expressed a desire to attain the knowledge that he had gained.

'Our life is shaped by our mind; we become what we think.' Dhammapada

What makes Buddhism interesting and different from most other 'consolidated bodies of belief or faith', and religions, is that the path was discovered by a man as ordinary as any of us. There is nothing divine about him – he became divine by his actions and Buddhism assures it is possible for everyone to attain the same divinity. Gautama Buddha was a man who decided one day to seriously pursue the answers to the questions that deeply intrigued him. The main question that Gautama Buddha was on the search for was the cause and cessation of human suffering. He'd seen it a part of every life. Everyone suffered in one way or the other, and for one reason or another. Gautama Buddha was profoundly disturbed to see misery pervading human life and wanted to understand the reasons for humans' subjectivity by it and how to discontinue that.

He tried to find his answers by trying different methods of what he thought would lead him to them. He became a pupil of well-known sages of his time, mastered different forms of meditation, and tried self-abjuration. He tried controlling his breath, holding it after inhaling till it felt the air would split his head, followed by reducing his diet to bare minimum that made his body extremely wasted. When all these attempts caused nothing but extreme stress to his health, he realized that hurting one's body is no use in gaining knowledge of the life and the world here and beyond. He learnt that path to knowledge need not be a dismal and joyless one. He thus, graduated from these methods.

Then he did what he incidentally had done once a few years ago as an adolescent one evening in his father's kingdom's crop fields – solitary peaceful simple meditation -- a comfortable feather-like dive into the depth of the mind. Gautama Buddha attempted to revisit this meditation again after all the tried and popular methods had failed. And this proved to be the right thing to do. He successfully re-experienced the contentment and tranquillity, reaching the depths of his consciousness. Thus, meditating for a long time, he consciously directed his mind to the questions he had set about to understand.

Eventually he did reach his answers. He succeeds in realizing that there is a cycle of suffering and there are causes for it. Realization of the main factors that characterized all human life and having found a way to master them, he felt an obvious freedom from the web of suffering that held its tentacles on human life. He could no longer be enslaved by it. He now well understood that to rise above the entrapment of suffering, is an ability that gives anyone an exalting feeling as you break free of the sense-desire influences, undergo a complete

annihilation of the sense of ego-self, the cessation of self-consciousness, and a freedom of the soul. As he became the Buddha, he shared this with other seekers and thence came Buddhism and the followers, rather seekers, of it. One is not a follower of Buddhism but a seeker of it.

The four truths that Gautama Buddha propounded are that: Suffering is universal; It is caused by desire. Suffering can be uprooted if desire is uprooted. That can be done by following the famous Eight Fold Path which includes: Right Understanding, Right Motives, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Meditation.

This spans the intellectual, moral and contemplative, thus helping one to live a holistic good life. The life of Gautama Buddha is at the same time an example and the message of Buddhism. The consciousness, with which Gautama Buddha realized the answers to his questions, inspiring others to set on to the path, was a very self-directed act and this autonomy of *choosing* the path to one's *chosen* destination is important to Buddhism. It is one's own conscious act, one's own conscious intentions and one's own conscious actions that take one where one wants to reach. This democratic sense also pervades into its opinion of 'karma' (explain later as a part of 'dependent origination') – which incidentally is an Upanishad one. It is the individual who decides his actions and his life.

Buddhism is a path towards knowledge and living with the knowledge that life does not exist without suffering and one must rise above it to live successfully with it. One must break the shackles of the cycle of desire, temptation, temporariness, disappointment, because these lead to suffering. It is as simple as it is difficult to realize. Buddhism requires active attentive realization of this. It does not recognize second-hand experiences.

Chanting of prayers cannot take you there, nor can ritual self-mortification nor can trance-like passive prescriptive meditation. You must walk the path yourself. And in this very sense and by allowing every human the agency to define and carve out his own life, Buddhism is accessible to everyone who really wants it and thus is very democratic in nature.

Some accounts claim Gautama Buddha to have proscribed his followers from sex, which I find difficult to believe for the obvious folly and impracticality of its abandonment, and also if it were true, I'm afraid it wouldn't leave Buddhism as democratic as Gautama Buddha wanted it to be, nor would this stand together with Gautama Buddha's support of

Vast emptiness, nothing holy:

Buddhism does not see human beings as pre-formed, unchanging, objective absolutes. It sees a human being as a constantly developing individual is ever-moving, just like the entire cosmos. Everything is moving in a constant journey, a wheel turning on its own and no grand being is doing it with some pre-determined plan. There is no divine being who is whole of his karma, habits, memories, experiences. An observing us from heavens. It is just us and our actions, and causes of those actions which lead to further actions – everything is a result of circumstances.

We do not need God to achieve salvation, peace and happiness. We can and must do it ourselves. This is one of the cardinal truths central to Buddhism and is popularly called 'dependent origination' ('*pratityasamutpada*'): all phenomena are constantly in an interdependent web of cause and effect. This interdependence can also be seen in Gautama Buddha's explanation of causes and conquering of suffering, and actions that can be undertaken to affect nirvana. In the same sense, the 'shoonyata' concept of Buddhism is a result of dependent origination, wherein every thing's meaning is dependent on other things as well that cause it or are caused by it.

Buddhism is about a human being's moral and spiritual awakening. One has to recognize it on his own and practice positive actions and strengthen himself to rise above the victimization of the sense-desire trap.

Buddhism is to be experienced, not to be learnt from any text. Gautama Buddha never wanted it to be canonized. Hence, he never authorized any attempt to record his teachings or his life in a written form because he wanted his experience (and the same path for everybody else) to remain democratic, un-supernatural, very human, nothing divine. This freedom from the constraints of rules and systems is one of the mainstays of Buddhism.

Nirvana:

It literally means 'blowing out'. In Buddhism it means 'the blowing out of the ego-self'.

Gautama Buddha is said to have explained the concept of a non-existent ego-self in this way: The 'I' is an ever-shifting, changing consequence of the 'skandhas' that make up our mind-body complex – mind, feelings, perceptions, intentions, and consciousness. Their inter-relationship keeps changing, and not one of these forms the absolute ultimate 'self' on its own. Hence, the 'I' is transient and impenetrable. This is also referred to as 'shoonyaata' where everything in itself is empty, and devoid of independent identity or existence. And this is Buddhism. Every meditation, every effort is towards this.

A person goes beyond existence and non-existence after nirvana. The Dhammapada says of it:

"He has completed his voyage, he has gone beyond sorrow. The fetters of life have fallen from him, and he lives in full freedom.' About Nirvana, Gautama Buddha is said to have said that it is, 'the unborn, the unageing, the unailing, deathless, sorrow less, undefiled supreme surcease of bondage."

Conclusion

Buddhism is very realistic because it refuses to worry about the unseen, the divine (the may be/the may-not-be), and only talks about the human life. It is truly 'personal' in nature — Buddhism does not demand any external form of ritual to be exercised, and this helps maintain its essence. By its dependent origination concept, it suggests that good leads to good, thus encouraging responsible and well-intended actions. By giving the agency for his life to every human, it is most truly autonomous and very efficiently lays the foundations of allowing the human spirit to flourish and exercise itself.

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