

BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY AND WOMEN'S EDUCATION – A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT:

Gautama Buddha is a chief exponent and great preceptor of Buddhism in 563 BC. The world saw the light of wisdom that perspective embodiment of knowledge, love and nonviolence. Buddhism was embraced by the rich and poor, the high and the low and attained knowledge, Rights, empathy, freedom in their life. People had relied towards four noble truths and eightfold path. There are three universal truths in Buddhism i.e. 1) Impermanence (Anitya), 2) Suffering (Dukkha), 3) No-Soul (Anatman). He advocated three baskets (Tripitakas). He introduced Monastic life as a model to all. The importance of woman education was duly recognized and emphasized in Buddhism. Education is a lofty one to eradicate suffering. Buddha had given permission to women to join sangha for education, liberty, equality and freedom from all savage traits of life.

Objectives:

1. To explore Buddha's struggle for knowledge and truth.
2. To know how Asia's culture became a world religion.
3. To enlighten real life and suffering.
4. To identify the importance of four noble truths and eight-fold path in life.
5. To distinguish karma and nirvana
6. To realize Buddhism's contribution for women education and emancipation.

Buddhism: its Origin and Growth

Gautama Buddha, Chief-exponent and preceptor of Buddhism, was born in 563 BC. Towards the end of the sixth century B.C., in the city of Kapilavastu, the capital of a small kingdom of the same name situated in Central India at the foot of the mountains of Nepal, north of the present kingdom of Oudh, the Buddha was born. His father, Suddhodana, of the tribe of the Sakyas, a descendant of the great solar race of the Gautamides, ruled over the country. His mother, Maya Devi, was the daughter of the King Suprabuddha.⁽¹⁾

Naturally in the sixth century B.C. that the world saw the Light of Asia, that perfect embodiment of knowledge, courage, love and sacrifice whose heart overflowed with purest emotion on seeing that human life was essentially fraught with misery and pain; who, moved by that spectacle to seek a remedy for men's ills, at the age of twenty-nine, boldly left not only the material luxuries of the Shakya Kingdom but also his beloved wife. After six years' rigorous religious austerities, at last found enlightenment as he lay emancipated under a tree near Gaya, dispelling the dark clouds of ignorance and conquering Mara, the Prince of Evil; who then preached the truth he had discovered. And Buddhism was embraced by the rich and the poor, the high and the low, the intellectual and the dull alike. It spread like wild fire far and wide from the lofty Himalayas to Cape Camorin and ranged beyond the frontiers of its homeland to Ceylon, Burma, Siam, Malaya, Java, Sumatra and then again to Nepal, Tibet, Mongolia, Korea, China and Japan. It became a world religion and a great cultural force at least in Asia⁽²⁾

Originating as a monastic movement within the dominant Hindu tradition of the day, Buddhism quickly developed in a distinctive direction. The Buddha rejected significant aspects of Brahmanic philosophy, but also challenged the authority of the priesthood, denied the validity of the Vedic scriptures, and rejected the sacrificial cult based on them. Moreover, he opened his movement to members of all castes, denying that a person's spiritual worth is a matter of birth.

The Buddha underwent a period of intense inner struggle. He began to preach, wandering from place to place, gathering a body of disciples, and organizing them into a monastic community known as the *sangha*. In this way he spent the rest of his life⁽³⁾ The Buddha was an oral teacher; he left no written body of thought. His teachings were transmitted as an oral tradition for several centuries, and were subsequently systematized and interpreted by various individuals and schools within India and elsewhere.

At the core of the Buddha's enlightenment was the realization of the Four Noble Truths.

(1) Life is suffering. This is more than a mere recognition of the presence of suffering in existence. It is a statement that, in its very nature, existence is essentially painful from the moment of birth to the moment of death. Even death brings no relief, for the Buddha accepted the prevailing Indian idea of life as cyclical, with death leading to further rebirth. (2) All suffering is caused by ignorance of the nature of reality and the craving, attachment, and grasping that arise from such ignorance. (3) Suffering can be ended by overcoming ignorance and attachment. (4) The path to the suppression of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path, which consists of right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right-mindedness, and right contemplation. These eight are usually divided into three categories that form the cornerstone of Buddhist faith: morality, meditation, and wisdom.⁽⁴⁾

Buddhism analyses human existence as made up of five aggregates or “bundles” (skandhas): the material body, feelings, perceptions, predispositions or karmic tendencies, and consciousness. A person is only a temporary composition of these aggregates, which are subject to continual change. Buddhists deny the permanent, independently existing self or soul (atman). The Buddha held that belief in such a self-result in egoism, craving, and hence in suffering. Thus, he taught the doctrine of anatman, or the denial of a permanent soul⁽⁵⁾

To the Buddha, all existence was characterized by “the three universal truths”: impermanence (anitya), suffering (dukkha), and non-substantiality or no-soul (anatman). The doctrine of anatman made it necessary for the Buddha to reinterpret the Indian idea of repeated rebirth in the cycle of phenomenal existence known as samsara. To this end he taught the doctrine of Pratitya Samutpada, or dependent origination. This 12-linked chain of causation shows how ignorance in a previous life creates the tendency for a combination of aggregates to develop. These in turn cause the mind and senses to operate. Sensations result, which lead to craving and a clinging to existence⁽⁶⁾ This condition triggers the process of becoming

once again, producing a renewed cycle of birth, old age, and death. Through this causal chain a connection is made between one life and the next. What is posited is a stream of renewed existences, rather than a permanent being that moves from life to life-in effect a belief in rebirth without transmigration⁽⁷⁾

Closely related to this belief is the doctrine of karma. The Sanskrit term karma literally means “action”, and as a technical term it refers to a person's intentional acts and their ethical consequences. Human actions lead to rebirth, wherein good deeds are inevitably rewarded and evil deeds punished. One's karma determines such matters as one's species, beauty, intelligence, longevity, wealth, and social status. According to the Buddha,⁽⁸⁾ karma of varying types can lead to rebirth as a human, an animal, a hungry ghost, a denizen of hell, or even among the various categories of gods.

The ultimate goal of the Buddhist path is release from the round of phenomenal existence with its inherent suffering. To achieve this goal is to attain Nirvana, an enlightened state in which the fires of greed, hatred, and ignorance have been quenched. Not to be confused with total annihilation, nirvana is a state of consciousness beyond definition. After attaining nirvana, the enlightened individual may continue to live, burning off any remaining karma until a state of final nirvana (parinirvana) is attained at the moment of death⁽⁹⁾

In theory, the goal of nirvana is attainable by anyone, although in early Buddhism it is a realistic goal only for members of the monastic community. In Theravada Buddhism an individual who has achieved enlightenment by following the Eightfold Path is known as an arhat, or worthy one, a type of solitary saint⁽¹⁰⁾ The ethic that leads to better rebirth, however, is centered on fulfilling one's moral duties as a member of a family or society. It involves acts of charity, especially support of the *sangha*, as well as observance of the five precepts that constitute the basic moral code of Buddhism. The precepts prohibit killing, stealing, telling lies, sexual misbehavior, and the use of intoxicants. By observing these precepts, the three roots of evil-lust, hatred, and delusion-may be overcome.

Shortly before his death, the Buddha refused his disciples' request to appoint a successor, telling them to work out their own salvation with diligence⁽¹¹⁾ At that time Buddhist teachings existed only in oral traditions, and it soon became apparent that a new basis for maintaining the community's unity and purity was needed. Thus, the monastic order met periodically to reach agreement on matters of doctrine and practice.

The Buddhist canon is known as the Tripitaka, or Three Baskets, because it consists of three collections of writings: the Sutta Pitaka, a collection of discourses; the Vinaya Pitaka, the code of monastic discipline; and the Abhidhamma Pitaka, which contains philosophical, psychological, and doctrinal systemizations and classifications.

The Visuddhimagga is the masterpiece of the most famous of Buddhist commentators, Buddhaghosa (early 5th century AD). It is a large compendium summarizing Buddhist thought and meditative practice. Theravada Buddhists have traditionally considered the Tripitaka to be the recorded words of Siddhartha Gautama. Mahayana Buddhists have not limited their scriptures to the teachings of this historical figure, however, nor has Mahayana ever bound itself to a closed canon of sacred writings.

From the first, the most devoted followers of the Buddha were organized into the monastic *sangha*. Monastic life was governed by the rules of the Vinaya, one of the three canonical collections of scripture. The *sangha* included an order for nuns as well as for monks, a unique feature among Indian monastic orders.

Lay worship in Buddhism is primarily individual rather than congregational. Since earliest times a common expression of faith for laity and members of the *sangha* alike has been taking the Three Refuges, that is, reciting the formula “I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the dharma. I take refuge in the *sangha*”. Although technically the Buddha is not worshipped in Theravada, veneration is shown through the stupa cult.

One of the lasting strengths of Buddhism has been its ability to adapt to changing conditions and to a variety of cultures. It is philosophically opposed to materialism, especially of the Marxist-Communist variety. Buddhism does not recognize a conflict between itself and modern science. On the contrary, it holds that the Buddha applied the experimental approach to questions of ultimate truth.

In Thailand and Burma, Buddhism remains strong. Reacting to charges of being socially unconcerned, its monks have become involved in various social welfare projects. Although Buddhism in India largely died out after the 12th century, resurgence on a small scale was sparked by the conversion of 3.5 million former members of the untouchable caste, under the leadership of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, beginning in 1956. A similar renewal of Buddhism in Sri Lanka dates from the 19th century.

Growing interest in Asian societies and spiritual values in the West has led to the development of a number of societies devoted to the study and practice of Buddhism.

Buddhism Views on Education and Woman

Buddhistic contributions to the philosophy of education have been tremendous. The Buddha himself is understood as the teacher (Sattha).

The notion of education entails many subsidiary notions, of ignorance and knowledge, of teacher and student. In the case of Buddhism and of Indian religions in general, ignorance (*avijja*, *avidya*) is never the mere lack of information. It is an expression of the fundamental human condition. It follows, then that knowledge (*Panna*, *Prajna*) cannot be reduced to information, but is a radical restructuring of the way in which we know and it is the case that, in Buddhism, this restructuring of the way in which we know has very direct stereological impact. Through the development of *Panna* or *Prajna*, one develops insight into the habitual patterning of mind and the skillful means (*Upaya*) as to how one cuts through such patterns. This learning process leads to the desire to work for the welfare, of all living beings, so that the mark of learning in Buddhism has been compassion. Buddhist education, then has begun with insight into individual's suffering and has devoted itself to the alleviation of the suffering of all. ⁽¹²⁾

The goal of Buddhist education is lofty one to eradicate suffering. Buddhist educators were very diligent in providing a course, which provided many penultimate goals enroot to this final goal. While Buddhism is tautological in the sense that all teaching is understood in the content of progress towards Nirvana.⁽¹³⁾

The importance of education was duly recognized and emphasized in Buddhism. The education that was imparted in Buddhist institutes was 'an education of the kind that lifted the savage to the sage and the saint, the barbarous to the fraternal, the warring to the peace.

Since the conception of Dharma was a most dominant feature of Buddhist culture, its stamp is evident on education also. The educational ideals followed the dictums and dictates of sacred Law and tradition, and never conflicted with the general philosophy of life which was built on an awareness of the temporal nature of the phenomena that surround us on the one hand, and a postulation of a supreme spiritual goal which transcends the world of sense on the other.

Thus, education in Buddhism was conceived as a process of creative self-culture, and aimed at constant growth and constant illumination of life, ultimately leading to perfect awakening, resulting in the climax of all striving. The aim of education to illumine life and to give wisdom, which is the supreme eye. It disciplines and subdues the human instincts and renders the individual noble and affable.

The Buddhist notion of education must always be understood in the content of overcoming avail, the fundamental egoistic structuring of one's experience, so a Buddhist notion of teaching must be understood as aiding the overcoming of suffering, and not merely the conveying of information. Of course, for a Buddhist this essentially involves the teaching of the Dhamma, it also involves instruction in these more 'secular' matters such as medicine and agriculture. In so far as ignorance of these matters redounds the suffering of the laity, Buddhism has rightly understood it the duty of the Sangha to provide secular as well as religious education from classical to contemporary times⁽¹⁴⁾ The Buddhist monastic centers are particularly suitable in the India context for the development of higher secular learning.

There are many instances, which show that education of women was prevalent in Buddhist period. Women were permitted by Lord Buddha to join Sangha. Buddhism attracted a large number of women and they became lifelong students of its philosophy. Sanghmitra, the sister of Ashoka went to Ceylon for preaching the principles of Buddhism. Subha, Anupma and Sumedha were the great preachers of Buddhism.

The life of women who came from the higher strata of the Society had a privilege to enjoy comforts of life and they were more cultured and accomplished than working class women, who had to struggle for existence. These women got more scope to educate and elevate themselves. Naturally, they were philanthropic, religious intelligent and possessed a breadth of vision.

Conclusion:

- Indeed, Gautama Buddha is a father of non-violence.
- He opened new vistas of knowledge, courage, love and sacrifice in human life.
- Buddha denied Dogma and advocated question & Answer method.
- He explained that desire is the root cause of all suffering in life.
- Buddha was an oral teacher and brought significant changes in human life.
- His Noble Eightfold Path is sufficient to lead a peaceful life and prosperity.
- He is idealistic as well as materialistic philosopher.
- The Three baskets (Tripitaka) had explained three ways for Nirvana.
- Monastic life was more important in Buddha teaching.
- Buddha strongly denied a caste system and its social untouchability.
- He did not accept ignorance (avidhya) of human being.
- Buddha had encouraged women education.
- Buddhism had given an opportunity for women to join in Sangha.
- Buddha had given liberty, freedom, and justice for women without any gender bias.

Societies, Communities, Institutions and people should learn and receive some Noble tenets/teachings from the Buddhism.

References:

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