

## THE BUDDHIST APPROACH TO OVERCOMING SUFFERING.

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The founding figure of the Buddhist religion, Gautama Sakyamuni was born about six centuries before Christ, and, just as Jesus was born into the Jewish religious tradition, Gautama was born into a Hindu society. It could be argued that Jesus did not intend to found “a new religion”, but was offering a universal innovation, so it is true that the Buddha, for so Gautama came to be known, was not intending to found a new religion, but was offering his insights as a universal truth. However, in order to understand the Buddha, we have to say some things about the Hindu background, since all the people that he taught were in fact Hindus.

Hindus have some fundamental beliefs. The only one that the Buddha retained throughout his life is that one’s ordinary, natural intelligence, unless enlightened through deliberate practice, is bound to illusions, mistaken conclusions about reality, which the Hindus called “maya”. Enlightenment must be sought in order to overcome such errors as the unenlightened mind is bound to make.

Hindus also believed in reincarnation, namely that the soul changes bodies from one birth to the next, not unlike one changes socks or shirts between occasions of laundering them. Hindus also believed that society is to be divided into four groups of social orders, castes, as we call them, named Brahmin, Sakya, Vaishya and Sudra. People belonging to these different castes have different rights and obligations. The most highly respected caste was that of the Brahmins, the priests, sages, scholars, and keepers of the traditional lores; the next most privileged were the sakyas, the rulers, governors, generals, and other officials; the third down the line were the vaishyas, merchants, traders, producers, and lowest, the sudras or servants who performed menial tasks. Even lower were those who did not belong to any of these groups, the “outcastes”. Gautama was born into the Sakya caste, privileged, but subordinate to the Brahmins. In general, the members of that group had to honour and pay a variety of tributes to a variety of Brahmins, Gautama, who sought enlightenment, came to reject this form of social organization, and eventually taught that people should not look to Brahmins for wisdom and advice, but rather, be “lamps unto yourselves”.

He undertook a rigorous search for enlightenment, overcoming “maya”, and when he found it, he took to teaching – not the doctrines of a new religion in contrast with Hinduism, but a universal truth, that should be persuasive to all. However, the audiences he was surrounded by were all Hindus, and he knew what their presuppositions were, and did not seek to reject them.

He summarized his teaching in what has come to be known as The Four Noble Truths. The first of these is that suffering is inherent in the very nature of things; the second

concerns the source or origin of suffering in craving; the third, that suffering can cease; and the fourth: the path to the cessation of suffering is “the Eight-fold Path”.

Thus, you see, the very heart of Buddhism is to help overcome suffering. This desire, to overcome suffering, is rooted in “karuna”, usually translated as “compassion”, and is certainly no different from the notion of loving all sentient beings – not just humans. This is the primary concern of the Buddha, and he is not wishing to establish a new and different religion. All who follow his teaching, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian or pagan, can overcome suffering.

Of course, as said previously, the people whom he addressed were Hindus. But when some of his devotees were asking about metaphysical or theological matters that puzzled them, he responded: “Did I promise to resolve such problem?” To which the response was: “No”. “What then, did I promise?” “To overcome suffering” “Well, the issues you ask about do not contribute to this concern”. And so he remained silent on such matters.

What then, is the way to overcome suffering? The Eightfold Path can be divided into three subsegments: Wisdom, Ethical Discipline and Lifestyle, and Mental Discipline and Lifestyle. Wisdom is the first two of the Eightfold Path: Right Understanding and Right Intention. The next three are ethical: Right Speech, Right Action and Right Means of Livelihood. The final three are related to Mental Discipline: Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

One needs to examine each of these more fully, and time does not permit us to do so here and now. But the Buddha’s insight is that although, mistakenly, we attribute suffering to external matters, we, ourselves, in misinterpreting and misunderstanding reality, are the source of our miseries. Usually we associate suffering with disease, pain, poverty, want, discomfort and death. These are, of course, aspects of reality. But they become experienced as suffering because we interpret them with our natural feelings and moods, that turn them into suffering. There are four natural feelings or moods that we must overcome in order to eliminate suffering. These are: clinging, desire, resentment and fear.

If we divide our reality into four general types, we can say that the “all” is divisible into the good actuality, the good future possibility, the bad actuality and the bad future possibility. The good actuality we cling to, not recognizing the transiency and impermanence of all that is real. So, not letting go of the actual good as it evanesces is the reason that what is actual good is experienced as suffering. Knowing that pleasures, joys, health, youth and life itself are all impermanent frees us from clinging, and thus liberates us from experiencing the pleasurable, desirable aspects of reality as suffering, the anxiety that these shall vanish. The future good is what we desire, and the very fact that we desire what is not there, makes the present unsatisfactory, a source of suffering. The actual unpleasant, such as disease, pain and death we respond to with resentment. Why did this happen? Why did this happen to me? It is the resentment that makes the apparently negative a source of suffering, for the truth is that all these, too, are transient, and if we can recognize them as events, actualities that we can weather and from which

we can learn, then they can be accepted without suffering. Finally, the future unpleasant, our own death, eventual losses and changes in the direction we deem negative, we entertain with fear. Overcoming clinging, desire, resentment and fear empowers us to accept and embrace whatever comes our way, and escape from suffering.

This is the Buddha's compassionate and universal teaching. Of course, over time Buddhism became a religion, giving rise to practices, devotions, texts and arts that the Buddha did not teach. This is so in Christianity as well. Jesus did not have the New Testament; there were no churches or masses, no Christmas traditions or weekly observances. They grew out of the original ministry of Jesus. Similarly, Buddhism developed into a religion as it spread through different peoples and regions over the centuries. But the central facts of the teaching of the Buddha is to claim that this transient world is all there is; the belief and hope in permanency and the substantiality of separate entities, individuals, is essentially illusion and deception. There is no permanent individual self, nor is there some eternal permanent, transcendent entity such as the God of the Judaeo-Christian-Muslim traditions' God or Allah; if we can accept the flow of the here and now, and concentrate on the what is, accepting it as dynamic and flowing, we can live a good life, which should be characterized by ethical behavior and compassion to all.

Buddhists do not believe in an afterlife, nor do they think we have a reincarnating soul. When death comes, it comes, and we can even choose or will it when the time comes. Of course, sometimes death intrudes in our lives, and the Buddha knew this. One woman, who lost her child, and came to the Buddha for comfort and advice was told to bring a mustard seed from a family who has not known death. She searched diligently for that seed, but found no family from whom she could bring one to Gautama. She then learned that death, as well as the other so-called "negativities" such as pain, sorrow, disease, famine etc. are aspects of the flow of reality, and if we can achieve right understanding, we can be delivered from the suffering these cause for the unenlightened.

Thus, overcoming suffering has to do not with eliminating those things we tend to think are the causes of suffering, but rather, gaining a perspective that can pay attention to the present as transient, and hence full of beautiful and joyous matters, but also, of their opposite, all of which are impermanent, but as such, satisfactory.