

The Philosophy of Buddhism as seen by Psychologists and Philosophers



(samma samadhi).

"The religion of the future should transcend a personal God and avoid dogma and theology. Covering both natural and spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things natural and spiritual as a meaningful unity. Buddhism answers this description ... If ever there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs, it would be Buddhism" – Albert Einstein (1879-1955).

Buddha was mainly concerned with reality and did not consider him to be any holier than any other person and asked his followers not to treat his teachings or words as law but to test them before their acceptance. The teachings of the Buddha are always open to scrutiny. "Come and see for yourself (ehpassiko)," says the Buddha. A scientific empiricist, Buddha was considered as the first psychologist by scholars.



Dr Mathu H. Liyanage

Yet, another eminent philosopher who is considered as one of the fathers of Western Philosophers, Socrates, was of the view that unexamined life was not worth living. Most Buddhists would agree with this sentiment because of the logical and rational examination of man and his life. This led most schools and traditions to accept that Buddhism has a strong philosophical flavour.

People are obsessed with permanence which causes suffering and dissatisfaction if it changes even by facts and events beyond their control. In fact, it is the mind that brings about dissatisfaction as a reaction to changes in their lives.

It is the Greek philosopher Heraclitus who stressed on impermanence by citing the example of a river. It is not possible, he said, to step into the river twice, meaning that a river is constantly changing over time and that a person can step into it for the second time but the water, which made up the river, will meanwhile have been

replaced by different water.

This truth was strongly backed up by Socrates' pupil Plato's Allegory of the Cave, a narrative to show that people chained in a cave forced to face a wall on which shadows are cast by graven images moved about behind their backs but in front of a fire. They mistake these shadows for reality. By breaking free of the chains, they examine the sources of the shadows and how they are distortedly projected. Out of the cave, their minds are free to understand the realities of the outer world and how things are imperfect from what they were accustomed to or forced to believe inside the cave.

Buddha, who was born to a princely family, left the palace, his wife and child, to lead the life of an ascetic in search of the causes and cessation of suffering (Dukkha) which not only involves pain arising out of old age, sickness, loss or separation from loved ones but also represents general unsatisfied feeling. His mission being a failure, he sat under a Bo tree and meditated, and the Four Noble Truths, the truth of suffering (Dukkha), the truth of the origin of suffering (Samudhaya), the truth of the cessation of suffering (Nirodha), and the truth of path to the cessation of suffering (Magga) were realized as he attained Buddhahood or Enlightenment.

Buddha taught that the root of all suffering is desire and tanha which come in the form of (1) greed and desire (2) ignorance or delusion and (3) hatred and destructive urges.

The path to the cessation of suffering (Magga) is a set of principles called the Eightfold Path or the Middle Way (avoidance of both indulgence and severe asceticism which the Buddha found fruitless in his search for enlightenment).

The Eightfold Path consists of (1) Right Understanding (samma ditthi), (2) Right Intention (samma sankappa), (3) Right Speech (samma vaca), (4) Right Action (samma kammanta), (5) Right Livelihood (samma ajiva), (6) Right Effort (samma vayama), (7) Right Mindfulness (samma sati) and Right Concentration

According to the modern cognitive psychology, the Noble Eightfold Path could be seen as cognitive dissonance which is the perception of incompatibility between two cognitions (mental states, images or constructs).

Dr GayWatson, writer concerned with the dialogue between Buddhist thought, psychotherapy and the Mind Science in her essay Buddhism Meets Western Science points out that Buddhism has always been concerned with feelings, emotions, sensations, and cognition and that Buddha speaks of cognitive and emotional causes of suffering; the emotional cause being the desire with its negative opposite, aversion. The cognitive cause is ignorance of the way things occur, and that all things are unsatisfactory, impermanent and without essential self.

The noble eightfold path is, from this psychological viewpoint, an attempt to change the patterns of thought and behaviour.

Professor Malcolm David Eckel of Boston University says, "For all its complexity, Buddhist philosophy is meant to be a tool to help a person see reality clearly and be free from the illusions that cause suffering and drive the cycle of death and rebirth."



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