

SOME SALIENT CHARACTERISTICS OF BUDDHISM

“Well expounded is the Dhamma by the Exalted One to be self-realised, with immediate fruit, inviting investigation, leading on to Nibbāna, to be comprehended by the wise, each for himself.”

— Majjhima Nikāya

Foundations of Buddhism



The four noble truths, which the Buddha himself discovered and revealed to the world, are the chief characteristics and the unshakable foundations of Buddhism.

They are suffering (the *raison d'être* of Buddhism), its cause, i.e., craving, its end, i.e., Nibbāna (the *summum bonum* of Buddhism), and the middle way.

The first three represent the philosophy of Buddhism, while the fourth represents the ethics of Buddhism in accordance with that philosophy.

All these four truths that constitute the Dhamma of the Buddha are dependent on this body itself. They are incontrovertible facts wholly associated with man and other beings.

Whether Buddhas arise or not these truths exist in the universe. It is the Buddhas that reveal them to the world.

Buddhism rests on the pivot of suffering. Although Buddhism emphasises the existence of suffering yet it does not follow that Buddhism is a pessimistic religion. On the contrary it is neither totally pessimistic nor totally optimistic but realistic.

One would be justified in calling the Buddha a pessimist if he had merely emphasised the truth of suffering without suggesting a means to end suffering and gain eternal happiness.

The Buddha perceived the universality of sorrow and prescribed a remedy for this universal sickness of humanity. The highest conceivable happiness, according to the Buddha, is Nibbāna, which is the total extinction of suffering.

The author of the article on “Pessimism” in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* writes:

“Pessimism denotes an attitude of hopelessness towards life, a vague general opinion that pain and evil predominate in human affairs. The

original doctrine of the Buddha is in fact as optimistic as any optimism of the West. To call it 'pessimism' is merely to apply to it a characteristically Western principle according to which happiness is impossible without personality. The true Buddhist looks forward with enthusiasm to absorption into eternal bliss."

Happiness

The Buddha does not expect his followers to be constantly brooding on the ills of life and so make their lives unhappy.

Joy (*pīti*) has to be cultivated by every Buddhist as one of the essentials or prerequisites of enlightenment. In the opinion of many unbiased writers, Buddhists are reputed to be the happiest people in the whole world. They have no inferiority complex that they are wretched sinners.

The members of the noble order, who lead the holy life in the fullest possible manner, are perhaps the happiest persons. "*Aho sukhaṃ, aho sukhaṃ*"—"Oh, happy indeed! Oh, happy indeed!" and "We shall be living in Joy"—are some of the oft-repeated favourite sayings of his followers.

One day a certain deity approached the Buddha and questioned him thus:

Who in the forest make their wonted haunt—
The saintly liver of the holy life—
Who by one daily meal do break their fast:
Tell me how look they so serene of hue?²⁶⁵

The Buddha replied;

They make no lamentation o'er the past,
They yearn not after that which is not come,
By what now is do they maintain themselves;
Hence comes it that they look serene of hue.

Happily the bhikkhus live in the eternal present with no worries about either the past or the future.

Causal Law in Terms of Happiness

In the Saṃyutta Nikāya is found an interesting interpretation of the dependent origination (*paticca samuppāda*) in terms of happiness. The Buddha says:

Suffering leads to confidence (*saddhā*); confidence to rapture (*pāmojja*);
rapture to joy (*pīti*); joy to tranquillity (*passaddhi*); tranquillity to hap-

265. *Kindred Sayings*, part 1, pp. 7, 8.

piness (*sukha*); happiness to concentration (*samādhi*); concentration to knowledge and vision of things as they truly are (*yathābhūta-nāṇa-dassana*); the knowledge and vision of things as they truly are to repulsion (*nibbidā*); repulsion to non-attachment (*virāga*); non-attachment to deliverance (*vimutti*); deliverance to the extinction of passions (*taṇhakkhaya*); i.e., to arahantship.²⁶⁶

This important passage clearly indicates how suffering can lead to happiness and ultimately to sainthood.

Tolerance of Buddhism

No blind faith is necessary to understand these four noble truths. The first two Truths, which are mundane (*lokiya*), can be experienced by worldlings themselves. The second two Truths, which are supramundane (*lokuttara*), can be experienced by attaining saintship.

It is on the bedrock of these facts, which could be verified by personal experience and tested by anybody, that the Buddha-Dhamma is built, and not on the fear of the unknown. Buddhism is therefore rational and intensely practical.

In the Dhamma there is nothing that is impractical or irrational. The Buddha practised what he taught; he taught what he practised. What he most emphasises in his teaching is practice, for creeds alone cannot purify a person.

The Dhammapada states:

Though much he recites the sacred texts but acts not
accordingly, that heedless man is like a cow-herd who
counts others' kine; he has no share in the blessings of a
recluse

— v. 19

A rational and practical system cannot contain any mysterious or esoteric doctrine. In the Parinibbāna Sutta the Buddha emphatically declares:

I have taught the truth without making any distinction between esoteric and exoteric doctrine; for in respect of the truth Tathāgata has no such thing as the closed fist of a teacher who keeps something back.²⁶⁷

Anantaram and *abāhiraṃ* are the words used by the Buddha. If the Buddha had thought—"This much of my doctrine I will not teach others," or "Only this much of my doctrine I will teach others," he would have fallen into the category of teachers who keep a closed fist. If the Buddha had thought, "To these persons I will teach," or "To these per-

266. Saṃyutta Nikāya, vol. ii, p. 32; *Kindred Sayings*, part ii, p. 27.

267. D II 100; S V 153.

sons I will not teach,” the Buddha would have created an inner circle and outer circle. The Buddha makes no such distinction.

With respect to secret doctrines the Buddha says in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*.²⁶⁸

O disciples, there are three to whom secrecy belongs, and not openness. Who are they? Secrecy belongs to women, not openness; secrecy belongs to priestly wisdom, not openness; secrecy belongs to false doctrine, not openness. The doctrines and rules proclaimed by the perfect Buddha shine before all the world and not in secret.

It is true that the Buddha had not expressed his view about some problems that perplex mankind. He was characteristically silent on these controversial subjects because they were irrelevant to his noble mission and unessential to one's emancipation.

On a certain occasion a certain bhikkhu, named Māluṅkyaputta, approached the Buddha and impatiently demanded an immediate solution of some speculative problems on the threat of discarding the robe forthwith. He said:

Lord, these theories have not been elucidated, have been set aside, and rejected by the Exalted One—whether the world is eternal or not eternal; whether the world is finite or infinite; whether the life-principle (*jīva*) is the same as the body or whether the life-principle is one and the body is another; whether the Tathāgata, after death, is or is not; whether the Tathāgata, after death both is and is not; whether the Tathāgata, after death neither is nor is not.

The Buddha advised him not to waste time and energy over such idle speculation which was detrimental to moral progress:

It is as if a person were pierced by an arrow thickly smeared with poison and he should say to the surgeon who wants to extract it: I shall not allow the arrow to be extracted until I know the details of the person who wounded me, the nature of the arrow with which I was pierced, etc. That person would die before this would ever be known by him. In the same way that person would die before these questions had ever been elucidated.²⁶⁹

The solving of these metaphysical questions did not lead to disenchantment, passionlessness, enlightenment, or Nibbāna.

On another occasion when his disciples sought information about these points he silenced them by citing the parable of the elephant and blind men.²⁷⁰

268. Part 1, p. 261.

269. Cūḷa Māluṅkyā Sutta (MN 63).

270. See Udāna, vi, p. 4; Woodward, *Some Sayings of the Buddha*, pp. 287, 288.

An elephant was presented to some blind men to describe what it looked like. Those who touched the different parts of the elephant's body expressed their own peculiar ideas about the elephant. They argued amongst themselves and their arguments naturally ended in a quarrel.

Useless speculations that do not tend to emancipation and that merely gratify curiosity, the Buddha dismisses with his characteristic silence.

Buddhism does not profess to provide an explanation to all ethical and philosophical problems that interest mankind. Neither does it deal with idle speculations and theorisings that do not tend to edification. Buddhism has a practical and specific purpose—the cessation of suffering—and with that goal in view, all irrelevant side issues are completely set aside. Nevertheless, every encouragement is given to keen investigation into the real nature of life.

No coercions, persecutions, or fanaticisms play any part in Buddhism. To the unique credit of Buddhism it must be said that throughout its peaceful march of 2500 years no drop of blood has been shed in the name of the Buddha, no mighty monarch has wielded his powerful sword to propagate the Dhamma, and no conversion has been made either by force or by repulsive methods. Yet the Buddha was the first and the greatest missionary that lived on earth. Buddhism has spread, and is still spreading rapidly throughout the world, and is making peaceful penetration to all countries mainly owing to the intrinsic merit and unsurpassing beauty of its teachings and not at all with the aid of Imperialism, militarism or any other indirect proselytising agencies.

Aldous Huxley writes: "Alone of all the great world religions Buddhism made its way without persecution, censorship or inquisition. In all these respects its record is enormously superior to that of Christianity, which made its way among people wedded to materialism and which was able to justify the bloodthirsty tendencies of its adherents by an appeal to savage bronze-age literature of the Old Testament."

Lord Russell remarks: "Of the great religions of history, I prefer Buddhism, especially in its earliest forms; because it has had the smallest element of persecution."

In the name of the Buddha no sacred place was reddened with the blood of innocent women, no sincere thinkers were burnt alive, and there was no merciless roasting of heretics.

Buddhism which teaches nothing mysterious does not speak of miracles. The Buddha no doubt possessed supernormal powers as a result of his mental culture, but he did not perform miracles. The *yamaka pāṭi-*

hāriya,²⁷¹ for instance, erroneously rendered “twin miracle,” is a psychic phenomenon which only a Buddha can perform. In this particular case, by his psychic powers, he makes fire and water issue from the pores of the body simultaneously.

Buddhism appeals more to the intellect than to the emotion. It is concerned more with the character of the devotees than with their numerical strength.

On one occasion Upāli the millionaire, a follower of Nigaṅṭha Nāta-putta, approached the Buddha and was so pleased with the Buddha’s exposition of the Dhamma that he instantly expressed his desire to become a follower of the Buddha. But the Buddha advised him, saying, “Of a verity, O householder, make a thorough investigation. It is well for a distinguished man like you to make a thorough investigation.”

Upāli, who was overwhelmed with joy at this unexpected utterance of the Buddha, said:

Lord, if I had become a follower of another teacher, his followers would have taken me round the streets in procession proclaiming that such and such a millionaire had renounced his former religion and had embraced theirs. But, Lord, you advise me to investigate further. The more pleased am I with this salutary advice of yours. And he appreciatively repeated or—For the second time I seek refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.

Though Upāli became a Buddhist by conviction, the Buddha, quite in keeping with his boundless compulsion and perfect tolerance, advised him to support his former religious teacher in accordance with his practice.

Exhorting all seekers of truth not to be influenced by external authorities or by mere persuasions, the Buddha even went to the extent of requesting his disciples not to bow down submissively to superior authority.

Buddhism is saturated with this spirit of free inquiry and complete tolerance. It is the teaching of the open mind and the sympathetic heart which, lighting and warming the whole universe with its twin rays of wisdom and compassion, sheds its genial glow on every being struggling in the ocean of birth and death.

So compassionate and tolerant was the Buddha that he did not exercise his power to give commandments to his lay-followers. Instead of using the imperative “You must do this or you must not do this”—he says, “It is proper for you to do this, it is proper for you not to do this.”

271. See text and footnote on page 66.

The ordinary precepts which Buddhists are expected to observe are not commandments but modes of discipline (*sikkhāpada*) which they take of their own accord.

This tolerance and sympathy the Buddha extended to men, women, and all living beings.

Buddhism and Caste

It was the Buddha who, for the first time in the known history of mankind, attempted to abolish slavery and “invented the higher morality and the idea of the brotherhood of the entire human race and in striking terms, ‘condemned’ the degrading caste-system which was firmly rooted in Indian Society at that time.

In the Vasala Sutta (Sn i.7) he Buddha declared:

By birth is not one an outcast,
By birth is not one a brahmin.
By deeds is one an outcast,
By deeds is one a brahmin.²⁷²

The Vāsetṭha Sutta²⁷³ relates that two young brahmins had a discussion with regard to what constitutes a brahmin. One maintained that birth made a brahmin, while the other contended that conduct made a brahmin. As neither could convince the other both of them agreed to refer the matter to the Buddha.

So they approached the Buddha and presented their case before him.

The Buddha at first reminded the questioners that although in the case of plants, insects, quadrupeds, serpents, fishes and birds there are many species and marks by which they could be distinguished, yet in the case of men there are no such species and marks. Then he explained how men differentiated themselves according to their various occupations. In conclusion the Buddha commented:

Birth makes no brahmin, nor non-brahmin makes;
‘Tis life and doing that mould the brahmin true.
Their lives mould farmers, tradesmen, merchants, serfs;
Their lives mould robbers, soldiers, chaplains, kings.

Another interesting dialogue concerning this problem of caste appears in the Madhurā Sutta (MN 84).

The king of Madhurā makes the following report to the Venerable Kaccāna.

272. Sutta Nipāta—Vasala Sutta.

273. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

“The brahmins say thus, Kaccāna, ‘The brahmins are the most distinguished of the four divisions into which the people are classified; every other division is inferior. The brahmins alone are accounted pure, not those who are not brahmins. The brahmins are the legitimate sons of Brahmā, born from his mouth, specially made by him, heirs of Brahmā.’ What do you, Sir, say to this?”

The Venerable Kaccāna replied that it was an empty assertion and pointed out how a wealthy person could employ as his servant a member of any class or caste and how a vicious person could be born in a woeful state and a virtuous person in a blissful state despite their particular castes, adding that a criminal, irrespective of his caste, would be punished for his crime. He emphasised the fact that all joining the order receive equal honour and reverence without any discrimination.

According to Buddhism caste or colour does not preclude one from becoming an adherent of the Buddha or from entering the noble order of the Sangha where all are treated as ariyas. Fishermen, scavengers, courtesans, together with warriors and brahmins, were freely admitted into the order and were also given positions of rank.

Upāli, the barber, was made, in preference to all others, chief disciple in matters pertaining to the vinaya discipline. Sunīta, who was honoured by kings and nobles as an arahant, was a timid scavenger. The philosophic Sāti was the son of a fisherman. The courtesan Ambapāli joined the order and attained arahantship. Rajjumālā, who was converted by the Buddha as she was about to commit suicide, was a slave girl. So was Puṇṇā whose invitation to spend a rainy season was accepted by the Buddha in preference to that of the millionaire Anāthapiṇḍika, her own master. Subhā was the daughter of a smith. Cāpā was the daughter of a deer-stalker. Such instances could be multiplied from the books to show that portals of Buddhism were wide open to all without any distinction.

The Buddha provided equal opportunities for all and raised, rather than lowered, the status of people.

In Buddhism one finds milk for the babe and meat for the strong, and it appeals equally to both the rich and the poor.

Buddhism and Women

It was also the Buddha who raised the status of women and brought them to a realisation of their importance to society.

Before the advent of the Buddha women in India were not held in high esteem. One Indian writer, Hemacandra, looked down upon

women as “the torch lighting the way to hell” (*narakamārgadvārasya dīpika*).

The Buddha did not humiliate women, but only regarded them as feeble by nature. He saw the innate good of both men and women and assigned to them their due places in his teaching. Sex is no barrier for purification or service.

Sometimes the Pali term used to connote women is *mātugāma*, which means ‘mother-folk’ or ‘society of mothers.’ As a mother a woman holds an honourable place in Buddhism. The mother is regarded as a convenient ladder to ascend to heaven, and a wife is regarded as the ‘best friend’ (*paramā sakhā*) of the husband.

Although at first the Buddha refused to admit women into the order on reasonable grounds, yet later he yielded to the entreaties of Venerable Ānanda and his foster mother, Mahā Pajāpatī Gotamī, and founded the order of *bhikkhūṇīs* (nuns). It was the Buddha who thus founded the first society for women with rules and regulations.

Just as arahants Sāriputta and Moggallāna were made the two chief disciples in the order of bhikkhus, the oldest democratically constituted celibate order, even so the arahants Khemā and Uppalavaṇṇā were made the two chief female disciples in the order of bhikkhūṇīs. Many other female disciples, too, were named by the Buddha himself as amongst most distinguished and pious followers. Amongst the Vajjis, too, freedom of women was regarded as one of the causes that led to their prosperity. Before the advent of the Buddha women did not enjoy sufficient freedom and were deprived of an opportunity to exhibit their innate spiritual capabilities and their mental gifts. In ancient India, as is still seen today, the birth of a daughter to a family was considered an unwelcome and cumbersome addition.

On one occasion while the Buddha was conversing with King Kosala, a messenger came and informed the king that a daughter was born unto him. Hearing it, the king was naturally displeased. But the Buddha comforted and stimulated him, saying:

A woman child, O Lord of men, may prove
Even a better offspring than a male.²⁷⁴

To women who were placed under various disabilities before the appearance of the Buddha, the establishment of the order of bhikkhūṇīs was certainly a blessing. In this order queens, princesses, daughters of noble families, widows, bereaved mothers, helpless women, courtesans—all despite their caste or rank met on a common footing, enjoyed perfect

274. *Kindred Sayings*, part I, p. 111. See p. 202.

consolation and peace, and breathed that free atmosphere which was denied to those cloistered in cottages and palatial mansions. Many, who otherwise would have fallen into oblivion, distinguished themselves in various ways and gained their emancipation by seeking refuge in the order.

Khemā, the first chief female disciple, was the beautiful consort of King Bimbisāra. She was at first reluctant to see the Buddha as she heard that the Buddha used to refer to external beauty in disparaging terms. One day she paid a casual visit to the monastery merely to enjoy the scenery of the place. Gradually she was attracted to the hall where the Buddha was preaching. The Buddha, who read her thoughts, created by his psychic powers a handsome young lady, standing aside fanning him. Khemā was admiring her beauty. The Buddha made this created image change from youth to middle age and old age, till it finally fell on the ground with broken teeth, grey hair, and wrinkled skin. Then only did she realise the vanity of external beauty and the fleeting nature of life. She thought:

“Has such a body come to be wrecked like that? Then so will my body also.”

The Buddha read her mind and said:

They who are slaves to lust drift down the stream,
Like to a spider gliding down the web
He of himself wrought. But the released,
Who all their bonds have snapt in twain,
With thoughts elsewhere intent, forsake the world,
And all delight in sense put far away.²⁷⁵

Khemā attained arahantship and with the king's consent entered the order. She was ranked foremost in insight amongst the bhikkhūṇīs.

Paṭācārā, who lost her two children, husband, parents and brother, under very tragic circumstances, was attracted to the Buddha's presence by his will-power. Hearing the Buddha's soothing words, she attained the first stage of sainthood and entered the order. One day, as she was washing her feet she noticed how first the water trickled a little way and subsided, the second time it flowed a little further and subsided, and the third time it flowed still further and subsided. “Even so do mortals die,” she pondered, “either in childhood, or in middle age, or when old.” The Buddha read her thoughts and, projecting his image before her, taught her the Dhamma. She attained arahantship and later became a source of consolation to many a bereaved mother.

275. *Psalm of the Sisters*, p. 82.

Dhammadinnā and Bhaddā Kāpilānī were two bhikkhuṇīs who were honoured exponents of the Dhamma.

In answer to Māra, the Evil One, it was bhikkhuṇī Somā²⁷⁶ who remarked:

What should the woman-nature count in her who, with mind well-set and knowledge advancing, has right to the Dhamma? To one who entertains doubt with the question: 'Am I a woman in these matters, or am I a man, or what then am I?'—the Evil One is fit to talk.

Amongst the laity too there were many women who were distinguished for their piety, generosity, devotion, learning and loving kindness.

Visākhā, the chief benefactress of the order, stands foremost amongst them all.²⁷⁷

Suppiyā was a very devout lady who, being unable to procure some flesh from the market, cut a piece of flesh from her thigh to prepare a soup for a sick bhikkhu.

Nakulamātā was a faithful wife who, by reciting her virtues, rescued her husband from the jaws of death.

Sāmāvatī was a pious and lovable queen who, without any ill will, radiated loving kindness towards her rival even when she was burnt to death through her machination.

Queen Mallikā on many occasions counselled her husband, King Pasenadi.

A maid-servant, Khujjuttarā, secured many converts by teaching the Dhamma.

Punabbasumātā was so intent on hearing the Dhamma that she hushed her crying child thus:

O silence, little Uttarā! Be still,
Punabbasu, that I may hear the Norm
Taught by the Master, by the Wisest Man.
Dear unto us is our own child, and dear
Our husband; dearer still than these to me
Is't of this Doctrine to explore the Path.²⁷⁸

A contemplative mother, when questioned why she did not weep at the loss of her only child, said:

Uncalled he hither came, unbidden soon to go;
E'en as he came, he went.
What cause is here for woe?²⁷⁹

276. See *Kindred Sayings*, Part i. p. 162.

277. See pp. 95 ff.

278. *Kindred Sayings*, 5 Part I, p. 270

Sumanā and Subhaddā were two sisters of exemplary character who had implicit faith in the Buddha.

These few instances will suffice to illustrate the great part played by women in the time of the Buddha.

Buddhism and Harmlessness

The boundless kindness of the Buddha was directed not only to all human beings but also to the dumb animals as well. It was the Buddha who banned the sacrifice of animals and admonished his followers to extend their loving kindness (*mettā*) to all living beings—even to the tiniest creature that crawls at one's feet. No man, he taught, has the right to destroy the life of another as life is precious to all.

A bhikkhu is expected to exercise this loving kindness to such an extent that he is forbidden by the Vinaya rules even to dig or cause to dig the ground. He cannot even drink water without it being filtered.

Asoka, the greatest Buddhist King, wrote on rock and monolith, saying: "The living must not be nourished with the living. Even chaff with insects must not be burnt."

A genuine Buddhist must practise this *mettā* towards every living being and identify himself with all, making no distinctions whatever. It is this Buddhist *mettā*, one of the most salient characteristics of Buddhism, which attempts to break all the barriers of caste, colour and creed which separate one man from another. If followers of different faiths cannot meet on a common platform like brothers and sisters just because they belong to different religions, then surely the religious teachers have failed in their noble missions.

In that noble toleration edict, which is based on the Culla Vyūha and Mahā Vyūha Suttas, King Asoka says: "Concourse alone is best, that is, all should hearken willingly to the doctrines professed by others."

In its teaching Buddhism has no features to confine it to any particular nation or any particular country. It is universal in its appeal.

To the Buddhist there is no far or near, no enemy or foreigner, no renegade or untouchable, since universal love, realised through understanding, has established the brotherhood of all living beings. A real Buddhist is a citizen of the world.

Some salient characteristics of Buddhism are, therefore, its rationality, practicability, efficacy, non-aggressiveness, harmlessness, tolerance, and universality.

Buddhism is the noblest of all unifying and uplifting influences that has operated for more than 2500 years.

Nations have come and gone. Empires built on might and force have flourished and perished. But the Dhamma empire of the Buddha, founded on love and reason, still flourishes and will continue to flourish as long as its followers adhere to its noble principles.

