

Existence and Enlightenment in Theravada Buddhism¹

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Abstract

All the teaching of Buddha are based on the theory of the relation between the existence and enlightenment through which relation the main doctrines such as Dependent Origination, the three characteristics of existent, the law of karma and Nirvana are understood. This article attempt to investigate and survey the philosophical and psychological views of existence and enlightenment as presented in Theravada Buddhism

In our study, we have found that the philosophy of Theravada Buddhism consist of the systematically concept of existent and enlightenment or the metaphysical (*Sacca-Dhamma*) and ethical (*Cariya-dhamma*) doctrines. In this article, *Sacca-dhamma* will be discussed under the term 'Existence'. While *Cariya-dhamma* will be discussed under the term 'Enlightenment'.

Keyword (s) : Existence, Enlightenment, *Saccadhamma*, *Cariyadhamma*, Theravada Buddhism

Introduction

The ordinary man is always possessed with ignorance, craving, clinging which transform his wisdom into the opposite and bring impurities into his life, that eventually result in his own mind's confusion and melancholy, and also the unclear or distorting sight of things. Besides, with all those mental-defilements, men will be held under the attachments. When ignorance, craving and clinging are abolished or

¹This article is the part of Ph.D. Thesis on "Existence and Enlightenment : A Study of Metaphysics and Ethics in Abhidhamma and Nikayas of Theravatha Buddhism" University of Madras.

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extinct, knowledge or transcendental wisdom will become transparent, one can see things of the world and his own life as they really are, not as what he wants them to be or to see them in their disguised form. With this kind of considering ability, one's acknowledgement of life and the world will be changed, together with his feelings and actions towards other things and also his own personality. The mind of the person with all these views will be broadly opened, delightfully liberal, fresh and clean, refined and profound, under the state denominated '*Nirvāna*'.

Nirvāna is beyond all terms of duality and relativity. It is therefore beyond our conceptions of good and evil, right and wrong, existence and non-existence. Even the word 'happiness' which is used to describe *Nirvāna* has an entirely different sense here.

The way leading to the cessation of suffering or *Nirvāna* is known as the 'Middle Path', because it avoids two extremes : one extreme being the search for happiness through the pleasures of the sense, which is 'low, common, unprofitable and the way of the ordinary people' ; the other being the search for happiness through self-mortification in different forms of asceticism, which is 'painful, unworthy and unprofitable'.

The Buddha discovered through personal experience the Middle Path 'which gives vision and knowledge, which leads to Calm, Insight, Enlightenment, *Nirvana*'. This Middle Path is generally referred to as the Noble Eight-fold Path, because it is composed of eight categories. The whole ethical teaching of the Buddha deals in some way or other with this Path. He explained it in different ways and in different words to different people, so as to understand and follow him. But the essence of

those many thousand discourses scattered in the Buddhist scriptures is found in the Noble Eightfold Path.

The eight factors aim at promoting and perfecting the three essentials of Buddhist training and discipline, namely :-

- a) Ethical Conduct (*Sīla*)
- b) Mental Discipline (*Samādhi*) and
- c) Wisdom (*Paññā*)

According to Buddhism for a man to be perfect there are two qualities that he should develop equally : compassion (*Karunā*) on one side, and wisdom (*Paññā*) on the other. Here compassion represents love, charity, kindness, tolerance and such noble qualities on the emotional side, or qualities of the heart, while wisdom would stand for the intellectual side or the qualities of mind. If one develops only the emotional, neglecting the intellectual, one may become a good-hearted fool ; while to develop only the intellectual side neglecting the emotional may turn one into a heard-hearted intellect without feeling for others. Therefore, to be perfect one has to develop both equally. That is the aim of the Buddhist way of life.

The teachings of the Buddha, as presented in this article, are divided into two groups ; metaphysical (*Sacca-dhamma*) and ethical (*Cariya-dhamma*). Of these teachings, ethical doctrines, namely the doctrines which lead to the cessation of human suffering, are based on Metaphysical doctrines. These metaphysical are the

philosophical foundations of the practical teachings. The purpose of this article would be mainly the explanation of the following points (1) to bring out the philosophical and psychological implications on the relation between existent and enlightenment in Buddhism which are connected with human beings here and now, (2) to make people aware of the way of life according to Buddhist teaching as the Noble Eightfold Path. (3) to show the way to put an end to the human suffering and to as account of how to lead a happy life in the empirical world, (4) to guide and teach people how to learn and practice the Noble Eightfold Path as the way leading to *Nibbāna*, which is the ultimate goal of Buddhism.

Existence and Enlightenment in Theravada Buddhism

For the forty-five years of his missionary work, the Buddha preached the *Dhamma* countless times to various groups of people ranging from beggars to kings. He taught them by different methods according to their tendencies, different places and circumstances. The Buddha's teachings were compiled and called the *Tipitaka* (Three Baskets). However, by focusing on the essence of the *Dhamma* our eyes are drawn to the Four Noble Truths.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, the distinguished monk-scholar of Thailand, has classified the *Dhamma* (Buddha's teachings) into four categories :

1. Nature Itself
2. The Law of Nature
3. The Duty to Act in Accordance with the Law of Nature
4. The Benefits to be derived from Acting in Accordance with the Law of Nature.[\[1\]](#)

The main teachings of the *Dhamma* have been summarized by the Blessed One in four propositions, which are generally know as the Four Noble Truths (*Cattāri*

Ariyasaccāni).^[2] They contain the philosophy and morality of Buddhism. They are as follows :

1. ***Dukkha*** : The Noble Truth of the Suffering is associated with all stages and conditions of conscious life. Birth, age, illness, death etc. lead to suffering. It is painful when we are not to obtain what we desire. It is painful when we joined with that which we do not like. More painful still is the separation from that which we love. Briefly stated, the five groups of physical and mental processes that make up the individual are due to grasping and are the objects of grasping. These five groups of grasping lead to *Dukkha*.

2. ***Samudaya*** : The Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering is the grasping of desire to live for selfish enjoyment. Sensations begotten by the surrounding world create the illusion of a separate self. This Illusory self manifests its activity in the craving to thing for selfish enjoyment which entangles man in pain and suffering. Pleasure is the deceitful siren which lures to pain.

3. ***Niroda*** : The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering is possible by abandoning selfish craving. When it is destroyed, then there is necessarily an end for suffering. This truth represents *Nibbāna*, the goal of every Buddhist endeavor. *Nibbāna* is a state of mind where ignorance and craving are replaced by wisdom and compassion.

4. ***Magga*** : The Noble Truth of the Eightfold Path (*ariya atthaṅgika-magga*) or the path which leads to the cessation of suffering. It is the means by which man can get rid of all selfish cravings and attain perfect freedom from suffering. He who has fathomed the *Dhamma* will necessarily walk in the right path, and to him salvation is assured.

Let us connect the Four Noble Truths to the four categories of the *Dhamma* mentioned by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu.

1. *Sacca-Dhamma* : It means the nature itself, the law of nature and the benefits to be derived from acting in accordance with the law of nature. The Buddha acknowledged, disclosed, and expounded upon the nature and the law of nature. They are not subject to the concepts of good and bad ; rather, they deal with the simple reality of things as they are : viz., truth. For example he preached about the law of human life, the reality of existence. In relation to the Four Noble Truths, *Sacca-Dhamma* deals with the Truth of Suffering (*Dukkha*), the Truth of Cause of Suffering (*Samudaya*), and the Truth of Cessation of Suffering (*Nibbāna*). These first three truths are path of the natural process of life and not judged as either good or evil.

2. *Cariya-Dhamma* : It means the duty to act in accordance with the law of nature. In the relation to the Four Noble Truths, *Cariya-Dhamma* directly refers to the Truth of Path which leads to the Cessation of Suffering or the Noble Eightfold Path (*Magga*) which deals with issues of right or wrong, good and evil. This Noble Eightfold Path is the essence of Buddhist ethics.[3]

1.The Buddhist Concept of Existence (Metaphysical Doctrine)

In Buddhism, all existing entities, namely, animals, persons, things etc. are only the streams of tangible states which are composed of a number of sub-elements within other sub-elements. All are dependently conditioned by causes, and relating to each other by their circles of existing and distinction. All those streams of states alter their formations all the time. We can easily say that what is called a person is the composition of all streams of mental-objects which is known by the term “the five aggregate.”

Man’s position in Theravada Buddhism is the state that completely refutes superstition, but derives from the Dependent Origination, that is, after existed, all states then gradually decline under the process of conditioned arising. This is the reality of human life.[4]

In the process of human development, Buddhism accepts the ability of human-beings and judges human as the creatures which are more capable of developing and purifying their own minds than gods, or even of training themselves towards the state of the Buddha.^[5] Moreover, Buddhism praises the person with self-training as an excellence.

Briefly saying, human beings are their own masters, their minds which are the most dominant conductors are capable of creating what they want without any aid from any outside factors. Theravāda Buddhism looks at all things in terms of integrated factors. There is no real self (or essence) in all things. When all of the elements composing one's being are divided and separated, no self remains. A simple example that is often employed is that of the 'car' : when all parts are assembled according to certain specifications, the result is called "car," but if all of those parts are completely separated, the form of the car cannot be found ; there are only parts that can be referred to according to their various names.⁴⁷ That is to say, the essence of the car does not exist separately from the composition of its part ; there is only the word "car" for the condition describing the assemblage of those parts. And no self can be found even in parts that consist of the combination of other smaller parts. Therefore, when we say that something exists in terms of a combination of various elements.

When the condition of all things is seen as integrated form composed of various elements, Buddhism can further inform us regarding the composition of those various elements, and their features. Since Buddhism has a special relationship to life, especially in terms of mind, a presentation of the various compositions must

include both the physical and the mental aspects, or *rūpa-dhamma* and *nāma-dhamma*, and especially an analysis of the mind.⁴⁸

This presentation could be done in many different ways depending on a specific goal, but a presentation will be done based on the Five Aggregates, which is the popular method found in the Buddhist *Suttas*.⁴⁹

According to Buddhism, dividing the Five Aggregates⁵⁰ entails an analysis of the constituent of life, which we call “being” (*satta*) or “person,” and so on :

1. Corporeality (*rūpa*) is comprised of the elements of the whole *rūpa-dhamma*, body and behavior of the body, or matter and material energy, including the qualities and behavior of this matter and energy.

2. Feeling and Sensation (*vedanā*) amounts to the impressions of pleasure (*sukha*), pain (*dukkha*), or difference that occur by contact with the world through the five senses and the heart/mind.

3. Perception (*saññā*) is that which can be established or known. In other words, it is the establishment of knowledge of conditions and the cause for remembering that object.

4. Mental formations, predispositions, or volitional activities (*saṅkhāra*) are the psychological compositions, or the various qualities that embellish the mind making it good, bad, or neutral, and they have intention (*cetanā*) as their guide. To put it very simply, some of these good and bad thoughts are as follows : confidence (*saddhā*), mindfulness (*satī*), moral shame (*hiri*), moral fear (*ottappa*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), joy (*muditā*), equanimity (*upekkhā*), wisdom (*paññā*), delusion

(*moha*), ill-will (*dosa*), greed (*lobha*), conceit (*māna*), perspective (*ditthi*), envy (*issa*), and avarice (*macchhariya*).⁵¹

5. Consciousness (*Viññāna*) involves being aware of sensation via the six senses (that is, the five senses and mind), such as seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, physically touching, and mentally understanding.

By the generality of an ordinary man, one is always processed with ignorance, craving, clinging which transform his wisdom into the opposite and bring impurities into his life, that eventually result in his own mind's confusion and melancholy, and also the unclear or distorting sight of things. Besides, with all those mental-defilements, men will be held under attachments. When ignorance, craving and clinging are abolished or extinct, knowledge or transcendental wisdom will become transparent, one can see things or the world and his own life as they really are, not as what he wants them to be or to see them in their disguised form. With this kind of considering ability, one's acknowledgement of life and the world will be changed, together with his feelings and actions towards other things and also his personality. The mind of the person with all this views will be broadly opened, delightfully liberal, fresh and clean, refined and profound, under the state denominated 'Nirvana.'

2. The Buddhist Concept of Enlightenment (Ethical Doctrine)

Nibbāna is beyond all terms of duality and relativity. It is therefore beyond our conception of good and evil, right and wrong, existence and non-existence. Even the word 'happiness' which is used to describe *Nibbāna* has an entirely different sense here.

The way leading to the cessation of suffering or *Nibbāna* is known as the 'Middle Path', because it avoids two extremes : one extreme being the search for

happiness through the pleasure of the senses, which is 'low, common, unprofitable and the way of the ordinary people' ; the other being the search for happiness through self-mortification in different forms of asceticism, which is 'painful, unworthy and unprofitable.'[\[6\]](#)

The Buddha discovered through experience the Middle Path 'which gives vision and knowledge, which leads to Calm, Insight, Enlightenment - the '*Nibbāna*.' This Middle Path is generally referred to as the Noble Eight-fold Path, because it is composed of eight categories or divisions : namely,

1. Right Understanding (*Sammā ditthi*)
2. Right Thought (*Sammā sañkappa*)
3. Right Speech (*Sammā vāca*)
4. Right Action (*Sammā kammanta*)
5. Right Livelihood (*Sammā ājīva*)
6. Right Effort (*Sammā vāyāma*)
7. Right Mindfulness (*Sammā sati*)
8. Right Concentration (*Sammā samādhi*).[\[7\]](#)

The whole ethical teaching of the Buddha deals in some way or other with the Path. He explained it in different ways and in different words to different people, according to the stage of their development and their capacity to understand and follow him. But the essence of those many thousand discourses scattered in the Buddhist scriptures is found in the Noble Eight-fold Path.

These eight factors aim at promoting and perfecting the three essentials of Buddhist training and discipline, namely :-

- (a) *Sīla* ; Ethical Conduct or Morality
- (b) *Samādhi* ; Mental Discipline or Concentration, and
- (c) *Paññā* ; Wisdom.[\[8\]](#)

When these three trainings are presented as a model for practice, they become an important part of a principle called the three admonitions (*ovādapātimokkha*) or the three major principles of the Buddhist teachings, namely :-

- (a) *Sabbapāpassa akaranam* – Do not perform evil deeds (*sīla*)
- (b) *Kusalassūpasampadā* – Cultivate good, be fully prepared to act properly (*Samādhi*)
- (c) *Sacittapariyodapanam* – Make the mind pure and bright (*paññā*)

The Path, or the Three-fold Training, explains the points of practice Along with the best way to put an end of *Dukkha*. Therefore they encompass all the various processes of the ethical doctrine (*Cariyadhamma*) of Buddhism. There are two qualities that Buddhist should develop equally to be perfected man : compassion (*Karunā*) on one side, and wisdom (*Paññā*) on the other. Compassion represent love, charity, kindness, tolerance and such noble qualities on the emotional side, or qualities of the heart, while wisdom represent the intellectual side or the qualities of the mind. If one develops only the emotional side neglecting the intellectual, one may become a good-hearted fool : while to develop only the intellectual side neglecting the emotional may turn one into a hard-hearted intellect without feeling for others. Therefore, Buddhist has to develop both equally to be perfected man. That is the aim of the Buddhist way of life. We have already mentioned that Middle Path amounts to a compilation of the practice of Buddhism.

Conclusion

There is the good old saying that nothing has been done without fault or nothing has been made perfect. In the same way, this article may be missing some points although the best possible effort is made to include almost all the relevant

points. As 'Theravāda Buddhist Philosophy' mainly deals with human life and practices for the ultimate goal, a major investigation has been done in this article to cover all the related subjects such as metaphysics and ethics. Nonetheless, there are some points connected with social philosophy such as education, and human existence etc., which could be incorporated and dealt with in this article. Therefore, there is ample scope for further research in the areas of education, human existence and morality of human being etc. connected with the philosophy of Buddhism.

Through Buddhism has been criticized as pessimistic in its outlook. Since it commences its spiritual philosophy with suffering, it passes through optimism by way of suggesting ways and means it overcome suffering and culminated in eternal pragmatism. For its preaching and practices are not exclusively for Buddhist followers, but the serious adherence of the principles, sincere adoption of the doctrines and systematic practice of its teachings will certainly bring for the global peace and prosperity. The findings and explanations make in this research article will certainly pave the way for understanding the notion of existence leading to Enlightenment so that the entire world becomes beneficial out of the age of norms of Buddhist philosophy. The teachings of the Buddha are divided into two groups :

- a) metaphysical (*Sacca-Dhamma*) and
- b) ethical (*Cariya-Dhamma*).

Of these teachings, ethical doctrines, namely the doctrines which lead one to the cessation of human suffering, are based on metaphysical doctrines. These metaphysical teachings are not directly practical in ordinary life, but they are the philosophical foundations of the practical teachings. Without these foundations ethical teachings in Buddhism must be baseless as a tree without roots.

Therefore the purpose of Buddhist philosophy is to study the concept of existence or metaphysical doctrines (*Sacca-Dhamma*) and the concept of

enlightenment or ethical doctrines (*Cariya-Dhamma*) in Theravada Buddhism. Especially, the final goal of Buddhist philosophy is to study the relations between the metaphysical and ethical doctrines or existence and enlightenment.

Footnote

[1] Donald K. Swearer, (Ed.), *Me and Mind : Selected Essays of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa*, Delhi : Sri Satguru Publication, 1991, p.128.

[2] *Vin.* 1-9 ; *D.* II. 305 ; *S.V.* 421 ; *Vism.* 498 ; *Vbn.* 99.

[3] Vide. P. Somwang Kaewsufong, *A Critical Study of the Ethics of Early Buddhism*, (Ph.D. Thesis, Banaras Hindu University, 1998), pp.26-27.

[4] Phrarajavaramuni, *Buddha-Dhamma*, Bangkok : The Dhamma Mobilization Party, 1982, p.16.

[5] Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Bangkok ; Haw Trai Foundation, 1999, p. 1.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[7] *D.* II. 312 ; *M.* I. 61 ; *M.* III. 251 ; *Vbh.* 235.

[8] Rahula, Walpola, *op.cit.*, p. 46.

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