



# The Relevance of Buddhism in the Modern Society - A Review

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## Abstract:

Buddhism, as one of the world's four major religions, is an empiricist and anti-metaphysical religion. Buddhism can be divided into three categories: philosophy, science, and religion. The Buddha's teachings are distilled into the Four Noble Truths. During his meditation under the bodhi tree, the Buddha came to understand these four principles. Even though there are many amenities for easy living and pleasure in today's scientifically and technologically developed global village, people are both physically and mentally unsatisfied and lack a sense of security. Buddhism offers a few very simple and very efficacious methods to combat that. Buddhism has a role to play in our life and a role in which we, from the Buddha's birth land, have an important part to play.

Keywords: Buddhism, Modern World, Nirvana and Noble Truths.

## Introduction

Gotama Buddha is known to many generations of Buddhists both as a legendary figure and as a historical one. In this chapter, we hope to peep into the personality of the Buddha, an awakened educator endowed with wisdom (*paññā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) of a Master whose birth into the world took place for the welfare and happiness of myriads of beings, who was born out of compassion for the world, for the profit, welfare and happiness of the *devas* and mankind.

The origin and development of Buddhism is one of most important question in Indian history. The question has been attracting the attention of large number of scholars in India and abroad. Buddhism arose as a Protestant faith to the Vedic Religion and thought. To others, it is a set of ethical principles and values sought to be propagated by *Sākyamuni* Buddha when the society in India and Nepal was undergoing social turmoil. According to northern tradition, Buddha's date ranged from 566 B.C., to 486 B.C., the *Pāli* tradition found in *Theravāda* countries, on the other hand, suggests a slightly earlier date, say, 624 B.C., to 544 B.C., in fact, the Buddhist era is based upon this tradition. As regards the span of life of Gautama Buddha all accounts agree that he live a full life of eighty years.

The family name of the Buddha was Gautama and he was given Siddhattha as his personal name by his parents. He was born in the *Sākya* family at Lumbinī garden as the son of Suddhodana, the chief of *Sākya* clan and his wife, Mahāmāyā. The place was identified by King Aśoka when he erected a stone pillar over the spot in order to commemorate the birthplace of the great master. It is located in the southern foothills of the Himalayas in Nepal today.

The transition records that the Buddha was born in a royal family and, therefore, grew up in luxury and was kept under guard away from the miseries of the worldly life. It further records that his mother, Mahāmāyā died within seven days of his birth and hence was brought up by his stepmother, Mahāprajāpati Gautamī, who was the real sister of his mother. In due course, when he grew up as a young man, he was married to Gopā who was called Yaśodharā by late poets. He begot a son who was named Rāhula.

Buddha record him to be a man of meditative bent of mind and not extraordinarily engrossed in worldly affairs. His father, on the other hand, wanted him to rise as a Universal King (Cakravartī Rājā). This situation might have influenced the young Siddhattha in searching his own career.

## The Life of Buddha

As far as the literary sources of the Southern Buddhists are concerned, regretfully, as M. M. Williams has observed there is no trustworthy biography of its founder. In his discourses or dialogues not much of the facts relating to his early life before the great renunciation were told by the Buddha himself. His earlier disciples, in like manner, paid much less attention to his life than to his teachings. Such Buddhist works as *Mahāvastu*, *Jātakas*, *Lalitavistara*, *Buddhacarita* by Aśvaghosa, which contain materials for the Buddha's biography, are late compositions, and more or less colored with legends. Undoubtedly, these works have their own importance as they are the earliest sources on the Buddha and his life. Because of this, it is the *Pāli* tradition that we must refer to and prefer over all other sources, if we desire to gather any information on the Buddha and his life.

The place of his birth was Kapilavatthu, the chief city of the *Sakyans*. It was situated probably near the site where the Lumbini pillar edict of Emperor Aśoka has been found. The *Sakyans* are described in the *Ambaṭṭhasutta* as proud *Khattiyas* of pure descent. They were an oligarchical clan with a public assembly and an elected chief called *rājā*. Their economic life, rural and agricultural in nature, was simple. Against this background the Buddha was born in a royal family endowed with material comforts. One text in the *Anguttara Nikāya* relates the early life of the Buddha who, as a prince, was delicately nurtured beyond measure.

In the *Mahāvagga*, we find the name of his father, Suddhodana, while that of his mother, Mahāmāyā, in the *Mahāvastu* and *Lalitavistara*. His own name, Siddhattha, is known in the *Mahāvastu* as *Sarvārthasiddha* and in the *Lalitavistara* as Siddhartha.

Siddhattha left his home into homeless state at the age of twenty-nine. The later records refer to the sights of the old, the sick, the dead, and the ascetic to illustrate the motive by which he entered the state of a wandering ascetic. But as G. C. Pande pointed out, it seems difficult to believe that the *Bodhisattva* could have lived for twenty-eight years without encountering sickness, old age, death, and asceticism. The *Ariyapariyesanasutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* claims to record that after having reflected much on the sorrowful fact of birth, old age, disease, dying... in spite of his parents' disagreement, he cut off his hair and beard put on yellow robes and went forth in search of truth.

At first, he came and learned *samatha* technique under the guidance two contemporary ascetics, Ālāra Kālāma, and Uddaka Rāmaputta. An account in the *Majjhima Nikāya* tells us that he quickly achieved what both had gained respectively, the state of, nothingness' from Ālāra Kālāma and that of, neither

perception nor non-perception' from Uddaka Rāmaputta. By, he was not satisfied with those attainments because they, do not conduce to disregard nor to dispassion nor to stopping nor to tranquility nor to super knowledge nor to awakening nor to *Nibbāna*.' Then he joined a group of the five ascetics and practiced the most severe ways of life. During this time (perhaps five or six years), he tried various methods of asceticism, the descriptions of which are now preserved mainly in the *Mahāsīhanādasutta* and the *Mahāsaccakasutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*.

Having restored his strength, Gotama continued his journey in search of truth and arrived at Uruvela, the camp township of Magadha. There he saw a delightful stretch of land and a lovely woodland grove, and a clear flowing river with a delightful ford, and a village for support nearby. He sat down just there, thinking: "Indeed this does well for striving of a young man set on striving." Taking his seat under the Bodhi tree on the bank of the river Nerañjarā (today in Bodhgaya of Bihar) Samana Gotama began to practice meditation, both *samatha* and *vipassanā*, the result of which led him to achieve the four states of *rūpajjhāna* and finally to reach the three kinds of knowledge (*tevijjā*). The *Bhayabheravasutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* provides us with an account of his awakening event. It begins with the techniques of taming mind by which *Samana* Gotama rises gradually from the first to the fourth *jhāna*. Then on the basis of these *jhānas*, he directs in turn his tamed mind to the three kinds of knowledge, viz. the knowledge of former habitations, that of the arising and passing away of beings, and that of the destruction of cankers (*āsavā*). All that happened just in one night.

According to the *Mahāvagga* and the *Udāna*, several weeks after obtaining enlightenment, Lord Buddha stayed under and near the Bodhi tree, contemplating the law of casualty (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), the content of his awakening, and enjoying the bliss of emancipation (*vimuttisukha*). During this time, thoughts came to him in regard to his hesitation to convey his understanding to human beings, his judgment on humans, their faculties and inclinations and his decision to preach the *Dhamma*.

The Buddha next went on to Rājagaha, the capital of Magadha, where he was invited by King Bimbisāra. The king was pleased with the Buddha's teaching and became a lay disciple. On this occasion, the king offered his Bamboo Grove (*Veluvana*) for the use of the Master and his order of monks. While staying at Rājagaha the Master converted Sāriputta and Moggallāna, who later became his efficient assistants in the supervision of new participants as well as in the management of the community. Not long after Sāriputta and Moggallāna had become monks in his order, the Buddha left Rājagaha for Kapilavatthu to visit his old kingdom, in response to the invitation of his father, King Suddhodana. On this occasion, the king took his refuge in the Triple Gem (*Tiratana*) as a Buddhist layman (*upasaka*), while some other members of the royal family received from the Buddha their ordination as monks. Among them were included Rāhula, Ānanda, Anuruddha, Kimbila, Nanda, and Devadatta, Channa and Upāli followed the *Sakyan* nobles and joined the Order. Channa had been the attendant and charioteer of prince Siddhattha, while Upāli, who later became the repository of *Vinaya* rules, belonged to a barber family. In the fifth year of his ministry at the request of Mahāpajāpati, the Buddha approved the formation of the order of nuns.

Among the kings who were converted and followed the advice of the Buddha, King Pasenadi of Kosala is known as the best devoted to the *Tiratana*. He appears in the *Nikāyas* as an admirer of the Buddha to Queen Mallikā was also devoted. Princesses Somā, Sakulā and Sumanā too figure as interested in the Buddha's teaching. From the rich class of Kosala, the two most important names are those of Anāthapindika and Visākha, daughter in-law of Migāra. The former is reported to have made the gift of Jetavana *vihāra* and the latter of the Pubārāma Migāramātupāsāda. A lot of the important discourses collected in the *Nikāyas* appear to have addressed at these two places, for, as it is reported, the Buddha spent eighteen rainy retreats at the Jetavana and another six in the East Grove Monastery (Pubbarāma) at Sāvatti, the capital of Kosala.

The last stage of the Buddha's life is narrated at some length in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*. This material describes the final journey of the Master, which starts at Rājagaha and ends at Kusinārā, the small town of the Malians where the Buddha decided to breathe his last. At his age of eighty, the Buddha knew what would come to him:

“Ānanda, I am now old, worn out, venerable, one who has traversed life's path, I have reached the term of life, which is eighty. Just as an old cart is made to go by being held together with traps, so the *Tathāgata*'s body is kept going by being trapped up. It is only when the *Tathāgata* withdraws his attention from outward signs, and by the cessation of certain feelings, enters into the signless concentration of mind, that his body knows comfort. Therefore, Ānanda, you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge.”

He reminded his disciple of the nature of the arising and passing away of all created things. He recalled them to their duties. As to how his disciples would behave to him after his death, to his *Dhamma* and to each other, he gave advice. At Kusinārā in *sāla*-grove, the Master breathed his last after having left the last word: all conditioned things are of a nature of decay - strive untiringly.

## The First Sermon of Buddha

On reaching Varanasi the Buddha delivered his first sermon entitled, *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta* (Revolving the Wheel of Law discourse) to his five pre-Enlightenment associates. They were staying at Isipatana Migadava identified with modern Saranath near Varanasi. In this sermon the Buddha gave in nutshell the essence of his teachings in the form of the Four Noble Truths, which are the cardinal principles of Buddhism. Before elaborating upon these Truths the Buddha advised his disciples to avoid two extremes in the path of religious and spiritual attainment. These are the avoidance of indulgence in worldly pleasure based on and the avoidance of self-torture.

## Noble Truths of Buddhism

Wheel of Life overview The Bhavachakra, the Wheel of Life or Wheel of Becoming, is a mandala - a complex picture representing the Buddhist view of the universe. To Buddhists, existence is a cycle of life, death, rebirth and suffering that they seek to escape altogether. The Wheel is divided into five or six realms, or states, into which a material and mental phenomenon can be reborn. It is held by a demon. Around the rim are depicted the twelve stages of dependent origination. This gallery will explain the parts of the diagram.

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## The Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths contain the essence of the Buddha's teachings. It was these four principles that the Buddha came to understand during his meditation under the bodhi tree.

1. The truth of suffering (Dukkha)
2. The truth of the origin of suffering (Samudaya)

3. The truth of the cessation of suffering (Nirodha)
4. The truth of the path to the cessation of suffering (Magga)

The Buddha is often compared to a physician. In the first two Noble Truths, He diagnosed the problem (suffering) and identified its cause. The third Noble Truth is the realisation that there is a cure. The fourth Noble Truth, in which the Buddha set out the Eightfold Path, is the prescription, the way to achieve a release from suffering.

### **Suffering (Dukkha)**

Three obvious kinds of suffering correspond to the first three sights the Buddha saw on his first journey outside his palace: old age, sickness and death. But according to the Buddha, the problem of suffering goes much deeper. Life is not ideal and it frequently fails to live up to our expectations. Human beings are subject to desires and cravings, but even when we are able to satisfy these desires, the satisfaction is only temporary. Even when we are not suffering from outward causes like illness or bereavement, we are unfulfilled and unsatisfied. This is the truth of suffering. Buddha's teachings do not end with suffering; rather, they go on to tell us what we can do about it and how to end it.

### **The Second Noble Truth: Origin of suffering (Samudaya)**

Our day-to-day troubles may seem to have easily identifiable causes: thirst, pain from an injury, sadness from the loss of a loved one. In the second of His Noble Truths, though, the Buddha claimed to have found the cause of all suffering - and it is much more deeply rooted than our immediate worries. The Buddha taught that the root of all suffering is desire, *tanha*. This comes in three forms, which he described as the Three Roots of Evil, or the Three Fires, or the Three Poisons.

### **The Fire Sermon**

The Buddha taught more about suffering in the Fire Sermon, delivered to a thousand bhikkus (Buddhist monks). Burning implies burning with the fire of lust, hate and delusion. We can interpret it as burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, grieves and despairs.

### **The Third Noble Truth: Cessation of suffering (Nirodha)**

The Buddha taught that the way to extinguish desire, which causes suffering, is to liberate oneself from attachment. This is the third Noble Truth - the possibility of liberation. The Buddha was a living example that this is possible in a human life-time.

### **Nirvana**

Nirvana means extinguishing. Attaining nirvana - reaching enlightenment means extinguishing the three fires of greed, delusion and hatred. Someone who reaches nirvana does not immediately disappear to a heavenly realm. Nirvana is better understood as a state of mind that humans can reach. It is a state of profound spiritual joy, without negative emotions and fears.

### **The Fourth Noble Truth: Path to the cessation of suffering (Magga)**

The final Noble Truth is the Buddha's prescription for the end of suffering. This is a set of principles called the Eightfold Path, the Middle Way: it avoids both indulgence and severe asceticism, neither of which the Buddha had found helpful in his search for enlightenment.

## Relevance of Buddhism in Modern World

The eight stages can be grouped into Wisdom (right understanding and intention), Ethical Conduct (right speech, action and livelihood) and Meditation (right effort, mindfulness and concentration). The Buddha described the Eightfold Path as a means to enlightenment, like a raft for crossing a river.

The Buddha was one of those who were very conscious of the many effects of hatred. He had seen people ruining themselves as a result of hatred. Buddha believed that hatred never ceases by hatred. To the Buddha the only way to solve it is that one party must stop. Loving kindness, which is the cornerstone of Buddhism, has not been taken by the Buddha as merely a simple ethical principle. He had analysed the principle of loving kindness into sublime life.

The Buddha also preached Karuna compassion: Compassion is more easily generated. When we see somebody in trouble, our heart moves towards that person and we rush to help him. Last of all comes the fourth aspect of loving kindness and that is total equanimity, Upekkha. We have no friends, no enemies, no one higher, and no one lower. We have absolutely no distinctions between one person and another, and are totally merged in a kind of unity with all beings, all things and all situations. So once you are able to live a life in which all these four characteristics govern your actions, there is no place for hatred, rivalry and competition. So this second principle of Sila looks after this set of troubles that we would have.

Another most significant aspect of the Buddha's preachings is Bhavana meditation. Bhavana means the training of the mind. The word itself etymologically means development - a further development of the mind. The Buddha believed that everything emanates from the man's mind. And that reflects the first line of the first verse of the Dhammapada. A pure mind, a trained mind, a well-developed mind, a mind that can be controlled at will, a mind that does not go on to subjects that are conducive to tension and boredom, but keeps alert, keeps on developing itself, discovering itself and within itself the secret of life, the problems of life and the reality of life, is man's greatest treasure.

Today in this scientifically and technologically developed global village, though there are many amenities, for easy living and pleasure, people are both physically and mentally not satisfied and do not have a feeling of security. When the mind is satisfied that the person is free of physical danger, the mind produces an experience of safety. In the world today, there are many multinational and multipurpose projects which are vast for the development of countries. But people are not satisfied with what they have. There is no contentment. Craving, grasping, arising and perishing are the main features in the world.

When one thinks of modern life one can think in terms of a great degree of optimism and an equal degree of pessimism. One can be so pleased that we live today at a time when there seems to be nothing that man cannot conquer, except few diseases and places in the universe, however the pessimistic aspect is that we have, in the process, lost something. Buddhism has an application today and has a place in modern life because of its timeless relevance, emanating from a set of eternal values.

### Buddha's teachings are more relevant today

Their quest of knowledge, attempt to ignite minds, timeless propositions form the basis of a society free of prejudice and pollution – both environmental and human minds.

Buddha Purnima is celebrated to mark three important events of the Buddha's life – his birth, his attaining enlightenment and his nirvana (death). Siddhartha Gautama is highly revered as 'Guru' for his moral sermons which form the cynosure for a worthwhile life.

The sublime position the Buddha has acquired is because of the guidance he has given to the human

race through his preachings which though were around 2500 years old, still hold relevance in today's world. He renounced all royal pleasures to discover the basic purpose of life.

A true teacher leads by example and the Buddha lead the way by setting an example. His five principles, four noble truths and eight-fold path – all steer us towards a righteous life. In today's world which is highly marred by violence, greed, intolerance and degradation of human values, his teachings offer efficacious ways to combat these maladies. His teachings propose practical remedies to the human predicament.

He laid down ethical precepts for a fulfilling life. In this 21st century, where kids and adults frantically are glued to devices and practices that digress them from the main purpose of life, Buddha's core principles of self-control, self-discipline, mindfulness and contentment serve as an antidote to cleanse our mind and body and equip us to lead a stressful life.

Be it the Buddha, Mahavir, Adi Shankara or Ashoka and many great gurus, their transformation and lives serve as moral lessons to today's generation. Their quest of knowledge, attempt to ignite minds, timeless propositions form the basis of a society free of prejudice and pollution – both environmental and human minds. Education means the development of the mind which is possible only when minds are open and free of taint. The Buddha's stainless teachings connect us with our inner selves and pave the path for eternal knowledge and happiness.

### **Conclusion:**

Modern developments have nothing to offer but insecurity and competitiveness as well as tensions and boredom associated with them. Buddhism offers a few very simple and efficacious methods to combat that. Buddhism has a role to play in our life and a role in which we, from the birth land of Buddha, have an important part to play. It is our responsibility to share our thinking, knowledge and experience, with as many as possible, so that ultimately we all see that the message of the Buddha continues to reach mankind in every nook and corner of the world. Buddha had been trying towards this though their thinking as well as doings. The area directly involves Indian philosophy and philosophy as such. The six systems of knowing (Shad Darsanas), Buddha in particular, is the philosophy of Mahatma. Indian culture as well as spirituality falls under the area of study. There shall also be bearings of actual situations, political and other.

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