



THE CONCEPT OF *NIRVANA* (LIBERATION) IN BUDDHISM: A BRIEF STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism is one of the major religious practices in the world and this is the third largest religion among the world religions. It is formed and developed by the Gautama Buddha and his followers It was started in 5th Century B.C. and spread mostly out of India. This paper speaks briefly about the beliefs, teachings of Buddha and the Scripture of Buddhism. Moreover, this paper is focusing more on Nirvana which means liberation and I try to explain what nirvana is and how it is happened in a person's life according to Buddhism. The four Noble Truths are very important in Buddhism they are called dukkha, cause of dukkha, way out of the endless cycle of rebirths and the Eightfold Path. These Four Noble Truths played a very essential role to attain the nirvana that is free from all types of dukkha and the endless cycle of rebirth. Now Buddhism is very active in South Asian countries such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, Malesia, Japan, Singapore and China.

Keywords: Buddha, Nirvana, The Four Noble Truths, Meditation, Awakening, rebirth, Dukka

I. INTRODUCTION

There are a few important questions we ask in that paper what is meant by Buddha? What is important to know about the background of Buddhism? Who was Siddharta and how becomes a Buddha? What is meant by the term nirvana? And How people will get or attain the nirvana? Buddhism is one of the major religions of the world and the word 'Buddhism is derived from two words *Buddhi* (awakening or mind or knowledge) and *ism* (theory). Buddhism means the 'theory of awakening 'or 'theory of knowledge' therefore Buddhism claims to be a reasonable religion teaching about faith and conduct designed to meet human needs and to solve man's spiritual problems through self-effort.¹ It was started with Siddhartha Gautama who was known as Buddha after his enlightenment. It began around the 5th century B.C. According to Terry C. Muck says in Buddhism: History, Beliefs, and Practices "Buddhism is a cross-cultural religion founded in India by a man named Siddhartha Gautama (563 -483 BCE). After extensive sampling of all the religions India of his day had to offer, from high-caste Hindu wealth and privilege to a wide range of ascetic practices in eh forest with other holy men (*sannyasin*), he discovered the Middle Way.

¹ S. Muttu Kumar (2018) 'Buddhist Religious Ethics and Thirukkural Ethics' in 'Religious Ethics and Ethics of Thirukkural' Christian World imprints; New Delhi: p.77.

Henceforth known as the Buddha (Enlighten One)² Buddha spent reaming of his life as a travelling mendicant preacher in North-eastern India and Nepal providence of his birth and early life. Purpose of the study: the purpose is to know what nirvana according to Buddha's teaching is and how it is essential to attain in-person life? The paper is explained in detail those questions and another brief background of Buddhism.

II. History, beliefs and practices of Buddhism

A. The historical background of Buddhism

“The Lord Buddha was born between 578-447 BCE into a royal family called Gowtama which means ‘most excellent cow’³ belonging to the *Sakya* clan at *Kapilavastu*, Bihar, India. His parents were Shuddodhana and Maya. He was the ruler of the *Sakya* clan, related to *Iksavaku* of Kosala. He was named *Siddhartha* (‘the one who has achieved his goal’⁴) by his parents. According to Buddhist traditions, many miracles were seen at the time of his birth. It seems that before his birth it was known that the queen will give birth to either a great king or a great saint. From his childhood, it was clear that the boy was intelligent and possessed extraordinary wisdom. He was serious and instead of playing the loved meditation. After his enlightenment, he came known as Buddha.”⁵ He was brought up in princely luxury and married to princess Yashodhara and they had a son named Rahula. He was the only son of his doting parents. His father took precautions therefore nothing will cause him any pain or displeasure. However, he out of the palace and saw three events that disturbed him very much: 1. A very old man; 2) a very sick man; 3) a corpse and 4) a sage who meditates. The first three sights convinced him that life is full of misery, sorrow and suffering and so he decided to find a solution to this problem. Then he saw a sage or hermit who seemed to live a life of peace amid unrest around him. He wanted to find out the secret to this kind of life.”

Buddha's teaching was successful he gained very soon a following that continued to grow even after his death. According to Terry “ His immediate follower held two councils shortly after his death, one to rehearse all they could remember of his teaching and his rules for monastic practices, the other two discuss divergent opinions that had arisen as to reaching and practice since his death. This second council is usually both response to the shape the teaching took as it spread into cultures different from its culture of origin and also an of that same geographical spread.”⁶ Moreover “Buddhism's widest diffusion, however, came as a result of the coming to power of the Mauryan political dynasty, which managed to unify much of the Indian subcontinent. The third ascender to the dynastic throne, Asoka, advertised his beloved Buddhism by shielding messages on rock pillars throughout and especially on the borders of his kingdom. He culminated this work b calling a council of Buddhist leaders, a meeting that resulted in the sending of Buddhism missionaries, called *mahadhammarakkhitas* or *dhramadhatus*, to the surrounding countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Pakistan and Central Asia.”⁷ Furthermore, Buddhism continued to spread into central, northern, and East Asia. It entered China in 40 CE, Korea in 350, Japan in 575, Tibet in 640 CE and Mongolia in the 1300s. The Buddha's teaching had very close to cross-cultural appeal. Also, Buddhist ideas spread to Europe and the West during and after the eightieth century.

² Terry C. Muck, (2014) *Buddhism: History, Beliefs, Practices in Hand Book of Religion* Baker Academic Grand Rapids, Michigan: p.81

³ S. Muttu Kumar (2018) ‘*Buddhist Religious Ethics and Thirukkural Ethics*’ in ‘*Religious Ethics and Ethics of Thirukkural*’ Christian World imprints; New Delhi: p.77.

⁴ Ibid, p.77.

⁵ Emmanuel E. James (2006) *Buddhism in A Study of Religions*, Theological Book Trust, Bangalore: p. 292.

⁶ Ibid., p.81

⁷ Ibid., pp.81-82

B. The Beliefs and Teachings of Buddhism

There are certain beliefs in Buddhism “What Siddhartha Gautama discovered sitting in deep meditation under the Bo-Tree at the age of thirty –what made him a Buddha an Enlightened One –was based on the common Indian worldview that assumed everyone is enmeshed in a series of rebirths (*samsara*) that are based in quality on the positive or negative value of one’s actions (*karma*), But whereas most Indian religious traditions taught that the value of one’s was based on strict adherence to sate duty (*dharma*), the Buddha taught that it was recognition through trial and error of the truth of his teachings- what came to be known at the Four Noble Truths- the determined the positive and negative value of once karmic deeds”⁸

1. Believes

There are certain beliefs and teachings of Buddhism which are believed by both groups the main beliefs are all forms of Buddhism agreed that the Buddha was the founder

- a. Buddha attained transcendental wisdom as he sat under the Bodi tree.
- b. Buddha pointed a path from the world of suffering to a beyond the undying and those fellows the path of liberation.
- c. Our subjection to time, to *samsara*, is due to *avidya*, unawareness leading to infatuation, depravity, *asava*, Ignorance and craving is the substratum of the empirical life.
- d. When we have *Upasana*, knowledge by seeing, clear perception, we will acquire *Samata*, unshakable calm.

2. Teachings of Buddhism

The First Noble Truths- It teaches about all is suffering (*dukkha*) it is the cause of the entire system. “We suffer, the Buddha taught, because we see permanence where there is only importance (*anicca*), we want to rely on things- fame, money, honour and achievements- that only have fleeting value. Even if we retreat to belief in only one enduring entry, our human self or soul we are mistaken, Gautama Buddha taught that even our selves while real, are only temporary⁹ constructs, or no-self (*anatta*). Everything is impermanent. But because we desperately want to cling to some enduring reality, we suffer.”

The Second Noble Truth is the origin of our suffering or **cause of suffering** “the Buddha said, in an ongoing spiral of existence that operates on the simple basis of cause ¹⁰and effect. He called the spiral *paticca samuppada*, the circle of dependent origination. Our existence is made up of a repeating cycle of twelve links in a chain of cause and to ignorance and death- and back to birth again. The cycle of dependent origination displays a sophisticated understanding of human psychology unmatched in the other cultures of the world.” **The third Noble Truth** teaches a way out of the endless cycle of rebirths. One breaks the cycle of existence by controlling one of the links of the chain, the desire (*tanha*) link. A full intuitive understanding of suffering and impermanence leads to a cessation of desire for an eternal self. Once the desire for such an existence ceases, rebirth ends. The state that follows is called enlightened when referring to the individual. But since the enlightened individual ceases, another term, nirvana, sometimes translated as “emptiness” is used to designate the eventual end of karmic existence. **The Fourth Noble Truth is the Eightfold Path**, which implicitly acknowledges that most of us do not become enlightened in this lifetime and continue in conditioned existence. Therefore the **Eightfold Noble Truths** are Right livelihood, Right speech, Right action, Right energy, Right concentration, Right mindfulness, Right thought and Right wisdom.

⁸ Terry C. Muck, (2014) *Buddhism: History, Beliefs, Practices in Hand Book of Religion* Baker Academic Grand Rapids, Michigan: pp., 82-83.

⁹ I bid. p. 83.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 83.

C. The Practices of Buddhism

In practice then Buddhists seem to cope with existences on two levels, the level of *samsara*, or conditioned existence (rebirth), and the level of nirvana or enlightening. (Release from rebirth). At the *samsaric* level, Buddhist laypeople do things that earn them positive karma (merit such as feeding and clotting monks (*bhikkhus*, and attending temple services for protection and veneration of the images of the Buddha. Such merit-making activities, if assiduously followed lead to images of the Buddha.

1. *Punya* karma/ Meritorious deeds
2. *Dana*/ Liberty
3. *Sila*/ Morality
4. *Bhavan*/ Meditation
5. *Patti*/ Giving
6. *Patacnumodana*/ Rejoicing in Another merit
7. *Veyyavacca*/ Performance of Religious Obligations
8. *Apacayana*/ Paying Homage
9. *Desang*/ preaching

D. The Sects of Buddhism

Buddhism evolved into many schools, of which two major branches survive: Theravada Buddhism, also known as *Hinayana* ‘the word ‘*Thera*’ in *Pali* language means ‘old person’. It is the doctrine of the elders of the ancient doctrine. This sect is also known as the *Hinayana* which means the small or lower inferior vehicle.’¹¹ The *Hinayana* schools teach the liberation from suffering by following the teachings of Lord Buddha. It had spread to Sri Lanka and throughout Southeast Asia, and *Mahayana* Buddhism ‘The word ‘*Mahayana*’ literally means the Great or Superior vehicle. Which had begun two hundred years after the death of Buddha and it taught the universal compassion to attain the Awakened Mind of Buddha-hood. Along with this teaching, a great emphasis is given to the notion of Emptiness.’¹² Mahayana Buddhism was spread northward to Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, and Japan. Despite the differences, there are common threads in all Buddhist branches:

1. All accept Buddha as their teacher
2. All accept the Middle Way the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.
3. All accept that both the members of the laity and of the Egha can pursue the path toward enlightenment.

E. The Scriptures of Buddhism

According to Emmanuel E. James, “Buddhist Scriptures cannot be taken as one religious book or treatise as is the case with Bible in Christianity, the Quran in Islam and *Guru Granth Sahib* in Sikhism. Buddhist Scriptures are a collection of texts which are found in different Buddhist schools *Hinayana* (*Theravada*) and Mahayana traditions. There is no lone unified body of texts that the entire Buddhists accepts as their Scripture. There are a vast number of Buddhist scriptures and religious texts, which are commonly divided into the categories of canonical and non-canonical The former, also called the Sutras (Sanskrit) *Suttas* (*Pali*) are believed to be either literally or metaphorically, the actual word of the Buddha. Also, he said, The Theravada Scripture is called the *Tipitaka* in *pali* and *Tripitaka* in Sanskrit it

¹¹ S. Muttu Kumar (2018) ‘*Buddhist Religious Ethics and Thirukkural Ethics*’ in ‘*Religious Ethics and Ethics of Thirukkural*’ Christian World imprints; New Delhi: p. 78.

¹² Ibid. 78.

includes a large collection of teachings, discourses and commentaries. 1. *Vinaya Pitaka*, 2. *Sutta Pitaka*, 3. *Abhidhamma Pitaka*.”¹³

F. The Five Precepts of Buddhism

There are five precepts of Buddhism it is a part of Buddhist Ethics they are:

1. “To avoid killing other beings.
2. Do not steal or avoid taking things that are not given.
3. Avoid overindulgence such as sexual misconduct.
4. Abstain from false speech, lying and deceiving.
5. Abstain from intoxication and rashness.”¹⁴

III. The concept of nirvana in Buddhism

The paper is going to discuss the concept of Nirvana in Buddhism. We are going to what is the main idea of Nirvana and discuss the meaning and definition and the characteristics, various names and different kinds of Nirvana. Moreover, it is discuss what the final state is and How to get Nirvana? First, we discuss the meaning and definition.

A. Meaning and Definition

The meaning of the term Nirvana is “In Sanskrit, the word nirvana means “extinction,” “liberation,” “tranquillity,” and non-arising.” The Great Nirvana Sutra says, “The extinction of all defilements is nirvana.” The Commentary on *Abhidharma* says the meaning of Nirvana is, “the elimination of all afflictions, the extinguishing of three fires (greed, anger, and ignorance), the extinguishing of the three aspects of all phenomena, and the leaving of all realms of existence.” The connected discourses of the Buddha say nirvana is “desire of greed forever ended, anger forever ended, and ignorance forever ended, and all afflictions forever ended.” Moreover, he says “When the Buddha became lightened on the diamond throne under the *bodhi tree*; he awakened to the Truth of the universe and attained perfect enlightenment. This is called nirvana which is perfect enlightenment.

Huston Smith says “that Nirvana is permanent, stable, imperishable, immovable, ageless, deathless, unborn, and unbecome, that it is power; bliss and happiness, the secure refuge, the shelter, and the place of unassailable safety; that it is the real Truth and the supreme Reality; that it is the Good, the supreme goal and the only consummation of our life, the eternal, hidden and incompressible Peace.”¹⁵

B. Various names for Nirvana

The word nirvana has been called by different other names “There are many words in Buddhist sutras and commentaries that are used to describe nirvana. With a total of forty-three different names for nirvana, the *Abhidharma skandha-pada* says that it is “non-action, non-abiding, without boundaries, without outflow, without arising, without extinguishing, without beginning, without defilement...” The *Treatise* on the Four Noble Truths explains nirvana in sixty-six different ways, as “without destroying, without loss, without equal, without hindrance, without desire, without anything above it. Without limit, without attachment...” These are all negating terms used to describe the meaning of nirvana. It also says that nirvana is “truth, the other shore, marvellous, tranquil, eternal, secure, supreme, the most wholesome and unique...” with a total of fifty ways. According to the *Treatise* on the Four Noble Truths, there are forty-six different descriptions: “liberation, transcendent, the one and only, complete, pure, supreme, truth, suchness...” These are affirming descriptions that give nirvana broader interpretations.

¹³ Emmanuel E. James (2006) *Buddhism in A Study of Religions*, Theological Book Trust, Bangalore: p. 302.

¹⁴ Emmanuel E. James (2006) *Buddhism in A Study of Religions*, Theological Book Trust, Bangalore: pp.31-318.

¹⁵ Huston Smith (1991) *The World's Religions*, Harper One, New York: p. 115.

In addition to these descriptions, the Great Nirvana Sutra says that Buddha nature is nirvana. The Flower Ornament Sutra says that the intrinsic nature of all phenomena is nirvana. The *Sutra* on the Perfection of Wisdom says, “*Prajana* that is beyond common knowledge and knows everything” is nirvana. The *Surangama Sutra* says “the Truth in which activity and stillness are ceased is nirvana.

C. The Characteristics of Nirvana

This is all about the characteristics of Nirvana, “Concerning the explanations and interpretations of Nirvana although there are many different names and descriptions in the sutras, the truth of nirvana never changes. It always refers to the pure intrinsic nature and the essence of reality. This nature and essence are “not increased in the sages and not decreased in the ordinary.” The Universal Complete Nirvana Sutra says that nirvana has eight characteristics. There are given below:

1. Eternal Being. Nirvana permeates the three time periods of past, present, and future and always exists. It pervades all ten directions and always abides in the universe.
2. Extinction and tranquillity. In the state of nirvana, birth and death are extinguished. It is also a state of total tranquillity.
3. Without ageing. Because it does not move, change, increase, or decrease, it is said to be “without ageing.
4. Without death. Since Nirvana never arises and ceases, it is said to be without death”.
5. Purity. Since all defilements have been purified, nirvana is the state abiding in purity.
6. Ubiquity. Because it permeates everything without difficulty, Nirvana is ubiquitous.
7. Non-action. Nirvana is completely tranquil and without action.
8. Joy. There is no more suffering from birth and death in the state of Nirvana.

D. The Four Noble Truths: (Eight-Fold Path/ *Astanga Marg*)

The Study of Religions says “The essence of the Buddha’s teaching is contained in the four Noble Truths, delivered in his first sermon at Sarnath (Varanasi). The first is the universal fact of suffering; “birth is painful, old age is painful, sickness is painful, death is painful. Sorrow, lamentation, dejection, and despair are painful...” Secondly, the cause of suffering is desire (*tanha*) “the craving for passion, the craving for existence, the craving for non-existence.” Thirdly there is the truth of the cessation of suffering “the cessation without a remainder of craving, the abandonment forsaking, release, non-attachment” and finally, there is the Way that leads out of suffering.”¹⁶ It is the Middle Way known Eightfold Path. According to Huston “The Buddha’s approach to the problem of life in the Four Noble Truths was essential that of a physician.....¹⁷The Eightfold Path, then, is a course of treatment. But it is not as an eternal treatment, to be accepted passively by the patient as coming from without. It is not treated by pills, rituals, or grace. Instead, it is treated by training”¹⁸

Emmanuel E. James “Buddha taught that the remedy for all sorrow and suffering lies in following an eight-fold path. This Eight-Fold Path is also known as Middle Path because, on the one hand, Buddha disliked the extreme nature of Brahmanism based on luxury and on the other he was against the severe and harsh austerity of Jainism.”¹⁹ The Eight-Fold Path can be classified as follows

¹⁶ Emmanuel E. James (2006) *Buddhism in A Study of Religions*, Theological Book Trust, Bangalore: pp. 307-308.

¹⁸ Huston Smith (1991) *The World’s Religions*, HarperOne, New York: p. 115.

¹⁹ Emmanuel E. James (2006) *Buddhism in A Study of Religions*, Theological Book Trust, Bangalore: p.309.

Morality

1. Right Speech. Abstaining from untruthfulness, tale-bearing, harsh language and useless talk.
2. Right Action. It is abstaining from killing, stealing and sexual affairs.
3. Right Livelihood. It is earning a living in was not harmful to any living thing.

Concentration

4. Right Effort. It is avoiding evil thoughts and overcoming them, arousing good thoughts and maintaining them.
5. Right Mindfulness. It is paying careful and vigilant attention to the very state of body, feeling and mind.
6. Right concentration. It is concentrating on a single object to induce certain special states of consciousness in deep meditation.

Wisdom

7. Right views. It is understanding the Four Noble Truths
8. Right thought. It is freedom from ill will, lust, cruelty and untruthfulness.

Emmanuel also mentions “It can be seen that Buddha’s teachings were based on the pure and disciplined way of life in which emphasis was laid on morality. The Eight-Fold Path leads to insight and wisdom and dismisses ignorance. Its goal is nirvana the state of perfect peace and bliss. Buddha claimed only to be a guide, and teacher of the Way but not a saviour. Man must work out his salvation by his efforts to achieve nirvana to gain spiritual emancipation. It is not a gift of divine grace but a conquest won by man’s intellect and will on his responsibility. Although Buddhism teaches that each person must work out his salvation, both Himalaya (Theravada) and

E. How to attain the Nirvana

According to Emmanuel “Buddha’s concern was to point out a way of putting an end to reincarnation. This is the Middle has consisted of the eight steps whose goal is nirvana. The literal meaning of the word nirvana is ‘dying out or extinction as of a fire. Buddha used this illustration to make him: the world is in flames, kindled by the fire of desire. The process of rebirth is a rekindling of this fire from one flame to another flame, and this keeps the fires of birth, decay, death, pain, anxiety etc Constantly burning. Nirvana is the extinguishing of this flame, the flame of desire. In a sense, this is not the annihilation of the self because according to the doctrine of *anatta*, there is no self to annihilate. It is rather annulations of the illusion, the thirst for life, lust, greed, selfishness, desires and all forms of suffering are annihilated. Nirvana also called is just nothing, it is called ‘the harbour of refuge’, ‘the cool cave’, ‘the island amid the floods, ‘the place of bliss’ ‘liberation’ ‘safely’, ‘the home of ease’, the end of suffering, and the supreme joy’.”²⁰

In addition, he said “Nirvana is an experience of bliss, which can be attained only in the distant future. Nirvana is a permanent state of bliss beyond the world of birth, death and rebirth. The ultimate end of the Buddhist pilgrimage is Nirvana. It is not a state of nonexistence but it is in their own words, deathlessness, fusion, of craving.” It is a “stopping of becoming, getting rid of craving, the termination of ageing and dying” “it is the end of woes”, Nirvana can be attained in this life also provided the conditions prescribed for its attainment are fulfilled. The Buddha stated, “But I deem the highest goal of a man to be the stage in which there is neither old age, nor fear, nor disease, nor birth, nor anxieties and in which there is no continuous renewal of activity.”²¹

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.311.

²¹ Emmanuel E. James (2006) *Buddhism in A Study of Religions*, Theological Book Trust, Bangalore: p.311.

“Pade tu asmin na jara no bhir na run na

Jamma naivoparamp na cadhayah

Tam eva manye purusartham uttamam na

Vidate yatra purnah punah kriya.

The early Buddhism the way to enter Nirvana was through one’s effort. The Buddhas were only teachers and guides. Later, especially in Northern Buddhism, the doctrine of Bodhisattva was introduced. A Bodhisattva has attained Enlightenment but has declined entrance into Nirvana, so he continues to help those who still struggle for their release from the bonds of Karma. Nirvana is an ethical state, a condition that eliminates any future rebirth, the extinction of all craving, and the final release from suffering. It may be defined as the deliverance from the trammels of the body, a supreme consciousness of peace and rest, and perfect passionless happiness. It is the state of mind in which karma comes to an end. It is the cessation of becoming, for when a process is not continued it simply ceases.”²² Moreover, he said “The Buddha aimed at a spiritual experience in which all-selfish craving is extinct and with it ever fear and passion It is a state of perfect inward peace, accompanied by the conviction of having attained spiritual freedom, a state that words cannot describe that is Nirvana.”²³

“Nirvana transcends all duality in the phenomenal world. It cannot be attained through worldly experience, knowledge, and learning It can only be attained through own cultivation and self- realization. From the teachings of the sages who have already attained nirvana, we know that there are three ways to reach this state.”

1. Rely on upholding precepts. The Questions of King Milanda says, “ If those seeking the Way are settled in upholding precepts and diligently cultivate, they can attain nirvana no matter where they dwell. This is like people who have eyes they can see the sky no matter where they stand. Therefore, nirvana relies on upholding precepts.
2. Rely on the Three Dharma Seals. If we want to achieve Buddha-hood we have to follow the Buddha’s teachings.
3. Rely on the three studies, the four means of embracing the six perfections. To attain the state of nirvana, we need to settle our body and mind with three studies which are: pre-
 1. Nirvana is the purity of nature
 2. Nirvana as complete purity
 3. Nirvana as skilled means.

Conclusion

Buddhism is a non-Aryan and non-Vedic path or religion it is a practical religion and the world’s fifth-largest religion. It was born in India and spread around would particular in Indian neighbouring countries. As the title of the article is “the concept of nirvana in Buddhism” This paper explained how to attain nirvana to avoid the *dukka* and endless cycles of rebirth in human life. According to Buddhism if anybody willing to attain the *nirvana* they must follow and practice the Four Noble Truths among the Eight-Fold Paths are very imported to attaining the nirvana. The nirvana is the purity of nature, complete purity and skilled one who attains the nirvana will be free from all anxiety, fear of *dukkha* and endless cycle of rebirth. That will be liberation from all worries of the universe.

²² Ibid., pp. 311-312.

²³ Ibid.p. 312.

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