UNIT 7 : THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS OF BUDDHISM

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7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- explain Buddhism
- elaborate the four-noble truths of Buddhism
- describe the concept of Nirvāṇa
- discuss the eight-fold paths of Nirvāṇa.

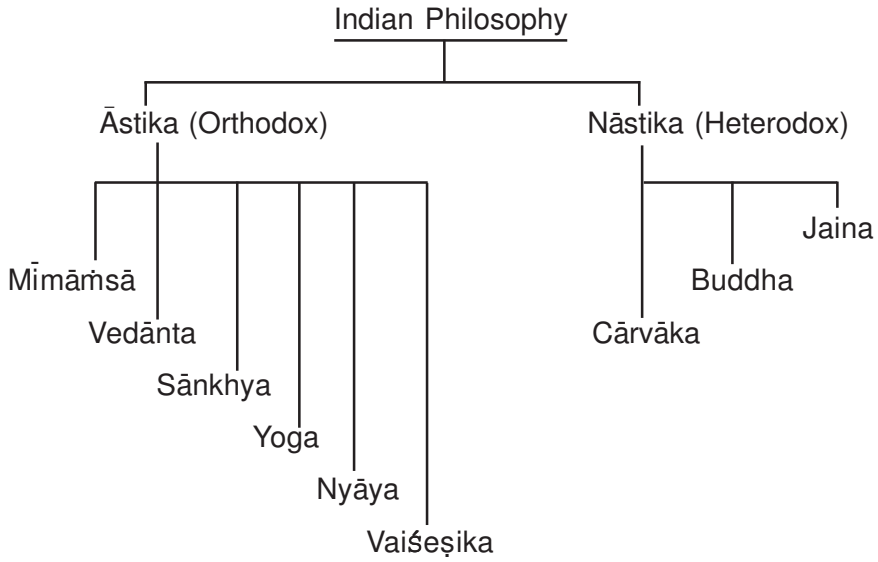
7.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to the four noble truths of Buddhism. In this unit the main teachings of Buddha are to be discussed. His teachings are contained in the four noble truths. These are– i) the truth that there is misery, ii) there is a cause of misery, iii) there is a cessation of misery and iv) there is a path leading to the cessation of misery. The main aim of

Buddha's teachings is the total extinction of suffering. According to him, nirvāṇa is attained here on the Earth. Nirvāṇa is the cooling of passion. It is the site of perfect peace and perfect enlightenment. The way to nirvāṇa is the eightfold path of right conduct, concentration and insight. They remove ignorance and desire, enlighten the mind and bring about perfect equanimity and tranquility.

7.3 A BRIEF SKETCH OF BUDDHISM

Indian philosophy is divided into two broad classes. They are– orthodox or āstika and hetrerodox or nāstika system. The orthodox system is also classified into another six systems. They are– Mīmāṁsā , Vedānta, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika. Similarly, heterodox system has also another three kinds. They are– Cārvāka, Buddha and Jaina. This classification can be presented in the following way–



Thus, we find that Buddhism belongs to nāstika system. The founder of Buddhism is Gautama Buddha. From his early age, Gautam felt very sad about seeing the human miseries, like– disease, old age, death etc. Therefore, he went to search for the cause of sufferings and also the means of removing it. At last he got the result of his journey. This form is known as the ''Four Noble Truths of Buddhism''. Generally, Buddha's teachings are found in the Pitakas. There are three Pitakas in Buddhism. They are– Sutta

Pitaka, Vinayapitaka and Abhidharma Pitaka. They are together known as the Tripitakas or the three baskets of teachings. Pitakas are written in Pali language.

In course of time his followers increased in number. So, they are divided into different schools. Buddhism is mainly divided into two schools.

1. Hinayāna
2. Māhāyana

This division is based on the question– "What is the object of Nirvāṇa?" Hinayāna prescribes nirvāṇa only for oneself. On the other hand, Mahāyāna believed that nirvāṇa is not for one's own sake but to obtain perfect wisdom of all beings in misery. Thus, we can say that the concept of Nirvāṇa is the central teaching of Buddhism.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1. State whether the following statements are true or false :

a) Buddhism belongs to āstika systems. (True / False)

b) There are 3 Pitakas in Buddhism. (True / False)

c) Pitaks are written in Pali language. (True / False)

d) The founder of Buddhism is Mahāvira. (True / False)

Q.2. What is the meaning of Tripitaka?

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Q.3. What are the main schools of Buddhism?

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ACTIVITY 7.1

a) Can nirvāṇa lead to ultimate happiness? Discuss.

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7.4 CONCEPT OF FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

Primarily Gautama Buddha is a social reformer and an ethical teacher. Being an ethical teacher his teachings are followed by human beings at large. These teachings lead us to a path or 'marga' to overcome sufferings. After a deep meditation Buddha got four prime truths. They are called "CATVARI ARYASATYANI" or the "FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS" of Buddhism. They are as follows–

i) Life in the world is full of suffering (Duḥkha).

ii) There is a cause of this suffering (duḥkha-samudaya).

iii) There is a cessation of suffering (duḥkha-nirodha).

iv) There is a path to the cessation of suffering (duḥkha-nirodha marga).

Now, we are going to discuss about these four-noble-truths in detail.

7.5 THERE IS SUFFERING (DUḤKHA)

The first noble truth of Buddhism is concerned with the nature of human sufferings. The causes of sufferings are birth, different diseases, old age and death. Therefore, there is suffering everywhere and at all stages of life. There is pain with birth. Similarly, disease is painful; death is painful. Union with the unpleasant is painful just as separation from pleasant is painful. Thus, Buddha is on the conclusion that "Life is all pain''. In our life, we the human beings get pleasure about certain things. But Buddha said that they are only the sensual pleasure and sensual pleasure is not permanent. According to him, sensual pleasure is transitory and followed by pain.

7.6 THERE IS A CAUSE OF SUFFERING

This Second noble truth is concerned with the origin of suffering. In his opinion, there is a cause of suffering also. Because every event must have a cause and without cause nothing can happen. Will-to-live or desire is the motivating power which creates the cycle of birth and death. And it is the cause of suffering. This desire is of three kinds. They are :

a) Will-to-live for sex or sensual pleasures.

b) Will-to-live for enjoyment of life, and

c) Desire for wealth and power.

Thus, will-to-live is the cause of suffering. Buddha describes these causes according to his theory of causation. It is known as ‘‘Pratitya-Samutpādavāda or Dependent Origination’’.

Let us discuss Dependent Origination in some detail.

7.6.1 Dependent Origination

Dependent origination or pratitya-samutpāda is the foundation of all the teachings of Buddha. The literal meaning of pratitya Samutpāda is arising (Samutpāda) after getting (Partitya). It means the production of an effect out of a complement of cause and conditions. When the cause and conditions disappear, the effect disappears. The causal formula is– ‘‘This being, that arises’’. It means Depending on the cause, the effect arises.

Buddha’s belief in the theory of dependent origination relates to a twelve-linked chain. It makes him able to trace back the origin of suffering. Here every consequent is dependent on the antecedent for its origin. Buddha explains the twelve-links in the following way–

Jarāmarana is the first link of the chain. It means suffering is due to the nature of old age, death etc. Jāti is the cause of this Jarāmarana. If anyone does not take birth then the question of suffering does not arise. So, birth is the cause of suffering. The cause of Jāti is Bhāva, means the will to be born. The cause of Bhāva is Upādāna. It means one’s clinging is due to Tṛṣṇa or the thirst for such enjoyment. This thirst is due to Vedanā. It is actual sense-enjoyment. The cause of this sense-enjoyment is Sparsha, i.e. sense object contact. Ṣaḍāyatana that is six sense organs including mind is due to nāma-rūpa. It means the psycho-physical organism. This organism is due to Vijñāna, the initial consciousness of the embryo. Samskāra means the forces generated by the past karmas, which

are finally the cause of Ignorance. Therefore, ignorance is the root cause of all human sufferings.

Thus, we get the twelve-links of Dependent Origination. They are:

1. Ignorance (avidyā) — Past life
2. Impressions of Karmic forces (samskāra) — Past life
3. Initial consciousness of the embryo (vijñāna)
4. Psycho-physical organism (nāma-rūpa)
5. Six sense-organs including mind (Ṣaḍāyatana) — Present life
6. Sense object-contact (Sparsha)
7. Sense-experience (Vedanā)
8. Thirst for sense-enjoyment (tṛiṣṇa)
9. Clinging to this enjoyment (Upadana)
10. Will to be born (bhāva)
11. Rebirth (Jāti) — Future life
12. Old age and death (jarā-maraṇa) — Future life

These twelve-links are called the Bhāva-chakra, Samsāra-chakra, Janma-marana-chakra, Dharma-chakra, Pratitya samutpāda chakra etc. Among these twelve-links, the first two (Avidyā & Samskāra) are related to the past life. The last two (Jāti & Jara-maraṇa) are with the future life and the others are related with the present life.

The doctrine of Karma is based on this theory. Our present life is due to the impressions of the past Karmas and it will shape our future life. Again, the theory of Kṣaṇa-bhaṅga-vāda or Momentariness is also based on it. According to it, all things are relative, dependent, conditional and finite. So, they must be momentary.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.4. State whether the following statements are True or False :

a) Buddhist theory of causation is called Four Noble Truths. (True / False)

b) There are twelve links in dependent origination. (True / False)

c) The doctrine of Karma is associated with the Pratitya-samutpada. (True / False)

Q.5. What is dependent origination? (Answer in about 50 words)

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Q.6. Among the twelve links which one is related to the present life?

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ACTIVITY 7.2

a) Does effect exist without a cause? Discuss.

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7.7 THE CESSATION OF SUFFERING

The third noble-truth is the extinction of suffering. Since everything arises from some cause and conditions, so, when the conditions are removed then sufferings also will be removed. The total elimination of suffering is known as NIRVĀṆA. Nirvāna means being free-from bondage and re-birth. It is the perfect calm and tranquility undisturbed by desires and passions.

7.7.1 Concept of Nirvāṇa

'Duḥkha nirodha' or the cessation of suffering is called Nirvāṇa. Buddha says that when a person controls his desires and passions he can get perfect knowledge. It is possible when he realizes the

four-noble truths. Then the person becomes to an Arhat. 'Arhat' means a worthy person. According to Buddha, this stage is popularly known as Nirvāṇa. It is the state of bliss and happiness. There is no place for misery or pain in it.

The literal meaning of nirvāna is "blown out" or "cool down". On the basis of the literal meaning, some Buddhists and non-Buddhists have explained a negative aspect of Nirvāṇa. According to them, Nirvāṇa means the complete elimination of all physical and mental states. But in the words of Rhys Davids, Buddha did not say that Nirvāṇa is the destruction of all existence. According to Buddha, nirvāna is the cessation of sufferings and it eliminates the conditions of rebirth.

In the Pali texts, Nirvāṇa is explained as a state of peace. Here, nirvāṇa is described as eternal health, the ultimate end and the place of no fear. Nirvāṇa is neither eternalism nor nihilism. Buddha says that Nirvāṇa is unknown, unique and uncreated. It is a matter of realisation. Just as the wind cannot be seen but its existence cannot be denied. So, it is a matter of realisation. Besides these, Nirvāṇa can also be described as permanent, stable, ageless, immovable, deathless, unborn and unbecome that it is the state of bliss and happiness. King Milinda (one of the disciples of Buddha) describes the nature of Nirvāṇa by saying that that "Nirvāṇa is profound like an ocean, lofty like a mountain peak, sweet like honey etc."

In the Pali texts, it is stated that there are two types of Nirvāṇa. One is called 'Upādhisesa Nirvāṇa' and the other is called "Niropādhisesa Nirvāṇa". First one is also known as Nirvāṇa and the later one is called Parinirvāṇa. In the state of Nirvāṇa, there is no attachment or desire, there is only the existence of pure consciousness. But in the state of Parinirvāṇa all these are eliminated.

According to Buddha, Nirvāṇa can be attained within the life. And Buddha himself is the greatest example of it. Nirvāṇa is an ineffable state of perfect wisdom, perfect peace and perfect self-command.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.7. State whether the following statements are True or False :

a) The literal meaning of Nirvāṇa is 'blown out' (True/false)

b) Nirvāna belongs to 3rd noble truths. (True/false)

c) Arhat means pain. (True/false)

d) According to Buddha, Nirvāna can be attained within the life. (True/false)

Q.8. What are the two types of Nirvāṇa?

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7.8 THE PATH OF CESSATION OF SUFFERING

The fourth noble truth is that there is a way of cessation of suffering. Buddha said that one can attain Nirvāṇa within his life-time. But there is a question– how can it be possible to obtain liberation or Nirvāṇa? According to Buddha, there are eight paths for the attainment of Nirvāṇa. They are called the eight-fold path or the astāngika-mārga of Buddhism. These paths is open to all monks as well as laymen. They are–

1. Right views (Samyag dṛṣṭi)
2. Right resolve (Samyag saṅkalpa)
3. Right speech (Samyag vāk)
4. Right conduct (Samyag karmānata)
5. Right livelihood (Samyag ājiva)
6. Right effort (Samyag vyāyama)
7. Right mindfulness (Samyag smṛiti)
8. Right concentration (Samyag samādhi)

Right views : Ignorance or avidyā is the root cause of all sufferings of human beings. Because of this ignorance man cannot acquire right knowledge about the relation between the self and the world. So, right knowledge is defined as the correct knowledge about the four noble truths.

When we acquire the right knowledge, it leads us to the supreme goal– that is Nirvāṇa.

Right resolve: Every man must resolves to reform his life in the light of the right knowledge. So, the act of resolution to lead an honest life in the path of right knowledge is right resolve. So, Buddha describes three contents of right determination.

They are–

a) to renounce all attachment to the world.
b) to give up ill-feeling towards others.
c) to stop from doing any harm to them.

Right speech : Right speech consists in abstention from lying, slander, abuse, harsh words etc. One should speak right, not the unrighteous. He should speak the truth not the false. We should speak well. And he must speak that which does not pain oneself nor hurts others.

Right conduct : It consists in abstention from the destruction of life, from stealing, from lying etc. Liberality, courtesy, kindness and unselfishness should be cultivated by all.

Right livelihood : Right livelihood means one has to maintain his life of honest means. By renouncing bad speech and bad actions, one should earn their honest means.

Right effort : Right effort consists in suppressing the evil states and cultivating the good states. A Restless mind is not conducive to good thoughts, good emotions and good conduct.

Right mindfulness : It is the recollection of the impurity of the body, the nature of feeling, pleasure and pain. It frees the mind from Raga and Dvesha and prepare the mind for higher concentration. Thus, right mindfulness is an indispensable prerequisite of right concentration.

Right concentration : Right concentration is the last path to the attainment of Nirvāna. It consists of four meditations.

a) In the first state, sensuality is eliminated.
b) The second state is concerned with the deep tranquility.
c) The third state is a mental consciousness in which all passions are eliminated.

d) The last one is a state of complete tranquility and self-passions. Thus, it is the state of perfect wisdom.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.9. State whether the following statements are true or false :

a) The way of cessation of suffering is called Nirvāṇa. (True / false)

b) Right determination consists of four meditations. (True / false)

c) Buddha upholds the eight-fold path for the attainment of Nirvāṇa. (True or false)

Q.10. What are the eight folds paths of Buddhism?

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Q.11. What is right livelihood, according to Buddha? (Answer in about 30 words)

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7.9 LET US SUM UP

- The four fold of paths of Buddhism are called "Four Noble Truths"
- The second noble truth of Buddhism holds that every event must have a cause. and nothing can happen without a cause.
- The second noble truth of Buddhism is associated with the theory of causation. It is known as Pratityasamut pāda or dependent origination.
- According to Buddha, Ignorance is the root cause of all human sufferings.

- The twelve links of dependent origination are called the Bhāva-chakra, Dharma-chakra, Pratitya Samutpāda Chakra etc.
- Buddha holds that there are eight paths for the attainment of Nirvāna. These eight fold paths are called the astāngika-mārga of Buddhism.
- Nirvāna means the cessation of suffering.



7.10 FURTHER READINGS

1) Chatterjee, S. C. & Dutta, D. M. (1968). *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*. University of Calcutta.
2) Hiriyanna, M. (1993). *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass publishers pvt Ltd.
3) Radhakrishnan, S. (1923). *Indian Philosophy* (2 volumes). Oxford: University Press.
4) Sharma, C. D. (1973). *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass.
5) Sinha, J. N. *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*. Calcutta: New Central Book Agency Pvt. Ltd.



7.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans. to Q. No. 1 : a) False b) True c) True d) False

Ans. to Q. No. 2 : Three baskets of teachings.

Ans. to Q. No. 3 : Hināyana and Mahāyāna.

Ans. to Q. No. 4 : a) False b)True c)True

Ans. to Q. No. 5 : It holds that every event must have a cause. And without a cause nothing can happen. That is why Buddha holds that the will to live or desire is the cause of suffering. When the cause disappears the effect also disappears. It indicates that depending on the cause the effect arises.

Ans. to Q. No. 6 : Nāma-rūpa

Ans. to Q. No. 7 : a) True b) False c) True d) True