UNIT 9: BUDDHISM: THE CONCEPT OF NIRVANA

UNIT STRUCTURE

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9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to :

- analyse the Four Noble Truths
- explain the Concept of 'Astângika mârga'
- describe the concept of Nirvâna

9.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you about the Buddhist concept of Nirvana. Nirvana means 'Moksa' or liberation. To analyse the concept of Nirvana, at first we have to discuss about the Four Noble Truths (Arya Satya) or catvari arya satyani. Basically, Buddha was an ethical teacher and reformer rather than a metaphysician. He preached orally. The message of his enlightenment shows people the way to lead towards Nirvana. Buddha found metaphysical questions useless in our practical life. So, he tried to enlighten people on

the most important questions of life: suffering, its origin, cessation from it and the path leading to its cessation.

9.3 BRIEF OUTLOOK ON BUDDHISM

Buddhism is known as Nastika school of Indian philosophy. Like the great teachers of ancient times, Buddha taught people through the medium of conversation. For a long time his disciples imparted his oral instructions to successive generations. The knowledge of Buddha's teachings may be found in 'Tipitaka' or the three baskets of law namely, Vinaya Pitaka, Sutta Pitaka and Abhidhamma Pitaka.

The teachings of Buddha were variously interpreted and developed by his disciples. Religiously, Buddhism is divided into two important sects: Hinayana and Mahayana. Like Jainism Hinayana is religion without God and Karma takes the place of God. Hinayana emphasizes liberation for and by the individual himself. According to Hinayana, Nirvana is negative. On the other hand, Mahayana believes that Nirvana is not a negative cessation of misery but a positive state of bliss.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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

a. Buddha taught people orally. (True/False)

b. The knowledge of Buddha's teachings may be found in 'Tipitaka'. (True/False)

c. Religiously Buddhism is divided into three kinds. (True/False)

d. Buddha did not accept that the world is full of suffering. (True/False)

e. Nirvâna means bondage. (True/False)

Q 2: What are Hinayâna and Mahâyâna schools of Buddhism ?

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9.4 CONCEPT OF FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

Buddha basically was an ethical teacher and reformer. He did not prefer to discuss to metaphysical questions. Instead, he always tried to enlighten persons on the most important questions of life: suffering, its origin, its cessation and the path of its cessation. Hence, from his spiritual experience Buddha became convinced of the four noble truths that (i) there is suffering, (ii) there is cause of suffering, (iii) there is cessation of suffering or it can be suppressed and (iv) there is a way to accomplish it or there is a way leading to its cessation.

Let us discuss about the four noble truths in the following way:

9.5 FIRST NOBLE TRUTH

The first noble truth 'There is suffering' (Du?kha) is considered as the tyranny of pain. Life is full of misery and pain. Each and everything in this universe is painful. Birth is painful, death is painful, disease is painful, decay is union with the unpleasant and is painful and separation from the pleasant is painful. It means that all that springs from attachment are painful. It is a common experience that the world is full of suffering. Poverty, disease, old age, death, selfishness, greed, anger, hatred, conflicts, exploitation are flourishing excessively in this world. No one can deny this fact. Hence life of an individual is painful.

9.6 SECOND NOBLE TRUTH

The second noble truth is 'There is cause of suffering' (Dukha-samudaya). It is concerned with the causes of suffering. According to Buddhism, everything has a cause; nothing comes out of nothing- 'ex nihilo nihil fit'. The existence of every event is dependent upon its cause and condition. Everything in this universe is considered as conditional, relative and limited. So, being a fact suffering also must have a cause. It must depend on some conditions. Craving generates the cycle of birth and death and is the cause of suffering. Craving is of three fold: (a) Craving for sensual pleasure, (b) craving for being and (c) craving for wealth.

Buddha stated that because of birth (jati) humans suffer or there is suffering (jara-marana). If a man were not born, he would not have been subject to the miserable states. Again, birth has its own condition i.e. the will to become (bhava) or born. Mental craving (upadana) to objects is the responsible condition for the will to born. The craving is also because of thirst (trsna) or desire to enjoy objects. Thirst again is due to sense experience (vedana) which is due to sense-object-contact (sparsa). Sense-object-contact is also because of the six sense organs of cognition (sadayatana). It is again due to psycho-physical organism (nama-rupa), which is dependent upon initial consciousness of the embryo (vijñana). Vijñana again is based on impressions of karmic forces (samaskara). It is also because of the ignorance of truth (avidya) which is the root cause of all suffering.

9.7 THIRD NOBLE TRUTH

The third noble truth is related to the cessation of suffering (dukha nirodha). Buddha viewed that though the world is full of suffering, it is not without a cause. Again, there is cessation of suffering i.e. it can be suppressed. Everything in this universe is dependent upon some causes and conditions. If these causes and conditions are removed, the effect also will cease to exist. Hence, as an effect suffering also have causes and conditions. If these causes and conditions are removed, then suffering will definitely be destroyed. Ignorance is the main cause of suffering and if it is removed suffering will cease to exist. By removing ignorance man can attain liberation or nirvana. It may be mentioned here that Buddha believed that Nirvana can be attained in this life. When the control of passions and constant contemplation of truth lead a human being to perfect wisdom through the stages of concentration, then he becomes free from the worldly attachment. He is therefore liberated and called as 'Arhat.' This state of human being is called Nirvana.

9.8 FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH

The fourth noble truth is known as 'Dukha-Nirodha-Marga' or there is a way leading to the cessation of suffering. There is an ethical and spiritual path by following which suffering or pain can be removed. Buddha himself followed this path and suggested to follow it. The right knowledge regarding the causes of suffering shows the way of liberation. Buddha recommended eight steps or rules to attain liberation. These are known as 'Noble Eightfold Path' or 'Astangika-marga'. For liberation, eight fold path should be practised. It consists of eight steps. These are as follow:

(i) Right View (Samyag drsti): The first step towards liberation is right view. It is defined as the correct knowledge about the four noble truths. It was stated by Buddha that the knowledge about the four noble truths helps moral reformation and leads the human being towards the goal-Nirvana.

(ii) Right Resolve (Samyag sankalpa): The mere knowledge of truth would be meaningless, if one is not firmly determined to reform life in their light. Therefore, the human being who wants to attain liberation should renounce worldliness, give up ill feelings towards others and stop doing any harm to others. These tree are the constituents of right resolve.

(iii) Right Speech (Samyag vak): Samyag sankalpa or right determination should be used in practice. It should guide and control our speech. People should keep away themselves from lying, slander,unkind words etc.

(iv) Right Conduct (Samyag karmanta): Right resolve is not limited to right speech only but it includes right conduct too. The concept of 'Pañca-Sila' i.e. abstention from killing, stealing, sensuality, lying and intoxication is included in right conduct.

(v) Right livelihood (samyag ajiva): Right livelihood means maintaining one's life by honest means. Human beings should perform action in consistency with good determination. They should never follow forbidden means to lead their lives.

(vi) Right Effort (Samyag vyayama): People should maintain a constant effort to root out evil thoughts. Because, if a person tries to live a reformed life through right views, resolution, speech,action and livelihood, he may be misled by the evil ideas that deep rooted in the mind. So, people should have constant endeavour to maintain moral progress by removing evil thoughts.

(vii) Right Mindfulness (Samyag smrti): The person who is willing to attain liberation should always remember and contemplate the body as body, the sensations as sensations, mind as mind and the mental states as mental states. We should have constant meditation on the knowledge gained through the feeling of soul, body, or perishable objects. If we cannot become mindful, we think that the body, the senses, the mind and the mental states are permanent and valuable. Hence, attachment arises to such things and we feel grief when we loss them. In this way, we become subject to bondage and misery. But, our contemplation on the perishable nature of these things helps us to remain free from attachment and misery.

(viii) Right Concentration (Samyag samadhi): Right concentration is the last step in the path that leads to 'Nirvana'. Any individual who has successfully guided his life in the light of the seven rules and thereby freed himself from all passions and evil thoughts is eligible to enter into the stages of concentration. These stages lead the human being to his goal i.e. cessation of suffering. These stages of right concentration are: (a) The first stage is on reasoning and investigation regarding the truths. Here is a joy of pure thinking. (b) The second stage is unruffled meditation, free from reasoning. Here is a joy of tranquility. (c) The third stage is detachment from even the joy of tranquility. There is then indifference even to such joy but a feeling of bodily ease still persists. (d) The fourth stage is detachment from bodily ease too. There are perfect equanimity and indifference and it is the state of Nirvana or perfect wisdom.

Thus, it may be mentioned here that the eightfold path of Nirvāna consists of three main things - conduct (sila), concentration (samrdhi) and knowledge (prajña).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Mention whether the following statements are true or false :

a. According to Buddha ignorance is the root cause of suffering. (True/False)

b. Buddha emphasized ninefold path to attain liberation. (True/False)

c. Buddha did not mention any path for cessation of suffering. (True/False)

d. Buddha argued that right knowledge can remove ignorance.

e. Pratityasmutpâda is known as 'Bhava-cakra'. (True/False)

Q 4: What is the second noble truth according to Buddha?

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Q 5: What is right concentration ?

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9.9 CONCEPT OF NIRVĀNA

The concept of Nirvāna is considered as the highest end for human beings. The word 'Nirvāna' literally means 'blowing out' or 'cooling'. Blowing out suggests extinction. Cooling suggests not complete annihilation, but only the dying out of hot passion. According to Buddhism, Nirvāna is not the blessed fellowship with God. By nirvāna Buddha meant only the extinction of false desire. Nirvāna which is the consummation of the spiritual struggle is a positive blessedness. It is the goal of perfection and not the abyss of annihilation. Through the destruction of all that is individual in us, we enter into communion with the whole universe and become an integral part of the great purpose. Nirvāna is an eternal condition for being, for it is not a samskāra or what is made or put together, which is impermanent. The illusion of becoming is founded on the reality of nirvāna. Nirvāna is the root principle of all and so is indefinable.

Nirvāna is compared to deep sleep and is stated that in Nirvāna the soul loses its individuality and lapses into the objective whole. It is neither annihilation nor existence as we conceive it. It is the state of activity which is not the subject of causality, for it is unconditional freedom. It is the state of real and enduring though not existent in the world of time and space. In one sense it is self-extinction, in another sense absolute freedom. According to Buddha, to think that Nirvāna is annihilation is 'a wicked heresy.'

Nirvāna is the extinction of greed, hate, anger and delusion. It is the extinction of becoming or rebirth. It is considered as complete extinction of passions and consequent suffering. It is neither annihilation nor inaction, but compatible with active intellectual and social life. It is that state of enlightenment which removes all ignorance. It is the state of perfect self-possession and unconditioned freedom. The liberated person is devoid of egoism or the sense of individuality. There is extinction of individual existence in the state of Nirvāna. However, attainment of Nirvāna does not make a person inactive and indifferent to the world around him. Buddha himself led an active life from his Enlightenment to the day of his death. Nirvāna is a way of life, in conformity with the spirit of Buddha's teachings that wisdom consists in treading the middle path, avoiding the extremes of asceticism, inactivity and indifference on one hand, and that of frantic pursuit of mindless pursuit of pleasure on the other.

In the Pali texts Nirvana has been described as a state of bliss. The liberated person is free from evil desire, he has perfect knowledge about the four noble truths. The Dhammapada states that Nirvāna is a state of bliss, crown of happiness, perfect peace, free from greed, hatred and delusion. It is that happiness which is distinct from pleasure. It is the blissful end.

The depth of Nirvāna is immeasurable and unfathomable as the ocean. It is inconceivable. According to Buddha, Nirvāna is neither annihilation nor eternal existence but an indescribable state of perfect wisdom.

We may mention here about two kinds of Nirvāna. These are: (a) Upādhisesa and (b) Anupādhisesa. In upādhisesa Nirvāna only human

passions are extinct and in anupādhisesa Nirvāna all being is extinct. When we say that people attain Nirvāna in this world, we mean upadhisesa Nirvāna. It is the arhatship which becomes pariNirvāna when the Arhat disappears from this transitory world. Parinirvāna means absolute perfection of being.

According to Hinayana school of Buddhism, liberation is only for and by the individual himself. It is the difficult path of self-help. Its goal is Arhathood or the state of the ideal saint who obtains personal salvation. On the other hand, Mahāyāna school which is considered as Great vehicle, the Big ship can accommodate a much larger number of people and can safely and securely take them to the shore of Nirvāna from the troubled waters of the ocean of sa?s?ra. Hinayana is considered as a small vehicle that aims at attaining arhathood. Mahāyāna considers Nirvāna as a positive state of bliss.

Thus, according to Buddhism the world is full of suffering. Ignorance is the root cause of suffering. Ignorance can be removed only through knowledge. Hence, knowledge is the sole means of liberation. To get rid of suffering people should have the right knowledge about four noble truths and they should follow the eightfold path or Astangika mārga provided by Buddha. When an individual follows the eightfold path, he can attain nirvana in this life.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: (a) What is the etymological meaning of Nirvāna ?

(b) Is Nirvâna the abyss of annihilation ?

(c) What does Dhammapāda state about Nirvâna ?

(d) Can the depth of Nirvāna be measured ?

(e) What are the two kinds of Nirvāna ?



9.10 LET US SUM UP

- Buddha taught people through the medium of conversation.

- The knowledge of Buddha's teachings may be found in 'Tipitaka' i.e. Vinaya Pitaka, Sutta Pitaka and Abhidhamma Pitaka.
- Religiously, Buddhism is divided into two important sects: Hinayâna and Mahâyâna.
- Hinayâna emphasizes liberation for and by the individual himself.
- Mahâyâna believes that nirvâna is not a negative cessation of misery but a positive state of bliss.
- Buddha basically was an ethical teacher and reformer who always tried to enlighten persons on the most important questions of suffering, its origin, its cessation and the path of its cessation.
- According to Buddha, life is full of misery and pain.
- According to Buddhism, everything has a cause; nothing comes out of nothing- 'ex nihilo nihil fit'.
- Ignorance is the root cause of suffering which can be removed only through right knowledge.
- Buddha showed eightfold path to attain liberation.
- Nirvâna is the goal of perfection.



9.11 FURTHER READING

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