

I N T R O D U C T I O N

No one who has lived in the world can be untouched by human suffering. Either in his own life or in the lives of those with whom he comes in contact there has entered injury, illness, misery, anxiety, death, or some other form of unwholesomeness and evil. Human existence is far from perfect. Even the most fortunate, the happiest people in the world have to admit a measure of unhappiness. Most people, in fact, recognize that life is not perfect. Either they simply shrug their shoulders and exclaim, "That is the way life is", or else they set about trying to reduce the imperfections in life. Ordinarily, when the latter attitude is adopted, effort is directed toward reducing poverty by increasing available wealth, reducing illness and premature deaths by extending sanitation or by promoting the practice of medicine, etc. But seldom is there a person who carefully and systematically directs his attention to the fundamental causes of suffering and the ways for the elimination of these causes. Gautama Siddhartha, the Buddha, was such a person, and the religious philosophy that issued from his teachings presents a systematic analysis of the nature and causes of suffering and provides a manifold of means for the overcoming of suffering.

Buddhism as a Way of Wisdom taught and practiced for the sake of improving the quality of life by removing the

sources of suffering is, in its details, a complicated phenomenon incorporating a great many historical changes, but in its essence, as taught by the Buddha, it is a relatively simple teaching to grasp. One must hasten to point out, however, that understanding the outlines of a Way of Wisdom is quite different from following that Way. Following the Way is difficult. It is, indeed, so difficult that it has not yet been mastered by the discipline and self-control of the majority of mankind. Consequently, it should be kept in mind that there is all the difference in the world between following the Way and talking about following the Way. To follow the Way there is no substitute for practice. In fact, without practicing the Way, it is unlikely that one will even achieve a satisfactory intellectual understanding of what the Way is. Nevertheless it is possible to achieve considerable knowledge about Buddhism by studying and analyzing the main features that constitute this Way of life.

The content of this enlightenment constitutes the basic message of Buddhism. This message, in simplest form, consists in the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. These truths are: (1) There is suffering; (2) Suffering is caused; (3) Suffering can be extinguished by eliminating the causes of suffering; (4) The way to extinguish the causes of suffering is to follow the Middle Way constituted by the

Noble Eightfold path.

The First Truth, concerned with the existence of suffering, lists seven¹ areas of suffering familiar to everyone. But these seven areas should not be taken as a definition of suffering; they are simply examples of suffering, examples obvious to anyone who has lived in the world. Suffering goes much deeper than those examples. It must be recognized that the pleasures of one person are often the pains of another. And the pains of others are disturbing to one's own contentment. Thus, though it would seem that the wealthy captain of industry who has all of the goods of society at his disposal should be happy, this may not be the case. If he is truly a sensitive human being, the poverty of those workers in industry which is the direct counterpart of the captain's wealth might very well be the bitter dressing spoiling the enjoyment of all his wealth. To be aware that one's pleasures come at another person's expense is not to bring suffering only to the other; it is also to bring suffering to oneself.

In addition, even in those cases where one's pleasures are not tied to the sufferings of anyone else, they

1 "Birth is suffering; decay is suffering; illness is suffering; death is suffering; presence of objects we hate is suffering; separation from objects we love is suffering; not to obtain what we desire is suffering..."

still are fraught with suffering. The pleasures that one enjoys bring with them an attachment to the objects and activities enjoyed. The anxiety resulting from the possibility of separation from the objects or activities in question is a hidden cancer in the pleasures, and thus a source of suffering.

Another feature of the suffering underlying the various pleasures of life concerns the fact that they are not self-perpetuating, but that they are self-accelerating. Deriving pleasure from an activity or object does not diminish the drive for that pleasure, but rather serves to strengthen the drive. One becomes more closely tied to the conditions that provide pleasure as he derives more pleasure from his activities. The more pleasures one achieves the more he seeks. This cycle goes on unendingly, catching one up in its increasing tempo, with seemingly no escape. Granted that the achievement of pleasure does not bring complete happiness and contentment, but rather leaves one even more dissatisfied and unhappy, it appears that one is being led to even greater unhappiness by grasping at the pleasures of life.

This last point is tied in with a basic assumption of Buddhism which holds that the drive for pleasure is too shallow and insignificant to fulfill a person and bring true happiness.

In the Dhammapada it is said, "One is the path that leads to worldly gain; and quite another that leads to Nibbana". If this is the case, then the pleasures that one finds in the world, being shallow, are really factors producing unhappiness. In recognition of this, the observation in the Dhammapada noted just above, is followed by the advice

Understanding this, let not the Bhikkhu, the
disciple of the Awakened One, delight in
worldly honour but develop detachment instead.

Thus, not only do those seven examples given by the Buddha in his first sermon belong to suffering, but even those examples that would be given of the "good" side of existence are, at bottom, only disguised suffering. The basic illness that is responsible for suffering goes deeper than the examples given; it is the grasping of the aggregates or constituents of self.

The Second Noble Truth is the truth that suffering originates in craving. In one sense, suffering is caused by craving what one cannot have or craving to avoid what cannot be avoided. Thus, craving money when one is poor leads to suffering; craving health when one is ill leads to suffering; craving immortality in the face of the inevitability of death leads to suffering; craving extinction faced with the continuity of the stuff of which life is made leads to suffering, etc. But there is a deeper sense of craving. This is craving in the sense of a blind compulsion to be or will to be have a self.

If the obvious forms of suffering are analyzed it will be seen that there are two basic factors involved. First, there is what might be called the existence of certain objective factors in the world. There is the fact that Jones has no money, that Smith's child just died, or that Singh's leg was cut off. But these objective facts in the world do not of themselves involve suffering. After all, who suffers when a boulder is split in two? Who suffers when a branch is cut from the tree? Who suffers when a young oak is broken in the wind? Probably no one would ever think of ascribing suffering to the boulder, or the trunk of the tree, or the "parent" oak. But probably everyone would attribute suffering to Jones, Smith and Singh. The difference between these cases is obvious. Trees and boulders do not have selves; hence there is no one to suffer. But Jones, Smith and Singh have, each of them, a self. And this self is aware of the suffering causes it by objective factors in the world. We think it makes sense for Jones, or Smith, or Singh to say, "I have lost my money, or child, or leg", but it does not make sense to think of the tree or boulder as saying, "I lost my part, or branch, or child". If this latter did make sense we ~~want~~ should very well impute suffering to boulders and trees as well as to persons.

This points to the second factor involved in suffering; the existence of a self. There is no suffering

until objective factors in the world are related to a self. When these objective factors are related to a self this self may crave them or crave to avoid them. And when what is craved is not had there is suffering.

But what is this self which constitutes the second basic factor involved in suffering? And does it make sense to attribute a self to a person? What is this "I" to which reference is made when a person claims, "I have lost my child?" The truth of the origin of suffering is that it is the craving of a self that gives rise to suffering. Blindly, a person craves a self that though separate is attached to the factors constituting the person. This craving leads to the invention and projection of a self. This self, being attached to the factors making up a person, suffers when the identification is threatened by changes in the factors to which it is attached, whether those be the factors of that person, other persons, or other objects and activities in the world.

Analysis of a person reveals the existence of (1) the activities constituting what we call the bodily, or physical, self; (2) activities of sensing; (3) activities of perceiving; (4) impulses to action; and (5) activities of consciousness. But in addition to these five groups of activities nothing more is to be found. The self, as that to which the groups of activities belong is a fiction, a fiction created by ignorant craving. And it is the craving for this

fictitious self that underlies all suffering.

The third Noble Truth, that suffering can be extinguished, follows upon analysis of the causes of suffering. If selfish craving is the cause of suffering, then the cessation of suffering lies in the extinction of that craving. This is precisely what the Buddha recommended. In fact, the very goal of the Buddhist - Nirvana - has the meaning "be blown out." What is blown out - like a lamp - or extinguished, is selfish craving. When selfish craving is extinguished, suffering is pulled up by the root. Thus, the truth of the cessation of suffering is the truth that the extinction of craving will bring about the cessation of suffering.

It is a long way, however, from the recognition of what will bring about the cessation of suffering to the actual accomplishment of that cessation. And the Buddha, good physician that he was, did not stop with an analysis and diagnosis of the malady nor with the recognition of what was required for cure, but he prescribed a method of treatment which would destroy the illness. The prescription constitutes the Fourth Noble Truth, which teaches the famous "Middle Way" of Buddhism.

This Middle Way, which sums up the way of life that characterizes Buddhism as a practical philosophy, is built upon the eight principles constituting the Fourth Noble Truth.

The various actions of life prompted by and expressing these eight principles should proceed more or less simultaneously, the aim being to achieve a completely integrated life of the highest order. The relationships between actions of life and the principles that underlie these actions can be seen by considering the three axioms of Ethical Conduct, Mental Discipline, and Wisdom, which underlie all principles and actions. The axiom of Ethical Conduct includes right speech, right action, and right livelihood. The axiom of Discipline includes right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The axiom of Wisdom includes right views, and right resolution. The purpose of Ethical Conduct is to check the inflow of additional cravings, and Wisdom is prescribed for living a sufferingless existence.

Understanding ourselves and the universe in which we live, action will be based upon a universal love and compassion. Accordingly, Ethical Conduct is based on love and compassion and springs from wisdom, or an enlightened mind. But to achieve wisdom and to cultivate love and compassion, discipline of the self is required. Thus, Ethical Conduct, Discipline, and Wisdom are the three axioms of the Good Life.

Accordingly, one begins and ends with all three simultaneously. To act ethically means to be correct in speech, action, and means of earning a living.

Right speech means generally to avoid all talk that will lead to unhappiness and to use speech to bring about happiness. Its negative application includes : (1) no lying; (2) no slander, or character assassination, or talk that might bring about hatred, jealousy, enmity, or discord among other; (3) no harsh or rude talk, no malicious talk, no impolite or abusive language; and (4) no idle or malicious gossip, or foolish chatter. Its positive application teaches that one should tell the truth, speak in a kindly and friendly way, use language meaningfully and usefully. This includes knowing the time and place for which certain talk is appropriate. This implies that sometimes one should maintain "noble silence".

Right action means avoiding killing or hurting, and precludes stealing, cheating, and immoral sexual activity. Positively, it means that one's actions should aim at promoting peace and happiness for others and respecting the well-being of all living beings.

Right livelihood extends the principle of right action to one's chosen profession throughout one's life. Accordingly, it precludes professions that would harm others, such as trading in firearms, liquors, drugs, poisons, killing, sexual procurement etc. Only those means of earning a living which promote peace and well-being are in accord with this

principle.

It is obvious how the axiom of Ethical Conduct rests upon compassion and love for others. But further, this compassion and love is the natural result of a recognition of the conditionedness and relativity of things. If no things have independent being (avabhava), then all are dependent upon each other. But this leaves no foothold for selfishness. Consequently ignorance and selfishness must be replaced by wisdom and compassion.