

# Tathagata Buddha: An Embodiment of Uniquely Talented Personality

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**Abstract:** *The Sanskrit term 'Buddha' is rendered into English as 'An Awakened One or An Enlightened One'. According to Tibetan etymology, "One who has awakened from the sleep of ignorance and spread his intellect to all objects of knowledge is called Buddha." As per this etymology, the term 'Buddha' refers to all awakened beings, not only to Śākyamuni. The essence of Śākyamuni's practical experience is called Buddha Dharma. The concept of Pratītyasamutpāda is the special characteristics of His teachings because this concept includes the system of formation and destruction of the universe, Law of Karma and its Result, Existence of Past and Future Lives etc. His concept of Bahujana Hitāya Bahujana Sukhāya as well as middle path and secular thought gives Him high status in Indian Philosophy.*

**Keywords:** *Akaniṣṭha Heaven, Dharmakāya, Nirmāṇakāya, Sambhogakāya, Prajñāpāramitā, Three Natures/Three Characteristics*

**Introduction:** Who is Buddha? What is His teaching? What is the special characteristic of His teaching? What is the status of Tathāgata Buddha and His Dharma in Indian Philosophy etc.? These are some pertinent questions that arise very often in conference or academic discussion on the Buddha and His Teachings. After consulting authentic sources, a brief information is being presented as under:

## 1. Who is Buddha?

The answer of the question given in the sub-theme of this article can be discussed in two ways— general and particular. Generally, 'Buddha' is a Sanskrit word. It is rendered into English as 'An Awakened One, A Realized One, An Enlightened One' etc. For instance, Śākyamuni Buddha. According to Tibetan etymology, it is explained as – "One who has awakened from the sleep of ignorance and spread his intellect to all objects of knowledge is called Buddha." As per this etymology, the term 'Buddha' refers to all awakened beings, not only to Śākyamuni Buddha. Thus this interpretation tells us that there is not a single Buddha in this universe but countless. However, according to Mahāyāna tradition, Buddha is nothing but an embodiment of two or three bodies— Truth Body (Dharmakāya), Perfect Enjoyment Body (Sambhogakāya) and Emanation Body (Nirmāṇakāya). Among them, the first one is the actual Buddha while the other two are its manifestations as these two are emanated in different times for the sake of the sentient beings. Accordint to this tradition, Śākyamuni Buddha is asserted to be the Supreme Emanation Body, one of the three Emanation Bodies of the Buddha. He already

attained the Buddhahood in the *Akaniṣṭha* Heaven (Heaven Beneath None)<sup>1</sup> countless eons ago. He just appeared in this world in the *Pradīpa Kalpa* (Eon of Light) to demonstrate the twelve spiritual deeds beginning with descent from Tuṣita Heaven to the human world<sup>2</sup> for the sake of beings. *Samādhirājasūtra* (King of Concentration Sūtra) says: “Do not look at the Conqueror (Buddha) from the viewpoint of the two form bodies.” The two form bodies are obtained from the blessings or sustaining power of Truth Body; are formed because of the vision of disciples or to lead beings to maturity; and stem from previous prayers. However, here one thing needs to be clear that Buddhahood needs to be attained through practicing the prescribed path as well as by traversing grounds.

## 2. What is His teaching?

We all know that after becoming a mendicant from a prince, the would-be Buddha initially demonstrated the spiritual deed of relinquishing household life. Then, followed by the attainment of Buddhahood at Vajrāsana (present Bodhgaya) through perceiving the reality of phenomena, he turned Wheels of Dharma at different places. His sole purpose of turning the Wheel of Dharma was to liberate the beings from suffering and its cause. He accomplished this task simply by giving dharma-teachings according to the mental capacity and interests of beings. Except showing right path in the form of giving virtuous teachings to liberation, he did not use his any supernatural power that can be seen or heard in other religions proclaiming ‘*Tathāstu*’, for the purpose of liberating beings. Actually, as per the mental capacity and interests of disciples Tathāgata Buddha shared the essence of

<sup>1</sup> The highest of Buddhafield. The highest of the heaven of the Form Realm. According to Mahāyāna, Buddhas first reach full enlightenment in Akaniṣṭha Ghanavyūha, and then manifest enlightenment through Nirmāṇakāya Body in the human realm. The other sixteen being— Brahmā Category, In Front of Brahmā (Priest of Brahmā), Great Brahmā, Little Light, Limitless Light, Bright Light, Little Virtue, Limitless Virtue, Vast Virtue, Cloudless, Born of Merits, Great Fruit, Not Great, Without Pain, Excellent Appearance and Great Perception.

<sup>2</sup> Through greatest compassion knowing all worlds,  
 Having seen all worlds,  
 Whilst never leaving the Dharmakāya,  
 Through various forms, apparitional by nature,  
 The one excellently born into the highest birth.  
 Descends from that Tuṣita Heaven  
 And passes into this world.  
 Enters the womb of mother and takes birth,  
 Perfectly skills in every science and craft,  
 Delightfully enjoys the company of royal consorts,  
 Renounces and practises as an ascetic,  
 Goes to the place to Awakening’s Heart  
 And vanquishes the hosts of Māra,  
 [Attains] perfect enlightenment and turns the Wheel of Doctrine.  
 Passes into Nirvāṇa— in all those places,  
 So impure, the [Nirmāṇakāya] shows these deeds  
 As long as worlds endure. [*Mahāyāna-Uttara-Tantra*, 3.53-56/220-223]

his practical experience in the form of giving teachings throughout a period of forty-five years. The essence of his practical experience is called Buddha Dharma. The Buddha Dharma which was shared in three Wheels of Dharma is included in several topics like Four Noble Truths, Prajñāpāramitā, Three Natures/Three Characteristics (*Trisvabhāva*) and so on. He gave teachings on the four noble truths in the first Wheel turned at R̥ṣipattana Mṛgadāva (present Sarnath), on Prajñāpāramitā in the second Wheel turned at Gṛdhra-kūṭa Parvata (Vulture Peak Mountain) in Rājgīr and on Three Natures or Three Characteristics in the third Wheel turned at Vaiśālī etc. While turning the second Wheel, he also manifested himself into Vajradhara and gave teachings on Tantra at Śrī Dhānyakūṭa (present Amravati). Among his all teachings, the four noble truths are its essence. It is the heart and central doctrine of the Buddha Dharma because it paves a conceptual framework for all Buddhist thought. The four truths explain the order of engagement to and disengagement from the *saṃsāra*. The four noble truths have two orders: The order with respect to the clear realization arising in the mind-stream and the order with respect to the meaning of cause and result. The concept of dependent origination is also established on the basis of these four truths. Without understanding the presentation of the four noble truths, no higher and secret teaching can be understood and practiced properly as well.

Actually, Buddha gave teachings on the four noble truths at the initial stage because he fully realized that the living beings suffer from three kinds of basic suffering—suffering of pain, suffering of change and pervasive suffering. There is no suffering which is causeless, rather every suffering has a particular cause. It means, whatever suffering the living beings undergo in their daily life, everything has some specific cause<sup>3</sup>. The cause may either be primary or cooperative. It is like a tree which is produced out of a particular seed. The particular seed is known as its primary cause. After being sown in the earth, some other causes or causes help it to take the form of sprout thereby coming out of the earth. These conditions referring to the four or five elements— earth, water, fire, air and space— are known as its cooperative causes. In the same way, in the case of us, the continuum of our past consciousness is known as our primary cause whereas the semen and blood of our present parents are known as its cooperative cause. On the other hand, regarding the action and result, what we experience here also has several aspects. For example, according to the time of their fruition, there are three: action whose result will be experienced in this life, action whose result will be experienced in the next life and action whose result will be experienced in other subsequent lives; secondly according to their nature, it is also of three: virtuous action, non-virtuous action and unfluctuating action; thirdly according to their nature of result, it is also of three: action giving

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<sup>3</sup> All phenomena are born from causes. The Tathāgata expounded about their causes. The causes have cessation, said by the Great Śramaṇa. [*ye dharmā hetuprabhavā, hetuṃteṣāṃ tathāgato hyavadat/teṣāṃ ca yo nirodha evaṃvādī mahāśramaṇaḥ*]

rise to happiness, action giving rise to suffering and action giving rise to indifference and so on. So these are the few facts which needed to be intimated to the sentient beings. It is because if sentient beings do not understand the suffering first as being suffering, they will not be aware to be free from it. When awareness will arise in them, they will definitely try to know directly or indirectly what the cause of suffering is. After knowing the cause, they will seek its remedy.

### 3. What is the special characteristic of His teaching?

As mentioned above that after attaining the final goal of Buddhahood, Gautama the Buddha, throughout a period of forty-five years, continuously kept on doing welfare through showing the right path. He never tried and even ensured anyone that his suffering and cause of suffering would be eliminated by His supernatural power<sup>4</sup>. Instead, as a spiritual guide, he just showed the right path for that. Whether the miserable migrators would wish to be free from the suffering and cause of suffering, it would totally depend on them<sup>5</sup>. This is a very impressive advice and guidance. As, if a person becomes sick, his sickness will only be cured when he himself will have the prescribed medicine. Instead of him, if someone else takes the medicine, how will his sickness be cured<sup>6</sup>?

Secondly, we are human beings. For our survival, all of us do more or less work. Let us keep aside the non-virtuous works, even whatever virtuous works we do, mostly our motivation is entangled in worldly *dharma*s, particularly craving like the craving of earning good name, praise, high status, service and so on. Likewise, whatever religious activities we do, mostly those are also associated with worldly conceptions like fulfilling our worldly desires. Though these kinds of activities look positive, but after all these cannot lead us to liberation or Buddhahood. Therefore, until worldly conceptions and cravings are not extinguished by purifying the mind, no liberation or Buddhahood can be gained. Buddhism mainly emphasizes the practice of taming the restless mind. This is the reason that Buddhism is also called the science of mind because it stresses on gaining peace and happiness of mind. In *Dhammapada* and several other *sūtras*, Buddha himself lays emphasis on controlling the mind:

One should not commit any unwholesome.

One should accumulate merits.

One should tame his mind wholly.

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<sup>4</sup> The sages do not wash away sins with water.

The sufferings of sentient beings are not eliminated with hands.

He does not transmit his realization to others,

But solely liberates by showing the peaceful ultimate nature.

<sup>5</sup> *tumhehi kiccaṃ ātappaṃ akkhātāro tathāgatā/paṭipannā pamokkhanti jhāyino mārabandhanā.*

<sup>6</sup> Illness is the object to be known, the cause of illness is to be given up. Then, having known the object to be gained, medicine is to be taken [*vyādhirjñeyo vyādhihetuḥ praheyah/svāस्थ्यam prāpyam bhesajam sevyamevaṃ. (4.53)*]

This is the teachings of the Buddhas. (14.5)

Thirdly, Buddha's entire teachings are subsumed in view and conduct. In other terminologies, these are called philosophy and doctrine. The concept of dependent origination, emptiness, selflessness, momentariness etc., are included in view<sup>7</sup> while practice of non-violence, ten virtuous actions, four means of conversion etc., are included in conduct. Among all these themes, the most important one is the concept of dependent origination. It is because this concept is actually a law. It is the key thought of Buddhist Philosophy and root foundation of Buddha Dharma. It is the very theory that establishes emptiness, the fundamental nature of all phenomena. This is the reason that the Buddha very clearly mentions in *Śālistambasūtra* (Rice Seedling Sūtra): One who sees [comprehends] *Pratītyasamutpāda*, sees [comprehends] the dharma and one who sees the dharma, sees the Buddha [*yah pratītyasamutpadāṃ paśyati, sa dharmam paśyati. Yo dharmam paśyati, sa buddham paśyati.*]. These very teachings lay down the theory that every phenomenon in this universe is transient, momentary and conditional. There is not even a slight particle which is inherently existent, permanent, and beyond change. Each and every phenomenon has a particular cause for its origination and rise in nature. The theory has its revolutionary aspect in the postulate that nothing should be accepted as immutable. This theory does not believe in the existence of a creator, unknown power or principle. The correct understanding of the concept of *Pratītyasamutpāda* helps to know the system of formation and destruction of the universe in a systematic way. Even the right understanding about the 'Law of Karma and its Result', 'Concept of the Existence of Past and Future Lives' etc., also exclusively depend on the theory of *Pratītyasamutpāda*. Apart from the above, the initial benefit of understanding the system of *Pratītyasamutpāda* is that every living being is bound to the fetter of birth, old age, sickness and death. As such, after the birth of a being, death is liable to occur. In addition to that, on realizing this state, the grasping at self comes to an end. As a result, right view arises in him. It also gives birth to the non-dual state of method and wisdom, the cause of the dual body of the Buddha. Therefore, Nāgārjuna says in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*:

Because there are no things at all,  
Which are not dependently originated,  
Therefore, there are no things at all,  
Which are not empty. [24.19]

Practically, the existence and relation between father and son, mother and daughter, teacher and student, king and subject, tall and short, good and bad, thick and thin, everything is accomplished depending on this theory. Keeping aside this theory, no

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<sup>7</sup> All compounded phenomena are impermanent; All contaminated things are miserable; All phenomena are empty and selfless; And *nirvāṇa* is peace.

relation, no existence, no formation, no destruction etc., can be proved and established by its own way. *Ratnāvalī* (The Precious Garland) says:

When this is, that arises,  
Like short when there is long.  
Due to the production of this, that is produced,  
Like light from the production of a flame. [Verse No. 48]

Again:

Just as a child is said to be born  
Depending on a father and a mother,  
So a consciousness is said to arise  
Depending on an eye-sense organ and on a form. [Verse No. 3.55]

A very simple example can be pondered: Suppose, a man is constructing a building. His construction work is connected to a long chain of contribution such as an owner purchases a piece of land from someone, it gets registered and recorded with the help of concerned office and officers, engineer makes a plan, workers give their labour making the house, hardware-merchant supplies bricks, cement, rod, colour etc. With the contribution of several stakeholders, the house is made. Here we can see the how the principle of dependent origination works even in the construction of a house. In this way, we can apply this principle in every work, every object and every theory too. This concept was introduced for the first time in history of human civilization by not other than Tathāgata Buddha. This concept can undoubtedly be considered as the special characteristic of his teaching.

#### **4. What is the status of Tathāgata Buddha and his Dharma in Indian Philosophy?**

This is the most important and complicated question related to Tathāgata Buddha and his Dharma. To be familiar with the answer of the question, I think, first of all one should know the Buddha properly. And for understanding the Buddha properly one actually needs to be equal to the Buddha. We find people, without knowing the Buddha properly, casting allegations saying him biased, selfish etc. On the other hand, having familiarized with the virtuous qualities of the Buddha's body, speech and mind, Āryadeva, the close disciple of Nāgārjuna, for eulogizing him, mentions in *Chatuḥśatkaḥ* (Four Hundred Verses):

There are no movements of the Buddhas  
That are not causes (for benefiting others).  
Even their breath is issued  
Only for the sake of (acting as a) medicine for sentient beings.  
[5.1]

The given verse tells that the appearance and movement of any Buddha in this world are not meaningless. His every activity that includes the interpretative and definitive is meant for bringing welfare to others (*Bahujana Hitāya Bahujana Sukhāya*). The reason is that before becoming a Buddha, first he cultivated the altruistic thought (Bodhicitta) for the sake of others; in the middle he amassed dual merits through doing welfare for others; finally he attained Buddhahood for the benefits of others. Now, see his initial, middle and even the last part is associated with the welfare of others, not for self purpose. The activity of doing welfare for others only becomes when a thought is imbued with great love and compassion as well as skillful means. Skillful means is the unique quality of the Buddha which makes him very special from other proponents, prophets, speakers and teachers. Without this quality including great compassion, no welfare for sentient beings can be accomplished in a proper, complete and satisfactory way. On the basis of skillful means, sometimes he expounded the existence of phenomena, sometimes non-existence of phenomena, sometimes he remained silent without giving answers of irrelevant questions and even sometimes he gave teachings in discordant manner like ‘Father and mother are the objects to be killed<sup>8</sup>.’ and so on. So, those who did not and even do not have precise knowledge about his skillful means, sometimes they become confused and start criticizing. It was his skillful means and great compassion that he could tame and establish several cruel, passionate, untouchable and arrogant persons in right path like Āṅgulimālā, Ajātaśatru, Nanda, Bṛhaspati, Ṛṣi Akṣapāda, Ṛṣi Gatisakti, Phenvat, Aśvottama and so forth.

Secondly, well, according to historical account, the age of Buddha Dharma is not more than 2,567 years. Prior to it, particularly in India, we find the existence of the Vedas and Purāṇas. History says that the Vedas mainly emphasized on the performance or fire-offerings and sacrificial offerings in which animal sacrifice is included. At the same time, performance of rituals was also encouraged. Similarly, equal opportunity for religious practice and worship for all genders and castes were not given. So, with the attainment of Buddhahood, Buddha brought a revolution by prohibiting animal sacrifice as well as giving equal opportunity to all castes, creeds and colours particularly for religious practice. This is the reason that Prakriti, a young girl born into a marginalized caste labeled as ‘*chaṇḍāla*’, Upāli who belonged to a barber community and so forth became important and ideal icons in the Buddha’s disciples by getting equal opportunity for spiritual practice. Later on, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar along with his thousands of followers also embraced this Dharma too. Seeing scientific approach, the all time great scientist Albert Einstein became a fan of the Buddha and His Dharma. By means of his message of love and compassion, he gave a new light for all that happiness and misery whatever a being experiences, it happens due to his or her own *karma*. As one does an action duly

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<sup>8</sup> *mātaraṃ pitaraṃ hantvā rājāno dve ca khattiye/raṭṭhaṃ sānucaraṃ hantvā anīgho yāti brāhmaṇo*  
// (21.5)

motivated by afflictive emotion (*kleśa*) so he reaps an effect accordingly. But there is a state which is free from this *karma* and *kleśa*, and that can be attained by following right path, popularly known as the eightfold noble path. He emphatically said that each and every being has the potentiality to be become Buddha that can be attained by becoming free all negative *karma* and *kleśa*. Moreover, he presented a new interpretation of the meaning of the term ‘Brāhmaṇa’ that one can become by doing positive *karmas*. Instead, one cannot become pure Brāhmaṇa just by birth. He emphatically explained in Dhammapada: “Neither can one become a Brāhmaṇa by keeping matted hair nor can he be so by birth or family. Rather, one who has perceived the truth, held the Dharma and cleansed the stains of delusion from his mind, he is truly a Brāhmaṇa.”<sup>9</sup> Goal is equal for all, but after all that is required to be done is one needs advance there by following the prescribed path that includes *śīla*, *samādhi* and *prajñā* (ethics, meditative concentration and wisdom). Buddha is just a guide to show that prescribed path, but it has to be practiced by the individual himself.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *na jātāti na gotten na jaccā hoti brāhmaṇo/yamhi saccañca dhammo ca so sucī so ca brāhmaṇo//*  
(16.11)

<sup>10</sup> *tumhehi kiccaṃ ātappaṃ akkhātāro tathāgatā/paṭipannā pamokkhanti jhāyino mārabandhanā//*  
(20.4)