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Religious Perspectives

Introduction to Buddhism

“Good afternoon. You all know me, my name is Andrei Adaryukov. I am the head librarian here at DEOMI. But here today I represent Buddhism so that is what I am going to talk to you about. As Dr. Desai very so rightly noticed, Buddhism emerged from the milieu of Hinduism. It originated in India specifically in northeastern India in what is today, Nepal. But talking about Buddhism is very, very difficult because basically you have to redefine a lot of words, a lot of familiar words and a lot of words you think you understand or you know but they are used or mean slightly different things in the Buddhist context. The same thing with Hinduism. Buddhism emerges from Hinduism but it, subtly and sometimes not so subtly, rethinks a lot of things from its mother religion. So, let me try.

Buddha, first of all, Buddha is not a god. He is not a one of the gods of Hinduism. He is a person. Praying to Buddha or worshiping Buddha wouldn't do you much good because he's dead. He's been dead for a very, very long time. He was born about the 5th Century before the Current Era. His personal name, his actual name was Siddhārtha Guatama. He belonged to a prominent clan of Shakyas, so sometimes he is known as Shakyamuni, the Sage of the clan of Shakyas. And the word Buddha is not a personal name, it simply means the awakened one.

Historically, in Buddhism, there is only one Buddha in this current history. But it doesn't mean that there can't be any others. Being raised as a young prince, groomed to be a ruler, in luxury, at some point he faced up to what all human beings face up to, and that is the question of our mortality. That is the idea that no matter how rich you are, no matter how powerful you are, you are going to grow up, at some point you are probably going to get sick, and at some point you are going to die.

So he left his life as a prince and went and joined a group of traditional Hindu holy men, Sannyasins, meditating, subjecting himself to, for several years, extreme practices, ascetic practices. But he still couldn't resolve the main question, he could not find the answer to the human mortality, to what is it all about, as we sometimes put it. So, he said, extreme, extreme denial of everything physical doesn't work, doesn't work either. So he meditated under a bodhi tree. This is partly legendary account, details, who knows 2500 years ago.

At some point he achieved enlightenment. He became Buddha. He discovered the truth. He discovered how to deal with human mortality - what is this all about? And he passed it on for the next 50 years to his disciples. And this teaching is what we today call Buddhism. Buddhism is actually a Western term. It was invented by the British scholars because if you actually go to any of the majority Buddhist countries in Asia, they don't refer to themselves often as Buddhists. They say we are following the Dharma. And Dharma is a Hindu term and it means

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the teaching but it also the actual structure of reality. So when you are following Dharma you are basically just doing the right thing. You're living how you're supposed to live.

So, the teaching. The teaching of the Buddha is encapsulated in four, in what's called four noble truths. Truth number 1, the life is suffering. And no, Buddha was not a Russian novelist of the 19th century, so we are not talking about tear your hair, tear your heart out, suffering – suffering. The original Pāli term - dukkha, can mean that kind of suffering but much broader it means dissatisfaction. Even our happiness is suffering in a way because we know deep down there will be an end to it. Everyone knows, on the very mundane example, you want something for a very long time, really, really want something, a car or something else. The moment you get it, first day - it's fun, second day - it's fun, third day – it's same old thing. So the first noble truth is the whole life is like that.

The second noble truth, that source of that kind of suffering is attachment, grasping. The idea again that's close to Hinduism but Buddhism goes further in saying everything isn't permanent. In Hinduism you heard there is the idea of Atman, a soul, which actually goes through the cycle of deaths and rebirths. In Buddhism there is a cycle of deaths and rebirths, it's called Samsāra. But there is no actual individual soul, there is no me, me that's going to die and be reborn again. What is being reborn is neither the same person nor something completely different. There's, a certain continuity of consciousness, a certain imprint of karma. We heard the term karma.

Karma simply means action. And in Buddhism it's not just any action; it's purposeful moral action. So when you are acting for good or for bad intentionally, you're leaving certain imprints that will survive you as you are now. But, you, you now, once you're dead, you're dead. So again, middle way. There is continuity but there is a radical absence of that abiding ego, abiding I. And the attachment to that abiding ego is what causes suffering in this life from small insults to world wars.

The third noble truth is that the liberation is possible. It is possible to stop this cycle.

And the fourth truth, how? And, that is called the eightfold way. And, we can compress the eightfold way into three components: right thinking – basically so right study, right intellectual understanding of all these propositions; right action – ethical action, which is probably the most important before anything else, because without right ethical action no thinking, no deep meditation is going to avail you of nothing at all; and the third is that right concentration, right meditation – Buddhism believes, in Buddhism we believe that it is not enough to simply intellectually process, read something, assent to some propositions like the four noble truths, but that you need to experience it. And for that there are certain techniques of mindfulness, meditation and so on, that practitioners engage in.

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So, that's Buddhism in a nutshell. Of course, it didn't actually survive as a major religious tradition in India itself but it spread around and there is a great diversity within Buddhism. There is a Theravada tradition, the way of the elders in the Southeast Asia – in Thailand, Laos, Burma, Cambodia. There is a Mahayana tradition, so called Great Vehicle which is much more mystical; and later schools that came into being in 12 -13th century in China and Japan incorporate a lot of other traditions Taoism, Confucianism. They developed much more sophisticated philosophical systems, mystical systems, but in the end, whether you were in Southeast Asia, in China or in Japan or in Tibet (where a very specific school of Buddhism emerged called Vajrayana, the lightning path or the diamond vehicle). It always comes down, in the end, it always comes down to the four noble truths and the eightfold path. If it doesn't, then it's not really Buddhism anymore.

Now, I recently talked to my friend in Germany and she attend one of similar panels and she told me over the phone, a little bit in jest, 'there was even a real authentic Buddhist there. He was shaved bald, he was wearing saffron robes, and he barely spoke English, or German.' Now, that tells you again that there is a culture, there is a monastic tradition, that's where the saffron robes are coming from. But not speaking English, there is still a lot of this perception that Buddhism is one of the exotic traditions.

Well, I don't know but it's been in the West in a serious way for several decades and out of 1.4 million in the military almost 5 and a half thousand as of 2009 were Buddhist. And they are more likely like me which is a lay Buddhist. I'm not a monk so I don't have any special distinguishing, outward appearances. In terms of accommodations it's gonna be something very similar to many other religions. There is going to be a need for space, for the ritual space whether to meditate or to chant. There are some Buddhist which are vegetarians, not all. And I really need to wrap up as I am out of time."

Disclaimer

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