

The Concept of Suffering in Buddhism and Christianity.

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Abstract

Buddhism believes that we suffered because of our *Avidyā* (ignorance) in our past lives. The origin of the life's evil is explained by Buddha through his special conception of *Pratityasmutpāda*. According to this, nothing is unconditional; the existence of everything depends on some conditions. i.e., everything is relative.

In Christianity, there are different ways of understanding the concept of suffering. For them, suffering is due to our sinful action, suffering helps a man and serves him to think about God, it also acts as a purification, and redemptive suffering, where human being accepted the suffering of Jesus Christ on the cross, which helps in repeal punishment for sins.

This paper intends to study and examine the understanding of suffering in Buddhism and Christianity.

Keywords: Suffering, Avidya, Sin

Introduction

Suffering or pain in a broad sense, may be an experience of unpleasantness and aversion associated with the perception of harm or threat in an individual. Suffering is the basic element that makes up the negative valence of affective phenomena. The opposite of suffering is pleasure or happiness¹

¹Suffering, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/suffering> (accessed October 20, 2019).

Buddhism is a religion, where beliefs, Faith, and spiritual practices are based on the teaching of Siddhārtha Gautama, who is known as Buddha. Buddhism believes in The Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eight-fold Path, and the Doctrine of Dependent Origination (*Pratītyasamutpāda*). They believe that we suffered because of our *Avidyā*(ignorance) in our past lives. They believe in ‘The Four Noble Truths’, where first noble truth deals with – there is a misery(suffering), the second noble truth deals with- there is a cause of misery (suffering), the third noble truth deals with- there is a cessation of misery (suffering), and the fourth noble truth deals with – a path leading to the cessation of misery (suffering).

Christianity is a religion which is based on the teaching of Jesus Christ. For Christianity the world has a purpose foreseen and moved toward by the providence of God.² According to Christianity, the world as the handiwork of God, in a part gone astray from the divine purpose, yet in essence good. Its essential worth or goodness is manifested in its order and beauty and in its capacity for redemption.³ Christianity believes in ‘trinity’, here trinity refers to the teaching that God comprises of three distinct entities. i.e., the father, the son, and the holy spirit. Christianity mainly explains suffering as a result of our Sin, where we inherit from our Birth, Sin which we get by doing against God's law. They also believe that sometimes we suffered in order to glorify God's kingdom, as purification of our self. According to Christianity, redemptive suffering is the most important one.

The paper will include the study and analysis of the understanding of suffering in Buddhism and Christianity. The paper will begin with the examining the concept and understanding of suffering in Buddhism; this will be followed by examining the concept and understanding of suffering in Christianity. And in the last section, will bring out my understanding of Buddhist and Christian suffering.

Buddhist Understanding of Suffering

Buddhism believes that human being is afflicted by *duḥkha* i.e., suffering. “This, O monks, is the sacred truth of suffering: Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is

² Winston L. King, *Buddhism and Christianity, Some Bridges of Understanding*(Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1952),pp.20.

³Ibid., pp.20.

suffering, to be united with the unloved is suffering, to be separated from the loved is suffering, not to obtain what desires is suffering, in short, the five-fold clinging(to the earthly) is suffering.⁴

As we have mentioned in the above, Buddhism believes in The Four -Noble Truth, where the first noble truth deals with –there is suffering. According to Buddhism, Birth, old age, disease, death, sorrow, grief, wish, despair, in short, all that is born of attachment, is misery.⁵ The second noble truth talks about the cause of suffering- according to this noble truth there is a cause for human suffering. “This, O monks, is the sacred truth of the origin of the suffering: it is the thirst (for being) which leads from Birth to Birth, together with lust and desire, which finds gratification here and there: the thirst for pleasure, the thirst for being, the thirst for power.⁶ Buddhism believes that nothing is unconditional; everything is conditional; the existence of everything depends on some conditions, or in other words, everything is relative. This conception is understood as *Pratītyasamutpāda* in Buddhism. So, here we have suffering because there is a cause of suffering. In the book, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, the author explains, how things are related to one another or link to each other. According to Buddhism, life's suffering i.e., old age, death, despair, grief denoted by the phrase *jarā-maraṇa* is there because there is birth. According to them, if a man were not born, he would not have been subject to these miserable states. Again, this birth has its condition, which is due to the will to be born. Again, this will to be born is due to our mental clinging to carrying to grasping the objects of the world, which is the condition responsible for our desire to be born. Again, this clinging is due to our thirst or craving to enjoy objects-sights, sounds, etc. Again, our sense-experience is the cause of our thirst and craving. Again, this sense experience is due to the contact of our sense-organs with the objects. Again, this contact of sense-organs with objects would not arise without the six organs of cognition, the five senses and *manas*(mind). This six organs of cognition, the five senses and *manas* is due to their dependence for their existence on the mind-body organism. Again, this mind-body organism depends on the initial consciousness. This initial consciousness, hails from the impression of the experience of the past life. Again, the impressions of the experience of past life is due to the ignorance (*Avidyā*) about truth. So, ignorance (*Avidyā*) is

⁴ Hermann Oldenberg, *Buddha His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*. William Hoey (Trans) (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2006), pp. 211.

⁵ H.C Warren, *Buddhism in Translation*(Cambridge:Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 368.

⁶ Hermann Oldenberg, *Buddha His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*. William Hoey(Trans) (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2006), pp. 211.

the root cause of the impression that cause rebirth, and also the cause of suffering. The third noble truth talks about there is a cessation of suffering. " This, O monks, is the sacred truth of the extinction of suffering: the extinction of this thirst by complete annihilation of desire, letting it go, expelling it, separating oneself from it, giving it no room.⁷ In the book, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*, the author explains everything arises depending on some causes and conditions, therefore if these causes and conditions are removed, the effect must also cease. The cause being removed, the effect ceases to exist. Everything being conditional and relative is necessarily momentary, and what is momentary must perish. That which is born must die. Production implies destruction. Again, In the book, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, the author explains how this suffering ceases from us. According to Buddhism, when the perfect control of passions and constant contemplation of truth lead a person through the four stages of concentration to perfect wisdom, he is no longer under the sway of worldly attachment. He has broken the fetters that bound him to the world. He is, therefore, free, liberated. He is said to have become an *Arhat*- a venerable person. This state is known as *Nirvāṇa* or *Nibbāna*. *Nirvāṇa* or *Nibbāna* literally means 'extinction' or 'quenching', being the word used for the 'extinction' of a fire. The fires of which *Nibbāna* is the extinction are described in the 'first sermon'. This teaches that everything internal and external to a person is 'burning' with the 'fires' of attachment, hatred, and delusion, and of birth, ageing and death. ⁸ Here the 'fires' refer both to the cause of *dukkha* (suffering) and to *dukkha* (suffering) itself. In the book, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, the author explains that depending on etymological meaning and the negative description of *Nirvāṇa* as the absence of all physical and mental known to us, some interpreters of Buddhism- Buddhist and non-Buddhists- have explained *Nirvāṇa* or liberation be extinction of all existence, then Buddha cannot be said to have been liberated till he died; his attainment of perfect wisdom and freedom for which we have his own words, turns then into a myth. It is difficult to hold, therefore, that *Nirvāṇa* as thought by Buddha, means cessation of all existence. According to Buddha, through *Nirvāṇa* rebirth is stop and therefore, the extinction of all misery and of the conditions that cause future existence in this world after death. This, O monks, is sacred truth of the path which leads to the extinction of suffering: it is this sacred, eight-fold path, to wit: Right Faith, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Living, Right Effort,

⁷ Ibid., pp.211.

⁸ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt.Ltd, 1990), pp.61.

Right Thought, Right Self-concentration.⁹ The Fourth noble truth consists of the eight-fold path that leads to a state which is free from suffering. Right Faith- According to Buddhism, ignorance, with its consequences, namely, wrong Faith about the world and the self, is the root cause of our sufferings. Right Faith is defined as the correct knowledge about the four noble truths. It is the knowledge of these truths alone, not any theoretical speculation regarding nature and self. According to Buddhism, this helps moral reformation and leads us towards the goal i.e., *Nirvāṇa*, Right Resolve- A mere knowledge of the truths would be useless unless one resolves to reform life in their light. So, we need right resolve. Right Speech- Right Resolve should be able to guide and control our speech. The result would be right speech consisting in abstention from lying, slander, unkind words and frivolous talk. Right Action- Right Resolve should merely end with good speech but should also end with Right Action. According to the Buddhism, Right Action includes the *Pañca-Sīla*, which consists of desisting from killing, stealing, sensuality, lying, and intoxication. Right Living- this path deals with even for the sake of maintaining one's life, one should not take to forbidden means but work in consistency with good determination. Right Effort-According to Buddhism, as the mind cannot be kept empty, he should constantly endeavor also to fill the mind with good ideas, and retain such in the mind. This fourfold constant endeavor negative and positive is called right effort. Right Thought- Right Thought or Right mindfulness is a crucial aspect of any Buddhist meditation, and is a state of keen awareness of mental and physical phenomena as they arise within and around one. In the book, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, the author explains that if we are not mindful, we will think that the body, the mind, sensations, and mental state are permanent and valuable. Hence there arises attachment to such things and grief over their loss and we become subject to bondage and misery. So, we need to be mindfulness. Right Self-Concentration- there are four steps in this path- 1) first, we should concentrate on reasoning and investigation regarding the truths and enjoys in this state, joy and ease born of detachment and pure thought. 2) we should initiate an attitude of indifference to be able to detach himself even from the joy of concentration. 3) here, we experience perfect equanimity, coupled with an experience of bodily ease. 4) this is a state of perfect equanimity, indifference, and self-possession-without pain, without ease. Following the above path, we can attain our desired goal, i.e., cessation of all suffering.

⁹ Hermann Oldenberg, *Buddha His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*. William Hoey (Trans) (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2006), pp. 211.

Christian Understanding of Suffering

Christianity believes that we suffered because we commit Sin, by doing action against God's law. According to the old testament in the Bible, we come across that God is omnipotent and omniscient. Nothing happens in the world without him. "When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it? (Amos 3:6).¹⁰ Here, it clearly shows that God has the responsibility to cause the disaster in the world, which means that if we are against his law, we will suffer definitely. In the book *A Comparative Study of Religions*, the author explains the advice was to follow the commandments of God. Suffering is due to Sin. Evil doers are bound to be punished, if not in this world, then certainly in the next. Thus, God was praised for all things, whether disaster or prosperity. "Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism".¹¹ In the above Bible verse, it clearly shows that if we are doing wrong, we will be suffered. But in the book of Job, it shows how Job was suffering without committed Sin. Job comforted himself with the thought; The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.¹² Here, God wants us to see our faithfulness towards him. Till the end, Job was faithful. According to Christianity, suffering also awakens a man and serves him to think about God. From the story of the parable of the lost son (Luke 15:11-32) it clearly shows how suffering awakens a man and serves him to think about God. The story starts with, there was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, father give me my share of the estate. So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, how many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death. I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants. So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with

¹⁰Holy Bible New International Version (UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 2015), pp.919.

¹¹Ibid., pp.1184.

¹²Ibid., pp.509.

compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Again, suffering is also considered to be purificatory. In the book, *A Comparative Study of Religions*, the author explains through suffering Abraham, Joseph, Job and, finally Jesus reached their perfection. According to Christianity, a Christian must suffer to participate in the suffering of Jesus on the cross, and thus perfect himself. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the spirit of glory and God rests on you.¹³ Through his suffering Jesus learned to be obedient and became perfect. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.¹⁴ Again, there is another understanding of suffering for Christian. i.e., Redemptive suffering. This is the suffering of Jesus Christ on the cross.

He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.¹⁵

According to Christianity, we are born as a sinner. i.e., from Adam sin. The suffering of Jesus Christ is considered to be the glory of God, for through the Faith in a redemptive death of the Jesus, sinner is reconciled to God. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."¹⁶

In other way, 'Redemptive suffering is the Christian belief that human suffering, when accepted and offered up in union with the passion of Jesus, can remit the just punishment of one's sins or for the sins of another, or for the other physical or spiritual needs of oneself or another.'¹⁷ For just as each of us has one body with many members, and to be members, do not all have the

¹³ Ibid., pp.1220.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 1204.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp.741.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp.1066.

¹⁷ Redemptive Suffering, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Redemptive_Suffering (accessed October 20, 2019)

same function. So, in, Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.¹⁸

My Understanding of Buddhist and Christian Suffering

Buddhism believes that suffering is there in the world. Through the twelve chains of cycle i.e., *Pratītyasamutpāda*, we came to know that *Avidyā* (ignorance) is the root cause of our suffering. In the book, *Two Ways of Perfection: Buddhist and Christian*, the author explains, for Buddhism man's suffering arises out of his *Kamma*, and *Kamma* arises out of his ignorance, craving and other defilements. By acting out of ignorance man produces *Kamma*, and *Kamma* produces rebirth, so this process continues. Whereas in case of Christianity, human being suffered because they commit Sin, doing action against God's law. In the Bible, we found that Adam and Eve Commit Sin. Here, In Christianity, the root of cause of our suffering is Sin.

As we mentioned in the above, the chain of twelve links i.e., *Pratītyasamutpāda* is one of the important terms in Buddhist concept of suffering. According to this, everything is dependent on, one another i.e., everything that cause is dependent on one another. So, here the cause of suffering is in chain. In order to end our suffering, we have to break the cycle of this chain. As we know, from the Buddhist concept of the beginning-less cycle of repeated births, consists of six realms among the realm, human realm has the possibility of attaining *Nirvāṇa*. In order to be in human realm, they should have a good *karma*; a bad *karma* can result a person being born to a lower realm, like in animal realm, hungry ghost etc. According to Buddhism, attaining *Nirvāṇa* is cessation of suffering.

In Christianity, suffering is due to our action against God's law, we suffered some time when God wants us to see our faithfulness, suffering also awakens a man and serves him to think about God, suffering is also considered to be purificatory, and they also talk about Redemptive suffering. For them, redemptive suffering is an important one. As we explained in the above, according to Christianity, they have Sin from the Adam and Eve. In the book, *Two Ways of*

¹⁸*Holy Bible New International Version* (UK: Hodder and Stoughton),pp.1139.
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Perfection: Buddhist and Christian, the author explains that man's misery results from his Sin against God. Adam's unfaith in his creator was the beginning of the present unhappy situation, which Christians refer to as man's fall, in which man became estranged from God by following his own human will rather than the will of God. In order to save us from our Sin and evil, God sent his son. Through, Jesus Christ we are redeemed. So, here, Jesus Christ, God's son is the way to end our suffering.

Conclusion

I have started with Buddhist understanding of suffering. Buddhism believes that human being is afflicted by suffering. For them, Birth is suffering; old age is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering. After that we discussed Buddhism believes in the four noble truth, where first noble truth deals with there is suffering, the second noble truth talks about the cause of suffering, the second noble truth talks about the cycle of wheel, the concept of *Pratītyasamutpāda*. The third noble truth talk about cessation of suffering and the four noble truth deals with the path to liberation. Here, in this noble truth, it consists of eightfold noble truth, they are Right Faith, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Living, Right Effort, Right Thought and Right Self-concentration. After this, we discussed Christian Understanding of suffering. First, we discussed according to Christianity, we suffered because we commit Sin, by doing against God's law, we examined by referring a passage from the Bible, we also refer a book *A Comparative Study of Religions*, further we examined the story of Job. After this we examined the parable of the lost son, this story shows how suffering awakens a man and serves him to think about God. Further, we examined purification type of suffering, in the end we discussed Redemptive suffering. After that I have discussed my understanding of Buddhist and Christian suffering. Here, we have examined what are the causes of suffering, and finally we came to know that *Avidyā* is the root cause of our suffering in Buddhist philosophy. Whereas in case of Christianity, Sin is the root cause of our suffering. After that we have discussed in Buddhism, breaking the cycle of rebirths is the end of our suffering or attaining *Nirvāṇa* is the cessation of suffering and in Christianity, Jesus Christ is the way to end our suffering.

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