Buddhism Essay, Research Paper

Buddhism is the religion of about one eighth of the world’s people (Gaer 27). Buddhism is the name for a complex system of beliefs developed around the teachings of a single man. The Buddha, whose name was Siddhartha Gautama, lived 2,500 years ago in India. There are now dozens of different schools of Buddhist philosophy throughout Asia. These schools, or sects, have different writings and languages and have grown up in different cultures. There is no one single “Bible” of Buddhism, but all Buddhists share some basic beliefs.

Buddhism is a Western word. The religion is known in the East as the Buddha-Dharma, or the teachings of the Buddha (Kelen 10). These teachings, based on his personal experience of Enlightenment, or Awakening, form the foundation of Buddhism. For every Buddhist the religion is both a discipline and a body of beliefs: that is, Buddhists share beliefs about the nature of the world and how to act within it. Budh in the Indian Sanskrit language means “to wake up, to know.” Buddha means “the Awakened or Enlightened One,” and all Buddhist teachings try to share the Buddha’s experience of awakening to truth.

Having led an indulgent life as a young man, E(Stryk 15) Siddhartha Gautama decided to pursue a course of bitter self-denial EStryk 18). Yet he felt that this brought him no closer to the truth he sought than the rich life he had led. One day he felt close to reaching his truth, and he sat down under a tree now known as the Bo tree. There he attained the bliss and knowledge he had been seeking. Legend has it that, though tempted by evil demons, he sat quietly under the tree for 49 days. This became known as the Immovable Spot.

Once Siddhartha Gautama was awakened to the truth about life, he became the Buddha and devoted his life to sharing his teachings with others. Preaching at first to only five followers, he soon founded an order of monks. For 45 years he gave public teachings and private counseling for his disciples. He died in about 480 BC at the age of 80.

Although he could have chosen to sit happily under a tree forever, the Buddha wanted to make his inspiration about the nature of life available to others for their betterment E(Rice 25). He worked his experience into a doctrine known as the Four Noble Truths, and these truths are the basis of all schools of Buddhism.

The first truth is that all life is suffering, pain, and misery, or dukkha. The second truth is that this suffering has a cause tanha, or selfish craving and personal desire. The third is that this selfish craving can be overcome. The fourth truth is that the way to overcome this misery is through the Eightfold Path.

Buddhists all believe in the idea of “no-self,” that people make a mistake when they identify too strongly with their own personal existence in any one life. To the follower of the Buddha, life goes on and on in many reincarnations or rebirths. This wheel of rebirth, known as samsara, condemns the individual to the suffering of being alive and striving. Life’s goal, according to the Buddha, is to escape from this cycle of rebirth, to stop being born as a suffering individual with selfish cravings and passions. This release is called Nirvana, the highest bliss, the end of the self. It was this bliss that the Buddha felt under the Bo tree E(Stryk 69).

The way to achieve Nirvana is to follow the steps of the Eightfold Path. The Buddha called his path the Middle Way, because it lies between a life of luxury and a life of unnecessary poverty. Not everyone can reach the goal of Nirvana, but every practicing Buddhist is at least on the Path toward Enlightenment. A basic step, too basic to be listed as one of the eight, is Right Association. One cannot achieve perfection unless one keeps the right company. A Buddhist is supposed to associate with other seekers of truth in a spirit of love.

1. Right Knowledge is knowledge of what life is all about; knowledge of the Four Noble Truths is basic to any further growth as a Buddhist.

2. Right Aspiration means a clear devotion to being on the Path toward Enlightenment.

3. Right Speech involves both clarity of what is said (taking care to say just what is meant) and speaking kindly and without malice.

4. Right Behavior involves reflecting on one’s behavior and the reasons for it. It also involves five basic laws of behavior for Buddhists: not to kill, steal, lie, drink intoxicants, or commit sexual offenses.

5. Right Livelihood involves choosing an occupation that keeps an individual on the Path; that is, a path that promotes life and well-being, rather than the accumulation of a lot of money.

6. Right Effort means training the will and curbing selfish passions and wants. It also means placing oneself along the Path toward Enlightenment.

7. Right Mindfulness implies continuing self-examination and awareness. The ‘Dhammapada’, a basic Buddhist text, begins, “All we are is the result of what we have thought.”

8. Right Concentration is the final goal to be absorbed into a state of Nirvana.

Buddhists believe that the first two steps on the Path can be taken by anyone. The third, fourth, and fifth are for novice monks, and the last three steps show real progress toward the goal. As in so many Eastern traditions, the religion is not based on attaining the goal so much as being on the road.

The Buddha lived and taught for almost 50 years after his Enlightenment, but he did not write a single word of his teachings (Dumoulin 30). No one during his lifetime put anything he said in writing. His original teachings were handed down from one generation to the next by word of mouth. This continuing oral tradition was not put in writing until about three centuries after his death. By this time, the religion had split into a number of schools. Each school set down the teachings as it understood them.

Since the Buddha felt his teachings were for everyone, not just scholars, he spoke in a language many people in India understood, Pali. In a country with a social caste system of segregation, the Buddha’s democratic views were a novelty and won him many followers. Since no one wrote down exactly what the Buddha said, all the Buddhist teachings begin with the phrase, “Thus have I heard.” Then they go on to tell what Buddha taught and believed. The oldest Buddhist writings, the Pali Canon, are also known as the Three Baskets (Compton s Interactive Encyclopedia). One of the baskets, the ‘Vinaya’ (meaning “discipline”) spelled out the rules for the Buddhist monks. These monks, the community known as the Sangha, constitute the oldest continuous religious order of all the world’s great religions. After the Buddha’s death, his followers split into a number of factions, each with its own interpretations of the master’s teachings. Within 200 years two major traditions emerged. This schism has persisted to the present time EKelen 36). Even within the major traditions, there are smaller sects.

The older tradition, known as the Way of the Elders, is also called Hinayana, or the Lesser Vehicle. Its adherents are the more conservative interpreters of the Buddhist teachings, and the name was given them by the more liberal sect, who call themselves the Mahayana, or the Greater Vehicle. A more respectful name for the Way of the Elders is Theravada Buddhism. It is still the main tradition in such countries as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia.

The word vehicle suggests that Buddhism is a means of journeying from the pain of this world to the bliss of the next E(Dumoulin 79). Each tradition believes that it is the best vehicle for Buddhists on their Path. The Greater Vehicle, Mahayana, is the form of Buddhism popular in Mongolia, Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Nepal. Zen Buddhism is a derivative of the Mahayana school, which has far more followers than the Theravada school.

The Mahayana Buddhists were able to spread and make more converts because they chose to interpret the teachings of the Buddha more liberally than did the Theravada Buddhists. For example, the ‘Vinaya’ states that monks can only wear cotton robes, which would be fine in India. But when monks wanted to carry the message north to colder climates, they were deterred by their light clothing. Mahayana monks chose to wear wool and felt robes in order to bring Buddhism to the Mongols and into China. They were more flexible than the Theravada Buddhists.

However, the basic difference between the two schools is in how they see the life and teachings of the Buddha. Theravada Buddhists see him as a man, a saint, who chose to give up all his wealth and comfort to achieve Nirvana. Mahayana Buddhists, on the other hand, stress the Buddha as a savior who devoted his life to serving and teaching others. He did not choose to rest, content in his own Enlightenment. This difference of interpretation led to the fundamental split between the two schools. Theravada Buddhists concentrate on the emancipation of the individual through his own efforts, while the Mahayana stress salvation through a life of good works.

Since all the teachings of the Buddha were written long after his death, each school disputes the other’s writings. The Theravada school criticizes the writings of the Mahayana for not being authentic. The Mahayanas write that the Buddha taught each according to his own level of understanding and taught only the most basic ideas to the Theravadas. His deepest insights, say the Mahayanas, he reserved for those on the Greater Vehicle (the Mahayanas).

In all its many different forms, Buddhism has three cornerstones that are always the same. These are the Three Jewels: Buddha, the teacher; Dharma, the teachings or laws; and Sangha, the community of believers. Monks and devout laypeople believe that these three elements of their religion shelter and protect them in the world. This is expressed in a Buddhist prayer, “I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dharma. I take refuge in the Sangha.” For those who choose to live their lives as Buddhist monks, the Three Jewels form the center of their daily lives. Prayer, meditation, and other rituals keep them on the Eightfold Path. In the Theravada tradition monks live isolated lives in their monastery retreats, whereas Mahayana monks include service to the larger community as part of their Path.

Throughout the Buddhist countries of Asia, holidays are celebrated to commemorate the life and teachings of the Buddha. The Theravada tradition celebrates four days every month as uposatha days (Gaer 59). These are the new moon, the full moon, and the eighth day after each new and full moon (Rice 109). Sermons, prayers, and offerings mark the uposatha day ceremonies. Theravada Buddhists continue the practice of vassa, a three-month retreat during the rainy season, from July to October ( Rice 110). The Buddha himself made this retreat. Many laypeople take a monk’s vows for three months, and monks mark their years in the community by the number of vassas they have attended.

Three major points in the life of the Buddha are celebrated in all Buddhist countries his birth, Enlightenment, and his death or final Nirvana (Compton s Interactive Encyclopedia). In countries of the Theravada tradition, all three events are celebrated on the same day. This is the full moon of the sixth lunar month, usually falling in April. In Japan and other Mahayana countries, the Buddha’s birth is remembered on April 8, his Enlightenment on December 8, and his death on February 15 (Compton Interative Encyclopedia). In China and Japan, with their long traditions of ancestor worship, Buddhists have an All Souls Festival for the dead. This festival has two purposes: to remember the dead and to bring final peace to the spirits of those who have died unburied. Anyone can step onto the Eightfold Path toward Enlightenment, and millions of laypeople follow Buddhist teachings and rituals to some extent. Those who have devoted their lives to the Path are known as Bodhisattvas, or Buddhas-to-be.

Visual art has been a useful instrument in bringing Buddhism to many people. Throughout Asia, drawings, paintings, and sculptures of the Buddha have been used for teaching and veneration. Buddhist art is not just decoration. Images of the Buddha show people what it looks like to have achieved Nirvana, total bliss E(Kelen 90). He is shown as calm and loving, usually with a soft smile and radiant energy ( Kelen 93). Some scenes show the Buddha at key moments of his life, for example, sitting under the Bo tree. Others illustrate his teachings. There is a story that tells of the Buddha offering his body as food for a hungry mother tiger and her cubs because he felt that all life was sacred. This scene is a popular visual theme in the cave temples of China and Japan. Other Buddhist paintings illustrate the sacred writings, as stained glass windows were created to illustrate the Bible in many Christian churches. Since Buddhists believe that anyone can be on the path toward Enlightenment, these visual images of the Buddha along his own path are a helpful addition to the writings that people study. They make the texts more personal and inviting.

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