

The Philosophy of Suffering and the Practice of Vipassana

Professor Angraj Chaudhary

The philosophy of suffering propounded by the Buddha is not speculative but it is born out of his own experience. It was the direct experience not of a common man but of a very sensitive and pure man, who was free from defilements like greed, aversion, jealousy, anger etc., which he had annihilated by practicing Vipassana.

His philosophy, therefore, is not based on abstractions. It does not speculate on ‘empty first principles’¹ in the words of Robert N. Beck - a pragmatic thinker. Buddha’s attitude to speculative philosophy becomes clear from what he says to Potṭhapāda² and to Mālunkyaṇḍita.³

When Potṭhapāda put ten questions relating to the world and the soul like ‘Is the world eternal or not eternal, is the world finite or not finite, Does the Tathāgata live after death or not and so on, the Buddha did not answer these questions. Why? Because he called them indeterminate questions. Answering such questions, according to him, is not ‘conducive to the purpose, not conducive to Dhamma, not the way to embark on the holy life, it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to higher knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna’⁴. Instead he explained the four Noble truths because their enunciation ‘is conducive to the purpose, conducive to Dhamma, the way to embark on the holy life; it leads to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to higher knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna.’⁵

From this it is clear that the philosophy propounded by the Buddha is not speculative but pragmatic. This is also clear from what he says to Cūḷamālunkyaṇḍita who also like Potṭhapāda wanted to know from him the answer to such speculative questions. The Buddha said to Mālunkyaṇḍita that to insist on knowing the answer to such questions before one agrees to lead the holy life is as foolish and fruitless as a man pierced with a poisoned arrow not agreeing to have the arrow taken out by a surgeon until he knows all about the arrow and the person who shot it. What would be the result? The result would be that he would suffer great pain and die but the questions would remain unanswered.⁶

The Buddha was a different kind of philosopher. The philosophies propounded by other philosophers are based on logic and reasoning. They, therefore, may be controversial and may not be logical. And certainly they are not useful at all for solving the existential problems of human life.

He was not like Leibnitz nor like Heraclitus. Leibnitz talks about monad - the indivisible simple entity. But how this concept of monad can enable one to end his suffering, which is the greatest truth and an incontrovertible fact of life? Heraclitus⁷ said that one cannot step twice into the same river and he definitely understood that all things are in a constant state of flux. But this he realized at the intellectual level. Had he, like the Buddha realized it at the experiential level, he would also have become the Buddha by

¹ Robert N. Beck (1979): Handbook in Social Philosophy, p. 123, Macmillan Publishing Co., New York.

² D. (Potṭhapāda Sutta)

³ M. (Cūḷamālunkya Sutta)

⁴ (Tr) Maurice Walsh (1995) The Long Discourses of the Buddha, pp. 164-165

⁵ Ibid.,

⁶ M. (Cūḷamālunkya Sutta)

⁷ Walpole Rahula: What the Buddha Taught”, footnote #1, p. 26: “You cannot step twice into the same river, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you...”

developing non-attachment to worldly things, which attract one and cause desire in him. One's desires are not always fulfilled because the things, which one longs for are not permanent. Therefore when they change they cause suffering in him. Had Heraclitus realized the impermanent nature of things at the experiential level and trained his mind not to long for those impermanent things he would have definitely gone the Buddha way.

The Buddha wanted to grapple with the problem of suffering which is ubiquitous and universal. Suffering is an existential problem not only of mankind but also of all living beings. No being is free from it. All are subject to different kinds of suffering, physical and mental. One who is born is subject to old age, disease and death. He is also separated from one he likes. This is suffering. He also has to live with somebody he does not like. This is also suffering. He does not get what he wants. This is also suffering. All these are sufferings from which no body is free. The Buddha saw it very sensitively and wanted to find a way out to end it.

This is from where he started. He started with the real problem that faced mankind, with nothing abstract and speculative. He saw the problem facing him starkly. He saw the disease. His effort was to know the cause of disease and find out its medicine as also how and when to take the medicine to be completely free from the disease.

In his spiritual journey he learned from his own experience. While practicing meditation he went deep into it and realized that one's suffering is caused by one's desires for the things he likes. His desires are never fulfilled because the things he desires are not permanent. They are in a constant state of flux. This realization came to him after practicing meditation. This was a sort of 'eureka' for him.

For practicing meditation concentration of mind is a *sine qua non*. The Buddha realized this while practicing meditation that so long as mind is not free from defilements like greed, aversion, jealousy, hatred etc., it cannot be concentrated. This was another big discovery. He thus concluded that in order to drive out defilements from mind observation of precepts (sīla) is necessary. Gradually he learned that observation of sīla helps one to achieve concentration of mind and with the help of this concentration one realizes the true nature of the objects of the world.

When one comes to know the true nature of things, ignorance goes away and he begins to see their true nature. In other words, true knowledge dawns upon him. He sees the objects of his attachment impermanent, becomes disillusioned and concludes that if the objects he longs for are transient and impermanent how can they make him happy? This again is a great realization born out of his direct experience.

Thus the Buddha concluded that one's suffering is caused by one's desires and one has desires for things the real nature of which he does not know. There is an in-built dynamo inside everybody. So long as one is ignorant of the real nature of the objects of the world the dynamo within him fuelled by desires keeps on generating desires. And multiplication of desires causes endless suffering. But once he comes to know the real nature of the objects he hankers after he begins to develop non-attachment for them. Practice of Vipassana meditation helps him a lot. Whenever he practices Vipassana he experiences that what arises passes away. Nothing is permanent. So he experiences impermanence (aniccatā). And whatever is impermanent is dukkha (Yad aniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ) Thus he either reduces his desires and reduces his suffering proportionately or he completely annihilates his desires and completely eradicates his suffering. Practice of Vipassana helps one understand this law as it had helped the Buddha.

The Buddha thus realized the cause of suffering. It was then just the second step for him to know that suffering can be eliminated by removing the cause. Thus he propounded the philosophy of suffering from his own experience. He had realized the great importance of observing moral precepts in concentrating his mind. He had also

experienced the great role of a concentrated mind in seeing things sharply and clearly as they are and by practicing Vipassana he had seen how cravings are caused and how they can be eliminated. By practicing Vipassana it became clear to him that ‘wherever in the world there is anything agreeable and pleasurable, there this craving arises and establishes itself.’⁸

It did not take the Buddha long to conclude that cravings can be eliminated by eliminating the cause of cravings. And what is the cause of cravings? The agreeable and pleasurable in the world are the causes of cravings. By practicing Vipassana he knew that even the most beautiful objects of the world are impermanent. They do not last forever. The natural question was then why crave for them? Thus he trained his mind to see the transitory nature of objects and give up his craving for them. In this way by practicing Vipassana he ended his suffering. It means that anybody can end his suffering by practicing Vipassana.

Because he had realized how suffering is caused and also because he had realized the role of morality (sīla) in eliminating it so while propounding the philosophy of suffering he ethicized it. He was also a great psychologist. He saw the role of our mind in causing craving, he also saw how to tame this monkey mind, which now craves for this object and now for that.

The Buddha thus propounded his philosophy of suffering with his bhāvanāmayā paññā, (experiential wisdom) which is yathābhūtañānadassana (wisdom arising from seeing the truth as it is). Bhāvanāmayā paññā means insight wisdom developed at the experiential level. There is no question of its being false or speculative or abstract. It is experiential knowledge. With this paññā he saw the cause of suffering. The philosophy of suffering propounded by the Buddha, therefore, is based on his direct experience. Anybody can see for himself where craving is caused, where suffering arises and how craving and suffering can be ended if he practices Vipassana.

The Buddha realized all this at the experiential level by practicing Vipassana and developing his paññā (insight wisdom or understanding based on his direct experience).

He propounded the four noble truths of suffering viz. suffering, its cause, its cessation and the way leading to its cessation and preached them to the first five disciples. He explained three aspects of each truth. One should know the first Noble Truth. This is the first aspect of the first noble truth. The first noble truth of suffering should be comprehended (pariññeyam). This is called kicca ñāṇa i.e. knowledge gained while doing. This is its second aspect. When it is thoroughly comprehended (pariññātam) it is called kata ñāṇa i.e. knowledge gained when done. This is its third aspect. Similarly the rest of the truths should also be known comprehensively. The second noble truth of suffering should be abandoned (pahātabbam). This is kicca ñāṇa and when it is completely abandoned (pahīnam) it is called kata ñāṇa. The third noble truth should be realized (sacchikātabbam). This aspect of this truth is kicca ñāṇa and when it is realized (sacchikatam) it is called kata ñāṇa. The fourth noble truth should be developed (bhāvetabbam). This is called kicca ñāṇa and when it is developed (bhāvita) it is called kata ñāṇa.

All the four noble truths are interdependent. That is why the Buddha says, ‘he who sees dukkha sees also the arising of dukkha, sees also the cessation of dukkha, and sees also the path leading to the cessation of dukkha.’⁹

One may know these four noble truths at the intellectual level, but this knowing is not of great help in eliminating suffering. When these four noble truths are respectively comprehended, abandoned, realized and developed then one understands them

⁸ (Tr) Maurice Walsh (1995) The Long Discourses of the Buddha, p. 346.

⁹ Walpola Rahula (1959) What the Buddha Taught (quoted from p. 27)

thoroughly. And this is not possible without practicing Vipassana, without realizing these truths at the experiential level. For this one has to develop bhāvanāmayā paññā (experiential wisdom).

The Buddha propounded the philosophy of suffering by developing his bhāvanāmayā paññā. Therefore his philosophy of suffering can be understood by developing bhāvanāmayā paññā for which practice of Vipassana meditation is inevitable.

For practicing Vipassana the nature of mind has got to be understood. Mind is very fickle and unsteady. This is Psychology. And for concentrating mind observation of sīla is inevitable. Sīla comes under Ethics. When one understands the true nature of the objects of the world for which one craves, this is Metaphysics. Apart from these Vipassana also means training one's mind to give up the old habit pattern of reacting to sensations that arise on one's body. Thus Vipassana is a very comprehensive practice to know the nature of mind and nature of reality. Besides, it is also an effective tool to train one's mind to learn to behave in a particular way.

Practicing Vipassana the Buddha propounded the Law of Dependent Origination, which explains how one creates saṅkharas in ignorance, how saṅkhāras give rise to consciousness, consciousness to nāma-rūpa... and how bhava gives rise to jāti and jāti gives rise to old age, disease, death and all sorts of sorrows and suffering. The Buddha also concluded that as effect has a cause and as it can be eliminated by eliminating its cause, so suffering can be extirpated by eliminating cravings. (Yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhammaṃ), but how to eliminate cravings - the cause of suffering?

The Buddha came out with an action –plan. The fourth noble truth i.e, walking on the Noble eight-fold path is the action- plan. This is how one can live this philosophy propounded by the Buddha, root out the causes of cravings, end one's suffering and live a peaceful life. This path consists of sīla, samādhi and paññā, which are inter-related. They are the three legs of a stool which keep it stable. Out of the eight constituents of this path, right action, right speech and right livelihood come under sīla, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration come under samādhi and right view and right resolve come under paññā. Samādhi cannot be achieved without observing precepts (five precepts) and paññā, which enables one to see the true nature of things, cannot be developed without achieving concentration of mind.

But how can the mind be concentrated without driving out defilements that agitate and disturb mind? For getting rid of defilements observing precepts is a sine qua non.

When mind is concentrated one can see the true nature of things. By practicing Vipassana one can see it again and again and come to realize that all things are impermanent. Because they are impermanent, so they cause suffering called vipariṇāma dukkha

While practicing Vipassana one sees the true nature of things again and again and realizes at the experiential level that things, however beautiful they look, are not permanent. Thus he develops non-attachment and gradually he develops no craving for them. When cravings end, sufferings end.

Thus the philosophy of suffering propounded by the Buddha is based on his experience. It is born out of his knowledge of truth as it is (Ñāṇa-dassana). Whether this philosophy is true or not can be proved by practicing Vipassana. The veracity or otherwise of the Law of Dependent Origination can be proved in no other laboratory than in one's fathom-long body.

But there is a basic difference between the physical laws and the laws connected with the four noble truths. In no other laboratory outside this fathom-long body can it be proved that sensations cause desire. This will be possible only when one who wants to

prove it lives a pure life, practices Vipassana and observes his sensations. He will see that he wants to have more of pleasant sensations and none of the unpleasant ones.

Physical laws can be proved in outside laboratories by anybody. He may be of greedy temperament. He may have several defilements. It does not matter. But the laws relating to suffering propounded by the Buddha can be experienced and proved by those, who live a virtuous life i.e. observes sīla, practice samādhi and are on the way to develop paññā.

The first requisite of being able to practice Vipassana meditation is to live a virtuous life. Only when one lives a virtuous life one can attain concentration of mind with which he can attain paññā. Paññā enables him to see the impermanent nature of things, which in turn makes him develop nirveda (non-attachment). Practicing this meditation one becomes able to see that even pleasant sensations do not last forever. They change. Realizing their true nature again and again at the experiential level one learns not to crave for them anymore. Realization of impermanence at the intellectual level is not enough. It has got to be realized at the experiential level. Only then one develops non-attachment and thus learns to remain equanimous.

This goes a long way in eliminating one's desires. One stops craving for things and thus stops creating desires. By practicing Vipassana one knows at the experiential level, not only at the intellectual level, that both the things he likes and does not like, cause his suffering. This experience becomes a 'eureka' for him. Once he realizes how desires arise and how sensations give rise to desires (vedanā paccayā taṇhā) he comes to realize how desires can be eliminated. He learns not to react to sensations either positively or negatively but learns to remain equanimous. It is, of course, not easy, but he learns not to give importance to sensations (vedanā), because he has realized that they are in a constant state of flux. Light of knowledge dawns upon him and gradually he is transformed. At least he does not crave as much as he used to do before when he was ignorant and did not know the real nature of things. A sure step towards reducing his desire has been taken. Vipassana helps one develop insight, understanding (bhāvanāmayā paññā). It goes a long way in reducing one's suffering if not completely annihilate it.

I practice Vipassana and I can say with confidence that it has enabled me to understand the philosophy of suffering clearly. I have also understood how I can reduce my suffering if not completely eliminate it. I have also learned not to be overpowered by defilements like anger and greed. There was a time when I used to be overpowered by anger. I used to burn for hours together. I used to be angry with those who had harmed me. But practicing Vipassana I learned that I burn and burn with anger without causing any harm to the persons I am angry with. This was a perceptible realization. This changed the course of my life. Now I don't burn with anger. I do not let anger overpower me but I become able to check it. I have learned to root it out. I can now very well understand what Thera Vasabha¹⁰ means when he says that 'I harm myself before I harm others' - pubbe hanati attānaṃ pacchā hanati so pare. I have learned it – so why harm myself? I have also learned not to let other defilements like greed overpower me. When they arise I observe them equanimously and they become feeble. I feel I have grown up in Dhamma. I see clearly how the Buddha's philosophy of suffering is based on the experiences he had by practicing Vipassana.

¹⁰ Verse no.139 of the Theragāthā.