

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN BUDDHISM

Buddhism frankly admits the existence of both good and evil in the universe. But the existence of evil does not constitute the same problem to the Buddhists as to the theists. The problem of evil takes a different form in Buddhism because a Buddhist does not start with the theistic assumption that the world is created by a perfect Being. Instead, he accepts the fact of evil and argues on this basis that the world, with all its imperfections, cannot be called the creation of a perfect Being. The presence of evil, in the form of suffering, is a challenge to the Buddhists and their main task is how to overcome it. Prof. K.N. Jayatillake rightly observes "...in general, the problem of evil for the Buddhists is to recognize evil as such, to look for its verifiable causes and by removing the causes eliminate evil as far as possible at all its levels of existence".¹ Thus, the problem of evil appears mainly as a life-problem in Buddhism. Let us examine the problem of evil in its different aspects in Buddhism.

The Concept of Suffering (dukkha) in the Pali Canon

The first Noble Truth of the Buddha clearly affirms the presence of *dukkha* in the world. The term *dukkha* is derived from two words, "du" and "kham". The word "du" (bad) is met with in the sense of vile (*kucchita*), for a vile child is called a *du-putta* (bad child). The word "kham" (-ness), however, is met with in the sense of empty (*tuccha*), for empty space is called 'kham'. Thus, *dukkha* is vile because it is the haunt of many dangers, and it is empty because it is devoid of lastingness, beauty, pleasure and so on. So *dukkham* is called (badness, suffering or pain), because of vileness and emptiness.² Thus as an abstract truth *dukkha*

1. Prof. K.N. Jayatillake, "The Buddhist conception of Evil" *The Mahābodhi*, Vol. 78, April 70, p. 84.

2. Bhikkhu Nānmoḷi (tr.) *The Path of Purification* Chapter XVI 16

means contemptible void; as a feeling it (*duḥkha*) means that which is difficult to be endured (du=difficult, kha=to endure).³

Kinds of duḥkha

We find descriptions of many kinds of *duḥkha* in the Pali canon. These are: "intrinsic suffering" (*duḥkhā-duḥkha*); "suffering in change" (*viparināma duḥkha*), "suffering due to formations" (*sankhara-duḥkha*), and concealed suffering, exposed suffering, indirect suffering and direct suffering. Physical and mental painful feelings are called "intrinsic suffering" because of their individual essence and their nature. Physical and mental pleasant feelings are called "suffering in change" because they cause pain when they change. Equanimous feeling and the remaining formations of three planes are called "suffering due to formations" because they are oppressed by rise and fall. Physical and mental affliction such as toothache, earache, fever of lust, fever born of hate, etc., is called "concealed suffering." Here the affliction is not outwardly visible. So it is also called "unevident suffering." The affliction produced by thirty two tortures is called "exposed suffering". Because such affliction is openly overt, it is also called "evident suffering." Except intrinsic suffering all other sufferings beginning with birth are called indirect suffering because they are the basis for one kind of suffering or another. But intrinsic suffering is called "direct suffering".

Suffering as Concomitant of Sin or Evil

Buddhism holds man responsible for his own suffering. Man is regarded as the maker of his own destiny. When he indulges in evil or sin, he brings suffering on himself. The two terms, "evil" and "sin" have been used as synonymous in Buddhism. All acts of human beings become evil by ten transgressions. These transgressions are: three sins of the body, four sins of speech, and three sins of the mind. The three sins of the body are murder, theft and adultery. The four sins of speech are lying, slander, abuse and idle talk. The three sins of the mind are covetousness (*lobha*), hatred (*dosha*) and error (*moha*). Thus suffering may be recognized as the concomitant of sin or evil.

It is generally believed that "Good" is productive of happiness and "Evil" the cause of suffering. In Buddhism good and evil really mean skilful (*kusala*) and unskilful (*akusala*), respectively. The good, the evil and the indeterminate states of consciousness are the opening words of the first book of the *Abhidhamma* (*kusala dhamma, akusala dhamma, avyakta dhamma*). A good or skilful thought (*kusala cetana*) may be defined as one which causes happiness. Pain or suffering as the outcome of unskilful or evil action can be easily illustrated with the help of an example. A child sees glowing coals of fire, and not aware of the inevitable result of fire upon his fingers, touches the burning coals and gets burnt. It is his unskilful or evil action born of his ignorance of the nature of fire, and of his desire, born of that ignorance to have a new and shining toy. This unskilful act of the child is evil because it causes him pain.

Ignorance as the Root Cause of Suffering

Like other Indian systems, Buddhism maintains that the real cause of suffering is ignorance. Therefore, "ignorance is the greatest impurity."⁴ Ignorance, (*avijjā*) or not knowing things as they really are, is the chief cause of *kamma* (action). The Buddha states in the *Paticca samuppāda* (dependent origination) that dependence on ignorance gives rise to "kammic activities". Associated with ignorance is its ally craving (*tanhā*), the other root of *kamma*. Evil actions are conditioned by these two causes. Man, according to Buddhism, is fundamentally good by nature and the evil he indulges in is not due to his basic wickedness but his ignorance.

Ignorance, according to Buddhism, may take three forms in the hearts of men: craving (*lobha*), passion (*dosha*) and the belief in the self (*moha*). These are the three branches of the tree of ignorance.

(i) *Craving or thirst (lobha)*

In the second noble Truth the Buddha says that it is the ignorant craving which leads to re-birth and causes immense suf-

4. *Dhammapada*, V. 243.

fering. The Dhammapada clearly declares: "The craving of a thoughtless man grows like a creeper. Like a monkey wishing for fruit in a forest he bounds hither and thither (from one life to another). Whomsoever this fierce craving, full of passion, overcomes in the world, his sorrow increases like the abounding *birana* grass."⁵ It is further stated: "Men driven on by craving run about like a hunted hare. Fast bound in its fetters they undergo suffering for long time, again and again."⁶ The Buddhists prescribe the destruction of craving to annihilate suffering. The *Dhammapada* says: "From craving springs grief, from craving springs fear; for him who is wholly free from craving, there is no grief, much less fear."⁷ Thus, destruction of craving conquers all sorrows.

(ii) *Passion or hatred (dosha)*

In Buddhist thought passion is synonymous with hatred (*dosha*). Attachment and hatred, coupled with ignorance, are the chief causes of all evils. The Buddha holds that the enemy of the world is lust or passion through which all evils come to living beings. This lust when obstructed by some forces is transformed into wrath.

Attachment and hatred are equally undesirable because they find an individual to the wheel of *samsāra*. Attachment makes one cling to material pleasures in order to gratify one's desires by any means. Aversion or hatred makes one recoil from undesirable things, and sometimes one is so irritated at the very sight of those things that one determines to destroy. These two are ultimately responsible for suffering. One can remove both attachment and hatred by giving up egoism. The most vehement form of passion is anger, ill-will or hatred. "Owing to anger and hatred the world is under the sway of quarrels, strife, disputes and animosities. The strenuous Buddhist has therefore to keep his mind ever anointed with the antidote of love."⁸

(iii) *Delusion or error or belief in the self (moha)*

The first excellent truth of Buddhism says that there is suffering. The only criterion of suffering is "transitoriness" or "mo-

5. *Ibid.*, Vs. 334, 335.

6. *Ibid.*, V. 342.

7. P.L. Narasu, *The Essence of Buddhism*, p. 73.

8. *Samutta Nikaya*. XXXV, 1.

mentariness". "Whatever is transitory is painful."⁹ According to the Buddha, everything is impermanent or transitory and therefore painful. He makes clear that "everything connected with personality, and therefore personality itself, is without exception, subject to the iron law of transitoriness, and thereby of dissolution and decay, therefore painful throughout its whole extent."¹⁰ He holds that the belief in a permanent self or soul is the most pernicious of errors, the most deceitful of illusions, which will certainly mislead its victims into the deepest pit of sorrows and pains. Asvaghosha rightly says that all false doctrines invariably arise out of the *ātman*-conception. Bertrand Russell seems to support the Buddhist conception of self when he says: "It would be said that the old distinction between soul and body has evaporated.... Psychology is just beginning to be scientific. In the present state of psychology, belief in immortality can at any rate claim no support from science."¹¹ The same author remarks: "The notion of a permanent self or an immortal soul is a pure myth."

Buddhism distinguishes between self and truth. Self is the cause of selfishness and the source of evil, truth is universal and leads to justice and righteousness. Self is *māre*, the temper, the evil-doer, the creator of mischief. Thus, the problem of annihilation of suffering raises the question of the conquest of our personality.

Thus we came to the conclusion that for Buddhism the problem of evil is vitally related to actual conditions obtaining in life. The Buddhists accept the presence of evil or suffering itself as a problem but they are not able to ward off the temptation of entering into a purely intellectual analysis of the fact of evil. Such analyses, at times, are so elaborate and so subtle that one gets lost and forgets the main purpose of reflection on this problem. The elaborate classification of the forms of evil, the detailed analysis of its many possible sources, the various branches of the tree of ignorance, etc., take the academic philosopher into abstract analysis. Consequently, the actual evil conditions of life are forgotten. Thus, the Buddhist also, more or less like the theists, became interested in deriving intellectual satisfaction from the exercises. And this becomes a major diversion from the main current of the Buddhist approach.

9. George Grimm, *the Doctrine of the Buddha*, P. 66.

10. Bertrand Russell, *Religion and Science*, p. 132.

11. Bertrand Russell, *Riddle of the Universe*, p. 166.