



# BUDDHIST MODERNISM: THE PATH TO FREEDOM AND THE SEARCH OF LIFE

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**Abstract:** Buddhism is a philosophy which is centered on awakening from suffering and achieving mindfulness through ethical conduct, meditation and insight into the nature of reality. Moreover, Buddhism teaches love, kindness, compassion and freedom, and a man can search for his inner dimension of life. It helps man to live in positivity, freedom and self-exploration. It helps every individual to understand the meaning of life and existence through individual awareness rather than believing in words. So, one can search the meanings of his existence, understanding the dynamism of life and its movements. Life, therefore, offers multiple possibility of observing the ever-changing pattern of nature and existence, so that a man can liberate himself to higher realms of life.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, existence, changing self, impermanence, search of life.

## I. BUDDHIST MODERNISM: THE PATH TO FREEDOM AND THE SEARCH OF LIFE

Buddhism is way for living life in positivity, hope, emancipation and searching the meaning of life. It frees us from the traditional thinking of god-centric belief system. It rather helps every individual to understand the meaning of life and existence from their own. So, one has to understand life through awareness instead of just believing in theories. So, Buddhism focuses every individual to watch and observe every moment because life is here and now, for it is neither in the past and nor is it in the future.

Everything in life is impermanent and always changing. Because nothing is permanent, and a life based on possessing things or persons doesn't make us happy. There is no eternal, unchanging soul and "self" is just a collection of changing characteristics or attributes.

According to Takakusu (1949), the Buddha regarded this world as the world of hardship, and taught the ways to cope

with it. Then, what are the reasons which make it a world of hardship? The first reason, as given by the Buddha that all things are selfless or egoless, which means that all things – men, animals and inanimate objects, both living and non-living do not have what we may call their original self or being. Let us consider man. A man does not have a core or a soul which he can consider to be his true self. A man exists, but he cannot grasp his real being – he cannot discover his own core, because the existence of a man in nothing but an 'existence depending on a series of causations.'

So, everything that exists is there because of causations; it will disappear when the effects of the causations cease. And this Buddhist notion of 'selflessness' is somewhat similar to that of the concept of quantum mechanics, because in the quantum level the particle exists in wave-particle duality, or the particle has no solid existence or its existence is uncertain. For instance, Greene explains in his book *The Fabric of Cosmos* (2004) that, so far, the word 'space' is concerned with psychological experience, is less direct, instead, there exists a far-reaching uncertainty of interpretation. This uncertainty reaches far back: the struggle to come to grips with the meaning of space is an ancient one. So, that the concept of selflessness and the search for life is an inherent truth in Buddhism.

In his book *The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy* (1949), Junjiro, further states that the waves on the water's surface certainly exist, but can it be said that a wave has its own self? Waves exist only while there is wind or current. Each wave has its own characteristics according to the combination of causations – the intensity of the winds and currents and their directions, etc. But, when the effects of the causations cease, the waves are no more. Similarly, there cannot be a self which stands independent of causations.

## II. EVERYTHING IS MOVING, NOTHING IS PERMANENT: NIRVANA IS THE FREEDOM FROM SPACE-TIME CONCEPT

As long as a man is an existent depending on a series of causations, it is unreasonable for him to try to hold on to himself and to regard all things around him from the self-centered point of view. All men ought to deny their own selves and endeavor to help each other and to look for co-existence, because no man can ever be truly independent.

So, Junjiro Takakusu further defines that if all things own their existence to a series of causations, their existence is a conditional one – there is no one thing in the universe that is permanent or independent. Therefore, according to the Buddha's theory selflessness is the nature of all things that inevitably leads to the state that all things are impermanent (anitya).

Men in general seem to be giving all of their energy to preserving their own existence and their possessions. But in truth it is impossible to discover the core of their own existence, nor is it possible to preserve it forever. Even for one moment nothing can stay unchanged. Not only it is insecure in relation to space but also it is insecure in relation to time. If it is possible to discover a world which is space-less and time-less, that will be a world of true freedom, i.e., Nirvana.

If, as the modern physicists assert, space is curved and time is relative, this world of space and time is our enclosed abode from which there is no escape – we are tied down in the cycles of cause and effect.

As long as men cannot discover a world which is not limited by time and space, men need to be creatures of suffering. So, in this case, the Buddha has already surpassed the concept of quantum physics, searching the possibility of living in another realm of the universe which is free from space-time boundary. So, the Buddha has therefore envisioned the concept of Nirvana, the ultimate liberation of humankind. To assert that, such a state, unlimited in time and space, is attainable by man is the message of Buddhism. Of course, there is no such thing as a limitless space of limitless time. Even modern physical science does not recognize infinity in time and space. However, the Buddha brought forward his ideal, Nirvana (extinction), following his theories of selflessness and impermanence. According to the Buddha, Nirvana means extinction of life and death, extinction of worldly desire, and extinction of space and time conditions. This further proves that Buddhism attempts to unfolding a world of perfect freedom.

Moreover, this is clearly an important issue for scholars of Buddhism, who tend to accept the view that meditative experience is central to the Buddhist tradition (Sharf, 1995). selflessness (no substance), and impermanence (no duration) are the real state of our existence; Nirvana (negatively extinction; positively perfection) is our ideal, that is, perfect freedom, quiescence.

## III. BUDDHISM AND THE CONSCIOUS PROCESS OF BEING AND EXISTENCE

Obvious as it is that Buddhism has its influence in the west. For instance, thinkers such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche liked Buddhism and said Buddhism as the best religion in the world (Buddhism and Western Philosophy, 2024). They further stated that 'Buddhism is the only genuinely positive religion to be encountered in history, and this applies even to its epistemology, which is a strict phenomenalism. Like Buddha's concept, Nietzsche also accepted that all is change and becoming, and sought to create an ethics which was not based on god or an absolutist being. Likewise, the Scottish philosopher David Hume also says that there is nothing that is constantly stable which we could identify as the self, only a flow of differing experiences. Our view that there is something substantive which binds all of these experiences together is for Hume merely imaginary. The self is a fiction that is attributed to the entire flow of experiences (Hume, 1739).

So, it seems that Buddhist philosophy is scientific in the sense that it stands against the conventional concept of 'self' which is static, unchanging. Buddhism, in this regard, is progressive and life-like, it also gives the similar view to that of quantum mechanics because the fundamental nature of every object is not solid, not fixed and rigid but it exists in the wave-particle duality. So, Buddhism highlights the similar and ever-changing pattern of the self, for everything is moving.

Moreover, Buddhism, like that of existential phenomenology, talks about the state of consciousness: the moving consciousness. So, Buddhism and existentialism share common attributes particularly focusing on individual responsibility and the search for meaning in life. Both Buddhism and existentialism highlight the inherent uncertainty and impermanence of existence. Moreover, both philosophies emphasize the importance of self-reflection and personal experience in exploring life's challenges.

Obvious as it is that existentialism explores the meaning of life and existence through freedom, choice and authenticity, whereas, Buddhism offers a path to liberation. Moreover, both of the philosophies consider the impermanent nature of all things. Nonetheless, both philosophies highlight the concept of introspection and self-awareness. For instance, existentialists encourage individuals to confront their own existence and make conscious choices, yet Buddhism highlights self-observation and the understanding of one's own mind. Yet, Buddhism brings forth the concept of no-self which contrasts with existentialism's focus on the individual self and its freedom to define itself.

Adams (2013) also puts forward his views that a person is the product of their choices and actions taken in the context of lived time, is a lifelong process model rather than a stage model. Moreover, in our desire to have continuity in time and a location in space (Laing, 1965, 41), to be something



rather than nothing, we actively construct a coherent sense of self out of the random events of our lives. Adams (2013) further states that this largely static sense of self is challenged by our everyday encounters with the dynamic relativity of time, relationality, freedom and ethics.

#### IV. LIFE IS SELF-CREATED OR SELF-CREATION

Buddhism is not actually a religion, rather it is a life-theory. Takakusu (1949) further defines that according to Buddhism, human beings and all living beings are self-created or self-creation of all beings. Buddhism does not believe that all things came from one cause, but holds that everything is inevitable created out of more than two causes. The creation or becoming of the antecedent causes continue in time-series – past, present and future – like a chain. This chain is divided into twelve divisions and is called the Twelve Division Cycle of Causations and Becomings. Since these divisions are interdependent, they are called Dependent Production or Chain of Causes. The formula of this theory is as follows: From the existence of this, that becomes; from the happening of this, that happens. So, from the non-existence of this, that does not become, from the non-existent of this, that does not happen.

Basically, people are accustomed to regard time as progressing in a straight line from the infinite past through present to infinite future. Buddhism, however, regards time as a circle with no beginning or end. Time is relative.

So Junjiro Takakusu further explains that the modern physicists have proposed the theory of indeterminism because it is experimentally impossible to determine the conditions for determinism; the theory generalized is said to be that of ‘uncertainty relation.’ According to this idea, the nature of things or substances can in no way be determined by reason, experiment or science. This theory can be called indeterminateness which is opposed to the old theory that everything can be determined by experiment. So, Buddhism has no concern with either determinism or determinateness because it is a religion of self-creation: it holds the theory of free will (not absolute) within the sphere of human beings. Moreover, Buddhism, therefore, has nothing to do with fatalism, for it does not admit the existence of anything like destiny or the decree of fate. According to Buddhism, all living beings have assumed the present life as the result of self-creation, and are, even at present, in the midst of creating themselves. In other words, every being is a stage of dynamic becoming. In truth, there is present only. That is to say, we have a long continuity of existence, birth and death being simply the rise and fall of the waves in the ocean of life. Birth and death are not the predestined fate of a living being but a corollary of action (karma), as it has been called by some.

The movement of life as the Buddha described is similar to quantum mechanics, for Buddhism begins with the actual, dynamic world, and the individual, by cultivation of oneself,

strives to real in the end. Samsara (the rise and the fall of life), is not an onward flow, but a ‘wavicle’ circle, each wave being a cycle of life appearing on the great orbit of samsara. It has no beginning nor end, just as one cannot point out the beginning of a circle.

So according to Buddhism all things, matter and mind, have no substratum, no soul, no abiding self-reality, no such thing as absolute self or ego. What appears to be real is a temporary existence, an instant in a causal sequence, one ripple in the long line of waves, the effect of two or more causes combined. For instance, in minutely definite and exact language, it is impossible to define yourself, or to describe yourself. However, there is no danger of losing yourself, for no one can extinguish the influence of your action, or latent energy. A particular manifestation of that energy in human form is yourself and the whole of you – for the present.

Takakusu (1949) further explains that a substance may become energy and energy may become substance, but one must not think that the energy is preserved always in one and the same substance. So, by virtue of our own action we will get our next life along the long lines of lives. Having no permanent center, a living being changes itself as time goes on, apart from the changing manifestations, but the cycles of the hanging manifestations as a whole constitute ourselves. Therefore, there is no possibility of the disappearance of our identity, so that, the idea of indeterminism which has been seen as the basis of the idea of indeterminism is expressed by many terms: having no special nature, having no definite nature, all things are emptiness, having no special state. All are of temporary existence, all are existence by combination of causes. No substance, no duration, is therefore the idea of Buddhism.

#### V. THE STATE OF INTERBEING

Obvious as it is that life is a precious gift of existence. So, we should live in harmony with each other to make our life meaningful. According to Hanh (2017), to be in touch with the mind means to be aware of the processes of our inner life — feelings, perceptions, mental formations — and also to rediscover our true mind, which is the wellspring of understanding and compassion. When we discover our true mind, we are filled with understanding and compassion, which nourishes us and those around us as well.

Furthermore, Hanh (2017) states that there are bodhisattvas all around us — our entire planet Earth is a bodhisattva. It carries us very solidly. It offers up so much that nourishes us and supports all life. It gives us water; it gives us air to breathe and food to eat. It is a true bodhisattva.

Moreover, Hanh (2019) says that the Buddha talks about non-duality because we have a tangible experience of non-birth and non-death, we know ourselves beyond duality. The meditation on ‘no separate self’ is one way to pass through the gate of birth and death. Life comes from the whole



universe. When we identify with the life of all that exists, we realize that birth and death are minor fluctuations in an ever-changing cosmos. Our life and the life of all existence are one continuous life. The peace and joy of our small toe are the peace and joy of our whole body and mind, and the peace and joy of the universe.

So, 'freedom of self-development and the encouragement of opportunities for it' are a foundation of Buddhist ethics. Every individual has the right to self-development. The Buddha teaches the goal of freedom that is to be reached by means of freedom and a happy means that leads to a happy end. Buddhism supports the advancement of knowledge and freedom for humanity in every sphere of life.

#### VI. THE PATH TO FREEDOM AND THE SEARCH OF LIFE

Everything in life is impermanent and always changing. Because nothing is permanent, a life based on possessing things or persons doesn't make us happy. There is no eternal, unchanging soul and "self" is just a collection of changing characteristics or attributes (Walk, 2022).

According to Takakusu (1949), the Buddha regarded this world as the world of hardship, and taught the ways to cope with it. Then, what are the reasons which make it a world of hardship? The first reason, as given by the Buddha that all things are selfless or egoless, which means that all things – men, animals and inanimate objects, both living and non living — do not have what we may call their original self or being. So, Buddhist modernism is not just confined to the domain of the religious; in fact, it may be most powerful when it works through other channels and eludes specialization to form a diffuse intellectual background or an international cultural style ( Saussy, n.d.).

For instance, Greene explains in his book *The Fabric of Cosmos* (2004) that so far, the word 'space' is concerned with psychological experience is less direct, instead, there exists a far-reaching uncertainty of interpretation.

This uncertainty reaches far back: the struggle to come to grips with the meaning of space in an ancient one. So that the concept of selflessness and the search for life is an inherent truth in Buddhism.

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