

Ethics
Prof. Vineet Sahu
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology-Kanpur

Module No. #01
Lecture No. #30
Buddhist Ethics – Part 1

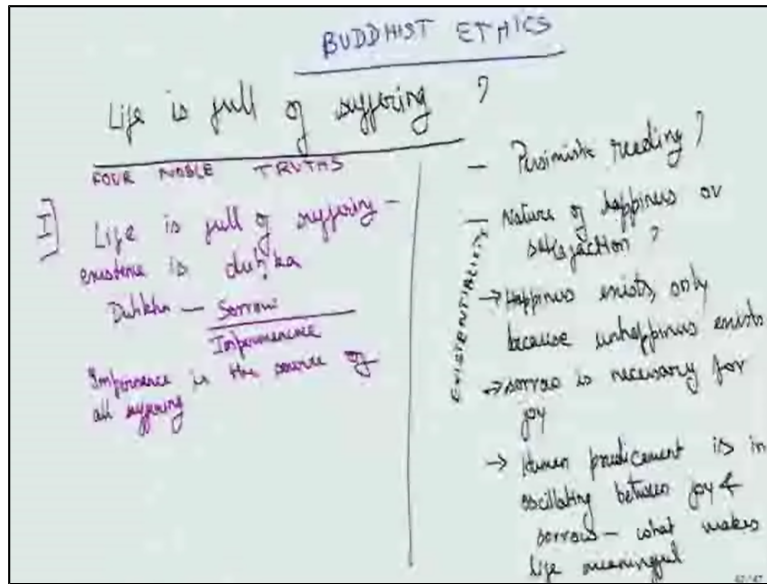
Hello, everyone. Today, we are going to talk about, Buddhist Ethics. That, what is the ethical claim of Buddhism. And, what is Buddhism, all about. It is going to be, more in the form of a story. When we find, what is it that led into Buddhism as, both the philosophy and religion, and the code of conduct and the Ethics, that it brings about. So, many of us may be familiar with the, story of Buddha. But, for those, who are not, let me briefly recapitulate, what is the story of Gautama Buddha or Siddhartha.

Now, Siddhartha was a Prince, born in the foothills of the Himalayas, in 563 BC. Now, Prince Siddhartha was of a royal descent. He was the son of a king. And, legend had it at that time, that when the King was blessed with a son, that the son would be, either a great ruler, or a great saint. So, the King naturally being interested, in wanting his son, to be his successor, did not want the son Siddhartha, to become a saint. And, wanted him to become, rather a great ruler.

So, the King insulated, the young Prince from any visions, or any aspects of society, which would perhaps trigger a saintly pursuit. So, he kept him comfortably in the palace, and with a lot of comforts insulated from the, world out there. Well. Siddhartha, and one of his visions, human societies. And, one might call a destiny, or one might not choose to call it destiny.

But well, Siddhartha did take a look at human life, as it is being lived in the world out there, outside his palace. And, that is where, that started to set him to think, that well. He saw the sides of an aged man, an old man sick, and a dead body, a person being born. Now, this caused him disillusionment. Now, this is more perhaps, is the most popular notion of Buddhism, that well, which claims, that well, life is full of suffering.

(Refer Slide Time: 03:17)



That, life is full of suffering. And, this is perhaps, one of the crucial comments, or crucial claims, that is popular about Buddhist Ethics. But, let us look at it, this way. That, what does Buddha mean, that well, life is suffering. But anyway, let me continue his story. Now, this young Prince Siddhartha, as he was known then, saw these sides of old-age, disease, sickness, and birth, and death. And then, he thought that well, why is there, so much of suffering.

And, what you could see all around, was a lot of suffering. That, people were suffering. That, even happiness, enjoy, that we see, is only intermediary between sufferings. So, that made Prince Siddhartha, go out in search of, what is it, that can give one escape from suffering. So, he left his palace. And father, whose heart was broken. And, he went out into the forests, as it was the practice then, to dwell on, what could be the reason for this suffering.

And, how could a, liberation for the same be attained. After, 6 years of rigorous hard penance, and an ascetic life, Prince Siddhartha was still, nowhere close to finding a solution. So then, he discarded the ascetic life, and took the middle path of leading, an ascetic life but not with the rigour, that he was living up to them. Then, he had this, what is regarded as the, enlightenment in the Buddhist history, is that, when sitting below a tree, Prince Siddhartha had an enlightenment, and could form his philosophy about life.

And, since then, he was known as, the Buddha, or the Gautama Buddha. And, since then, he is

propagated, or he is counselled, people around there. And thereof, what came to be known as Buddhism, both as a religion and philosophy. It is both, a religion, and philosophy. Because, it also talks about the fundamental questions. It debates, dwells, and reasons, into giving its justifications.

It is also religion, because it provides a code of conduct, a way of living, a way of conducting one's life, a set of guidelines. So, Buddhism is both of philosophy and a religion, just like Jainism, and Hinduism. Now, we see that well, this is briefly, the history of the journey of Prince Siddhartha, from an opulent Princely childhood, to an ascetic middle-aged, to an enlightened soul.

Now, let us also know the historical background, that well. Buddhism was at a time, 5 centuries before Christ. And, it is there, when Hinduism was very popular. But, it had become very ritualistic. The caste system was present. And that, Buddhism arose as perhaps, many scholars see it as a reaction to the, hard-core Hinduism prevailing there. And, it became wildly popular. And, Buddhism, even spread to various far East Asian countries, including Burma, Japan, Tibet, and other nations around.

And, it was quite popular. So, this having placed the trajectory of Buddhism. Now, let us come back to, what Buddha talks about. Now, whether this fundamental claim, that we have written, that life is full of suffering. Now, this is where, we need to spend some time, that whether life is full of suffering. And, is it a pessimistic reading, life is full of suffering. Now, is this a pessimistic reading. But, before we go into analysing this, let us try to understand, why the Buddha made such a claim.

Now, Buddha made such a claim, because well, he observed that well, whatever and however we lead to a life, to whichever stages, the only thing inevitable is suffering. Because, even the movements of happiness or pleasure that we have, is placed between periods of suffering. That, we have disease. That, we have death. That, we have old-age. That, we have decay. That, we have impermanence. That, we have things changing. That is what makes life, so full of suffering, according to Buddhist.

It will perhaps, not be a pessimistic reading, as much as, he would like to call it, a factual statement of affair, that well. The entire futility of human existence, or human predicament, as it is said, that we labour hard, and we achieve, and we toil, and we relish it. But then, it is all transitory. It gets away. So imagine, what is happening in Prince Siddhartha's mind. Well. He is born in a very comfortable situation, set to rule. And, he could have a life full of pleasures, or happiness. And, morally justified happiness, not a life of rampant pleasure.

Yet, what is it that disturbs him. That disturbs him is that, well, even the Prince is not immune to disease, not immune to decay, not immune to death, not immune to having things go away. In short, not immune to impermanence. So, wherever we find that, let us transpose it to today's life. Like, if we tend to believe, that well, perhaps that was show on that time. Well. It is perhaps not so, if you just look at around us.

That, whatever our pursuits are, we are still a part of the, simple yet profound observation, that there is birth, or growth, middle stage of equilibrium, and then there is a decay and death. That, death is a part of life. That, death is an inevitable part of life, is too obvious for us, to perhaps strike us in our day-to-day living. But, no matter what, whatever we wish, we desire, we achieve, our loves, our triumphs, our achievements, are still susceptible to the death of the agent, to the decay of the agent, to change.

So, at a more deeper and more fundamental level, what is in happiness, and looking for a happiness, that lasts forever. Now, many religious texts talk about, eternity, eternal happiness, eternal bliss. What is it that, when we are looking for eternal. Why eternal. Why eternity is revered, in so many texts. Because, eternity is a liberation from impermanence, from change, from unhappiness, from suffering. So, when the Buddhist say, that well, life is full of suffering.

Well. Buddha is trying to say there, no matter, for what all our achievements are, we still have suffering as a part of it. Because, our achievements are, just an intermediary between, phases of suffering. So, is this a pessimistic reading. I would leave that, onto the audience, to decide. Leave it open ended. Let me look to explore, another perspective. The second perspective, that I would

like to explore is, what is the nature of happiness or satisfaction.

Now, for many of us, who would like to argue, one could explore this angle, that well, when the Buddha says, that life is full of suffering, perhaps he has not got his understanding of, the notion of happiness and human life as, right. Why do I say so? Now, this claim, would claim, that well, happiness exists only because, unhappiness exists. Sorrow is necessary for joy.

So, this school of philosophy, which could be regarded as the existentialist, or those who believe that life has to be lived, that the human predicament, is in oscillating between the two extremes, between joy and sorrow. And, this is what makes, life meaningful. Okay. Now, what is this point. Now, we have a very popular understanding, of the human spirit, or the human predicament of existence, that well, we have happiness only because, we have unhappiness, we have sorrow. So, we need the darker shades to, realise the lighter shades.

So, there is nothing to worry, or gloom about suffering. But rather, look at it as a necessary condition, for us to experience joy. Now, Buddha is against, would call this, also suffering. So, a life of activity, a life of defeats and triumphs of overcoming odds, where the human spirit, so to say, vibrates energetically, as a part of a meaningful life, is also not what convinces Buddha, as the good life. Because, as a ruler, what is regarded in Indian Philosophy, as a Rajasic life.

A ruler would have a very Rajasic life, and would have all the pleasures, or all the triumphs, tribulations, and achievements, that human existence presents. So, it is a life, where one has to struggle, fight, win, lose. And, that is what makes a game, worth playing. Yes, the existentialist would claim, that well, thank god, we have sorrow. Because, we have sorrow, so we can struggle to alleviate it, and then we have happiness.

But, this would be the existentialist reading of sorrow, that sorrow as a necessary darker shade, to bring into focus, the lighter shade. So, sorrow is a necessary part of human existence. And, how we can get rid of it, should not matter to us. Rather, we should try to maximise our happiness possible. Well. The Buddha is still not convinced.

The Buddha's claim. Siddhartha looks for eternity, looks for permanence, looks for happiness or satisfaction, that is eternal. Looks for this escape from, what he regards as the cycle of ignorance, pain, suffering, pleasure, and again, a binding. So, throughout Indian Philosophy, and Indian Ethics, an aesthetics strain is seen, which many have critiqued as an escapist strain. But, many could also see it as, a desire to see something, which is liberating from mundane human existence, as a metaphysical or ontological new state.

But anyway, we see that well, when Buddha claims, that life is full of suffering, well, he has his justification. He is making a claim, that well, no matter what we do, where we are placed, human life essentially has suffering. And, that because, we may love, gives us happiness. But, we inevitably have to lose, gives the sadness. Well. It is perhaps, to be a part of human nature to suffer, and that is what, gives us meaning.

But, Buddha does not agree with that. He wants an escape from suffering. That well, life is full of suffering. And, what is the way out. He refuses to reconcile with the claim, that well, suffering is what makes life meaningful. He thinks, that life has to have something more, which makes it eternal, which gives him a liberation from impermanence. We will talk about impermanence, in some time. Well. That, there is suffering.

Now, this comes out to be, the first of the Four Noble Truths, as popularly regarded. So, the First Noble Truth is that, life is full of suffering. And, existence is Dukkha, as it is regarded. Now, what is the meaning of Dukkha. Dukkha would mean, well, sorrow, in the psychological sense. But, at a deeper sense, it would mean, impermanence. And, this impermanence, is the cause of all suffering. Well. Look at it this way. Now, when Buddha puts his points out to suffering, he is making a claim, that well, what is suffering.

What claims is he making? Well. There is suffering. And, where the suffering come. He does not discount the pleasures and the joys, we receive. But, what he calls as suffering. Because, on the larger scale, he sees, that these pleasures, and these joys, are just a facade, or a transitory, a temporary benefit. It is like this. If, I may be permitted to make a naive analogy. We are sitting in a train or a plane, which is about to crash.

But, it is about to crash, in say, a long-time. And, we have no escape from the train. But, right in the train, we have a lot of goodies. We have good books to read. We have good people to interact with. We have good food to eat. And, we have a comfortable life to lead. So, inevitably, the train is going to crash. Now, there are various ways of, how people would make peace in such a situation. That well, when death becomes imminent, people have different philosophies.

But, in such a situation, there could be a person, who would say that well, death is imminent, and the crash is imminent, but I can still make good of my, whatever time I have on this train. Someone could say, that well, if death is imminent, then all these things, all these goodies, and all these comforts, that we have around ourselves, does not matter. That is what, Buddhism talks about. That, when death is imminent, when decay is imminent, and where loss is imminent, it does not matter that we have, whatever highs of joy and pleasure.

So, what is this death. Or, what is the strange. Not necessarily the human death. It is the whole abstracted notion of impermanence, that we do not have permanence. Impermanence, is a fact of life. But, to begin with any philosophical thinking, one does not have to regard facts and absolute. It is the liberation from the factual domain, that is the beginning of philosophical thinking. That, you are no more enamoured or captured with, how things are, but how things could be.

So, that necessarily requires you to be, liberated from, how things are. So, coming back. Now, I see that, Buddha making this claim, like the person sitting in the train, that well. When the crash is imminent, I would like to seek something, that would make whatever happiness, I can enjoy as eternal. And, whatever happiness I can enjoy, is not eternal, then it is really not happiness. It is suffering, in the guise of happiness. So, impermanence is, what is known as Dukkha. Impermanence is, what is known as suffering.

So, as long as things are impermanent, the final calculation is that, it is a part of Dukkha. So, the First Noble Truths, that Buddha proposed was, that life is full of suffering. That, human existence is Dukkha. And, Dukkha is to be, and is understood as, Anitya or impermanence. Impermanence

is the source of all suffering. Now, the Buddhist Ethics is the first stage put forth as the Four Noble Truths, that Buddha realised, which are profound by themselves, although they may appear simple by itself, at the first glance.

(Refer Slide Time: 24:14)

existence is dukkha - Sorrow
 Impermanence
 Impermanence is the source of all suffering

II] Doctrine of dependent origination
 (Pratityasamutpada)

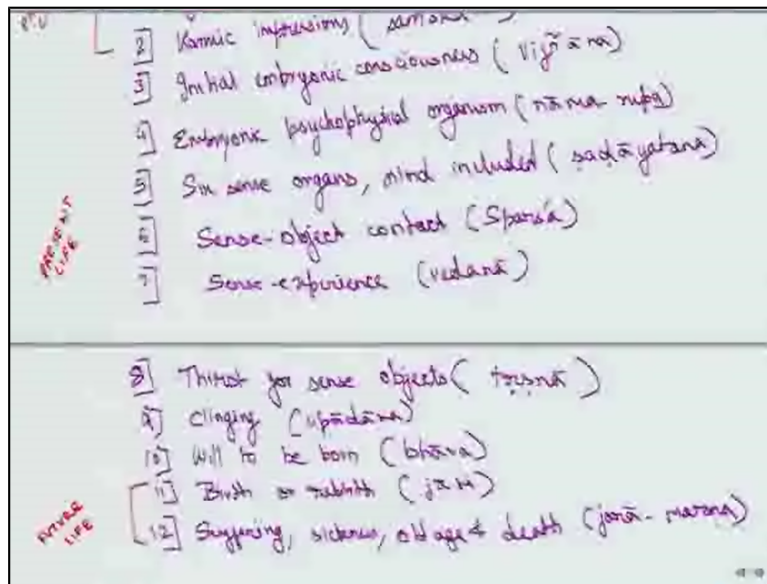
EXISTENTIAL → Happiness exists, only because unhappiness exists
 → Sorrow is necessary for joy
 → Inner predicament is in oscillating between joy ← sorrow - what makes life meaningful

- Suffering is not an accident, it is caused
- Suffering has a cause

origination (Pratityasamutpada) → Sorrow - some life meaningful

- Suffering is not an accident, it is caused.
- Suffering has a cause

- 1] Ignorance (avidya)
- 2] Karmic impurities (samkara)
- 3] Initial embryonic consciousness (vijñāna)
- 4] Embryonic psychophysical organism (nāma rūpa)
- 5] Six sense organs, mind included (saḍāyatana)
- 6] Sense-object contact (Sparsa)
- 7] Sense-experience (vedanā)



Now, what is the Second Noble Truth, that Buddha talks about, is the doctrine of dependant origination, or which is known as Pratityasamutpada. Now, what does this mean. It means, well, it is the doctrine of dependent origination, that well. What it simply means is that, suffering is not an accident, it is caused. So, suffering as a cause. Now, contrast Buddhism, as a reaction to Hinduism of that time, which greatly perhaps propagated theory of fatalism. That, many of the incidents in life, were a part of one's dessert, and therefore unalterable.

Now, Buddha makes a change over here. He regards, suffering as an event, which is caused. So, there is a cause to suffering. And, if the cause is removed, suffering is removed. So, the Second Noble Truth is breaking down, in four sequences. Now, the Four Noble Truths, breakdown in sequence, the understanding of Dukkha, and its elimination. So, suffering is, and is not an accident, it is rather caused. So, what is this suffering about. Well. Suffering is not as a result of chance.

Now, coming to, what exactly are these, what is suffering. So, we say, that well, the Buddhist claim, that there are twelve links of suffering. And, what are these links. Well. Let me first put them down, for you to go through. And then, we will talk about in detail. Ignorance or Avidya. Karmic impressions or Samskara. Initial embryonic consciousness or Vijnana. Embryonic psychophysical organism or Namarupa. Six sense organs, mind included, Sadayatana.

And then, there is sense object contact or Sparsa. There is sense experience or Vedana. Now, thirst for sense objects, Trishna. Then, we have clinging, which is Upadana. Then, we have will to be born or Bhava. Birth or rebirth is known as Jati. And finally, we have suffering, sickness, old age, and death, it is Jara-Marna. Okay. Now, these are twelve classifications, that he would perhaps find, in any of the textbook dealing with Buddhist Ethics.

What is it trying to point out? It is called the twelve links, a part of the Second Noble Truth, in a part of diagnosis. That, first it makes a claim, that well, suffering is a part of existence. And, because existence, as this necessary nature of impermanence. And therefore, the impermanence is a part of existence. And therefore, impermanence causes suffering.

So, suffering is inevitably tied up with existence. And, if this suffering, or this impermanence is caused, it is not an accidental or unnatural import. There is a cause for that. There is a reason, why it is there. And, the reason is analysed, into these twelve links. That well, what we have seen here. That well, if you look at it, now the first two, are to do with past life. So, Avidya, and Samskara, these are a part of our past life. And, they come from our past life.

What we do. We are born, because we have initial embryonic consciousness. Now, this is also putting forth a metaphysical claims of Buddhism, that well, we have initial embryonic consciousness, and therefore we are born. We have this Namarupa. Or then, we become a psychophysical organism. And, the part of the psychophysical organism, we have six sense organs, which is the Sadayatana. And, these sense organs, have contact with objects out there.

And, the moment we have, this sense object contact, this Sparsa, we have sense experience, or Vedana. Now, this Vedana, which causes the thirst for sense objects, or Trishna. And, this Trishna causes us, to be cling to these sense objects. And, this clinging causes our will to be born. And, this causes again our birth. And then, we have suffering, sickness, old age, and death. So this, that hears to future life. And this, that hears to present life.

So, what in essence, is the claim. If we look at it as a whole, is that well, we are born. And, born

because, we have fundamental embryonic consciousness. And then, because of that, we feel ourselves as a psychophysical organism. We have sense organs. The sense organs, get in touch with the world out there. And, that causes sense experience. Sense experience breeds desire. And, desire and attachment. And, this attachment causes us to be reborn.

And, this again, puts us through a cycle of birth, decay, disease, suffering, and death. So, liberation from this, is the way, to get away, from this cycle of dependent origination. Now, these twelve fold to chain of causation, is often referred to as Dharmachakra, or the wheel of becoming. It is referred to as Bhavacakra, or Duvadhasnidhan. So, this is the nature of suffering. Now, let us come to the Third Noble Truth.