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Did the Buddha teach any ‘ism’?

What is “ism”? The suffix ‘ism’ is generally added to denote the teaching of a religious teacher or the view and social philosophy of a social thinker. The teaching of the Buddha is called Buddhism and the teaching of Mahavira who was also called a Jin Jainism. Marx’s social philosophy is called Marxism and Gandhi’s socio-political view is called Gandhism.

This suffix is also used in the derogatory sense. When one talks about something disapprovingly he uses this suffix such as racism or fascism. It is in this sense that the suffix ‘ism’ is used when we say ‘Hinduism’ ‘Buddhism’ ‘Jainism’ and ‘Sikhism’ and their followers are respectively called ‘Hindu’ ‘Buddhist’ ‘Jain’ and ‘Sikh’. Because their teachings are different from one another and also because each is fond of the teaching taught by his teacher so he talks disapprovingly of others’ teaching. In this sense Buddhists, Jains and Hindus are different sects. Although the followers of each sect call their teacher’s belief dharma, it is not dharma in the true sense of the term as it is not based on universal laws but on the belief of their teachers.

Each sectarian Dhamma has two parts; one is based on universal laws and the other on personal beliefs of the teacher. If one holds a religious teacher in high esteem then his personal views are regarded as sacrosanct and his followers consider them to be right in preference to others’ views. It so happens that with the passage of time his personal beliefs are given more importance than the universal laws to be practiced in life in order to be happy and peaceful.

If we consider the teachings of the Buddha from this point of view we will see that his teachings are based on laws that apply to all. If the Buddha says that when one is angry he suffers and harms himself first before he harms another, this is not merely a statement. Whether it is true or not can be verified by one at the experiential level by practicing Vipassana—the action -plan of the Buddha’s teaching.

Unlike other teachers who believe in a creator God or in the Son of God or in the last prophet of God whom they ask us to have faith in for achieving peace and happiness in life, the Buddha asks us to see the laws of nature. There are some laws which explain the cause of our suffering; there are others which explain how we can end it. The Buddha has discovered and propounded those laws, which can bring us peace and happiness. These laws apply to all whether they are Hindus or Christians, Jains or Mohammedans.

But these so -called dhammas believe in different gods. Followers of each Dhamma want others to have faith in their God or Son of God or the Prophet. The Buddha does nothing of this kind. He wants us to follow the laws of nature and see what is good for us to have peace, harmony and happiness. Therefore, it is clear that what the Buddha taught cannot be called sectarian as the Dhamma he propounded is based on universal laws that apply to all mankind belonging to different sects. He has succinctly defined Dhamma as ‘sabba pāpassa akaraṇaṃ, kusalassa upasampadā/ Sacitta pariyodapanaṃ etaṃ buddhānusāsanaṃ’ i.e. not to do any evil, to do good and wholesome actions and purify one’s mind—this is, in a nutshell, the Teaching of the Buddhas.

In the Tipitaka we find many such laws rightly called Dhammas which were realised by the Buddha.

These laws or Dhammas apply to all as said above. All who lose their temper will burn and suffer whether they call themselves Hindus, Jains, Christians, Mohammedans or Buddhists. Therefore it can be said that the Buddha never taught any ‘ism’ which is based on one’s belief which is not universally acceptable.

The Tipitaka gives a detailed account of such dhammas as were realised by the Buddha. Therefore he did not teach any ‘ism’ which is narrow and not universal.

Though nowadays we come across words like ‘Buddhism’, ‘Jainism’, and ‘Hinduism’ etc., such words are not found in Pali Canonical literature. Followers of these sects call themselves -Buddha, Jain, and Hindu respectively. As Mahāvīra was known as ‘Jina’ – the Conqueror, his followers later on came to be known as ‘Jain’ and their religion as ‘Jain-dharma’ (Jainism). In the same way the followers of the Buddha came to be known as ‘Buddha’

and the religion as 'Bauddha dharma' (Buddhism). Even the words 'Hindu' and 'Hindu- Dharma' (Hinduism) seem to be of quite a late origin.

Minute examination of the Pali scripture known as "the Tipitaka" confirms that in the entire Tipitaka no term meaning the followers of the Buddha or "Bauddha" is found as they are called today. It is a matter of research, to find out how and when the word came into use. The followers of the Buddha, on the contrary, were called 'Dhammaṭṭho' (established in Dhamma), Dhammiko (follower of Dhamma), etc.

The following questions then arise: "How did people or the followers of the teachings of the Buddha start calling themselves 'Bauddha'? Did the Buddha really teach something sectarian, that can be called Bauddha Dharma? If not, what distinguishes the 'Buddha's Dhamma' from 'Bauddha Dharma'?"

Various definitions of the term "Dhamma" are given in Pali Literature:

The word Dhamma has been defined as **Dhāretīti dhammo**. Here the word Dhamma means nature. Another definition of Dhamma such as **attano sabhāvaṃ dhāretīti Dhammo** corroborates it. The nature of fire is to burn itself and burn others. This is its Dhamma.

As the first definition of Dhamma indicates, the mind can have now wholesome (kusala) and now unwholesome (akusala) dhammas. Hence we encounter words like pāpa Dhammā (evil phenomena), puñña Dhammā (meritorious phenomena), ariya Dhammā (noble) anariya Dhammā (ignoble), sukka Dhammā (wholesome) kaṇha Dhammā (unwholesome) etc.

According to Pali literature, the very characteristic of unwholesome Dhamma is such that it makes a person unhappy. This is explicitly written in the scripture that 'Dukkha vipāka lakkhaṇā akusalā dhammā' and "Sukha vipāka lakkhaṇā kusalā dhammā". I.e. the characteristics of unwholesome dhammas are to produce suffering, whereas those of wholesome dhammas are to produce happiness then and there.

When the contents of the mind are unwholesome, that is to say, if one's mind generates anger, hatred, ill-will or animosity, then the very nature of these negativities is to burn him. He will burn first and become the first victim as the vessel containing the fire becomes its first victim. Only then do this fire and the heat generated by it start spreading around him.

These definitions clearly indicate that whenever a person has any defilement like greed, anger, hatred, or animosity he becomes miserable whereas whenever one has wholesome mental states such as non-greed, loving-kindness, compassion, or joy at others' success, he becomes happy then and there. Seen from this point of view Dhamma simply means "the law of nature", which is the law of causality. When this is done, this will be the consequence.

The purpose of practicing Dhamma is to eliminate those conditions that disturb us, that cause our suffering and generate those conditions that produce peace and happiness. The ultimate goal of living a Dhammic life is to enable us to end all our suffering and attain nibbāna—the summum bonum of life. Understanding of the law of Dependent Origination enables us to live a Dhammic life of peace and happiness and not of unrest and suffering. This law helps us see what is good for us to adopt and what is bad for us to give up or shun.

Paṭiccasamuppāda – the law of nature:

This universal law of causality is clearly reflected in the words of the Buddha: "iti imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti, imassuppādā idaṃ uppajjati; iti imasmiṃ asati idaṃ na hoti, imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati;" – "When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises; when this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases." According to the Buddha, the law of dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda) is also Dhamma because it is an unfailing law. An understanding of this law makes us Dhammika in the true sense of the term because we learn to give up that which causes our suffering and follow that which helps us end that suffering and gives us peace and happiness.

The law of Dependant Origination explains how phenomena are causally related and how even suffering arises from a cause. The Buddha made a research to first find out the root cause of suffering and then showed the definite way to end it.

The quest of the Buddha:

Before the Buddha, it was believed that craving arises for the various objects of sensual pleasures and so the whole effort was to run away from such objects. The Buddha investigated the truth within himself and found that it is not the whole truth. The Law of Dependent Origination that he discovered gave him the missing link in the sequential chain of cause-and-effect. The Buddha stated that when our six sense organs come into contact with their respective objects, then there arise sensations as explained by the law 'phassa paccayā vedanā' (because of contact there arises sensation) and as per evaluation by the conditioned mind this bodily sensation changes into pleasant and unpleasant sensations. He found out that it is the tendency of the mind to react with craving towards pleasant bodily sensations, and, to react with aversion towards unpleasant bodily sensations. When this craving of the mind, either to retain pleasant sensations or to get rid of unpleasant sensations, is not satisfied, suffering begins.

Buddha's discovery was that the psychological reaction of craving does not arise immediately, because of sense objects. Instead, it occurs in response to pleasant or unpleasant bodily sensations which one feels as a result of the cause antecedent to these, as explained above. Craving then arises for them either to retain pleasant sensations or to get rid of unpleasant ones. The Buddha found the way by which one can realise at the experiential level the impermanent characteristic of these bodily sensations and develop the wisdom whereby instead of generating craving and aversion one starts generating equanimity towards the same bodily sensations.

Realisation of Dhamma

With the help of Insight meditation when one develops one's mind to the level where one can feel the bodily sensations and experiences their impermanent characteristic he does not generate greed for and hatred towards them but remains equanimous then he can liberate himself fully. As he does not give the input of fresh reactions, the law of nature –Dhamma - is such that old saṅkhāras (reactions) will automatically come on the surface and if he remains equanimous then he can reduce the accumulated stock of mental reactions. A time comes when he gets fully liberated from the entire stock of greed and hatred. So with the help of sensations only can one liberate oneself from misery and lead a happy and peaceful life. This, in the words of the Buddha. Is "khīṇaṃ purāṇaṃ, nava natthi sambhavaṃ."

All animate and inanimate things have the inherent characteristic of impermanence. This is what is realised by Vipassana meditators at the experiential level. This is the true realisation of Dhamma.

Nature of Dhamma:

When the Buddha says that one who sees "this law" sees "Dhamma", one thing becomes very clear that according to the Buddha, Dhamma is nothing but the 'laws of nature'. These Laws of nature are universal and applicable to all. The characteristic of fire is to burn - it was so in the past, it is so in the present and it will remain so in the future. So in this sense these laws of nature are 'eternal' (sanātana). These laws operate impartially i.e. they do not differentiate between one and another on the basis of caste, gender and creed. These laws are applicable to all. So Dhamma according to the Buddha is universal.

What do these universal characteristics have to do with Hinduism? What have they got to do with Buddhism, or Christianity, Jainism or Sikhism? Fire burns! Ice cools! This is the universal law of nature. If it does not give light and heat, it cannot be called the sun. The Dhamma of the moon is to give a soft and cool light. This is its Dhamma, the nature of the moon. If it does not do that, then it is not the moon.

As far as we human beings are concerned our Dhamma should be to develop those qualities which make us happy and peaceful and give up those which make us miserable. One has to work hard for developing these qualities. One can do so by walking on the eight-fold path consisting of śīla (morality), samādhi (concentration) and prajñā (wisdom) as taught by the Buddha.

Benefits of Dhamma:

It is only by the actual practice of Dhamma that one can remove all sorts of mental impurities to become an enlightened person. As and when the mind generates purity, the negativities get eradicated. And in accordance with the law of nature, when the mind is pure, not only is negativity removed, but in addition to it, the dormant good qualities of the human mind - loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity- get a chance to bloom. This is the nature of a pure mind. This was the quest of the Buddha.

Although Dhamma is universal and has nothing to do with sectarianism, the misconception that these are one and the same has prevailed in India for a long time. Even in the Buddha's time there were people who would use such terms as "my dharma" and "your dharma": They would call their own dharma perfect and true and other's dharma imperfect and false. Thus contending, they quarrelled with one another. They considered their own belief to be true.

Sectarianism:

There is a difference between Buddha's 'dhamma' and 'Bauddha dhamma'. 'Bauddha-dhamma', like Hindu dharma or Jain dharma seems to have a sectarian connotation. It seems to be meant exclusively for those who call themselves Buddhists and not for Hindus, Jains. Christians and people professing other religions. Similarly, the terms Hindu-dharma and Jain-dharma also mean dharmas to be professed respectively by the Hindus and Jains, not by others. Buddha-dhamma, on the contrary, does not have any such narrow and sectarian connotation. It is the Dhamma taught by the Buddha. And because the Dhamma taught by the Buddha is based on universal laws that operate in the moral-spiritual world, and not on his personal belief, so it is universal. It is based on experience and reason, so it is also scientific.

Someone who calls himself a very staunch Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist etc., may be a very good Dhammic person or may not have even a trace of Dhamma in him. Sectarian rites, rituals, sectarian beliefs or philosophies; sectarian religious ceremonies and outward appearances have nothing to do with true Dhamma which when followed gives us peace and happiness and ultimately take us out of the cycle of birth and death. The

yardstick of Dhamma should be purity of mind from defilements. The more one achieves the purity of mind, the greater a Dhammic man he is. This he can achieve by knowing the nature (svabhāva or dharma) of all and cultivating only those which can do him good, which will make him happy and peaceful. ---the highest objective of living a Dhammic life.

Conclusion:

Buddha-dhamma is based on universal laws. These laws apply to all and do not make any discrimination between a Hindu and a Christian. If one has craving and aversion he must suffer whether he is a Hindu or a Jain or a Christian. If he is angry he must burn, if he is attached to something in ignorance and considers it permanent he must suffer when it changes. The Buddha has taught us to see these laws. But this is not enough. These laws explain why we suffer.

But do we want to suffer? No. We want peace and happiness in life and for this purpose we should practice dhamma. Our practicing dhamma means getting rid of mental defilements that cause our suffering and make us unhappy and developing those positive qualities of love, compassion etc which make us happy. He taught us to practice Vipassana to enable us to see what is good and what is evil, what burns us and what soothes us, what makes us unhappy and what makes us happy and finally to choose and practice that which makes us happy and peaceful.

But we cannot practice Vipassana unless we live a life of morality, unless we concentrate our mind to see the laws of nature clearly and unless we develop wisdom to see that all things are in a constant state of flux. When we realise this at the experiential level we develop non-attachment (nirveda) to the various objects of the world. Our craving ceases and our suffering ends. This is the highest end of living a dhammic life. The Buddha has shown us the universal path consisting of śīla, samādhi and prajñā which are the prerequisites for walking on the eight-fold path and for practicing vipassana to end suffering.

The emphasis in the teaching of the Buddha is on realising for oneself the universal laws that cause our suffering as also the universal laws that go to reduce and end our suffering and he says that one can realise this by walking on the eight-fold path.

Thus we can clearly see that the Dhamma is nothing but the Laws of Nature which operate in the moral-spiritual world. This has been the essence of the Buddha's Dhamma. This is what the Buddha taught during the entire period of his life.

Religion, in the narrow sense of the term, is merely a profession of faith in some divinity or saintly person. Dhamma, on the other hand, is walking on the noble eight-fold path consisting of śīla, samādhi and prajñā. It helps one to get rid of blind faith. It also enables one to examine by the touchstone of one's own intuitive wisdom whether what he is following is true Dhamma. The most precious fruit of Dhamma is to abandon those defilements, which cause our suffering and develop those qualities, which result in experiencing peace and happiness. It also enables us to achieve equanimity of mind in all the circumstances of life knowing well that everything in life is impermanent.

Practice of Vipassana, which makes all the laws of nature clear, is the quintessence of the Buddha's teaching. It enables one to see the cause of suffering, end it and live a peaceful life, which is the goal of practicing Dhamma. Any body, whoever he may be, a Hindu, a Jain, a Christian or a Mohammedan, who practices Vipassana, can be peaceful and happy.

Corrigendum:

A correction regarding the result of one of the researches mentioned in our last journal (Feb. 2013):

Research Project: Randomized controlled trial of Vipassana meditation among patients with migraine.

The research team is still in the process of carrying on research and has not reached the conclusion as yet.



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