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Author: Zeite Shumneiyang Koireng

Centre for philosophy, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India

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The Concept of Liberation in Buddhism and Christianity

Zeite Shumneyang Koireng

shumneyangzeite@gmail.com

Research Scholar, Centre for philosophy, JNU, New Delhi

Buddhism is a religion, where beliefs, faith and spiritual practices are based on the teaching of Siddhārtha Gautama, who is known as Buddha. Buddhism believe in ‘the four noble truth’. In his third noble truth, he talks about the cessation of suffering, which means discontinuance of suffering. Here, the concept of *Nirvāṇa* arises, which means ‘blown out’.

Christianity is a religion, which is based on the teaching of Jesus Christ. In Christian philosophy they understand ‘Salvation’ as liberation. A definition of Christian doctrine of salvation would be deliverance by the grace of God, from external punishment for sin which is granted to those who accepted Jesus Christ as their saviour.

This paper intends to study and examine the understanding of liberation in Buddhism and Christianity.

Keywords: Liberation, *Nirvāṇa*, Salvation.

Introduction

Buddhism is a religion, where beliefs, faith and spiritual practices are based on the teaching of Siddhārtha Gautama, who is known as Buddha. It is originated in ancient India during 6th to 4th centuries B.C.E. Buddhism believe in ‘the four noble truth’ these are firstly, there is misery, secondly, there is a cause of misery, thirdly, there is a cessation of misery and lastly, there is a path leading to the cessation of misery. Here the second truth i.e. there is a cause of misery is important since he talks about cause; he points out the existence of everything in the world is conditional, all things are subject to change. In other words, we can say nothing is permanent in the world. The fourth truth i.e. there is a path leading to the cessation of misery talk about following the eight-fold path which finally leading to the state of perfection i.e. *Nirvāṇa*, which means ‘blown out’.

Christianity is a religion, which is based on the teaching of Jesus Christ. Christians believe in the ‘trinity’ here trinity refers to the teaching that God comprises of three distinct entities i.e. the father, the son and the Holy spirit. In Christian philosophy they understand ‘Salvation’ as liberation.

The paper will include the study and analysis of the understanding of liberation in Buddhism and Christianity. The paper will begin with the review of the existing literature. It will follow by the methodology to be used in the paper. The third and the fourth section will be examining the concept and understanding of liberation in Buddhism and Christianity respectively. The fifth section will bring out the difference and similarity of the two and in the last section will bring out my understanding on Buddhist and Christian liberation.

Review of Literature

S.C. Chatterjee and D.M.Datta in their book *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy* examines and discusses the four-noble truth. As we know the third-noble truth i.e. the cessation of suffering talk about the concept of

Nirvāṇa. Here, in this book they explain how a person can attain *Nirvāṇa*, according to them, when the perfect control of passions and constant contemplation of truth lead a person through the four stages of concentration to perfect wisdom, he is no longer under the sway of worldly attachment. He has broken the fetters that bound him to the world. He is, therefore, free, liberated. He is said then to have become a vulnerable person. The state is more popularly known as *Nirvāṇa*- the extinction of passions and a misery.

M.Hiriyanna in his book *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* examines the concept of *Nirvāṇa*, here, he mentions after following the rules we attained a stage called *Nirvāṇa*, the word literally means ‘blowing out’ or ‘becoming cool’ and signifies annihilation- heaven of nothingness.

Debiprasad Chattopadaya in his book *Indian Philosophy- A Popular Introduction* examines the concept of liberation. He mentions that the third noble truth i.e. the one conceived with the extinction of suffering, contained the famous conception of *Nirvāṇa*. It was conceived as the state in which the suffering was completely overcome, the mental intoxicants completely subsided.

Surendranath Dasgupta in his book *A History of Indian Philosophy Volume I*, examines the concept of liberation, here he mentions that *Nirvāṇa*, according to Madhyamaka theory is the absence of the essence of all phenomena that which cannot be conceived either as anything which is produced. In *Nirvāṇa*, all phenomena are lost; we can say that the phenomena cease to exist in *Nirvāṇa*, but like illusory snake in the rope they never existed.

In the book *A Comparative Study of the Concept of Liberation in Indian Philosophy* of A.K.Lad, according to Buddha, the *Nibbāna* is annihilation, but not the annihilation of soul, it is the extinction of cravings.

Dr. Radhakrishnan in his book *Indian Philosophy Volume I*, Buddha’s real attitude is probably, that *Nirvāṇa* is a state of perfection inconceivable by

us, and if we are obliged to offer description of it, it is best to bring out its inconceivability by negative descriptions, its richness of content by positive predicates, realizing all the time that such descriptions are best approximations only.

In the *Holy Bible* of New International Version, it mentions the following points:

The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them. (John 3:35-36)

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. (John 10:11-14)

Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. (John 11:25-26)

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me". (John 14:6)

Lewis Sperry Chafer, in his book *Salvation God's Marvelous Work of Grace*, defines Salvation to indicate a work of God in behalf of man and also the result of the work of God for the individual rather than the work of the individual for God or even the work of the individual for himself.

In summary, S.C. Chatterjee and D.M. Datta in their book *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy* and Debiprasad Chattopadaya in his book *Indian Philosophy- A Popular Introduction* examines the concept of liberation, both mentions third-noble truth talks about *Nirvāṇa* and also explains how a person can attain *Nirvāṇa*. According to them, *Nirvāṇa* is a state where extinction of passion and misery or suffering was completely overcome. M.Hiriyanna, in his book *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* mentions following rules, we attained *Nirvāṇa*. Surendranath Dasgupta in his book *A History of Indian Philosophy Volume 1*, mentions according to Madhyamaka school, *Nirvāṇa* is the absence of the essence of all phenomena that which cannot be conceived either as anything which is produced.

The Holy Bible mentions, that Jesus Christ is the son of God, whoever believes in the son has eternal life but whoever rejects the son will not see life. And also, Jesus Christ is the light of the world and he is the way and truth and the life.

Methodology

As the paper is on the understanding of the concept of liberation of two different religions Buddhism and Christianity, the method that will be employed is analytical way of study. Since the paper includes comparison of the two religions, comparative way of study will also be used.

Buddhist concept of liberation

As mentioned in the introduction part '*Nirvāṇa*' is understood as Buddhist term for liberation. The four-noble truth of Buddha is the foundation where the concept of *Nirvāṇa* comes up. In his first truth he talks about 'suffering' and how it comes in our life. According to the Buddha birth, old age, sorrow, grief are form or type of suffering. In the second truth, he talks about how this suffering occur and the causes, and also mention the chain of twelve links. In brief, we can explain, we suffered in life because of our

birth in the world, we are born because there is a will to be born, there is a will to be born because our mental are clinging to objects, again our clinging to objects is due to our thirst for object, this thirst for object is due to our sense experience, again our sense experience is due to our sense object contact, our sense object contact is due to sense organs of knowledge, this sense organs of knowledge is due to our mind and body which is our embryonic organism, which is again due to our initial consciousness of our embryo, this initial consciousness of the embryo is due to the impressions of our past experience and lastly, this impressions of our past experience is due to ignorance.(Chatterjee and Datta(1948). In his third noble truth he talks about the cessation of suffering which means discontinuance of suffering and here he talks about *Nirvāṇa*. In his fourth noble truth he talks about the path to liberation i.e. the path to *Nirvāṇa*, and about the way to liberation. The path of liberation consists of eight rules which is known as eightfold noble path. They are right views, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

According to Buddhism, they took *Nirvāṇa* as inexpressible, it has no origin, no change, no decay. In other words, we can say it is deathless and has to be realized within oneself. (Singh, 1987) In other words, they describe *Nirvāṇa* as positive existences, which is characterizes by its permanence, blissfulness, freedom and purity on the other hand, *Nirvāṇa* as the cessation of lust of hatred and delusion, it is without origination, as it has no antecedent cause, it is not produced by contemplation, it is only attained and realized by it. (Mookerjee,2006)

Different schools of Buddhism have different view regarding *Nirvāṇa*, According to Vaibhāṣka, *Nirvāṇa* is a positive state of existence in which the momentary manifestations have stopped absolutely, passion have been extinguished completely and there is no possibility of arising them again. (Lad 1967, pp.66) According to Sautrāntikas, *Nirvāṇa* is absolute end of

manifestations, the end of passions and life without any positive counterpart. (Lad 1967, pp.69) According to Mahāyanā Buddhism, particularly Śūnyavāda, the root cause of our bondage and pains is our own intelligence. It is indulging in views or imagination. According to Nāgārjuna, *Nirvāṇa* is merely appearance and not reality. If there is anything higher than *Nirvāṇa*, that too is like a dream. Thus the attainment of *Nirvāṇa*, is like the overcoming of an illusion. (Lad 1967 pp.74,75)

Nāgārjuna emphatically maintains that the absolute point of view, all the conceptions used in everyday life which are the productions of thought, are proved self- contradictory, hence, relative, essenceless and ultimately not real all of them, *Nirvāṇa* and *Tathagata* included are merely appearances and not reality. (Lad 1967, pp.75)

Christian concept of liberation

‘Salvation’ is the Christian understanding of liberation. According to Christianity, human being are born with sin, and it is inherited from the sins of Adam and Eve. In order to save us from our sin God send his son Jesus Christ. ‘For all have sinned and fall short glory of God’ (Romans 3:23) ‘For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our lord’ (Romans 6:23). From here, we can draw ‘Salvation’ is a God grace act by sending his son to save us from sin. In Christianity, we can attain Salvation when we consider Jesus Christ as our Saviour.

According to Christianity, Jesus Christ is the way to Salvation, when Jesus spoke to the people, he said, I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. (John 10:9). When we talk about Christian liberation i.e. Salvation, the term ‘Grace’ is very important. From the scripture we found by the grace of God we are saved, ‘For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and that is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God’. (Ephesians 2:8).

According to Christianity, in order to attain Salvation, we need to have faith. In the scripture we found, ‘And how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus’. (2 Timothy 3:15) They also consider Salvation as the end of faith, ‘For you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls’. (1 Peter 1:9).

We can have considered Salvation in three time; in the past, in present time and in future time. Lewis Sperry Chafer, in his book *Salvation God's Marvelous Work of Grace* explains the three aspects of understanding of Salvation. According to him, the children of God was saved from the guilt and penalty of sin when he believed. The story of a sinner woman, how she believed in Jesus Christ in Luke chapter 7 talks about how Salvation is there for us. “Jesus said to the woman, your faith has saved you, go in peace.” (Luke7:50).

According to him, the children of God, constituted such through belief, is being saved from the power and domination of sin. “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth”. (John 17:17). “For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace”. (Romans 6:14)

According to him, the children of God, begotten as such through belief, is yet to be saved from the presence of sin into the presence of God. “And do this, understanding the present time: the hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed”. (Romans 13:11) “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In this great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time”. (1 Peter 1:3-5).

Difference and Similarities

As from above, we know Buddha's four-noble truth is the foundation where the concept of *Nirvāṇa* comes up. In his first truth he talks about suffering where he basically talks about how suffering come up in our life. According to him, birth, old age, sorrow, grief are form or type of suffering. In second truth, he talks about how this suffering occur which means how it causes, he talks about the chain of twelve links. In his third noble truth he talks about the cessation of suffering which means discontinuance of suffering, here talks about *Nirvāṇa*. In his fourth noble truth he talks about the path to liberation. So, what I understand is when someone attain *Nirvāṇa*, he or she is already escape from this world and from the cycle of birth and rebirth. In other ways we can say in order to attain *Nirvāṇa* we have to detach from this worldly existence.

According to Christianity, we human are sinners, we are born with sin. According to the scripture, 'For all have sinned and fall short glory to God', 'For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our lord.' (Romans 3:23,6:23). So, Salvation is a God grace act by sending his son to save us from sin. In Christianity we attain Salvation, when we consider Jesus Christ as our saviour.

As we know, from the Buddhist concept of *Samsāra* i.e. the beginning less cycle of repeated birth, where there are six levels. Human realm has the possibility of attaining *Nirvāṇa*, so in order to be in human realm, they should have a good karma while, a bad karma can result a person being born to a lower level of existence like animal realm, hungry ghost realm. So, the Buddhist understanding of liberation i.e. *Nirvāṇa*, is related to *karma*. While in Christianity there is no such concept, the only thing is considering Jesus Christ as our saviour.

When we examine the Buddhist concept and Christian concept of liberation, we found that they have one final goal to achieve i.e *Nirvāṇa* in Buddhism, Salvation in Christianity. Though, they have different ways to attain. In

Buddhist and Christianity there is steps to attain liberation. In Buddhism, we have eight-fold noble path while in Christianity, there is no exact rule or steps to follow but along with considering Jesus Christ as saviour, we need to do all the commandment given by Jesus Christ for instances, love one another, honour your father and mother, etc.

My Understanding on Buddhist and Christian liberation

From the above discussion of the two religion, it is found that two religions have different concepts of liberation, *Nirvāṇa* for Buddhism and Salvation for Christianity. Buddhist *Nirvāṇa* can be attained when a person is free from the continuous cycle of rebirth, whereas Christian Salvation can be attained when a person considers Jesus Christ as his/her saviour.

In Buddhist liberation *karma* plays a major role. *Karma* which means action, in the Buddhist tradition karma refers to action driven by intension which leads to future consequences. That intension is considerable to be the determining factor in the kind of rebirth. As we know, the cycle of rebirth plays a very important role in Buddhist liberation, a person attains *Nirvāṇa*, when he/she stops the cycle of rebirth. The cycle of birth is determined by *karma* of the particular person. According to Buddhism, there are six realms of rebirth. Among this, Human realm only provide an opportunity to attain *Nirvāṇa* and end the cycle of rebirth. A person must do good action so that he/she can born in this realm. According to Christianity, human being are born with sin and it is inherited from the sin of Adam and Eve. We have to accept Jesus Christ as our saviour. But suppose, after accepting him, Jesus Christ as our saviour if we commit sin i.e. we didn't follow his commandments or fails to keep faith then, we might lose our Salvation, for that we need to do good action. In the Bible it mentions that "This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone". (Titus 3:8)

What I am trying to say is that if we did good action, we will have good result. So, like Buddhist *karma*, Christian concept of sin can relate with good action.

Conclusion

It is evident from the above discussion that even though Buddhist and Christian have different concept of liberation, both of them have one final goal i.e. *Nirvāṇa* in Buddhism and Salvation in Christianity. And also both of them concern on good action.

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