



The Spiritual Essence of Religions and Their Role In The Future Of
Mankind

Buddhism and Jainism

The Essence of Religion

- It is believed that 'religion' began almost 11,000 years ago, with the Neolithic period when man began to cultivate the land and changed from hunter-gatherer to a settled lifestyle.
- It was a natural turning, a necessary step in the evolutionary growth – from the animalistic nature to a human and more mentalized being. Man began to seek for answers other than those of survival/self-preservation.
- The earliest 'religions' were the Vedic period in India (worship of natural forces and hymns to gods); vedic rituals influenced later Hinduism. The monotheistic religion in ancient Egypt (worship of the sun-god Aten) was also one of the ancient religions. Ancient organized religions –Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Jainism, Confucianism, Buddhism.
- Purpose of Religion – to encourage cooperation and tolerance among strangers, along with a belief in a moralizing God.
- Organized Religion – gave purpose to life, guidance in difficulty, hope and faith for a better future, moral values (right/wrong), religious laws (10 Commandments), racial unity, sense of well-being, a common language of communication, rituals like singing, praying in groups, listening to sermons, reading scripture created bonding and sense of happiness/trust/fellow-feeling/good health, answered questions of death and after-life...
- Created great literature, the great epics, treatises/holy books, writings of saints/sages, art and architecture, music, mythology...

Buddhism and Jainism - Overview

- The 6th century BC saw a revolution in religious thought in India and abroad – China, Persia, Palestine, Greece.
- Rising against the priest-class of Brahmins, warrior class princes founded and propagated Buddhism and Jainism. Some sources claim that Jainism belonged to the Rig-veda era and therefore Jainism is an offshoot of Hinduism.
- Buddhism originated in N India from the teachings of the Buddha (Awakened One).Gautama Buddha is believed to be the 9th Avatar of the Hindu God (Vishnu).He expounded the 4 Noble Truths –suffering, its cause, its destruction and the way to eliminate sorrow.
- Buddhism spread throughout Asia via the Silk Road and also by sea to Korea, Japan. In the 20th century it spread to the West. In the West it is referred to as a philosophy, not as religion.
- Jainism was founded by Rishabhdeva who was succeeded by 23 Tirthankaras (savior and spiritual teacher), the most important one being Vardhamana Mahavira belonging to the royal family of Magadha. Mahavira was a contemporary to the Buddha.

Buddhism/Jainism – Some Principles

The 4 Noble Truths of Buddhism:

Suffering exists. All life contains suffering.

Suffering has a cause - desires/law of craving.

Suffering can cease by following the 8-fold Path: Right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

All sorrow/suffering ends permanently – attain Nirvana. Complete liberation from the cycle of birth/rebirth.

Law of Impermanence: depends on 5 aggregates and 5 Elements.

Fundamental Principles of Jainism:

Man has a dual personality – material and spiritual. Every soul is bound by karma particles and therefore impurity and imperfection is an existing condition. Karma is believed to be a physical substance that is everywhere in the universe and is attracted to the soul by its actions, therefore karma is a pollutant that obscures the pure qualities of the soul. The soul is trapped in the temporal world. Liberation can be achieved by following a path of purification, becoming responsible for one's actions, through practicing austerities.

The human soul can attain perfection because it is endowed with the characteristics of infinite perception, knowledge, power and bliss.

Man must therefore control/subjugate his material nature by his spiritual nature. Subjugate and control matter, senses and thought.

Each individual is responsible for his own life. No other person can help/guide him in separating his soul from karmic bondage. No god or saint can interfere with human life. The emancipated soul is considered god.

Buddhism/Jainism (Contd)...

Buddhism teaching does not recognize an inner soul.

There is only a stream of consciousness from moment to moment(bundle of associations) which is kept moving by the wheel of karma. If the associations can be untied and thrown away, then it dissolves and the idea of a 'person' ceases. Only a Nothingness is left. This is Nirvana. Buddha did not speak of God, nor Self. All that was necessary was to know the causes of this temporal existence and the way to dissolve it.

Therefore, both religions lay emphasis on Moksha (liberation)as the noblest objective of life.

The **monastic life** was given great importance due to this objective. Buddhist monks lived in monasteries, took alms for food, practiced the Dharma and guided lay people. Women were admitted into the order as nuns. Monks shaved their heads as a symbol of renunciation of ego.

Jain monks were divided in 2 categories – white-clad (wear only white), and sky-clad (naked). Rituals for ascetics were stricter than laity.

Continued...

Desires lead to Suffering in both Jainism/Buddhism.

- In Buddhism, 5 kinds of desires that keep man in bondage/ignorance – food, sleep, sex, money, fame.
- In Jainism, the goal is 'to desire to be desireless', in order to be free of karma and rebirth. Non-violence is the highest tenet of Jainism. It advocates right speech, right thought and right action to achieve salvation.

Action driven by intention (desires) lead to future consequences. Such intentions are the determining factor in re-birth. Karma is also created by thoughts, words, attitude, lifestyle, expectations, actions done consciously/unconsciously.

Re-birth in Buddhism, refers to the actions committed by a person in a past life as responsible for the next existence after death. This cycle is full of sorrow/suffering. The cycle stops only when liberation is achieved by insight and extinguishing craving.

Similarly in Jainism the goal is to be liberated from the endless cycle of birth/death, to achieve 'moksha'. This is attained by living a non-violent life.

Decline of Religion

- Religion began to decline soon after the 2nd World War when belief in God was severely tested. Around the 1960s and 1970s, religion began to lose its hold on people. With the Hippie movement in America there was a revolt against organized religion and any form of religious law/authority. This feeling soon spread...
- The Consciousness in man was moving away from outer rituals, morals and text-book learning to an inward search for meaning. Philosophers/the new psychology/yoga was gaining attention. National boundaries between East and West were thinning out and people were 'experimenting' with different religious practices. One could believe in 2 or more 'paths', and even feel free to declare agnosticism/atheism. Travel became easier and people inter-mingled and experienced other cultures and religious practices.
- Buddhism had spread worldwide and in the West it became spiritual psychology, that appealed to the rational mind. In India, Buddhism had divided into different schools – Mahayana, Hinayana, Theravada, Tibetan (tantric Buddhism) each claiming to be the only and original, the undefiled doctrine of the Buddha. Similarly, Jainism had spread to different countries and though it retained its principles, it was a difficult to maintain its absolute original form, because the practices were severe and binding.

Role In Future of Mankind

- Both religions taught an 'escape' from the cycle of birth/rebirth in order to overcome suffering. This practice does not change the 'situation' in earthly life, does not help nature to transcend her limitations. The emphasis of both lay on the moral conduct of man, it emphasized the importance of harmlessness, being truthful, compassionate, taking responsibility for one's actions...it was a preparation of nature for the next step. The goal was to lead a life free of ego and desires, in order to achieve freedom from the lower nature.
- Both reach out to individual salvation. Individual salvation was a necessary step in the past, to drive into man's mentality the idea of a Divine beyond that one could aspire for. Just as the concept of reward/punishment in the after-life, was a needed belief in the 'humanization' of primitive habits.
- Individual salvation is the first step of the growth of consciousness towards becoming universal/cosmic. The future belongs to the 'salvation' of the community/nation/world. To bring the Divine down to earth and 'build the kingdom of heaven on earth' is the true goal.

The Future....

- Buddhism has the unique feature of adapting to the needs of the people according to Time in history. From the ancient land of India, Buddhism travelled East and West.
- In 1222, Nichiren Daishonin was born in Japan at the time of early Kamakura period. He proclaimed that the power of Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings would be lost 2000 years after his death. Nichiren Daishonin made his advent as the True Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law in order to save all beings. His Buddhism is of Mahayana tradition based on the chanting of the Lotus Sutra (Saddharmapundarika Sutra). His teachings were meant for the 'Latter Day of the Law' – when a declining aristocracy in Japan and a rising military and peasant class (samurai) were revolting against the old order. This was a new form of Buddhism, not tied to the orthodox schools.
- The Daishonin rejected the next-worldly form of salvation and focused on this-worldly personal and national liberation through the simple practice of chanting the Lotus Sutra (the Mystic Law). The chant is manifested in a mandala – object of worship, and there are no restrictions (even worldly desires can be used to bring out the True nature of Buddhahood), as it is believed that the Mystic Law operating within, brings changes to life which manifest in outer experience. One is free to chant whenever and for as long as one can. Chanting 'Nam-Myo-Ho-Renge-Kyo' enables a person to bring out his/her 'Buddha nature' and attain Buddhahood in this life based on the teaching of cause and effect. True happiness is the achievement of tranquility in our life. The Soka Gakkai (Value-creation) has millions of followers worldwide.
- Mother has said 'the age of religions is over'; it is now an age of synthesis. Both the essence and practice must be brought together and we must connect to the greater consciousness behind the religion, with an awareness of the opposing forces, which should only help to strengthen our resolve.