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Religions of South Asia - RELS310

10/27/25

The Connection Between Impermanence, Desire, and Nirvana

This essay examines the connection between the Buddhist doctrines of impermanence, desire, and nirvana by exploring how both Buddhism and theosophy conceptualize the path to liberation, arguing that each offers complementary insights into the relationship between impermanence, desire, and spiritual transcendence.

As given in Walpola Rahula's 1959 book *What the Buddha Taught*,² the first Noble Truth that Shakyamuni taught his disciples was that all existence involved *dukkha*, which can be defined as suffering such as through physical and emotional pain, but also as a general dissatisfaction with life. This *dukkha* arises due to *annica*, which is generally defined as impermanence such as that which results from aging and death.

The Second Noble Truth explains that the true cause of *dukkha* is *tanha* (desire) and attachment to people and things, so that *dukkha* may also be understood to result from our ignorance of Ultimate Reality, and thus to our resistance to inevitable change. Embedded in this Truth is the teaching that our attachments cause *dukkha* not only in the present, but that they keep us tethered to the wheel of *samsara* where we are continually reborn according to the karmic pull of our explicit and latent desires.

The Third Noble Truth reveals the hope that our endless cycles of suffering can be absolved by the realization of nirvana when desire is fully extinguished. The Fourth

Noble Truth provides the pathway to achieve nirvana and the end of suffering through the Noble Eightfold Path, which involves development of the Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

This leads the curious and philosophical student to question exactly how to interpret and implement the ‘right’ way of living to which the Buddha referred, and to the discovery that the Eightfold Path is organized into three categories: *prajna* (wisdom), *sila* (virtue) and *samadhi* (concentration). Through *prajna* one comes to “right understanding” of the Four Noble Truths and to “right intention” through the commitment to non-violence, compassion, and renunciation. Through *sila* one comes to “right speech” by speaking only verities, “right action” through proper and legal conduct, and “right livelihood” by learning to make a living in such a way that it does not harm others. Through *samadhi* one arrives at “right effort” in meditative thought, “right mindfulness” through monitoring one’s five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, mind, consciousness) and “right concentration” by developing and focusing one’s mind effectively through meditation.

Since the Buddha taught the doctrine of *anatta* (no soul), it becomes difficult to describe precisely what might be affecting the individual’s release from samsara and to define exactly what it is that reincarnates. Instead of defining this ‘something’ that reincarnates or causes one to experience rebirth, it is often likened to the process of lighting a wick with another flame, indicating a replication that leaves the original flame unchanged. Some have explained that the state of the individual’s desire-body at death

determines the form and karmic context into which they will be reborn but they do not provide insight on the process itself. To date, the most complete explanation that I have discovered lies in the syncretic theosophy of Alice A. Bailey. In *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*,¹ she provides great detail on this process that involves the petals of the egoic lotus and the permanent atoms. Her teachings assert that we, as human personalities, must work to open nine petals of the egoic lotus, which are arranged as knowledge, love, and sacrifice petals on each of the three planes of human endeavor; physical/etheric, astral/emotional, and mental/causal planes. Our overall progress, according to Bailey, is recorded in what she terms our “permanent atoms” which exist upon the atomic plane (highest) of each of the three planes defined above. Thus our physical karma is carried over through our physical permanent atom; our desire-based karma is linked with the astral permanent atom, but our mental progress is contained within both a lower “mental unit” and a higher “mental permanent atom” which corresponds to the lowest point of a tripartite soul.

In both orthodox Buddhism and theosophy, the purification of the vehicles (body, emotions, mind) becomes the primary work that confronts humanity if we wish to put an end to our suffering. As we work to moderate and sublimate our desires, either through the Noble Eightfold Path of the Buddha or other techniques, we hope to alleviate our existing debt and avoid creating new karma. In both traditions, the steady purification of our desires leads us away from those forces of causation that result in automatic rebirth, and likely engender circumstances of rebirth that we may consider to be increasingly fortunate. Professor Veidlinger asserts that this fortune in the rebirth

“lottery” is taken by Buddhists to suggest that such a birth is only considered to be fortunate because it may provide them with an opportunity to study under a great teacher of the dharma. Additionally, it may be incorrect to presume a linear progression of the reincarnated being as, for instance, moving from an ugly form in early lives up through beautiful ones in later lives; or from an unintelligent mind up through a sophisticated intellect. Instead of linearity, a circuitous method would permit the soul to tailor experiences and tests for the personality, which may be useful in the career of the soul because much of the purification that is necessary for us to achieve lies not in the physical and mental perfection of the form, but with the underlying emotional health and inner psychology of the individual. I believe it is this sublimated psychology that ultimately renders us incompatible for automatic rebirth within the three worlds, and thus releases us from samsara.

This leads the student to consider next what might exist beyond these three worlds of physical, emotional, and mental existence, since both theosophy (who rejects them as eternal principles) and Buddhism consider these as sunya, or lacking permanent existence. Theosophy’s septenary system includes a fourth plane above the mental plane that is referred to as the Buddhic plane and it is described as the plane of intuition, bridging spirit above and mind below. According to theosophy, it is to the top (Buddhic permanent atom) of this plane that the Buddha first achieved complete awareness, which is the “lowest” eternal principle; one that is *not empty*. Nirvana is interpreted by theosophy to be achieved through the union and dissolution of the tripartite soul with

the non-individualized *pure being* (spirit) upon the next higher plane, the spiritual plane.

Thus it can be seen in both traditions that the purification of the lower bodies becomes a prerequisite to the attainment of consciousness upon the higher, more subtle planes of existence, which are themselves the paths leading to nirvana and off the wheel of forced rebirths. It may be further pertinent to mention that the Mahayana belief in bodhisattvas is also shared by theosophy, as these lofty souls are believed to continue serving as teachers in our spiritual hierarchy once they have reached the threshold of nirvana. Thus the Buddha, and all others who have achieved the goal, may be presented with the choice to move beyond the spiritual scheme and merge with the monad or even the planetary logos, or to remain at the threshold where they can serve as bridges between the strictly human and the super-human worlds. Therefore the shared focus on transcending desire and impermanence reflects a universal vision of spiritual ascent culminating in nirvana as the complete realization of unity beyond form and individuality.

Works Cited

1. Bailey, Alice A., and Djwhal Khul. *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*. Lucis Publishing Companies, 1925.
2. Rahula, Walpola. *What the Buddha Taught*. Grove Press, 1959.