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## Impact of Buddha's philosophy on Indian society

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### Abstract

The word "Ahimsa" is from the Sanskrit language and means 'non-harm/injury' and is commonly translated into English as "non-violence". It is a doctrine in the four Indian religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism and is defined by the Encyclopaedia Britannica as "the ethical principle of not causing harm to other living things. In Buddhist thought, Ahimsa is also an important concept, the first precept of Buddhism is to avoid doing harm to other living things. To undertake the training to avoid taking the life of beings. This precept applies to all living beings not just humans. All beings have a right to their lives and that right should be respected. Buddhism teaches us non-violence towards others; violence towards other living things is contrary to the teachings of the Buddha. Historically, Buddhists have, on the whole, adhered to this precept. The Buddha taught us to overcome and avoid suffering. Therefore, we cannot impose suffering on others. Killing not only causes suffering for the person who is killed but also causes suffering for their family and friends who have lost their loved one. It is also the seed of future suffering, with bad karmic compassion for the killer. The Buddha also taught us to show love and compassion to others in place of hate and violence, and not just love for our friends but equally for our compassion, or those who seek to do us harm.

**Keywords:** Ahimsa, Buddhism, violence, compassion and compassion

### Introduction

Introduction Religion is a matter of faith. It is a faith in supernatural or superhuman forces. It considers some acts as righteous and sacred and endorses such acts. It deems other acts as impious and profane and condemns such acts. Behaving in accordance with the religious laws is virtuous; going against them is sacrilegious. The virtuous acts are believed to bring man good results, on the other hand the profane acts result in calamity. The concept of heaven and hell are intertwined around the sacred and profane acts. Man, the social animal, is also a religious or spiritual being. Religion is a major concern of man. It is one of the earliest and the profoundest interests of the human beings. It is universal, permanent, pervasive and perpetual interests of man. We as human beings not have only biological, economic and social needs, but also, what is termed as a religious need. Therefore, the Biblical saying "Man cannot live by bread alone." Religion is not a phenomenon of recent origin. Its beginning is mysterious. It is timeless. But, it is found in all the societies, primitive and modern. Religion is not only the most persuasive force of social control, but also the most productive guide of human behavior. It has influenced and conditioned economic endeavors, political movements, property dealings, educational tasks, ideological fervors, scientific inventions and artistic developments. It is closely affiliated with morality and has detailed rules of conduct.

Furthermore, the world religions—Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism and Islam—are truly centers of elaborate cultural systems that have influenced all societies/nations for centuries. India occupies a distinctive place in the world community. It is the country of the followers of all the major religious ideologies of the world viz; Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Zoroastrianism. All of these influence India society in varying degrees. In terms of historical antiquity Buddhism is a little later development than Jainism for Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, was an older contemporary of Buddha. Mahavira's period is generally accepted to be between 599-527 BC and Buddha's is 560-480. Buddhism is one of the most important religions in the world. It originated in India during 6th century BC. Buddhism emerged as a challenge to the Brahmanical supremacy and the caste inequality.

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It declared that caste or Varna should not come into the way of person's seeking to obtain 'Nirvana'. In Buddhism all the monks are equal and they have simple philosophy. As a result many Hindus accepted Buddhism. It has spread its influence both inside and outside the borders of India.

Buddhism introduced organization by accepting one order or one leader. This influenced the Hindu thinkers and they started establishing organizations. In contemporary India we can see a large number of organizations. Buddhism has invariably been a very simple and basic religion. There were no complicated rituals like Hinduism. Therefore, the Indian society embraced this type of simple religion and transmitted it to their liking. Gautama Buddha Founder of Buddhism Buddhism was founded by Gautama Buddha (563-483 B.C.). He was born in Lumbini, now in modern day Nepal. His original name was Siddhartha. His father was Suddhodana, the ruler of Kapilavastu. His mother was Mahamaya of the Kosalan dynasty. Mahamaya died at child birth and Siddhartha was brought up by his step-mother Prajapati Gautami. He married his cousin Yashodhara and had a son Rahul. Siddhartha was provided with a comfortable and happy life. Yet the royal splendors did not make him content; he was moved by human miseries in the form of old age, sickness, death and disillusionment.

### Review of literature

Review of related literature makes the investigator fully aware with the previous work that has been done. It also provides an opportunity of gaining insight into the method, measures, subject and approaches employed:

Nikkyo Niwano (1989) <sup>[1]</sup> A Buddhist Approach to Peace, The 'Lotus' tells the story of Devadatta a disciple and also a cousin of Buddha, who subsequently defied the Buddha and broke away from Buddha's community of disciples. He indulged in the crimes of murder, slandering the Dhamma, causing dissensions among Buddha's disciples and even attempting to kill Buddha on various occasions. Comparing the evil deeds of Devadatta with that of Buddha who endured them, we learn many valuable lessons.

Bronkhorst, Johannes (2011) <sup>[2]</sup> In Buddhism, karma as an aspect of causality functions as a denial of determinism and an affirmation of the efficacy of human action, even if it is limited by circumstances beyond one's control. This is best contrasted with the complete determinism of the Ājīvikas.

Barborich, Adam L. (2017) <sup>[3]</sup> According to the Buddha, Ājīvika determinism and fatalism did not provide a valid reason for living a moral life and the Buddha explicitly rejected this view. In fact, the Buddha declares that Ājīvika doctrine is the worst of all doctrines specifically because it denies "karma, deed and energy" and proclaims (M.I.483) that no Ājīvika has made an end of suffering and that the only Ājīvika who was reborn in heaven over 99 aeons was a believer in karma (kammavādin).

### Methodology

The present study is based on the secondary data. The required data and literature for the study purpose has collected from the number of reference books, Journals and Internet.

The misery of the human life cast a deep spell on Gautama. After seeing an old man, a sick man, a corpse and an ascetic, he decided to become a wanderer. In order to find a solution to the miseries of mankind he left his wife Yashodhara and son Rahul at the age of twenty-nine and wandered from to

place in ascetic garb. This event is known as the 'Great Renunciation.' Gautama spent six years as a wandering ascetic and had discussions with sages and Brahmins. Their teachings did not help him to find a solution. In order to find the truth, he resorted to rigid austerities of various kinds of self-torture. Eventually, he abandoned everything and went to Uruvela on the banks of Niranjana River and sat under a pipal tree (Bodhi Tree) and meditated. He attained the 'supreme knowledge' (Enlightenment) on the forty-ninth day of his continuous meditation. The place where he got enlightenment is known as Bodhi Gaya. From there on he came to be known as the Buddha (the enlightened one). He gave his first sermon at Sarnath (deer park) where his five former disciples had settled. To these five ascetics he preached his first sermon and called it 'Dharma Chakra Pravartana' (setting in motion the wheel of Dharma). He died at the age of eighty (483 B.C.). His last words were "all composite things decay, strive diligently." Teachings of Buddha Buddha did not accept the God as creator or destiny maker. He preached Anatmavada (No Atma) and Anitya Vada (nothing is eternal and everything undergoes transformation). He did not acknowledge the sanctity and supremacy of Vedas and Yagnas and repudiated the caste system. He emphasized that 'man is the maker of his own destiny.' The first sermon preached by Buddha at Sarnath contains his philosophy. His teachings were simple and conveyed to the masses in their languages i.e. Prakrit (Pali) and not in Sanskrit. The essence of his teachings are contained in the 'Four Noble Truths' and the 'Eightfold Path. Contribution and Impact of Buddhism to Indian Culture Buddhism has made a remarkable contribution to the political, social, religious and a cultural life of India. In social life Buddhism contributed egalitarianism. It raised voice against caste discrimination and social oppression. It helped in upliftment of women by making religion and education accessible to them. The doctrine of 'Ahimsa' (non-violence) encouraged virtues like kindness and considerations among the people.

The word "Ahimsa" is from the Sanskrit language and means 'non-harm/injury' and is commonly translated into English as "non-violence". It is a doctrine in the four Indian religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism and is defined by the Encyclopaedia Britannica as "the ethical principle of not causing harm to other living things. In Buddhist thought, Ahimsa is also an important concept, the first precept of Buddhism is to avoid doing harm to other living things. To undertake the training to avoid taking the life of beings. This precept applies to all living beings not just humans. All beings have a right to their lives and that right should be respected. Buddhism teaches us non-violence towards others; violence towards other living things is contrary to the teachings of the Buddha. Historically, Buddhists have, on the whole, adhered to this precept.

The Buddha taught us to overcome and avoid suffering. Therefore, we cannot impose suffering on others. Killing not only causes suffering for the person who is killed but also causes suffering for their family and friends who have lost their loved one. It is also the seed of future suffering, with bad karmic consequences for the killer. The Buddha also taught us to show love and compassion to others in place of hate and violence, and not just love for our friends but equally for our enemies, or those who seek to do us harm. One cannot become enlightened without compassion; killing

is the fundamental opposite of compassion. The only exception might be in the opinions of some — a mercy killing such as euthanasia for terminally suffering beings, or defending another innocent being from harm. But when I refer to killing, I am referring principally to war, murder and killing.

### **Non-Violence in Buddhist Sutra**

The Buddha spoke about non-violence in many sutras. The Buddha taught through his activities and actions as much as through his words. That one I call a brahmin who has put aside weapons and renounced violence towards all creatures. Such a one neither kills nor helps others to kill... That one I call a brahmin who is never hostile to those who are hostile toward him, who is attached among those who are selfish and at peace among those at war.

A 'Brahmin' is a member of the highest and priestly caste of Hinduism, The Buddha rejected the caste system; what he is declaring here is that the "Superior caste" the Brahmin is one who doesn't kill and isn't hostile to anyone, rather than someone born into the caste. There are countless passages in Sutra, where the Buddha is even more explicit that killing is wrong even where it looks like there is no other choice. Monks, even if bandits were to sever you savagely limb by limb with a two-handle saw, he who gave rise to a mind of hate towards them would not be carrying out my teaching. This statement seems to be the most extreme form of non-violence possible. The Buddha is clearly saying here that even if someone is killing you, hating him would be contrary to the Dhamma. To many non-Buddhists and maybe even some Buddhists themselves, this seems illogical. How can one not hate and not only that, have compassion for someone who is hurting them, or who wants to kill them? But in order to do this, it would obviously require the highest compassion. It is clear from the teachings of the Buddha mentioned above, that Buddhists should embrace non-violence towards others and condemn killing and harming others as something terrible that will also result in bad karmic consequences for the killer.

The story of Angulimala is one of the most famous in the Buddhist cannon and one of the stories I believe that we can learn most from to apply to today's world. Angulimala became a serial murderer, killing innocent people and terrorising many others. He chopped off their fingers and made them into a necklace and thus became known as "Angulimala". He was a wanted criminal by the state, killer of 999 people. He was someone who was viewed as irredeemable evil, with no hope that he could become better. The Buddha refused to believe this and went to talk to Angulimala, even though he was warned by almost everyone not to do so. Angulimala saw the Buddha coming and ran towards him in waving a knife. However, no matter how fast he ran, and even though the Buddha was walking at his normal pace, Angulimala couldn't catch up to the him. He eventually called out to the Buddha to stop. "I have stopped Angulimala, you stop too," Buddha replied.

Angulimala asked how it was possible since the Buddha was still walking. Buddha famously replies: "Angulimala, I have stopped forever, I abstain from violence towards living beings. But you have no restraint towards things that live. That is why I have stopped and you have not". Angulimala relents and realising the error of his ways, he takes refuge in Buddha, and becomes a monk. He changed his name to "Ahimsaka" (non-violent one) to reflect his new identity and change of heart. Later, King Pasenadi looks for Angulimala, sees the Buddha and warns him about the serial killer. The Buddha then asks the king, what he would do if he saw that

Angulimala had changed, abandoned violence and become a monk to which the king replies that he would be very pleased and even support Angulimala. Ahimsaka's life as a monk is far from easy. Often, when he went for alms he was attacked by people who remembered him and what he did in his former life. However, he takes all this as it comes and does not retaliate towards his attackers. The Buddha tells him that this is the result of his actions and that he being attacked is his karmic debt being paid off. Ahimsaka later became enlightened and became an arhat, after years of purifying the negative karma of his violent past.

Although the story of Angulimala teaches us many things, its main point is that no one is inherently evil and that no one is beyond redemption. The Buddha challenges someone who practices extreme violence with non-violence and wins. As the King admits, his armies had not been able to beat Angulimala with violence but the Buddha had done it with compassion. Angulimala — and many other similar stories — it is clear that Buddhists must avoid killing and creating suffering. Equally, we should not hate someone who creates our suffering. We might object and disagree with the negative action, but we should view all sentient beings as redeemable. Because of these teachings, for example, (in my opinion) Buddhists should also be against the death penalty because it goes against the principle of Ahimsa. They must have at least the chance to do this and from a Buddhist perspective, repay their karmic debt.

Buddhists are generally opposed to war; it goes against the fundamental teachings of Buddhism and the first precept. However, Buddhists are against the practice of war not against the soldiers fighting in it. As the Dalai Lama also says later on, the vast majority of soldiers join to defend the country, or establish themselves in a good career not to kill. In short, soldiers join with good intentions. Therefore, it is unacceptable to claim that soldiers are somehow responsible for murder. Buddhists are against killing and war not the people fighting the wars. Non-violence is still an action with positive karmic results. Because, refraining from killing isn't enough. Reducing suffering of others also requires "action" karma in Sanskrit. If we are to decrease suffering, we cannot let injustice continue unopposed. Therefore, non-violent resistance against oppressors, aligns best with Buddhist teachings. In the sixties, this might result in a "sit in protest" against war, or the civil rights movement. Today, we might think of the Occupy movement. Ahimsa has been a part of Buddhist tradition since ancient times. In modern times, Ghandi made the concept famous. Ahimsa is one of the greatest gifts from India to the rest of the world taught by the Buddha, Mahavira of the Jains, Guru Nanak of the Sikhs and the ancient sages of the Hindu tradition.

In the sphere of religion, it was against ritualism, superstitions and sacrifices. Further, it popularized idol worship. It was Mahayana followers who worshipped images of Buddha. The Hindus took over from them the idol worship. In cultural field, Buddhism enriched the architectural heritage of India through Stupas of Sanchi, Gaya, Amravati etc. Tripitakas occupy the same position as the Vedas for Hindus. The Buddhist contribution in the field of education is immense. They universalized it and opened schools for even Shudras as well as women. In addition to this, the Buddhist missionaries who went outside India carried with them Indian language, literature and culture. Buddhism exercised great influence in shaping the various aspects of Indian society. Its impact in socio-cultural, religious and political spheres cannot be overlooked. Buddhism developed a popular religion, without any complicated, elaborate and unintelligible rituals requiring necessarily a priestly class. This was one of the reasons for



its mass appeal. The ethical code of Buddhism is also relatively simple based on charity, purity, self-sacrifice, truthfulness and control over passions. It laid great stress on love, equality and non-violence. It is an acknowledged fact that the Upanishads, too, had illustrated these virtues before the advent of Buddhism but credit goes to Buddhism for raising public morality to those heights never witnessed before. It became an article of faith for the followers of Buddhism. But more importantly Buddhism laid stress on the value that man is the architect of his own destiny, not any God or gods. There is a great element of individuality in Buddhism and it sans any elaborate idea of God. Notwithstanding Buddhism could never dislodge Brahmanism from its high pedestal it unquestionably jolted it exhilarated institutional changes in Indian society. Rejecting the caste system and its concomitant evils, violent rituals based on animal sacrifices, pilgrimage, fasting and conservation, it propagated total equality. In the Buddhist system gods and goddesses, fatalism, previous birth and movements of planets are not believed to be accountable for man's present plight. It exhorts people to seek answers from this world.

Therefore 'this worldliness' rather 'that worldliness' should be the basis of man's quest for seeking answers of the unknown. Compassion, equality between all human beings including gender equality, protection of all life forms and welfare of all tried to bind the entire society into one. Promotion of social equality and social justice helped Buddhism cross the frontiers of Indian sub-continent and become a world religion. The impact of Buddhist thought may be seen in our foreign policy, national integration, mutual cooperation, peace efforts, Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence, upliftment of weaker sections and welfare of SCs, STs and depressed classes. Since Buddhism identified ignorance as the root cause of sufferings, it laid great stress on acquisition of knowledge. Promotion of democracy and democratic values is yet another contribution of Buddhism to Indian society. Buddhist 'sanghs' and 'maths' promoted democratic conduct and in the course of time its impact was felt in many Hindu 'maths' and religious institutions.

In the field of education Buddhism tried to make education practical, action oriented and geared towards social welfare. Most of the ancient India's varsities for instance, Taxila, Vikrampur, Nalanda, Vikramshila and others are product of Buddhism. A free search for the acquisition of knowledge in Buddhism produced such eminent scholars as Dignang, Charak, Nagarjun, Vasumitra and similar ones of highest order. The flag of independent India carries the picture of Ashoka's wheel and the national emblem has been adopted from Buddhism. Buddhism also familiarized the Indian vernaculars and thus promoted respect for different languages and dialects. Indisputably, Buddhism has exercised a profound humanizing and philanthropic influence on Indian society. Buddhism preached universal brotherhood. Asoka took deep interest to promote universal brotherhood through the propagation of Buddhism. Even he sent his own son Mahendra and daughter Sanghamitra to distant Ceylon for the spread of Buddhism. In due course of time Buddhism spread to Burma, Japan, China, Tibet, Java, Sumatra, Bali, Borneo, and Champa and so on. Thus, Buddhism spread a unique feature of Indian culture abroad that is universal brotherhood. Buddhism spread in the nook and corner of India It encouraged the concept of national unity and integrity. Asoka, Kanishka and Harshavardhan became the ardent champion of nationalism and they tried to unite India under one umbrella. This was followed by the Mughals, the British and later on freedom struggle

nationalists. Thus, Buddhism undoubtedly brought national unity. Last but not the least, Mahatma Gandhi) also learnt the lesson of Ahimsa from Buddhism and started the struggle for freedom against the British rule by following the path of non-violence. Conclusion Buddhism originated in Ancient India sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries BC from where it spread into foreign countries like China, Japan, Mongolia, Burma, Tibet, Sri Lanka, and Nepal and exercised substantial impact on the culture and civilization of those countries.

### Conclusion

It made valuable and lasting contributions in the field of religion, philosophy, literature and art. Its contribution was not confined to architecture and sculpture alone. It also made valuable contribution to the art of painting. It gave us a simple, intelligible and popular religion. It immensely appealed to the people on account of its simplicity; emotional element, easy ethical code, the use of vernacular language and the methods of teaching. One of the greatest contributions of Buddhism to India was that it promoted a sense of national feeling amongst the Indians. It laid great stress on the principle of Ahimsa which immensely affected the character of the people. It insisted on virtues like charity, purity, compassion, self-sacrifice, truthfulness, control over passions, non-injury to living creatures in thought and action etc.

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