
THE EMANCIPATION FROM SUFFERING IN MAHAYANA BUDDHISM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY MENTAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

Human beings constantly seek meaning and temporary happiness for themselves. Nevertheless, they live in a perpetual cycle of universal and subjective suffering, affecting their general and mental wellness. Scholars in the humanities continue to pursue questions of meaning and interpretation of suffering, and in science there is still no solution for the emancipation of human suffering. This study will try to show that the concept of Bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism can address the issue of emancipation of suffering in a meaningful way. Mahayana Buddhism suggests that suffering comes from the objectification of the mind, the notion of self, and the discriminatory mind that arises from dualistic views. Overcoming suffering is possible by using the type of discipline usually reserved for the Bodhisattva. This discipline provides a way even in secular society to emancipate individuals from suffering, and improve their quality of life and mental well-being. In conclusion, the study suggests that Bodhisattva practice can be used in public education as a psychological tool for self-help and the emancipation of sufferings.

Keywords: Psychology; Mahayana Buddhism, Suffering, Bodhisattva

Introduction

The subject of human suffering and its removal is an old philosophical problem. For Aristotle, attaining happiness is the goal of character-based virtue ethics. And in the same way, suffering (dukkha) and its removal was the concern of Gautama Buddha. This paper focuses on the emancipation of suffering using the fundamental practices of the Bodhisattva, particularly the universal and subjective truths of sufferings through the six paramitas or the six perfections of wisdom expounded by the Lord Buddha.¹ It will provide insight into the reasons that the fundamental practice of the Bodhisattva is suitable for the secular world.

In this paper, the study tries to find how the concept of Bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism helps mitigate human suffering. And how such a way could become practical for the public, transcending any religious boundaries.

Subjective and Objective Suffering

Human being have lived in a perpetual cycle of objective and subjective suffering for centuries because of the various unfulfilled human desires in search of happiness. This involves basic survival connected to shelter, food, clothing, birth, living, fears, and anxiety. This suffering can be termed as objective and is inseparable from the environment which affects the emotional, spiritual, physical, and cognitive aspects of human beings. On the other hand, subjective suffering mainly depends on an individual's perspectives towards their life conditions. Studies have found that even human sensory organs have a role in selecting the forms of selective survivorship.²

The complexity of contemporary human society has aggravated the issues of human suffering. Society and happiness are in a direct relationship in contemporary economics and external and internal human factors are related to it. Given the fast lifestyle, human beings are chasing short-term happiness as a solution to their well-being and adaptation to their circumstances in life. They are constantly searching for meaning for self-actualization. This gives further rise to sufferings

due to increased desires and egocentric behavior. Modern science has so far no real solutions to this general emancipation of suffering in human beings.³ These factors to some extent affect the quality of human life, therefore there has recently been attention to this general wellness by the World Health Organization (WHO).⁴

Suffering in Mahayana Buddhism and Contemporary Society

Suffering (*dukkha*) is one of the central concepts in Buddhism and its understanding in Mahayana Buddhism. It is considered to be connected to the objectification of the mind which is the formation of the notion of self that produces a discriminatory mind leading to dualistic views. This is considered the root issues of the suffering of men. Buddhist scholars state that men need to end the “becoming,” or in other words they should remove the notion of self^{5,6}. Therefore, the method to end suffering is possible only through the cessation of the passions and the suppression of the discriminatory mind.⁷

The abovementioned concept can be realized by the fundamental practices of the Bodhisattva that comprises of three key characteristics: non-self, non-duality, and emptiness; and they can enable men to achieve the emancipation of sufferings.

The three characteristics of non-self, non-duality, and emptiness are taught in all the Mahayana Buddhism Sutras.⁸ In the *Lotus Sutra* the vehicle of the Bodhisattva is one of the three vehicles towards the path of enlightenment and is considered the only path to the true path of enlightenment.⁹ It is due to the Bodhisattva’s ability to recognize the world manifested by the objectification of the mind and to free the discriminatory mind from wrong reasoning and imaginations unlike the other two vehicles of Sravakas and Pratyekabuddhas, the six paramitas to gain Annattara Samyak Sambodhi leads to the highest enlightenment.^{10,11}

So what sets this Bodhisattva vehicle apart is the practicing of the six paramitas or the six perfections of to assist to gain emancipation from suffering.

This idea of the overcoming of the suffering can be used to understand the subjective suffering which is common in contemporary society. This is often understood as stress. We can rephrase the four noble truths to suggest that (1) life is stress (*duhkha*) (2) the source of the rising of stress (*samudaya*) (3) Cessation or extinction of stress (*nirodha/nirvana*) and (4) the way to the cessation or extinction of stress (*marga*).¹² For the end of suffering is to recognize that life is stress and the rising of stress comes from the aspects of increases in the desires of men for material things,¹³ leading to the increasing discontentment and dissatisfaction in life.¹⁴

Secondly, the cessation of stress involves using one of the six paramitas or the six perfections of wisdom, which is mediation, towards the development of mental, morality, and wisdom, which are said to be the highest quality of the transcended self.¹⁵ It has the purpose of ending the attachments of the discriminatory mind. And it addresses the suffering which arises from unfulfilled worldly passions and complicated emotions which result from sickness, old age and, death.¹⁶ An example of the cognitive sufferings of irrational thoughts that habitual thinking can affect the behaviors of the individual that caused problems not limited to depression, anxiety, anger, resentment, rumination, hopelessness, and which compromise the mental wellness of the individuals.

This is also recognized by neuroscience. It has been discovered that the brain through instinctual, learned, and thought-related processes could activate emotions, due to a high connection of early life experiences causing ruminations due to memory in the individuals which resulted in painful emotions.¹⁷

Yet neuroscience still has limitations in its findings regards to the interactive factors of momentary worry, rumination, cognitive and behavior avoidance, and psychological disorders, and the associated negatives impact. Academicians do not have solutions for the emancipation of sufferings as they are often engaged in seeking new meanings and interpretations of suffering leading to questions of morality and obligation.¹⁸ But the acknowledgment of the four noble truths and the

practicing of the six paramitas or the six perfections of wisdom are useful for the emancipation from these kind of suffering prevalent in contemporary society.

The Six Paramitas or the Six Perfections of Wisdom

In the book “*The Tree of Enlightenment*” Buddhist scholar, Satina explained that prajnaparamita has the Sanskrit language origin of “*prajna*,” which means wisdom or “insight” and paramita means “Perfection”, “transcended” or “the climax of wisdom” The combination of “*prajna*” & “*paramita*” means the perfection of wisdom.¹⁹

The practicing of the six paramitas or the six perfections of wisdom is the method to end suffering. In practicing six paramitas is to develop one’s qualities in morality, mental aspects leading to wisdom. Mental development prepares the mind to achieve wisdom, which opens the door to freedom and enlightenment. This wisdom is gained is through the attainment of the “non-self” and “emptiness.”²⁰ The practicing of the fundamental practices would help to resolve the issues of discriminating mind producing dualistic views and the notion of self in men through the good works that purify the mind.²¹

The purpose of the practice of the six perfections or paramitas is to suppress the function of the discriminatory mindset; to be free from attachment of thoughts concerning objects. This leads to emancipation (*vimoksa*) from these continuous dualistic tendencies leading to desires, pleasures, and anger.²² The fundamental practices of the Bodhisattva consist of practice in the aspects of (1) generosity (*danaparamita*), (2) discipline (*shilaparamita*), (3) patience (*ksantiparamita*), (4) energy (*virya*), (5) meditation (*dhyana*paramita) and, (6) wisdom (*prajnaparamita*).^{23,24} There are eight steps of the path in conjunction with the practice of the six perfections of wisdom or the six paramitas. These eight steps consist of the right speech, right action, and right livelihood cultivates good morality; right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration cultivate good mental development; and right understanding and right thoughts cultivate or develop of wisdom.²⁵ Through the development of wisdom,

craving and ignorance ceased through the achievement of nirvana, which is the third noble truth of the cessation of sufferings.²⁶ If it is practiced well, it helps in removing greed, hatred, and delusion and men will be able to be emancipated from the universal and subjective truth of sufferings.²⁷

In the *Lankavatara Sutra*, the six paramitas or the six perfections of wisdom operate to break the habit energy or memory, that is stored up in the storehouse of the memory by the false images of this world (*vishaya*).²⁸ The memory or habit energy is accumulated over time because of false reasoning and imagination of the individuals through the great variety of objects and actions closely related that produce discriminatory ideas, This habit energy or memory constantly affects and agitates the mind, giving rise to distorted ideas of the external world.²⁹ It is through practicing the six paramitas, that the Bodhisattva can cut off from the aggregates or the skandhas that make up the personality and its' external world.³⁰ It is the cessation or abandoning of the skandhas that are considered as true emancipation in Mahayana Buddhist tradition.³¹

Emptiness

To end the cycle of the causation of suffering, it is important to expand the knowledge to prevent the misunderstandings and malpractice of the fundamental practices of the Bodhisattva and the achievement of the three key characteristics of non-self, non-duality, and emptiness. Emptiness is one of the difficult concepts that deserves an explanation because it is related to practice and metaphysical understanding of existence.

The need for understandings the three marks of existence in the Mahayana Buddhism tradition is crucial that all existence is “impermanence (*anitya*), dissatisfaction or suffering (*duhkha*), and insubstantiality (*anatman*, “without self”), which can allow men to reduce stress or sufferings from passion and desires causing craving, cling and grasping. as there is no way for men to reduce sufferings, due to the inability to recognized the three marks of existence from craving, cling, and grasping arise from passion and desires.³² As these are defines as

causes of attachment, ignorance, and discriminatory notion.³³ If men are not equipped with this essential knowledge, men will perpetually move in the cycle of universal and subjective truths of sufferings as they will still have craving and ignorance,³⁴ due to their desires and passion from the dissatisfaction and discontentment in life.

One of the achievements of the three key characteristics of the Bodhisattva is emptiness. Emptiness is a difficult concept to understand³⁵ due to the intellectual level of men. There are seven types of emptiness taught by the Lord Buddha Siddhattha Gotama³⁶ and the given the example of the “*Thirty-seven Practices of the Bodhisattva*” written by Buddhist Scholar, Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron, 2009, which are the practices of the enlightened Bodhisattva³⁷ and such advanced practice is documented in “*The Lotus Sutra*.”³⁸ It is not suitable to the practice of the general population due to the different intellectual of men as emptiness is not an easy concept to understand and often being misunderstood and misinterpreted, which could lead to complications toward the achievement of enlightenment.³⁹ Men, then, can gain general well-being and mental wellness from the attainment of blissfulness through one of the six paramitas or the six perfections of wisdom amid their universal and subjective suffering. Blissfulness is described as Nirvana,⁴⁰ and Nirvana is described as stillness or the state of tranquillity (*samapatti*).⁴¹

The stage of tranquility is attained through the path of meditation to enter the Noble Wisdom or Tathaghatood.⁴² Through this path of perfect tranquilization enable to cast off desires,⁴³ or enabling men to cut off any formation that arises from the faculty of the six organs. Men then can be able to experience the seven different types of emptiness consisting of the emptiness of individual marks (*lakshana*); The emptiness of self-nature is unborn (SKT. *bhavasvabbava*); (3) The emptiness of no-work is explained as Skandhas are Nirvana itself, and no work is doing in them from the beginning, therefore is called emptiness of no-work (*apracarita*), (4) The emptiness of work explained as is skandhas are devoid of an ego and its’ belonging and go on functioning, when there is mutual conjunction of cause and action, therefore is the emptiness of work (*pracarita*), (5) The

emptiness of all things in the sense they are unpredictable (*nirabhilapya*) speaks of the nature of false imagination is not expressible, therefore it is the emptiness of unpredictable, (6) The emptiness of the ultimate reality realizable by noble wisdom speaks of inner attainment of realization through noble wisdom without traces of habit-energy generated by all the mistaken conception, (7) The emptiness of mutuality (*itaretara*) means when things are missing here, one speaks about it being empty.

Emptiness is not for the practice of the general public for the following reasons. Firstly,

Its misinterpretation can further complicate thought patterns and lead to more complicated psychological issues. Secondly, emptiness is not an easy concept to understand because of the different intellectual levels of men. Thirdly, Bodhisattva is the “enlightened” being able to practice emptiness and the general population is yet to be enlightened and the need to work towards the cessation of becoming and to deconstruct the notion of self. The enlightened Bodhisattva can sacrifice the physical parts of their body documented in “*The Lotus Sutra*” due to the achievement of the key characteristics of non-self, non-duality and gaining the noble wisdom to recognize the three marks of existence that all things are “impermanence (*anitya*), dissatisfaction or suffering (*duhkha*), and insubstantiality (*anatman* or “without self”) to reduce stress or sufferings from passion and desires causing craving, cling, and grasping.

Secularizing Practises of the Bodhisattva

The fundamental practices of the Bodhisattva are suitable to be used for general public education and as a psychological tool for self-help thus improving the quality of life. As the acknowledgment and embracing the Four Noble Truths and practicing the six paramitas or the six perfections of wisdom do need not have the commitments of Mahayana Buddhism. They do not need to be labelled in terms of religion and spirituality.⁴⁴ Since human beings are found out to be geared by the continuous activities of dualistic poisoning desires (*trishna*) accompanied by pleasure (*nandi*) and anger (*raga*) and ignorance (*avidya*) in the

Mahayana Buddhism tradition.⁴⁵

Embracing a religion can be a double-edged sword. They have many benefits such as promoting connections, values, the formation of identities, cultivating a sense of belonging beyond the individual, and for achieving a communal transcended spirituality. But religions often exacerbate differences that often lead to conflicts of the world. Whereas, secular forms of meditation can develop spirituality, mindfulness, and self-compassion. Mindfulness fosters adaptive, flexible, and receptive awareness and fosters an empathetic attitude towards others, and the six paramitas practiced by the Bodhisattva can be used for public education and as a psychological tool for self-help in daily living without the formal adherence to Mahayana Buddhism. The fundamental practices of the Bodhisattva can be incorporated and emphasized as a therapy for dealing with universal and subjective truths of sufferings.

Men have lived in the perpetual cycle of universal and subjective truth of suffering for centuries. It is through this pragmatic system of training of the mind to work towards the deconstruction of the notion of self that will help men to gain freedom from the issues of life and death, which are the universal and subjective truths of sufferings. The embracing of the Four Noble Truths helps men to identify and be conscientious with the causes of suffering and the way to end it. It is through understanding the fundamental practice of the Bodhisattva to gain insight and transcended wisdom to achieve the three key characteristics of non-self, non-duality, and emptiness. This can serve to eliminate the ignorance that arises from life experiences and wrong reasoning. The expansion of knowledge in the interdependent practices of the Bodhisattva in the cultivation of morality, the good mental state without the discriminatory mind towards wisdom to prevent misunderstandings and bad practices.

There are two key reasons that it is suitable for general public education and use it as a self-help psychological tool for daily living for men to be emancipated from sufferings of different kinds. Firstly, if men still have increasing desires and passions and they do not eradicate the notion of self and discriminatory mind arises from the dualistic views

that contribute to sufferings. Secondly, we have found out through the academic findings in our research on the pros and cons of religion, spirituality, and secular meditation. This secular meditation yields results or benefits for personal development in terms of morality and a good mental state. This is not just beneficial on the interpersonal level, but it will benefit people across a wider spectrum and can address issues concerning the environment, racism, inter religious issues which are often the result of distortions of identity formation, dualistic views and discriminatory mind in contemporary society.

ENDNOTES

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¹¹ The Lotus Sutra, 1993, 356.

¹² John S. Strong, *Buddhism: An Introduction* (London: One World, 2015), 446. ^[1]_{SEP}

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- ¹⁸ Sternberg, 2006, p.176.
- ¹⁹ Satina, 1997, 169.
- ²⁰ Santina, 1997, p. 400.
- ²¹ *The Diamond Sutra*, 1986, Section XXIII.
- ²² *The Lankatavara Sutra*, 1932, xvii.
- ²³ *The Lotus Sutra*, 1993, p. 338
- ²⁴ *The Mahayana Mapaharinirvana Sutra*,1973, 191.
- ²⁵ Santina, 1997, 63.
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- ³⁰ *The Lankavatara Sutra*, 185.
- ³¹ *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, 1973, p.71
- ³² Kyabgon, 2001, 23.
- ³³ Kyokai, 2005, 42 .
- ³⁴ Santina, 1997, 20-21.
- ³⁵ Yun, 2018, 1.
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