

Is Buddhism Pessimistic?

* Some writers, disturbed by the fact of ‘dukkha’ being discussed as the First Noble Truth in Buddhism, incline to hold the wrong view that Buddhism is pessimistic in outlook from the very beginning.

* Buddhism is neither pessimistic nor optimistic. If anything at all, it is realistic, for it takes a realistic view of life and of the world. It looks at things objectively. It tells you exactly what you are and what the world around you is, and shows you the way to perfect freedom, peace, tranquility and happiness.

* The psychoanalyst Freud said that man is always suffering from an uncertainty, a fear expressed in terms of anxiety. This harrowing uneasiness of his mind overpowers his reason.

* The existentialist philosopher Kierkegaard emphasized man’s fear that torments him when he confronted with life’s problems. He named that mental tendency as ‘anguish’ and declared that it can only be relieved by transcendental faith in God.

* Two other existentialists, Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre, totally denying the existence of God, said the honest encounter with dread and anguish is the only gateway to ‘authentic’ living.

* Philosopher Kant was emphatic in stating that man is ever in a predicament.

➔ Yet nobody calls them pessimists!

* The Buddha does not deny happiness in life when he says there is suffering. On the contrary, he admits different forms of happiness, both material and spiritual. However, all these are included in dukkha, even the jhanic stages, because they are impermanent. Any experiences that are impermanent all fall into the category of Dukkha (Yad aniccam tam dukkham).

* What is pessimism? Pessimism is a gloomy view of life. A pessimist sees only the worst aspect of everything. He always anticipates defeat. Pessimism overwhelms one with despair, frustration and inaction. Contrary to that, optimism offers a bright view of life full of hope. Buddhism teaches us to understand things as they really are.

* The Buddha was realistic and objective. He says that with regard to life and the enjoyment of sense-pleasures, one should clearly understand three things:

- 1) attraction or enjoyment (assada)
- 2) evil consequence or danger or unsatisfactoriness (adinava)
- 3) freedom or liberation (nissarana)

These three things are true with regard to all enjoyment in life.

* From this it is evident that it is no question of pessimism or optimism, but that we must take account of the pleasures of life as well as of its pains and sorrows, and also of freedom from them, in order to understand life completely and objectively.

* Buddhism is quite opposed to the melancholic, sorrowful and gloomy attitude of mind which is considered a hindrance to the realization of Truth. On the other hand, it is interesting to remember here that joy (piti) is one of the seven Bojjhngas or 'Factors of Enlightenment' the essential qualities to be cultivated for the realization of Nirvana.

* There are two ancient Buddhist texts called the Theragatha and Therigatha, which are full of the joyful utterances of the Buddha's disciples, who found peace and happiness in life through his teaching.

* Furthermore, the Buddha does not stop after analyzing dukkha. He actually shows us the way out of this samsaric dukkha, which is the Noble Eightfold Path towards ultimate happiness.

“NIBBANAM PARAMAM SUKHAM”