

The Analytical Study of Buddha's quest for Enlightenment with special emphasis to Suttas of Majjhima Nikaya

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Abstract

There were various **sramana** traditions (like Ajivikas) prevalent in ancient India even before Buddha's birth. And there was a common belief among them that the desire of the senses causes hindrance in the realization of Nibbana. Therefore they believed that in order to realize freedom from this desire realm one should follow the opposite path of practicing suppression of the senses.

But contrary to the common belief, Buddha realized after practicing these self mortification practices that these austerities didn't give rise to any supreme and supramundane knowledge which was worthy of wise and noble ones.¹

Buddha further spoke about the drawbacks of extreme asceticism in verse 70 of Dhammapada,

"Although a fool might eat small amount of food as compared to a tip of grass, month after month, but it's worth isn't equal to one sixteenth of those who have tasted the nectar of Dhamma."²

Extreme asceticism is not only unbeneficial but it also leads to a bad destination as evident from the account of Lomahamsa Jataka , even Arahant Jambuka who was previously an Ajivika speaks about harmfulness of extreme asceticism in the following verse.

Doing many unskillful actions of such kind, one goes to a bad destination after death.³

Contrary to self mortification Buddha carefully established vinaya discipline which takes into consideration the needs of the body since he knew body is a vehicle on which all realizations are based therefore body should be looked after with a sense

¹ *Mahasaccaka Sutta*, MN 36.

² *Dhammapada* translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Valley Center: Metta Forest Monastery, 2014, p.31.

³ Theragatha(trans.), *Verses of The Senior Monks*-a new translation of the Theragatha by Bhikkhu Sujato & Jessica Walton, Taipei: CBDEF, 2014, p.73.

of ease with respect to its basic necessities. Therefore he allowed clothing to wear to ward off heat and cold and insects. He allowed daily almsround to fulfill daily dietary needs so that one can sustain the body in a healthy state which was not so in case of self mortification since they were based upon not eating enough and practicing extended fasts . Furthermore he allowed a shelter of the tree or a overhanging cliff to get protected from direct sunlight and rainfall. This clearly indicates that these precepts are not extremes and could be observed by not causing much strain to the body. But on the other hand these precepts are demanding in the sense of not allowing any space for the sensual indulgence to seep into .For example wearing robes picked up from footpaths and cremation grounds leads to the detachment with regards to clothing, eating food from the alms bowl leads to letting go off the craving related to food.

Thus Buddha propounded the Middle Way i.e. Noble Eightfold Path, which directly leads to the realization of Supramundane truths.

Suttas in Majjhima Nikaya depicting Buddha's Quest

After renouncing the worldly life at the age of 29, Buddha sought various teachers for learning their dharma so that he could realize the supreme goal of the spiritual life for which householders go forth from home to homelessness. Therefore he first met Alara Kalama and mastered his teachings on formless attainment i.e. Concentration on sphere of nothingness. But he was not satisfied with this attainment because this is a state in the sphere of mind only and was not a permanent state. He further met Uddaka Ramaputta and mastered his teachings on attainment of sphere of neither perception nor non-perception. But this attainment again was unsatisfactory. So ascetic Gotama went in search of other forms of spiritual endeavors in Magadhan town of Uruvela. There he joined the ascetics practicing the then prevalent self mortification practices.

Therefore Pre Buddhist Asceticism had the direct impact on Buddha's quest of Enlightenment. Ascetic Gotama undertook these self mortification practices for six years as mentioned in some Discourses of Majjhima Nikaya like Mahasihanada Sutta, Mahasaccaka Sutta etc.

These practices are related to torture of body only and had nothing to do with the purification of mind. These practices are grouped into different categories as given below-

Extreme Asceticism related to clothing

Sometimes he used to go without clothes rejecting conventions and sometimes he used to wear something for covering up his body parts.

“He clothed himself in hemp or cloth mixed with hemp, in refuse or cast off rags, in tree’s bark or in antelope hide and its strips, in fabric of bark, woodshavings and kusa grass fabric, in wool of head hair or wool of animals or in wings of owl.”⁴

Extreme Asceticism related to food

Some of these precepts were practiced by Jains and Ajivikas also like eating vegetarian diet and eating cow dung or excreta. He rejected food brought on invitations. “He received nothing from a pot or a bowl, across a threshold, stick and a pestle, he didn’t received alms from two eating together, from a woman who is pregnant, or who is giving a suck, or from one lying with a man, neither he received food from where it was advertised for distribution, from where a dog is standing nearby or from where gadflies were buzzing; he didn’t accepted meat”⁵. He neither ate meat nor took intoxicated drinks.

He did his alms round methodically for his sustenance, he sustained on one morsel from one house, two morsel from two houses and upto seven morsels from seven houses, he survived on one small servings, two small servings and upto seven small servings in a day, he ate food once daily, once in two days, once in three days and upto once in a fortnight.

“I used to eat greens and millets, wild rice, moss and hide parings, bran and scum of rice or floor of sesamum seeds or green grass and cow dung”⁶

He depended on fallen fruits as well various eatable plant roots.

He started reducing his diet depending on soups of various sorts like mung bean soup, pea soup etc.

He further reduced his diet periodically sometimes eating just a single red date a day or one mung bean a day or one sesame seed a day or one chick pea a day.

He also ate cow dung of young calves or sometimes ate his own excreta and drank his urine until it exhausted completely.

Extreme Asceticism related to dwelling

⁴ MN,(trans.) Bhikkhu Nanamoli And Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Kandy:B.P.S.,1995,p.173.

⁵ Ibid,p.173.

⁶Piya Tan, *Mahasihanada Sutta: The Greater Discourse of Lion-roar*, Accessed at <http://dhammafars.com>

Buddha talks about extreme asceticism he practiced with regards to dwelling in Mahasihanada Sutta .He used to dwell in very dense forests and in winters he used to dwell in open during nights and in grove during day while in summers he would dwell in open during day and in groves during night. “He used to make his bed in a cremation ground using the bones of the dead for his pillow.”⁷. He would also use thorns mattress for his bedding.

Extreme asceticism related to energetic efforts

He experimented with various postures, he would reject seats, he would keep standing continuously, and when he squatted he did it continuously without breaks. He tried taking these two postures (standing and sitting) to their extremes.

Miscellaneous self mortification practices

The method of Suppression of mind was used by Ascetic Gotama during his six ascetic years of penance. This method is also mentioned in the Vitakka Santhana Sutta (Majjhima Nikaya sutta 20) as a means to tackle the agitated mind..

“When he subdued, restrained and beaten his mind, with clenched teeth and his tongue pressed against his palate, he would beat down his mind with mind and in this process sweat poured down from his armspit.”⁸

Breathless meditation – he experimented with breathing in a number of ways.

- Sometimes he would stop his breath for long periods, and when he did this there used to be a loud sound of winds coming from his ear.
- Further he would stop his breathing through his mouth ,nose and ears, and due to this he used to experience violent winds as if slicing his head and carving his stomach, he also experienced excruciating pains in his head and burning sensation in his body due to breathlessness.

Effect of Self Mortification Practices:

His body became extremely thin, his limbs became like bamboo knots, his buttocks became like camel’s foot, his backbone got twisted like a vine, his ribs appeared decayed like a broken beam of old house ,eyeballs appeared to be immersed in eye sockets, “his head’s skin became withered and became shrunken because of having so little food “⁹,while touching his stomach he could also feel the touch of his backbone because of his thinness ,while rubbing his limbs his hairs used to fall apart , colour of his skin changed and it sometimes appeared black, sometimes

⁷ Mahasihanada Sutta translated by Bhikkhu Nanamoli.

⁸ Piya tan ,Mahasacchaka Sutta: The Greater Discourse to Saccaka Accessed at <http://dhammafarers.com>

⁹ Anandjyoti Bhikkhu, *From Buddha- To- Be To Teacher In The Buddha’s own words*, p.19.

appeared brownish or golden coloured. When going for defecating or urinating he would fall on the ground.¹⁰

Although he put strenuous efforts into these extreme self mortification practices but he didn't derive any beneficial results from them, neither mundane benefits nor supramundane benefits. Instead these practices made his body overstrained and made him completely exhausted. Therefore he reached to the conclusion of searching some another pathway for the arising of insight knowledge worthy of noble ones and that pathway happened to be the middle way.

Buddha practiced the Middle Way.

There were two extremes which were sought after to find satisfaction and peace of mind, one of the extreme was the sensual indulgence and another was self mortification practice.

Some people considered that one could find release from suffering by gratification of the senses (**kāmasukhallikānuyogo**) and another section believed that suppression of one's senses (**attakilamathānuyogo**) is the way for finding solution to human problems. The Buddha after pursuing both these two ways reached to a conclusion that-

"There are two extremes, Bhikkhus, which should not to associate with by one who has renounced the householder life, one of these extremes is devotion to the sensual pleasure and taking delight in them, this is lowly, vulgar and worldly, ignoble, and isn't connected with the spiritual goal for which one has gone forth; and other extreme is devotion to self-mortification, and this is painful and ignoble, and is not connected either with the spiritual goal."¹¹

So after understanding the limitations of these two extremes, Buddha decided to practice the middle way which avoids both extremes and thus after walking the middle way he reached to the direct understanding into the real nature of phenomenal world in terms of three characteristics of transitoriness, suffering and selflessness.

After his Enlightenment, Buddha started his Dhamma teaching out of compassion for all Beings. On one hand Buddha taught Dhamma which included his central

¹⁰Piya Tan, *Mahasaccaka Sutta :The Greater Discourse to Saccaka*, Accessed at <http://dhammafars.com>

¹¹Dhammachakkapavattanasuttam, (trans.) Ānandajoti Bhikkhu, *The Discourse that Set the Dhamma Wheel Rolling (from Vinaya Mahāvagga 1)*, Accessed at <http://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net> on 22-11-2017, p.1.

doctrines like four noble truths and Paticcasamuppada and on the other he laid a strong foundation of Vinaya both for his lay disciples and monastics like five Sila for lay persons, eight Sila for Anagarikas and Patimokkha for monks and nuns.

Noble Eightfold Path¹² as laid down down by Buddha as his central doctrinal teaching. It discusses in brief all the Eight limbs of Majjhimapatipada as divided in three categories of Sila, Samadhi and Panna.

The three factors of Morality, three factors of Concentration and two factors of Wisdom as mentioned below have been discussed in detail.

- I) Wisdom (*panna*):
 - (i) Right Understanding (*samma-ditthi*),
 - (ii) Right Aspiration (*samma-sankappa*)
- II) Morality (*sila*):
 - (iii) Right Speech (*samma-vaca*),
 - (iv) Right Action (*samma-kammanta*),
 - (v) Right Livelihood (*samma-ajiva*)
- III) Concentration (*samadhi*):
 - (vi) Right Effort (*samma-vayama*),
 - (vii) Right Mindfulness (*samma-sati*),
 - (viii) Right Concentration (*samma-samadhi*).¹³

Conclusion

Buddha himself practiced Self Mortification Practices and reached to a conclusion that the extreme self mortification practices are not conducive for achieving the higher goal thus he also guided other Ascetics to avoid self mortification practices as clearly mentioned in the second Sutta of Patthika Vagga of Digha Nikaya which is Udumbarika sutta given to Ascetic Nigrodha who was a wandering Ascetic.

Buddha's realization of Enlightenment led him to organize his teachings into Noble Eightfold Path which avoided two extremes (sensual indulgence and self

¹² Ven. Ajahn Sumedho, *The Four Noble Truths*, Hertfordshire: Amaravati Publications, p.48.

¹³ Ibid, p.49.

mortification) which are an obstruction to the path of liberation. As a result he taught Dhamma and Vinaya for welfare of all beings. Apart from that he also established training discipline which avoided both luxuriousness and extreme asceticism prevalent in those days and at the same time were beneficial for various personality traits from different backgrounds. As a matter of fact, a large number of spiritual seekers both from householders as well as ascetics came to him for his guidance. On one hand his Dhamma and Vinaya acted as an antidote to sensual desires for disciples who were from the householders background and were previously inclined to enjoying sensual desires, and on the other hand these teachings pleased disciples from the Ascetic background because they were not painful and suited their previous conditioning of Ascetic lifestyle. Thus the Noble Eightfold Path came into light out of compassion of the Blessed One. Although the Path was timeless, but it was not clear and long hidden for the worldly beings due to ignorance and delusions. Buddha made it clear, easily understandable and practicable so that those who practice this path generate their welfare in the beginning of the path, in the middle of the path and in the end of the path.

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