Early Buddhism

Introduction

As used here, the expression "Early Buddhism" refers to the time between the birth of Gautama Buddha to about 150 years after his death; the terminal date marks the splitting of Early Buddhism into sects or schools, which appears to have taken place shortly after the death of King Aśoka in 231 BCE.[1] If the Buddha died somewhere between 410 and 370 BCE, the period would stretch roughly between 470 and the 220s BCE. These are suggestive dates only, for the specific dates of the Buddha's life are vigorously debated.[2] Because the period occurs before the formation of the early sects or schools of Buddhism (traditionally numbering 18 or 20), it is referred to as well as the period of pre-sectarian Buddhism. Other discussions of Early Buddhism restrict the period to the life and times of the Buddha only, from his Enlightenment to the rise of the early schools, or to the span of time of the early Buddhist schools themselves, among other definitions.

To state the obvious, Early Buddhism was a foundational period in the history of Buddhism, for the basic teachings of the Buddha and his immediate disciples, as recorded in much later texts, form the core teachings that all later schools of Buddhism accept in one form or another. This primer concentrates on these basic teachings, though it also reviews the history and development of Early Buddhism within its context in India, and problems that eventually arose over the intent and meaning of his teachings. Notes and references are included to facilitate further study of this foundational and fundamentally most important period in the historical development of Buddhism.

History and Development

In brief review, the man who became Gautama Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama, was born near Lumbini in western Nepal in a secure, perhaps luxurious, family setting.[3] At the age of 29 he became a wanderer (a *śramana*) seeking answers to the problem of human suffering and, perhaps, the meaning of human life in a rapidly changing world. Six years after his quest began, he attained the awakening he was seeking and became known as Gautama Buddha or simply the Buddha (the 'Awakened One'). For the remaining 45 years of his life, he traveled throughout the towns and cities of northeast India giving spiritual instructions. He died at the age of 80 from old age and perhaps illness. Even this brief review is speculative, for few details of his life are known with confidence.[4] This is due in large part to a concentration on his teachings and not on the man himself, and to the fact that his teachings were orally transmitted for hundreds of years. His discourses, as remembered, were not written down until the first century B.C.E. in what is now Sri Lanka and perhaps elsewhere in India and surrounding countries. The first extended biography of his life is an epic poem, the *Buddhacarita* ("Acts of the Buddha"), composed by Aśvaghoṣa in the second century C.E., roughly 500 years after the events it describes took place. Typical of religious traditions, it contains much hagiography full of legend and the miraculous.

The Buddha's teachings were preserved orally in the canons (collections of scriptures) of the early schools of Buddhism. The only canon traditionally preserved intact was the Theravada schools Pali Canon, which was the canon written down in Sri Lanka. It consists of three divisions or 'baskets' (*pitaka*): the discourses or sermons (*Sūtra Pitaka*), which were separated into five divisions known as *nikāyas*, the monastic rules (*Vinaya Pitaka*), and the Scholastic Treatises (*Abhidharma Pitaka*), which was a later collection of scholarly works.[5]

The Buddha's teachings are largely opaque if not understood within their historical and cultural setting, which as a very immense and complex topic can only be skimmed here.[6] The Buddha was born into a spiritual setting dominated by Vedic literature and its visionary tradition (Rg-veda and Upanisads), and an historical setting undergoing a dramatic transition as traditional family and tribal system life ways were being overwhelmed by the emergence of centralized governments, empires, a money-economy, widespread trading networks, and state-focused Bramanical ritual activities. The 6th and 5th century B.C.E. "seeker" (*scramana)* movement in India was in part a reaction to these revolutionary changes, changes that were accompanied by new ideas about karma, rebirth, and the nature of human life that the old ideas did not satisfactorily answer. In response, the seekers, including Siddhārtha Gautama, sought new answers to how humans could find true happiness and escape from what seemed endemic suffering and endless rebirths.

These answers played out against the backdrop of Indian cosmology according to which time and history are cyclical, there are numerous other worlds, the world was not created by a divine creator, people can be reborn into different realms of degrees of suffering, and karma is a universal law which moves people from one realm of rebirth to another.[7] The Buddha's teachings are a response to the historic changes that were occurring around him, these cosmological beliefs, and new questions about the meaning and purpose of life, such as: What is the relationship between the body and the soul? When a person is reborn, how is their past karma transmitted to them? and What happens to enlightened persons when they die? As Prebish and Keown phrase it, "The entire history of Buddhist thought can be seen as a search for answers to these questions."[8]

The main developments in Early Buddhism following the death of the Buddha and the emergence of the main Buddhist sects and schools are equally shrouded in uncertainty and controversy.[9] According to tradition three councils were held during this period to resolve issues that arose among dispersed groups of practitioners. The First at Rājagrha took place soon after the Buddha's death. According to tradition, its intent was to establish an authoritative record of his teachings. The Second at Vaisāli 100 years later was purportedly held to settle disputes about monastic practice. And the Third around 250 B.C.E. at Pātaliputra discussed, again according to tradition, monastic practice and, perhaps, the true teachings of the Buddha, which, because of the Buddha's practice of teaching to the level of his audiences, were occasionally contradictory and thus open to interpretation.

Some scholars suggest that King Asoka, who had consolidated much of India within his empire, played a major role in condemning the sectarian divisions that were beginning to appear within the once unified sangha. Asoka also played a major role in promoting Buddhism by having Buddhist edicts carved on pillars, rocks, and in caves throughout his empire, by sending ambassadors to other kingdoms to promote the Buddha's teachings, and by creating an architectural and art legacy in the form of stupas. After Asoka's death in 231 BCE, the fledgling schools of Buddhism began to flourish, which eventually marks the end of Early Buddhism as defined here.

The Basic Teachings

The Buddha's basic teachings, which are referred to collectively as the Dharma, are most commonly mentioned in the Pali Canon as a middle path, the eightfold path, the four noble truths, the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination, the five skandhas, and the three characteristics of existence.[10] All are in the sutra portion of the Pali Canon. It is often claimed with some degree of assurance that the first two parts of the Canon were composed

during the time of the Buddha, but as stressed above little is known with assurance about what occurred and when in the Early Buddhism time period.

These basic teachings are said to have set in motion the Wheel of the Dharma, for they brought the message of the Buddha to all beings. However, as the Buddha often stressed, these teachings are what he experienced on awakening, for he only taught what he himself had experienced. In other words, he awoke to the truth of being, rather than having created the truth himself.

The Dharma is a Middle Path

According to legend, the Buddha began his first discourse after awakening, which was with his five former companion seekers at Sārnath, near Vārānasi, with his discovery of a "middle path," which was a path between the extremes of asceticism and a life devoted to pleasure seeking. He described the Dharma as a middle path in his initial sermon first because he and his companions had practiced a path of extreme asceticism, and they had admonished him when he first appeared at Sārnath for having abandoned that path.

The Eight-Fold Path

During his first sermon at Sārnath, the Buddha described his path as a "noble eightfold" path that has eight separate practices: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right meditation, and right concentration. These eight practices have since been divided into three trainings: the first two practices, which produce wisdom; the next three are practices, which focus on morality; and the last three, which are various facets of meditation. During the initial phases of this path, at least according to the Pali Canon, morality was emphasized first, then meditation, and finally wisdom, for one must gradually build the capacity, with sustained effort, to see what is.[11] With experience and effort the three trainings become intertwined, for while meditation is needed to clearly see what arises in the mind, wisdom is required to provide a conceptual framework to make the practice of meditation effective, and morality is required throughout to establish a firm foundation for these practices.

But what happens at the end of this eightfold path? The Buddha's answer was that it is the cessation of suffering. But what does that mean? Is the awakened person happier than before or just devoid of existential suffering? Although not stressed in the basic teachings, this is where the doctrines of karma and rebirth come into play. A strong belief, at least in traditional Asian Buddhism, is that what gets extinguished is the end of a person's series of rebirths.

The Four Noble Truths

After introducing the noble eightfold path, the Buddha then described the four noble truths, truths that are regarded as having "a central organizing function in his teachings."[12] The four truths are: (1) there is suffering, (2) there is the origination of suffering, which comes into existence in dependence on causes, (3) there is the cessation of suffering, for the arising of suffering can be prevented, and (4) there is a path (the eightfold path) that leads to the cessation of suffering.

The first truth, that there is suffering, needs some explanation, for the word "suffering" can mean different things, such as painful feelings caused by sickness, misery, distress, or loss. In Buddhism, suffering (*dukkha*) does not refer to ordinary pain, but to

existential anguish that is a mental reaction to these other kinds of unpleasant feelings. A simple example of ordinary pain is a stubbed toe that hurts. Dukkha arises in reaction to this pain: I become angry at whoever left the item I walked into, feel sorry for myself, and decide to treat myself to something special to make myself feel better.

The second noble truth is meant to explain how the feeling of existential suffering arises. Very briefly, a feeling of suffering in the above mental sense is a characteristic of all sentient beings. It arises in ignorance and works its way through what is called the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination. The basic idea is that we are born into a life whose true nature we are ignorant about. In our ignorance, we feel desire for some things, aversion for others, and indifference for still others. In the process, we live a life of craving for the things we desire. This produces suffering, for all things change and we cannot hold on to what we desire forever. The third noble truth states that since ignorance can be cured, it is possible to put an end to suffering, and the fourth noble truth, as we have seen, introduces eight practices that can bring about this cure.

The Twelve-Linked Chain of Dependent Origination

The second of the four noble truths was later flushed out in terms of a twelve-linked chain of causes and effects, the first of which is ignorance.[13] Without going through the twelve links in this short primer, we concentrate instead on what characteristics of existence human beings are ignorant about. They are most often referred to as: the impermanence of all things; the fact we lack a true 'self'; and the nature of suffering itself. Through this ignorance, we make assumptions like: there is a true 'me' who can possess 'things'; I can attain happiness by acquiring things I desire; and I can hold on to those things. The core idea of the eight-fold path is that by learning how suffering is perpetuated through the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination we may be able to control the arising of existential suffering.

The Five Skandhas

According to the Buddha, human individuals consist of five components or 'aggregates' without remainder: form, feelings, perception, volitional factors, and consciousness. Since the Buddha found no permanent 'self' in any of these aggregates, he concluded that there is no underlying soul or self.[14]

The Three Characteristics of Existence

The three characteristics of existence, which are mentioned above, are impermanence, suffering, and non-self. According to the scriptures, suffering is caused by ignorance of these three characteristics and it is overcome by fully understanding them. It has been argued that the key to understand the cause of suffering is the truth of non-self (not impermanence), for existential suffering depends on "the assumption that there is a 'me' for whom events can have significance."[15] The Buddha based his doctrine of non-self on the argument that no part of a person is permanent or has an unchanging essence.

Problems That Arose with the Basic Teachings after the Buddha's Death

After the Buddha's death, questions arose about apparent gaps and inconsistencies in his teachings. For example: while much is said about attaining nirvana, little is said about life

after nirvana; in the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination, how could there be ignorance without a sentient being already in existence; and just what passed from one life to the next if there is no self. There are likely many reasons for these gaps and inconsistencies. First, the Buddha explicitly stressed that his goal was to free all beings from suffering, not to develop a coherent philosophy. Second, the Buddha taught groups of people different "truths" depending on their level of understanding of the dharma. And third, it seems possible (and maybe even likely) that the Buddha's original teachings were reworked in various ways through time, as mentioned earlier in this primer. Regardless, differences in resolving these issues led to the formation of separate schools and movements, such as Abhidharma, Madhyamika, and Yogacara, with 18 to 20 schools appearing alone in the early sectarian period of the development of Buddhism.

Other problems with the Buddha's teachings have arisen recently in the West, where many if not most practitioners do not accept the doctrines of karma and rebirth. Why would one sit in meditation for years if there were no reward, such as a better future life? Why not just seek ordinary, conventional happiness? One common answer is that through practice we do acquire a better understanding of our self and learn to live a calmer, less turbulent life. But, then, is this still Buddhism? All of this is something to ponder. Nonetheless, it is this elusive background of Early Buddhism upon which later schools and traditions of Buddhism are based.

Notes

1. For examples of studies of Early Buddhism, see de Jong (1993), Fogelin (2013), Gombrich (2002), Hamilton-Blyth (2000), and Prebish and Keowan (2006:26-42, 76-85).
2. For the debate over the dates of the Buddha's life, see Cousins (1996) and Violatti (2013).
3. For reconstructions of the life of the Buddha, see Armstrong (2001), Carrithers (2001), and Prebish and Keown (2006:26-42).
4. As Armstrong (2001:xxi) phrases it, "there is not a single incident in the scriptures that we can honestly affirm to be historically true." Also see De Jong (1993:11-13), Collins (1990:72), and Gombrich (2002:8-10) for similar statements.
5. For Theravada Buddhism and the Pali Canon, see Gombrich (1988), Collins (1990), and D. and R. St. Ruth (2007). It seems likely that the canons of other early schools, which were carried to China by pilgrims from China, when translated will transform our understanding of the Buddha's teachings (e.g., Choong 2000, 2005).
6. For an overview of the early discourses, see Bodhi (2000, 2005) and Holder (2006). For an account of the Buddha's first expounding of his path, see Bodhi (2000:1843-47). On karma, see Kyabgon (2015).
7. For Indian cosmology and the nature of life at the time in India, and their importance in understanding Early Buddhism, see Gombrich (1988:5-86), Sadakata (1997), and Prebish and Keown (2006:1-7).
8. Prebish and Keown (2006:7).
9. For the history of Early Buddhism after the death of the Buddha, see Gombrich (2002).
10. For discussions of the Buddha's basic teachings, see Kornfield (1993) and Gombrich (2009).
11. Bodhi (1994), Burton (2004:62-75),
12. Tsering (2005), Dalai Lama (1997).
13. For the 12-links of dependent origination, see Blanchard (2013) and Payutto (1995).
14. For the five skandhas, see Lama Surya Das (1995).
15. Siderits (2007:26-27).

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