

# BASIC CONTENTS OF THE BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY OF HUMAN LIFE

Dang Thi Lan<sup>1</sup>, Nguyen Thi Le Thu<sup>2</sup> Email: Dang685@scientifictext.ru

<sup>1</sup>Dang Thi Lan - PhD in Philosophy, Assistant Professor, Lecturer,  
UNIVERSITY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES  
VIETNAM NATIONAL UNIVERSITY;

<sup>2</sup>Nguyen Thi Le Thu - Postgraduate,  
UNIVERSITY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES  
VIETNAM NATIONAL UNIVERSITY,  
LECTURER,  
NATIONAL ECONOMICS UNIVERSITY,  
HANOI, SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

**Abstract:** buddhism is a large religious-philosophical system that has profound impacts on the spiritual life in many Asian countries, including Vietnam. In the eyes of the Buddha, human life is full of suffering. The birth of Buddhism has opened a path for liberating human and expressing people's aspiration for a happiness, freedom and equality. This is considered a thorough content of Buddhist philosophy. In this article, the author analyzes the concept of Buddhist philosophy about people and human life, which is profoundly expressed in the following aspects: Impermanence, egolessness as the nature of being human; Cause-effect - karma as an indispensable law of life; Suffering is like a reality of human life; Liberation as the highest purpose of life.

**Keywords:** buddhism, perception, outlook on life, release, human existence, philosophy on human.

## ОСНОВНОЕ СОДЕРЖАНИЕ БУДДИЙСКОЙ ФИЛОСОФИИ ЧЕЛОВЕЧЕСКОЙ ЖИЗНИ

Данг Тхи Лан<sup>1</sup>, Нгуен Тхи Ле Тхы<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Данг Тхи Лан - кандидат филологических наук, доцент, преподаватель,  
Университет социальных и гуманитарных наук  
Ханойский государственный университет;

<sup>2</sup>Нгуен Тхи Ле Тхы - аспирант,  
Университет социальных и гуманитарных наук  
Ханойский государственный университет,  
преподаватель,  
Национальный экономический университет,  
г. Ханой, Социалистическая Республика Вьетнам

**Аннотация:** буддизм - это большая религиозно-философская система, которая оказывает глубокое влияние на духовную жизнь во многих азиатских странах, включая Вьетнаме. В глазах Будды человеческая жизнь полна страданий. Рождение буддизма открыло путь для освобождения человека и выражения стремления людей к счастью, свободе и равенству. Это считается полным содержанием буддийской философии. В этой статье автор анализирует концепцию буддийской философии о людях и человеческой жизни, которая глубоко выражена в следующих аспектах: Непостоянство, эгоизм как природа человеческого существования; ; Причина-следствие - карма как обязательный закон жизни; Страдание как реальность человеческой жизни; Освобождение как высшая цель жизни.

**Ключевые слова:** буддизм, восприятие, взгляд на жизнь, освобождение, человеческое существование, философия человека.

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The Buddhist philosophy of human life is a central part in the system of Buddhist philosophic ideology, expressing the most general conceptions of Buddhism on human life, explaining problems that human beings usually face in life and moving towards a better future.

Buddhism aims at actual issues of human life, but not aims at the interpretation for metaphysical issues. The Buddhist philosophy of human life help everyone perceive their own human values, recognize the dignities for life and find out ways to achieve those dignities. It can be affirmed that *human philosophy of Buddhism on human being and human life is a systematic and social-historical ideology of Buddhism on human being and human life to solve problems on nature, rules and goals of human life and to release human being from sufferings in life.*

Therefore, the Buddhist philosophy of human life is a basic, key contents throughout Buddhist philosophy. In that sense, it is approached from philosophic angle, expressed through specific, profound philosophies in the system of Buddhist philosophic ideology. Those philosophies themselves implies all of the most general conceptions of Buddhism on human being, human life and nature. Though in later periods, many schools of

Buddhism have been born and developed many Buddhist thoughts transcendent to initial thoughts, there are still “fundamentals that all Buddhist philosophical schools agree on, the basic teachings of early Buddhism” [5, p. 14].

These philosophies are the cores of Buddhist philosophy of human life. On that basis, Buddhism interprets all the contents on nature, meaning and goals of human life as an individual and humane person.

*\* The impermanence and non-self are the nature of human existence and human life*

According to Buddhism, since every phenomenon has the nature of “Non-self” (absence of separate Self) and “Impermanence” (always flows), everything is “illusory”, “fake”. In other words, because of eternal changes, what can be felt by senses basically does not really exist.

From this conception on the world, Buddhism explained the impermanence and non-self of human existence. Whereby, human being was not born by the God or any holly forces. Buddhism supposed that “*the human personality is analyzed in two ways: first, in terms of six elements - earth, water, fire, air, space, and consciousness - probably with a view to refuting the belief in a material 'self'; and second, in terms of the five aggregates-material form, feeling, perception, dispositions, and consciousness--mainly for the purpose of rejecting the belief in a psychic 'self'*” [2, p. 51]. However, due to the nature of impermanence, these elements sometimes gather, sometimes separate. Each of elements in the five aggregates-material form also change continuously. In Buddhist Sutra, it says “Form is not different from emptiness, emptiness is not different from form, form is empty, and emptiness is form. Feeling, perception, dispositions, and consciousness are the same” [Heart Sutra ((Prajnaparamitahridaya Sutra)]. Therefore, that human of forms is just temporarily empirical, there is no regularly determined self, no constant self or individual self. But “due to not recognizing the origin of infinite and endless change of things and beings, human misunderstand that we exist forever, everything is regularly determined, everything is ours, by us” [8, p. 24].

Obviously, Buddhism does not completely deny the existence of self in its experimental meaning, when material and psychic elements gather, a human of forms with defined humanity is born. However, the cardinal point of Buddhism after all is that there is not really any self (constant) because the nature of non-self and impermanence is “natural purity” (Tathata). “An individual is named with a Buddhist noun as Santana – a flow of living or a continuity. It includes psychic as well as material elements. The continual flow of living or the continuity of this psychophysics phenomenon is caused by Karmic Power” [6, p. 139]. In other words, if the nature of human existence is non-self and impermanence, the entire human life is non-self, impermanent, a continual, eternal flow from the past to the present and future.

In addition, as a destiny, a living form, in Buddhist view, all beings are the same regardless of positions, conditions. They have the same nature of undeceiving – “all beings deceive Buddha’s nature” [Avatamsaka Sutra (*buddhāvataṃsaka*)]. It means when following Buddhism, everyone is able to perfect themselves, practice on their own, cultivate to release from the non-self and impermanence. By extension, on the basis of Buddha’s nature as the starting point, in spite of social positions, cultivating morality and reaching to the release is the measures of human dignity. This is an advanced and humane point in the Buddhist conception on human being in compared with contemporaneous thoughts.

*\* Philosophy of Cause-effect – Karma is the inevitable law of human life*

Different from other religions, from the beginning, Buddhism did not recognize the creation role of any Supreme. The motion of the entire universe and human life performs with a variety of shapes, but absolutely operates under cause-effect law. Due to cause-effect law, things are in a continual changing process, being born, staying, decaying and dying. Dhammapada Sutra also says: “Nowhere on land, sea or even secret ravine can a culprit of illegal action elude from Cause-Effect law” [Dhammapada Sutra (*dhammapada*)]. That means: Things are never born naturally, no theocracy can create human being who is born by their own Cause karma and improve our lives. Buddha taught: “Sentient species are the owner of karma, also the inheritor of karma” [Majjhima-Nikaya, Sutra 135].

In cause-effect law, Buddhism proposes three categories: cause, condition and effect. They have close relationship and mutually metabolize.

When mentioning Cause, Buddhism supposes it is the inception element which can generate other things. “Human being and things are in the world. Nothing is born by accident. All have bases of cause. Those bases of cause combine together, creating things in different shapes. No way is there natural birth” [Milindapanha]. It means that having causes creates the possibility of effects, like grain is the cause of rice, it can be sprout to any other tree. Cause becomes effect, this effect becomes the cause of next effect, and thus the chain of cause and effect happens continuously. Buddhism supposes “the flame of one lamp in the second watch is the continuation of the flame in the first watch. These two flames create a chain: the first one is the cause of the second one because they have the same characteristic” [7, p. 26]. However, Buddhism emphasizes the cause must be known as total of causes, set of causes forms a cause with ability to generate effect, therein if one of element causes is missing, there is no effect or if causes in that group are separated, no effect is born.

Having causes creates the possibility of effects, but it needs condition for effect to appear. Hence, “if there is something completely different from the cause is generated, it is due to the impact of condition factor to the

cause in the process of generating effect” [7, p. 28]. Effect is the thing generated from defined causes and conditions. How the effect becomes is due to the impact of cause and condition. With different causes and conditions and different impacts, the effects cannot be the same. There is simultaneous cause-effect, yet there is also anisochronous cause-effect. Despite difference, effect is still generated from cause and condition, then we can find basis to explain every case when effect is generated.

In fact, the cause-effect law seems very complicated. One cause can generate many effects, but there is an effect generated from many causes. In the endless flow of life, sometimes things called effect are really the condition because no cause is the first one, and no effect is supposed to be the last one. Therefore, cause, effect and condition continuously move and mutually metabolize.

On that basis, Buddhism proposes Twelve nidanas – twelve causes leading to the sufferings in past, present and future life. In Dirghagama Sutra, Buddha said: “Ananda! Due to such ninadas: due to ignorance, condition has dispositions; due to disposition, condition has consciousness; due to consciousness, conditions has name and form; due to name and form, condition has six entrances; due to six entrances, condition has sense; due to sense, condition has feeling; due to feeling, condition has desire; due to desire, condition has grasping; due to grasping, condition has existence; due to existence, condition has birth; due to birth, condition has decrepitude and death, sorry, distress which combine and become catastrophe. That is the cause and conditions of great misery skandha (body). [Dirghagama Sutra (Dīrghāgama)]

Each link of Twelve nidanas is the cause and the effect simultaneously, mutually dependent to create an interactive circle in the unified continuity. Human being is one object in the universe, so they are both cause and effect harmonized from those twelve nidanas. Twelve nidanas have close relationship and define each other in the process of forming each person’s Karma. Karma is cause, as well as effect, and continuously follows to make the transmigration circle of human life.

Karma – Cause implies all the actions expressed in spirit, speech and behavior because first of all, karma is the action. In actions (by body, mouth and will) there is potentially possibility of creating effect. The possibility of creating Effect is attached to Karma. Buddha said: “Dear Bhiksu, Tathagata confirms that Attention of mind is Karma, desire led to action by body, mouth or will” [Samannaphala Sutra (Sāmajjaphalasuttam)]. Karma caused by attention of mind is called will karma. Karma caused by our actions, our acts, or actions by our body is called “body karma”. Karma caused by our speech is called “mouth karma”. Karma – Cause can be likened to the fact that seeds are able to become trees.

Karma – Effect is the result of Karma – Cause; it is also called Retribution (except for unrecorded things: either good or bad to other people); and divided into good and evil, immobile karmas (the action of practicing with their own mind, not shake in case of passion); special karmas (weighty karma, accumulating karma, near-death karma, direction karma). Moreover, Retribution itself is the effect of many (chain of) other causes like ignorance (stupidity and delusion) leading to desire, greed (desire for living, desire for pleasure, desire for wealth...), that means Three poisons (greed, anger, delusion) cause sufferings.

Karma in the past leads human being to current karma – retribution, and in its turn, current karma is karma – cause of karma in the future. The process of creating karma is linked to heart. So, retribution in one life is the composition of karma at present and karma in the past, which will determine the hereafter to be good or bad, kind or evil. Each person’s destiny and karma is created by themselves, according to Buddha’s speech: “Only we do the wrong things, make ourselves polluted. Only we can avoid the sins, and wash ourselves. Purity or pollution is caused by ourselves, no one can make the other pure” [Dhammapada Sutra, sentence 165]. Therefore, following Buddhism, we can improve our Karma.

Hence, cause-effect – karma shows that each individual is responsible for their own actions, their own life. Mentioning law of cause-effect – karma is mentioning the process of creating human’s karma under the absolute operating rule in human life.

**\* *Philosophy on suffering – reality of human life***

According to Narada Maha Thera, “Buddha did not try to solve all the moral and philosophic problems which themselves confuse human being. He also did not mention doctrines and theory which do not release or improve human being. Buddha did not ask His believers blind belief in The Primary Cause (of human life). He only discussed the issue of suffering and suffering extinction. With practical and clear target in this idea, other unapplied issues are not mentioned absolutely by Buddha” [6, p. 109-110].

Category of “suffering” is one of basic conceptions on human life’s nature in Buddhism. “Dear Bhiksu, I always talk about the suffering and suffering extinction” [Majjhimanikāya I]. According to Buddhism, life is a sea of suffering and all of those suffering can be recognized from our own life. Buddhism started from Suffering (The truth of Suffering and the Accumulation of Suffering) to come to suffering extinction (The Extinguish of Suffering and The Truth of Religion).

In ancient India, “suffering were supposed to be like sand in Ganges river (countless) and forms of suffering as well as desire for suffering extinction exist in the tradition of ancient Indian thoughts and religion” [3, p. 14]. In that stream of thoughts, Buddhism proposed the truths that suffering is the nature of human life. “Dukkha” in

Sanskrit means “misery”, “pain”. When used in Buddhism, Suffering – Dukkha has more profoundly philosophic meaning on human life and universe.

According to Buddhism, there are three forms of human’s suffering:

The first one is pain – pain (Duhkha-duhkata). It is the sufferings related to the inevitable cycle of life in the transmigration: birth, age, sickness, death. Life in Buddhist conception is a reality existing between birth and death, in the transition period from birth to death, human being have to undergo so many pains. Thus, pain – pain is the natural, inevitable suffering that each identity, each destiny of human being must go through.

The second one is the suffering of decay caused by impermanence. Buddhism supposes the experience that human feel joyful, delightful and happy is just relative because the nature of all things and phenomena is continuous change. Things comforting and satisfying human will disappear under the rule of impermanence and thus, these joy and delight becomes the reason of human’s suffering.

The third one is the suffering of action caused by cause and condition. Under the law of cause-effect, due to condition, human being exist. Human being are just illusory, non-self, but they always misunderstand it really exist so desire and passion come to them, they are unwilling to leave, which leads to mirage and then suffering.

On that basis, Buddhism proposed eight generalized forms of suffering, including physical and psychic suffering: suffering of birth, age, sickness, death; suffering due to separation from our loved ones; suffering of meeting the hateful; suffering due to unaccomplished wishes; suffering due to the existence of all five aggregates. Remarkably, Buddhism supposes human being are not just equal in Buddha’s nature as a destiny, they are also equal to suffer the same pains, including Brahman class who claim themselves holy.

From The Truth of suffering, Buddhism analyzes that every suffering has its own reason, originating from human’s Ignorance, greed for passions and love. Those causes are summarized to ten elements: greed, anger, delusion, arrogance, doubt, illusion of the self, one-sided standpoint, heretical view, practice view, upholding forbidden religious practice. Out of those are three main causes (Three poisons): greed, anger, delusion. And then twelve nidanas like strings binding human to the transmigration circle in many lives.

When judging “life is a sea of suffering”, Buddha was not pessimistic at all because along with this was the definite attitude and action to find way to extinguish the suffering. Buddhism also affirms in the Extinguish of suffering that human being can exterminate suffering actively and self-consciously by cultivating, accumulating kindness to end karma creation, therefore, the transmigration would end, and at that level, human achieve the release. “Only when human being want to exterminate the ignorance and passions, life flow stops; and the transmigration ends like in case of the Buddhas and Arahats” [6, p. 109].

**\* *Philosophy on release – the finish line of human life***

Buddha while alive affirmed many times that: “The oceans have one taste of saltiness. And likewise, Paharada, the object and law of Tathagata have only one taste of release” [Anguttaranikāya, chapter Eight objects].

In *Upanishad*, one of books known as the climax of ancient Indian philosophy, the category of Release is defined as the elimination of all constraints in sensual world, bring ego-self (Atman) or individual spirit integrate to the great self (Brahman) or “absolute universal spirit”. Buddhism at that time internalized the explanation for semantics of “release”: “Unloosing is being removed from constraints, being free, untying bind caused by karma; Escaping is going out of the suffering in the Three realms (realm of desire, realm of form, realm of formlessness)” [cm. 4, p. 1-84]. However, Buddhism added a theistic and equal intension to Release. That is release at first is an autotelic way, by ourselves, not by expecting The Supernatural. This is a breakthrough in Buddhist thought compared to other ancient theocratic religions in India by expressing that human being need to lean on themselves to achieve the release.

Moreover, Buddhism proposes a radical conception that despite the classes, slave, pariah or clergy are equal in the ability to release and reach Nirvana with minds. “There is no class in the same red blood, there is no class in the same salty tear, human being do not have necklace on their neck or tinca sign (a noble sign in Brahman) on their forehead when they are born” [10, p. 115]. Buddhism recognizes all classes, including the Brahman, are basically equal in suffering since they are under the control of impermanence law (birth, age, sickness, death) and psychology rule (love, hatred, exultancy, rage, greed, anger, delusion...). Hence, the possibilities of escaping from sufferings are equal when we understand the reasons of suffering are not determined by any Gods, we ourselves create the karma through ignorance and a chain of cause and condition (twelve nidanas). Buddhism affirmed that: “I (Buddha) is an accomplished Buddha, living beings are becoming Buddha” [buddhāvataṃsaka Sutra] because all of us have same Buddha’s nature. However, these possibilities must be practiced with self-conscious and persistence. Buddha always asserted that the way for release is releasing ourselves. In *Dīghanikāya I Sutra*, *Great Nirvana Sutra*, when entering into Nirvana, Buddha said in his testament: “Be our own light. Lean on yourselves, do not lean on any other things. Use proper doctrine to be the light, use proper doctrine to lean on, do not lean on any other things. Light the torch yourselves to go” [Dīghanikāya I Sutra ]. Buddha just showed the way and method for you to practice, undeceive and escape yourselves from sufferings, Scholar Daisaku Ikeda in his research raised a comments on equal spirit of

Buddhism as follow: “Overpassing narrow-minded point of view on blood, class and nation, Buddhism expressed the intentness about the equality of the four traditional class in Indian society” [1, p. 108].

According to the Extinguish of suffering, release is the status of escaping from all constraints of phenomenon and sensual world, entering Nirvana. While the human being eliminate, exterminate causes of suffering, they simultaneously reach the status of undeceiving and releasing, thus entering Nirvana. “Buddhism advocate that living of one being is a continual flow of change on the momentum of continuous cause-effect of the five aggregates. The motive of that living flow is desire and passion. If there is desire and passion, there is still living, transmigration, just like if oil and wick remain, lamp is still lighted. When passion is wiped out, changing flow of the five aggregates will stop and birth-death. At that moment, Nirvana will appear” [9, p. 30].

According to etymology, Nirvana means no more being sunk. Nirvana in Buddhism is the completely silent status, not being lust, exterminating love and desire, removing the ignorance, ending all sufferings, sorrows, ending the transmigration circle. “Nirvana of Buddhism is not a heaven as many people misunderstand. Buddhism advocate that things are impermanent and non-self, hence, no permanent existence of a world is recognized though that world is Land of Ultimate Bliss” [9, p. 29]. Nirvana is a sublime status that human being can achieve in present life. Buddhism does not teach the supreme goal can be achieved in the afterlife. This is the significant difference in the conception on Nirvana between Buddhist and Non-Buddhist about a permanent Heaven only reached after death; or the harmony with the Holly spirit or Gods in afterlife. “Nirvana achieved in the present life with remains of body is called Incomplete Nirvana. When an Arhat’s body is destroyed, there is no more material that means he achieves Nirvana, at that time it is called Remainderless Nirvana” [6, p. 150].

From the affirmation that suffering can be exterminated, the way of release that Buddhism choose is the Middle Way; that means not being sunk in mean passions but not constrain ourselves to be ascetic. “Dear Bhiksu, Tathagata gave up those two extremes and found out (attain) the middle way (Majjhimâ Patipadâ or Madhya Pratipada), the way helping us see (cakkhu), recognize (nâna) and leading to calmness (vupasamaya), supreme wisdom (abhinnâya), undeceiving (sambodhâya) and Nirvana [Dharmacakrapravartana Sutra]

Buddhism proposes The Truth of religion – way to release sufferings – which substantially is exterminating the ignorance. Method of suffering extinction, reaching release, achieving Nirvana is The Noble Eightfold path, combining moral, intellectual and belief cultivation (three studies: Discipline – Meditation – Wisdom). According to that, human being go back to their own minds at first to exterminate the ignorance, enlighten inherent intellect and to escape, enter Nirvana.

The Noble Eightfold path is the true way or the set of eight practicing methods helping human being reach the achievement of release. They are: correctly acknowledging to recognize true things belongs to *Right view*; thinking straightly, insightfully (*Right thought*); speaking out sincere, sound things, not editing, fabricating false stories (*Right speech*); genuine actions, activities (*Right action*); choosing jobs suitable to your own ability not to affect others in living-making (*Right livelihood*); attempting and working hard to extinguish evil things, aim at kind things (*Right effort*); minding and thinking about good and true things (*Right mindfulness*); Keeping heart stable, not fluctuating, and keeping your spiritual status calm is *Right concentration*.

In which, Discipline: (*right speech, right action, right livelihood*) is the forbidden things and rules helping the priest not make mistake caused by body, mouth and will. They leads human being to live morally, it is the initial, essential period and the foundation to move to later period. Meditation (*right conception, right mindfulness and right effort*) is the method helping the priests’ heart not be dispersed, therefore bad thoughts and ideas are exterminated. Meditation is also concentrating the thoughts on doing good things, therefore comfort will arise. Wisdom (*right view, right thought*) means that the priests having insightful intellect can extinguish the ignorance, greed for passions and do kind things, benefit beings.

Therefore, thought of release in Buddhism expresses the profound humanity spirit. It concerns the condition of each person and advocate to release all of beings from sufferings in life by their own moral life and power of intellect.

In conclusion, contents of Buddhist philosophy of human life mentions and helps human being solve issues related to their life, recognize the nature of suffering in life and find out way of practicing to escape from sufferings, release ourselves. With those humane contents, when entering Vietnam, the Buddhist philosophy of human life Buddhism has made profound impacts on all sides of social life, especially in moral life of Vietnamese.

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