

## ***Life of Pi: A Story of Suffering and Liberation from Buddhist Interpretation***

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### **Abstract**

*Life of Pi* is a fantasy adventure novel written by Yann Martel. Published in 2002, it won a big award and was later adapted into a much acclaimed movie by Ang Lee. A shipwreck story with a boy and tiger coexisting on a lifeboat invites various interpretations. This paper explores its meaning from Buddhist perspective, aiming to prove that it is not only an intriguing survival story but a universal allegory of human predicament and the ways to be liberated from it.

The contents of this study are divided into two parts. The first part illustrates Pi's experiences as the embodiment of samsara. His suffering reflects the first of the Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha. The ocean on which he drifts symbolizes human life full of sorrow and uncertainty. The shipwreck signifies the inconstancy of life that falls prey to trials and tribulations. Pi's ordeals can be classified into eight different types of suffering common to humanity. The second part explores the path to nirvana. The moment Pi reaches the land implies the attainment of nirvana. The ways leading to the end of his suffering enact the last of the Four Noble Truths. For this part,

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Buddhist doctrines on meditative stability and emptiness are discussed.

Buddhism is not one of the three religions Pi embraces, nor is Pi a Buddhist disciple practicing the ways to nirvana. Yet, his story is rich in Buddhist implications. His adventure bears witness to the remedy of suffering as prescribed by the Buddha. Suffering and the cessation of suffering are not only the Buddha's central teaching but the eternal theme in literary works.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, suffering, liberation, wisdom, faith



## ***Life of Pi: A Story of Suffering and Liberation from Buddhist Interpretation***

*Life of Pi* was written by Yann Martel, a Canadian writer travelling in many countries and experiencing many odd jobs. Having written some unsuccessful works, he got international literary reputation in 2002 with the publication of *Life of Pi*, his second novel. It won the Man Booker Prize, and was adapted into a popular 3D film by director Ang Lee in 2012. Pi is a 16-year-old Indian boy embracing three religions: Hinduism, Catholicism and Islam. He changes his name from Piscine to Pi because his schoolmates often tease the similar pronunciation between “Piscine” and “pissing.” Pi’s name has symbolic meanings. For one thing, Pi is the 16th letter of the Greek alphabet, which corresponds to Pi’s age. It’s also a mathematical term for 3.14 or  $22/7$ , and 227 is the number of the days his ordeals last. Political turmoil forces his family to leave India for Canada. The cargo ship sinks on the Pacific and Pi is the only survivor. On the lifeboat are a zebra, hyena, orangutan and tiger, all of which are to be sold to foreign zoos. The hyena quickly devours the zebra and orangutan, and is in turn eaten by the tiger. Pi is left alone with the tiger named Richard Parker. He tames Richard Parker by offering it food and water, establishing his status as a circus master to dominate a wild animal. A subtle relationship made up of love and fear thus develops between him and the tiger. Pi’s lifeboat finally lands on Mexican coast and Richard Parker disappears into the forest.

The critical responses of the novel, compared with those of the film, were lukewarm, if not negative. James Wood (Martel, 2002, p. ix) ridiculed its “shipwreck conventions.” The desperate search for food and water, the sighting of a passing ship, and a brief respite on a tiny island are all stereotypes in a survival story. Wood was not the only critic to refuse *Life of Pi* a big applause. It was regarded as merely an “edge-of-seat adventure” (Jordan, 2002), or a novel of “proposition” and “conjectures” failing to achieve the intention to make readers believe in God (Clements, 2002). And Martel’s assertion of the same operation of religion and novel by using Coleridge’s phrase “suspension of disbelief” was highly problematized (Cole, 2004). Indeed, the story itself requires the very “suspension of disbelief.” A man and a tiger may be unlikely to coexist, and an acid island may be botanically impossible. But the surface meaning can be transcended and endowed with something deeper. To achieve this aim, this paper analyzes it as an allegory carrying a Buddhist theme.

In this novel, Pi’s story is said to be the one that “will make you believe in God” (Martel, 2002, p. ix). This paper builds on this claim, examining Pi’s adventure in the framework of Buddhist philosophy to make readers believe in God. But this God, instead of the three gods embraced by Pi, is the Buddha, and His teaching is the very religious discourse used to analyze this novel. This paper is divided into two parts: samsara and nirvana. The first part illustrates suffering as the common feature of life. The second part analyzes the wisdom to cease suffering as manifested in this novel. Meditative stability and emptiness are the two paths to be explored

as the effective remedy of suffering. Although Pi doesn't worship Buddhism or practice the Middle Way, Buddhist philosophy finds rich expression in this novel. Appropriating Buddhist discourse to analyze *Life of Pi* not only deepens its meaning but also highlights the significance of Oriental thinking. The Buddha once said that he taught only one thing: suffering and the cessation of suffering (Humphreys, 1990). This paper pays tribute to Buddha's sublime aspiration by analyzing Pi's suffering and his ways of liberation.

## **Samsara**

From the Buddhist perspective, *Life of Pi* is an allegory to symbolize the journey of life. The ocean on which Pi drifts is the ocean of "samsara," the cycle of repeated birth and death that individuals undergo until they attain nirvana ("Samsara," 2004). According to the Four Noble Truths<sup>1</sup> taught by the Buddha, this endless cycle of rebirth is produced by karmic consequences and entraps humans in an inextricable web of suffering (Trainor, 2004). Buddhist scriptures abound in the image of ocean as a reservoir of suffering with sentient beings engulfed in it. Those with enlightened minds like the Bodhisattvas succeed in reaching the shore and devote themselves to helping the populace cross the ocean (Conze &

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<sup>1</sup> The Four Noble Truths are the central teachings of Buddhism. The Buddha discovered them while struggling for enlightenment. They cover the key steps in acknowledging suffering as the truth of life, attachment as the cause of suffering, nirvana as the end of suffering and the Middle Way as the path to the end of suffering (Trainor, 2004). All the sentient beings who come to a full understanding of these Four Noble Truths and stay on the path the Buddha prescribes will be led into the eternal state of peace and happiness.

Horner, 1954).

*Life of Pi* fits the Buddhist images of the ocean of samsara and land of salvation. The ocean on which Pi drifts is a realm of sorrow and despair. He is trapped in it, dominated by impermanence and powerless to control his way. On this ocean, he experiences enormous suffering. The animals on his lifeboat incur his greed, hatred and delusion, the “three poisons”<sup>2</sup> defined in Buddhism as the root causes of rebirth. The hyena and the tiger show the extreme struggle for survival in harsh times. Pi’s cannibalism ends their struggle, meanwhile culminating the three poisons he is contaminated with. The shipwreck implies the impermanence of life wherein nothing is fixed but subject to change all the time. The lifeboat is the tool that enables humans to be saved. The moment the boat, raft or ship reaches the land is the moment of human deliverance. The metaphoric implication of Pi’s drifting and Buddhist philosophy is elaborated in the following aspects of suffering.

## Birth

In Buddhism, the pain of birth initiates all the other sufferings. In this novel, birth takes on the symbolic meaning instead of the

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<sup>2</sup> In Buddhist teachings, greed, hatred, and delusion are known as the three poisons, the three unwholesome roots, and the three fires (“akuśala-mūla,” 2004). Greed refers to our misplaced desire and attachment. Hatred refers to our anger, aversion and repulsion toward unpleasant things. Delusion refers to our misperception of reality. All our negative states of consciousness are seen as ultimately grounded in one or more of these three roots. Only when wisdom eradicates these roots can the mind become free at death and one is no more subject to rebirth.

literal one. It refers to the moment when the lifeboat dropped onto the sea and thereby ushered in all the trials. Hidden in the cargo ship, the lifeboat remains intact, safe and sheltered, like a fetus protected by its mother in the womb. With the change of external conditions, things begin to evolve into different forms. The birth of human life, like the lifeboat forced to drop onto the sea, depends on causes and conditions to happen. The sudden change of the weather, together with the defects of the ship and probably the negligence of the crew, caused the ship to sink. The sharp pain of being pulled out of the womb in literal birth parallels the terror of the shipwreck when the lifeboat was cut off from the ship. The Buddhist perception of the pain of birth finds a reverberating echo from Western psychoanalytic critique. Birth, in the psychoanalytic formulation, means the departure from merging with the mother into a world of distinction and rivalry. In more specific terms, birth marks the entry into the Oedipal phase from the pre-Oedipal one. In Nancy Chodorow's (1978) view, the preoedipal stage involves the strong attachment and intimacy with the mother. Primary love and flexible ego boundaries are overriding at this stage. The later oedipal period, however, has a sudden curtailment of fusion with the primary love, and emphasizes a more separate and rigid self. Psychoanalysis and Buddhism agree that all the torment and anguish in life can be attributed to birth.

In Buddhist thinking, birth means more than the moment when a baby undergoes physical separation from its mother. It is regarded as the herald to bring all the joy and sorrow to life, or the beginning of thoughts and feelings related to future sufferings. Such

a perception is not a far cry from Western psychoanalysis, which claims that the bliss of the pre-oedipal period is gone with the entry into the oedipal phase. When ego boundary is generated during the oedipal stage, the fusion and intimacy between mother and child vanishes and in its stead is a more separate and rigid self, what Buddhism discerns as the main cause of suffering. Birth disrupts the infantile blissful state and produces a limited self always seeking for happiness. The dropping of the lifeboat onto the sea is the beginning of Pi's ordeals. It symbolizes the birth of life which is equivalent to the generation of suffering.

### **Aging, Sickness and Death**

Aging, sickness, death, together with birth, constitute the whole cycle of life. Once a cycle is completed, another cycle begins. The reincarnation of life goes on without stopping until the day the individual gets enlightenment to transcend the limits of samsara: "each soul travels in this life on a pilgrimage where it is born and dies, and is born again and dies again, and again, and again, until it manages to shed the sheaths that imprison it here below" (Martel, 2002, p. 61). Hinduism as well as Buddhism shares the concept of the never-ending cycle of life. The "sheaths" that imprison the soul in each lifetime, in Buddhist philosophy, are the three fires of greed, desire and delusion. Once these psychological defilements are destroyed by wisdom, the mind becomes free and radiant and at death, one is no more subject to rebirth ("Dharma Data," 2008). The moment one manages to "shed the sheaths" is the moment of absolute cessation of suffering, by which the transcendental state of

Buddhahood, Nirvana, is achieved.

In contrast with the perfect state of Nirvana, this endless cycle is full of impermanence and turbulence. Decay, disease and death are the inevitable dooms of humans. Not only living beings but inanimate things perish away gradually. The Bodhisattva's remark illustrated aging and death: "except for the great Nirvana of deathlessness, every other thing, being compounded, must perish; it is impermanent and subject to extinction and decay" (Conze & Horner, 1954, p. 25). Pi suffers from the decaying nature of things on the sea: "Everything suffered. Everything became sun-bleached and weather-beaten. We perished away. It happened slowly, so that I didn't notice it all the time. But I noticed it regularly" (Martel, 2002, p. 300). Near the end of his journey, his clothes were torn, his skin blistered, his body became frail and he was temporarily blind. Pi's misery reflects the doom of most sentient beings when their life is coming to an end. The decaying body, blurring eyesight and delusion are the signs of death. The landing on Mexican coast ended Pi's journey, symbolizing the death of a lifetime full of sorrow and bitterness.

### **Denial of One's Desires**

Pi's drifting symbolizes the loss of autonomy over the external situation. Pi's lifeboat was dominated by ocean currents, just as our fate is determined by external circumstances. His is a universal human condition, a puppet manipulated by exterior forces: "What was the point of plotting a course if I could not act on it? ... so I

drifted. Winds and currents decided where I went. Time became distance for me in the way it is for all mortals---I travelled down the road of life” (Martel, 2002, p. 244). Pi’s reminiscence echoes the Buddhist teaching that we mortals are not free to act on our own. The currents, like the external condition, drive us off the course we want. We are all like Pi, a castaway “perpetually at the center of a circle,” and “caught in a harrowing ballet of circles” (Martel, 2002, p. 269). Drifting on the sea of life, Pi is always unable to get what he wants. As he recollected, “When it is light, the openness of the sea is blinding and frightening. When it is dark, the darkness is claustrophobic” (Martel, 2002, p. 269). Caught in opposites, he is in perpetual want of something else. Happiness is only a transitory sensation, unstable and changing all the time. When Pi is in darkness, he suffers from claustrophobia and longs for the dawning of light. Yet when he is in broad daylight, the blinding light and unlimited space frighten him. Pi’s happiness is transitory as it arises from the lessening of pain. Happiness and pain are relative sensations without an inherent entity. That explains his longing for the day after long exposure to darkness and vice versa. Neither darkness nor light is soothing or comforting in itself.

### **Separation from the Pleasant and Association with the Unpleasant**

The departure from India to Canada separated Pi from the beloved things he possessed. Saying farewell to the animals in his father’s zoo and other familiar things saddened him. But the sadness was trivial compared with the deep sorrow caused by the shipwreck.

This accident deprived him of his family members, making him a helpless orphan. When the hope of reunion with his father and brother was gone, he felt desperate. The cruel death of his mother was another great blow to him. Death is the common fate of humans. Gradually or suddenly, it comes and deprives us of the pleasing things we own. Pi remarked the universal pain of waiting for death:

Oncoming death is terrible enough, but worse still is oncoming death with time to spare, time in which all the happiness that might have been yours becomes clear to you. You see with utter lucidity all that you are losing. The sight brings on an oppressive sadness that no car about to hit you or water about to drown you can match. (Martel, 2002, p. 186)

Death is terrible in that it takes away the worldly happiness we think belongs to us. Buddhism has pointed out the very fact that death causes great distress because of our attachment to the beloved things and people. The more we are attached to somebody or something, the more miserable we will become when they disappear.

Opposite to the suffering of separation from the pleasing is that of association with the unpleasing. The two coexist inseparably in one's lifetime. The encounter with our enemy or unpleasant things brings us lots of pain. In Pi's story, he lived with a deadly rival on the lifeboat. The tiger, real or imaginary, posed a great threat to Pi, forcing him to keep alert all the time. Besides the dangerous companion, the struggle for survival was the most unpleasing and

challenging task for Pi to undertake. With scarce food and water, surviving became extremely difficult and killing was the sole means of survival. The French cook, in Pi's second story, was the murderer of the Chinese sailor and his mother. The encounter with such a cruel man corrupted Pi, evoking in him the inborn evil: "He [cook] was such an evil man. Worse still, he met evil in me---selfishness, anger, ruthlessness, I must live with that" (Martel, 2002, p. 391). Because of his bad influence, Pi consumed more than his share of the rations on the lifeboat. Like the cook, Pi began to kill and eat raw meat, aware of his existence as degenerate as an animal. To avenge his mother's death, he killed the cook and ate his organs. The meeting with the cook resulted in Pi's cannibalism, a terrible crime weighing down on his mind forever. Altogether, separation from the pleasing and association with the unpleasing trigger Pi's greed, hatred and delusion, the three poisons as discussed earlier.

### **Five Aggregates of Attachment**

According to Buddhist philosophy, the "five aggregates of attachment" ("upādāna-skandha," 2004) is the final part of the first Noble Truth, suffering. This kind of attachment, begotten from humans' five aggregates, is the source of desire for pleasurable sensations. Such a craving is intrinsic to human existence, which generates an endless cycle of suffering. In Pi's case, rain or shine, day or night, there was no absolute and lasting comfort but the feeling of lack tormented him. Together, his body and mind became the generator of evil and the evil in turn did harm to him. The desire for survival made him a ruthless killer. When he killed fish for

the first time to quench his hunger, he felt horrified at the sight of blood. But later when he landed on a mysterious island, he killed more meerkats than he needed to release the pent-up anger of being hungry. As Pi reflected, “When your life is threatened, your sense of empathy is blunted by a terrible, selfish hunger for survival” (Martel, 2002, p. 151). The feeling of lack transformed Pi from an animal-caring vegetarian to a cruel killer of animals. The first killing of fish brought more killings later on.

Buddhism regards desire as the inclinations to increase or continue the separateness of existence (Humphreys, 1990). Such a desire for self at the expense of others’ welfare causes suffering. Pi’s temporary relief of hunger depended on the killing of other creatures, and thus brought everlasting trauma to him, as he confessed sadly, “I was now a killer. I was now as guilty as Cain” (Martel, 2002, p. 231). The burning desire for survival and the consequent evils were imprinted in Pi’s mind just as the mark of murder was branded on Cain’s forehead. The image of Richard Parker will prey on him forever. While he was aware of his weakness, he was unable to control his desires. His is the universal human condition dominated by desires for sensory gratification. When it was hot, he was parched and wished to be wet, yet when it rained, he was nearly drowned and wished to be dry (Martel, 2002, p. 273). Manipulated by pairs of opposites, he is powerless to quench the desires generated in this material world.

## Nirvana

Pi is the only survivor to reach the land, the Buddhist symbol of the blissful state of nirvana in contrast with the ocean of samsara. Compared with the other beings on the same ship, he alone has the religious temperament. Faith and religion is the invisible vehicle to ferry him across the ocean. His salvation results from his inner strength instead of supernatural help. The obstacles to be overcome to reach the land are fear and desire. Joseph Campbell (1988) remarked that the Buddha achieved enlightenment because he transcended the fear of death and desire for life. Pi is not the Buddha that has totally rid himself of fear and desire. Yet, his adventure on the acid island implies the possibility of such transcendence. This island is a great temptation of fear and desire---the fear of death when drifting on the ocean again and the desire to stay alive on an island with abundant supplies of food and water. He could have yielded to this temptation and never reached the land. But in the nick of time, he fled the island for fear of the spiritual death there: “How many forlorn hours in the arboreal city with only meerkats for company? How many dreams of a happy life dashed? ... How much loneliness endured?” (Martel, 2002, p. 357) A secluded life without contact with humans is no better than death. The escape from the uninhabited island is a symbolic refusal of egoism in favor of the Mahayana principle, which emphasizes the spirit of altruism. A hermit’s life of isolation is not preferable as it benefits only oneself without considering others’ welfare. This episode can be interpreted as the choice of living an altruistic life rather than a secluded one.

Pi's overcoming of fear and desire is prerequisite to his salvation. His experiences highlight the potentiality of enlightenment. The path to nirvana, the last of Buddha's Four Noble Truths, leads to the cessation of suffering. Pi's ways of dealing with trials fit Buddha's remedy for ending suffering. They include the practice of meditative stabilization and the perception of emptiness. The path to liberation is long and hard but open to all beings with the Buddha consciousness. Pi points the way to nirvana although he doesn't acknowledge himself a Buddhist disciple.

### **Meditative Stabilization**

In Buddhist practice, meditation is neither day-dream nor reverie. It is a severe system of mental training. Prayer is the meditation of an ethical kind, which consists in cherishing the moods of loving kindness, compassion, and impartiality (Coomaraswamy, 1964). Buddhism classifies meditative stabilization as one of the six perfections.<sup>3</sup> It refers to a virtuous state of mind that focuses on its object of meditation without distraction to other things (Tsong-kha-pa, 2004). Such mentality helps to clear away suffering by stabilizing body and mind in bliss within the present moment.

The power of meditation is not advocated by religion alone. Scientific research also confirms its effect on achieving emotional

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<sup>3</sup> Six perfections are the summation of all the key points of bodhisattva practice, the foundation for achieving Buddhahood (Tsong-kha-pa, 2004). They refer to the perfect qualities of generosity, ethical discipline, patience, joyful perseverance, meditative stabilization and wisdom. Each perfection is the precondition for subsequent ones. The bliss of liberation is attained through the power of wisdom, which is obtained by means of meditative stabilization (Tsong-kha-pa, 2004).

equanimity. Meditation in its broad sense covers sitting meditation, yoga, tai-chi and praying. All these different forms of meditation involve deep breathing, focus on one thing and struggling with being in the here and now (Flower, 2011). Through the practice of mindfulness, one develops a more malleable brain, becoming more positive and resilient in the face of painful emotions. In brief, meditation helps build stronger immune system and overcome major depression (Flower, 2011). Either Buddhism or scientific research affirms the power of meditation. Pi embodied the effect of meditation through his praying. Before his adventure, his praying with a Muslim mystic led him to the union with the universe, wherein he and nature were one, born of the same mystery: “Whereas before the road, the sea, the trees, the air, the sun all spoke differently to me, now they spoke one language of unity. ... Every element lived in harmonious relation with its neighbor, and all was kith and kin. ... I felt like the center of a small circle coinciding with the center of a much larger one” (Martel, 2002, pp. 78-9). While everything existed unrelayed before, he saw them as the manifestation of God’s love after the praying. Meditation made him see everything as interrelated and equally part and parcel of this universe. Buddhist compassion, impartiality and loving kindness reside in this view of the harmonious relationship of man and nature.

The ability to transcend the limited human mind to something higher and noble is the key to Pi’s survival. During his ordeals, praying became an essential daily routine. He divided his time into five sections every day, and each section began or ended with

praying. His fervent praying brought a certain degree of serenity, which in turn helped to aestheticize his misery into something sublime. For example, he would point to his turban and call it “God’s hat,” his pants as “God’s attire,” Richard Parker as “God’s Cat,” lifeboat as “God’s ark” and sky as “God’s ear” (Martel, 2002, p. 264). Long exposure to praying purified his mind, elevating his vision to something higher and thus relieving his sufferings. Incessant praying also exposed him to the manifestation of divinity on the sea: “For two, perhaps three seconds, a gigantic, blinding white shard of glass from a broken cosmic window danced in the sky, insubstantial yet overwhelmingly powerful. Ten thousand trumpets and twenty thousand drums could not have made as much noise as that bolt of lightning” (Martel, 2002, p. 293). Seeing the miraculous sight, Pi exclaimed, “This is a miracle. This is an outbreak of divinity. ... I could not find what it was, this thing so vast and fantastic” (Martel, 2002, p. 294). All the sorrow, pain and fear vanished at the very moment of divine manifestation. It may well be claimed the moment of liberation when he felt the alliance with a higher power, receiving its boundless love and mercy. After the awe-inspiring spectacle, he felt his suffering insignificant.

In Buddhist teaching, profound meditation brings forth the cosmic consciousness wherein human mind is raised to its highest plane (Humphreys, 1990). The practitioner of Zen achieves such a sense of union with nature and thereby sees into one’s true nature. All forms of life, being manifestations of one life, are interrelated in a complex web. The world of distinction is therefore seen as falsely

imagined and all discriminations crumble (Humphreys, 1990). Cosmic consciousness prepares his mindset for the future difficulties. Without the belief that the founding principle of existence is love, he can't possibly survive. Such consciousness results in tolerance, compassion and serenity to dispel all the sorrow and despair as experienced in his later ordeals. Devoid of tension, the world is seen and enjoyed more fully than before. Dr. Suzuki (1961), a master in Zen Buddhism, illustrated the blissful vision as follows: "The grandeur, the vastness, the inexhaustible of nature are in man, and the sensitiveness and mystic impenetrability of the soul lies also in the bosom of nature" (p. 342). The vision of cosmic consciousness connects each soul not only to the universe but to one another in the infinite mutual relationship, thus relieving human afflictions (Humphreys, 1990). Through meditation, Pi experienced the Zen vision of unity with nature and the universe, and the consequent sense of serenity saved him from despair. The supreme message in cosmic consciousness is love. The cultivation of meditative stabilization reveals that the phenomenal world is the manifestation of love. The moment Pi gained this consciousness was the moment of his enlightenment. This is the invisible armor that protects him during the trials. If human illusion disrupts the unity and harmony of all beings, love is the cohesive element to make the separate parts become one (Humphreys, 1990). Put in the grand universe, suffering is insignificant. It is a part of life, an essential instrument to make life whole and complete.

## Wisdom of Emptiness

The realization of the non-substantiality of things is the essence of Buddhist wisdom. *Life of Pi* implicitly reveals this wisdom. In this section, the concept of emptiness, together with its related ideas of impermanence, dependent-arising and karmic consequences is to be explored as Pi's spiritual aid to help him reach the land.

Emptiness is the central teaching in Buddhism. It conveys the basic Buddhist doctrines on impermanence and dependent-arising (Wright, 2010). Impermanence means that all phenomena are empty of inherent existence and subject to continual changes. Dependent-arising is the principle the Buddha used to explain the functioning of phenomena, which is characterized by impermanence and change (Kalupahana, 1986). Lacking essence, all phenomena are dependent-arising. As Master Tsong-kha-pa (2002) illustrated: "All compounded phenomena are dependent-arising. Anything that is a dependent-arising is not autonomous because it is produced in dependence upon causes and conditions. These things all lack autonomy. Therefore, there is no thing which has self, that is, intrinsic nature" (p. 760). Here, Master Tsong-kha-pa explained the message of *The Heart Sutra*, with the best known lines on "emptiness" like "form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form, the same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness." *The Heart Sutra* clearly explicates that emptiness is synonymous with worldly form and all human feelings and perceptions. So, emptiness

doesn't mean "nothing" or nihilism as some people misunderstand. Conze and Horner (1954) attributed the prevalent misinterpretation of emptiness to language, which can only convey its half truth, "nothingness," not its "fullness." Contrary to the surface meaning of the word, "emptiness" is already full, filled with Tao or Zen or Light (Humphreys, 1990). The fullness of the concept of "emptiness" is shown in the passage from a Buddhist scripture, *Majjhima-nikāya*:

"By abiding in what (concept) are you now abiding in its fullness, Sariputta?"

"By abiding in (the concept of) emptiness am I now abiding in its fullness, Lord."

"This is the abiding of 'great men', Sariputta, that is to say (the concept of) emptiness." (as cited in Conze & Horner, 1954, p. 92).

### **Unfixed subjectivity**

Based on this doctrine of "emptiness," human subjectivity is never fixed or static. *Diamond Sutra* mentioned this point: "there is no such thing as a self, a person, a living being, or a universal self---all things are devoid of selfhood, devoid of any separate individuality" (Ch.17). Subjectivity is a living, complex and evolving organism responding to external conditions. We act and are acted upon by external conditions, lacking autonomy and intrinsic nature. The ordeals evoked Pi's dark self, transforming him from a bookish and religious vegetarian into a violent and cruel killer. His identity was determined by the external condition, not a fixed or

static entity. In this novel, Pi and Richard Parker<sup>4</sup> are two sides of the same being, with the tiger serving as the boy's substitute ego. The tiger is not merely the animal saved by Pi during the shipwreck; it points to something deeper and mysterious. "The Tyger," a poem by William Blake (1794), conveyed the awe at the mystery of creation and God's inscrutable will power: "Tyger Tyger, burning bright, / In the forests of the night; / What immortal hand or eye, / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?" The two lines, "Did he smile his work to see? / Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" further question God's intention to make the good and evil, innocent and experienced coexist in this universe. *Life of Pi*, as Tim Adams (2002) remarked, asks readers to find reference point in Blake. The aesthetic beauty and fearsome power of Blake's tiger parallels Pi's tiger, whose role leaves fertile space for interpretation.

Pi remarked that he couldn't survive without Richard Parker. This statement validates the assumption that the tiger is his substitute ego, a natural response to the need of survival. The overlapping of Pi and tiger's identity is implied in Pi's confession of how he

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<sup>4</sup> The choice of the name "Richard Parker," according to Yann Martel (2003), is the result of a triple coincidence. One is the 1884 lifeboat case in England. It's about a cabin boy killed and eaten by three other survivors during a shipwreck, who fed on his body and blood until a ship appeared and rescued them. The case went to the court and the captain was found guilty, for cannibalism is immoral, an improper way for human beings to treat one another. Another is a novel written by Edgar Allen Poe in 1837. It's about a shipwreck and the two survivors ate a third man called Richard Parker. The other also involved a foundered ship in 1846, on which there were deaths and cannibalism, one of the victims being Richard Parker. Martel concluded by saying that "So many victimized Richard Parkers had to mean something. My tiger found his name. He's a victim, too---or is he?"

ate like Richard Parker. The way Richard Parker “opened his maw and the squealing rat disappeared into it” parallels Pi’s eating crabs alive: “Every time they [crabs] appeared, I popped them one after another into my mouth like candy” (Martel, 2002, p. 249). There are some other clues from the novel to prove that the tiger is Pi’s alter ego. Throughout the journey, Pi was all alone without a tiger aboard. Here is the proof: “I looked out at the empty horizon. There was so much water. And I was all alone. **All alone** [my own emphasis]” (Martel, 2002, p. 212). The two words “all alone” reveal the fact that the tiger is an imaginary creature. Pi once called himself the “top tiger,” who claimed his territory by splashing his urine on the tarpaulin. And he later smelt a sharp, musky smell of urine coming from the tiger. Here, Pi and the tiger are one and the same. Being gluttons for anything resembling food, both became constipated. Altogether, they killed a man and ate his organs. Near the end of the journey, they became blind simultaneously.

Like the tiger, the French cook serves as Pi’s dark self. There is also a parallel identity between the two. The way the cook saved him was just the way Pi saved the tiger: “I wouldn’t have made it if the cook hadn’t thrown me a lifebuoy and pulled me in” (Martel, 2002, p. 382). Similarly, the animal story shows that Pi threw a lifebuoy to Richard Parker and pulled him in. The cook built a raft to help with the fishing; Pi also built a raft to flee the tiger. The cook swung his arms, catching flies and eating them greedily. Parallel to this crude behavior is Pi’s catching flying fish and crabs indiscriminately. The eating of rats was shared by the cook, tiger and Pi. The love/hatred

complex exists between Pi and the cook. As Pi remarks, “when your life has been given a reprieve, it’s impossible not to feel some warmth for the one to whom you owe that reprieve” (Martel, 2002, p. 389). Though horrified by the cook’s savage cruelty, Pi couldn’t but feel love and gratitude to him. There were even some moments when Pi looked at him with tenderness and imagined they were friends. When the cook hauled aboard a turtle or caught a big fish, Pi and his mother would smile broadly and there was a glow in their hearts that lasted for hours. The “evil” cook can be an angelic savior, depending on the situations Pi finds himself in. The contradictory feeling of love and hatred exists among Pi, the tiger and the cook. Though scared by them, Pi felt them the sustaining force to keep him alive. The tiger resembles the role of the cook, both functioning as Pi’s dark half, a kind of bad conscience and indispensable companion in solitude.

The overlapping identity of the three characters implies that there is no coherent, free and autonomous subject; instead, subjectivity is dependent-arising, changing and contradictory all the time. There is no permanent and autonomous self but different selves subject to revision and always in motion based on external conditions. Pi’s narration of the tiger and cook reveals his awareness of the evolution of different selves. Back in India, he is the devoutly religious boy and a keen observer of the animals kept in his father’s zoo. In the shipwreck, he becomes a cruel and cannibalistic killer. After he is saved, he becomes a postmodern thinker invalidating the existence of objective truth. All his transformation of consciousness

is conditioned by external circumstances. Good and evil, religious and revengeful, Pi fabricates his ego as a contradictory and arbitrary illusion of forms manifested by the tiger and cook.

The final touch of Pi's story resonates with Shakespeare's *Tempest*: "The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces, / The solemn temples, the great globe itself, Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve, / And, like this insubstantial pageant faded, / Leave not a rack behind" (IV.i.1883-87). The tiger's disappearance is the "insubstantial pageant" echoing the emptiness of phenomena. The ever-changing and non-fixed entity of everything is the ultimate truth of life. The tiger is the crucial sign of Pi's subjectivity, elusive and changing all the time. As the tiger dissolves in the end, leaving not a trace behind, so the self is devoid of essence, depending on external causes to arise.

### **Impermanence**

In *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha pointed out the impermanent nature of all phenomena as follows:

This is how to contemplate our conditioned existence in this fleeting world:

Like a tiny drop of dew, or a bubble floating in a stream;

Like a flash of lightning in a summer cloud,

Or a flickering lamp, an illusion, a phantom, or a dream.

So is all conditioned existence to be seen. (Ch. 32)

All mortal existence is temporary, subject to motion and change.

Empty selfhood as discussed above means the impermanence of personal feelings. The lack of an inherent self suggests the lack of permanent sensory impressions. Light and dark, wet and dry--- the trials Pi encounters on the sea teaches him the impermanence of phenomena. Neither light nor darkness has an inherent entity to please or annoy him. The suffering from the one triggers his desire for the other.

The concept of impermanence is also implied in his remark that all things deteriorate and wear away. He sees the Nature as a ceaseless becoming and never-ending change without an intrinsic existence. For example, the sea “roared like a tiger,” “whispered in your ear,” “clinked like small change in a pocket,” “thundered like avalanches,” “hissed like sandpaper,” while sometimes it became “dead silent” (Martel, 2002, p. 272). There were also many different skies characterized by majestic sights. The skies were “heavy, suffocating blanket of grey cloud,” “dappled with small, white, fleecy clouds,” and “featureless milky haze” (Martel, 2002, p. 271-2). The impermanent nature made him forget his suffering, as his mind was occupied with the thoughts that ‘span the universe, that capture both thunder and tinkle, thick and thin, the near and the far’ (Martel, 2002, p. 295). The fleeting wonders of nature teach him that the present moment is always different from the previous one. All natural phenomena are subject to change and dissolution, so is his suffering. The sense of unity with grand nature is cosmic consciousness, which helps relieve his sorrow.

## Karma

In Pi's reflection, he mentioned his belief in karma: "The paths to liberation are numerous, but the bank along the way is always the same, the Bank of Karma, where the liberation account of each of us is credited or debited depending on our actions" (Martel, 2002, p. 61). In its literal meaning, karma refers to cause and effect relationship of all things. In both Hinduism and Buddhism, karma is the truth that "whatever is subject to origination is subject also to cessation" (Coomaraswamy, 1964, p. 45). This law of universal causation is linked with emptiness. The lack of essence and dependent-arising are two aspects of the same thing. While emptiness reveals the non-fixity of all phenomenal, the law of karma explains the reason for the emergence of everything in the universe. Buddhism considers humans uncontrollably manipulated by the "habit-energy" acquired in previous lives (Conze & Horner, 1954). Driven blindly by this energy, people produce false views and defilements.

In Humphrey's (1990) opinion, the Buddhist doctrine of karma is significant in that it corresponds to Newton's third law of motion: the equal and opposite operation of Action and Reaction. Christianity also has the similar precept on cause and effect: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (*English Standard Version*, Gal. 6:7). As a record of natural justice, karma appeals to both Oriental and Occidental thinkers. Carl Jung's insight into archetypes is also related to karmic theory. Archetypes make up the collective unconscious, implying the

“psychic heredity” based on the hypothesis of reincarnation (Coward, 1985). Therefore, archetypes may well be claimed the psychological equivalent of memory traces. Psychic heredity does exist, as there is an unaccountable predisposition to certain traits, disease or talent.

The Buddhist teaching of karma meets with negative responses as it suggests a fatalistic or mechanic worldview. Yet, a true understanding of it prevents us from complaining about our present circumstances and helps us look positively for the future. Each event is at once the result of all that has preceded it and a contributing cause of all to come (Humphreys, 1990). Ananda Coomaraswamy (1964) illustrated the interrelationship of karma and free will as follows: “Buddhism is fatalistic in that sense that the present is always determined by the past; but the future remains free. Every operation we make depends on what we have come to be at the time, but what we are coming to be depends on the direction of the will” (p. 233). Karma implies an impulse that can be acted upon, reinforced or negated by the exercise of our free will (Coward, 1985). Every man is free within the limitations of his self-created karma.

The faith in karmic consequences plays a crucial role in Pi’s liberation. The law of karma teaches him that all deeds remain inerasable. The account of liberation, in his words, is “credited” with good deeds and “debited” with bad ones. With the firm belief in this logic of cause and effect, he learns to be patient with his sufferings, bearing them with perseverance and fortitude. For him, suffering equals the payment for the debts of evil deeds done in previous lives. The awareness that this endless cycle of life is to

clear debts strengthens him to confront hardships. But karma is not just the negative cause and effect relationship; it also calls for strenuous efforts to fight for a better future. Pi's clinging to life, praying all the time and never yielding to ordeals is the positive endeavor to reap future liberation. Like all phenomena in this world, liberation is dependent arising. In Buddhist thinking, saints or saviors are not born; they are made. We must work out our own salvation with diligence. As the nature of self is in a constant state of flux, so is the path to liberation. The path is not fixed or static but subject to change. It's the reservoir of cause and effect, the more the investment, the richer the profit. Implied in Pi's remark on karma is the belief in self-reliance. The imagery of a savings account illustrates the cause and effect doctrine in Buddhism. We should store positive merits for personal uses in the future; otherwise, we won't achieve the blissful state of liberation for ages to come.

At the moment Pi was saved, the tiger disappeared, but its memory lasted. This fact highlights the Buddhist wisdom of karma. The ending of a lifetime isn't a real end. Material things may collapse and decay, just as the tiger may vanish from his eyesight. But the cause and effect relationship spans across countless lifetimes. Past deeds, good or wrong, leave their traces indelibly in the sub-consciousness and exert their influences in future lives. What Pi experienced on the lifeboat will stay in his mind forever. The ending of the journey can't wipe out the memory of the evil he experienced. And the memory affected his new life in Canada. His religious fervor got more intense and his relationship with his family

became more intimate.

## **Conclusion**

Analyzed from the Buddhist perspective, *Life of Pi* is a spiritual allegory on universal suffering and the ways of liberation. The Pacific Ocean represents the sea of bitterness where people are powerless to defy the unpredictable currents. The lifeboat is the medium to cross over the sea to reach the shore beyond. The imagery in this novel fits the Buddhist philosophy on life in general. The suffering Pi experiences spans from birth to death. His liberation lies in his own efforts, not the gods he worships. It's his unique perception and deeds that make him reach the land. The perception echoes Buddhist wisdom of emptiness and the deeds equal the Buddhist practice of meditative stabilization.

How to cease suffering is the core issue in Buddhism. *Life of Pi* touches this issue implicitly, pointing to the first and last of the Four Noble Truths. Through knowledge of samsara is nirvana. Experiencing suffering is prerequisite to the pursuit of liberation. In this novel, suffering is first presented in eight different forms and the path to later liberation lies in Pi's ceaseless efforts. Meditation equips him with the power to experience cosmic consciousness. Put in the grand universe, his suffering becomes insignificant. Although unacknowledged, the wisdom of emptiness exists in his mind, together with its interrelated ideas of impermanence and karma. The coexistence of him and the tiger bears witness to an empty selfhood. Knowing the law of karma empowers him to withstand hardship

and meanwhile fight for future liberation. Pi's adventure points to the spiritual potentialities of every one of us. Like him, we must undergo a journey of sorrow, desire and fear. Yet, there is always the possibility of release and deliverance.

Pi's first story may not be true in the scientific sense as endorsed by the two Japanese investigators. But they admitted that it was the better one than the other with humans killing each other. Granted that religious and scientific truths are irreconcilable opposites, the former is given a greater value in this novel. Faith is the invisible lifeboat that helps Pi cross the ocean of samsara to reach the land of nirvana. Buddhist wisdom, as shown in this paper, serves as the strong armor protecting Pi to weather through hardships although he is unaware of it. All living beings have the germ of Buddhahood in them; the path to liberation is open to all.

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## 以佛法的觀點詮釋《少年 Pi 的奇幻漂流》： 有關苦難與解脫的故事

許惠芬\*

### 摘要

《少年 Pi 的奇幻漂流》是 Yann Martel 於 2002 年所寫的奇幻小說，出版後獲獎，李安導演之後改編成電影亦備受好評。印度少年 Pi 在救生艇上和老虎共存並得救的故事留下無限的解讀空間。本文嘗試以佛法的角度檢視此小說的義涵，看到它不只是引人入勝的冒險故事而已，而是生命存在的寓言，呈現出苦諦及解脫的智慧。

本文內容分兩部分，第一部分闡釋 Pi 所經歷的苦難反映眾生沉淪生死苦海，也就是佛陀所說的四聖諦當中的第一道諦——苦諦。大海是生命的象徵，充滿無常之苦，而船難是生命中無所不在的試煉。第二部分探討解脫的方法，此小說多處指涉禪定及空性的概念。Pi 上岸得救可視為到彼岸成就涅槃的象徵，而通向解脫之路需要智慧，四聖諦當中的道諦說明此道理。

Pi 不是修行的佛弟子，佛教也不是他所信奉的三個宗教之一。但是他的故事充滿佛法的寓意。在不自覺中他見證了佛法最核心的思想，也是文學作品恆久的主題——苦難及解脫。

**關鍵字：**佛法、苦難、解脫、智慧、信念

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