

## **BUDDHISM AND ITS INFLUENCE**

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When we take into consideration the immense service rendered by Buddhism during the last 2500 years we have to admit the fact that no other religion on earth has contributed so much for the peace, happiness and general welfare of mankind. Buddhism was introduced to many a country through amity and friendship and not by way of persecutions and aggressions. Its history clearly shows that it has not been forced down the thorax of people unwillingly. Nor has it tried to destroy the age old customs and traits of the people to whom it was introduced. The differences which we observe today in respect of various rites and practices in many Buddhist countries clearly show how closely Buddhism has been welded to the cultural patterns of the countries concerned. In contrast, we notice what different ways and means others have adopted to achieve the same end.

The historical accounts reveal to us that at one time Buddhism spread from India to Japan as well as from Indonesia to Mongolia. It was due to the influence exerted by Buddhism that literature, history, philosophy, arts and science of these countries developed so rapidly. This, no doubt is a valid indication of cultural heights attained by these countries under the auspices of Buddhism. We should ask ourselves the question what religion other than Buddhism has contributed so much to the promotion of ancient civilizations as that of India and China. Or, can we contemplate on any cultural achievement in Ceylon that Buddhism was not instrumental in promoting? Buddhism in this way is not a mere religion but a cultural force that has enriched the entire humanity.

During the life-time of the Buddha and at subsequent intervals, there have been great sages and philosophers in various countries. But no one has preached such a rational doctrine that appealed to the vast humanity. This is a fact that has been acknowledged by scholars of other faiths too. Prof. Rhys David has on one occasion said, "Gotama, the Buddha has not preached a doctrine which could be changed and altered according to the whims and fancies of his own disciples". In other faiths we know there have been teachings which had to be restated owing to the discoveries of various scientists. It is evident that faiths which try to change their fundamental doctrines by giving new interpretations to their old tenets according to the light shed by latest discoveries do not stand on stable ground. Religions that seek to gain a foothold by means of wealth, persecution and proselytizing are despised and looked down upon by the civilised people. Buddha's doctrine contains nothing that has to be changed and

interpreted as a new doctrine according to the changing circumstances of the world. It is in His doctrine that one finds the decisive answer to the real problems of life and the world.

Before the advent of the Buddha, the society, not only of India but of many other countries was quite a complex one. It was no one else but Buddha alone who gave the necessary advice for the people in order to get themselves disentangled from such intricacies of life. He pointed out clearly the obstacles that caste system brought in its wake and explained its evils. He fully realised the misery and the tribulations the poor had to undergo because of slavery and preached against its enforcement. He brought real freedom to women who had hitherto no right to aspire to higher positions in life, who were forbidden from higher academic pursuits and who were barred from taking part in religious performances. He showed by example the importance of tending the sick and the disabled. Thus we see how Buddha was instrumental in making a corrupt and crooked society refined and cultured by His valuable advice.

Buddhism bestowed on people who were not accustomed to think and speak freely the full benefits of such a freedom. It pointed out that man was no slave of God; that all efforts of man to placate Him by offerings and sacrifices were tantamount to an unjust bribing of divine powers. On the other hand, it emphasised the importance of wisdom and self-effort from one's own deliverance. Thus did Buddhism free man from his shackles of enslavement to the Divine Powers and raised him to a higher position. The doctrine that "One's salvation lies in one's own hands" was first discovered by Buddha himself. Buddha has shown by example that one is entirely responsible for one's own life. A person could attain to the heights reached by a Buddha only through individual effort and not through benevolence of God. His activities on earth have clearly shown that he is a person above all Gods. While all the founders of world religions have proclaimed that their discoveries are the revelations of a God, Buddha alone affirms that His omniscience is the result of His effort achieved without the help of any divine Grace.

Buddhism also teaches us that life is a force that flows incessantly subject to the laws of change. What we could expect from such a continuous flow is misery and not happiness. Hence if one were to obtain real happiness one must develop one's own mind to such a pitch as to divest oneself of all worldly hankerings and reach a supermundane level. Although many religions offer heaven as their final goal, Buddhism alone points out the utter vanity of such belief.

There is a great difference between the pleasure one derives from sensual gratification and that one gets from restraining them. Thus it was Buddha who

taught for the first time that the highest bliss in life is to be attained by controlling one's senses and not by indulging in them freely. While some religions say that beings attain immortality after death, others proclaim that there is no life after death. According to Buddhism both these views are all false. All changes in life are due to the good and bad actions of the individual. One is not free from rebirth as long as he is subject to the defilements.

Buddhism which accepts non-violence as one of its principles, teaches that one should develop loving-kindness towards all beings. The Buddhist doctrine that "Enmity does not cease through enmity" has indeed contributed a great deal to world peace. Our past history has shown that Buddhism was the only religion which has spread without blood-shed and violence. Yet the injustices committed by those who tried to propagate the God's message are recorded in our annals in blood.

To the world which was prone to safeguard religion as some private monopoly, Buddha taught that religion was a common heritage of all and every individual has a right to benefit from it.

Lord Buddha had expressed that we should not accept anything without due investigation. It was due to the encouragement that independent research received from Buddhism that literary and philosophical activities thrived in countries to which Buddhism came to be introduced. The Buddha's doctrine which is mainly rationalistic is not based on mere faith alone, as blind faith has no place in it. It has not asked its adherents to refrain from sin through fear of punishment from gods or the Buddha Himself. Refraining from sin is not to be done through any selfish motive but through the realisation of its unfairness.

The religions which sought to explain the origin and the end of the world find themselves in a mess today. In the light of the findings of the scientists we know that most of their explanations have been proved to be false. At the same time it is the Buddha's doctrine alone that has stood the test of time and won the applause of the entire world. While all other religious founders have been honoured and revered by their adherents only, the Buddha owing to the universal appeal of His doctrine has earned the respect and the admiration of the entire civilised world.