

# **BUDDHISM AND THE CONTEMPORARY MIND**

By Ven. Bhikkhu M. Sumedha

If we look around today with some awareness, we find human society plunged in great confusion, embitterment and despair everywhere. The individual has neither purposive clarity nor the clarity of purpose. To secure his goal - happiness - man has taken stupendous steps, but quite in vain. The 70 years of the Twentieth Century alone have witnessed many a pioneer endeavour in varied directions, of staggering cost, labour and organisation. Communism, Scientific Humanism, various modes of Socialism, the Welfare State and so on have been tried out without success to answer the vital discontent of man.

The individual crushed under the weight of organised life has sought escape through art, existentialism, money, sex and psychedelic drugs. Frustration is on the increase with its outbursts of crime and violence, juvenile delinquency and suicide. And man has not yet resolved this question of war. One half of the world lives in great poverty, a sub-human existence whilst the other half exists in satiety and disgust with their superfluous wealth. One thing is certain – technology has closed the erstwhile gulf between the individual and the world and these are no longer the leisurely Victorian days when individuals could pursue lonely courses, unaffected by and detached from the world process.

## **The pace**

Technology has forged the pace: the individual problem is the world problem, and vice-versa. We realise more keenly today the great truth in the lines of the English poet John Donne who wrote: “Any man’s death is my death, for I am involved in mankind. Therefore do not send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee”. All men are one in the fact of sorrow, in suffering. Right-minded and serious persons cannot claim to peaceful callings, if they do not awaken to the fact of sorrow and act so as to combat the mass of human suffering.

Man has, from time to time, sought to find a solution, a way out of this misery and confusion, through political, social and economic arbitration, planning and system. But from the picture of society today, both in the East and in the West, we can conclude without fear of opposition that there appears to be some fundamental error in judgement, some vital aspect of life overlooked, some truth not perceived. These socio-political systems are like the gropings of the blind, a blind’s man hesitant staff. What then is the error: what is it that has been overlooked?

Religion is that venue of thought where man inquires into and explore the truth of his own being. How do I come to be here, in a certain environment, under so many conditioning factors and with my own peculiar desire and thought pattern? Who am I? What am I? What exactly is the mystery of birth and death? What significance has this vast endless creation? Is there a God? Are not these questions the truly fundamental questions? Can man find anything like significance, beauty or truth without probing into these central facts of experience presented to him by his own consciousness?

Two thousand and five hundred years ago, a young man of majestic bearing and of astonishingly calm demeanour clad in the simple robes of a monk had, by his right efforts and undaunted quest, discovered the key to many a problem. He had tracked the answer, and had found it in the depths of his sublime meditation. Seated under a tree, renouncing as the ultimate measure even the will to live, he had pursued on that cool bright night of Full Moon, in the forest depths, the elusive truth that unravelled the riddle of his own existence. Through the watches of the night, the young aspirant pursued Truth through many a precarious course until Triumph greeted him with the morning sun. At dawn the splendour of Buddhahood illumined the skies crowning humanity with the glory of Freedom.

Through twenty-five centuries men from all over the world have united in the devotional greeting, “**Namotassa Bhagawato Arahato Samma-Sambuddhassa**”. “Salutations to the Blessed One, the Fully Awakened, the Enlightened”. For the blessing of a **Samma Sam-buddha** consists in making known a Path where hitherto none was visible. A Buddha has not only come to the end of the journey of evolution, but is also a World Teacher. As a Teacher, a Buddha excels, for, he is in sympathy with all the levels at which common humanity is found to struggle. He discourses at the level of the eager disciple, teaches in order to enlighten and does not talk down from a high pedestal. He is a master in the employment of appropriate similes, analogy and example. He chooses words with an unfailing meticulousness. A master of dialectics, analysis and logical perspicacity. He is also full of feeling which is pure and simple.

Compassion is not at variance with clarity. In a Buddha, the blend of heart and mind is perfect. His state is of Total being. He is a fully-bloomed flower of humanity. His own state is immeasurable and no descriptive symbols or images carved by the mind or by hand can adequately point to that immeasurable Reality, that boundless Being called a Buddha. He is “**Anantagocara**”, the trackless. Even, to pay homage to such a One is attended with Blessing. As is sung in the Dhammapada: “Who so pays homage to those who deserve homage, whether the Awakened or their disciples, those who have overcome the hosts of

evils and crossed the flood of sorrow, who have found deliverance and know no fear, his merit can never be measured by anyone”

As a Teacher, wherever he went, the Buddha struck the note of right inquiry. No modern document petitioned in the most democratic spirit can excel the Kalama Sutta in its charter for free, unhindered thinking. Strangely, today, man is demanding consciously, or unconsciously, exactly what was envisaged by the Buddha long ago in His remarkably pointed Charter of Free Inquiry. Inquiry can only bloom to fruition in a climate of freedom. Set aside all that you have been taught in the past, and inquire for yourself. No matter if the inquiry is into religious truths – all inquiry must be fostered in freedom.

If we look around with some awareness, we would find the people at the top lead sorry lives, full of insecurity, fear and burdened by a sense of false prestige. Are the people at the top – the captains of industry, political leaders, so-called social workers, executives, so-called statement-sane, rational, clear thinking men full of loving kindness? On the contrary, it is they who are the most sick at heart and in the mind.

Soon after His enlightenment, the Buddha exclaimed: “It is as a man lost in a dense forest, should suddenly come upon a track, a path, an ancient, forgotten path that led him to a city long lost to view, so have I. O Monks, discovered a Way, a Path. It is the Way revealed by the Buddhas, long lost to man in the wilderness of his thoughts.”

We all know what desire is: that which is most fundamental to life is desire. We are all aware of our wishes, longings and attachments. How easily does a wish form itself in the mind, how soon it garners the power to impel us to volitional activities: How quickly do we set about obtaining the object of our desire! And, how many desires arise during a single day, and how many there go to make a lifetime! Life, consciousness and desire are so closely knit that, to unravel the knots of existence, one has to investigate and acquaint oneself with the entire field, to know the factors and the process and create a “person”, a “self”, a “being”.

With discovery comes light; with light comes clarity; and with clarity knowledge beyond doubt, uncertainty and fear. “Unshakeable is my mind”, declared the Buddha to Subhuti, for he has penetrated beyond speculation and conjecture: “The Tathagatha has no theories, O Vaccha! He has penetrated the nature of perception. He sees forms, the arising of forms and the cessation of forms”, of the Arahata, the Buddha said: “His thought is quiet, quiet are his words and deeds when he has obtained freedom by true knowledge, when he has thus become a quiet man.”

The Buddha has no use for belief in his preaching, during his ministry – which lasted for about 45 years – He never called upon a hearer to believe. In this dispensation one does not have to accept a set of beliefs to begin with. The Pali word “Dhamma” has a threefold implied meaning, namely, substances, states and processes. The goal of Buddha meditation is insight; that is, to penetrate through the appearance and the reality of every phenomenon that comes within the fields of attention. There is nothing second-hand in this process: no passed-over truth: no handed-down belief. One has to work for oneself – it is your own adventure!

The first step on the Path is “Right Views” called in Pali “Samma Ditthi”. The Buddhist views are not opinions of any person – even that of the Buddhas. There is nothing subjective in the Views. One can only come to Right Views through dispassionate observation of life. If one looked at life without hope or despair, as a scientist or an objective person would look at a substance, one would arrive at a correct evaluation of the life process. One need adopt no theories; no metaphysics is required. The direct look, straight and simple, without the clamours and the clingings of the self, is all that is needed to establish the Right Views.

When the young Prince Siddhartha, saw the Four Sights – of death, illness, age and mendicancy – he deeply took in all the implication. Just that one look, that clear objective observation was enough to convince him that “the world is a mirage, a froth, a bubble, a dream, a conjurer’s trick.”

Right Views evolve from right observation. The whole of the Buddhist training is to enable one to become conscious of the blockages within the mind that hinder clear vision. The first step stands out in contradiction to other systems in blazing a new trail. Man can attain the perfection of Nibbana with only himself as his guide and light. Only, he has to acquire the skilful means of knowing how to observe and what hinders observation. When one has mastered this, is there anything else of greater value to be sought?

Friends, at the risk of being repetitious, I would request you once again to consider deeply all the implications in the First Step on the path. We are asked to establish Right Views within ourselves. No exhortation, other than to correct one’s vision, to be able to see with great clarity and to allow the facts to speak for themselves. Simple and at once complex, is it not?

Blessed are we that we have taken birth in the era that resounds with the Voice of the Buddha. Even in this lifetime we can enter upon that Path that delivers us from sufferings. “Two things alone do I teach”, said the World Teacher,

“Sufferings, and the cessation of sufferings”. Of the truth that He taught, the Teacher spoke only two words by way of Propaganda, only two words of great dignity and import – **“Ehi Passiko”**. Come and see!

When the young, philosophically inclined Sariputta asked of the Elder Assaji as to what the Teachings of His Preceptor – the Venerable Gautama were, the Elder pondered for a while and said, “Of all things that have a cause, the cause thereof, and the way of removing the cause is, what the Great Recluse teaches!”

“Suffering must have a cause!

“Life can be understood in terms of cause and effect!

“This being, that arises; with the cessation of this, that ceases!”

It opened a door in the mind of Sariputta, and the first ray of sainthood shone upon him.

“The arrow of grief” was a term that the Buddha often used. Grief in the heart of man, piercing and blinding as an arrow! Remove the arrow, and the mind will then be able to discern rightly, precisely, sharply. And how does this arrow find lodgement? Through attachment! And how does attachment arise! Through not seeing the three characteristic marks of all things in this casual, temporal and phenomenal world. What are the three characteristic marks?

Impermanence, Imperfection and Impersonality – **“Anicca, Dukkha, Anatha.”**

As is sung in the Dhammapada, “All existing things are transient.” He who knows and sees this, ceases to be in the thrall of grief.

And so-the First Step is right perception. The mind of man, in the course of evolution, has developed many faculties: Reasoning, Will Memory, Imagination and Creative skills and talents. But it has lagged behind in right perception. Craving for material and sensate pleasures, the incessant demands of the ego, emotional bonds, craving for intellectual and aesthetic pleasures, these psychological elements curtain the clear, lucid perception of an untrammelled and spotless mind.

Today, under the stress of modern conditions, individuals in almost every society are full of fear, sorrow, neurosis and anxiety. Their nerves are in a semi-shattered condition. The senseless race for higher and higher standards of living has made him some kind of gadget-acquiring machine. Heedless and unmindful of his own good, he leads a wrecked life.

The need to understand the teachings of the Buddha is urgent and imperative. For, unless we learn the lessons of right perception and the importance of holding right views, all our actions would flounder on the rocks of inanity. Through the Buddhist Teachings, the individual can overcome sorrow, fear, neurosis and anxiety.

The truly religious mind knows no sorrow, fear, neurosis and anxiety. It is a mind that can observe keenly, directly, simply. It is a practical and realistic mind. It does not confuse the “What is” with the “What ought to be”. It is not stupidly idealistic. It does not revel in, or seek ambiguities. The religious mind, moves from fact to fact. That is why the Teaching of the Buddha is said to be “excellent in its consummation”. For, it trains the mind in the skilful means of right perception.

With the First Step for foundation, seven more steps are revealed – right aspiration, right speech, right means of livelihood, right action, right energy, right mindfulness and right concentration. This Eightfold Path is a movement, a simultaneous movement in three directions: Conduct, Knowledge and Meditation. Whether one look at the Eight Steps through the eyes of logic or through pragmatism, these points, phrase and stage of true religious discipline and development. When the Exalted One was asked whether it is possible for man to come to the truly religious mind outside this discipline, with recourse to another system He declared, “Any system that contains within it the essence of the Eightfold Path can alone lead to the religious mind.”

“The best of ways is the eight-fold; the best of truths the four sayings: the best of states passionless; the best of men, he who has eyes to see.”

The criterion that the Buddha adopted for testing any truth, idea or system was: Does it conduce to peace, to calm, tranquillity, passionlessness, Nirvana?

The Methods that He adopted and counselled were – investigation and the reference to one’s own experience “**Savitakka, Savichara**”, or “with analysis, with reflection” – is how one is to proceed. Tradition, authority, hearsay, belief and opinion do not lead to truth; they lead only to dogma. “With self for refuge”, “With self for lamp”. “With self as an island” - such are the injunctions in this dispensation. Where then, is the room for our dogma here, or for the imposition of one’s truths upon another?

## **Challenge**

The world has not known another Teacher who invited and encouraged interrogation, question, challenge and debate. At the time of the Buddha, there

were in Kajgriha alone, 62 systems of learning and piety. Many an eager, questing mind sought to wrangle with the Buddha. Most of these systems were founded on extreme-of the eternalistic view and annihilationism.

The Buddha held the Middle View. The Middle avoids extremes of any sort. Reason and emotion have always like two choleric Caesars opposed one another for the throne. The Buddha reconciled the issue by pointing out a Middle Way, the way of awareness of the entire subjective process. Unless man knows his mind – the mind – in all its layers and functions, delusion and self-deception will dog his every step.

In Buddhism, sanctity is not hidden in a book, in a person, in a temple or in a mantra or phrase. But one comes to that which has true sanctitude by cleansing the mind of impurities, by refining it through right views and then making it subtle by right meditation. The mind made pure, refined and subtle leads to saintliness, to bliss, and blessedness.

There is no saviour from the outside, no grace of indulgent gods, no remission or divine pardon – “By oneself is evil done. By oneself is one purified”. “There is no cave, forest, mountain or river bank retreating a man can escape the consequences of his actions”. Here is an instance of raising awareness to its highest, of making man conscious of the highest responsibility.

The Buddha intended to make men serious, responsible and mature. As long as we blame others, or cry to the mute heavens above, or point outwardly to anything, we lack in balance, proportion and knowledge. We lack in clarity. But once we turn to self-knowing, to understanding the psychological knots and complex workings, we gain insight, clarity and wisdom: and freedom is quite close at hand – around the bend!

The sorrow of man today is his inability to use his mind. Man does not use his mind, he is used by his mind. He is mesmerised by words, ideologies and so called principles. He is a bundle of prejudices – whether he lives in the fifteenth floor of a skyscraper in New York or in a filthy little village in Asia! Used by prejudice, anger, pride, passion and the implacable lust for power, man everywhere has forfeited his right to humanity. Even at his most peaceful, passive movement, the crouching tiger in him waits, biding time to pounce and devour.

Yet, if we would but behold, that Light that was lit a long day ago and still, and forever, shed its sane, quiet radiance! If we would but listen, that word uttered a long day ago can still and forever dispel the gloom from our sorry lives! If we

but awaken to the importance of right living, that Path revealed a long day ago, can still and forever be our guide and refuge!

This mind of mine went formerly wandering about as it liked, as it listed, as it pleased: but I shall now control it perfectly as a rider controls with his hook a rutting elephant”.

To refrain from all evil, to achieve the good, to purify one’s own heart – this is the Teaching of the Awakened.

May the Peace of the Buddha be with You.

The Maha Bodhi