

BUDDHISM IN THE WEST

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Even after nearly one and a half century's study of Buddhism, there still prevail in the West some fundamental misconceptions introduced by certain early writers either through lack of understanding or prejudice.

For instance, there is the misconception that Buddhism is a pessimistic religion. First of all, Buddhism is neither pessimistic nor optimistic. If anything at all, it is realistic, for it takes a realistic view of life and of the world. It does not falsely lull us into living in a fool's paradise, nor does it frighten and agonize us with all kinds of imaginary fears and guilt-feelings. It tells us exactly and objectively what we are and what the world around us is, and shows us the way to perfect freedom, peace, tranquility and happiness.

The Buddha taught four fundamental truths pertaining to our life, our existence, which are known as Four Noble Truths. The First is that our life, our existence, is impermanent and is attended with conflicts, sufferings, dissatisfactions both physical and psychological. The Second Noble Truth teaches that the cause of all these sufferings, conflicts and dissatisfactions, is our own selfish desire due to our false idea of self. The Third one declares that by getting rid of selfish desire, getting rid of the idea of self, one can get rid of these conflicts and sufferings, and one can attain perfect freedom, harmony and peace, one can realize the Absolute Truth, Nirvana, here and now in this very life. Lastly, the Fourth Noble Truth teaches the Way, the Path to attain the state of peace through our own efforts, through our moral, spiritual and intellectual discipline and perfection.

This is no pessimism. People in Buddhist countries are not pessimistic; they are spontaneously cheerful and gay. Buddhist art and architecture, Buddhist temples, never give the impression of gloom or sorrow, but produce an atmosphere of calm and serene joy. In fact, according to Buddhism, joy (*piti*) is one of the seven qualities necessary for Enlightenment. In Buddhist painting and sculpture the Buddha is always represented as serene, peaceful, calm and compassionate. Never a trace of suffering, agony or pain is to be seen in his countenance. The German philosopher Hermann Keyserling says: "The East has succeeded in what has never yet been reached in the West: the visible representation of the divine as such. I know nothing more grand in this world than the figure of Buddha." This grandest creation of art, the figure of the Buddha, surely could not have been produced by a pessimistic religion.

Then there is another misconception equally grave that Buddhism is a monastic religion, a religion for monks living in secluded monasteries, and not a religion for laymen leading a family life. The Buddha's teaching is not intended for monks alone, indeed it is for laymen as well. Vacchagotta once asked the Buddha straight-forwardly whether there were laymen and women leading the family life who followed his teachings successfully and attained to high spiritual states. The Buddha categorically stated that there was not one or two, not a hundred or two hundred or five hundred, but many more. Surely it is the same today. It is only a question of sincere effort.

It might then be asked: If a layman can follow Buddhism while leading the life of an ordinary man, why was the Sangha, the Order of Monks, established by the Buddha. The Order provides opportunity for those who are willing to devote their lives not only for their own spiritual intellectual development, but also for the service of others. An ordinary layman with a family cannot devote his whole life to the service of others as a monk can. I should like to emphasize here that true Buddhist renunciation is not a cowardly escape from life, but the giving up of all selfish desires and interests to face life boldly in a higher and nobler way in order to be able to serve mankind. A Bodhisattva who renounces everything, even his own Nirvana in order to save all living beings, does not escape from life; he takes all life on himself.

Others say that Buddhism is interested only in lofty ideas, high moral and philosophical thought, and that it ignores and discourages the social and economic well-being of people. This, again, is a grievous misconception. The Buddha was interested in the happiness of men. According to him, true happiness was not possible without leading a pure life based on moral and spiritual principles. But he knew the difficulties of leading such a life in unfavourable material and social conditions. Certainly Buddhism does not consider material welfare as an end in itself: it is only a means to an end, a higher and nobler end. But it is a means which is indispensable.

The Buddha did not take life out of the context of its social and economic setting. He looked at it steadily and as a whole, in all its social, economic and political aspects. His ethical, spiritual, and philosophical teaching is fairly well known. But little is known, particularly in the West, about his teaching on social, economic and political matters. Yet there are numerous discourses dealing with these questions. For instance, in one of the discourses he said that a layman who leads an ordinary family life has four kinds of happiness:

- 1) a sufficient income, i.e. economic security (*atthi-sukha*),

- 2) the enjoyment of his wealth (*bhoga-sukha*),
- 3) freedom from debts (*anana-sukha*) and
- 4) leading a blameless, pure, moral and spiritual life (*anavajja-sukha*).

It should be noted that the first three of these four are economic and material. Elsewhere the Buddha said that one of the causes of immorality and crimes is poverty (*daliddiya*), and that instead of trying to suppress them by punishments, which is a futile and unsuccessful method, rulers should find ways to raise the economic standard of the people. This sounds very modern.

In fact, Buddhism, though it is 25 centuries old, is most modern. It appeals to modern rational, scientific minds. Buddhism arose in India as a spiritual force against social injustices, against degrading superstitious rites, ceremonies and sacrifices; it denounced the tyranny of caste-system and advocated equality of all men; it emancipated woman and gave her complete spiritual freedom.

In Buddhism there are no dogmas or beliefs that one has to accept on blind faith without question. It gives full responsibility and dignity to man. It makes man his own master. According to Buddhism, there is no higher being that sits in judgment over his affairs and destiny. That is to say, our society, our world, is what you and I want to make out of it, and not what some other unknown being wants. The Buddha said: “One is one’s own refuge, who else could be the refuge?”

Based on this principle of individual responsibility, the freedom of thought allowed by the Buddha is unheard of elsewhere in the history of religions. He advises us (in the *Kalama-sutta*) not to accept anything just because it is handed down by tradition, or because it is set out in religious texts, or because it is taught by our teacher or by some other authority. Only when we know for ourselves that certain things are good and wholesome, then we should accept them; when we know for ourselves that certain things are bad and unwholesome, we should give them up.

Not merely the freedom of thought, but also the tolerance taught by the Buddha is astonishing to the student of history of religions. Once when Upali, an important follower of Jainism, begged the Buddha to accept him as one of His lay disciples, the Buddha advised him to respect and support his old religious teachers as he used to before.

In the 3rd century B.C., the great Buddhist Emperor Asoka of India (to whose Edicts reference was made earlier), following this noble example of tolerance

and understanding, honoured and supported all other religions in his vast empire. In one of his rock Edicts the Emperor declared that “one should not honour only one’s own religion and condemn the religions of others, but one should honour others’ religions for this or that reason. So doing one helps one’s own religion to grow and renders service to the religions of others too.... Let all listen, and be willing to listen, to the doctrines professed by others.”

This spirit of freedom of thought, tolerance and sympathetic understanding has been from the beginning one of the most cherished ideals of Buddhist culture and civilization, and may be considered as the most important lesson that the world today can learn from Buddhism. Though Buddhist countries might have gone to war for political or other reasons, there is not a single example of persecution or the shedding of blood in order to convert people to Buddhism, or in its propagation, during its long history of 2500 years. It spread peacefully all over the continent of Asia, having 600 million adherents today.

There is a complaint prevalent everywhere that modern man is secular minded and is uninterested in religion. This, I think, is an incorrect appraisal. Man today is no more secular minded or less interested in religion than in any other period. It is a universal tendency that people always believe that the past was the best, that the present is bad and the future will be worse. But humanity as a whole has gradually progressed, not only materially and technically, but also morally and spiritually. Some ideas preached by religions have been absorbed into our social system. One example: Buddhism and Christianity both are against slavery, though it could not be abolished during the time of the Buddha or of the Christ. But today by and large it no longer exists, although there may still be some vestiges of it which, too, will surely disappear in time to come. May we not consider the principles on which the United Nations is organized – ideas like freedom, peace, human rights, the dignity and worth of the human person, etc. – as the essence of true religion, although not declared as such? The label is immaterial.

If modern man does not believe in a personal god, if he does not accept some dogmas of the established religions which are incompatible with modern scientific liberal spirit, it does not follow necessarily that the respect for or belief in moral and spiritual values, which constitute the essence of religion, has waned. In fact, modern man yearns for the living spirit of religion divested of its out-worn dogmas, beliefs and mythologies.

There is a common belief that material and technical progress is unfavourable to religious and spiritual life. It is hard to understand how an oil-lamp is more conducive to religious life than an electric lamp, or that an ox-cart should produce more spirituality than an automobile. If religion cannot live in a

society of material and scientific progress, in a society of prosperity, if it can thrive only in a society of poverty, misery and ignorance, then the sooner that religion disappears from the face of the earth the better for humanity. Anachronistic and out-dated external forms and expressions of religion must change with the change of the times, but the spiritual essence or religion, vital piety and true knowledge, will survive and will continue to renew humanity.

Buddhism is neither a faith nor a belief; it is a way of life to be experimented with and experienced, to be followed and practised in the world we live in, here and now. It is a vast and complete system of ethico-philosophical and psychological teaching based on a highly scientific and analytical method, going deep into all aspects of human life. It is a Path that leads man gradually through his own moral, spiritual and intellectual discipline and development, to the highest realization, to the realization of the Absolute Truth, Nirvana.

I do not propose now to go into the details of this Path. But very briefly, this Path – which is called the Noble Eightfold Path because it is composed of eight categories or divisions, namely, Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration – aims at developing three essential qualities necessary for man's true happiness, his peace and harmony, and for the realization of the Ultimate Truth.

The first of these three essential qualities is a pure moral and ethical conduct, without which no spiritual progress is possible. The second is mental purification and development through meditation, which is indispensable for insight, inner peace, harmony and equilibrium. The third is the development of Wisdom, which is not only the ability to see things objectively as they are, not only perceiving the Truth, but also attaining complete freedom from selfish desire, hatred and violence, and the unlimited capacity to love all living beings without discrimination. The attainment of this perfect Wisdom-Love is the ultimate aim of the Buddhist way of life.

You may ask: But what is Buddhism's answer to social unrest, social conflicts? Buddhism's answer is very clear. As the first verse of the *Dhammapada* teaches, all unrest, all conflicts, all disturbances are first born in the mind. Conflict or war is nothing but an external manifestation of greed, hatred, ill-will, violence, ignorance born in the minds of men. Social conflict is nothing but an individual conflict on an enormous scale. There is no society apart from individuals, and there is no social conflict apart from individual conflict. If there is peace within individuals, then society is peaceful. So, in order to have a peaceful world, we have to produce peace within individuals providing them with social, economic, moral and spiritual security. This is Buddhism's answer,

it is clear, but difficult to achieve. Yet without achieving it, no amount of treaties and pacts on paper can produce real peace in the world.

The United States of America today is a leader of nations in the material sphere. It would be most fitting that she should lead nations spiritually as well by putting effectively these noble teachings of peace, freedom, non-violence, into practice, even as Asoka did in the 3rd century B.C., and thereby setting an example to other nations for the peace and happiness of all men.