

RELIGION OF FREEDOM AND REASON

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The influence of Buddhism on human thought has been considerable. At the time of Buddha a large number of great thinkers in India held various philosophic views of man nature. Knowledge according to those ancients fell into three categories, knowledge through experience, knowledge through influence and knowledge contained in the sacred books.

The Buddha accepted the possibility of arriving at knowledge through experience and through influence but rejected the authority of books. The Buddha's warning on this issue in the Kalama Sutta is as applicable today as it was then. He said: "Do not accept out of respect for the teacher or because it is stated in books". In this manner Buddhism firmly asserted the freedom of thought and attached importance to the freedom of the individual.

Today when man, as an individual, is fast losing his freedom, particularly the freedom of thought and expression, and when man under totalitarian systems is being reduced to a mere machine, the importance of this contribution of the Buddha to culture cannot be over emphasized, and but for this freedom neither Buddhism nor any other progressive movement would have arisen. A unique contribution of Buddhism to human thought is perhaps the doctrine of Anatta, the central theme of the teachings of the Buddha, on which his numerous ethical and philosophical teachings are based. The doctrine as preached by the Buddha was to himself and his disciples not a mere subject of philosophical speculation but a real experience based on analytical insight. He emphasized the supreme importance of mind. The study and the analysis of mind forms the central theme of the Abhidhamma Pitaka.

Missions

Buddhism was a great force in the ancient world. The ideal of universal brotherhood, inspired the great Buddhist Emperor Asoka to send missions of peace and goodwill to distant countries like Syria, Egypt, Macedonia and Epirus in Asia, Africa and Europe besides sending his son Mahinda to Ceylon.

Many of the Missioners settled down in those countries and formed the nuclei of influential Buddhist communities. Professor Mackenzie in his book "Buddhism in Pre-Christian Britain" says that Buddhism had reached Britain before the Christian era.

Asoka then renowned as a conqueror, after coming under the influence of Buddhism, at the height of his military achievements, gave up all wars and attempts at conquests. He devoted himself entirely to the upliftment of mankind. By his unparalleled interest in the welfare of humanity he proved himself to be a great benefactor of the human race. H. G. Wells considers that "amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowned the columns of history their majesties and graciousnesses, serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Asoka shines, and shines, and shines almost alone, a star." The 13th rock edict of Asoka shows that he had established hospitals for men and beasts and as Bishop Copleston states in "Buddhism primitive and present." "The credit of having founded hospitals belongs undoubtedly to Buddhism". Under the influence of Buddhism this noble Emperor abolished slavery, capital punishment and religious intolerance, taught kindness and chastity, forbade cruelty to animals and founded a higher morality and a society based on the ideal of brotherhood of the whole human race. Buddha raised the status of women and made them realise the importance to society. In Buddhism, sex is no barrier to spiritual progress.

Caste

Buddha fought against the decadent caste system, which hindered the social, economic and spiritual progress of mankind and aimed to eradicate the social evil prevalent during his time. In the midst of the caste ridden Brahmanic society he taught that "by birth is not an outcast made, by birth is not one a Brahmin, by deeds one becomes an outcast, by deeds one becomes a Brahmin". History shows that India and other ancient countries were in their peak of glory during the periods that Buddhism held sway in those countries. The idea of democracy as known by us today, was perhaps originated by the Buddha for, a study of the conduct of affairs of the religious orders established by him, shows that they were governed by principles of democracy. Not only in the realms of thought, literature and social conditions but also in those of art, architecture and the sculpture the influence of Buddhism was keenly felt. An analysis of Eastern art shows that the best of Indian art up to the 6th century and the origins of Chinese and Japanese art were largely influenced by Buddhism.

Buddha Image

When speaking of Buddhist art and sculpture it would not be incorrect to say that to the devotee the greatest creation of Buddhist sculpture is the Buddha image which depicts the sublime ideals of this religion. The humble devotee who grasps his hands and the feet of the All-Compassionate One sees before him “a life of lonely contemplation, a perfect poise of the emotions, a serene penetration by the intellect into the nature of things and a happiness that comes out of a wisdom which enables one to expect what happens and not to be perturbed at the natural course of events.

Courage

It, more than ever, gives him patience and courage to face the turmoil of life. The benign influence of Buddhism on mankind has been second to that of no other world movement, which became a dynamic and civilizing force from its inception has throughout its long history been dominated by the spirit of tolerance and universal brotherhood. Let us remind ourselves of the noble heritage and regard no sacrifice too great to hold steadfastly to the doctrines of the Buddha.

