

THE BUDDHA'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE WORLD

By Buddhadasa P. Kirthisinghe*

The Buddha throughout the ages has been depicted as seated, calm, serene and gently smiling upon mankind. He is shown as a man who has attained imperturbable happiness and who was anxious to make all others as happy as he was. The prime message of the Buddha is to make the whole of humanity happy. The word *Buddha* means the awakened or enlightened one, who knows the inward nature of man, that is, the physical nature, rather than the outward side of man.

Buddha taught man the gospel of self-help in his efforts to lead a noble life. To achieve the highest condition of mind and heart Buddha said man has to make his own way, and that man need not look to outside help, even to a God. He told man that he has the ability and strength to gain this supreme end. Buddha, by living an exemplary life, has shown man that he has strength in himself to achieve his own deliverance from delusion, enmity and self-craving. Buddha gave a tonic or stimulus, as it were, to man to stand on his own feet to reach the goal of perfection.

The Buddha asserted that it is man's own deeds that make him noble and warned man to guard against his own deeds that would make him low. Thus Buddhism is not a religion that looks upon a supreme spirit who lifts him up, saves him and shields him from the results of his own misdoings. It is a religion of man who will fear to commit evil deeds and even if man were to commit evil deeds his deliverance depends on nothing else but his own good deeds. Buddhist scripture states thus:

“By oneself alone is evil done, by oneself is one defiled,

By oneself is evil avoided, by oneself alone is one purified.

Purity and impurity depend on oneself; no one can purify another:

By oneself one must walk the path; the Buddha merely shows the way.”

Thus the Buddha sounded the clarion call of human liberty. He said: “Be ye refuges unto yourselves, be ye your own salvation. With earnestness and high resolve work out your salvation with diligence.”

Buddha proclaimed self-help as the only true way to deliverance from evil. He strongly condemned all sacrifices performed in the name of religion and particularly those involved in animal sacrifice in the name of God. It was believed at the time of the Buddha, and some do believe even to this day, that

animal sacrifice atones for sin and evil. Animal sacrifice in the name of God is a horrible thing. The Buddha did the world a great service by telling the world that this practice is cruel and useless. It is a futile means of placating God, since man does not need to please any God but has only to purify and elevate himself.

Buddha adjures man to practise active loving kindness towards all beings. This led the Buddhist Emperor Asoka, in 300 B.C., to issue edicts to practise kindness towards all living things and particularly the animals that helped in daily labours.

On one occasion the Buddha found a monk suffering from dysentery and lying in filth. He washed him and changed his bed with the help of his companion Ananda, and said to his disciples: "Whoever among you monks would nurse me should nurse the sick." Hospitals for both animals and men were established during the reign of Emperor Asoka in India. Therefore it is the Buddhist sense of compassion that led to the establishment of hospitals three centuries before Christ.

The Buddha condemned slavery in any shape or form. He did so in India 2,500 years ago, laying down the Golden Rule for properly earning one's living, in that one should not engage in any form of trafficking in human beings. He advocated the treatment of household servants with as much consideration as a member of one's own family as regards their personal rights.

In the pacifist movement the Buddha was a great pioneer. His first precept against taking life deprives a soldier of any justification or countenancing on the part of the Buddha for what he does while following his profession. In his own life he did all he could to discourage men from taking up deadly weapons. In the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path towards perfection, the fifth precept is Right Livelihood, where the Buddha condemns five occupations as bad, one of these being trade in weapons of war. The new India's struggle for independence from the British was based on Buddha's pacifism. Mahatma Gandhi's passive resistance typifies the Buddhist conception of non-violence.

The temperance movement owes its beginnings to the words of the Buddha, who called his followers to abstain from using or selling intoxicating liquor. It is hardly necessary here to deal with the evil effect of alcohol on human system.

The Buddha pointed out the absolute wrongness of all distinctions between man and man. It was in the time of the Buddha, 580 B.C., that the caste system as a social order was being established in India. It determined and fixed man's place in the social order by the fact that his father was this or that. The four great castes were Brahmins or Priests, soldiers, merchants and farmers. Then came the Sudras, the workers who were denied the privilege of hearing the holy scriptures and learning the deeper mysteries of life. They were denied an

education. They were thus fixed low in the social ladder, which was so brutally fixed that they could never escape from its various tentacles.

Buddha revolted against this vicious social order. He asserted absolute equality of all men. Once when he was travelling and preaching and became thirsty, he stopped to ask for water from a man at a wayside well. The man, perceiving him to be a nobleman, declared, "Master, I am of low caste, I cannot give you anything to eat or drink." Then the Buddha said: "Friend, I do not ask for caste, I ask for water."

Buddha admitted to his order of monks people of the so-called low castes, barbers, butchers, sweepers, the untouchables, along with the members of the other noble castes. He made absolutely no distinction between them in the ranks of monks. All received equal homage and reverences, and saluted one another. Noblemen were upset by these actions of the Buddha and one of them dared to challenge the Buddha to define a nobleman. It was then that he declared:

"No man is noble by birth,
No man is ignoble by birth,
Man is noble by his own deeds,
Man is ignoble by his own deeds."

Thus the Buddha was the greatest democrat of the era. The great Buddhist Emperor Asoka (300 B.C.) imbibed these noble principles of the Buddha into his reign, to make his period the golden era of Indian history. The late H.G. Wells in his *Outline of History* called Asoka the noblest monarch in the annals of mankind.

There was an interesting story related of the Buddha which was the first demonstration of democracy in the world. There was a powerful prince who had wonderful and well-trained army; he had his eyes set on the adjoining estate. But this ambitious prince was unable to conquer the adjoining state. His sources weakened by the autocratic nature of his rule. Somehow it was the custom in those days to see the Buddha and ask him for advice during times of trouble and worries, and seek solace as well as moral courage. The prince did likewise and asked why it was that he could not conquer the next state. The Buddha said: "Yes, you have a powerful army, but you will never be able to conquer the adjoining state. The reason is this; they elect their leaders and the leaders listen to the voice of the people. They work as one family and may not be ousted." This is the actual teaching of the Buddha which embodies the highest principles of democracy.

Buddhism does not mention God at all and, instead, sets before man a goal through the Noble Eightfold Path to be reached by his own effort: a goal to be

reached by Right Understanding and Right Action based on such understanding. There cannot be Right Action without Right Understanding – and there is no Right Understanding without Right Action. This is the Buddhist reason for the practice of moral behaviour. And there is no truly right action without right understanding, which is the Buddhist reason for the exercise in every domain of reason, logic and sound and sane common sense.

Buddha preached the gospel of tolerance. He taught not to despise other religions or try to belittle them. He said other religious people are also following the Buddhist way to perfection, although they are not aware of doing so. Buddha, in declaring his message or teaching, told his followers not to accept his teachings unless they were in accord with their own reasoning. He said, ‘Please do not accept merely because it is sanctioned by usage, because it is custom, because there is tradition behind it.’ He dealt a blow to established traditions, practices and customs. He wanted men to look at life afresh. He gave every man a sturdy independence, asked him to look at life as it is and to make up his own mind, and not accept his teachings just because they were his own words.

Buddhism is an appeal to the intellect and it is an appeal to reasoning. It was because the Buddha showed in his life that what he taught was most practical and reasonable, that he exerted such a mighty influence on mankind. Dr. Radhakrishnan said, “He offered his followers a scheme of spiritual development and not a set of doctrines, a way and not a creed.”

Buddha wanted man to be happy. He would make him happy. He wanted to get rid of all malice, hatred and all indulgence in lower desires, all lying and evil thoughts. For these Buddha wanted to substitute good thoughts, worthy desires, a feeling of charity and compassion, and an attitude of serenity and composure. Let men purify their thoughts and desires and complete happiness will be theirs.

* Dr. Buddhadasa P. Kirthisinghe, Representative Maha Bodhi Society of India and the World Fellowship of Buddhists; Honorary Minister N.Y. Buddhist Church.

