

THE SECRET OF THE SUCCESS OF BUDDHA'S MESSAGE

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“Go forth, O Bhikkhus, go forth on a mission for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, with compassion towards the world, for the benefit, the welfare and the happiness of men and gods. Let not two of you go the same way. Preach to them. O Bhikkhus, the doctrine, lovely in the middle, lovely in the end and full of meaning and distinctive characteristics. Proclaim to them the pure and complete Higher Life.... I myself am proceeding to Uruvela to preach the doctrine.”

Thus began a mission of incessant activity which lasted forty-five years. During this period, the Buddha laid the foundation for a spiritual and cultural movement which spread to all parts of Asia and influenced the lives and thoughts of millions of people for over two thousand five hundred years. It has found expression in a voluminous literature in hundreds of languages, in a vast collection of works of art and in the lives of devotion of successive generations of monks and recluses, who dedicated themselves to the promotion, propagation and preservation of the word the Buddha preached and the life he advocated.

No single teacher, who stood before man as a man without claiming divine assistance, inspiration or guidance and who preached a doctrine of rationalism, had evoked the response of mankind to the degree the Buddha had. Without the aid of military territorial expansion or commercial patronage and in spite of a rare spirit of tolerance and a unique absence of centralized organization, the Buddhist Order had spread to every corner of Asia and is now making its presence felt in the Western World as well.

What is the secret of the Buddha's success? How did he win over millions of people even outside India when the other great philosophers and founders of religions of that sub-continent failed to do so? Is it because the doctrines of the Buddha were unique? Or is it because the personality of the Buddha was all-conquering? Or is it because he was an accomplished debater, a talented poet and an eloquent and convincing orator?

The personality of the Buddha did certainly contribute substantially to the spread of Buddhism. His royal background, the voluntary renunciation of worldly comforts, the persevering search for an answer to life's problems and his humility which enable him to beg for his food in his father's own kingdom and to wash the sores of his ailing disciple must have captured the imagination of the people. But that is by itself not an adequate explanation for the continued

success of Buddhism in many lands under varying social, economic and spiritual conditions.

It is true the Buddha organized an unparalleled system of missionary activity. His disciples went from village to village and city to city proclaiming:-

“The Buddha hath the causes told

Of all things springing from a cause

And also how things cease to be.

It is this the Mighty Monk proclaims.”

He, himself, wandered about at great personal discomfort and even risk and preached his doctrines to all who were prepared to listen. Those, who were not prepared to listen, he won over by means of his convincing logical argumentation. His life-story is full of courageous deeds such as the pursuit of the dangerous criminal, Angulimala. He adopted the language of the people in preference to that of scholars. He got his teachings methodically codified so that, within three months of his demise, the disciples could hold a Sangayana. He was also a great educationalist who utilized unfailing tenets of common sense as well as advanced principles of psychology in dealing with his disciples. But the secret of his success lay elsewhere.

The most remarkable contribution of the Buddha to human advancement was his positive approach to problems of life. Guiding man to a salvation which was to be achieved by man alone by dint of hard work, concentration and insight, he instilled into the minds of his disciples a spirit of inquiry so that they thought for themselves, unhampered by conventions, traditions, orthodoxy, bigotry or intolerance. Though he stood before the people as a teacher, he avoided dogmatism and neither claimed infallibility nor demanded intellectual surrender. As a philosopher, he separated the essentials from superfluous academic issues. He was a pragmatist and emphasized that all activities should be purposeful and conducive to the spiritual advancement of man.

In refusing to waste his time on the origin of the universe or man, the Buddha expounded the famous “parable of the wounded man” which reflects his pragmatic attitude to all problems: “If a man were pierced through by a poisoned arrow and his friends, companions and relations called in a surgeon and he should say, ‘I will not have this arrow pulled out until I know who the man is who wounded me, whether he is a Ksatriya, a Brahman, a citizen or a servant,’ or else he should say, ‘I will not have this arrow pulled out until I know who the man is that wounded me, whether he is tall or short or of medium height.’ Verily such a man would die before he could sufficiently get to know all this.” This approach gave the doctrines of the Buddha a scientific basis,

which had won for him the admiration of many a modern thinker. It was Paul Dalkhe who said, “It is true that there breathes about this system something of the coldness of mathematics; on the other hand, there lives in it that purest and sublimest beauty that taintless beauty, which belong only to mathematics.”⁵⁵

Equally refreshing was the Buddha’s rejection of the supernatural and the miraculous. The most effective miracle, he believed in, was the power of the word to carry conviction to the listener. When faced with the situation where Kisagotami expected the Buddha to give life to her dead child, he chose to teach her the true nature of life and lead her to salvation. The episode, wherein the Buddha sent Kisagotami from house to house begging for a mustard seed from a home that had not seen death, reflects his masterly grasp of the inner working of the human mind.

He contrived situations which could drive home the truth of what he taught. He would appear amidst warring camps to preach on the evils of war. To stress the futility of worldly pleasures, he offers sale the decomposing corpse of a courtesan to the wealthy young men who view with one another for her favours and lavished their riches on her when alive. He would interrupt the elaborate ritual of a Brahmanical sacrifice to save the animals about to be sacrificed and to preach to the bewildered sacrificers a more efficacious way of achieving their goal. He deliberately acted contrary to the prevailing social order. Not only did he denounce caste, which decreed man to be high or low according to birth, but showed that he meant what he said by making a barber of humble origin take a place in precedence over his nearest relatives. The happiness of the scavenger and the slave was as much his concern as that of the kind and the wealthy banker. He would accept the invitation for lunch from a poor householder in preference to that of a king or a prince. He would chide a person for wasting his time on useless pursuits but would not preach to a hungry man until he had had his food. He lived the life he preached and the admiration of those who knew him or heard of him was spontaneous.

The universal applicability of the code of ethics, the Buddha expounded, is the other factor which has made Buddhism a World Religion of the first order. He enjoined the disciples to follow the Middle Path of Virtue, Concentration and Insight avoiding both extremes of self-mortification and self-indulgence. This Path, which was also known as the Noble Eightfold Path leading to the Cessation of Suffering, consisted of Right Understanding, Right Thoughts, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Endeavour, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. Without postulating a god or a supernatural being, whose intervention was necessary for man’s deliverance or a permanent soul which had to be saved from eternal damnation, the Buddha laid down a set of values in human relations, based entirely on the intrinsic worth of life and the importance of the individual.

He called upon man to extend to all around him a deep and abiding sense of loving kindness: “Now may every living thing, feeble or strong, omitting none, tall or middle-sized or short, subtle or gross of form, seen or unseen, dwelling near or far away-whether they be born or yet unborn – may every living thing be happy and safe. Let none deceive another, nor think scorn of him in any way whatever. Let him not, in anger or ill-will, desire another’s down-fall. Even as a mother, as long as she lives, watches over her child – her only child, even so should one practise limitless compassion (lit, an all-embracing mind) unto all beings. And let man practise a boundless good-will for the world – above, below, across in every way – goodwill unhampered, without **ill-feeling** or enmity.”

The foundation of the entire system of Buddhist ethics is this concept of loving kindness to all beings. This doctrine has been so thoroughly worked out that a simple virtue like goodwill takes in Buddhism an elaborate form. Known as the fourfold Sublime Existence, goodwill manifests itself as **Metta** pure and simple friendly disposition, (a positive feeling of friendliness and love), as **Karuna**, compassion or sympathy (a response to another’s miseries and misfortunes – the flow of the milk of human kindness), as **Mudita**, sympathetic joy (a state of joy in other’s happiness, the very antithesis of jealousy and envy), and **Upekkha** equanimity (where there is no room for conceited self-appraisal). All moral laws have these four forms of good-will as their basis. The avoidance of killing, stealing, lying and so forth is for the purpose of attuning one’s mind to the positive aspects of the fourfold Sublime Existence. What is remarkable is that this code of ethics is neither fostered nor bolstered up by either the primitive concept of the “fear of the unknown” or by the widely prevalent idea of the fear of divine punishment.” The Buddha was quite emphatic when he said,

“By one’s self alone is evil done,

By one’s self is one defiled.

By one’s self evil avoided,

By one’s self alone is one purified.

Purity and impurity depend on one’s self.

No one can purify another.”

The Buddha, himself, called his teachings “timeless”. Their validity and usefulness remain unabated. The material progress and the scientific and technological advancement of mankind have, in no way, reduced the efficacy of even his simplest teachings. On the contrary humanity, today, needs more and more guidance of such benign teachings to save itself from self-inflicted annihilation.

The message of the Buddha is one of goodwill, peace and hope. Its power of ennobling man remains undiminished. At a time when the world around looks bleak and the prospects of humanity appear dark and dismal, it should be a solace to realize that the beacon light of the Buddha's teachings can still guide man to security and salvation.

Facets of Buddhism