

THE WIT AND WISDOM OF THE BUDDHA

By R.K. Raval

The nine episodes recounted here portray succinctly, in the words of the writer the picture of a man “who was primarily concerned with suffering and its cessation, whose reverence for and belief in the sanctity of life in all its manifestations were deep-rooted, who advocated the Middle Way of Life, and who, above all, had faith in the primacy of an ethical pursuit of life over futile metaphysical disputes.”

- Ed.

In the sixth century B.C. there arose in India the mighty figure of Gautama the Buddha, one of the most illustrious sons of the country. Destined to become a Prince among the great spiritual figures of the world, he renounced all the pleasures and pomp that a princely life could afford even in those distant days. Sensitive to the sufferings of all sentient beings and meditative by nature, he took to the life of a wandering mendicant in search of the Light that had been eluding Him so far. Never wanting to put His name on the red record of history, he delighted in drinking the nectar of holiness in the surrounding bliss of ancient India's sylvan solitudes. Basically tender and compassionate at heart, destruction of life and sacrifice of any living creature were for Him acts of outright cruelty and He reacted against them with the instinctive abhorrence of a born rebel.

In His long life of about eighty years, He dedicated almost fifty of them to the scattering of the words of wisdom among the people whom He loved, and who came to Him from all quarters and all stations of life in search of peace and an authentic meaning of existence. And what the Buddha preached, he first put into practice, so that His words could carry a ring of conviction right through the hearts of those who thronged around Him to listen to His message of universal love and friendship.

While His acts exuded compassion, His words were couched in a language that was at once witty, rational and compelling. Repartee *sans virulence* was one of the chief weapons in the armoury of His arguments. While it hits the mark, it left no sting behind, and conquered without hurting, leaving the disputant more amazed and mute, rather than bitter and humiliated. At times, like the great Upanisadic sages before Him, the Buddha also resorted to a parabolical method to bring home the point.

The following are some of the episodes chosen from the life of the Master, both before and after His Enlightenment. In the original Pali texts they are presented in the form of dialogues entered upon by the Master with different persons from time to time in His long, wandering career. Their language and style, replete with wit and wisdom, can be paralleled in the West only by that of the dialogues of Socrates, the picture that finally emerges from these events in the life of the Master is of a man who was primarily concerned with suffering and its cessation, whose reverence for and belief in the sanctity of life in all its manifestations were deep-rooted, who advocated the Middle Way of Life, and who, above all, had faith in the primacy of an ethical pursuit of life over futile metaphysical disputes.

(The Episodes)

(I) (Siddhartha and the Wounded Swan)

And that day while Prince Siddhartha was wandering down the winding paths of His royal garden, a swan wounded by an arrow stuck into its body, suddenly fell at His feet. Moved by pity and compassion at the helpless condition of the bleeding swan, the Prince lifted it up tenderly into His lap and picked the fatal arrow out from the bird's feathery body. And while He was busy healing the wound, Devadatta, the Prince's cousin, whose arrow had brought the tender bird down, arrived on the scene to claim the swan as his prize. Siddhartha, firmly refusing to hand over the precious charge to the cruel cousin, replied, "Devadatta, under no circumstances am I going to part with this wounded swan, for those who save a life have a greater claim on it than those who wish to destroy it."

(II) (Gautama and Sujata's *Khir*)

It is almost nearing the end of the sixth year of His homeless life after the Great Renunciation that Gautama, the young mendicant, is still on the move in search of the Light that has eluded Him. Even the practice of different ascetic exercises under various teachers of repute has failed to grant Him the Peace that passeth all understanding. Dissatisfied with the ways pointed by others, He has decided to seek the Unfathomable on His own. Sitting under the shade of a tree He meditated for days, while rigours of self-mortification reduced His body almost to a skeleton and He fainted. Sujata, a passing milk-maid belonging to the shepherd clan, offered the emaciated figure some *Khir* (a sort of milk-pudding mixed with rice), and He accepted it gladly, thus rebelling against the man-made walls of caste-ism and, in doing so, laid unwittingly the foundation of the world's first spiritual order which was to incorporate within its democratic fold people ranging from princes like Bimbisara and Ajatsatru to a barber like Upali and a courtesan like Amrapali. The acceptance of *Khir*, moreover, had infused His body with a new vigour freshness. For the first time Gautama the wanderer

realised the need of avoiding the extremes of both self-indulgence and self-mortification, thus giving rise to His famous Middle Way of life. Sujata's *Khir* had opened His eyes to the fact that the music of life can best be played on a well-strung *sitar*, for,

“The string o'er stretched breaks, and music flies;

The string o'er slack is dumb, and music dies;

Tune us the sitar (of life) neither low nor high.”¹

Realising that Truth can best be grasped by a sound mind in a sound physique, He henceforth decided to keep Himself nourished with food. Aghast at this profanity of their Master, the whole idea of taking food being something alien to the prevalent custom of keeping oneself in a starved condition while undergoing spiritual practice, the few disciples that had gathered around Him, deserted Him. Commenting on this desertion, the celebrated historian H.G.Wells writes, “His disciples deserted Him, and went off in a melancholy state to Benares. The boom of the great bell had ceased. Gautama the wonderful had fallen. For a time Gautama wandered alone, the loneliest figure in history battling for light.”²

(III) (The Buddha at the Court of King Bimbisara)

And one day as the Enlightened One was on His way to Vaisali, He came across a shepherd herding his sheep to the court of King Bimbisara, where a great sacrificial *yagna* (a sacred fire ceremony requiring the offering of animal life) was under way. The little dumb ones driven by the shepherd were to be his contribution to the total number of animals to be offered as sacrifice at the royal *yagna*. The compassionate Buddha, moved by the tragic fate of the helpless sheep, decided to accompany the shepherd to the king's court to save the sheep from this senseless slaughter. With the appearance of the Master at the court, the King, along with all the courtiers and the Brahmins (the priestly class) performing the sacrificial rites, rose in veneration to welcome the great Buddha. The Master, without wasting any time, inquired of the august assembly the purpose of holding such a sacrificial *yagna*. On hearing the reply from the head-priest that the sacrifice of beasts would please the gods and ensure prosperity and salvation to the king and the performers alike, the Master turned to Bimbisara and answered, “O King, if the sacrifice of these innocent creatures

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1. Edwin Arnold, ‘**The Light of Asia**’, (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co. Ltd., London, 1943), Bk VI, p.94.
 2. H.G. Wells, ‘**The Outline of History**’, (Cassell and Co Ltd., London, 1951), p.390.

is going to secure peace and salvation for you and your court, sacrifice first Me a human being, whose offering may bring you all a greater peace and salvation.” The king, along with all those present in the court, was too dumbfounded to offer any resistance to these words of wisdom and compassion. Filled with remorse for his act of folly, the king bowed to the great Buddha and from that day it is said, the slaughtering of any life in any form was banned in his little kingdom.

(IV) (The Tathagata and the Sick Monk)

On a fine morning as the Tathagata, *along with His beloved Ananda, was strolling near a *Vihara* He suddenly heard the cry of a monk writhing in unbearable pain. The Master at once rushed to the cell where the monk was lying in waste and fever, unattended to by any of his fellow-brethren. With loving care and tenderness the Master, along with Ananda, washed the waste off the ailing monk’s body, while attending to his other needs. And then, turning to the monks, who by now had gathered around the place with a feeling of shame for having neglected to attend to one of their own brethren in suffering, the Master said:

“If you, O brethren, would not attend to your own suffering brother-in-robe, who else would? But for you, O homeless ones, who would be there to look after any ailing member of the *Sangha* (the order of the holy monks)? And remember, dear brethren, whoever amongst you tends the sick and the suffering, waits upon Me.”

(V) (The Buddha and the Householder)

While on His daily round to collect the alms every morning, the Buddha that day encountered a householder who, instead of giving alms to Him, showered Him with unwelcome words. The Master, unperturbed by such unexpected welcome, quietly asked the householder, “Friend, if one were to give alms to somebody and if that somebody were to refuse to accept the alms, who would the said alms return to?”

The householder replied arrogantly that the alms in question would then naturally return to the one to whom they belonged.

Back came the Master’s unassailable query, “In that case, my dear friend, if I were to refuse to accept the words showered by you, who would they return to?”

The householder, left speechless, continued to stare after the departing figure of the Master who was by then already on the move.

(VI) (The Master and the Testing of Purna)

And one day it so came to pass that the Exalted One called Purna, a young monk newly initiated into the order of the holy brethren, and tested him as follows:

“Purna, what would you do if the people of the place you visited for alms-begging, instead of giving you alms, were to humiliate you with words of insult?”

Purna, answering the Master with full humility, said, “Master, I should thank them most profusely for not beating me with arms.”

“And suppose they were to beat you with arms, O Purna, then how would you react”.

“Master, I should still feel happy at the thought that they, by beating me thus with arms, were making me learn the hard lessons of forgiveness the easy way.”

“And”, persisted the master relentlessly, “What would be your attitude to them, O Purna, if you came to know that they had decided to deprive you of your life?”

“Even then, O Master”, replied the young initiate humbly but fearlessly, “ I should bless them from the bosom of my heart for bringing me so near to the threshold of Nibbana (the Final Release)”.

Pleased at this reply of Purna, the exalted One, felicitating the young monk on his quiet courage and spirit of forgiveness, said “Blessed art thou O Purna, for thou hast perfectly mastered the secret of the Tathagata’s teaching. Go Purna, in any direction that thou chooseth to go, and thou wilt make a success of thyself. My blessings shall go with thee, O Purna, wherever thou goest.”

(VII) (The Blessed One and the Way to *Nibbana*)

Thus have I heard. As the Blessed One wandered alone in the *hush* of the Jetavana Grove, some Brahmins approached him and asked, “How come, O great Sramana, that there are some among your followers who tread the path pointed out by you, while there are others who do not?”

The Blessed One inquired of the Brahmins in turn, “Don’t you ever come across the people who ask you the way to Rajagriha?”

“Yes, Sramana Gautama, we do.”

Don't you then point out to them the way to Rajagriha?"

"We do", replied the eager questioners.

"Does everyone, after you point out the way, necessarily take the road to Rajagriha?" asked the Blessed One.

"Some take, some do not, O Gautama."

"Likewise, My dear friends", replied the Master, "My duty also is to point out the way to *Nibbana* to all those who come to Me seeking the path. Those who aspire after *Nibbana*, tread the path: those who do not wish to tread it, don't. The Tathagata simply points the way to the right direction; it is up to the seekers to follow it or not."

The Brahmins, unable to continue their argument any further on finding the tables turned against them, bowed to the Master in silence and left.

(VIII) (The Buddha and the Parable of the Wounded Man)

Once as the Exalted One was staying at Savatthi in Anathapindika's Park, the venerable Malunkyaputta, a monk perturbed by such thoughts as 'Does the soul exist or not?', 'Is it eternal or not?', 'Is it finite or infinite?'; 'Does the Tathagata exist after death or not?', and others of a like nature, approached the Master to quell his doubts concerning them.

On hearing Malunkyaputta, the Master, always concerned with man's ethical and spiritual progress, realised how the venerable monk was wasting his time in metaphysical questions which lead one nowhere and left one all the more confused at the end. And then, addressing Malunkyaputta as follows, the Master said:

"Waste not, dear Malunkyaputta, your time in such useless and idle thoughts or disputes, for they will take you not even an iota nearer to your salvation, nor contribute to your spiritual amelioration in any way. Cessation of suffering and freedom from all clinging is the goal set for you, and this can be achieved not by stirring the muddy waters of metaphysics, but by treading firmly along the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to liberation. Moreover, Malunkyaputta, a monk wasting his time in such disputes, instead of pursuing the path that points the way to peace and happiness, is like the man who, on being wounded by a poisonous arrow pierced into his body, instead of immediately pulling the arrow out and thus seeking relief, prolongs his suffering by asking such irrelevant questions as, 'What place the arrow was made at?': 'At what distance was it released from?': 'Who released it?': 'Who was its maker?' etc. Waste not therefore, O Malunkyaputta, your time in such unprofitable talk. Instead, set your heart to

plucking this poisonous arrow of suffering out from the system of your life to ensure a quick and peaceful Release.”

(IX) (The Exalted One and Cunda’s Meal)

And thus we come to the last scene in the life of the Master. Behold the magnificent evening of about 2,525 years ago when the great Buddha lay in repose under the shady grove of Sala trees near Kusinara, waiting for the Great Release to dawn upon Him, the meal offered erstwhile so devotedly by Cunda, the metal-worker, had contained some mushroom and it had proved to be fatal for the Master. Lest Cunda should feel guilty of offering such food, the Master called Ananda and told him to convey the following message to Cunda to allay his feeling of guilt:

“Ananda, I have come to know that Cunda, having offered his meal so very devotedly to me, now feels guilty and repentant. Tell him, O Ananda, not to feel wrong in any way for the food he served me with. Tell him he is blessed for what he has done and I am deeply grateful to him for his excellent food. Ananda, in no case is Cunda to be blamed, for how could it ever have been possible for him to know the after effect of the meal on my body? On the contrary, Ananda, let it be known to him that it is for the second time that somebody has served me with food that has proved to be as precious in my life as had Sujata’s *khir* long ago. Tell him, O Ananda, not to worry on this count, for just as Sujata’s *khir* had once brought me to the brink of Enlightenment, so has Cunda’s meal brought me to the very threshold of *Nibbana*, the Final Release from which there is no more returning.”

And thus the Master, with a heart as wide as the ocean, blessed Cunda for the meal that had opened the doors of deliverance for Him (the Master), and soon after, surrounded by His beloved disciples, He closed His eyes at the twilight hour of that unforgettable evening, but not without giving His last message to them “Short is the life and impermanent is the nature of things. Work out, therefore, O beloved ones, your salvation with diligence.” And the Dewdrop very quietly, very peacefully, slipped into the Shining Sea.