

Buddhism: The Indian Heritage

Prof. Lokesh Chandra, New Delhi

The intrinsic strength of Buddhism is in its homocentric moral sense, the universality of its message, the serenity of its tenor, its scorn for excesses, its golden mean, and above all the personality of Lord Śākyamuni, so serene, and yet so human. The pain of life became the poem of Primal Buddhism. Human personality and its will for virtue were elevated to a supreme place. Humans are a part of all other humans, of all life, of all matter, of all stars and of the voids of eternity. They are the sons of Bodhisattva Varaprabha who voyages the wilderness of the worlds on the pristine gleam of light, and proclaims the Lotus Sutra in amazing exfoliations of simplicity and of an open mind.

Buddhism has kissed this world with compassion, enwoven light and love in the hearts of men, kindled lamps in the forlorn recesses of sombre shades of life, and enlivened dead dogmas with logic.

Buddhism arose as a spiritual force against social injustice, and advocated the equality of all men irrespective of their birth. It gave spiritual freedom to women. The welfare state created by the Buddhist emperor Aśoka is an outstanding example of the spirit of its perennial teachings. The Buddhist Middle Path summons us to a dialogue of timeless day, from thought to awakening awareness, from ideology to ideas, so that tiny pebbles gathered on the shoreline of life become fine like pearls, and when we carry these pebbles back home to our hearts, intertwined with them will be the Sea of Consciousness in our sleeves. It seeks glistening waters in the rhythms of the universe, in the flow of the spiritual and the scientific, evolving humans into a growing wholeness of inner unity and constant change.

Śākyamuni spent the last monsoon season at the Veṇuvana on the outskirts of Vaiśālī. Resting under a tree after the rains had ended, he remarked: "This world is beautiful, it is a joy to live in it." मनोरमं जीवितम्। The murals of Ajanta speak of such spiritual greatness in the consummate beauty of life. The visible finds its meaning and depth in the life of the Buddha, in the Bodhisattvas, and in the narratives of the avadānas. André Malraux on a pilgrimage to Ajanta reminisces: "The mind is but a shaft from the unknown. With a lotus in our hands, we are all Bodhisattvas watching the river that runs through the gorge. Compassion makes the world as twilight makes a day...."

The sublime attitudes of social well-being are the four brahmavihāras: *maitrī* 'friendly feeling', *karuṇā* 'compassion', *muditā* 'benevolence', and *upekṣā* 'equanimity'. They are the divine states in which the mind pervades the universe with thoughts of love, compassion, benevolence, and equanimity. *Maitrī* is the desire to bring happiness and well-being to others, and an antidote to all anti-social tendencies as malevolence (*vyāpāda*) and violence (*himsā*). *Karuṇā* or compassion is kindness and sympathy towards fellow-beings. *Muditā* is to desire others rejoicing in their happiness and to feel happy with them. It is social concord. The fourth *upekṣā* or equanimity is cultivation of social values free from personal bias. The meditation on these four sublime states or *brahma-vihāras* was of extraordinary relevance in removing tensions, healing wounds, leveling of social barriers, and promoting harmony. The Sutta-nipāta says:

*As a mother guards her only son at the risk of her own life,
So may we develop a boundless heart towards all creatures.*

Humanity crosses the River of Today and ferries across to the Other Shore of unborn tomorrows. Crossing frontiers is man's heritage, or in the chimes of the Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya-sūtra: *gate gate pāra-gate pāra-saṅgate bodhi svāhā*. This pāramitā illumines and enlightens our hearts and summons us to span life with compassion, wisdom and beauty. We gain what we give: to be whole we must leave the earth whole. Do we walk home to discover ourselves myself homeless. No, humankind shall speak a spiritual language, science and technology being its dialects.

A streaming radiance has to flow between two banks of the River of Life, trans-humanising humans into the divine. The perennial message of the Buddha underlines the Human Imperative in the words *bahu-jana-hitāya bahu-jana-sukhāya*. Belonging to humankind, nothing human can be alien to us.

Humans are resonances of the interdependence of life. Living entities, their environment, the vast physical universe and human beings are one. Saṃyuktāgama and Ekottarāgama illustrate it:

"Beneath the pippala tree, the hermit Gautama focused all of his formidable powers of concentration to look deeply at his body. He saw that each cell of his body was like a drop of water in an endlessly flowing river of birth, existence, and death.... Intermingled with the river of his body was the river of feelings in which every feeling was a drop of water. In his meditation Gautama "looked up at a pippala leaf imprinted against the blue sky, its tail blowing back and forth as if calling him. Looking deeply at the leaf, he saw clearly the presence of the sun and stars—without the sun, without light and warmth, the leaf could not exist.... He also saw in the leaf the presence of clouds—without clouds there could be no rain, and without rain the leaf could not be. He saw the earth, time, space, and mind—all were present in the leaf. In fact, at that very moment, the entire universe existed in that leaf. The reality of the leaf was a wondrous miracle"

The Lotus Sūtra implies an ethos of symbiosis, that favours harmony over opposition, 'we' over 'I'. Its message is one of "human restoration". We can be reborn in a serene harmony that guides us towards more noble paths as well as transforms them. The open book of Man's spirit is the hide and seek between intense action and tranquility of introspection.

Human society will have to replace greed by need. Consumerism needs to be substituted by delimitation of our desires. A new harmony and flow has to enter vitally in the course of human actions. Buddhism favors avoiding waste, and a careful use of nature. In the Aṅguttara-nikāya, the Buddha censures the indiscriminate shaking down of a large number of fruits of *Ficus glomerata* to eat just a few. Contentment can preempt this wasteful *udumbara-khādikā*.

The plants have no desires, no possessiveness, no anger and are thus spiritual gurus. Buddha-nature is inherent in all nature.

Dhammapada reflects Buddhism in simple profundity: "For hatred does not cease by hatred at any time; hatred ceases by love: this is an old rule".

The Pali Mahāvagga of the Vinaya narrates how the Buddha and his monks were invited to a meal at the palace by King Śuddhodana, along with other guests. The Buddha gave a discourse on how to meditate to transcend suffering. The Buddha smiled and spoke: "But suffering is only one face of life. Life has another face, the face of wonder. If we can see that face of life, we will have happiness, peace and joy. When our hearts are unfettered we can make direct contact with the wonders of life. When we have truly grasped the truths of impermanence, emptiness of self, and dependent co-arising, we see how wondrous our own hearts and minds are. We see how wonderful our bodies, the branches of violet bamboo, the golden chrysanthemums, the clear streams, and the radiant moon are".

The image of the feminine in Buddhism goes beyond the maternal. She represents the perfection of wisdom, the blissful, the compassionate. In esoteric Buddhism, she is wisdom (*vidyā*), heroine (*śūrī*), and the noble insight (*prajñā*) born by reason of the most pure discrimination.

The Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa focuses on a goddess who resides in Vimalakīrti's house. She playfully engages Śāriputra the eminent disciple of the Buddha himself, in a battle of wits. In an engaging display of satire and illusion, she eloquently wins her case. "The Sutra of Queen Śrīmālā" is another instance, among others, in the Buddhist tradition of its egalitarian view concerning women.

The Buddha extolled joy on the birth of a daughter: "When the Buddha was once at Śrāvastī, the Kosala King Prasenajit came to visit Him. One of the King's men arrived and, approaching the king, announced to his private ear that Queen Mallikā had given birth to a daughter. The king was not pleased. Thereupon the Buddha, discerning the matter, uttered these verses:

*A woman child, O lord of men, may prove
Even a better offspring than a male.
For she may grow up wise and virtuous.*

The positive attitude of the Buddha towards women "ranks as one of his greatest claims to fame as a benefactor of the human race" (Dr. Ms. I.B. Horner, Cambridge).

When Gandhiji arrived in London at the age of eighteen, theosophist friends invited him to read two of Sir Edwin Arnold's works: *The Song Celestial* (Bhagavad Gītā) and *The Light of Asia*. The *Gītā* became his 'spiritual reference book', and the life and teachings of the Buddha stirred him to the depths. The Tolstoy Farm of Gandhiji at Johannesburg was donated by a devoted Buddhist of German origin, Mr. Herman Kallenbach. In 1930 Gandhiji decided to spend a few days with Romain Rolland in Switzerland on his way back to India. A Japanese artist rushed from Paris to make his sketches. Gandhiji said to him: "Buddha renounced every worldly happiness because he wanted to share with the whole world his happiness which was to be had by men who sacrificed and suffered in the search for truth." Gandhiji affirmed at the Asian Relations Conference, held at Delhi in March 1947, that the Asians have to put their hearts together—not merely their heads—to understand the message of the wise men of the East, like the Buddha, and become really worthy of that great message, and to deliver this message to the modern world.

The Visuddhi-magga 149-51 lays emphasis on goodwill among humans as the best state of heart in the world: "As a mother, even at the risk of her own life, protects her only child, so let (the upright man) cultivate goodwill without measure among all beings".

The Buddha propounded the harmony of societies in the Dīgha-nikāya 2.73: "... So long, Ānanda, as the Vajjians assemble in harmony and disperse in harmony; so long as they do their business in harmony; so long as ..., just so long as they do these things, Ānanda, may the prosperity of the Vajjians be looked for and not their decay."

The last words of Lord Buddha to Ānanda were: "We are leaves fading, while the tree lives. Be then, O Ānanda, your own Lamp. Be your own Refuge".

The birthplace of our beloved and iconic Prime Minister was a major centre of Avantika traditions. Aśoka's son Mahendra went from Avanti to Srilanka. As a bhūmiputra of Avanti, our Prime Minister enlivens the depths of the Lotus to unveil the peaks of India's mind with the spring of development. No flowers can forget the spring. Our Prime Minister continues the work of Lord Buddha to sow precious seeds of Bodhi in the hearts of millions so that humanity abides in the beauties of life.