

BUDDHA : INDIA'S MESSAGE FOR GLOBAL BUDDHA-CONSCIOUSNESS AND HUMAN WELL-BEING

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What Thought and Culture Existed in India before Buddha

In order to understand Buddha and his teaching, we need to understand what thought and culture existed before and during his time. To make the point clear, we begin our paper with some important and relevant lines from Prof. T.R.V. Murti (1998): "Buddha tells us that there are two principal viewpoints -- the existence and the non-existence views (*bhavaditthi* and *vibhavaditthi*). No one holding to either of these can hope to be free of this world. Only those who analyse and understand the origin, nature and contradictions of these two views can be freed from the grip of birth and death -- *samsara*. Kaccayana desires to know the nature of the Right View (*sammaditthi*) and the Lord tells him that the world is accustomed to rely on a duality, on the 'It is' (*atthitam*) and on the 'It is not' (*natthitam*); but for one who perceives, in accordance with truth and wisdom, how things of the world arise and perish, for him there is no 'is not' or 'is'. 'That everything exists' is, Kaccayana, one extreme'; 'that it doesn't exist' is another. Not accepting the two extremes, the *Tathagata*¹ proclaims the truth (*dhammam*) from the *middle position*."

Buddha discussed these two views in the 6th century BCE, that is, more than 2500 years ago from today. The question is: has there been any change in these views today? Fundamentally, it may be said, not very much, although the horizon of modern scientific knowledge and enlightenment has widened incredibly and broken almost all barriers of ignorance, dogma, and superstition. So, even today we come across 'professors of science' who deliver their lectures in university class-rooms after their routine holy morning prayers to God-s and Goddesses at their homes, or 'scientists' who work hard day and night in laboratories and invent wonderful inventions for the well-being of humanity or otherwise and give due credit to God for their works, or people who feel proud of being declared themselves as 'atheists' having no belief and fear in God and in His Rewards and Punishments! Actually, there is no problem in these views in themselves. However, their implications are far-reaching so far as their impacts on one's individual and social life are concerned. The problem begins to surface when people mould their belief and culture and mind and body and lose their free-thinking, right knowledge (*prajna*), and universal compassion (*karuna*) under their influence.

In this backdrop, it is, need, hard to speak of Buddha and of his teaching in the world. And because of this fact, sometimes Buddha may even sound offensive and blasphemous to those who are not familiar with him and his teaching. It may become very sensitive and risky too.

In the *Brahmajala Sutta* (*Digha Nikaya*), Buddha speaks of the 62 views existing in the Jambudvipa (Ancient India, now broadly Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar) before and during his time. These may be summed up in two broad schools of thought. Oriental philosophers and thinkers term them respectively as

¹The Sanskrit term '*Tathagata*' literally means 'Thus-Come' and used as an epithet of Buddha, Charles S. Prebish, *The A to Z of Buddhism*, 2007, New Delhi, p.249. In our understanding this meaning is too little to convey the true meaning of *Tathagata*. *Tathagata*, according to our understanding, means the embodiment of Truth or True Law of Nature that appears in the world and disappears from the world, or that which travels from the Nirvana via the *samsara* to the Nirvana, for the right education and well-being of mankind.

'*sasvatavada*' (existence or eternalism) and '*uccedavada*' (non-existence or nihilism). In simple language these may be called 'theism' or idealism and 'atheism' or materialism respectively. The first believed in the existence of Creator-God and eternal Soul, efficacy of karma and its effect, life after death, heaven, hell, and salvation. They developed Religion and Religious Scripture. They worshipped Creator God and various gods and goddesses and practised rituals and austerity as per their Religious texts for their well-being and salvation. The later believed in none of these. According to it, nothing exists after death and everything comes to an end with death. They indulge in luxury. The mind and body and the life and culture of the people of the Jambudvipa were evolving centre round these two schools of thought.

Who Is Buddha?

In the *Dona Sutta (Anguttara Nikaya)*, Buddha's self-introduction is that he is neither a 'god' (*deva*), nor a 'celestial being' (*gandharva*), nor a 'divine being' (*yaksa*), nor a 'human being' (*manusya*); he is a 'Buddha', an enlightened, compassionate, and transcendental being. He was a human being namely, Siddhartha Goutama but he attained Supreme Enlightenment and became a Buddha.

Prof. Lal Mani Joshi (2008) writes, "In our view the greatness of Sakyamuni (the Sage of the Sakya) lies not merely in his being a 'human being' but in his being a Buddha, an Awakened Being. No one denies that he was a 'human being'; every man is a human being but every human being is not a Buddha. If Buddha were to be remembered merely as a 'human being' there would have been no 'Buddhism'. Born as a human being, Siddhartha Goutama had gone beyond the state of human beings and become the Glorious One (*bhagavata*). The liberating wisdom which he had realized had transformed his status as a human being; he was no longer a man, nor a god; he had become a *Tathagata*, a Buddha."

Venerable Narada (988) writes, "In the *Tipitaka* there is, absolutely no reference whatever to the existence of a God. On several occasions, the Buddha denied the existence of a permanent soul (*atta*). As to the denial of a Creator-God, there are only a few references. Buddha never admitted the existence of a Creator-God whether in the form of a force or a being. Despite the fact that the Buddha placed no Supernatural God over man, some scholars assert that Buddha was characteristically silent on this important controversial question. The following quotations will clearly indicate the viewpoint of the Buddha towards the concept of a Creator-God. In the *Anguttara Nikaya*, the Buddha speaks of three divergent views that prevailed in his time. One of these was: 'whatever happiness or pain or neutral feeling this person experiences all that is due to the creation of a Supreme Deity (*issara nimmana hetu*). According to this view, we are what we were willed to be by a Creator. Our destinies rest entirely in His hands. Our fate is pre-ordained by Him. The supposed free-will granted to His Creation is obviously false. Criticizing this fatalistic view, the Buddha says: 'So, then owing to the creation of a Supreme Deity men will be murders, thieves, unchaste, liars, slanderers, abusive, babblers, covetous, malicious and perverted in view. Thus, for those who fall back on the creation of God as essential reason, there is neither desire nor effort nor necessity to do this deed or abstain from that deed.'"

In the *Cula Malunkya Sutta (Majjhima Nikaya)*, Buddha maintains noble silence on the question of certain metaphysical questions raised by Malukyaputta such as, whether the world is eternal, or not, or both, or neither; whether the world is finite, or infinite, or both, or

neither; whether the *Tathagata* exists after death, or does not, or both, or neither; whether the soul is identical with body or different from it.

According to T.R.V. Murti (1998), "Buddha likens the metaphysician to that foolish man wounded by an arrow who, before being attended to, would like to know what sort of arrow struck him, whence it came, who aimed it etc. The wounded man would have died before he got satisfactory answers to his questions. The moral drawn is that metaphysical enquiries are unnecessary and can even prove harmful to spiritual life." Because of such position maintained by Buddha on these metaphysical questions some charged him to be an agnostic. Nagarjuna (7th century CE), has answered to this charge in his *Mula-Madhyamika Karika* and shown that empirical human knowledge and experience cannot establish or de-establish the answers to these metaphysical questions with convincing reason and evidence. Any answers to these questions in terms of 'yes' or 'no', or 'both yes', or 'both no' and are liable to be logically and scientifically invalid. The only golden answer to these questions is noble silence. Similarly, metaphysical God can be established and de-established with empirical human knowledge and experience. As such, both acceptance and rejection of God are empirically impossible. God is a belief, not an experience.

We misunderstand Buddha as 'God', or an '*Avatara* of God', or a 'Human Being'.

***Dhamma* is Not Religion and Buddha is not Religious Preacher**

Before we proceed further, it is pertinent to know what Religion means. The definition of Religion given in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 1996, India goes thus: "Belief in the existence of a god or gods, esp. the belief that they created the universe and gave human beings a spiritual nature which continues to exist after the death of the body". Religion is part of human culture which is inseparably connected with man's belief in a Supreme Being known in various names in various cultures. This Supreme Being is regarded as the Creator, the Controller and the Destroyer of the universe. He is the Supreme Authority and the Supreme Justice of the universe. He rules everything in the universe according to His Will and Grand Plan. Those who believe Him and obey His Message earn virtues and go to Heaven after death, and those who disbelieve Him and disobey His Message earn sins and go to Hell after death. Nothing moves in the universe without His Will. Human beings should be faithful to Him and honestly abide by His Message, Rules and Rituals written in His Sacred Scripture for their purity, *punya* and salvation.

In the light of the above definition of Religion, Buddha, who neither accepts nor rejects God cannot be called God, or an *Avatara* of God, or a Religious Preacher and his teaching cannot be called a Religion. Prof. Lal Mani Joshi (2008) notes that a section of professed Buddhists seems to persist in its belief that 'original' Buddhism should not be called a 'religion' but treated as a kind of 'scientific' rationalistic' and humanistic way of life.

Buddha doesn't believe in such Supreme Being and in such Heaven and Hell. He says that human beings are born/reborn in the *samsara* due to their greed, hatred and delusion or unskilful karma. He further says that, like him, they can also liberate themselves from the *samsara* and attain the Nirvana by practicing skilful karma as explained in his "Noble Eightfold Path" or "Middle Way". Religion is based on human belief. *Dhamma* is based on human experience.

Buddha does not establish and preach any Religion or sectarian view. Vipassana Acharya S. N. Goenka (2015) beautifully observes it thus: “Buddha teaches the *Dhamma*. He does not establish any particular Religion or sect. On one occasion, while explaining the *Dhamma* to some people, Buddha said, ‘I am not interested to make you my disciples. I am not interested to snatch away you from your old gurus. Your aim is to become liberated from misery. I am not interested to take you away from that aim. Everyone wants to come out of misery. Nobody wants to live a miserable life. I am here to help you fulfil your aim, to come out of misery. I have a technique for doing that. Give it a trial.’”

Buddha is a secular teacher who teaches a secular truth, the ‘*Dhamma*’, the True Law of Nature, to men and women for their true awakening, well-being, happiness, and liberation on the basis of the merit of their own karma. As such, the *Dhamma* doesn’t belong to any particular individual or group, nor does it belong to Buddha himself. It represents two truths:

1. Empirical truth (the *samsara* or bondage). It explains the cyclic existence of birth and death of sentient beings and all phenomena as they truly are, that is, *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta* (impermanent, suffering and no-soul); and
2. Transcendental truth (the *Nirvana* or liberation). It explains one's liberation, that is, exit from the *samsara* and entry into the *Nirvana* with the ending of his greed, hatred, and delusion and the beginning of his generosity, compassion, and wisdom.

Buddha investigated, analysed, examined, and realized these two truths with his very personal knowledge and experience when he attained Enlightenment. He then stated with full confidence that everybody can attain Enlightenment and verify these truths and become a Buddha like him. For that all he needs to do is to follow and practise the ‘Noble Eightfold Path’ or the ‘Middle Way’.

Buddhist logicians like Dignaga (6th century) and Dharmakirti (7th century) developed Buddhist logic and epistemology on the basis of this teaching of Buddha. Commenting on Acharya Vinitadeva's commentary, *Nyayabindu-Tika*, on Dharmakirti's treatises like *Nyayabinduprakarana* and *Pramanavartika*, Mrinal Kanti Gangopadhyaya (1971) writes, “The attainment of all human ends is preceded by right knowledge (*samyaka jnanam purvika sarvapurusartha siddhi*).” He goes on to write that “right knowledge is of two kinds -- perception and inference.”

We perceive and conceive the *samsara* and the *Nirvana* only with two valid sources or means of knowledge, that is, perception and inference. There are no others valid sources of knowledge except perception and inference, and there are no other objects in the universe to be perceived and conceived. We perceive the unique particular (*svalakshana*) of an object with our perception and we conceive the universal (*samanyalakshana*) of an object with our inference.

The *samsara* and the *Nirvana* are the two sides of the same coin. All is *sunya* (empty) in the *samsara*, in the *Nirvana* and in the universe. This is the only Truth. Buddha lives liberated in this Truth.

Buddha teaches a unique method called the ‘Noble Eightfold Path’ or the ‘Middle Way’ to men and women for their understanding of the *Dhamma* and well-being, happiness, and liberation. In his first public discourse called ‘*Dhammacakkappvatana Sutta*’ (Setting the Law of Truth in Motion), Buddha categorically rejects two worldly extreme views: luxury and austerity,

existence and non-existence, eternalism and nihilism, theism and atheism etc and expounds the 'Middle Way', which, according to him, freed of all theories or views produces vision and knowledge and leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding or liberation from all suffering and bondage (Nirvana).

Man becomes a dogmatic or a slave of his belief or disbelief in a particular view or ideology like when he surrenders his independent and free thinking to it. Thus, he closes the door of his right knowledge and true liberation. Buddha's teaching is not based on belief or disbelief -- it is purely based on independent and free thinking and practical knowledge and experience.

Buddha's Fundamental Discoveries and Teachings

1. Transcendental or insight meditation (*vipassana jhana*),
2. Dependent Origination (*paticcasamuppada*).
3. Noble Eightfold Path or Middle Way (*arya atthangika magga*), and

Before and during Buddha everybody knew that there was suffering and cause of suffering in life but nobody knew that there was an end of suffering and a way leading to an end of suffering. It was Buddha who first came to know it in the human history through his discoveries mentioned above. Like a scientist, he had to do a lot of research, investigation, experiment, examination and analysis for it. After these discoveries he attained Enlightenment and became a Buddha, an Enlightened, Compassionate and Liberated Being. These discoveries are the fundamental contributions of Buddha to mankind. A man struggling to get rid of suffering in his life or one trying to understand Buddha and his teaching must study and practise these discoveries.

The central point of Buddha's teaching, the Noble Eightfold Path, is '*samma*' (Sanskrit: *samyaka*), that is, harmony. It means that the way of life of humans should be guided by right knowledge and compassion in harmony with the law of nature (*Dhamma*) for their well-being and happiness in the *samsara* and liberation in the Nirvana. If the way of life of humans and the law of nature are not in harmony, then all types of conflict, problem and suffering strike humanity and the world-system at large. Human should use their right knowledge and universal compassion for well-being of sentient beings.

The objective of Buddhist education is to acquire right knowledge and to cultivate universal compassion for the well-being, happiness and liberation of all sentient beings. In the *Dhammapada*, Buddha says, "Abstain from all defilements, do mental, verbal and bodily deeds associated with generosity, compassion and wisdom, and purify the mind—this is the eternal teaching of Buddhas." Man's right knowledge and universal compassion can solve all his worldly problems in the *samsara* and lead him to the *Nirvana*. Man who can solve his worldly problems become successful and happy in his life and man who can't solve his worldly problems becomes failure and unhappy in his life.

Buddha's teaching promotes a greed-hatred-and-delusion-free and an enlightened-and-compassionate human culture, that is, a knowledge-and-value-based society which is necessary and important for '*bahujana hitaya and bahujana sukhaya*' (inclusive development, well-being, happiness, and social and spiritual liberation of all men and women irrespective of their race, religion, color, gender and status).

The fundamental principles and values of Buddha's teaching are based on democracy and human rights, freedom of thought, right knowledge, non-violence and universal compassion,

equality and non-discrimination, inclusive development and well-being, brotherhood and fraternity, and harmony and peace. Modern international human and animal rights standards may be traced back to Buddha's idea and ideal. These principles and values cannot be realized in traditional societies burdened with the institutions of religious dogmas and superstitions, race-religion-and-gender-based prejudices, inequality, and discrimination, and vested interest.

Bhikkhu Sangha and Bhikkhuni Sangha

Buddha established two organizations -- one for men and one for women which are respectively called '*Bhikkhu Sangha*' (Order of Monks) and '*Bhikkhuni Sangha*' (Order of Nuns) -- on the basis of his principles and values just mentioned above and instructed them to promote the *Dhamma* in the world for universal human development, well-being, happiness, and liberation. Thus, he worked like a true social engineer and reconstructed ancient India with his idea and ideal, replaced God-s and Goddesses with men and women, Religion (belief) with the Noble Eightfold Path (experience), Hell with *samsara* and Heaven and Salvation with Nirvana (social and spiritual liberation), and brought about a cultural revolution there.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru (2004), the first Prime Minister of independent India, aptly puts it thus: "Buddha had the courage to attack popular religion, superstition, ceremonial, and priestcraft, and all the vested interests that clung to them. He condemned also the metaphysical and theological outlook, miracles, revelations, and dealings with the supernatural. His appeal was to logic, reason, and experience; his emphasis was on ethics, and his method was one of psychological analysis, a psychology without a soul. His whole approach comes like the breath of the fresh wind from the mountains after the stale air of metaphysical speculation."

"Light of Asia" and Enlightened and Compassionate Asia

Buddha left a glorious human heritage in ancient India. Later his disciples and followers like Emperor Asoka (3rd century BCE) spread it across Asia and beyond with any violence. Thus, Buddha became the "Light of Asia", as Edwin Arnold (1879) writes, Asoka and his administration became 'the Great' in human history, and Asia became an enlightened and compassionate human culture and civilization.

Gurudeva Rabindranath Tagore (10 Jaistha, 1363) pays his homage to Buddha, whom he regards in his innermost being as the greatest man ever born on this earth, and fondly remembers this important historic development of Buddha-consciousness in Asia thus: "At the end of his austerities, Buddhadeva rose up and manifested himself to the world. In the glory of that manifestation, true India was revealed. The light spread far beyond the geographical boundaries of India to eternize his advent in the history of mankind. India became a land of pilgrimage, that is to say, people of other lands were drawn to her by bond of kinship; for, through the words of the Buddha, India had accepted all men as kins. India ignored none and, therefore, remained unacknowledgeable by none. The barriers of race and country were swept away by the flood of truth, and India's message reached men of all races in every land... he will be our refuge who manifested the ideal of Man in himself, who spoke of the liberation which is not a negation but a positive reality -- the liberation that comes not by abjuring work, but by the practice of self-giving through right action, and which consists not merely in the rejection of anger and malice but in the cultivation of immeasurable love and good-will towards all creatures. In these days, blinded as we are by motives of self-interest

and by cruel and insatiate greed, we seek refuse in him who came into the world to reveal in his own person the real self of the Universal Man.”

Disappearance and Reappearance of “Light of Asia”

Unfortunately, the "Light of Asia" disappeared and his heritage was forgotten in many parts of the Jambudvipa from the 13th century CE onwards, and gradually his heritage withered away from there due to sectarian greed, hatred and delusion, which Buddha never indulged in his life and teaching.

The rediscovery and study of Buddha’s heritage in India archaeologically and literally began with the establishment of the Asiatic Society by Sir William Jones in Kolkata in 1784. Later British and other European and Asian scholars like James Princep, Edwin Arnold, Anagarika Dharmapala, Alexander Cunningham, Rhys Davids, Herman Oldenburg, Poussin, Max Muller, Giuseppe Tucci, Sylvia Levi, Suzuki, Rajendralal Mitra, Rabindranath Tagore, Haraprasd Shastri, Rahul Sankrityayan, Swami Vivekananda, Bhadanta Ananda Koushalayan, Bhikkhu Jagadish Kashyap, D. D. Kosambi, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar etc joined in the mission and widen the horizon of knowledge about Buddha and his heritage.

In an All-India Radio Broadcast on 3 October 1954, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (Jaffrelot, 2017) declares: “Positively, my Social Philosophy, may be said to be enshrined in three words: Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Let no one, however, say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French-Revolution. I have not. My philosophy has roots in religion and not in political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my Master, the Buddha. In his philosophy, liberty and equality had a place... he gave the highest place to fraternity as the real safeguard against denial of liberty or equality or fraternity which was another name of brotherhood or humanity, which was again another name for religion.” Dr. Ambedkar enshrined these principles, along with ‘social justice’, in the Constitution of modern India. In his historic speech of 25 November 1950, while presenting the final draft of the Indian Constitution to the Assembly, he also pointed out that by becoming a parliamentary democracy India again is back to its Buddhist roots.

The idea and ideal of Buddha enshrined in the Constitution of India need to be cultivated in our mind and body and in our practical life and culture. For that they should be transmitted to our next generation through our educational curricula and institutions.

Modern India has the potential and the obligation to lead the global campaign for promotion of Buddha-consciousness in the world in general and in Asia in particular for global human unity, understanding, friendship, cooperation and well-being. We strongly believe that India and its knowledge hubs are working towards this direction.

We are happy to note the message issued by Mr. Antonio Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, on the *Buddha Jayanti* 2021 in recognition of the importance and relevance of Buddha and his teaching in today’s world, which reads “On this Day of Vesak, let’s resolve to build lives of peace and dignity for all on a healthy planet” and also the keynote speech delivered by Honourable Prime Minister of India Sri Narandra Modi-ji, who says “*jahan Budh hai wohi juddh nahi hota hai*” (where is Buddha, there is no war) at an international program celebrating the 2565th *Buddha Jayanti* in New Delhi in 2021.

May all beings be happy and free from suffering!

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