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# **Buddhism as a Practical Teaching**

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# Buddhism as a Practical Teaching

**B**uddhism is a vast and complex subject and volumes have been written on its many aspects. Any subject so vast can be interpreted in different ways by different people. Some could emphasize certain aspects of the teaching and de-emphasize or ignore altogether other aspects. Ultimately each person has his own understanding of Buddhism. In this paper my intention is to try to convey to you my own understanding of the relevance of Buddhism for worldly existence, especially urban existence.

We can say that there are two broad perspectives in understanding Buddhism or any other great message or philosophy. The first is a more or less literary understanding of the sacred texts as the total truth. This is the approach of the unquestioning believer. The second might be called the contextual approach whereby the teaching is related to a particular socio-historical context. In this approach, the words of the teacher are not taken as absolutes. Instead they are understood in the context in which they were spoken, and in terms of such questions as to whom and under

what circumstances. Such an approach also implicitly looks at the teacher as an analytically and practically-minded person and not as a divinely inspired prophet. This approach is particularly suitable to the study of Buddhism because the Buddha is unique among the founders of great religions to insist that he was human and not divine, or divinely inspired. In this paper I adopt this second approach.

My theme is selected from the very center of Buddhism. It is the question of mental peace and tranquility, the ultimate version of which is Nirvana. I would like to suggest that the search for such ultimate tranquility is full of meaning and relevance also for proximate tranquility, or peace of mind here and now. In other words, I would like to suggest that the Buddhist teaching is not oriented towards the release from *samsāra* alone: and that it offers help and solace for the sorrows of the mind here and now, in our present existence.

Before coming to the relevance of Buddhism for urban life which is emphasized in this paper, it is necessary to address ourselves to the large question of its relevance to mundane existence in general. This is necessary because it is sometimes claimed, both by critics of Buddhism and by certain scholars, that Buddhism is only concerned with the spirit, with salvation, and with the other world; and that it has no

interest in, or orientation to, human existence here and now; and therefore it is not useful to us in our daily lives.

Such a view was expressed by German sociologist Max Weber. Because of his pre-eminent position as a great exponent of social thought, many of his followers have blindly accepted this view, and written long treatises using as a basic premise the idea that Buddhism is indifferent to the social, political and economic world. Writing on what he called “ancient Buddhism,” Weber says, “it is a specifically unpolitical and anti-political status religion, more precisely, a religious ‘technology’ of wandering and intellectually-schooled mendicant monks.” Weber thought that Buddhism has no concern with society here and now, and that its only concern is the ultimate concern of “blowing out,” or extinguishing the self. This is an extreme view of Buddhism, and we find no basis for such views in the available historical facts of early Buddhism. Why, then, did Weber hold such a view? It is because the sources from which he learnt about Buddhism were second-hand sources, written in English or German by writers who emphasized certain doctrines and left out the social and political background. These writers wrote in this way because they were reacting to the theistic doctrines of their own cultures which they found unacceptable, and

were idealizing the rationality of the Buddhist quest. In the process they forgot the human and social content of early Buddhism.

Critics of Buddhism have similarly, without adequate knowledge of the background, considered Buddhism to be selfish and lacking in a positive attitude to contemporary existence. They have considered Buddhism to be concerned with private salvation alone. It is sufficient to say that this cannot be true for the reason that a basic premise of Buddhism is *anattā*, or the rejection of the theory of an individual soul.

Study of the Buddhist sources themselves—rather than second hand sources—make it quite clear that the Buddhist teaching is not concerned with the destiny of the individual, but the whole realm of being, which inevitably encompasses social and political matters. These matters receive copious attention in the teachings of the Buddha as represented in the early Buddhist texts.

A review of the social context of the rise of Buddhism and its early history by reference to the Buddhist texts themselves, will show us that Buddhism, from its inception, was concerned with social and political matters as much as it was concerned with the discipline of the mind with a view

to ultimately breaking the chain of causation that binds men to saṃsāric existence.

The time of the Buddha was a time of considerable significance from the point of view of political evolution. It was a time when society was experimenting with a new form of government—monarchy. The existing form of government was republican and the time of the Buddha was a time of transition when both types existed side by side. Some, like the Sakyan republic to which the Buddha was born, were at that time exhibiting features of both forms; they were in an advanced stage in the transition to monarchy. The expanding monarchies were a threat to the continuity of the republics. An equally dangerous threat to them was feuding among themselves.

The republics were located in the middle of the Gangetic plain in a line that stretched from northwest to southeast. They were the republics of the Sakyans, Koliyas, Moriyas, Mallas and Vajjis. All these names are familiar to anyone with even a faint acquaintance with Buddhist literature—either the canonical literature or the non-canonical works such as the Jātaka stories. The Vajjian republic was a loose confederation consisting of such republics as the Licchavis, Videhas and Mallas.

The republics were governed by the elders of the tribal groups that constituted them. Discussion was the method used in making decisions. The leaders met regularly in an assembly known as the Sangha. The Buddha seems to have organized his monastic order on these same lines in which discussion and argument were the basis of decisions: as we all know, his monastic order was known by the same name—Sangha. Since the republican assembly or Sangha was the core of their organization the republics were themselves known as Sanghas. These were by no means democracies. The elders were not elected representatives. They were the leading men of the tribe.

We noted that the monarchies were expanding at the expense of the republics. We cannot go into the complex reasons why this was so. Although the Buddhist Sangha itself was organized on republican principles, the Buddha seems to have thought pragmatically and impartially of the monarchy. Perhaps he may have considered an enlightened and powerful monarchy sympathetic to his teaching to be useful in facilitating the spread of the doctrine. This may be the reason why the Buddha maintained close association with the important monarchs of the time. Pasenadi, the King of Kosala, and Bimbisāra, the King of Magadha, were close friends and ardent supporters

of the Buddha. We read in the literature that Pasenadi visited the Buddha frequently to have discussions with him. It was at Sāvattihī, the capital of Pasenadi's kingdom that the Buddha delivered the majority of his discourses. Similarly, King Bimbisāra, ever since he first met the Buddha, was a firm supporter of the Buddha and Sangha. Now, if we pause for a moment to remember that these two kingdoms—Kosala and Magadha—covered most of the lower Gangetic plain, it becomes clear that the Buddha was directly and closely in contact with the two most important political centers of the time. These two kings—Pasenadi and Bimbisāra—who were the Buddha's disciples, asked him for advice not only on religious and moral matters but also on political and social matters.

The Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta gives a dramatic example. Bimbisāra was no longer the King of Magadha. His son, Ajātasattu had ascended the throne. Ajātasattu is about to wage war against the Vajjian republic to the north of his kingdom, across the river Ganges. He sends a messenger to the Buddha, who was at that time residing at Rājagaha, the capital of Magadha, asking for advice. The Buddha's words to the messenger sum up the source of the strength of the republican form of government. His words were that so long as the Vajjians continue to observe their

traditions properly and to meet regularly in their republican assembly seeking agreement in all matters, so long as they honor their elders and maintain their customary rites and ceremonies as a republic, no harm can be done to them. The messenger interpreted this to mean that the Vajjians cannot be militarily defeated but they could be destroyed as a political entity by the subversive means of creating internal strife and dissension, that is, by destroying the essential republican principle of agreement and concord. (Incidentally, this may be the reason why creation of dissension among the Sangha is considered one of five heinous crimes, *ānantariya kamma*, in Buddhism.) Indeed, soon afterwards, dissension tore apart the Vajjian republic and Ajātasattu was able to annex it to the Magadhan Kingdom. The Buddha's statement was an astute political observation. This is not surprising because the Buddha as Prince Siddhartha was brought up to be a ruler, and by the time he renounced lay life he was already well trained in statecraft and the military arts, like any other heir to a kingdom at that time, So the Buddha was undoubtedly familiar with the concerns of government and it is unlikely that he would have lost all interest in it, especially in view of his close association with kings and other political leaders. Even the most artistic or poetic dreamer has an idea of what society and polity should be—that is,

has a theory of society and political organization, and we all know that the Buddha was no dreamer.

It indeed appears that the Buddha gave careful thought to monarchical and republican forms of government. As we noted, he actively associated with kings, but his own Sangha, the monastic order, he decided to organize on the basis of the original Sanghas or republics. As we noted, the source of strength of the republican form was expressed in the Buddha's evaluation of the Vajjian republic. That source of strength was frequent meeting and reaching agreement on matters relating to government. So, agreement or concord is considered the basis of the Sangha. Even today communities of Buddhist monks, despite organizational elaboration of modern times, preserve the idea of agreement or concord, as seen in such terms as *ñatti* (resolution) and *sammuti* (agreement) used in monastic deliberations.

So, the Buddhist Sangha is organizationally very different from a monarchy. Whereas for lay society the Buddha seems to have considered righteous kingship as the suitable form of government, for his own community of disciples he rejected the principle of personal rule. The impression we get is that the Buddha weighed realistically the two organizational forms and rejected the one in favor of the other as the basis of organization of the Sangha. This is a decision

that illustrates realistic concern with social order and forms of government, rather than an ascetic indifference to the political affairs of men.

From these large issues of political and social order, if we come down to matters on the other end of the spectrum, such as the affairs of the householder, the Buddha expressed equal knowledge and interest. A good example is found in the text dealing with the question asked by the young householder Sigāla, who asks the Buddha for advice regarding his moral duties. The answer given by the Buddha is comprehensive. It shows that Buddhism was neither other-worldly nor solely spiritual nor selfish. Since this advice is so detailed it is sometimes referred to as the Vinaya for the householder, implicitly comparing it to the elaborately detailed code of conduct laid down by the Buddha for the monkhood.

So far, I have tried to show that early Buddhism, contrary to certain opinions, showed ample concern for and knowledge of society here and now. Let us now narrow down this same perspective to bring out the special significance of Buddhism for urban life in general and especially for the life of the large, busy and competitive modern city which most of us have chosen as our home.

Any significant and complex creation of the human

mind, such as a philosophy, a theory, or an invention, comes into being due to two broad factors. One is undoubtedly the creativity, the genius, of the mind that conceived it. Very often we are content with emphasizing this factor alone. There is no doubt that all due credit must go to the creator of an idea. But we must not forget that there is another factor. This factor is the times, the environment, or the state of thinking in the context of which the new theory or philosophy appears. If we think for a moment of the field of science, it is easy to realize that theory could not come into being except for the existing theory or theories which the new theory is replacing. This is what we mean by the expression that a given thinker stands on the shoulders of his predecessors. This is so even if the thinker rejects his predecessors, because rejection of a theory is often only partial and there is always a corner of the foundation of the demolished theory on which the new theorist can build profitably. Indeed, by the advancement of knowledge we mean nothing but the partial replacement of old theories by new ones. But the new theories are possible only because old theories were there for the new theories to demolish. The physics of Einstein was made possible, because the physics of Newton was already there. We say science is cumulative.

When we come from the physical and natural

sciences to the social sciences and philosophies, it is abundantly clear that theories or philosophies arise—without forgetting individual genius—not only from pre-existing knowledge, but even more demonstrably, from the social and economic environment. For example, I do not think you would quarrel with me if I were to say that *Das Kapital*, the great work of Karl Marx, could not have been written in ancient India or Greece or even in Medieval Europe. We can indeed say that *Das Kapital* could have only been written in a post-industrial European country which had established a certain type of production relations. We are making a similar statement when we say that Hobbes' *Leviathan*, is a justification of the nation-state and its armed guardian, the absolute monarch. There is no great work dealing with man and his society that cannot be partially explained with reference to its social origin.

If we adopt a truly inquiring spirit we must look at the Buddhist doctrine, which is a philosophy of man, society, and of human destiny, in the same way, that is, we must partially understand it in relation to the social, political and economic environment in which it came into being. What was the nature of this environment?

About the time of the Buddha there was an increase in agricultural activity in the area, that is, the middle

Gangetic plain. This means the opening up of forest land for agriculture. A clear result of this kind of change is demographic change. With nomadic peoples, population density is low. But with extensive cultivation, a given area can support—especially with rice cultivation—a much higher density. The pastoral diet of meat and milk also would have been replaced by rice which we today associate with higher human fertility. This would have in turn given rise to opening up of more land, and this process seems to have given rise in some areas to an urban pattern of social life. By the time of the Buddha several big cities, such as Sāvattthī, Sāketā, Kosambī, Kāsi (Varanasi), Rājagaha and Campā were already in existence. Further, there was a whole constellation of smaller cities such as Kapilavatthu, Vesāli, Mithila, and Gayā. These cities and towns were centers of industry and trade. They had guilds of wood-workers, iron-workers, leather-workers, painters, ivory-workers and so on. These guilds seem to have been organized bodies with effective control over their membership—like trade unions. The cities were also political and administrative centers. They were busy places because of either their strategic location or their proximity to some natural resource such as iron-ore. From these facts we can infer that these cities had developed a style of life that is distinct from that of the rural areas.

In addition to being political and business centers, these cities were centers of learning; and they also supported typically urban forms of entertainment such as theatre, dance, singing, gambling, alcohol, and prostitution. In other words, they had developed some of the characteristic features of city life that we have today, in our own cities.

I have referred to the two forms of government—monarchist and republican—and noted that this was a period of transition from republicanism to monarchy. That is, the republican form was in decline. It is of great interest to look at the causes of this decline, and we have no better analysis than the Buddha's evaluation of the chances of survival of the Vajjian republic which we have already referred to. The Buddha's words were that if the Vajjians respected their elders, if they held the customary republican rites, if they met regularly and reached agreement, then their republic would be invincible. In sum, the republic would survive so long as there was agreement and concord. This statement is a clue to an important social process that was taking place, because the Vajjian republic was soon vanquished, not so much by the enemy's sword, but by the internal dissension of its elite, that is by lack of agreement, lack of concord. What does this mean? What is the meaning of the absence of concord? It can only mean

one thing—that the individual will had triumphed over the collective will, over agreement, over concord. When there was concord there was a suppression of the individual will in favor of the collective will. When concord ceased to exist, the individual will was set free to assert itself in competition with each other. Republicanism gave way to monarchy where individuals claimed private authority in their own relatively higher or lower status positions. So, we seem to be confronted with a set of interrelated factors—the increase of population, the rise of urbanism and the rise of individualism. These are classic features of a syndrome that could bring about social turmoil, dislocation and confusion referred to by sociologists as *anomie*, a state in which the norms of society are called into question, giving rise in the individual members of the society to a heightened sense of dislocation, isolation and anxiety. These are characteristic problems of our own urban civilization today, for which we as a society seek remedy in various rehabilitative and preventive programs, and as individuals in therapy and stimulant or antidepressant medicines which we are told from time to time, could be harmful.

It is with this picture of the social background in mind that we must return to our discussion on the rise of Buddhism. When we do so we can see how

Buddhism provided a soothing remedy for the society's dislocations and confusions. We can see Buddhism as a response to this social illness. It is tempting to refer to some of the early sculptures where the Buddha is depicted as *bhesajja guru* or a doctor who cures the ills of the world.

Certain Buddhist myths of origin of private property express with particular clarity the ills of individualism. According to one of these myths, in the beginning there was an idyllic state when a self-generating and exquisite variety of rice sprang from the earth and was freely available to everyone. The earth was made of sugar. So, two of the commodities that people from oriental countries love— rice and sugar—were freely and abundantly available. It was common property. There was no notion of individual ownership. Suddenly, greed or the desire for individual ownership arose, that is, individualism emerged subjugating the common will and consent. And people started partitioning the earth and fencing plots of land as individually owned. As a mystical punishment for this greed, the rice stopped growing by itself and the earth lost its sugary taste. The idyllic state came to an end and ever since man had to till the soil, use fertilizer, sow the seed, reap the harvest, thresh it and do all kinds of other exacting tasks to earn a living. The moral of the story is very clear.

Uncontrolled individual desire and greed had brought about misery.

When we place the Buddhist doctrine into this context some of its ideas become more and more intelligible. For example, we can look at the doctrine of *anattā* or the “no-soul theory” as it is sometimes called. Of all great religions Buddhism alone denies the existence of a private, individual soul. Indeed, the entire effort of the Buddhist is to undermine and erode the idea of a permanent individual personality. If one were to consider the individualism of the urban society as an important cause of an increased sense of dislocation and anxiety among its members, it is no surprise that a remedial doctrine emphasizes the need to abandon the ego-centrism and the inordinately high evaluation of the individual. What would be a more effective way of doing this than by a philosophical denial that the individual exists?

At this point we may digress into the Buddha’s decision to organize his monastic order along non-individualist lines. We have discussed at some length the two alternative forms of social and political organization—the monarchist and the republican. The monarchist form seems to have arisen, we noted, as a result of the subordination of the collective will and the rise of the individual will. We also noted that the Buddha may have considered an enlightened and

righteous monarchy to be beneficial to the spread of the Dhamma. But as a form of social organization for his monkhood of disciples, he clearly preferred the republican form where the assertion of the individual will was given no place, and where agreement and concord, and therefore, the assertion of the collective will was given emphasis. In other words, by organizing the, monastic order as a non-authoritarian order, or as a Sangha, the Buddha seems to have expressed the idea that unbridled individualism was not a way to organize a society of persons in search of mental tranquillity.

To return to our discussion of doctrinal concepts, we may look at *taṇhā* or attachment, one of the causes of suffering. Attachment could be for anything and when coupled with individualism, it would be greatly intensified, Because, the more you designate certain things as your own and no one else's, the more you expect it to be so, and the greater the anxiety in your attempt to protect and preserve that claim, and the greater the suffering when you lose it. On the other hand, if one could devalue the notion of 'mine', the notion of personal belongingness, one would develop an equanimity, which would shelter one from the anxiety of attachment.

The fact that Buddhism in its social concern, was probably a response to urbanism is further seen if we

reflect on the fact that the Buddha's teaching was mostly conducted in the cities. Except for the brief period in which he experimented with asceticism and the time he temporarily journeyed to the countryside, the Buddha lived in urban surroundings. It was near the great metropolitan center of Benares that he expounded the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the Setting in Motion of the Wheel of the Dhamma, popularly known as the First Sermon. From there he returned to Rājagaha, the capital of Magadha, another big city. We know from the information given in the discourses themselves that the vast majority of the discourses were delivered in the two big cities of Rājagaha and Sāvathī. We can also infer that he resided mostly in the city of Sāvathī. He first went there at the invitation of the merchant and banker Anāthapiṇḍika. Anāthapiṇḍika first met the Buddha when he was on a visit—very likely a business visit—to Rājagaha where the Buddha was residing at the time. When Anāthapiṇḍika returned to his home city of Sāvathī, he bought a piece of land at a very high price—we know that real estate prices are high in big cities—and built a suitable monastery in anticipation of the Buddha's visit. This monastery, or vihāra, is the celebrated Jetavana, where the Buddha was to preach many discourses in the subsequent years. The Buddha spent twenty-five Vassa or rainy seasons at this vihara.

Rājagaha, the capital of Magadha was then ruled by king Bimbisāra who, as we noted, was a close friend of the Buddha. Even when the Buddha was living in Sāvattihī, he made frequent visits to Rājagaha. Many important discourses were delivered in Rājagaha, where there were eighteen large monasteries. That there were so many monasteries lends support to the view that the urban center was the fertile ground in which early Buddhism thrived.

The city depicts in clear relief the cause of suffering—a heightened sense of the individual and resulting desire. This causes confusions, anxieties and a sense of deprivation in day-to-day living. But this is not all. The same cause—desire or *taṇhā*, according to Buddhist thought, results in *ultimate* suffering of continuing rebirth in Saṃsāra. If desire is both the cause of suffering in this world and ultimate suffering as Buddhism understands it, that is continuing rebirth in Saṃsāra, then our attempts to eradicate desire for the purposes of getting rid of Samsaric existence also should help us in getting rid of our confusions, anxieties and our sense of deprivation in *this* world, here and now.

The Buddhist method of eradicating the cause of suffering is through mental discipline which will lead the practitioner to *upekkhā* or equanimity. By equanimity we mean the ability to remain, as the

Mahāmaṅgala Sutta puts it, "...unshaken when touched by the way of the world." The "way of the world" is that there is both pleasure and pain in it. In our day-to-day life, when something pleasurable happens, we are thrilled and overjoyed; and when we have a painful experience we are greatly depressed. We react excessively to both experiences. Equanimity is the ability to remain unmoved either way and maintain a balanced outlook. This is the secret of happiness. This state can be reached according to Buddhism, only by achieving control over one's own mind through systematic meditation and concentration. Concentration is simply a technique of tying up the mind that otherwise runs wild.

It is easy to intellectually understand that meditation will train our minds to *upekkhā* or equanimity. I think we all understand this. But understanding is different from realization. Realization is difficult. To give an example, we all know that our minds get attracted to a thing of beauty, whether it is a beautiful creation, or a beautiful thing or a beautiful person. Similarly, we know that we are repelled by a thing that is ugly and unpleasant. This happens every time. We intellectually understand this. But that is not enough. To achieve equanimity we must realize that such attraction and repulsion is the way with the mind. But it can and should be brought

under control. We must think of the mind as if it were something exterior to ourselves. Then it would be a phenomenon that we could objectively see. If we can achieve this state, we have achieved the ability to remain relatively calm and unmoved when confronted with the ways of the world. Then we would neither be unduly attracted by beauty nor unduly repelled by ugliness. That is a consummation devoutly to be wished.

For the follower of the Dhamma, mental discipline shortens saṃsāric suffering. But it can also relieve us of anxiety here and now, because it trains our minds to achieve *upekkhā* or equanimity in the face of worldly happenings. If so, it is a healthy alternative to professional therapeutic help or tranquilizing drugs for relieving our anxieties and stresses. When we look at Buddhism this way we have an answer to the sceptics—Buddhist or non-Buddhist—who do not believe in a life hereafter. If you succeed in disciplining your mind to achieve equanimity, then you have conquered yourself, and reached peace and tranquillity within yourself. Mental discipline is simply a piece of knowledge we have, a technique with which we may combat the restlessness, indiscipline and the lack of decorum of our minds, and the resulting states of anxiety and disturbance. One does not have to be a Buddhist or believer in re-

birth to make use of that technique. It is a question of the existence of problem and a way of solving it. It does not matter whether one is Buddhist, non-Buddhist, atheist or sceptic. Meditative technique is not a matter of faith, it is a matter of putting the technique to use. It is not an object of veneration, it is a method for gaining one's own peace of mind. It is a road to tranquillity without tranquilizers. Although hermitages may be located in forests, it is no wonder that to-day meditation movements are urban phenomena, and the occupants of forest hermitages are not peasants but, most of the time, city people.

The believer knows that meditation will stand him in good stead in his sojourns in Saṃsāra. The sceptic—if he trains his mind—will reap the same benefits if it turns out that, contrary to his beliefs, re-birth is a fact, and he is reborn. If not, meditation would still bring him peace of mind here and now in this world. We can confidently echo the Sinhalese poet Alagiyavanna, the author of *Subhāsita*, that “irrespective of whether there is another existence or not, it is not a bad idea to do good deeds.”

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