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Influence of Buddhism on a People

By Nyanatiloka Thera



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Influence of Buddhism on a People

It is merely a few decades ago that any one in the West who should show sympathies with the Doctrines of the Buddha, was not taken seriously. All that time Buddhism was still considered generally as a conglomeration of mysticism and superstition and nobody ever thought that it was destined to play such a prominent role in the Wes-tern countries as it actually does to-day.

There are still many in the West, mostly belonging to hostile camps, who find fault with Buddhism and try to convince their own followers that Buddhism exercises a most pernicious influence on the character of its adherents by making them melancholy and pessimistic, and that it thus becomes a danger to social activity and to national development. These allegations, however, appear quite baseless to those who possess some knowledge of Buddhism, or have lived in a real Buddhist country, for instance Burma, where the people are thought to be the happiest and most cheerful on earth.

In the following we shall see that a doctrine such as

Buddhism is, can exercise only the most beneficial influence on the character and manners of a people.

Buddhism makes man stand on his own feet and rouses his self-confidence and energy. In no other religious teaching is energy so frequently pointed out as the root of all good things, and mental torpor and sloth so emphatically stigmatised as in Buddhism, Says the Buddha: "Energy is the road to the Deathless Realm, But sloth and indolence the road to death." "It is through unshaken perseverance, monks, that I have reached the light, through unceasing effort that I have reached the peace supreme. If you also, O monks, will strive unceasingly, you too will within a short time reach the highest goal of holiness, by understanding and realising it your-selves." And the Buddha's last words were "Strive for your goal with earnestness!"

Thus the follower of the Buddha is again and again reminded that he has to rely on himself and his own exertions, and that there is nobody, either in heaven or on earth who can help him and free him from the results of his former evil deeds. "By oneself evil is done, by oneself one becomes pure. Purity and impurity spring from oneself. No one else can be one's saviour." Buddhism teaches that every one is responsible for his own good and bad deeds, and that only he himself can mould his own destiny. "Those evil deeds were only done by you, not your parents,

friends or advisers; and you yourself will reap the painful results.”

Knowing that no God and no Church, neither ceremonies nor priests, can help to save him, the Buddhist of necessity will feel compelled to rely on his own efforts, and thereby he will gain confidence. Nobody can really deny that the feeling of dependence on God, or on any other imaginary power, must necessarily weaken man’s faith in his own power and his feeling of self-responsibility, while, on the other hand, in one who trusts in his own power, self-confidence will become firm and strong.

A further wholesome factor in developing in a people the feeling of self-reliance and self-confidence is presented by the Buddha’s announcement that no one is expected to believe anything on mere tradition and authority, but that anyone who wishes to reach perfection and mental emancipation, has to rely on his own understanding and thinking power, uninfluenced by dogma and blind belief. The Buddha said:

“Do not go according to mere hearsay or tradition.... do not believe in a thing merely because your master told it. But if you yourself understand that such and such things are evil and bad, and lead you and others to misfortune, then you may reject these things.”

A doctrine like this, which makes an appeal to man's own understanding, must indeed have a beneficial influence on a people; whereas one that demands blind faith in authority, scriptures, ceremonies and traditions, and does not admit personal investigation must necessarily lead a people to spiritual lethargy. Spiritual progress is possible only where there is freedom of thought. Where, however, blind belief in authority prevails there will be no mental progress. Freedom of thinking leads to mental vigour and progress, while dogmatism leads to stagnation.

Experience further shows that dogmatic belief and intolerance everywhere go hand in hand. Wherever the one appears, the other is not far off. One is here reminded of the Middle Ages of Europe with their pitiless inquisitions, cruel murders, violence, infamies, tortures and burning; being results of dogmatic belief in religious authority and the intolerance connected therewith. Dogmatism and intolerance do not shrink from using any means to oppose progress. Though at present there are no longer employed such barbarous methods as those against Galileo and Giordano Bruno, intolerance and cruel fanaticism, nevertheless, are perpetuated, perhaps in a still more insidious manner in politics. By the way, it would be interesting to ascertain whether or not the principles for which

Galileo and Bruno were persecuted and condemned, have since been officially ruled out by the Church as criminal.

An unhampered and peaceful progress in social development, in morality, knowledge, art, science, and philosophy, is possible only in a country where tolerance and freedom of thought reign, and not in a country where religious and political tutelage and intolerance prevail and where the freedom of the people is suppressed.

Now, what above all helps to promote this sense of tolerance in a people, is that universal and all-embracing kindness and love, in Pali called "Mettā", which in Buddhism forms, as it were, the foundation on which all moral and social progress is based. And it is a fact that all the real Buddhist nations are imbued with this spirit of all-embracing kindness, which is not the result of blind obedience to a certain religious commandment, but which is the outcome of the understanding that all living beings, from man down to the earthworm, are subject to the same laws and conditions of existence. 'As I am, so are they; as they are, so am I;' thus one should identify oneself with all that lives, and should not kill, nor hurt any living being.

Nowhere has this universal kindness, or selfless

love, been so clearly defined as in Buddhism. The commandment 'Love thy neighbour as thyself' is correctly speaking, vague and ambiguous, as every person loves himself in a different way, and at times even very unreasonably. *Mettā*, or Burmese *Mvitta*, is that innermost wish that all living beings, without exception, may be happy, free from pain and grief. Thus the *Mettā Sutta*, 'the Hymn of Universal Love' forms in all Buddhist countries the daily bread, the daily prayer, being daily recited, morning and evening, by high and low, old and young. I should like to give here in English just those two verses of it in which the whole is summed up:

“Just as a mother her own child,
Her only son, protects with all her might,
Just so one should t'wards all that lives
Develop one's own mind in boundless love.
Thus t'ward the whole wide world one should
Unfold one's own mind in all embracing
kindness,
Above, below, on ev'ry side.
Unhindered, free from hate and angry feeling.”

And now note the crying dissonance of such non-Buddhist declarations and exhortations, as: “All those that believe otherwise are beasts and have only the shape of men and as they are beasts, they are not

worthy to serve the chosen people.” And: “Kill your enemies wherever you encounter them bathe in their blood, for that is the punishment to be meted out to the unbeliever ..’ Further: “Fight against your enemies, till you have reduced them to powerlessness, till God’s cult is established... Let them suffer the pain of retaliation....”

It is evident, wherever such barbarous commandments find acceptance, there they will produce a most disastrous influence on the people. They will lead them to intolerance, fanaticism, brutality and cruelty, and will help to increase the frightful misery and distress in the world. In the Buddhist scriptures, wherein so much boundless love and kindness is mentioned, and so much tolerance is preached, it is quite evident that there is no place for any similar commandment or advice. Further, no Buddhist missionary or monk would ever think of preaching ill will and hatred against so-called ‘Unbelievers’. Religious, national, or political intolerance and hatred are incomprehensible to a people imbued with the real Buddhist spirit; and war, especially an aggressive war, would never be approved by it. The Buddha, in addressing his monks, said even: “Should, O monks, robbers and murderers cut off your limbs and joints, and should you give way to anger, in that case you would not be fulfilling my

advice. For thus ought you to train yourselves: 'Undisturbed shall our minds remain, no evil words shall escape our lips. Friendly and full of sympathy shall we remain, with heart full of love, and free from any hidden malice. And those persons we shall penetrate with loving thoughts, wide, deep, boundless, freed from anger and hatred.'

This all-embracing kindness, or *Mettā* is something very different from the passive love of the lamb that, beaten on one cheek, should also tender the other one.

“Hatred never ends through hatred,
All hatred ends through love alone.”

Thus, without fire and sword, Buddhism has found its way into the hearts of millions and millions of beings. From history we know that, since the time of the Buddha up to this day, not a single drop of blood has been shed in the name of the Buddha, or for the propagation of his Doctrine. But how does this matter stand with the other religions? It is impossible to relate here all the manifold barbarous ways of religious proselytism. As, however, Buddhism teaches that mere belief or outward rituals are of no use for reaching the wisdom and emancipation proclaimed by the Buddha, outward conversion becomes meaningless and to promote Buddhism by force would mean pretending to propagate justice and love

by means of oppression and injustice The follower of the Buddha despises proselytism, as it is of no consequence to him, whether another man calls himself a Buddhist or not, as he knows that it is only through man's own understanding and exertion that he may come nearer to the goal preached by the Buddha. He would rather wish to make all other beings happy by leading them to virtue and wisdom, and showing them the path to deliverance from suffering.

It may also be mentioned that, since the earliest times, this embracing kindness, or *Mettā*, has had a powerful influence on the Buddhist people in inducing them to build on all important high-roads free resthouses for the weary wanderer, put up stands containing pots for ever fresh drinking water for the thirsty, provide food and drink for man and animal, build, for both, free hospitals and distribute free medicines to all. In this connection we would recommend to the reader the unique work of Fielding Hall, "The Soul of a People", in which the author draws a lively and charming picture of the Burmese people.

There is another most important factor that has, to a great extent, contributed to keep the Buddhist peoples from degradation and brutality, namely, the abstaining from intoxicating drinks, which is one of

the 5 moral rules, or Silas, enjoined on all Buddhists. The Buddha warns against intoxicating drink and shows clearly its pernicious influence on man's mind, character and morality. Even, taken only in little doses, or from time to time, alcohol has a deleterious influence on body and mind. Gradually it may bring about that excitement during which one no longer distinguishes between right or wrong, and during which all endeavour to resist immorality and crime, entirely disappears. In short, intoxicating drink deadens the moral sense of man and renders him morally insensible. Many an innocent girl has through intoxicating drink become a victim of vice, and finally has ended in crime and prison. Most of the murder cases happen under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. Drunkenness is temporary madness produced through the alcoholic poison, and may finally lead to permanent insanity. An overdose of alcohol deprives a man of the faculty of thinking, poisons character, and paralyses mind. It is drinking that causes moral insensibility, rudeness, cruelty, etc. A people that abstains from the use of alcohol remains sober in mind and is able to exercise mental and moral control.

Some politicians are of opinion that the sale of alcohol with the money it brings through taxes will financially benefit the Government, but the report of Prof. Paulsen seems to prove just the contrary. He

speaks of an American fisherman called Jukes, living in the 19th century, who was a drinker but healthy and robust. From him came into existence 7 successive generations with 709 descendants who have been watched. Amongst them were 174 prostitutes, 18 brothel-housekeepers, and 77 criminals including 12 murderers ; further 64 of them were living in poor-houses, 148 were living on the public relief of the poor, 85 were suffering of diseases of degeneration, and almost all were drinkers. In the 5th generation all females were prostitutes, all males criminals. The expenses of the Government paid only for these people in 75 years came up to 1.25 million dollars.

In summing up we may now state that, instead of having a pernicious influence on a people—as so often alleged in the West—Buddhism is, on the contrary, of all religions in the world the best suited to improve and elevate the character and manners of a people; awakens the self-respect and feeling of self-responsibility of a people and stirs up a nation's energy. It fosters spiritual progress by appealing to man's own thinking powers. It promotes in a people the sense by keeping it free from religious and national narrowness and fanaticism. It spreads amongst the people the feeling of all-embracing kindness and brotherhood and keeps them away from hate and cruelty. It makes the people clear and sober

in mind by discouraging intoxicating drink. In short, it produces the feeling of self-reliance by teaching that the whole destiny of man lies in his own hands, and that he himself possesses the faculty of developing his own energy and insight in order to reach the highest goal which no God ever can give him. Hence, self-respect, self-confidence, comprehension, tolerance, all-embracing kindness, soberness of mind and independence of thought: these are some of the salient qualities created in a people by the influence of Buddhism. And in the country in which such qualities preponderate, peace and happiness will reign supreme, and such a country will be a model to the whole world, will be a paradise on earth.

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