

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT THE BUDDHA TAUGHT AND
THE WORLD TODAY

There are some who believe that Buddhism is so lofty and sublime a system that it cannot be practised by ordinary men and women in this workaday world of ours, and that one has to retire from it to a monastery, or to some quiet place, if one desires to be a true Buddhist.

This is a sad misconception, due evidently to a lack of understanding of the teaching of the Buddha. People run to such hasty and wrong conclusions as a result of their hearing, or reading casually, something about Buddhism written by someone, who, as he has not understood the subject in all its aspects, gives only a partial and lopsided view of it. The Buddha's teaching is meant not only for monks in monasteries, but also for ordinary men and women living at home with their families. The Noble Eightfold Path, which is the Buddhist way of life, is meant for all, without distinction of any kind.

The vast majority of people in the world cannot turn monk, or retire into caves or forests. However noble and pure Buddhism may be, it would be useless to the masses of mankind if they could not follow it in their daily life in the world of today. But if you understand the spirit of Buddhism correctly (and not only its letter), you can surely follow and practise it while living the life of an ordinary man.

There may be some who find it easier and more convenient to accept Buddhism, if they do live in a remote place, cut off from the society of others. Others may find that that kind of retirement dulls and depresses their whole being both physically and mentally, and that it may not therefore be conducive to the development of their spiritual and intellectual life.

True renunciation does not mean running away physically from the world. Sariputta, the chief disciple of the Buddha, said

that one man might live in a forest devoting himself to ascetic practices, but might be full of impure thoughts and 'defilements'; another might live in a village or a town, practising no ascetic discipline, but his mind might be pure, and free from 'defilements'. Of these two, said Sariputta, the one who lives a pure life in the village or town is definitely far superior to, and greater than, the one who lives in the forest.¹

The common belief that to follow the Buddha's teaching one has to retire from life is a misconception. It is really an unconscious defence against practising it. There are numerous references in Buddhist literature to men and women living ordinary, normal family lives who successfully practised what the Buddha taught, and realized Nirvana. Vacchagotta the Wanderer, (whom we met earlier in the chapter on *Anatta*), once asked the Buddha straightforwardly whether there were laymen and women leading the family life, who followed his teaching successfully and attained to high spiritual states. The Buddha categorically stated that there were not one or two, not a hundred or two hundred or five hundred, but many more laymen and women leading the family life who followed his teaching successfully and attained to high spiritual states.²

It may be agreeable for certain people to live a retired life in a quiet place away from noise and disturbance. But it is certainly more praiseworthy and courageous to practise Buddhism living among your fellow beings, helping them and being of service to them. It may perhaps be useful in some cases for a man to live in retirement for a time in order to improve his mind and character, as preliminary moral, spiritual and intellectual training, to be strong enough to come out later and help others. But if a man lives all his life in solitude, thinking only of his own happiness and 'salvation', without caring for his fellows, this surely is not in keeping with the Buddha's teaching which is based on love, compassion, and service to others.

One might now ask: If a man can follow Buddhism while living the life of an ordinary layman, why was the Sangha, the Order of monks, established by the Buddha? The Order provides opportunity for those who are willing to devote their lives not

²*Ibid.*, pp. 490 ff.

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only to their own spiritual and intellectual development, but also to the service of others. An ordinary layman with a family cannot be expected to devote his whole life to the service of others, whereas a monk, who has no family responsibilities or any other worldly ties, is in a position to devote his whole life 'for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many' according to the Buddha's advice. That is how in the course of history, the Buddhist monastery became not only a spiritual centre, but also a centre of learning and culture.

The *Sigala-sutta* (No. 31 of the *Digha-nikaya*) shows with what great respect the layman's life, his family and social relations are regarded by the Buddha.

A young man named Sigala used to worship the six cardinal points of the heavens—east, south, west, north, nadir and zenith—in obeying and observing the last advice given him by his dying father. The Buddha told the young man that in the 'noble discipline' (*ariyassa vinaye*) of his teaching the six directions were different. According to his 'noble discipline' the six directions were: east: parents; south: teachers; west: wife and children; north: friends, relatives and neighbours; nadir: servants, workers and employees; zenith: religious men.

'One should worship these six directions' said the Buddha. Here the word 'worship' (*namasseyya*) is very significant, for one worships something sacred, something worthy of honour and respect. These six family and social groups mentioned above are treated in Buddhism as sacred, worthy of respect and worship. But how is one to 'worship' them? The Buddha says that one could 'worship' them only by performing one's duties towards them. These duties are explained in his discourse to Sigala.

First: Parents are sacred to their children. The Buddha says: 'Parents are called Brahma' (*Brahmatī matapitaro*). The term *Brahma* denotes the highest and most sacred conception in Indian thought, and in it the Buddha includes parents. So in good Buddhist families at the present time children literally 'worship' their parents every day, morning and evening. They have to perform certain duties towards their parents according to the 'noble discipline': they should look after their parents in their old age; should do whatever they have to do on their behalf; should maintain the honour of the family and continue the family tradition;

should protect the wealth earned by their parents; and perform their funeral rites after their death. Parents, in their turn, have certain responsibilities towards their children: they should keep their children away from evil courses; should engage them in good and profitable activities; should give them a good education; should marry them into good families; and should hand over the property to them in due course.

Second: The relation between teacher and pupil: a pupil should respect and be obedient to his teacher; should attend to his needs if any; should study earnestly. And the teacher, in his turn, should train and shape his pupil properly; should teach him well; should introduce him to his friends; and should try to procure him security or employment when his education is over.

Third: The relation between husband and wife: love between husband and wife is considered almost religious or sacred. It is called *sadara-Brahmacariya* 'sacred family life'. Here, too, the significance of the term *Brahma* should be noted: the highest respect is given to this relationship. Wives and husbands should be faithful, respectful and devoted to each other, and they have certain duties towards each other: the husband should always honour his wife and never be wanting in respect to her; he should love her and be faithful to her; should secure her position and comfort; and should please her by presenting her with clothing and jewellery. (The fact that the Buddha did not forget to mention even such a thing as the gifts a husband should make to his wife shows how understanding and sympathetic were his humane feelings towards ordinary human emotions.) The wife, in her turn, should supervise and look after household affairs; should entertain guests, visitors, friends, relatives and employees; should love and be faithful to her husband; should protect his earnings; should be clever and energetic in all activities.

Fourth: The relation between friends, relatives and neighbours: they should be hospitable and charitable to one another; should speak pleasantly and agreeably; should work for each other's welfare; should be on equal terms with one another; should not quarrel among themselves; should help each other in need; and should not forsake each other in difficulty.

Fifth: The relation between master and servant: the master or the employer has several obligations towards his servant or his

employee: work should be assigned according to ability and capacity; adequate wages should be paid; medical needs should be provided; occasional donations or bonuses should be granted. The servant or employee, in his turn, should be diligent and not lazy; honest and obedient and not cheat his master; he should be earnest in his work.

Sixth: The relation between the religious (lit. recluses and brahmanas) and the laity: lay people should look after the material needs of the religious with love and respect; the religious with a loving heart should impart knowledge and learning to the laity, and lead them along the good path away from evil.

We see then that the lay life, with its family and social relations, is included in the 'noble discipline', and is within the framework of the Buddhist way of life, as the Buddha envisaged it.

So in the *Samyutta-nikaya*, one of the oldest Pali texts, Sakka, the king of the gods (*devas*), declares that he worships not only the monks who live a virtuous holy life, but also 'lay disciples (*upasaka*) who perform meritorious deeds, who are virtuous, and maintain their families righteously'.¹

If one desires to become a Buddhist, there is no initiation ceremony (or baptism) which one has to undergo. (But to become a *bhikkhu*, a member of the Order of the *Sangha*, one has to undergo a long process of disciplinary training and education.) If one understands the Buddha's teaching, and if one is convinced that his teaching is the right Path and if one tries to follow it, then one is a Buddhist. But according to the unbroken age-old tradition in Buddhist countries, one is considered a Buddhist if one takes the Buddha, the *Dhamma* (the Teaching) and the *Sangha* (the Order of Monks)—generally called 'the Triple-Gem'—as one's refuges, and undertakes to observe the Five Precepts (*Panea-si la*)—the minimum moral obligations of a lay Buddhist—(1) not to destroy life, (2) not to steal, (3) not to commit adultery, (4) not to tell lies, (5) not to take intoxicating drinks—reciting the formulas given in the ancient texts. On religious occasions Buddhists in congregation usually recite these formulas, following the lead of a Buddhist monk.

There are no external rites or ceremonies which a Buddhist has

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XV. The Buddha—from Sarnath, India



XVI. The Buddha—from Borobudur, Java

to perform. Buddhism is a way of life, and what is essential is following the Noble Eightfold Path. Of course there are in all Buddhist countries simple and beautiful ceremonies on religious occasions. There are shrines with statues of the Buddha, *stupas* or *dagabas* and Bo-trees in monasteries where Buddhists worship, offer flowers, light lamps and burn incense. This should not be likened to prayer in theistic religions; it is only a way of paying homage to the memory of the Master who showed the way. These traditional observances, though inessential, have their value in satisfying the religious emotions and needs of those who are less advanced intellectually and spiritually, and helping them gradually along the Path.

Those who think that Buddhism is interested only in lofty ideals, high moral and philosophical thought, and that it ignores the social and economic welfare of people, are wrong. The Buddha was interested in the happiness of men. To him happiness was not possible without leading a pure life based on moral and spiritual principles. But he knew that leading such a life was hard in unfavourable material and social conditions.

Buddhism does not consider material welfare as an end in itself: it is only a means to an end—a higher and nobler end. But it is a means which is indispensable, indispensable in achieving a higher purpose for man's happiness. So Buddhism recognizes the need of certain minimum material conditions favourable to spiritual success—even that of a monk engaged in meditation in some solitary place.¹

The Buddha did not take life out of the context of its social and economic background; he looked at it as a whole, in all its social, economic and political aspects. His teachings on ethical, spiritual and philosophical problems are fairly well known. But little is known, particularly in the West, about his teaching on social, economic and political matters. Yet there are numerous discourses dealing with these scattered throughout the ancient Buddhist texts. Let us take only a few examples.

The *Cakkavattisihanada-sutta* of the *Digha-nikaya* (No. 26) clearly states that poverty (*daliddiya*) is the cause of immorality and crimes

¹MA I (PTS), p. 290 f. (Buddhist monks, members of the order of the *Sangha*, are not expected to have personal property, but they are allowed to hold communal *Sanghika* property).

such as theft, falsehood, violence, hatred, cruelty, etc. Kings in ancient times, like governments today, tried to suppress crime through punishment. The *Kutadanta-sutta* of the same *Nikaja* explains how futile this is. It says that this method can never be successful. Instead the Buddha suggests that, in order to eradicate crime, the economic condition of the people should be improved: grain and other facilities for agriculture should be provided for farmers and cultivators; capital should be provided for traders and those engaged in business; adequate wages should be paid to those who are employed. When people are thus provided for with opportunities for earning a sufficient income, they will be contented, will have no fear or anxiety, and consequently the country will be peaceful and free from crime.¹

Because of this, the Buddha told lay people how important it is to improve their economic condition. This does not mean that he approved of hoarding wealth with desire and attachment, which is against his fundamental teaching, nor did he approve of each and every way of earning one's livelihood. There are certain trades like the production and sale of armaments, which he condemns as evil means of livelihood, as we saw earlier.²

A man named Dighajanu once visited the Buddha and said: 'Venerable Sir, we are ordinary lay men, leading the family life with wife and children. Would the Blessed One teach us some doctrines which will be conducive to our happiness in this world and hereafter.'

The Buddha tells him that there are four things which are conducive to a man's happiness in this world: First: he should be skilled, efficient, earnest, and energetic in whatever profession he is engaged, and he should know it well (*uttbana-sampada*); second: he should protect his income, which he has thus earned righteously, with the sweat of his brow (*arakkha-sampadd*); (This refers to protecting wealth from thieves, etc. All these ideas should be considered against the background of the period.) third: he should have good friends (*kalyana-mitta*) who are faithful, learned, virtuous, liberal and intelligent, who will help him along the right path away from evil; fourth: he should spend reasonably, in proportion to his income, neither too much nor too little,

¹See above p. 47.

i.e., he should not hoard wealth avariciously, nor should he be extravagant—in other words he should live within his means (*samajivikata*).

Then the Buddha expounds the four virtues conducive to a layman's happiness hereafter: (i) *Saddha*: he should have faith and confidence in moral, spiritual and intellectual values; (2) *Si/a*: he should abstain from destroying and harming life, from stealing and cheating, from adultery, from falsehood, and from intoxicating drinks; (3) *Caga*: he should practise charity, generosity, without attachment and craving for his wealth; (4) *Patina*: he should develop wisdom which leads to the complete destruction of suffering, to the realization of Nirvana.¹

Sometimes the Buddha even went into details about saving money and spending it, as, for instance, when he told the young man Sigala that he should spend one fourth of his income on his daily expenses, invest half in his business and put aside one fourth for any emergency.²

Once the Buddha told Anathapindika, the great banker, one of his most devoted lay disciples who founded for him the celebrated Jetavana monastery at Savatthi, that a layman, who leads an ordinary family life, has four kinds of happiness. The first happiness is to enjoy economic security or sufficient wealth acquired by just and righteous means (*attki-sukha*); the second is spending that wealth liberally on himself, his family, his friends and relatives, and on meritorious deeds (*bhoga-sukha*); the third to be free from debts (*anana-sukha*); the fourth happiness is to live a faultless, and a pure life without committing evil in thought, word or deed (*anavajja-sukha*). It must be noted here that three of these kinds are economic, and that the Buddha finally reminded the banker that economic and material happiness is 'not worth one sixteenth part' of the spiritual happiness arising out of a faultless and good life.³

From the few examples given above, one could see that the Buddha considered economic welfare as requisite for human happiness, but that he did not recognize progress as real and true

¹A (Colombo, 1929), pp. 786 ff.

²D III (Colombo, 1929), p. 115.

³A (Colombo, 1929), pp. 232-2)3.

if it was only material, devoid of a spiritual and moral foundation. While encouraging material progress, Buddhism always lays great stress on the development of the moral and spiritual character for a happy, peaceful and contented society.

The Buddha was just as clear on politics, on war and peace. It is too well known to be repeated here that Buddhism advocates and preaches non-violence and peace as its universal message, and does not approve of any kind of violence or destruction of life. According to Buddhism there is nothing that can be called a 'just war'—which is only a false term coined and put into circulation to justify and excuse hatred, cruelty, violence and massacre. Who decides what is just or unjust? The mighty and the victorious are 'just', and the weak and the defeated are 'unjust'. Our war is always 'just', and your war is always 'unjust'. Buddhism does not accept this position.

The Buddha not only taught non-violence and peace, but he even went to the field of battle itself and intervened personally, and prevented war, as in the case of the dispute between the Sakyas and the Koliyas, who were prepared to fight over the question of the waters of the Rohini. And his words once prevented King Ajatasattu from attacking the kingdom of the Vajjis.

In the days of the Buddha, as today, there were rulers who governed their countries unjustly. People were oppressed and exploited, tortured and persecuted, excessive taxes were imposed and cruel punishments were inflicted. The Buddha was deeply moved by these inhumanities. The *Dhammapadatthakatha*, records that he, therefore, directed his attention to the problem of good government. His views should be appreciated against the social, economic and political background of his time. He had shown how a whole country could become corrupt, degenerate and unhappy when the heads of its government, that is the king, the ministers and administrative officers become corrupt and unjust. For a country to be happy it must have a just government. How this form of just government could be realized is explained by the Buddha in his teaching of the 'Ten Dudes of the King' (*dasa-rajadhamma*), as given in the *Jataka* text.¹

Of course the term 'king' (*Raja*) of old should be replaced today
Jataka I, 160, 599; II, 400; III, 274, 320; V, 119, 378.

by the term 'Government'. 'The Ten Duties of the King', therefore, apply today to all those who constitute the government, such as the head of the state, ministers, political leaders, legislative and administrative officers, etc.

The first of the 'Ten Duties of the King' is liberality, generosity, charity (*dana*). The ruler should not have craving and attachment to wealth and property, but should give it away for the welfare of the people.

Second: A high moral character (*si/a*). He should never destroy life, cheat, steal and exploit others, commit adultery, utter falsehood, and take intoxicating drinks. That is, he must at least observe the Five Precepts of the layman.

Third: Sacrificing everything for the good of the people (*pariccaga*), he must be prepared to give up all personal comfort, name and fame, and even his life, in the interest of the people.

Fourth: Honesty and integrity (*ajjava*). He must be free from fear or favour in the discharge of his duties, must be sincere in his intentions, and must not deceive the public.

Fifth: Kindness and gentleness (*maddava*). He must possess a genial temperament.

Sixth: Austerity in habits (*tapa*). He must lead a simple life, and should not indulge in a life of luxury. He must have self-control.

Seventh: Freedom from hatred, ill-will, enmity (*akkodha*). He should bear no grudge against anybody.

Eighth: Non-violence (*avihimsa*), which means not only that he should harm nobody, but also that he should try to promote peace by avoiding and preventing war, and everything which involves violence and destruction of life.

Ninth: Patience, forbearance, tolerance, understanding (*khanti*). He must be able to bear hardships, difficulties and insults without losing his temper.

Tenth: Non-opposition, non-obstruction (*avirodha*), that is to say that he should not oppose the will of the people, should not obstruct any measures that are conducive to the welfare of the people. In other words he should rule in harmony with his people.¹

¹It is interesting to note here that the Five Principles or *Pancba-sila* in India's foreign policy are in accordance with the Buddhist principles which Asoka, the great Buddhist emperor of India, applied to the administration of his government in the 3rd century B.C. The expression *Pancha-sila* (Five Precepts or Virtues), is itself a Buddhist term.

If a country is ruled by men endowed with such qualities, it is needless to say that that country must be happy. But this was not a Utopia, for there were kings in the past like Asoka of India who had established kingdoms based on these ideas.

The world today lives in constant fear, suspicion, and tension. Science has produced weapons which are capable of unimaginable destruction. Brandishing these new instruments of death, great powers threaten and challenge one another, boasting shamelessly that one could cause more destruction and misery in the world than the other.

They have gone along this path of madness to such a point that, now, if they take one more step forward in that direction, the result will be nothing but mutual annihilation along with the total destruction of humanity.

Human beings in fear of the situation they have themselves created, want to find a way out, and seek some kind of solution. But there is none except that held out by the Buddha—his message of non-violence and peace, of love and compassion, of tolerance and understanding, of truth and wisdom, of respect and regard for all life, of freedom from selfishness, hatred and violence.

The Buddha says: 'Never by hatred is hatred appeased, but it is appeased by kindness. This is an eternal truth.'¹

'One should win anger through kindness, wickedness through goodness, selfishness through charity, and falsehood through truthfulness.'²

There can be no peace or happiness for man as long as he desires and thirsts after conquering and subjugating his neighbour. As the Buddha says: 'The victor breeds hatred, and the defeated lies down in misery. He who renounces both victory and defeat is happy and peaceful.'³ The only conquest that brings peace and happiness is self-conquest. 'One may conquer millions in battle, but he who conquers himself, only one, is the greatest of conquerors.'⁴

You will say this is all very beautiful, noble and sublime, but impractical. Is it practical to hate one another? To kill one

¹Dhp. 15.

²Ibid. xv n 5.

³Ibid. xv 5.

⁴Ibid. VIII 4.

another ? To live in eternal fear and suspicion like wild animals in a jungle? Is this more practical and comfortable? Was hatred ever appeased by hatred ? Was evil ever won over by evil ? But there are examples, at least in individual cases, where hatred is appeased by love and kindness, and evil won over by goodness. You will say that this may be true, practicable in individual cases, but that it never works in national and international affairs. People are hypnotized, psychologically puzzled, blinded and deceived by the political and propaganda usage of such terms as 'national', 'international', or 'state'. What is a nation but a vast conglomeration of individuals ? A nation or a state does not act, it is the individual who acts. What the individual thinks and does is what the nation or the state thinks and does. What is applicable to the individual is applicable to the nation or the state. If hatred can be appeased by love and kindness on the individual scale, surely it can be realized on the national and international scale too. Even in the case of a single person, to meet hatred with kindness one must have tremendous courage, boldness, faith and confidence in moral force. May it not be even more so with regard to international affairs ? If by the expression 'not practical' you mean 'not easy', you are right. Definitely it is not easy. Yet it should be tried. You may say it is risky trying it. Surely it cannot be more risky than trying a nuclear war.

It is a consolation and inspiration to think today that at least there was one great ruler, well known in history, who had the courage, the confidence and the vision to apply this teaching of non-violence, peace and love to the administration of a vast empire, in both internal and external affairs—Asoka, the great Buddhist emperor of India (3rd century B.C.)—'the Beloved of the gods' as he was called.

At first he followed the example of his father (Bindusara) and grandfather (Chandragupta), and wished to complete the conquest of the Indian peninsula. He invaded and conquered Kalinga, and annexed it. Many hundreds of thousands were killed, wounded, tortured and taken prisoner in this war. But later, when he became a Buddhist, he was completely changed and transformed by the Buddha's teachings. In one of his famous Edicts, inscribed on rock, (Rock Edict XIII, as it is now called), the original of which one may read even today, referring to the conquest of Kalinga, the

Emperor publicly expressed his 'repentance', and said how 'extremely painful' it was for him to think of that carnage. He publicly declared that he would never draw his sword again for any conquest, but that he 'wishes all living beings non-violence, self control, the practice of serenity and mildness. This, of course, is considered the chief conquest by the Beloved of the gods (i.e., Asoka), namely the conquest by piety (*dhamma-vijaya*).'¹ Not only did he renounce war himself, he expressed his desire that 'my sons and grandsons will not think of a new conquest as worth achieving... let them think of that conquest only which is the conquest by piety. That is good for this world and the world beyond.'

This is the only example in the history of mankind of a victorious conquerer at the zenith of his power, still possessing the strength to continue his territorial conquests, yet renouncing war and violence and turning to peace and non-violence.

Here is a lesson for the world today. The ruler of an empire publicly turned his back on war and violence and embraced the message of peace and non-violence. There is no historical evidence to show that any neighbouring king took advantage of Asoka's piety to attack him militarily, or that there was any revolt or rebellion within his empire during his lifetime. On the contrary there was peace throughout the land, and even countries outside his empire seem to have accepted his benign leadership.

To talk of maintaining peace through the balance of power, or through the threat of nuclear deterrents, is foolish. The might of armaments can only produce fear, and not peace. It is impossible that there can be genuine and lasting peace through fear. Through fear can come only hatred, ill-will and hostility, suppressed perhaps for the time being only, but ready to erupt and become violent at any moment. True and genuine peace can prevail only in an atmosphere of *metta*, amity, free from fear, suspicion and danger.

Buddhism aims at creating a society where the ruinous struggle for power is renounced; where calm and peace prevail away from conquest and defeat; where the persecution of the innocent is vehemently denounced; where one who conquers oneself is more respected than those who conquer millions by military and economic warfare; where hatred is conquered by kindness, and evil by goodness; where enmity, jealousy, ill-will and greed do not infect

men's minds; where compassion is the driving force of action; where all, including the least of living things, are treated with fairness, consideration and love; where life in peace and harmony, in a world of material contentment, is directed towards the highest and noblest aim, the realization of the Ultimate Truth, Nirvana.

