

Some Reflections on Buddhism and Gandhism

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The Teachings of Lord Buddha

THE teachings of Lord Buddha may be divided into two groups: 1. Philosophical; 2. Moral. The two groups are interwoven in such a way that the one cannot be understood properly without knowledge of the other. The fundamental principle of the Buddha's philosophy is the theory of Causation or Dependent-Orientation. The Buddha said, "Suffering and pain are the direct result of ignorance." Commenting on the cause of suffering in the Buddhistic ethics, Radhakrishnan writes, "Ignorance is the main cause out of which false desire springs. When knowledge is attained, suffering is at an end. Ignorance and false desire are the theoretical and the practical sides of the one fact." The desire to live as the sole cause of suffering is not possible as long as the desire to live continues. If the craving for passion, existence, birth, rebirth, and pleasure is the cause of evil, the removal of evil can occur through the cessation of craving.

The other important theory of the Buddha concerns the Four Noble Truths, the first being that all existence is full of suffering. The second truth is that all suffering has a cause. The third truth is that suffering can be made to cause to an end and the last that there is a way to end suffering.

Why does the Buddha say that the existence of a being is full of suffering? It is because all beings are subject to birth, decay, disease, death, and again, rebirth. Even pleasures and worldly happiness lead one to sorrow because they are both transitory and the loss of pleasure and happiness is worse than never to have had them at all.

Just as a good doctor tries to discover the cause of a malady before advising a remedy, the Buddha, the great spiritual doctor, tried to find the ultimate cause of the worldly suffering of human beings, who all are animate creatures. He found the cause to be ignorance or the craving rising from it. The Buddha primarily implores the people to remove their ignorance of the mystery of birth and their craving for happiness.

The Buddha proposes three phenomena as the course of suffering and unhappiness. First, *Pride* is the main causes of material suffering and misery as well as spiritual downfall. Second, that every being in the world is *Transitory*. Third, that we are the makers of our own *Destiny*.

One reaps what he sows. Desire is never satisfied. Lord Mahavira said, "... if the entire universe together with all its wealth is given to you, still it can neither satisfy your cravings nor will be able to protect to you." Gandhi said, "There is enough in this world to satisfy everybody's need, but not a single man's greed." Swami Vivekananda said, "Kill the desire first. That is the hardest of all disciplines. Try hard for the salvation of others if you want to scale the peak of spiritual attainment." The importance of SEVA, or service to others, was expounded by Swami Vivekananda who declared that one should forget his own salvation and go all out to serve those who are poor and in distress. He said those who work only for their own sake are more dead than living. Gandhi had beautifully summed it in three words; "Renounce and enjoy."

The Buddha's heart was full of love for all living creatures. His sole purpose for dedicating his life to the propagation of truth was to provide a permanent cure for worldly ills. The Buddha therefore was morally above all, and could tolerate no hindrance in the way of prescribing a righteous life and a cure for sick souls and bodies, even if it meant scepticism with regard to God and Soul, etc.

Give Up One's Ego

The life of righteousness is the key to Buddhist ethics and it is this aspect of Buddhism that has been responsible for its popularity in India and the other countries. Discontent with worldly life, which prompts us to lead a life of detachment as commanded by the Buddha, should not however be misunderstood as a merely pessimistic condition. Yet, the ethics of the Buddha are of a transitory nature and they instigate the painful ending of so-called worldly pleasures because they are based on attachment. The point that the spiritual disquietude of Buddhism is in fact based on insight into the cause of human suffering born of ignorance or Avidya. This fact is well illustrated in the story of the Buddha and his brother Nanda, a prince.

Nanda possessed a charming personality and was regarded as the most handsome man in the world. His wife was Sundari, who was the prettiest woman of her time. They were deeply in love with one another and would seldom separate from each other. Once it happened that both of them were together in their private apartment in the palace and were lost to the world when Lord Buddha, who had once belonged to the

royal family, came to the royal palace to beg for alms. The Buddha had attained enlightenment and had been acknowledged as a world teacher. But, as ill luck would have it, none of Nanda's servants took notice of the arrival of the Tathagata (Buddha). So he waited at the gate of the palace for some time and after some words with passers-by, started to return to his ashram. Just as he was about to leave, he was noticed by a bold maidservant, who mustered the courage to enter the private apartment of the Prince and inform him that the great spiritual leader had come to beg alms at the royal gate and that he had left without being offered a seat, words, or alms, just as if he had emerged from a remote forest. Nanda, being full of high regard for the Buddha, was vexed on hearing this news from the maidservant. He immediately asked leave of Sundari to pay homage to the Tathagata. She consented on the condition that he come back before the sandalwood paste on her body had dried.

Nanda hurried towards the ashram of the Buddha and soon reached there. He bowed to the teacher and apologized for his negligence. The Buddha encouraged him to stay in the ashram and to meditate on his carelessness. Although Nanda made sincere efforts, he could not forget the beauty of his wife and was distracted in meditation. The Buddha called him near and asked, "Perhaps you are disturbed by the thoughts of your beautiful wife and you are feeling her absence strongly. Is it true?" Nanda replied in the affirmative. Legend tells us that the Buddha told Nanda to close eyes, and both of them began to levitate. They rose to the height of a dry and desolate mountain. Nanda saw an ugly old one-eyed monkey sitting on the dry branch of a lovely old tree on the mountain. The Buddha said to Nanda, "Look at this she-monkey. Does she look beautiful in comparison to your wife?" Nanda replied, "Respected master! Not to speak of the comparison. I cannot fathom even the contrast between the charm of Sundari and the ugliness of this she-monkey." The Buddha again asked him to close his eyes and they began to soar higher. After some time, they reached the garden of Indra, inhabited by beautiful heavenly damsels whose loveliness and divine charm dazzled the eyes of the mortal Nanda. When he was asked by the Buddha to compare the beauty of those heavenly figures with that of his wife Sundari, Nanda said, "Venerated master, the contrast between the beauty of these fairies and Sundari is as unfathomable as it was in the previous case between Sundari and the she-monkey." After that they returned to the ashram and the Buddha suggested Nanda meditate without being disturbed if he desired the company of heavenly damsels. With this object in view, Nanda succeeded in concentrating his mind and totally forgot about Sundari.

This time Nanda was able to concentrate his mind for several days, after which the Buddha called him again and asked, "Does the thoughts of Sundari disturb you even now?" Nanda answered, "Revered master! I am so much absorbed by the meditation that I cannot think of Sundari, even for a moment." The Buddha asked him again, "Is it not a fact that you are aspiring for the company of the beautiful heavenly damsels and the pleasures and enjoyment of the garden of Indra?" Nanda confessed it was so, and the Buddha continued, "You will undoubtedly stain all pleasures contemplated by you as the fruit of your meditation and righteous life. But will you not pine for these heavenly pleasures as you had recently for the pleasures of your palace and for the beauty of your wife? When the storehouse of your merits is exhausted, you will have to bid farewell to the heavenly damsels of Indra's garden: and you must imagine the intensity of the torture and the pangs of separation you will have to undergo at that time." Nanda began to shudder at the very thought of it, and then the Buddha said, "Therefore, if you want to have permanent pleasure, eternal enjoyment, and peace, you must continue to meditate on the Supreme Truth without any expectation and attainment." The Gita advocates the same.

Krishna states in the Gita that the difference between the ignorant and wise is that the ignorant man works in his own interest, while, the enlightened or wise man performs unattached work for the good of others (Gita 3.25). Self-less work is God's or the Buddha's work. Man has to go beyond or transcend the sense of 'I' and 'mine' and replace it with the sense of 'we' and 'ours.' He has to change in accord with the Gita and perform social service with selflessness and equanimity. To Gandhi it served as a profound guide in his work.

A similar story has been cited by film historian Sangeeta Datta from a film by Shyam Benegal. There is really striking story from Benegal's 1978 film called 'Kondura' that is about a young Brahmin who is told that the power of a benefit will stay only if he stays celibate. The fellow and his wife abide by the condition, but what is he to do about the pangs of lust he feels for the landlord's daughter-in-law. He sits in the temple praying but sees visions of the beautiful girl. This results in him raping his wife who then kills herself. The young Brahmin ends up running out in the fields calling desperately for the sage who granted him the benefit, pleading with him to take it back.

The transitory nature of sensual enjoyment and worldly pleasures, and the antinomies of the alternative experiences of pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, struck the imagination of the enlightened Buddha, who advocated a detached attitude to worldly life. The aim of the ethics of

Buddhism is the highest stage of Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva is one who must give up egoism altogether and rise above anger, hatred and error to gain the virtues of conviction, compassion, benevolence, and disinterestedness.

Once a great scholar sought out a God-man (or Buddha) and beseeched him for guidance. "Swamiji," submitted the learned man, "I am a reputed scholar, but I have yet to realize that this life is in vain. Please instruct me how to know the imperishable Self, which is beyond all change." The holy man reflected and said, "You must give up. That is the way to Self-Realization and Bliss." Accordingly, the scholar gave away all he possessed. He also renounced his wife and children. Time passed, but peace of mind eluded him. He went again to the holy man for guidance. Again, he was given the same answer, "Give up. Renounce. That is the only way to Self-Realization and Bliss." Although the scholar owned only a begging bowl, a coarse cloth, and a blanket, even these he gave away. A long time elapsed. Still, he seemed farther than ever from his cherished goal. So he said to himself, "All I have now left to give up is this body. Is this getting in the way of my Self-Realization?" He started a large fire and was on the point of throwing himself into the flames. Then the holy man arrived and held him back. "What are you doing?" he remonstrated. "Do you think you have the right to destroy your body? It was given to you by your parents. It is not yours to dispose of as you like. Give up what belongs to you." In a flash, the scholar realized that what he had to give up was his 'Ego,' the offspring of selfishness and self-aggrandizement. This is what all of us have to follow. That is Vasudhaiva Kutumbkam. The world is One Family.

The Power of Dialogues

The Buddha does not want a suppression of emotion and desires, but asks for cultivation of true love for all creation. The glowing emotion must fill the whole universe and result in an overflow of goodwill. The adoption of universal love, tenderness, and compassion has been advocated in the well-known Buddhistic world.

The Buddha said that just as fire cannot extinguish fire. Similarly today, we cannot solve disputes by fighting. Enmity cannot overcome enmity; it can be overcome only with love. Disputes can be settled through dialogue and negotiations, not by war. This is the main philosophy of Gandhiji.

The year 1956 marked a milestone in the checkered history of Buddhism in India. While laying the foundation stone of the Buddha Jayanti

Park on the New Delhi Ridge, the late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said that the 2,500th Buddha Jayanti celebrations signify the 'Home Coming' of the Buddha. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar sanctified the occasion by embracing Buddhism along with his half-million followers on October 14, 1966, the Vijaya Dashmi Day. Thus, Ambedkar made the Home Coming of the Buddha a reality. Ambedkar said in his emotional voice, "I started the movement of renouncing the Hindu religion in 1936 and since then I have been continuing the struggle. This conversion to Buddhism has given me enormous satisfaction and pleasure unimaginable. I feel as if I have been liberated from hell." He further remarked, "I believe that religion is necessary for humankind. When religion ends, society would perish too. After all, no government can safeguard and discipline humankind as does Niti or Dharma."

Buddhistic ethics are *alteristic* through and thorough. The Buddha's three jewels are: 1. Sila (virtue); 2. Samidhi (concentration of mind); and 3. Shin or Prejan (wisdom), along with the four Brahma vihar: 1. Maitri (friendliness or love); 2. Karuna (compassion or mercy); 3. Medita (cheerfulness or happiness); and 4. Upeksha (equanimity).

The Buddha's pragmatism is evident from his preference for the middle path or course. He avoided extreme views about the way of life. He advocated neither the life of sensual indulgence nor that of rigorous asceticism. The Buddha suggested eight efforts one must make to achieve happiness. They are: 1. Right Understanding; 2. Right Thought; 3. Right Speech; 4. Right Action; 5. Right Livelihood; 6. Right Effort; 7. Right Mindedness; and 8. Right Concentration.

An Importance of Ahimsa

Mahavira, Buddha, and Gandhi all advocated Ahimsa (nonviolence) as the highest virtue. They placed it higher than truth. They regarded adherence to truth as the necessary corollary of nonviolence.

According to the Buddha, Nirvana literally means blowing out the candle. Nirvana means a stage of desire-less-ness while the truth means a stage of ego-less-ness. That is, to reduce oneself to zero. In faith there is enough light for those who want to believe and enough shadow to blind those who do not. Mathematically, zero is the point where positive and negative infinity meets. Krishna says to Arjuna (Gita 10.20), that I am the universe seated in the hearts of all beings. Hence, I alone am the beginning and middle and also the end of all being. Therefore, nothingness is also a form of God. Gandhiji in this respect says that the experiences and experiments have sustained me and given me great joy. But I know that I have still before me a difficult path to traverse. I must reduce

myself to zero. So long as a man does not of his own free will put himself last among the fellow creatures, there is no salvation for him. Ahimsa is the farthest limit of humility. (M.K. Gandhi, *My Experiments with Truth*)

The Buddha's and Gandhi's teachings can be summed up as: 1. The abstention from evil; 2. The accumulation of whatever is good and noble; and, 3. The purification of the mind.

Both Guru Nanak Dev and Gandhiji drew their inspiration from Buddhism as is evident from their personal examples and devotion to work for emancipation of humanity. For a successful life, Gurbani lays emphasis on three cardinal principles, that is, life regulated by the triple principle of meditation, work, and social responsibility. Guru Nanak condemned exploitation in very strong terms. He says, "If a garment is stained with blood, it is considered to be soiled. How then can they who shed the blood of men be reckoned to have a pure mind?" Guru Nanak preferred to eat the coarsest but hard-earned meal from the house of a carpenter than partake of rich food at the home of a wealthy nobleman.

Buddhism believes that all men can become Buddhas irrespective of race, caste, creed, and gender. Mahatma Gandhi was the first Indian after Asoka the Great to apply nonviolence to politics and to thus spiritualize India's struggle for independence. Truth and nonviolence form the crux of his philosophy. He identified truth with God and nonviolence with love. He awakened and inspired millions of Indians to fight the battle of truth by adopting nonviolence. An organized nonviolence which would grin a reign of love and peace to be the only remedy against organized violence.

The Buddha says: "Existence is one. There are no boundaries. Nobody is separate from anybody else. We live in one ocean of consciousness. We are one consciousness—denuded by the boundaries of the body and the mind, and because of the identification with the body and mind, we think we are separate, we think we are selves." This is how we create ego. You are not separate from life, you are part of it. Like a wave, you are not separate at all. Neither as a saint nor sinner are you separate. You are not separate at all. You are neither dependent on life, nor are you independent of life. You are interdependent. When you understand that we are all interdependently linked with each other, life is one, we are just manifestations of it, then you start to become blissful.

The goal of life has to be simply to work hard at becoming better than what we were yesterday.

M.B. Lal writing in the introduction to the second edition of the book by the Late Prof. R.D. Ranade *Spiritual Awakening in Gandhi and*

Other Indian Saints (Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, Varanasi, India, 2003, pp. 11-13) says the following:

The classic tragedy of Gandhi is that the world remembers him as a man of peace and non-violence but not as a man of God, like Christ in whose footsteps he tried to walk all his life. He was never tired of repeating that he was not unarmed in his struggle against injustice. He was armed with a weapon, 'mightier than the atomic bomb' which he invoked by the constant (inner) chanting of Ramanama (name of God). This chant went on silently within him with every breath. His role objective in life was to see God 'face to face' and the non-violent struggle for freedom was merely a means to that end. Like Mother Teresa he saw in the 'daridranarayan,' the poorest of the poor, whose service was the sole purpose of his life. In one word, the book is about Gandhi's unshakable 'Faith' in God', without which he repeatedly said he was a cipher. And Faith is the fountain of love.

The spiritual ethos that has pervaded over the centuries and produced some of the greatest saints of humanity among whom Gandhi was perhaps the last.

Arun Gandhi in the foreword to his book says; "It is only through love that we can bring about a 'union of human souls' and create a climate and relationship between people where conflict would be reduced, if not eliminated altogether. I know, some of you will ask: How can anyone love people like Hilter and Saddam? He should not love what they do but we must respect them as human beings. Therefore, we ought not to attack the human being but analyze and resolve the issues that make people do bad things so that others are not forced into similar action."

To fight and kill in the name of God is the worst form of evil according to Gandhiji, who was convinced that God is the epitome of compassion, love, respect, and understanding. Gandhiji believed that we human beings have divided the image of God because we want God to relate to the fragment of truth that we hold precious. To bring back some semblance of sanity in people's understanding of religion, Gandhiji advocated a friendly study of all the scriptures as the sacred duty of every individual. Scholars, he said, have often made critical studies of religions, but not many, perhaps not any, have made a 'friendly' study. Gandhiji himself made a friendly study and concluded that no religion could truly claim to 'possess' the Truth, but that all the religions in their own way are 'pursuing' the Truth.

Buddha and Gandhi were evolved souls. They had conquered their senses and were never fickle minded. They were like the mother-root for

this tree called Humanity. Let us follow their ideals in our thoughts and actions.

A number of natural laws replete this universe. Our existence is also governed by a set of natural laws. One such law is Newton's Law of Gravity. We know that life is subject to the gravitational pull exerted by earth. It does not mean that he was instrumental in bringing it into existence. Before its discovery, gravity always existed. Suppose there are two men, one who believes in gravity, and the other who does not believe in it. Both decide to jump off a cliff. The fall will lead law of gravity the existence of God is a fact.

The Causal Wheel of Buddhism had made a deep effect on Gandhiji's mind. In fact, Gandhiji's identification with Buddhism came from the Buddha's identification with Law or God. Gandhiji's point was that Buddha did really believe in God, and that he identified God with the moral Government of the world. Gandhiji writing in the November 24, 1927 issue of *Young India* said; "He (the Buddha) emphasized and redeclared the eternal and unalterable existence of the moral government of this universe. He unhesitatingly said that the Law was God himself." Again, he said: "I have heard it contended... the Buddha did not believe in God. In my (Gandhiji's) humble opinion, such a belief contradicts the very central fact of the Buddha's teaching." R.D. Ranade in his book *Spiritual Awakening in Gandhi* endorses Mahatma Gandhi's interpretation, namely the psychic and the theistic pertain only to the Hinayanist philosophy and may be, even the Mahayanist. Above and beyond both these systems, the Hinayanist philosophy and maybe, even to the Mahayanist, there is a mystical element in Buddhism that has recently been brought to light and without which, as Mrs. Rhys David says, no great religion could have been founded.

The Dharma Chakra is the essential symbol of Buddhism. It will be seen that this concept of Dharma Chakra was present in Buddhism before King Ashoka founded the Great Royal Chakra. Three interpretations may be given of this Chakra. In the first place, it may designate the victory of conqueror over all quarters. Secondly, it may represent the victory of the Dharma over physical force. And thirdly, it may be a symbol of the ever moving *Samsara*—the whole process from birth to death and rebirth again, implying the principle of continuity. The first interpretation may have a political element, the second a religious element, and the third a philosophical one.

The ultimate goal of everybody had to be to do good to humanity. Let me conclude by quoting the clarion call of Swami Vivekananda; "What we want is strength, so believe in yourselves... what we want is muscle

of iron and nerves of steel.” He further said; “Think positively and masterfully, with confidence and faith and life becomes more secure... richer in achievement and experience. Let the world say that it chooses, I shall treat the path of duty... otherwise if one has to attend day and night to what this man says or that man writes, no great work is achieved in this world,” said the Swami.

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