CHAPTER IV

Buddhism - its basic principles and historical importance in the Modern World

In his Introduction to Sir Edwin Arnold's Light of Asia, Sir E. Denison Ross observes, "There was nothing absolutely new to the Indians in the teaching of Gautama, and his message could only be intelligible in its original form to the Hindus; the changes he made were in either the cosmogony or the ritual of the Hindus, and could only appeal to those familiar with both".

In his preface to the above book, Sir Edwin Arnold says -

"Though the profession of Buddhism has for the most part passed away from the land of its birth, the mark of Gautama's sublime teaching is stamped ineffaceably upon modern Brahmanism, and the most characteristic habits and convictions of the Hindus are clearly, due to the benign influence of Buddha's precepts".

Buddhism has left a permanent mark on the culture of India. Its influence is visible on all sides. The faith has

1 Sir E. Denison: Introduction to Sir Edwin Arnold's Light of Asia, p.xiii.
2 Sir Edwin Arnold's: Light of Asia, p. xix.
absorbed the best of its ethics. A new respect for life, kindness to animals, a sense of responsibility and an endeavour after higher life have been brought home to the Indian mind with renewed force. Thanks to Buddhist influences, the Brahmanical powers have shed those parts of their religion which were irreconcilable with humanity and reason.

Buddhism is connected with the name of Lord Buddha - a study of the life of Lord Buddha is essential for understanding the essential teaching of Buddha and its philosophical implications. Indian philosophy is vitally connected with life. Indian philosophers in general and Buddha in particular refuse to preach anything without realising the truth of what they preach. Their realisation of ethical truth is expressed in their philosophical systems. Their philosophic beliefs and creeds have been translated into practical life. Entire society has been moulded in the pattern of their philosophical thoughts. Hence as compared to Western philosophy which is more theoretical and abstract in essence, Indian philosophy may be said to be a real philosophy which is not detached from life rather it paves the way for the solution of the problems of life with which the entire human race is involved. This is true of almost all systems of Indian philosophy in general and Buddhism in particular.
The three important events in the life of Buddha - birth, enlightenment and parinirvana take place in the Purnima or full-moon day of the month of Vaisakha which is considered to be the most auspicious day in the Buddhist calendar. It is probable that Buddha left home when he was twenty-nine, attained enlightenment when he was thirty-five, passed away at the age of eighty. From Arnold's poem, "The Light of Asia" we know how Buddha was born a prince and how the misery of the world struck him deeply; how, although brought up and living in the lap of luxury, he could not find comfort in his personal happiness and security; how he renounced the world, leaving his beautiful princess and new-born son behind like a broken pot in search of truth because people were in misery, how he wondered searching for truth from Teacher to Teacher. But though he sought light from many religious teachers, he remained dissatisfied. This threw him back on his own resources. He had recourse to continued intense meditation for the discovery of the mystery of the world's miseries till at last his ambition was crowned with success. Siddartha became Buddha or the enlightened. In other words, he achieved true freedom, emancipation of heart. This state was described earlier by the Upaniṣads in the following verse -

"Bhidyate ṛṣaya-granthiḥ chidyanti Sarvasamāṁsayāḥ;
Kṣīyante caśya karmāṇi tasmin drste parāvare"³

³ Mundaka II.2.9.
'The knots of the heart are cut asunder, all doubts became destroyed, and all their actions (bondage – producing seeds of actions) become eliminated, when the supreme truth is realised.'

What is Buddhism then? In reply we may say that in one sense it is man's understanding of the teaching of Gautama, the Buddha; in another it is religion – philosophy which has grown about that teaching. Through investigation scholars have come to know that Buddha himself wrote nothing, he only preached to his disciples. All his messages come through later writers after four hundred years of Master's demise. Our knowledge about Buddha's teaching is gathered from the three Tripitakas, namely, Vinayapitaka, Sutta pitaka, and Abhidhamma Pitaka, the three baskets of teachings which are claimed to contain his views as reported by his most intimate disciples. The three Tripitakas comprise information regarding early Buddhist philosophy. In course of time the followers of Buddha were divided into Hinayana (small vehicle) and Mahayana (large vehicle). These divisions among his disciples in the latest stage made the simple creed of Buddhism complex and obstruse.

From his teaching we have come to know that Buddha did not bother himself about metaphysical questions but sought to enlighten men on the most important questions of sorrow, its origin, its cessation and the path leading to its cessation.
To quote Lord Buddha: "This does profit, has to do with fundamentals of religion, and tends to aversion, absence of passion, cessation, quiescence, knowledge, supreme wisdom and nibbāna." It is through lack of understanding and of comprehension of the four noble truths 0 monks, that you and I have passed for long in this road of rebirth. When the noble truths of suffering, of the origin of suffering, of the cessation of suffering, and of the way to the cessation of suffering are completely understood, the craving for the process of life will be destroyed, and there will be no more recurring of the present state. To Buddha every walk of life is fraught with misery. Unlike the Āryavākas, Buddha holds that worldly pleasures appear as such to short-sighted people. Their transitoriness, the pains felt on their loss, and the fears felt lest they should be lost, and the evil consequences make pleasures lose their charm and turn them into positive sources of fear and anxiety.

"Insistence on suffering is not peculiar to Buddhism, though Buddha emphasized it overmuch. In the whole history of thought no one has painted with misery of human existence in blacker colours and with more feeling than Buddha. The melancholy foreshadowed in the Upaniṣads occupies the central place here ....... Tormented by thought, cheated by chance, defeated by

4 Majjhima-nikaya-sutta, 63 (Warren, p.122).
the forces of nature, oppressed by the massive weight of duty, the horror of death, the dread of consciousness of coming lives where the tragedy of existence will be repeated, the individual cannot help crying, 'Let me escape, let me die'\(^5\).

But this is only one aspect of Buddhistic thought. The other aspect is far more impressive and illuminating. Though Buddha over-emphasized the distress inherent in life, he did not thereby ask humanity to give way to despair. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan rightly observed, "Buddha does not preach the mere worthlessness of life or resignation to an inevitable doom. His is not a doctrine of despair. He asks us to revolt against evil and attain a life of a fairer quality, or arhat state"\(^6\). Buddha not only suggested but laid down the path of liberation or attaining, Arhat through his doctrine of Karma. Through this specific chain of Karma one not only can do away the evils of life and bring about amelioration of the people but one can also attain liberation through it. Sorrows can be overcome and liberation attained through his Karma-Vada. So we find that Buddhism is not really running away from life but acceptance of life with all its imperfections and evils with a view to excel them in order to attain blessedness or Beatitude. But life has

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many temptations, diversions, allurements and ignorance which are the greatest stumbling blocks in the way of fulfilment. And suffering follows in consequence. Buddha opines that ignorance in the last resort is the root cause of our suffering. The various cravings arise, according to Buddha, because of our ignorance about the four noble truths. This avidyā plays the double role of infatuation and greed. Under its influence we mistake unsatisfactoriness for satisfactoriness, evil for good and vice versa. Under the effect of lure and lust we move from one birth to another, from birth to death always troubled by sufferings and sorrows. One can put a stop to suffering by a complete destruction of thirst, craving or will to be born. The cessation of suffering consists in utter detachment - shorn of colouring due to clinging as also of antagonistic bitterness - from the cravings, the stoppage of, release from and in the absence of any sort to them. Lord Buddha is always opposed to quietism or the tendency to inaction. He has emphatically stated, "I proclaim the non-doing of evil conduct of body, speech and thought. I proclaim the non-doing of various kinds of wicked and evil things. I proclaim the good conduct of the body, speech and thought. I proclaim the doing of various kinds of good things."

7 Rhys Davis: Dialogues of the Buddha, p.35.
Lord Buddha occupies an important place in Indian Ethics by virtue of his ethical teaching. His teachings have a universal appeal, because they deal with problems which have been puzzling the entire human race and inducing it to solve them for ever. Buddha's teaching has received more attention than ever because of internecine quarrels, hatred, jealousy, lust, greed, misery and suffering which are the characteristics of the modern age. Mahatma Gandhi has received inspiration from the life and teaching of Lord Buddha. To quote Gandhiji, "So far as I have been able to understand the central fact of Buddha's life, nirvāṇa is utter extinction of all that is base in us, all that is vicious in us, all that is corrupt and corruptible in us. Nirvāṇa is not like the black, dead peace of the grave, but the living peace, the living happiness of a soul which is conscious of itself, and conscious of having found its own abode in the heart of the Eternal".

Lord Buddha did not remain content with his personal illumination but decided to teach the way to it to others also. To quote Swami Vivekananda, "He experienced certain truths, saw them, came in contact with them, and preached them to the world". "Go unto all lands", said Buddha to his disciples,

8 Mahatma Gandhi : Young India, p.4.

"and preach this gospel. Tell them that the poor and the lowly, the rich and the high, are all one; and that all castes unite in this religion as do the rivers in the sea". Buddha wanted to teach all the way of life. "Never in this world", he said, "does hatred cease by hatred; hatred ceases by love". "Let a man overcome anger by kindness, evil by good".10

None will deny that there is much that is beautiful and noble in Buddhism; and Buddhism was the child, the product, of those phases of Indian belief out of which Hinduism afterwards arose .......... He probably deemed himself to be the most correct exponent of the spirit, as distinct from the letter, of the ancient faith. And it can only be claimed for him that he was the greatest and wisest and best of that long line of illustrious reformers who have endeavoured, through the centuries, to infuse new strength and new truth into the religious life of India.

Buddha was an ethical teacher per excellence. "His appeal was to logic, reason and experience; his emphasis was on ethics, and his method was one of psychological analysis, a psychology without a soul. His whole approach comes like the breath of the fresh wind from the mountains after the stale

10 Jawaharlal Nehru: Discovery of India, p. 138.
air of metaphysical speculation"11. We have not to look for any metaphysics as such in the teaching of Buddha. He was averse to all theoretic curiosity. But though there is no explicit metaphysics in his teachings, there is a good deal of it in an implicit form.

Buddhistic philosophy has its foundation in the doctrine of dependent origination or pratityasamutpada which avoids the question of eternalism (or the theory that reality eternally exists independently of any creation) and nihilism (or the theory that something existing can be annihilated and can cease to be without bearing any mark behind). In between eternalism and nihilism Buddha offers a middle course, namely, that everything that we perceive possesses an existence but is dependent on something else for its existence and that thing in turn does not perish without leaving some effect. But the question remains to be answered, if every fact is dependent on some cause for its existence, what is the cause of ignorance then? We donot find any explicit answer to this question from Buddha.

The belief in the law of Karma is only an aspect of the doctrine of dependent origination. Our present life is the result of the deeds done in our previous life and our future life will be determined by the actions of this life. Because

11 Jawaharlal Nehru: Discovery of India, p.128.
of their karmas men are not similar, but some are long living,
some short living, some healthy, and some unhealthy etc.
Buddha refuses to accept the doctrine of Karma as something
mechanical. According to him, though the present life is deter­
mined by the past, the future life is dependent on our will.
The doctrine of Karma does not mean determinism. If that he so,
there is hardly any place for religion and ethics in human
life. The doctrine of Karma implies an order in the field of
spiritual development as well as that of terrestrial process.
It does not lessen the importance of effort and responsibility.
The philosophy of Buddha is against absolute determinism as
well as absolute indeterminism. According to Buddhist philosophy
Karma ceases to have any effect after attaining liberation. In
that stage Karma remains but they bear no fruits as the burnt
seeds do not sprout in the plant.

From the doctrine of dependent origination later
followers of Buddha developed the theory of momentariness. Buddha
did not say that things other than consciousness are momentary
but later followers of Buddha applied the doctrine of momenta-
reness to all objects material and spiritual. In this connection
we bear in mind the excellent words of Shelley:

"Worlds on worlds are rolling ever,
From creation to decay,
Like the bubbles on a river,
Sparkling, bursting borne away."

12 Shelley (in *Ode To A Nightingale*)
Consistently with his doctrine of universal change, Buddha refuses to accept the existence of unchanging and abiding soul independently of changing mental states. Though not believing in the existence of a permanent soul over and above the changing mental states, Buddha does not deny the continuity of the stream of ideas composing the human self. When a particular idea constituting the self of a particular moment disappears, it does so after leaving its mark behind, and the self of the next moment is consequently by it through and through. Rebirth is not transmigration, that is, migration of the same soul. It is causation of the next life by the present one.

Thus we find that though Buddha is primarily an ethical teacher, there is good deal of metaphysics in an implicit form which we have discussed.

We are now out to determine the importance of Buddhism in the modern world which is involved in hatred, jealousy, mutual conflict and distrust. Can Buddhism help the modern world to get rid of its problems which are driving it to destruction? In this connection we bear in mind Kaviguru Rabindranath Tagore's optimism about the re-appearance of Buddha along with Buddhism which has been expressed by him in the following beautiful lines -

Hinsay unmmata Pritwi nitya nithuma dwandwa,
Ghora kutila pantha tar love jatila bandha.
Nutana taba janma lagi katara jata prani,
Kara tran mahaprana Ana Amrita bani,
Bikashita kara prema padma chira madhunisyanda
Shanta he, mukta he, he ananta punya,
Karunaghana dharanitala kara kalanka shunya"\textsuperscript{13}

We have not an element of doubt that Buddha reappeared again in Swami Vivekananda to save the world from destruction. But unlike Rabindranath, Vivekananda was not ready to accept Buddha along with his divinely message without reservation. Swamiji realised the fact that Buddhism as it stands must have a background of Advaita Vedanta of Sankara so as to mould the world with new light and vision.

How far the message of Buddha can be practised by the modern world of material and industrial civilisation bears a great question-mark. As a state-religion it prevails in Japan and South-East Asian countries. It also prevailed in eastwhile China. Could the creed of love and Ahimsa embodied in Buddhism persuade Japan to stop its war activities during the nineteen thirtys against China? Just as Christianity failed to compel

\textsuperscript{13} Rabindra Rachanavali, Vol. XI, p.494.
so-called Christians stop their war-mongering, love of power, love of domination, love of wealth and lust, luxury and unrestrained enjoyment of life and pleasure, so also Buddhism failed to turn the tide of materialism and materialistic thought back to spiritual and ethical ideals laid down by Lord Buddha. Could there exist any disparity between man and man if Buddhism or for that matter Christianity could hold its sway over the minds of the people?

These point to some lacuna and flows in the basic structure inherent in the creed of Buddhism. Yet Buddhism was a historical necessity and it played its glorious part in the history of mankind - in the individual life and in the collective life as well. But then, the wolves of baser instincts of man, the carnal desires of self-satisfaction were lurking in the universal consciousness of man. Hydra-headed monster of materialism cropped up its heads in individual life as much as social life ushered in by scientific and industrial revolution which brought in its trail, diverse problems and made life more dynamic and gave it new dimensions. Pitted against this monster of materialism and mechanical civilisation which stood for glorification of life and enjoyment of life, which stood for utilising the scientific knowledge and natural resources for the fulfilment of human and mundane desires, Buddhism had to leave a sneaking existence cowering in the face of the
onrush of non-spiritual, unethical social upheaval. Thus Buddhism failed to offer mankind any permanent solution to life's evergrowing and many-fold problems though it offered a cementing force to the basic moral structure of society. It subsists more as an ideal than as a reality particularly in this era of commercial and industrial civilisation and colonialism. Marxism is a great challenge to all that is spiritual and it is held to be the soundest materialistic ideal so far evolved. It stood firmly not merely against Buddhism but against all religions for that matter.

Swami Vivekananda was confronted by this challenge of materialism of Western and American world. He had the farsight to see the deluge of Marxism curling over the horizon rolling on and on over the citadel of spiritualism. He stood on the bed-rock of Indian philosophic systems firmly rooting his mind on the Advaita Vedānta, yet not denying the truth of Buddhism in its embryonic form. Herein lies the historical role of Vivekananda. We shall elaborate the point in relevant chapter.

It cannot be gainsaid that Buddhism is a religion based on lofty ideals. Lord Buddha was the embodiment of infinite kindness, love and compassion. Hence a religion like Buddhism is bound to give refuge to those who seek for peace
and tranquility of the soul. As Birth said that Buddha was a man who was the finished model of calm and sweet majesty, of infinite tenderness for all that breathes and compassion for all that suffers, of perfect moral freedom and exemption from every prejudice. Hence the historical importance of Buddha’s teaching in the modern world which is involved in hatred, jealousy and internecine quarrels cannot be underestimated. Life and teaching of Lord Buddha is a living example of persons of modern world who is groping through sin—through misery. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, “This Buddhism went as the first missionary religion to the world, penetrated the whole of the civilised world as it existed at that time and never was a drop of blood shed for that religion.”

As the gentle falling of dew at night brings support to all vegetable life, so slowly or imperceptibly, this divine philosophy has been spread through the world for the good of mankind.

As has already been stated Marxism is a challenge to all that went before as a social philosophy of life. It also stood against our spiritual concept of life. The principle of "Be good and do good" is too high and too idealistic and impractical proposition in the eye of Marxian creed. Of course,

Marxism does not discard the question of ethics in social life. It has another connotation in Marxian parlance. If people are asked to make their individual life subservient to the corporate life, it does not stand for dissolution of selfish instinct. It is rather the process through which the need of the individual self can be satisfied through collective living. So collective life has received more emphasis than individual or private life. To serve self one must be selfless. It is a reversed process. So there is ethics even in Marxian philosophy of life.

But the ethics involved in Buddhism is as wide as the vast firmament of the sky; it has no colour or shade of selfishness. It is universal good that should serve as the motive force of action. It is entirely selfless. "Loose thyself to find thyself", is at the core of Buddhistic thought.

Marxists find in this concept the seed of bourgeoisie society. It is really this sort of call for selfless action that provides the scope of exploitation, social injustice and oppression in social and national life as also in colonialism. So Marxism keeps the call to all exploited mass of people to breakdown the bondage of moral and spiritual preaching as laid down in the book of ethics. It is in this sense religion has been called an opium of the people. While Marxism stands for life and material enjoyment of life in a corporate social order,
Buddhism uses life as a stepping-stone towards annihilation of life. In this respect they are poles asunder. But in other sphere Marxism and Buddhism meet in the same platform. Both of these ways of life stand for equality of men and equal rights of men, annihilation of all sorts of disparity between man and man, social or caste barriers, throwing open the door of knowledge to all and sundry.

In this context Buddhism can offer a prospect of classless society and also can offer the basic principle of humanitarianism and the creed of action. For Marxism also stands for all these crados though for a different purpose and through different means.

What is the importance of Buddhism in the so-called free world which stands for competitive life and which aims at providing individual the scope for his flourishment in disregard of the case of other persons? This competition naturally is self-motivated and it has no scruple to adopt any means fair or foul to achieve its end. This free competition unshackled by any very strict surveillance of the state machinery leads to oppressive capitalism. The masses are sacrificed at the altar of this handful of persons who are living at the upper storey of life. It is not really a sort of society where all can find bliss and peace. The elite are virtually
the gods that curb out the destiny of man. Yet this infinite craving for more and more wealth finds no satiety. It causes rather a sort of restlessness and a new type of distemper grows which will not let them peace of mind, no rest, no sleep but an unceasing breathless movement. They cannot cry halt to this onward march. This race of men to go fast and to go ahead to reach the undefined goal leads to bitter rivalry and war, bloodshed and destruction of human lives and accumulated priceless treasures of civilisation. The world is often faced with this catastrophe. The entire humanity is caught in a mesh. They know the evil of these modern civilisation. Yet they cannot free themselves from the snares of tantalising mirage of Eure of wealth, power and unrestricted enjoyment of life. There is often scattered revolts by groups of persons against this capitalist society. This revolt takes various shapes. Often it throws them back to primitive way of life. They look for some new life which can deliver them from the bondage and crisis of civilisation. Marxism offers an allurement for such dismayed and disintegrated persons. But the hot-house and stuffy atmosphere of Marxian ideas often cloy them. They turn to "the light of Asia".

How far Buddhism can come to their rescue? Can the Western civilisation trek back to oriental society? Can they roll back to the society in which Buddha preached and asked
men to live a life of mendicants? It is an utopian and a retrograde thought. Sciences totally changed the horizon of mind and the face of the world has completely changed. The image of Buddha scarcely fits in with this framework of modern civilisation. It can at best uphold a moral image and can hoist up the banner of love, ahimsa and charity, can only talk about the nothingness of the world as Christ did latterly. But Christ was crucified and everyday Christ is being crucified. Buddha also has already met with similar rebuff in the hands of the so-called Buddhists. Yet it will be ever-shining as a luminary, offering bacon-light to the generations of people who have lost their way in the wilderness of modern civilisation. It will act as a remainder to the humanity of their real task which they have long forgotten in the din and bustle of the modern world. Buddhism has already served their purpose. In fact, it has become exhausted and has become out of tune with the modern world. It has been played out. However much we may invoke the spirit of Buddhism, it will never be reinstated in the framework of modern society. If the poet in desperation and dismay cries out for the spirit, that will be a cry in the wilderness of life and that will mean that the humanity has lost all faith in itself. But that can never be accepted as a reality and as a truth. Human spirit (that is creative instinct of man or 'life-force') is eternal. It is dynamic
and ever-changing. If it goes astray for the time being, it can as well come back to the high road of victory of soul. It is not by decrying the entire society, not by repudiating science and all human endeavour that humanity can find peace. It is by accepting these and many more things and transmuting them with the eternal spirit of Advaita Vedānta that a fresh and god-like image of man can be shaped out. Vivekananda laid the foundation for that new heavenly bliss curbed out of the chaos of this modern civilisation. The actual process of thought will be dealt with in relevant chapter.
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