

LORD BUDDHA AND HIS MIDDLE PATH

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THE life of Gautama, the Buddha is a beacon that has been shedding light undimmed for two and a half millenniums now, informing, inspiring and illuminating people, and will continue to do so till man values more something higher than the things of the mundane world, till man cares even a little for a righteous kind of life, till man loves to live a peaceful life, nay till man exists. For it was a life of sacrifice intensely lived, in which there was no disparity between the things spoken and things done. It was a life which knew no fear, made no distinction between the high and the low.

Buddha did not lay much stress on the abstruse metaphysical side of philosophy. Perhaps, he thought he should give a practical demonstration of a good life for ages to come than dwell on mere speculation. This trend of his thought is discernible in his reply to the question regarding the existence of the soul. He asks: 'Will you, if you find a man pierced with an arrow, first try to investigate by what hunter it was shot, of what poison it was tipped and so on indefinitely or relieve the sufferer of his miseries by extracting the arrow out and applying soothing balms to the wound?' 'Man' he seems to say, 'is burning in the miseries of this world, show him the path out of it and leave alone all other dry discussions.' His life, therefore, as a most rational one appeals to one and all, starting with the unbelievers, the agnostics and the atheists up to the trustful and the religious. Whatever doctrinal differences, may there have been or still be between his followers and those of other faiths, it cannot be denied that his life has still a charm which thrills people, moves them to the core of their very being. It almost resembles a lyrical song taking you along its current of melodies, now making you see into the depths of despair at his struggle, now lifting you up, on to the crest of joy at his enlightenment, now moving you to tears at the readiness of the Blessed One to sacrifice his life to save that of a lamb, and again making you stand in awe at the sternness in his desire of maintaining the purity of his creed, free of all miracle-mongering.

What pity and compassion must have flowed in those veins, what intense sufferings should have been felt in that heart to be moved so!

Here we find the ununderstandable Upanisadic saying, (*sarvam khalvidam brahma*) "all this is verily Brahman," being literally lived and that not as a practice, but spontaneously as a result of the realization of the Unity of Being.

II

Now let us make a brief survey of his life, a detailed one being beyond our scope at present. Most of the accounts of Buddha's life that we get is from *Lalitavistara* and such other Pali Canons.

The Buddha is the name by which Siddhartha, the Gautama, was known after his enlightenment. He was born in the year 563 B.C. to the provincial king Suddhodana and his queen Maya, of Kapilavasthu, a township in the plains near the foot-hills of Nepal. Foretold, that his son when grown to manhood would either become a powerful king or moved by the woes of the world turn a religious leader, king Suddhodana in order to avoid the latter tragedy, as he considered it, brought up his son away from the three woes of the world: disease, old age and death. When Siddhartha grew into manhood, the father desiring to bind him securely to wealth and kingdom, had him married to a girl of his choice, named Yasodhara, beautiful and loving and virtuous. They had a lovely child who was named Rahula. Suddhodana was now feeling a little secure as he thought the responsibility of the family and love for his wife and child would hold Siddhartha back.

The wheel of time rolled on. Meanwhile, destiny seemed to have been laughing in its sleeves when the king was endeavouring, vainly, to entangle Siddhartha in the world. Siddhartha, now, desirous to know his people set forth from his palace in his chariot. And as if Providence was lying in wait, just for this moment, to strike and strike hard to shock into rude awakening Siddhartha's consciousness, which was till then kept in the dark about the real state of affairs of the world. He came across the very three phenomena which the king had all the time kept away from his son. He saw on his way an old man, bent double, made feeble by ravages of time, dragging his burden of the body with great effort. He learnt from his charioteer that that was the way of all mankind, that this same old man was once a joyous, sportive youth but that time had worked its way and reduced him to that state. Then he saw a palsied man, with some fingers of his hands missing, lying on the road side writhing in pain. To Siddhartha's feeling inquiry regarding the man Channa, the Charioteer, explained that the man was stricken with disease. Disease he said comes to human beings in several forms but none knew how. Then Siddhartha came face to face with a dead body being carried on the hearse. To Siddhartha's enquiring glance Channa said that was the end of all human beings; that those who were born had to die one day. Each of these sights had thrown Siddhartha into deeper and deeper contemplation. He was sad. Was there no way out of these triple woes? thought he. As if to

show him the way he next met a Sannyasin, serene and self-possessed and dignified, carrying a beggar's bowl. Siddhartha was impressed and asked Channa who that person might be who could be so calm, and learnt that it was a monk who had 'abandoned all longings and led a life of austerity and lived without passion or envy and begged his daily food'. Siddhartha mused within himself, "well, that seems to be the course of life set for me"; "to become religious has ever been praised by the wise and this shall be my refuge and the refuge of others and shall yield the fruit of life, and immortality!"

He drove back to the palace brooding, unheeding of anything, and when the palace was plunged in the calmness of the night his resolve was made. Bidding farewell to his sleeping wife and child Siddhartha rode forth followed by Channa till he had covered a great distance and then putting off his royal robes and jewels, sent Channa back to the palace and himself went into homelessness. He had then reached the age of twenty-nine.

His first encounter after this great renunciation was with the king of Magadha, Bimbisara. Siddhartha who had gone on his begging round into the city of Rajagriha had attracted attention of the people. When the king came to know of it he went to the place where Siddhartha was and impressed by the beauty of his person and nobility of his bearing, offered to bestow upon him the whole kingdom. Siddhartha refused to have anything to do with the worldly empire but promised the king to teach him his way when he had found it.

From here he proceeded to the hermitage of Ālāra Kālāma, a renowned teacher of the time, and became his disciple and learnt the art of meditation from him. But not satisfied with the metaphysical part of his teachings he retired to a forest and practised austerities, of fasting and mortification, for years until his body was like a withered branch. At the end of six years he considered the state of his mind sitting under a Jambu tree. Mortification had weakened his body and yet he was not in sight of enlightenment. He thought of abandoning the path of fasting and went and bathed in a river but he was so weak that he could not rise from the stream. With great effort he struggled out but on the way to his abode he fell down in a swoon. His companions, the five monks, thought he was dead. But he revived and then he resolved to beg his food, that his health and strength may be restored. Seeing that Siddhartha had broken his fast without attaining enlightenment the monks left him. Now, the daughter of the village headman of Uruvela where Siddhartha was practising his austerities had desired that the great Sakya Muni would deign to receive food from her.

So on the day he was to attain enlightenment she had a pre-vision. She, therefore, carried a bowl of thickened milk cooked with rice and offered it to the Great One. Siddhartha took the bowl, went to the river, took his bath and having partaken of the food and refreshed his limbs made the greatest resolve: 'Let my body dry up, my skin and my nerves and my

bones waste away, yet this body will not move from this seat until I have attained Supreme Enlightenment, which is difficult of attainment even after aeons.' Various were the temptations that came to him at that time, yet he overcame them all and as the dawn approached Siddhartha attained to Supreme Enlightenment, became the Buddha.

It is said that the Blessed One remained in that state for 49 days enjoying the bliss of emancipation. On the forty-ninth day two merchants who were passing by saw his majestic figure full of peace and were moved to make an offering of food to the Blessed One. The Buddha accepted their offering and pointed out to them the way of salvation and they became his first lay disciples.

Now the Buddha deeply pondered whether he should teach what he had realized. For he thought the worldlings will not understand the truth because their happiness was in bodily enjoyments. Yet he felt an inner urge that the Truth so dearly earned should not be lost. And then he remembered his five disciples and coming to know that they were living at Isipatana near Banaras he wended his way there. The monks saw their former master approach but resolved not to show him any respect, as he had broken his vow of fasting. But as the Blessed One approached them they involuntarily rose from their seats in spite of their resolution, bowed down to him and offered him a seat and he taught them. That was his first sermon. To them he taught the ineffectiveness of useless austerities and exhorted them to follow the middle path which he had discovered.

By now he had already a good number of monks in his retinue. From Banaras he went to Rajagriha, to King Bimbisara, and received him into his fold, and preached his Dharma. From Rajagriha the Buddha made for Kapilavasthu being invited by his father. There he converted the Sākya Princes to his Dharma and received his son Rahula—who taught by his mother Yaśodhara, had claimed his patrimony — into the Order. Much later at Vesali he decided to admit women into the Order at the prayer of Ānanda who had witnessed a group of earnest women, sore of foot due to walking, and laden with dust, had come to beg of the Tathagata to be ordained as nuns.

For forty-five years the Blessed One travelled, preached and taught the way to salvation. He had now 1200 disciples who were monks. He had a great following among the lay men and women too. Now, when he was full of years (he was then eighty) and his mission was fulfilled the Blessed One proceeded to Pāra where he accepted the hospitality of Canda, a smith. But the Buddha was attacked by a fell disease soon after he partook of the meal offered by Canda and was in great pain. Yet, mindful and self-possessed the Buddha bore it without complaint. He then proceeded to Kusinara and halted in a Sāla grove. Growing weary he asked Ananda, his disciple and attendant, to spread his couch between two Sāla trees and lay down on his right side.

And as the last moments drew near lo, a seeker came and wanted to be taught and he approached Ananda. But Ananda refused permission

to allow him to go to the Blessed One, knowing that the Master was weary and was not to be troubled. However, Buddha who overheard their conversation and knowing that the seeker was sincere caused the man to be brought and dissipated all his doubts. Thus did the Buddha teach every sincere seeker till the last breath of his life. The Blessed One's last exhortation to the Brethren was: "Decay is inherent in all component things. Work out your salvation with diligence."

III

Now we come to the teachings of the Buddha of which we shall discuss here only about the middle path. A lot of confusion has arisen in the interpreting of this path and passage of time has not helped to remove these misunderstandings. Rather people were and are still not in a mood to break the cherished images of their own interpretation of these teachings. People are apt to forget that a great spiritual Master's exhortations cannot be construed properly except in the light of his own life. Secondly, we have also to consider the times in which the Master lived and the context in which he spoke the particular words.

We have, as it has come down to us in translation, the Blessed One's teachings on the middle path as follows:

"The Tathagata," said the Buddha, "does not seek salvation *in* austerities, but neither does he for that reason indulge in worldly pleasures, nor live in abundance. The Tathagata has found the middle path.

"There are two extremes, O monks, which the man who has given up the world ought not to follow — habitual practice, on the one hand, of self indulgence which is unworthy, vain and fit only for the worldly-minded; and the *habitual* practice, on the other hand, of self-mortification, which is painful, useless and unprofitable"¹

The Buddha continues:

"By suffering, the emaciated devotee produces confusion and sickly thoughts in his mind. Mortification is not conducive even to worldly knowledge; how much less to a triumph over the senses!"²

First of all, we have to understand that fasting and mortification of the flesh was considered at that time *the* way to salvation. If we recollect what has been said earlier we shall find that the Buddha gave his first sermon to his disciples who had deserted him when he took to begging after being faint with fasting and mortification. The impression of the disciples that he had broken his vow by taking food and was no more a Muni but a man of the world was so great that when they saw him after his enlightenment they addressed him as "Brother", as an equal, and not as their Master. This false notion was to be counter-acted. For the Buddha

¹ Gospel of Buddhism by Paul Carus, PP. 41 and 42. Pub: The Publication Department, Government of India, Delhi.

² Ibidem

had come as a saviour and he could not but drive out false notions that were prevalent in his time, to save religion from total annihilation. He had to speak the truth and in forceful language too, fitting the occasion that it demanded. Again, mortification was not the goal of man, whereas people of those times saw salvation only in it. Mortifications were, if anything, only the means. Was not then the goal forgotten in vaingloriousness of austerity? That is why the Buddha exhorts how difficult it is to triumph over the senses by mere austerity, which makes man weak and unable to know even the ordinary things of life. Who was a better authority of what is conducive to salvation than the one who had attained enlightenment himself? But the Buddha warns, those who may swing to the other extreme, "Sensuality is enervating; the self-indulgent man is slave to his passions, and pleasure seeking is degrading and vulgar". Yet he does not want to leave undefined what he has got to say about his middle path. So he continues: "But to satisfy the necessities of life is not evil. To keep the body in good health is a duty, for otherwise we shall not be able to trim the lamp of wisdom, and keep our mind strong and clear.

"This is the middle path that keeps aloof from the extremes."³

Those who stop with the Tathagata's instructions regarding austerity and follow not his later injunctions are in a graver danger of losing their foothold on the spiritual path than the others. This is to be remembered by all aspirants. Further, we have to consider the meaning of every word of his sayings quoted above. There is the word "*habitual*" qualifying practice of austerities, which we have put in italics, to show that it is not at all against the injunctions of the Buddha to observe fasts and vigils, occasionally without injuring the body. The idea behind the Tathagata's instructions is clear and unambiguous and should not be twisted to suit our needs. Lest people should be led away by his denunciation of austerities the Buddha remarks: "Let him be moderate, let him eat and drink according to the needs of the body." The "needs of the body" again may be a dangerous term. For in the present times our needs have a tendency of increasing in a telescopic manner. But our ancient idea was, as Swami Vivekananda puts it, 'with how little can we keep the body trim and not with how much can we be content'.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* too gives an almost identical teaching: "Yoga cannot be practised by one who indulges in eating nor by one who completely abstains from food; neither can it be practised by one given to too much sleep nor by one who wakes up all the time. To one who is moderate in his food and rest, moderate in his physical exertions, moderate in sleep and wakefulness yoga becomes easy of practice and a dispeller of miseries."⁴ Of course, this does not mean there is no stage when man can abstain from food. The Buddha, himself, if we have to believe in tradition, was without any food for 49 days after his enlightenment, immersed in the joy of that bliss. In our own times Sri

³ Ibidem

⁴ Bhagavad Gita, VI, 16 & 17.

Ramakrishna lived in that state for six months without being aware, of what went on round him, even of his body. Providentially, however, a wandering monk who happened to come to Dakshineswar at that time and comprehended the real state through which Sri Ramakrishna was passing, administered food unto him sometimes even by beating Sri Ramakrishna's person to bring his mind down to the normal plane. But these are exceptional cases where illumination had been attained first. Perhaps, the needs of the body are not so exacting in that state as when man is on the normal plane. But for all others who are still aspirants the middle path prescribed by the *Gītā*, reinforced by the Buddha and reiterated by Sri Ramakrishna is the safest guide.

Sri Ramakrishna, when he was told that a certain person had given up fish and betel leaf, is said to have remarked, 'What has poor betel leaf and fish done? Let him give up lust and gold'. The meaning is, that lust and avarice are the two greatest impediments on the spiritual path. If one performs austerities and yet retains longings for enjoyment here or hereafter he will not be able to attain salvation. Let us not jump to any conclusion without understanding the purport of this teaching. Observe how like a hawk Sri Ramakrishna kept his watchful eyes on his disciples. Sri Ramakrishna was very particular even as to what food, and how much of it each of his boy-disciples took, and never failed to reprimand them if it was more than the needs of the body of the particular individual. That is the middle path which the Buddha also taught. Let us remember this always and be not led astray either way.