

Some Aspects of The Teaching of Buddha

This article was written by Ram Bilas Sharma

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Preparations for the celebrations of Buddha Jayanti have evoked wide interest in the teaching of Buddha both among the leaders of the Indian bourgeoisie and progressive intellectuals. Buddha was an Indian and the founder of one of the first world-religions. This article deals with only some aspects of the teaching of Buddha.

Gana Organisation

Siddhartha Gautama belonged to the tribe of the Sakyas. "The administration and judicial business of the clan was carried out in public assembly at which young and old alike were present, in their common mote hall at Kapilvastu." (Rhys Davids). The state had not yet emerged in their tribe; there was as yet no public power standing above the society with an army, prison, law courts, etc. There were many such tribes in northern and eastern India in the first millennium B.C. They were often called *ganas* where authority was vested in the whole people and not in a select governing class.

K. P. Jayaswal made a detailed study of the *ganas* in his work *Hindu Polity*. He says: "A great reason of their political strength was that a republic was *nation-in-arms*. Where you have a nation-in-arms, there is no public power standing above the society. Alluding to the discussion *ganas* in the *Mahabharata*, Jayaswal says, "*Gana* refer the whole body politic, the entire political community in the alternative, the parliament, and not to the 'governing body' only (a view to which Dr. Thomas inclines)."

Equality in the *ganas* was determined by birth. The *Mahabharata* says, "There is universal equality by birth (in the *ganas*) and also there is equality by *kula*." In other words, these organisations were based on blood-kinship. Rahul Sankrityan in an article on "Buddhist Dialectics (*New Age*, Monthly, January 1956) says about the Lichhavi *gana* that "democracy existed only for those who belonged to the Lichhavi clan" and "the non-Lichhavi brahmin or grahapati (trader) caste though free had no right of vote for the senate (*samsad*)."

Wealth and inequality were growing in these *ganas*. The *Mahabharata* points out that the danger to the *gana* organisations arose from within them—the inevitable disputes with the growth of wealth and private property. The priest, the trader and the nobility along with the ordinary peasants—this typical fourfold division of feudal society, our well-known *varna*-system—was emerging. Slaves also existed among them as in most tribal societies.

As a result of the growth of private property, power was being concentrated in the hands of a few families. These were sometimes called *rajanyas*, the families from whom the chiefs were elected. Jayaswal draws attention to the meaning of this word: “*Rajanyas* being leaders of families consecrated to rulership.” In some of the *ganas*, only those were entitled to sit in the assembly “who furnished the state with an elephant.” The *ganas* were thus tribal societies in a state of transition to feudalism about the middle of the first millennium B.C. They represented a social system that was disintegrating in face of feudalism that was emerging.

Feudal Monarchies

Side by side with the *ganas*, there existed full-fledged feudal monarchies, with state as public power standing above the society—the kingdom of Magadha reigned over by King Bimbisara and afterwards by his son Ajatasatru and the powerful kingdom of Kosala ruled over by Prasenjit. In this world of feudal monarchies and *ganas*, Siddhartha Gautama made his appearance. After leaving Kapilvastu, the first place Gautama visited was Rajgriha, the capital of the feudal kingdom of Magadha. “The teachers of the Ganges Valley had probably a greater reputation for learning and sanctity than the rough wits of the Sakya land and this may have attracted Gautama.” (Sir Charles Eliot : *Hinduism and Buddhism*, Vol- I, p. 135). Enlightenment came to him outside the Sakya land in Gaya and he preached his doctrine for the first time in Banaras the important cultural centre of northern India. “For about forty-five years he moved about Kosala, Magadha and Anga visiting the two capitals Savatthi and Rajagriha and going as far west as the country of the Kurus.” (*Ibid.*, p. 147). Thus Buddha’s fields of activity was primarily the two feudal monarchies of Magadha and Kosala and not the *ganas*.

Feudal Patrons

The leaders of these monarchies, and not so much the aristocracies of the *ganas*, became the patrons of Buddha both in his life-time and afterwards. Big

merchants also became his followers. The feudal state needed a religion and Buddha supplied a state-religion, a well organised church, the first of its kind in India and perhaps in the world. This was because he did not touch upon the basic contradictions of feudal society, the contradiction between the small producer and the exploiter of his labour, prince and the merchant.

He criticised brahmins but this criticism is made from the standpoint of the prince and the merchant whose right to exploit others he does not challenge. The contradiction between Brahmanism and Buddhism is partly explained by the contradiction among the property owners, the brahmins and the kshatriyas. Buddha is more against false brahmins than "true" brahmins. "Him I call indeed a Brahmana who calls nothing his own, whether it be before, behind, or between, who is poor, and free from the love of the world." (*Dhammapada*).

With this many of the brahmins themselves would have agreed. Buddha criticised sacrifices, rituals, etc., and demanded good conduct from true brahmins. The *Chhandogya Upanishad* parodies a priestly procession in a sacrifice and calls it "a procession of dogs chanting 'Om! Let us eat. Om! Let us drink!'" (*History of Philosophy: Eastern and Western*, Vol. I, p. 57). The *Mundaka Upanishad* makes a scathing attack on ritual and compares sacrificial forms to unsafe boats trusting which fools are overtaken by old age and death. (*Ibid.*) Not to mention other schools of Indian philosophy, the *Upanishads* themselves at times criticise the priestly order and ritual. Hence such criticism on the part of Buddha was not original. Like brahmins, Buddha's followers were above the social law. Bimbisara proclaimed that "It is not permitted to do anything to those who join the order of the Sakya-puttiya." (*Hinduism and Buddhism*, Vol. I, p.942). Instead of the Brahmanic priesthood, Buddha was creating priesthood and not assailing the basis of priesthood itself.

Appeal of Doctrine

The great attraction in the teaching of Buddha for princes and merchants was the doctrine of the cessation of desire. The world is full of sorrow. This sorrow is common to all, the exploiters and the exploited alike. Instead of focussing attention on class greed, the suffering engendered by the domination of one class over another, Buddha spoke of greed in general, suffering and misery in general and hence the path of human salvation pointed out by him is also general and was incapable of alleviating, much less

removing altogether, the specific human suffering of a given social epoch. "By oneself the evil is done, by oneself one suffers; by oneself evil is left undone, by oneself one is purified. Purity and impurity belong to oneself; no one can purify another." (*Dhammapada*). Hence, instead of fighting the oppressors, the duty of a person is to eradicate impurity from within himself.

Suffering and evil exist in the individual also but these are different from suffering and evil that exist on a social scale. The suffering and evil of class contradictions cannot be removed by the purification of the individual. Only when these contradictions are removed can the social suffering and evil engendered by them be also removed. This is the reason that such an outlook as that of individual sin and salvation has always been acceptable to the ruling classes.

Instead of struggling against evil, man becomes passive towards it. Passive acquiescence in suffering is implied in the struggle for self-purification. This passivity is still very popular with certain leaders and thinkers in India. It certainly hinders the organisation and the activity of the masses. It serves to conceal the real roots of the misery of the people and the way to end it.

Taking the individual by himself, it may be pointed out that his salvation lies not in the negation of desire but in their control and fulfilment for individual and social welfare. Buddha modified the extreme asceticism of some of the Indian schools but his outlook remained basically that of the traditional *yogis* and *sanyasis* who found virtue in the renunciation of the world. The greatest evil for such people is the very fact of man's birth in the world. Desire and birth are raised to a metaphysical plane and salvation is said to lie in a ceasing of the imaginary chain of births and rebirths. "Some people are born again; evil doers go to hell; righteous people go to heaven; those who are free from all worldly desires enter *nirvana*." (*Dhammapada*).

World Outlook

This brings us to the question of Buddha's world outlook. He called himself a follower of the middle path, the path between materialism and spiritualism. This implies not an acceptance of materialism but its rejection. Dialectical materialism apart, Buddha was opposed to the traditional materialist doctrines of his own times. Professor Tarapada Chowdhury has pointed out the existence of the materialist outlook in the *Rig Veda* itself. "In the *RV* the incidence of human ignorance (i. 164. 5, 6; 10. 88. 18. etc.) and of the elusiveness

of truth (5. 85. 8; 10. 139. 5; cf. 8. 100. 3) is frankly admitted." (*History of Philosophy: Eastern and Western*, Vol. I., p. 51). "Enquiry about material and efficient causes is common (RV. 10. 81. 2, 4; 168. 3)." (*Ibid.*). Professor Dakshinarajan Bhattacharya says about this early materialism, "Matter as ultimate reality was first envisaged by Brihaspati Laukya or Brahmanaspati of the *Rig Veda*." (*Ibid.*, p. 133).

The famous Charvakas were the followers of Brihaspati. Theirs was a well-established historical tradition in ancient India. "Almost every period of Indian history has champions of the Charvaka view. The sage Javali of the *Ramayana* was a teacher of materialism. His advice to Rama to comparable with the Charvaka view.... The teachings Ajita-kesa-kambalin, who, according to the old Buddhistic and Jain works, was a contemporary of Lord Buddha, resemble the teachings of the Charvaka school. Payasi, who was Ajita's successor, championed Ajita's view." Both before and after Buddha, the exponents of this materialist school existed in India. The different idealist systems vilified the Charvakas. The repeated reproaches only show the virility of that school.

For the Charvakas, matter is primary; the human mind consciousness are secondary. "That matter is the ultimate reality is implied from Brihaspati's dictum —'Out of matter came forth life'.... Consciousness is a quality of the body. It originates from material particles when they mysteriously combine and become transformed into a human organism." (*Ibid.*, p. 135). As opposed to this materialist view, Buddha said: "All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts." From this follows the corollary that by ceasing to think of desires, man can put an end to the chain of births and rebirths.

The Charvakas held: "With the dissolution of the body, con-sciousness disappears and each of its constituent elements is mingled with its kind leaving behind only ashes and dust." (*Ibid.*, p. 135). As opposed to this materialist view, Buddha held that the chain of *karma* pursues a man even after his death. The virtue of *nirvana* lies in negating this chain effect after death.

Rahul Sankrityayan says of this aspect of the teaching of Buddha: "Just as a man's mental culture proves his earlier studies even when he has left the college for a number of years and has forgotten all that he read there, in the same way, why should not the precociousness of a child be treated as the result of his earlier study?... Children who were extraordinary mathematicians and musicians are seen to have been born of uneducated parents. Thinking

over the problem in the above mentioned way, we feel that our life-stream of this body is only a link in the prolonged life-stream, which has been flowing earlier for a long time." (*Buddha Darshan*, p. 16). However, he admits that this is not materialism.

Referring to this fourth characteristic of the teaching of Buddha, he says, "but this fourth feature, i.e., not to accept this life-process as confined to this body, separates it from materialism and at the same time is a beautiful way for an individual to make the future hopeful without which it is difficult to put any ideal into practice." (*Ibid.*, p. 17). Buddha denied the soul but accepted the continuity of individual consciousness even after death. In this he was an idealist just as the Charvakas were materialists.

Buddha's Idealism

Discussing Buddha's philosophy, Balaramamoorthy says in connection with the Charvakas, "What is matter?" Matter consists of indivisible atoms. Indivisible atoms are the absolute category. While rejecting the absolute categories of the idealistic philosophy, God, and soul, *Lokayatas* introduced another absolute category called 'indivisible atom.' The *Vaisesika* and *Sankhya* systems also shared this mechanistic stand. But Buddha, whose main concern was to show that everything was impermanent and changing, treated *Lokayatas* and idealists alike." (*New Age Monthly*, March 1956).

Engels wrote in *Dialectics of Nature*, "The whole of nature accessible to us forms a system, an interconnected totality of bodies, and by bodies we understand here all material existence extending from stars to atoms, indeed right to ether particles, in so far as one grants the existence of the last named.... And if, in addition matter confronts us as something given, equally uncreatable as indestructible, it follows that motion also is as uncreatable, as indestructible." Engels points out that it was the philosophers who, before the scientists, discovered this truth. "And since this recognition," he says, "had been reached by philosophy long before it came into effective operation in natural science, it is explicable why philosophy, fully two hundred years before natural science, drew the conclusion of the uncreatability and indestructibility of motion." Hence to believe that nothing is permanent in this world in an absolute sense is not materialism but idealism.

Buddha did not believe in God or soul and he did not accept the authority of any sacred book. The Charvakas also said the same thing and he is indebted

to them for this much of rationalism in his teaching. But instead of God, he held up *nirvana*, a counterpart to theistic salvation; instead of the soul in bondage, he put up the *karma* chain which binds man and causes pain in more than one birth. Instead of the sacred book, the pious have only to rely on Buddha's own enlightenment to furnish any proof of the continuity of this cause and effect chain even after death. In choosing the middle path, Buddha rejected materialism and accepted idealism. His words are different; the content is essentially the same.

Theory of Causality

The law of dependent origination is the central point in Buddha's logic. Whatever exists arises from causes and conditions and is in every respect impermanent. The cause does not live in the effect but ceases the moment the effect comes into being. Rahul Sankrityayan says, "Buddha's *pratityaya* is such a cause as is always seen to be vanishing in the very moment before the birth of a thing or an event." (*Baudha Darshan*, p. 33). The words "dependent origination" do not accurately reflect the sense of the words *pratitya-samutpada*. It means "when one thing vanishes or perishes, another is born." (*Ibid.*) Professor T. R. V. Murti has put it very neatly thus: "Change, in the Buddhist conception is replacement of one entity by another; it is a series of entities emerging and perishing in entirety; one entity does not become another." (*History of Philosophy: Eastern and Western*, Vol. I, p. 195).

This is the metaphysician's mode of reasoning. "For him a thing either exists, or it does not exist; it is equally impossible for a thing to be itself and at the same time something else. Positive and negative absolutely exclude one another; cause and effect stand in an equally rigid anti-thesis one to the other." (*Anti-Duhring*). For Buddha, cause and effect are rigidly opposed to each other. Hence a thing ceases every moment instead of ceasing and not ceasing at the same time. Hence the universal and the particular are rigidly opposed to each other. There are only particulars and no universals.

According to Professor Murti, "the Buddhist holds that all existence is particular; the universal is a thought-construct, a *vikalpa*." S. Chatterjee and D. Datta in *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, say in connection with this logic, "Man is only a conventional name for a collection of different constituents, the material body, the immaterial mind, the formless consciousness, just as a chariot is a collection of wheels, axles, shafts, etc." Such logic can lead only to

the denial of reality. Instead of combating metaphysics, it supports it. Human consciousness continues from one life into another but the objective reality perishes in the moment. Since the succession of entities is not on a continuous but discontinuous stream, Rahul Sankrityayan justly remarks, "Basing himself on this discontinuous stream of *pratitya-samutpada*, Nagarjun later on developed his *Shunya-vad*." (*Baudha Darshan*, p. 33).

Since only the particulars exist, "there are as many things as there are distinguishable 'parts' or aspects." (Prof. Murti). Even this part or thing is "not only an instant lacking duration, but also a spatial point lacking all magnitude and diversity as well." (*Ibid.*). Further: "By the same logic we are led to the denial of the *universal* or identical aspect of things. Each entity is discrete and unique." (*Ibid.*). Such logic does not help one to understand movement. "There is neither flow nor movement in each entity nor in the series; it is the spectator who projects that into the several static entities." (*Ibid.*)

Early Dialectics

According to the sankhya system, *prakriti* is one entity but is composed of the opposite elements of *satva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. "*Satva* is primarily responsible for self-maintenance and self-manifestation of *prakriti*. *Rajas* is the cause of all activity and energising. *Tamas* is responsible for inertia and restraint of activity." (*History of Philosophy: Eastern and Western*, Vol. I, p. 244). This is more dialectical since it embraces the unity of opposites and sees in nature both inertia and movement. According to the *Nyaya-Vaisesika* school, "the atoms of earth, water, fire and air are eternal, while compounds made of them are non-eternal." (*Ibid.*, p. 225). This is more dialectical because it helps one to see both permanence and impermanence in nature.

The Charvakas held that the causal connection is not invariable. Where there is fire there is smoke but the smoke depends on the wetness of the fuel. "So long as the relation between two phenomena is not proved to be unconditional, it is an uncertain ground for inference." (Chatterjee Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, p. 61). What the Charvakas denied was not causality but its invariability. This helps one to study a given phenomenon in all its inter-connectedness and not to base any conclusion only on some aspect of it.

The Jain thinkers held that "reality is characterised by organisation, decay and permanence." (*History of Philosophy: Eastern and Western*, p. 140). This is

more dialectical since it helps one to understand the relation between change and identity. The doctrine of *asti-nasti-vada* implies that “you can describe an object *from one point of view* that it exists and *from another point of view* that it does not.” (*Ibid.*, p. 142). This is just what the metaphysician does not understand. For him it is impossible for a thing to be itself and at the same time something else. The *asti-nasti-vad* view is more comprehensive and dialectical.

For the Charvakas, consciousness did not exist in the four material elements and yet it existed in the material body of man. Their thesis was that “qualities not present originally in any of the component factors may emerge subsequently when the factors are combined together.” (Chatterjee and Datta: *An Introductoin to Indian Philosophy*, p. 64). If Buddha had followed the methods of the Charvakas, he would not have been led to the ultimate denial of life and reality and to a belief in the chain of births and rebirths and the salvation in *nirvana*.

Service to Feudalism

Thus both in his method and outlook, Buddha is an idealist. His teaching does not follow an imaginary path between materialism and idealism; it rejects the former and embraces the latter. He is not a simple idealist like Shankara. In the epoch of rising feudalism materialist philosophy was still a force to reckon with. Buddha had to convince not the backward people of a primitive communist society but intelligent thinkers of a rising propertied class. This is the reason that Buddha’s idealism does not become apparent immediately.

He accepted the Charvaka rejection of God, soul and the authority of the *Vedas*. This was the best way of combating the Charvakas. This resemblance with the Charkas, in rejecting God, soul and the *Vedas* is superficial; what is essential to Buddha’s teaching is the chain of *karma*, the salvation from the cycle of births and rebirths and the attitude of passivity and non-resistance to social evil. Whereas the great epics of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* taught the people to hate and destroy the unjust forces of society, Buddha taught men not to see evil outside themselves but to practise the cessation of desires.

Like the brahmins, his followers were placed above the law; they preached the virtue of poverty and renunciation but participated in the fruits of the labour of others by becoming the priestly guardians of society. The brahmins also

nominally held no property and yet they became the main props of feudal property owners. Despite renunciation, Buddha's point of view is that of the wealthy classes—the merchants and the princes. His teaching had an attraction for the common people for it created the illusion of equality within the samgha and also a sense of relief that not only the poor but the rich also suffer and ultimately die. But this did not inspire them to fight the injustices of the feudal system.

Everything will pass away—this was a philosophy of resignation and not of struggle. Sir Charles Eliot has put it very candidly thus: "The majority of intelligent men are prepared to devote their lives to the service of the British Empire; the fact that it must pass away as certainly as the Empire of Babylon and that they are labouring for what is impermanent does not disturb them and is hardly ever present to their minds." (*Hinduism and Buddhism*, Vol. I, p. 204).

Buddha was born among the tribe of the Sakyas but his field of activity was the empires of Magadha and Kosala. Runaway slaves were not admitted into the samgha; women were admitted with great reluctance. This is a manifestation of the outlook of propertied classes and not of the grandeur of primitive communism. Buddha's method too is essentially metaphysical and is opposed to the dialectical method of many other Indian thinkers.

Rahul Sankrityayan makes the following comment on the relation between the teaching of Buddha and the interests of the merchants and the princes: "Buddha's philosophy holds up absolute momentariness. But he did not wish to apply this view-point to the economic system of society. It was natural that having established peace with the wealthy ruler-exploiters, the respect for such a brilliant philosopher as he should increase in the upper classes. Rich and influential Brahmins like Sonadanda and Kootdanta of the priestly class became his followers; the princes seemed to be too anxious to show him all respect. The wealthy merchant class of those days loosened the purse-strings for honouring him. ... The truth is that more than princes, the merchants helped to spread the religion of Buddha. If Buddha had opposed the contemporary economic system, how could these facilities have been obtained then?" (*Baudha Darshan*, pp. 30–31).