

44. The Lord Buddha

Today, 2,500 years after the Maha-Parinirvana of the Lord Buddha, the world is ringing with thoughts of the life and teachings of the Enlightened One. The Buddha-Jayanti celebrations have focussed the attention of humanity on the significance of the great sermons of the Blessed One who has been acclaimed as the first flower in our tree of humanity. In the process of evolution of the universe from the mineral to the plant and animal stage and on to the human, there were two souls who were always ahead of all the others. In one Love was dominant, while in the other it was Wisdom. In the Occult Hierarchy a selection had to be made to fill the post of the Buddha who was in charge of the religious instruction of the world, an office till then held by Kashyapa, a Great One from

Venus. The candidate chosen was He known to us as Gautama Siddhartha, One in whom the Wisdom-Love was personified. As Bodhisatwa, he took the vow before Kashyapa to work his way up and to equip himself for the great office of the Buddha. He came to the world several times: as Vyasa in India, as Hermes in Egypt, as Zarathushtra in Persia and as Orpheus in Greece. When the time came for his elevation to the high office of Buddha he chose to be born in Kapilavastu with Sudhodana and Maya as the parents.

One great significant feature about the Lord Buddha is the amount of authentic, reliable, historical data available about his life and activities apart from mere traditions. The main incidents of his life are quite well known unlike in the case, say, of Shankara.

Now, what is the significance of the Lord Buddha to the world in general and to us in India in particular? It looks as though the Lord Buddha never intended to found a new religion. When he was born, the general tendency was to regard the world as a vale of sorrow and there was a feeling of escapism, an anxiety for liberation, and this was sought to be achieved through contemplation, severe austerities and infliction of pain on the physical body by fasting and so on. Prince Siddhartha also followed the same line till he swooned under the Bodhi tree. When, however, he awoke from this faint he was the Buddha, the Enlightened One, a personality quite different from the one that had swooned. The difference between the two is very marked. From then on the Lord Buddha struck a new path, cutting away from the old moorings and blazing a new trail, presenting a new view of eternal truths and a new way of approach to life's problems.

The Teachings of the Lord Buddha were the natural outcome of the paths followed earlier. The central theme

of his teaching was "Follow the Middle Path". He reiterated the teachings of the Gita in regard to Yoga and pointed out that extremes were not suited to our needs. There had been a shifting from one point to another in the ultimate goal of Hinduism. A section regarded Moksha as the ultimate ideal, while another regarded Immortality, Deathlessness or Amritattva as the goal. The former laid emphasis on getting away from the body. This was regarded as a negative approach and the importance of discipline, control of body, ascetic life etc., was overstressed. In the second alternative the emphasis shifted to Immortality. There was a deep cleavage between these two ways of thought when the Lord Buddha came. As one having experienced luxury and austerity, pleasure and pain, the Lord Buddha felt that the proper solution was a commonsense approach through the middle course, a balanced life through the Noble Eightfold Path.

There is a view that in all his teachings the Lord Buddha did not mention God. This was because He was born a Hindu and took God for granted. He never felt it necessary to mention God particularly. He did not bother about metaphysical disquisitions. He never presumed he was founding a religion. His was a reformed, reasonable, and tolerant presentation of Hinduism with stress on the ethical side. The Eightfold Path and the Panch Shila were guides to the life here, based on a presumption of all the metaphysics of Hinduism. His teachings can best be understood and appreciated only when taken along with the fundamental tenets of Hinduism with which they were closely integrated. His message, constituting a code of conduct in everyday life, went directly to the hearts of men.

Some have held that the Lord Buddha was concerned with only the negative aspect of life which he considered as full of sorrow. His Four Noble Truths, it was held, represent only a partial view. But this is closing our eyes to

the fact that joy can be squeezed out of sorrow too. Sorrow and bitter experience give us a firmer grip of life and develop newer and greater faculties in us. The Lord Buddha only re-emphasized the lessons of the ancient scripture that if one was impersonal and did not get entangled in any situation, joy could be got out of sorrow. He was concerned with relating even sorrow to daily life and so gave His Five Principles, laying emphasis on the ethical side.

The teachings of the Blessed One are as vital today as they were twenty-five centuries ago and provide a wonderful code of conduct for a humanity in travail. His purity and tenderness, in the words of Sir Edwin Arnold, united the truest princely qualities with the intellect of a sage and the passionate devotion of a martyr. As Lama Anagarika Govinda has said, His message of love and compassion has opened the hearts of men, His wisdom of the Middle Path has freed their minds. The practice of meditation has helped to unite their faculties of heart and mind and has created that self-discipline and insight into the innermost nature of man, and this has made Buddhism a world religion and one of the profoundest influences in the cultural life of humanity.