

Contribution of Buddhism in upliftment to society

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism strives for a deep insight into the true nature of life. Buddhism can be divided into two main schools, the Theravada or Hinayana in Sri Lanka and South East Asia, and the Mahayana in China, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan. A third school, the Vajrayana, has a long tradition in Tibet and Japan. The term which Buddhists use to designate the teaching is Dharma. Empowerment means the enhancement of an individual's capacity to know, to act and to enjoy. It brings confidence, awareness, mobility, ability to choose and capacity to control all types of resources and possess decision-making power. The Buddha emphasises the fruitful role the women can play and should play as a wife, a good mother in making the family life a success. In the family both husbands and wives are expected to share equal responsibility and discharge their duties with equal dedication. Buddhism does not restrict either the educational opportunities of women or their religious freedom. In Buddhism, experience and reasoning come first, and then scripture. Buddhism does not require its followers to have dogmatic belief in anything that the Buddha taught. The Buddha advised people not to blindly accept what he taught, but research on them for themselves before accepting. For this reason his teachings have remained unaltered and valid for all times and under all circumstances.

Key Words : Buddhism, Women empowerment, Teachings, Science

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism is a nontheistic religion that encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs and practices largely based on teachings attributed to Siddhartha Gautama, commonly known as the Buddha. Buddhism originated in India sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE, from where it spread through much of Asia, where after it declined in India during the middle ages. Two major extant branches of Buddhism are generally recognized by scholars: Theravada (Pali: "The School of the Elders") and Mahayana (Sanskrit: "The Great Vehicle"). Buddhism is the world's fourth-largest religion, with over 500 million followers or 7% of the global population, known as Buddhists. Buddhists believe that human beings have the potential to become free from suffering by practicing meditation and cultivating a lifestyle prescribed by the Buddha. Whether we categorize Buddhism as a religion depends, of course, on our definition of the word religion. The term Buddhism is now used to denote the teaching of the

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Buddha, a historical person who flourished some 25 centuries ago on the Indian subcontinent. This teaching has been described variously as a religion, a philosophy, a psychological system, an ethico-moral code, a socio-economic blue-print, and so on. No doubt all these aspects could be discerned in different parts of the Buddha's teaching, but the teaching is itself something more than all these combined. The term which Buddhists use to designate the teaching is Dhamma or Dharma (www.buddhismtoday.com). According to religionist Van Harvey, we deem a system of belief and practice to be religious if it expresses a dominant interest in certain universal and elemental features of human existence as those features bear on the human desire for liberation and authentic existence (Harvey, 1981). Buddhologist Roger R. Jackson similarly portrays Buddhist meditation as a type of ritual act. While such characterizations are certainly valid for some types of Buddhist meditation, they are profoundly misleading for the practices of meditative quiescence (Samantha) and contemplative insight (vipasayana), which are the two core modes of Buddhist meditative training (Jackson, 1999). The Buddha gave many lectures before his death. His teachings are referred to as the Dharma. Whether the Buddha intended it or not, his teachings became a religion, a religion to which people were prepared to hold allegiance and which has its own ritual, organization, and ways or criteria for deciding what is properly done or what is improperly done. Now that is another kind of Buddhism. If one were to take each of these aspects separately, and try to examine the impact of what he would call Buddhism on modern life, it would certainly be an enormous task. The ologian Langdon Gilkey declares that religion addresses questions concerning the meaning and purpose of life, our ultimate origins and destiny, and the experiences of our inner life. Science, in contrast, seeks to explain objective, public, repeatable data with theories that are logically coherent and experimentally adequate, presenting quantitative predictions that can be tested experimentally (Gilkey, 1985). Buddhism greatly influenced the Indian religion. It gave to Indian people a simple and popular religion. It rejected ritualism, sacrifices and dominance of priestly class. It has also left its permanent mark on Indian religious thought. Buddhism appealed to the masses on account of its simplicity, use of vernacular language in its scriptures and teachings and monastic order. Buddhism left deep impact on the society. It gave serious impetus to democratic spirit and social equality. It opened its doors to women and shudras. Buddhism encouraged abolition of distinctions in society and strengthened the principle of social equality. Buddhism helped in the growth of literature in the popular language of the people (www.historytuition.com). In scientific materialism the boundaries between science and religion dissolve, and a new religion is presented as a substitute for all traditional religions. The sacred object of its reverence, awe, and devotion is not God or spiritual enlightenment but the material universe, which exists transcendently, "outside out heads." In other words, scientific materialism appears to be a modern kind of nature religion, which has innumerable precedents in the preliterate history of humanity (Goodenough, 1998 and Wallace, 2000).

Teachings and beliefs :

The basic doctrines of early Buddhism, which remain common to all Buddhism, include the "four noble truths": existence is suffering; suffering has a cause, namely craving and attachment; there is a cessation of suffering, which is nirvana; and there is a path to the

cessation of suffering, the “eightfold path” of right views, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Buddhism characteristically describes reality in terms of process and relation rather than entity or substance. The Buddha teaches that these four mental faculties, together with the Four Noble Truths, are to be cultivated by all bhikkhus and later all Buddhists through reflecting upon the sentient beings of infinite numbers who are on their way to become a buddha. Yet the altruistic mental faculties are combined with the wisdom developed along with the gradually deepening reflection. This is the guiding principle of all Buddhist practices – the middle way. Through these mindful actions conducted with moderation an ideal Buddhist state of existence come true living in harmony with everything (sentient or non-sentient) in the universe. According to Sanskrit dictionaries (Hirakawa, 1997; Ogiwara, 1979), the words *samnipata*, *samgri*, and *samgama*, all refer to the concept of peace. These words share the root *sam-vii* meaning people do things together, which is also shared by the Sanskrit word referring to war (*samit*). Buddhism, being a religion with a claim of the reality of existence, has well acknowledged causal forces that could constitute the hindrance to a harmonious living on every level of human actions. Buddhist analysis of the causes of violence and conflict is arrayed along three domains: the external, the internal, and the root (Shih Yin-shun, 1980). Buddhologists seem to do is stuff Buddhism into familiar files, such as “religion” or “philosophy,” without attending closely to the ways in which it does not fit our Western categories. Having comfortably classified Buddhism in ways that do not challenge any of their preconceptions about religion, philosophy, or science, they conceive of the great proponents of traditional Buddhism over the ages in their own image: as scholars who spent their time reading other people’s books and writing their own books about other people’s books. While contemporary Buddhologists may be validly regarded as professional scholars of Buddhism, few consider themselves, or are considered by others, as professional contemplatives within the Buddhist tradition. This contrast between scholarly professionalism and contemplative inexperience has introduced a glaring bias into modern academic Buddhist scholarship (Wallace, 1999). A flagrant example of this trend occurs in the writings of religionist Paul Griffiths. In his extensive writings on the nature and goals of Buddhist meditation, Griffiths candidly acknowledges that in terms of his own methodology he does not even begin to address whether or not there actually are or were virtuoso Buddhist practitioners who claim to be able to enter the meditative state called “the attainment of cessation” (*nirodhasama- patti*), which is a primary goal of Buddhist meditation. On the basis of his text-critical analysis of the attainment of this meditative state, he concludes that it is analogous to “some kind of profound cataleptic trance, the kind of condition manifested by some psychotic patients and by long-term coma patients” (Griffiths, 1986).

Women empowerment :

Buddhism has much to offer women, especially psychologically and spiritually. Buddhism has been socially liberating for women, giving women the rights to divorce, remarry, and monastic life, which have translated to considerable social freedom. Empowerment in Buddhism means not simply gaining power and agency, but continually orienting one’s life in the most positive direction. The Buddha, embodying the most fully-realized positive potential

of our humanity a life characterized by profound compassion, courage and wisdom exists as a role model or ideal to inspire this effort. Gautama Buddha was quite aware of the fact that social customs and practices are also responsible for the suffering of the individual especially, women's suffering. That is why he said that a woman's life is full of suffering. When her husband dies, she becomes unhappy. When her husband marries with another lady, she becomes unhappy, when her child dies, she becomes unhappy. Understanding the social reasons behind the suffering that comes to woman's life, the Buddha had insisted on the equality between man and woman and tried to convince the people to behave with women impartially. These thoughts of the Buddha are abundantly reflected in the Pâli literature. Buddhist literature that there is a biological difference between women and men, but they have similar intellectual, mental as well as spiritual capabilities. The Buddhism accepts that every human being, independent of the consideration of sex, gender, class etc. On this basis, Buddhism has advocated the equality between man and women and thus has transcended the gender difference. It treats man and woman at par with each other. His teachings have always been directed towards the removal of sorrows and sufferings in the cycle of human life (Harvey, Brian, Peter, 2007). Ignorance poverty, ill-will and disease cause sorrows and bring sufferings like sickness, depravity, pains and ultimately death through the phases of growth from childhood, to youth and old age. The end of life is death and these phases of life are common to both men as well as women. According to him, the woman had a dignified and an important role to play in the society, and he defined it with great insight, fitting her harmoniously into the social fabric. She was a lovable member of the household, held in place by numerous relationships, and respected above all, as the mother of worthy sons. Gautama Buddha accepted that men and women are equal with regard to their spiritual capacity and their personality development. This in fact he tried to convey to the people. During the Buddha's time, women's position in society was very low. He was criticized by the prevailing establishment when He gave this freedom to women. He moved to allow women to enter the Holy Order was extremely radical for the times. Yet the Buddha allowed to prove them and to show that they too had the capacity like men to attain the highest position in the religious way of life by attaining Arahantahood.

Scientific approach :

According to Bacon, scientific inquiry is a means to understand Nature in order to gain power over it and exploit it for human purposes. This goal, he believed, was divinely sanctioned and was to be accomplished with religious zeal (Bacon, 1994). Several modern Buddhists point out that Buddhism has a "scientific outlook" with regard to morality and religion (Jayatilleke, 1984). The lack of correlation between scientific progress and human flourishing stems in part from the belief that the domains of science and religion do not overlap: science deals with the world of objective facts, while religion is concerned with the world of subjective values (Gould, 1999). Sociobiologist Edward Wilson takes a somewhat more equivocal position regarding the relation between religion and science. He first defines science as the "organized, systematic enterprise that gathers knowledge about the world and condenses the knowledge into testable laws and principles" (Wilson 1998). Most mainstream religious thinkers and many scientists share the view of religion and science as independent and autonomous rather

than conflicting realms, with each discipline having its own domain and methods that can be justified on its own terms. One of the most prominent scientists to promote this view is palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould. In his book *Rock of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* Gould argues that religion and science are logically distinct and fully separate in terms of their styles of inquiry and goals. But, rather than suggesting that they are irrelevant to each other, he emphasizes the need to integrate insights from both in order to build a rich and full view of life (Gould, 1999). Albert Einstein (1879-1955), however, expressed a much deeper insight when he proclaimed, "Science without religion is lame, and religion without science is blind." Buddhism is quite similar to science, which insists on the verification of hard facts. Secondly, Buddhists assert that, like science, Buddhism pays attention to cause and effect: everything, including spiritual experiences, except of course the unconditioned state of liberation (Pali nibbana; Sanskrit nirvana), is subject to the law of causality (Jayatilleke, 1984). In Theravada beings are not unitary substances or souls, but impersonal mental or physical phenomena, which last only for a moment, such that a being is not a substantial, enduring thing, but rather a series of moments, where each succeeding moment is similar to the previous moment, thus giving the false impression of a substance that lasts at least for a certain amount of time. This false impression is only a conventional truth. In reality, each being is not a substance, but an aggregate of material shape, feelings, perceptions, habitual tendencies and consciousness. These five aggregates (Pali khandhas, Sanskrit skandhas) exist only for a moment, and are succeeded by another set of five aggregates at every moment, so that a being is merely a series of similar but momentary aggregates. This is the absolute or ultimate truth. Thus there are two 'truths', conventional and absolute. It should be noted, however, that the external world is real, even if each being is an aggregate existing only for a moment. There is no Supreme Being in Theravada Buddhism. Thus the evolution and dissolution of the universe is not brought about by a Creator or Emanator God (Sheth, 1973). Although both the Theravada and Mahayana conceptions of the cosmos are couched in mythical language, one can find several parallels with the scientific understandings of the universe. In this context, one can find more similarities between science and the Buddhist multi-world or innumerable world systems than with the Buddhist single-world system. For instance, in the multi-world system the first level or the Small World System has been compared with a galaxy with its stars and planets. The Middle World System is similar to groups of galaxies, existing for instance in Coma Berenices. The third tier, viz., the Great World System, corresponds to a Metagalaxy like the Big Dipper, which is said to be the cradle of at least a million galaxies (Davis, 1984). Some even attempt to correlate the Buddhist texts with the shapes of galaxies. The term cakkavala is derived from the Pali word cakka (or Sanskrit cakra) which means a sphere or a wheel. This is said to correspond to the spiral galaxies. The Hwa Yen Sutra, the Chinese version of the original Sanskrit Garland Sutra, also refers to worlds that spin like a wheel and others that look like shining wheels. The sutra speaks of some worlds which are thin, and these are said to be the barred spiral galaxies. Worlds that have the shape of sea shells are easily related with spiral galaxies. On the other hand, Davis seems to stretch our imaginations to incredulity by connecting worlds that are shaped like a flower to intergalactic rings of gas, or by claiming that the mention of a volcano refers either to galaxies that explode, e.g., Quasar 3C273 or Galaxy M87 in Virgo, or to nova and supernova

stars. Similarly, the mention of a lion's mouth is said to allude to a black hole that devours everything into its gravitational jaw. We should be thankful that he does not connect worlds which are square with any heavenly body (Davis, 1984). On the other hand, others compare the Buddhist understanding of a universe that is a series of continuous moments to the Steady State Theory, again a theory that is rejected by many scientists (Kirthisinghe, 1984).

Conclusion :

Buddhism has been described as a very pragmatic religion. It does not indulge in metaphysical speculation about first causes; there is no theology, no worship of a deity or deification of the Buddha. Buddhism takes a very straightforward look at our human condition; nothing is based on wishful thinking, at all. Everything that the Buddha taught was based on his own observation of the way things are. Everything that he taught can be verified by our own observation of the way things are. The core of Buddhism depends upon science, because the Four Noble truths (life is suffering, suffering is caused by craving and aversion, suffering can be overcome and happiness can be attained) can be tested and proven by anyone in fact the Buddha himself asked his followers to test the teaching rather than accept his word as true. Buddhism depends more on understanding than faith.

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