

## Teachings of Lord Buddha

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### No theories

It was on a full moon night in the middle of *Vaishakh* i.e. the middle of May, that a prince was born and his name was Gautama. When he grew up to be a young man, he attained illumination, again on a full moon night in the month of May, and became known as the Buddha, the Awakened One. Then again many years later, when he was an old man, on a full moon night in the month of May, he attained his final *nirvana*. So it is called the thrice-blessed day.

In one of the Buddhist scriptures we learn that *Tathāgata* (that was another name of Buddha) had no theories. If anybody came to him to satisfy his curiosity about theology, he had to go away dissatisfied. Lord Buddha was concerned only with the practice of religion, practice of the way to peace. How to attain peace? How to find the Truth? That was what he was concerned about.

Now, in this, Buddha was not alone. Jesus too had an abhorrence for dogmas and creeds. He taught a new way of life. The Cross is a symbol, not a dogma. How to overcome evil by good, free ourselves from egotism and attain our perfection and completion in God-head was what Jesus was concerned about. Theories, theologies, beliefs, dogmas, creeds developed centuries later. But as far as Christ and Buddha are concerned, I am sure, they would have no use for these. In the present age Sri Ramakrishna used to say in response to intricate philosophical questions: You have

come to a mango orchard. There are ripe mangoes hanging. Why waste your time counting the leaves of the trees? Why not just eat the mangoes and be satisfied?

Sri Ramakrishna had a parable about a dry scholar. The man got into a boat to cross a river, which was in full spate. There were ordinary folks in the boat and he began to talk to them: 'Do you know *Sāmkhya* philosophy?' 'No Sir'. 'Do you know *Nyāya*'? 'No Sir.' 'O, you have not studied any of these systems of thoughts of great philosophers and their philosophies?' 'No Sir, we are ignorant people.' And then, midway, there was a storm and the boat began to rock. Then the people asked him: 'Sir, do you know how to swim.' 'No, no, no, I do not know. Well, goodbye.' He drowned.

Now, Buddha has a similar story. A man was hit by a poisoned arrow. His friends rushed him to a doctor. The doctor was about to draw the arrow out of the wound, but the wounded man stopped him, saying, 'I will not have the arrow drawn out until I know who shot it, whether a woman, or a man, a brahmin, or a vaishya or a shudra, which family he belonged to, whether he was tall or short', and so on. So the main thing in spiritual life is how to find peace. All great religious teachers are concerned to show us the way. And that is religion.

Buddha says in his first sermon in Benaras, 'If you walk according to my teaching you shall even in this present life apprehend the Truth and see It face to face.' When Narendra as a young boy came to Sri Ramakrishna, he asked him: 'Sir, have you

seen God?’ And for the first time in his life the young man heard someone say, ‘Yes, I have, and He can be seen by everybody.’ So that is the fundamental principle of religion. What did Christ teach? Be perfect even as the Father in Heaven is perfect. Ye shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make you free. Now let us see what Buddha teaches. Buddha says, ‘I know the world of Brahman and the path which leadeth unto It; yea, I know It even as one who has entered the Brahman world and has been born within it.’ Then he tells his chief disciple, ‘O Ānanda, be a lamp unto yourself. Betake yourself to no external refuge.’ He affirms that the *bhikkhus*, his disciples, must be anxious to learn. Here is the crux of the matter. One has to be anxious to learn.

Swami Vivekananda defined religion by saying that the thirst for God is religion. Now there is a parable which Sri Ramakrishna attributed to Jesus. The parable is this. A disciple came to Jesus and asked to know the Truth. Jesus says, come along with me. Let us go for a bath in the river. So both of them went to the river. And there, as they were swimming, suddenly, Jesus got hold of this man and held him down under water and did not let go of his hold for a little while. Then he suddenly let him rise to the surface. Jesus then asked him, ‘How did it feel?’ ‘O, I was gasping for a breath of air.’ Then Jesus said, when you feel like that, when you cannot live without God, then God reveals Himself to you. In Vedanta philosophy this state of thirst or yearning is called *mumuksha*—longing for liberation, longing for God. Whenever anybody asked Sri Ramakrishna about the way to know God, his answer would be: yearn for him with a longing heart.

### Preparations

But, of course, as we all know, this yearning does not come all of a sudden. There are certain preparations as it were,

and we have to come to a certain stage of development. First comes curiosity. You go here and there, read scriptures and books of philosophy, and then at last when that search deepens, you come to realize that truth is not to be found anywhere except within one’s own heart, within oneself. Then one begins to have discrimination. What is the Eternal Truth? What is the Reality? When one comes to the understanding that there is one Eternal Truth, then, there comes earnestness and there comes dispassion.

One sees sorrow and suffering everywhere. We find that Lord Buddha based his whole religion upon a psychological fact and that was suffering. You know that Buddha was brought up as a prince. His father built a garden house where all the objects of enjoyment were provided, because, an astrologer had predicted that the moment Gautama came across suffering, he would renounce the world.

One day, Gautama went out to the city to see life for himself. As he had an enquiring mind, the moment he saw an old man tottering, he asked the charioteer what it meant. He was answered that it was old age and that everybody who lived had to go through this stage if he lived long enough. Then suddenly he saw a sick man. ‘What is this?’ he asked. ‘That’s sickness, disease. Body is subject to diseases.’ Then he saw a dead man. ‘Shall I also die?’ ‘Yes.’ As he saw life for what it was, his heart was made up—not only to overcome suffering, disease, death for himself, but also to show the way to all mankind. So he based his whole philosophy, his whole religion upon the psychological fact of a universal experience.

You see, as long as we feel and think that everything is—what you say—hunky-dory, there is, of course, no need for religion. You go to Church, hear some

singing and that's all. As long as you feel you can get something out of this surface life, there is no seeking for something else. But there come moments in life when you see the ephemeral nature of everything. It is not that somebody has to point this out to you. If you just sit quietly and look at things as they are, you will find that everywhere there is change. Flux, flux, flux. You can't, as Buddha says, bid the clouds stay still. They move on. So our life is moving on and on. Don't you see how we try to hold back our youth? how we all try to hold back our loved ones? Oh! Don't think it is pessimism. If you try to ignore these facts, you are like the proverbial hare that tried to put his head in the sand and think that he was safe.

But I must tell you Buddha was not unique on this. Take for instance Jesus. Oftentimes I hear people say that the Oriental religions are all life-negating whereas Christianity is life-affirming. Well, I would say that they understand neither Oriental religions nor Christianity. He who loves this life shall lose it. This life, the surface-life, life on the plane of the senses is not everything. There is another life in everyone of us—one that knows no death, knows no suffering. It is this eternal life that Buddha and Christ, and Sri Ramakrishna speak about. But remember, you cannot eat the cake and have it too. You have to dive deep beyond this surface life. Let me tell you what Jesus says, 'Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.' (John 4:14). In the *Dhammapada* we read: Not in the sky, nor in the depth of the ocean nor in the caves of the mountains, nor in the whole world can man dwell without being overpowered by death. Why don't you seek a light when you are surrounded by darkness? This body is wasted, full of sickness and pain and this heap of corruption breaks to

pieces—life indeed ends in death. Is there any denying this fact?

### The cause of suffering

Now, Buddha asks, what is the cause of suffering? There is, indeed, a cause. And what is that? To quote Buddha—it is ignorance. You see, ignorance is the cause. There is the Truth, there is that Eternal Life within each one of us, but, covered by ignorance, we are holding onto the surface life. So from ignorance there springs attachment to the impressions of the deeds of the past lives.

Here I must point out that Buddhism, like Hinduism or Vedanta, is based upon what is known as the law of *Karma* and rebirth. We do not believe that this is our first birth, for we have existed in the past. We are born with a bundle of impressions of the past lives. From this arises ego-sense. We identify ourselves with those impressions and form our sense of individual identities. We identify the mind with the body. Actually, I am neither the body nor the mind. I am the Spirit, the Truth within—this is what Buddha says.

There is a philosophy in the West which says pleasure is real, pain is not. But you see, it is the same nerve that carries the sensation of pain and that of pleasure. Buddha puts them into the same category. From sense-contact arise feelings and sensations, from sensation springs thirst. From thirst comes attachment, from attachment spring the deeds which cause the rebirth. Again you go on doing the same things over and over again and you are caught up within the wheel of *Karma* and rebirth. Such is the origin of the whole mass of suffering.

If Buddha speaks of suffering and its cause, he also points out how that suffering can be overcome, not after death, but in this very life, this very moment. How? He says,

with Knowledge. Not all knowledge, not ordinary knowledge. He calls it the noble kind of wisdom.

Once, when Buddha was asked, ‘Are you a man?’ He said, ‘No.’ ‘Are you a God?’ ‘No’. ‘Are you an angel?’ ‘No.’ ‘What are you?’ He said: ‘I am the Buddha, the Awakened One.’ We are asleep. We have to be awakened to the Truth. The Truth is so near to everyone of us that to know It is our birthright. Yet, we suffer—for no reason.

### Wake up

That reminds me of something my master taught me. He said: Meditate, meditate, meditate. Then you will find such bliss, such joy within that your heart will go out in sympathy for others, realizing how unnecessarily they suffer. Suffering is unnecessary. There is a fountain of bliss in everyone of you. That’s what Buddha taught us all. That’s what every teacher taught. What Buddha calls the awakening, Jesus calls the birth in Spirit. You have to be born in Spirit. The Upanishads call that *turiya*, the fourth state. Waking, dreaming, dreamless sleep—these are the three states of ignorance. We wake up to the fourth. In the Yoga philosophy it is called *samādhi*—the transcendental consciousness. That’s what *nirvāna* means. Oftentimes this word *nirvāna* is misunderstood. Translated literally, it means cessation. But cessation of what? Cessation of suffering, cessation of ignorance. This state has no relation to anything or any other state. Buddha would not define God. That is why again there is the misunderstanding that Buddha was agnostic. When Buddha was lying in his deathbed there were two disciples near him and one of them asked, ‘Holy Sir! Did I understand you to say that there is Brahman?’ ‘Did I say that?’ Buddha asked. Then another disciple asked: ‘Did I understand you to say that there is no

Brahman?’ He replied, ‘Did I say that?’ You see that even to say that He is, is to limit Him. He is indefinable, inexpressible. As Sri Ramakrishna said, when one attains *samādhi*, then alone comes the knowledge of Brahman. They speak of a Hindu God and a Christian God. This is ignorance. When you have known Him, there is perfect silence. In that realization all thoughts cease. There is no power of speech left by which to express Brahman.

There is a very interesting incident in the life of Sri Ramakrishna. Some of his disciples pressed him to tell them what kind of state that *nirvikalpa samādhi* is. He said, ‘Alright I’ll try’. He came out of that state and tried to express but again he was lost in *samādhi*. He made a few more attempts but everytime he tried, he went back into that state. So who was there to tell whom? Then in his inimitable way he said, ‘I want to tell you but Mother would not let me.’

This noble kind of wisdom is attainable according to Buddha by the noble conduct of life and the noble earnestness of meditation. He emphasised two things: noble conduct of life which includes ethical life that purifies the heart and, then, the earnestness of the quest—where is God, where is the Truth? You see, as you close your eyes, you see darkness, but if you have that earnestness of meditation, this darkness goes away. You see the light of Truth. In the *Gita* Sri Krishna tells Arjuna, ‘With these eyes you cannot see God, but I shall give you divine sight.’ In other words, what is called in mystic language the third eye, the eye of wisdom, opens and bestows understanding. That noble kind of wisdom comes which leads to peace, to higher wisdom, to full enlightenment, to *nirvāna*. Not until through these means—noble conduct of life and earnestness of meditation—the evils of ignorance and misconceptions are washed away, can

spiritual peace be attained. Come disciples, says Lord Buddha, lead a holy life for the extinction of desire. Look, he does not say, believe in me, but says—lead a holy life for the extinction of desires.

### The eight-fold path

The right conduct and the right meditation comprise what is called the ‘eight-fold path’ in Buddhism. The first is the Right View. What is the Right View? Buddha points out that he is not unique in attaining that awakened state. Many others before him had attained Buddhahood, and there will be many Buddhas after him. In other words, as the Vedanta points out, each one of us has to attain that state. The Right View means faith in that ideal, which I must realize in this very life.

There is one thing you have to admit about Buddha, that he was concerned to attain the Truth here and now and not wait for after-life. So he says, that is the Right View. If you have faith in yourself, you can attain it. Then comes Right Aspiration. Yes, that is my ideal. I must attain it. But for what? The Right Aspiration is to want to live in love and harmony with all. Everybody wants to give. Even a beggar wants to give a million dollars. But what have you got to give? Should the blind lead the blind? I want to attain the Truth, not for myself, but for all. Buddha calls it the Right Aspiration.

The third is Right Speech. What is that? It is truthfulness—in word, thought and deed. Hold fast to the truth, like a lamp. That is the inner meaning. In the Upanishad we read: *ātmānam evam jānāti*, know the truth of the *ātman*, give up all vain talk.

Regarding the Right Conduct, Buddha emphasizes one thing: Compassion. Not to hurt any being—in word, thought or deed. You know, if a few individuals follow these

truths, this world will be a heaven. We all want peace in the world, but do nothing to give peace a chance. It is the transformation in the individual lives that would bring about peace and understanding. These are very practical truths and easy to follow if we make up our minds.

Right Livelihood. This means Chastity and non-covetousness. The highest truth is not possible to be found without chastity and freedom from greed. When I preach about chastity, it does not mean that I am against marriage. No religion can be against marriage. But, remember, married life is a sacred institution. It is where we learn self-control. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, after one or two children are born, live like brother and sister. You see that energy conserved turns into spiritual energy. This is something which you will find in almost every religion.

Then Right Effort. It is to free our mind, whenever we choose to, from the thralldom of the senses. You have to train your mind in such a way that you can take your mind away from the subjective world. It’s a practice—in-gathering of the senses—that the ancient Indian psychologist Patanjali calls *pratyāhāra*.

Next step is Right Mindfulness or what you call concentration. And from that comes Right Meditation. Right Meditation is to make our mind and heart run towards the Truth within continuously for a period of time, just as you pour oil from one vessel to another and there is a continuity, no break in the flow. In Yoga psychology it is affirmed that if you can meditate that way—*taila dhārāvāt*—for about twenty-nine minutes you attain *samādhi*. Through practice you come to that stage of development. Then arises the noble kind of wisdom, the *nirvāna*. ■

\* The article is based on a speech delivered at Santa Barbara Vedanta Temple on 5 December, 1957. Swami Prabhavananda was a disciple of Swami Brahmananda.