

# The Godliness of Buddhism

**H. E. Homi J. H. Taleyarkhan**

*Governor of Sikkim/President: SRITOBS.*

“If I cannot convince you, I must not convict you”, was the formula Lord Buddha gave to his followers forbidding them to convert people to his way of religious thinking except by using the weapon of persuasive language. I say, way of religious thinking because Buddha believed in the universality of religion.

Nearly twenty six centuries later, the contemporary saint, Mahatma Gandhi preached the same creed. Never use force. Never indulge in violence. Both believed in the power of good over evil. Both preached and practised simplicity, integrity, unity and equality for all mankind. Both believed in piety and pity, in compassion and consideration for all and in the invincibility of gentleness.

The only difference between Mahatma Gandhi and the Buddha was that while the one firmly believed in the existence of God, the Almighty, the other said, “I know nothing about the mystery of God. But I know something about the misery of man”.

It was the sight of this misery that converted Buddha from a prince to a pauper. Gandhiji had no silver spoon to cast away. He was not born with one in his mouth. He had begun and ended his life in simplicity and humility and had suffered untold humiliations in the service of suffering humanity.

All sorts of legends are woven round the life of Buddha. It is said that when he was born “light flooded the world. The blind suddenly saw. The deaf heard. The maimed ran. The new born infant suddenly spoke and said, This is my last birth. Henceforward, there will be no more births for me”.

The century in which he was born, the Sixth Century B.C., was full of extraordinary intellectual genius borne of discovery for every ancient civilization.

Buddha was born in India. Zoroaster in Persia. Confucius in China. Anaximander and Herclitus in Greece. Zoroaster said, "mankind had a choice between Truth and Evil-a choice each must decide for himself". Indian philosophers had put the same question and their finding made India the centrepiece of religious activity in the world.

The Rigvedas were the most ancient religious scriptures way back in the second millenium B.C. Commentaries on the Rigvedas became world famous as the Upanishads in 700 B.C. They probed right into the heart of things, the nature of the universe and of the human soul.

India's religious frontiers went beyond the sacred scriptures. It founded Jainism, Buddhism and laid the foundations of other religions. India began to be transformed then from a country believing in natural forces into a nation justly famed for its concern with deep rooted religious understanding. To this day that ancient reputation we acquired adheres and has directed our action through so many vicissitudes through which our great country has passed. The Guiding hand has always been there to correct our course wherever and whenever we had strayed.

Lord Buddha was one of those forces. Buddhism was born in our country and spread to various parts of the world, far flung in their spread but never far fetched in their beliefs. Our Upanishads preached, "There is only one God. The belief that all gods, all people and all things are different manifestations of the One Spirit that pervades the Universe, took firm roots".

Buddha never denied the existence of God. He never admitted it. He never disrespected those who had faith in Him. Buddha concerned himself with the suffering of humanity and how to relieve it. That has also been the line of pious thinking and action and sacrifices of all Prophets.

It was succession of sights of such human suffering, a man broken by old age, another suffering from leprosy, a third dead, that changed the course of his life and perhaps one facet of the course of history. His Charioteer Channa told his lord, the Prince then as Buddha was till about the age of 29, "this, my lord, is the way of life and this is the end of life" as they came to the corpse.

It made the young Siddhartha Sakyamuni Gautama, shed his royal robes almost there and then made him go into deep meditation. He left his royal father, the king, his beautiful wife and son and plunged into the lonely woods in search of Truth which he found at the age of 35. He found it under a Bo-tree--the tree of enlightenment, And from then on, he began to preach his new faith in Benaras wandering from place to place like a pauper with a begging bowl.

But he rejected after some years of the practice of severe ascetism which reduced him to almost a skeleton, such practices which according to him did not lead to salvation. He resumed normal but frugal ways of living and spread "the knowledge of life" from place to place, gathering ever increasing number of followers in the wake of his wanderings.

Dying at Kusinagar at the age of eighty, he told his anxious disciples as he approached "the blessed silence of peace", "Do not think because your Teacher is gone, the Word is ended". But not in his wildest dream could even Buddha have known then what turn his Word was destined to take. The great religious teacher who did not admit and did not deny the presence of God, was to become virtually a god unto himself, the god of a new religion.

Buddha himself had never desired to be so considered, never wanted to be deified. Yet he was, like in the case of so many other religious leaders even among the living Sai Baba today has repeatedly said, he is not Bhagwan and his followers should not so address him. Yet out of sheer reverence for him they insist on doing so and he cannot prevent them, however much he says he is merely the interpreter of God.

In the case of Buddha after he left the sadhus creed of superstitions and rituals which divided the people into social castes, ranging from Brahmins to the untouchables, an evil which even today, inspite of all the exhortations and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and his living along with the Harijans, the respectability of the name he gave them, it still painfully persists in our society, he sat struggling in the suspense of doubt and loneliness, when suddenly a great peace descended on him. When he rose at dawn, he was no longer Gautama the sceptic, but Buddha the Enlightened.

He preached his first sermon in Benaras before an audience of five. That became his most enduring sermon. It proclaimed the famed Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path—the Right Understanding, the Right Purpose, the Right Speech, the Right Behaviour, the Right means of livelihood, the Right Effort, the Right Awareness, the Right Meditation which means pondering on Truth till Salvation comes.

He told his followers that in his Search for Truth, he had tried both the extreme of passion — the voluptuary passion of a prince and the self-mortification of the Hermit. He had found that both King and Hermit were wrong. He said that “as rain breaks down upon an ill-thatched hut, so also passion breaks down upon an untrained mind”. And that he had discovered the famous MIDDLE PATH which opens the eye and bestows understanding which leads to peace of mind and to the higher wisdom and finally to full Enlightenment.

After numerous experiences and experiments, he taught his disciples that each living soul was “like a torch whose flame was handed down in turn to another torch and so on through the ages, until at last it melts into the universal flame of immortal life”. Buddha’s counsel was “Do good for its own sake and for the good of your own spiritual peace”.

Shunning the concept of personal immortality which has been eventually thrust on him, he preached that he who subordinates his little personal self to the larger interests of humanity is ready at last to end his long pilgrimage from life to life by attaining Nirvana of eternal rest, “the Heaven of Peace”

Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi both preached tolerance, respect for all creeds, respect for all men of all races and of all creeds. Both taught self-control against self-indulgence and repaying hatred with kindness, keeping forbearance in the forefront. Both showed the power of love in an endeavour to flush the world with love. Both taught the heroism of suffering without inflicting pain and the courage of dying without killing, "the knighthood of hateless chivalry".

In the evening of his life when he returned to his royal home, to his father and his wife, who never lost her faith in him through all the years, Buddha, after they got over the initial shock of seeing their beloved son and husband in a monk's smock and emaciated in appearance and physique, they turned towards his creed, including his son Rahula who also took the begging bowl from his father's hand.

Buddhism passed beyond India's border into Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, Japan and many other countries to become one of the world's great religions which believed in the goodness preached by all other religions. The most outstanding monument of Buddha's life and work is the great Stupa at Sanchi built in the first century A.D. It depicts all his teachings.

There have been so much research on his teachings, so many interpretations given by so many scholars all over the world. There are many Institutes of Tibetology in different parts of the world, of which the one in Sikkim is perhaps the most renowned and famous. After its foundation stone was laid by Dalai Lama, the Institute was inaugurated by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru who was a keen student, scholar and admirer of Buddhism.

The Institute is on the eve of completing twentyfive years on which occasion Mrs. Indira Gandhi, our revered Prime Minister will be coming to Gangtok to inaugurate its Celebrations.

In honour of the occasion, a special commemorative volume is being brought out, containing articles by renowned scholars of Buddhism on the various aspects of Buddha's teachings.

I am sure it will make a distinguished contribution to the vast storehouse of Buddhist thought and literature.