

Buddha and Jaina Dhamma for Peace and Harmony

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In order to bring peace and harmony to the world, first of all we must get rid of the terms like Buddhism and Jainism. We could trace back the “isms” to Max Weber who tried to label the Dhamma as “heterodox Hinduism” after creating “Hinduism”, to pull in the entire Eastern Dhamma to the level of their own revealed “religions”.¹

Max Weber treated Buddhism in the same lines as Jainism, grouping them together into one chapter as the two great heterodoxies. Probably that is why we are here today to discuss Buddhism and Jainism. Weber admitted that “Buddhism diffused to all areas of India; Jainism to considerable portions of India”. But in the very next paragraph he begins, “This was only transitory. Although Buddhism was later completely disappeared from India, it developed into a world religion...” Here he has created two myths, one that it is disappeared from India and the other that Buddhism became a world “Religion”. As Muller and Weber did not understand the Buddha’s teachings, they grouped it under other religions, as the West knew it. The Oxford Dictionary defines Religion as a “particular system of faith and worship” and “human recognition of superhuman controlling power and specially of a personal God or Gods entitled to obedience and worship”. By categorizing Buddhism as a religion, they very conveniently made Buddhism to be absorbed into the new Hinduism.

That is probably why Romila Thapar had to say, “Buddhism was not just another religion. It was the result of a more widespread movement towards change which affected many aspects of life from personal beliefs to social ideas”. (Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas).

We have to read this alongside “What the Buddha Taught” by Walpola Rahula. “Among the founders of religions, the Buddha (if we are permitted to call him the founder of a religion in the popular sense of the term) was the only teacher who did not claim to be other than a human being, pure and simple. Other teachers were either God, or his incarnations in different forms, or inspired by him.” He also said “Man’s position, according to the Buddhism, is supreme. Man is his own master, and there is no higher being or power that sits in judgement over his destiny.”

When Ajhan Buddhadasa explained Buddha Dhamma to the western audience in just four words, “Be Peaceful and Useful”, I believe he summed up the entire philosophy of life in ancient Asia. This definition could apply to all different variations of Buddha and Jain Dhamma as well.

First let us get rid of the concept of “religion” as given to us by the West. In early historic Asia, there could not have been any “religions” as we know them today. There could have been individual beliefs, and also group participations in rites and rituals, but probably with no labels.

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When the post independent India accepted to group all Indian Dhamma under the western label of religion, it probably contributed to further division among the people on India. Article 25: 2 (b) explanatory note has grouped Sikh, Jaina and Buddhism as “religions” which can be identified as a part of the Hindu “religion”. This is the only clause which mentions the words of Buddhism and Jaina. I could not find any reference to Dhamma, let alone Vedic, Buddha or Jaina Dhamma.

To understand the present calamity, we have to go back into deep history. We could start with rereading the Agganna Sutta of the Digha Nikaya.

First the man began to hoard food, and then started to grow his own. The greed for land and for property created more greed and envy. Afterwards they appointed someone to rectify what is right and what is wrong, give warnings to those who need it, give punishment to those who deserve it, and in return, they will give him a share of their rice. So, they went to the fairest, ablest, most likeable, and most intelligent person and appointed him to make judgements and passing out sentences on the reward of a share of rice. The appointed person thus agreed and the people bestowed upon him the title : ‘Maha-Sammata’ meaning: The People’s Choice. Then, they bestowed the second title also: ‘Khattiya’ meaning the ‘Lord of the Rice Field’, and finally the third title: ‘Raja’ which means ‘Who gladdens people with Dhamma (or Truth)’. This hierarchy was created by the people’s wish and need, based on the Dhamma. The Buddha stated again that Dhamma is indeed the best of all things.

If human beings had not developed Thanha, there would not have been a need to appoint a Mahasammata, which later evolved into Raja. In the entire history of mankind, there would never have been a Raja “who gladdened the people with Dhamma”. Not even Ashoka, because we do not have any record of the people under his rule had been truly happy. We have only his own words for that. It is because the Rajas failed to lead the people into Dhamma that great human beings like Buddha and Mahavira had to try their best to bring the human beings back to the days before they wanted to possess material things.

Perhaps the decline of humanity accelerated with the evolution of the Mahasammata into a Raja, When one person holds both power and wealth, it automatically makes that person more greedier than the others. Their greed would lead to have more and more portions from other people, which developed into state taxes. Farmers had to produce more and more to pay taxes, and amongst everything, greediness and enviousness began to grow, leading to violence.

This situation has created a need for a Mahavira and then a Buddha, in order to bring sanity back to humanity, to convert man again into a more humane being.

But they had to depend on other human beings to take their message and their teachings across to all mankind. With their parinivarna, the teachings were taken over by those who had not let go of their Thanha, and they were aided and abetted by the rulers, who became greedier and greedier, the wealthier they became.

Perhaps Ashoka realized this deterioration continuing, despite the teachings of the two great men. and the threat not only to humanity, but to all life on Mother Earth, and that could have motivated him to try to instill Dhamma, once again among the mankind. But his attempt had been sabotaged by his

ministers and some of the Shramana of various schools of thought and the Brahmana. That is what happened to Chandragupta himself and in the end, he left all his powers and wealth in the last days of his life as a mendicant. He is said to have followed Jaina Dhamma. But Chandragupta and Ashoka could not shed their greed, or let go of their wealth and power. Chandragupta did not set his people free, or distributed his wealth among all countrymen, he just handed them over to Bindusara. Ashoka had never stated anywhere that he had reduced taxes, or freed his captives, though he claimed he regretted capturing 150,000 Kalinga people as slaves. Perhaps Chandragupta and Ashoka never understood Jaina or Buddha Dhamma.

The rites and rituals, and the intentional and unintentional interpretations of the words of Buddha and Mahavira has been the cause of immense confusion among people. These interpretations, the temples and other “sacred” symbols and monuments erected, had prevented man from seeing the true Dhamma. The Buddha is claimed to have said that the one who sees the Dhamma sees the Buddha. However we cannot see the Dhamma, and thus we cannot see the Buddha (or Mahavira) today because of the statues, temples and thousands of written material on Dhamma. We are drowned in the literature.

Perhaps, Buddha and Mahavira would have realised the danger of committing their words to writing, which could have limited the vision into the few words used to record them. The written word could be misinterpreted, mistranslated, and even distorted, and unlike with the oral transmission, written word would be considered as absolute truth by the reader, never to be questioned. From the time, the teaching was converted into writing, we began to hold the written word as sacred, and began to worship the “sacred” books, in blind faith, without trying to understand what was written.

Another reason for not committing anything to writing may have been because they had a very highly sophisticated orality and people were not dependent on writing, as we do now, not only for Dhamma, but even for literature. Their power of memory would also have been greater, then.

A very good example of the failure of writing is the Ashokan inscriptions. We are still unable to understand some of what has been written, and they also show how discrepancies could creep into records, when they are copied.

Even though we read all the literature on the Dhamma, and many of us claim that we understand what is written, among all mankind on Mother Earth, most of us are blinded by religious illiteracy. We are illiterate, when it comes to Dhamma, because we are reading so-called religious literature written by many who themselves were Dhamma illiterate. If all those who wrote had really understood the Dhamma, they would have become enlightened, become Arhath.

We cannot believe that Buddha and Mahavira were illiterate, or that there was no script in their times. If there had been no script then, it would have been impossible for Asoka to develop a script spontaneously for his inscriptions.

Buddha or Mahavira may or may not have been illiterate, if by that term we mean they did not know to read and write. There is doubt if even Ashoka, who is said to have put up so many edicts and

inscription all over India, was literate. That is because of the many discrepancies, found in the edicts, which means that either the king or his mahamatyas had not bothered to read them or were unable to read them.

Buddha's or Mahavira's literacy is not important. Probably they did not bother to have their sermons written down or recorded in anyway, because they saw the danger of such writings after their parinirvana. That is why a highly reputed Indian academic translated from the Culcutta-Bairat Ashokan inscription "*budhena bhāsīte sarve subhāsīte*" as "utterances of the Buddha are gospel truth." That is why a highly respected Buddhist monk of the last century talked about Buddhist missionaries".

Just because Ashoka stated that the words of the Buddha were *subhasite*, it does not make Ashoka a Buddhist, or that he had renounced Jainism. Many Buddhist scholars have tried, ever since Princep translated the Ashoka Edicts, to state that Ashoka was converted to Buddhism, there could never have been any concept of "conversion" at the time in ancient India. To convert from one "religion" to another, a person has to renounce his faith and accept another as his "religion". Such a concept would have come to India only with the entry of a "revealed" religion, Islam, and the misguided belief of the invading Muslim rulers, that there was the True Faith, and all others were heretics. Here again, it is the illiteracy or the ignorance of their own faith which would have led the Muslim invaders to compel the vanquished to renounce their faith and embrace Islam.

Today most of us visit Buddhist or Jain temples because of the architectural and artistic attractions. Prof. Nasim Khan studies the Buddhist sculpture and art of Gandhara. It is not the Buddha Dhamma that interests him. When Jose Pereira or Lisa Owen writes about the Jain caves at Ellora, the Jain Dhamma is not what interested them. We could say the same thing about the Ajanta paintings, where we just walk through the caves looking at the paintings. When we visit Ranakpur temple in Rajasthan, we are interested in just looking at the 1444 pillars and the carvings on every inch of marble in the temple. But we visit the temple in the same way that on the same Rajasthan visit, we would have gone to the Shrinathji temple in Nathdwara, Sufi Dargah at Ajmer or the City Palace in Udaipur. Many of us do not even bother to question at Ranakpur, why we have to remove not only our hats and shoes, but even our belts, which are made of leather.

Ellora is a very good example of a multi-religious space of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain caves, where unfortunately studies had been made of the Hindu or Buddhist caves, while the Jain caves have been mostly ignored, and there is very little study of the entire cave complex and the possibility that the work on the caves would have crossed religious boundaries. The work on the Ellora caves would have progressed simultaneously by the followers of Buddha and Mahavira and Shiva.²

There is no record anywhere that those who followed Buddha or Mahavira tried to convert anyone by force or fraud, if not by conviction. In order to be converted, Ashoka would have renounced whatever he believed in, Vedic, Jain or Ajivika faiths.

Though Religion has been, and still is a burden for many people, Dhamma could never be a burden. The mental burden is when we have to obey and follow the laws and regulations laid down by religious organizations. Most of such rules may not have been laid down by the religious leaders but by the priestly institutions over the ages.

We cannot compare what is today accepted as Jainism with the Buddha Damma. Jainism survived because it was adopted by the merchant class. The total Ahimsa concept did not allow those who followed Jain Mahavira's teaching to pursue agriculture, because it caused destruction of life. So they turned to trade to avoid such conflict. Today it is mostly the business community who follow Jain teaching. Yet, no one can really succeed in business, as a true Jain or a true Buddhist, because man needs his thanha, to be able to earn high profits. In our villages we used to distinguish between earning and rightful earnings. "*hambakirima*" and *harihambakirima*".

Many people accept the presence of Jains in India, while believing that Buddhism has disappeared. A few years ago a group of academics from Sri Lanka visited India to make a study about how and why Buddhism disappeared from India. So far I am not aware of any publication of their findings and interpretations. My personal experience, having visited India at least five or six times a year over the past twenty years, has convinced me that there are more people in India who are true followers of Buddha Damma, than I find in Sri Lanka. Buddha Damma never disappeared from India and will never disappear, even if it disappears from Sri Lanka. It is true that Buddhism as we know it today may not be found to a great extent in India, except for Dr Ambedkar's revival, which was more a social movement, using Buddha's teachings to narrow the caste conflict in India. But it is the Buddha Dhamma which is found among the Indian people.

Buddha Dhamma has been known and practised from the time of the Buddha and will continue to be of religious importance in India, even if they did not have the neo-Buddhist revival by Dr Ambedkar. Buddhism has only been absorbed to some extent into the greater Indian popular religion which is now known as Hinduism, the same way that in Sri Lanka, the other Indian religions were absorbed into the popular religion known and accepted as Sinhala Buddhism.

Historian Romila Thapar once suggested that "a fundamental sanity in Indian Civilization has been due to an absence of Satan."³ . But unfortunately today Mara has crept in, in the guise of a Satan, filling our minds with evil thoughts and hatred. The situation became worse when Mammon crept into the image of Kuvera, making us all denounce everything and embrace Mammon only, as our true god, the god of ill-gotten wealth, or filthy lucre.

"As the most creative social philosopher in our history, Buddha has symbolized an alternative of possibilities of organizing society, an alternative to the hierarchical and inegalitarian principles of Brahminism", wrote Prof. Uma Chakravarti, commenting on Kancha Ilaiah's book, "God as Political Philosopher, Buddha's Challenge to Brahmanism".

Kancha Ilaiah in his book has tried to study Gautama Buddha as a political thinker, and Buddhism as a school that emerged to challenge contemporary Hindu society and its hegemonic ideology of Brahmanism. He also claims that Buddha was the forerunner of all political thinkers, in the East and West, pre dating Manu, Kautilya, even Confucius, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Looking at the issue from his viewpoint, there is never a question of Buddhism as a religion disappearing from any country.

Many writers and poets in Bhutan write about the evils of democracy which divides people. More than democracy, today religion divides people, when fanatics take over religious organizations. A major reason for conflicts arising from religions is by attempts at conversion, setting up more and more religious spaces, buildings and statues, festivals and extremist movements. To follow a true

Dhamma, there is no need of any of these. Once we realize this, there would not be any religious conflicts.

We have to talk about religious tolerance today, which is most unfortunate. Those who were hungry for power and wealth began to create conflicts. Religious conflicts, are the result of the intolerance bred by man's psychological insecurity and his fanatical attachment to the symbols of his religion. This fanaticism he mistakes for the religion itself, and which, because they are exclusive to his own religious culture, he looks upon as superior.

Buddha Dhamma survived for nearly 2500 years without a flag. But an American, with his western Christian mindset managed to convince Sri Lankan Buddhists that for the revival of Buddhism we needed a flag, and thus the Buddhist flag was created, and now accepted the world over. A flag is a symbol of violence, of conflict and murder. It was used to identify the friend from the enemy in the battle field.

Jains also have a flag. I have not been able to trace its origin, and a true Jain should be the last person on earth to carry a flag into war.

"I believe in acceptance. not tolerance. Toleration means that I think you are wrong and I am just allowing you to live. I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all. Gautam Sen quotes Swami Vivekananda.⁴

By bringing back the concept of Dharma, as Vedic Dharma, Buddha Dhamma, Jain Dharma and even Christhu Dharma and Sufi Dharma, we can all relate to each other better. This will enable us not just to "tolerate" other religions, but to accept and respect all of them. Once we begin to talk of Dharma instead of religions, we can bring back even Asoka Dharma to the whole world. One advantage of considering Asoka Dharma is that it could be accepted without getting involved with any religion.

One of the most important and frequently used words in the Ashokan edicts is Dhamma, which the scholars have interpreted in different ways over the centuries. He does not mention Buddha Dhamma, or the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. Nor does he mention the Jain Ratnatraya (Triple Gem), nor the Vedic concept of Sanatana Dharma. This is a topic which needs to be discussed in a separate forum.

The Kandahar Greek inscription uses the term Eusebeia or "piety" instead of Dhamma. If that was Ashoka's concept of Dhamma, then he is not referring to Buddha Dhamma or, for that matter, any other particular Dhamma.

It is such unity that can lead to true human development, spiritually first and materially next. Asoka Dharma can be followed by every human being, irrespective of their race, creed, ethnicity, social state, or caste. We could abandon the shackles of secularism and sectarianism. We need not make any special efforts to bring back the well-being of not only humanity, but of all life on earth. The practice of true Dharma, of any faith, will lead to all humans to show loving kindness towards all. This would lead to compassion, not only in words and deeds, but even in consumption. Such actions would lead to the optimal utilization of natural and man-made resources, leading to fair and equal distribution and sharing of such resources. That will also lead to narrowing the inequality we find in the society today.

Let us try to convince all human beings of all faiths, that our Dhamma, Buddhist, Jain or Hindu, is a universal truth, which can be accepted by all without denying or even compromising their own faith and practice.

Footnotes

¹ Weber, Max. Religion of India the Sociology of Hindusim and Buddhism. 1958

² Owen, Lisa, Carving Devotion in the Jain Caves at Ellora. Brill. 2012 p.7

³ Romila Thapar, Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300, (Oxford University Press, 2000), xvii