

Contextual understanding of Buddhist texts is essential for a fuller appreciation



Kindness and Compassion as a means to Nirvana

An Interview with
Professor Richard Gombrich
By A Rangarajan

Buddhism has come to hold a universal appeal as a religion of peace and compassion. If the message of liberation was central to Buddha's discourse, an equally significant hallmark of Buddhism has been the ethical frame work it set out for the basis of social equity. With extensive following in the countries of the Far East and a resurgent following now in India, it was the religion of the famed Silk Route. In West today there is renewed reflection on the Buddha teachings. While the enduring nature of the message is acknowledged clearly, the conditions of genesis of Buddhism are less appreciated and for the historian of ideas this is vital for a richer understanding of Buddhist thought. Perhaps such a study would seek to establish that not only was the Buddha spiritually awakened, helping others in their suffering, but that he was one of the foremost philosophers and rational thinkers the world has ever known.

This has been the subject of nearly a life-time's research by Professor Richard Gombrich. Professor Gombrich is a Pali and Sanskrit scholar and has taught at the Oxford University for over three decades. He currently heads the Oxford Centre of Buddhist studies and has had the privilege of delivering the first Buddha Jayanti Lecture organised by the Indian Council of Philosophical Research in New Delhi last September. Drawing from his research on Buddhist canonical texts and philological studies he has published extensively on how Buddha was clearly responding to the established ideas of his time and that, at times, Buddha was even responding to specific passages from the Upanisads. Professor Gombrich goes on to admirably argue in his recent book, 'What the Buddha thought', that The Buddha not only built on some of the tenets central to the Upanisadic worldview but even used them as metaphors to some-times to bring them to mean just the opposite! Karma by definition a term used to denote action, or ritual action, was interpreted by the Buddha to mean Intention! By positing Karma as intention he disengaged ethics from status and circumstance and made the field level for moral goodness, Gombrich points out.

Q1. Professor Gombrich, while every religion has two defining elements, namely the contextual and universal, in the case of Buddhism – the universal has tended to overshadow the contextual and your work has centred around the conditional genesis of Buddhism. Would you please trace out the major contextual premises here, for us?

It is a large question and I shall try and answer it in a nutshell. One has to remember that the Buddha lived around the 5th Century BC in the later Vedic age. The Early Upanisads like the Brhadaranyaka and Chandogya spoke of an essence with in every human which was in fact an aspect of the essence of the world, some kind of a spark of a universal fire. This essence with the ultimate characteristics of existence, consciousness and bliss was called the Atman and if we realise this, upon death, this essence merges back into the universal essence. Buddha responded to this by saying that how much ever he looked into himself or the world he could not see any evidence of such an essence nor could he experience it. He could experience his body, his feelings, his consciousness, his perceptions, his volitions but not such an essence. Whether then such an essence existed or not it was not recognisable and was therefore not interesting when it came to trying to understand ourselves or the world. Buddha went on to say as everything changes, he saw no unchanging essence in the world. So the anti-essentialism discourse of the doctrine of Anatta (no soul or no self) formulated by Buddha has to be seen in this contextual framework. The three hallmarks of phenomenal existence or ti-lakkhana according to Buddha are impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, absence of self. Things are impermanent, i.e., ever changing and by that token they are not satisfactory and by that token they cannot be atman. He undoes with reasoning the ultimate characteristics envisioned in the Upanisadic world view cited earlier.

Q2. If this was the intellectual frame work that conditioned the genesis of Buddhism, how would you describe the social history and material conditions of ancient North East India that saw this happen?

A great historian like DD Kosambi has described these material conditions well. We know that during the time of Gotama Buddha, there was large surplus from agricultural production from adoption of improved hydrological systems. This surplus led to plenty of trade. Monetisation, use of money, along with urbanisation had given rise to great mobility for the individual and to a large extent an individual could make choices that mattered to one's destiny. Even political power did not rest with kings but a certain oligarchy was in charge in Buddha's time. So a considerable section of the population had a sense of freedom from both oppressive political structures and from the hierarchies of a stratified society. Trade and contact with faraway peoples had widened the horizons of understanding. A Sutta from Majjhima Nikaya texts records Buddha saying that 'you know out there in the North West a master can become a servant and a servant a master'. Buddha had clearly seen that hereditary classes, like the caste system, were only a human convention. And he went on to teach that as individuals people are responsible to themselves for being morally good. By rejecting the status or gender dependent predisposition for rituals aimed at accumulating merit, he had established a universal moral and ethical frame-work for a spiritual life which resonated with the recognisable social equity of the time. Sadly these material conditions did not last for long and in all of human history these conditions were actually rare and they have been somewhat replicated in the richer West in modern times.

Q3. You have written and published from your research of Pali and Sanskrit Texts that Buddha actually pointed to Kindness and Compassion as a path to Nirvana. Could you elaborate and show in the process specific correlation between texts?

To explain this I would actually start at the Brahadaranyaka Upanishad, Book 6, where the Five Fire Doctrine gives an account of how people fare at death, depending on how they had lived their lives. People who had led spiritually enlightened lives, the doctrine states, pass up through the flame of the funeral pyre through a series of stages and then go to a place beyond the sun to join Brahman, never to be reborn again. This actually is an account of salvation based on a certain metaphysical idea of structure of the world. Going to Brahman actually does not indicate a place but indicates the going back to the essence of the world. Now Buddha in a text called the Tevijja Sutta, part of Digha Nikaya, gave an account of what he understood by dwelling with Brahma or Brahma –Vihara. And according to him this does not take place through a salvific gnosis or understanding of metaphysics, but through an ethical transformation. Buddha substituted ethics for metaphysics. He said that you should meditate in such a way that you break down the boundaries between yourself and others. And just as you feel for yourself, kindness, compassion and sympathy so should you feel it for all other beings giving up selfish egoistic existence. In other words expand your sense of self to include all beings through benevolent thoughts and love. So here Buddha is actually taking an Upanisadic idea turns it to a metaphor and uses it to mean Nirvana. In order to fully appreciate the Tevijja Sutta the context of the Upanisad is essential. This would have helped Buddha's audience as they would have been on familiar turf while receiving new ideas. This was a special skill of Buddha. There can be a longer discussion on how in these boundless states of Brahma –Vihara ,from kindness to compassion, which the Buddha states that when fully developed finite Karma or Pamana –Katam in Pali, comes to an end- alluding again to freedom from rebirth. This can be seen as one of the paths to Nirvana others being insight, self control etc.

Q4. Why does one see this dichotomy between the practicing Buddhists and the world of academics? The Brahma-Vihara in Tevijja Sutta has a completely different interpretation in the Theravadin tradition.

Yes, the passage has been interpreted to mean that the monk is literally reborn in Brahma's company. I think the exegetes resorted to homogenisation of Buddha's original message, irrespective of the context. And the Theravadin tradition of excess literalism of ascribing technical significance to simple usages and the subsequent commentaries losing touch with historic context and lack of knowledge of the Upanishads are in a way responsible for this. If we overcome these we can have a richer and fuller understanding and even appreciation of the texts.