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# The Significance of Vesak

Vesak is traditionally associated with the birth, enlightenment and Parinibbāna of the Buddha, who renounced a life of luxury to solve the riddle of the universe and bring happiness to mankind as well as to other beings. As in the case of other religious teachers of antiquity, his birth is enshrouded in myth and legend, the later accounts found in the *Lalitavistara*, for instance, containing descriptions of more miraculous happenings than in the earliest accounts in the Pali Canon. As Buddhists, who have to believe only in things as they are, and therefore in verifiable historical truths, we are not obliged to believe in all these myths and legends. The truths of Buddhism stand or fall to the extent to which the Dhamma contains statements which can be verified as true and the veracity of Buddhism, therefore, does not depend on the historical accuracy of legendary beliefs about the birth or death of the Buddha. Besides, the Buddha encouraged self-criticism as well as a critical examination of his own life on the part of his disciples. Even with regard to matters of doctrine or discipline, textual criticism was encouraged. For instance, a monk who claimed to have heard something from the Buddha himself was asked to examine its authenticity in the light of the Sutta and Vinaya, (a collection of texts regarding doctrinal and disciplinary matters made during the time of the Buddha himself), since his personal recollections and interpretations may not be altogether trustworthy.

## Historical Facts

This does not mean that we need to dismiss all the statements associated with the birth, life and demise of the Buddha as mythical or legendary. Some of us may feel that if we were closer in time to the Buddha we would have had a better opportunity of apprehending the historical facts about him. But in a way we are better placed today for we can study the historical development and expansion of Buddhism and also compare the life of the Buddha and contrast it with that of other great religious teachers and philosophers of mankind. Some of the legends may have a kernel of historical truth. Human imagination seems to have worked in a very similar way with regard to some of the heroes of history. At least a hundred years after the death of the Buddha we find in the *Mahāvastu* the statement that “the Buddha’s body was immaculately conceived” (*na ca maithuna-sambhūtaṃ sugatasya samucchritaṃ*) or, in other words, that the Buddha had a virgin birth, but if we trace the origin of this idea to the Pali Canonical texts, we find it stated that the mother of the Buddha had no thoughts of sex after the Buddha-child was conceived, which may quite possibly be historically true.

Some of the claims are certainly historically significant. Everyone would admit today that the Buddha was the first religious teacher in history with a universal message for all mankind and that he was the founder of the concept of a world-religion. Asita’s prophecy that the Buddha was “born for the good and happiness of the human world” (*manussa-loke hita-sukhatāya jāto*) may be seen today in all probability to be true although at the time that it found its way into the text, it was a mere prophecy. It was also a historical fact that the birth of the Buddha was marked by a spiritual awakening of the whole human race. In Greece, Pythagoras conceives of philosophy as a way of life and establishes a brotherhood. The prophet Isaiah in Israel dreams of the brotherhood of man and an era of universal peace. In Persia, Zoroaster, who conceives of the world as a battleground of the forces of good and evil, is convinced of the eventual victory of good over evil. In China, we find Confucius preaching a new ethic of human relationships and Lao Tse speaks of the necessity of living in conformity with eternal principles and values. In India itself from about 800 B.C., there was a persistent quest for truth, light and immortality:

From the unreal lead me to the real!  
From darkness lead me to light!  
From death lead me to immortality!

(Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad, I, 3. 28)

It is in answer to this quest that the Buddha declares: “Open for them are the doors to immortality” (*aparuta amatassa dvāra*). So when the Prophet Isaiah contemporaneously says that a people who walked in darkness have seen a great light and speaks of a child who shall be called the Wonderful, the Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father and the Prince of Peace, someone has only to point out that the Buddha claimed or it was claimed of the Buddha that he was the Wonderful Person (*acchariya-puggala*), the Counsellor of gods and men (*sattha-devamanussānaṃ*), the God among gods (*brahmātibrahmā*), the Everlasting Father (*adhipita*) and the Prince of Peace (*santirāja*). Similarly, the Buddhists of China have seen in a text attributed to Confucius a prophetic utterance alluding to the Buddha, which reads: “Among the people of the West there is a Sage. He does not speak and is yet spontaneously believed, he does not (consciously) convert people and yet (his doctrine) is spontaneously realised. How vast he is!” Are these texts interpolations or do they support the historical veracity of the Buddhist legend that the world at this time was eagerly awaiting the birth of an Enlightened One.

## Last Days

Let us now turn to the last days of the Buddha on earth, as reported in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta. Here again we find fact with an occasional admixture of legend. Here again, it is difficult at times to distinguish the hard core of fact from legend. The Buddha, it is said, was transfigured just prior to his death. His robes, it is said, were aglow when touching the body. Is this fact or fiction? We do not know. But there are a number of significant statements about the Dhamma whose historicity is self-authenticated. It is said that the Buddha did not want to pass away until he had brought into existence a set of monks who were learned in the Dhamma, had realised its fruits and were competent to deal with any criticisms levelled against it.

When the sal flowers from the twin sal-trees, under which he lay, wafted over his body, it appeared as though nature was paying him homage. Today we Buddhists, worship the Buddha by offering flowers before his image. But the Buddha says that one does not really pay homage to the Transcendent One by such offerings. It is the disciple whether he be man or woman, who follows in the footsteps of the Dhamma and lives in accordance with it who truly reveres and pays the highest homage to the Transcendent One. When Ānanda is worried as to how the funeral rites should be performed, the Buddha asks him not to worry about these rituals but to “strive hard to attain the good goal” (*sadatta ghatatha*); for Ānanda had not as yet become an Arahant.

Most instructive is the Buddha’s last sermon, which was to Subhadda, the wandering ascetic. The question he asked was very interesting: Did all the six outstanding teachers who were contemporaries of the Buddha understand the truth? Or is it the case that only some understood or none? In the order in which they are mentioned, there was Pūraṇa Kassapa, who was an amoralist because he thought that everything was strictly determined by natural causes, Makkhali Gosāla who was a Theist who believed that everything happened in accordance with God’s will, Ajita Kesakambalī the materialist who denied survival, moral values and the good life, Pakudha Kaccāyana the categorialist who tried to explain the world in terms of discrete categories, Sañjaya Bellatṭhiputta the agnostic Sceptic or Positivist who held that moral and religious propositions were unverifiable and Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta who was a relativist and an eclectic. The significance of the question comes to this: Are amoralism, theism, materialism,

categorialism, agnosticism and eclecticism all true? Or is none true? Or are one or some of these theories true?

## The True Religion

Elsewhere, in the *Sandaka Sutta*, there is a clear-cut answer to this question. There Ānanda says that in the opinion of the Buddha there are four false religions in the world and four religions which are unsatisfactory though not necessarily totally false, while Buddhism is distinguished from all of them. The word for religion here is used in a wide sense as in modern usage to denote theistic and non-theistic religions as well as pseudo-religions or religion-surrogates, i.e. substitutes for religion such as, say, marxism, existentialism, humanism, etc. The four false religions or philosophies inculcating a way of life are first, materialism which denies survival, secondly, amoralism which denies good and evil, thirdly, any religion which asserts that man is miraculously saved or doomed and, lastly, theistic evolutionism which holds that everything is preordained and everyone is destined to attain eventual salvation.

The four unsatisfactory religions in some sense uphold survival, moral values, moral recompense as well as a relative freedom of the will. They are, first, any religion that claims that its teacher was omniscient all the time and knows the entirety of the future as well; second, any religion based on revelation, since revelations contradicted each other and were unreliable; third, any religion based on mere reasoning and speculation, since the reasoning may be unsound and the conclusions false; and fourth, a pragmatic religion based on purely sceptical foundations, which is, therefore, uncertain. On the other hand, Buddhism is to be distinguished from all of them by virtue of the fact that it was realistic and verifiable. Its truths have been verified by the Buddha and his disciples and open to verification (*ehipassika*) by anyone who wishes to do so.

The answer to Subhadda's question, however, is different. There is no examination of the relative claims of materialism, theism, scepticism etc. Instead the Buddha says, leave aside the question as to whether these several religions and philosophies are all true, all false or that some are true. In whatever religion the Noble Eightfold Path is not found, in that religion one would not get the first, second, third or fourth saints and in whatever religion the Noble Eightfold Path is found, in that religion one would get the first, second, third and fourth saints. Finally, there is a very significant remark: "If these monks lead the right kind of life, the world would never be devoid of Arahants" (*ime ca bhikkhū sammā vihareyyuṃ. asuñño loko arahantehi assa*).

The Buddhist view is that any religion is true only to the extent to which it contains aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path. Let us take one of the factors of the Path—the necessity for cultivating right aspirations instead of wrong aspirations. Right aspirations consist in the cultivation of thoughts free from lust and sensuous craving, and the cultivation of creative and compassionate thoughts. Wrong aspirations consist of the cultivation of lustful thoughts and sensuous craving as well as the cultivation of destructive and malevolent thoughts. Now if any religion asserts that one may indulge in lustful, destructive and malevolent thoughts and yet be saved if one professes faith in the creed, then such a religion, according to the Buddha, is not to be trusted. It is the same with each of the other factors of the path. The net result is that there is no salvation outside the Noble Eightfold Path. It is the one and only way for the salvation of beings and the overcoming of suffering.

## First Saint (*Sotāpanna*)

What kind of person is the 'first saint' spoken of here? It is none other than the person who attains the stream of spiritual development (*sotāpanna*) as a result of which his eventual salvation is assured and he does not fall into an existence below that of a human being. Such a person, it is said, sheds three fetters on attaining his spiritual insight. They are (i) the fetter of believing in a substantial ego somehow related to aspects or the whole of one's psycho-physical personality (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*), (ii) the fetter of doubting the veracity and validity of the Dhamma (*vicikicchā*) and (iii) the fetter of clinging to the external forms of religion (*sīlabbataparāmāsa*). The belief in an ego satisfies a deep-seated craving in us—the craving of our egoistic impulses (*bhavataṇhā*). Misleading implications of language tend to make us believe that there is an 'I' and a 'me' (which is unchanging) when in fact there is only a constantly changing psycho-physical process. We certainly exercise a certain degree of control over ourselves, which makes us believe that there is an 'I' which controls but such control is only an aspect of the conative functions of our conditioned psycho-physical process. A dispassionate analysis would ultimately expose the hollowness of this belief. Shedding our belief in such an ego does not however mean that we get rid of conceit (*māna*) altogether for the 'conceited' view 'I shall try to attain the goal,' it is said, is necessary to spur us on up to a point. He gets rid of this 'conceit' (*māna*) only in a later stage of his spiritual evolution. Doubt has to be got rid of in Buddhism not by blind belief but by critical inquiry and by living the Dhamma. Such inquiry and the personal experience of verifying aspects of the Dhamma gives us the inner conviction that we are treading on the right path. Overcoming such doubt through conviction does not, again, mean that we have totally got rid of ignorance (*avijjā*), which we can do only at a later stage in our spiritual evolution. Religion, likewise, becomes for such a person not a matter of conforming to external ritual and forms of worship, not a form of obsessional neurosis (to use Freudian terminology) but a matter of day-to-day living of the Dhamma. It is such a person who is said to have entered the stream of spiritual development, a state which is within the capacity of any of us to attain.

When we ponder over these admonitions of the Buddha in his last days on earth, we see how far the modern Theravada tradition in Ceylon has strayed from the true path of the Dhamma. Are we not preserving the Dhamma in its pristine purity only in the books when we try to rationalise our belief in caste, for instance, with the help of opinions which go contrary to the teachings of the Buddha? Are we not rationalising our disinclination to live the Dhamma by fostering false beliefs that Arahantship is not possible today, when this is contrary to the assertions of the Buddha himself?

## Enlightenment

If we turn from the birth and the last days of the Buddha to his enlightenment, it strikes us that it was not a revelation from above but an illumination from within. Part of the realisation was of the nature of causal laws operative in nature and in us.

When we come to the first sermon, we are again confronted with the Noble Eightfold Path as the right path leading to emancipation, happiness and realisation. It is the straight and narrow road between indulgence of our desires and ascetic deprivation. The most obvious way to happiness appears to be in the gratification of desires, but unfortunately there is a law of diminishing returns which operates here. Gratification gives temporary satisfaction but continued gratification gives less and less of it. Besides, we become slaves of our passions and lose our freedom and self-control while our minds become unclear and confused. Ascetic

deprivation on the other hand results in repression and self-inflicted suffering. It substitutes one kind of suffering for another. The way out or the way to transcend suffering is by a watchful self-control exercised by a person guided by the Noble Eightfold Path.

Another significant fact about the first sermon is the claim of the Buddha that it was to set up the kingdom or rule of righteousness (*dhammacakkam pavattetum*), which shall in the fullness of time be established on earth and neither Brahmā (God) nor Māra, (Satan) nor anyone else in the world could prevent this. In spite of many reverses, truth and justice shall win in the end. As one of the Upaniṣads puts it “truth alone shall conquer and never untruth” (*satyam eva jayate nāṅṛtam*).

It is not possible to measure the enlightenment of the Buddha. As he said in the Siṃsapā forest taking a few leaves into his hand saying what he knew but did not teach us was like the leaves in the forest while what he taught amounted to the leaves in his hand. What he taught was only what pertained to man’s emancipation, happiness and understanding.

Since the Buddha’s ministry was spread over forty-five years, this teaching in itself is vast as is evident from the Buddhist scriptures. If we take its essence we can see the immense worth of the Buddha’s teaching and hence the true significance of Vesak, which mankind has yet to comprehend.

In these teachings we have a theory of knowledge, a theory of reality giving an account of the nature and destiny of man in the universe, an ethical system, a social and political philosophy and a philosophy of law.

Let us take the most significant teachings in each of these fields.

## Theory of Knowledge

Take the theory of knowledge. Nature is conceived as a causal system in which there are to be found non-deterministic causal correlations. The events of nature are not haphazard, nor are they due to the will of an omnipotent God nor again to rigid deterministic causal laws. The Buddhist theory of conditioned genesis (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) steers clear of the extremes of indeterminism (*adhiccasamuppanna*) on the one hand and of strict determinism (*niyati-vāda*), whether theistic or natural, on the other. Understanding, therefore, is the key to salvation and not blind belief in unverifiable dogmas. And for understanding we need an impartial outlook. We must not be influenced by our prejudices for or against (*chanda, dosa*), by fear (*bhaya*) whether it be fear of nature or of the supernatural, nor by our erroneous beliefs (*moha*). To gain personal knowledge, we must not rely on authority—whether it be revelation, tradition, hearsay, conformity with scripture, the views of experts or our revered teachers. We must not rely on pure reasoning alone, nor look at things from just one standpoint nor trust a superficial examination of things nor base our theories on preconceived opinions. Personal verification and realisation was the way to truth.

Here was man’s charter of freedom, which makes Buddhism the most tolerant of religions and philosophies. It recommended an outlook which we today call the scientific outlook. So there have been no inquisitions, heresy trials or witch-hunts in Buddhism as in some theistic traditions and, positively, there has been the recognition of human dignity and freedom. The Buddha, again, was the earliest thinker in history to recognise the fact that language tends to distort in certain respects the nature of reality and to stress the importance of not being misled by linguistic forms and conventions. In this respect, he foreshadowed the modern linguistic or analytic philosophers. He was the first to distinguish meaningless questions and assertions from meaningful ones. As in science he recognised perception and inference as the twin sources of

knowledge, but there was one difference. For perception, according to Buddhism, included extra-sensory forms of perception as well, such as telepathy and clairvoyance. Science cannot ignore such phenomena and today there are Soviet as well as Western scientists, who have admitted the validity of extra-sensory perception in the light of experimental evidence.

## Theory of Reality

If we turn to the theory of reality, the Buddha's achievements were equally outstanding. Buddhism recognises the reality of the material world and its impact on experience. Conscious mental phenomena has a physical basis in one's body. Life (*jīvitindriya*) is a by-product (*upādā-rūpa*) of matter. The economic environment conditions human relationships and affects morality. Like modern psychologists, the Buddha discards the concept of a substantial soul and analyses the human personality into aspects of experience such as impressions and ideas (*saññā*), feelings or hedonic tone (*vedanā*), conative activities (*saṅkhāra*) as well as cognitive or quasi-cognitive activities (*viññāṇa*). There is a dynamic conception of the mind, and the stream of consciousness (*viññāṇa-sota*) is said to have two components, the conscious and the unconscious. The first explicit mention of unconscious, mental processes and the unconscious (*anusaya*) motivation of human behaviour is in the Buddhist texts. The Buddhist theory of motivation may be compared with that of Freud although it is more adequate than the latter.

Man is motivated to act out of greed, which consists of the desire to gratify our senses and sex (*kāma-taṇhā*, comparable with the *libido* of Freud) as well as the desire to gratify our egoistic impulses (*bhava-taṇhā*, comparable with the *ego-instincts* and *super-ego* of Freud). He is also motivated to act out of hatred, which consists of the desire to destroy or eliminate what we dislike (*vibhava-taṇhā*, comparable with the *thanatos* or *death-instinct* of Freud) and also out of erroneous beliefs.

Both man and nature are in a state of perpetual flux. As such personal existence is insecure and there is no permanent soul or substance that we can cling to despite our strong desire to entertain such beliefs.

Owing to the causal factors that are operative, man is in a state of becoming and there is a continuity of individuality (*bhava*). Morally good and evil acts are correlated with pleasant and unpleasant consequences, as the case may be. Man is conditioned by his psychological past, going back into prior lives, by heredity and by the impact of his environment. But since he is not a creature of God's will or a victim of economic determinism, he can change his own nature as well as his environment.

There is no evidence that the world was created in time by an omniscient, omnipotent and infinitely good and compassionate God. In fact, the evidence clearly tells against the existence of such a God and the Buddhist texts mention two arguments in this connection. Although evil is logically compatible with the existence of a good God, there are certain evils (such as the suffering of animals and of little children, for instance), which are inexplicable on the assumption of the existence of a merciful God, who is also omniscient and omnipotent. Besides, the universe created by such a God would be a rigged universe in which human beings were mere puppets devoid of responsibility. According to the Buddhist theory of the cosmos, it has no origin in time. This Buddhist conception of the cosmos, which is a product of clairvoyance, can only be compared with the modern theories of the universe. The smallest unit in it is said to be the minor world-system (*cūḷanikā lokadhātu*), which contains thousands of suns, moons, inhabited and uninhabited planets. Today we call this a galaxy. The next unit is the middling world-system (*majjhimikā lokadhātu*), which consists of thousands of such galaxies, as we find in *Virgo*, for instance. The vast cosmos (*mahā lokadhātu*) consists of thousands of such clusters of

galaxies. This cosmos, is said to undergo periods of expansion (*vivaṭṭamāna-kappa*) and contraction (*saṃvivaṭṭamāna-kappa*). So the universe is in a state of oscillation, continually expanding and contracting without beginning or end in time (*anamatagga*).

Recent findings based on observations made from radio telescopes have shown that the 'big-bang' theory (fancied by theists) and the oscillating theory are preferable to the steady-state theory. But of the 'big-bang' and oscillating theories, the latter is to be preferred on scientific and philosophical grounds. It does not involve the concept of the creation of the dense atom out of nothing and it does not have to face the problem of an infinitude of time prior to creation.

While the Buddhist conception of the cosmos forestalls the modern astronomer's conception of it, it goes beyond the latter in speaking of a subtle-material world (*rūpa-loka*) and a non-material world (*arūpa-loka*), which is not accessible to science.

Similarly, Buddhist atheism is not the same as materialistic atheism in that Buddhism speaks of the objectivity of moral and spiritual values and of a transcendent reality beyond space, time and causation. Neither the Buddha nor those who attain Nirvana cease to exist, according to Buddhist conceptions. When the Buddha was asked, whether the person who has attained Nirvana does not exist or exists eternally without defect, his answer was: "The person who has attained the goal is without measure; he does not have that, whereby one may speak about him."

## Ethics

If we turn to Buddhist ethics and examine its ethical system, we find that according to Buddhist notions, the propositions of ethics are significant. There can be no ethics without a concept of moral responsibility. But there cannot be moral responsibility unless (i) some of our actions are free (though conditioned) and not constrained, (ii) morally good and evil actions are followed by pleasant and unpleasant consequences, as the case may be and (iii) there is human survival after death to make this possible with justice. Now, the question as to whether these conditions are fulfilled or not is a purely factual question. If there was no free will and human actions were strictly determined, there would be no sense in our talking about moral responsibility for our actions. According to Buddhist conceptions, nature is such that all these conditions are fulfilled and, therefore, moral responsibility is a fact.

Buddhism considers human perfection or the attainment of Arahantship as a good in itself and likewise the material and spiritual welfare of mankind. Whatever actions are good as a means in bringing about these good ends are instrumentally good and these are called right actions, defined as actions which promote one's own welfare as well as that of others. Right actions consist, in refraining from evil, doing what is good and cleansing the mind. The goal of perfection is also therapeutic in that only a perfect person, it is said, has a perfectly healthy mind. Hence the necessity for cleansing the mind, which consists in changing the basis of our motivation from greed, hatred and ignorance to selfless service, compassion and understanding. The Buddha emphatically pointed out that what he showed was a way, a way to achieve this change in motivation by a process of self-analysis, meditation and self-development. Men and women are classified into different psychological types and different forms of meditation are prescribed for them to achieve this end. The aim of Buddhist ethics therefore is the attainment of personal happiness and social harmony. The Buddhist theory of reality and its ethics are summed up in the four Noble Truths.

## Society, Polity and Law

The social and political philosophy of Buddhism is equally relevant and enlightening. Again, the Buddha was the first thinker in history to preach the doctrine of equality. Man was one species and the division into social classes and castes was not a permanent or inevitable division of society, although it was given a divine sanction at the time. Historical and economic factors brought about, as the Buddha relates in the Aggañña Sutta, the division of people into occupational classes which later became castes. All men are capable of moral and spiritual development and should be afforded the opportunity for this. The doctrine of equality does not imply that all men are physically and psychologically alike for they are obviously not, but that there is sufficient degree of homogeneity amongst men in terms of their capacities and potentialities as to warrant their being treated equally and with human dignity (*samānattatā*). It is a corollary of the doctrine of equality that there should be equality before the law, equality in educational opportunities and in the enjoyment of other human rights such as the right to employment, etc.

Society, according to the Buddhist, like every other process in nature is liable to change from time to time. The factors that determine this change are economic and ideological, for men are led to action by their desires and beliefs. It is the duty of the state to uphold justice and promote the material and spiritual welfare of its subjects. There is a social contract theory of society and government. Ultimate power, whether it be legislative, executive or judiciary, is vested with the people but delegated to the king or body of people elected to govern. If the contract of upholding law and order and promoting the good of the people is seriously violated, the people have a right to revolt and overthrow such a tyrannical government (see *Padamānavakusala Jātaka*).

Sovereignty is subject to the necessity to conform to the rule of righteousness. The rule of power has to be dependent on the rule of righteousness (*Dharmacakram hi nivrāya balacakram pravartate*). Punishment has to be reformatory and only secondarily deterrent and never retributive. In international relations the necessity for subjecting sovereignty to the rule of righteousness requires that no nation be a power unto itself, while in its dealings with other nations it always has the good and happiness of mankind at heart. The ideal just society is both democratic and socialistic and ensures human rights as well as economic equity and the well-being of the people. It is likely to come into existence after a catastrophic world-war, when the remnant that would be saved will set up a new order based on a change of heart and a change of system.

Such in brief is the message of the glorious religion and philosophy of the Buddha, whose value and full significance the world has yet to realise. Such is the message of Vesak.

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