

Notes

Buddhism and Gandhara Civilization

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More than two thousand five hundred years ago Prince Siddhartha Gautama was born to the Shakya King Suddhodana and Queen Maya of Kapilavastu. It was on the full moon of May at Lumbini forest, on the way to the queen's parents' home in Devadaha. All these places are in present day Nepal. Early in life Siddhartha showed a reflective turn of mind but was nevertheless trained as a Kshatriya prince in archery and other martial arts. At the age of 16 he won an archery contest and married princess Yasodhara of Devadaha.

In an effort to forestall a prediction that Siddhartha would renounce the world and become a seeker of truth, King Suddhodana surrounded his son with luxury, with music, games, dances and the good life. Any contact with misery or sorrow was kept out of his way.

One day, while riding in his chariot he encountered the four great sights: a decrepit old man, a sick man, a dead man being carried to a cremation ground, and finally a serene dignified recluse in yellow garb. These sights strengthened Siddhartha's resolve to seek and find the cause of suffering and the cessation of suffering, for the liberation of all mankind. At the age of 29 he decided to renounce his life of luxury and even his wife, and his new born son whom he called Rahula, meaning the Fetter.

For six years Siddhartha Gautama studied under renowned philosophers and also practiced severe forms of austerities. He made some spiritual progress but did not find the answer to his quest for liberation and supreme enlightenment. Weak and emaciated, one day as he sat in contemplation under a tree, Sujata, a young maiden from Senanigram, offered him some rice gruel. She thought Gautama was the Tree God that she worshipped. Siddhartha accepted the food. At his taking food from the hand of a woman his five disciples abandoned him and departed. After the meal Siddhartha realized that self mortification and extreme austerity only weakened the body as well as the mind. Like

the *veena* (a stringed instrument) to function well it had to be strung neither too slack nor too taut.

Siddhartha bathed in the river Niranjana and receiving seven fistfuls of grass from a grass cutter, he selected a secluded spot under a peepul tree in what today is known as Bodh Gaya in Bihar, India. With a resolve not to rise again until he attained complete and total enlightenment, he sat down to meditate. If in the process he had to encounter death so be it, he determined, but he would not give in. It was full moon in May and Siddhartha was exactly 35 years old. In successive stages the renunciate prince gained profound knowledge and attained supreme enlightenment and became the *Samyak Sambuddha*. The Buddha means the All-Enlightened one, and his status depicts serenity and compassion. He is also referred to as the *Tathagata*, the one who has arrived at suchness.

From then on until his death (*parinirvana*) at the age of 80 the Buddha preached the law, the teaching, the *dhamma* called Buddhism. The Buddha taught four noble truths, and the middle path, to *nirvana*. He preached to the rich and the poor, to kings and slaves, to men and women, without any discrimination in the region of Magadha, Kasi, Kosala in today's Bihar, in Uttar Pradesh and in Nepal.

Against greed, hatred and delusion, says the Buddha, pervade your mind with love and compassion. For the layman and woman he prescribes *panchasila*, the five moral precepts: abstain from taking life, stealing, unlawful sexual conduct, telling falsehoods, and alcohol and drugs. The individual is enjoined to lead an ethical life of sobriety, to cultivate awareness and to practice *dana* (giving), and *samadhi* (contemplation and meditation). This is the way, the Buddha says, to opening the thousand petalled lotus of the mind leading toward the supreme bliss of *nirvana*. Adopt the golden mean between two extremes. Eschew a life of sensual indulgence, also avoid self mortification. Both are ignoble and unproductive. Cultivate equilibrium and equanimity; do good, shun evil.

To achieve the happy balance, the Buddha advocates the noble eightfold path: right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Cultivate *moitri* (love), *karuna* (sympathy), *mudita* (empathetic joy), and not envy at the happiness and success of others, and *upekkha* (equanimity). The individual should look upon any and all living beings with compassion. Feel for all beings as a mother feels for her only child.

The *Jataka* stories of 550 previous lives of the Buddha are illustrations of the inexorable law of *karma* or cause and effect, non-ego, compassion and sacrifice for the welfare of others. The underlying theme

of his teachings is like that of the Zoroastrians: good thought, good speech, good deed. Buddha emphatically postulates the law of cause and effect (*karma*) or (*kamma*); every action brings its result, good and bad, no intermediary can intercede. Nothing is permanent, everything is in perpetual flux. There is a coming into being, an existence, then dissolution; mere flow of phenomena. There is no durable self or ego. The Buddha advised his followers: Be islands unto yourselves. Take no external refuge. His last words were: subject to decay are all compounded things. Strive with diligence.

The Buddha rejected the caste system totally and said that a man is to be judged by his actions, not by his status at birth. In his brotherhood of monks (the *sangha*) there were the highborn like Aganda, Devadatta, and the Buddha's son Rahula. There was his chief disciple Sariputta the Brahmin and also the humbly born low caste Upali, the barber, who rose high and earned much respect in the fraternity of monks. The teachings of the Buddha traveled to distant lands principally through missions sent out by emperor Ashoke and later by king Kanishka of Gandhara.

Buddhists today are generally known as the *Theravada* (followers of the earlier teaching of the canonical Pali contained in the *Tripitaka*), and the *Mahayana*. The former also known as Southern Buddhism is found in Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Laos, Cambodia, and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Chittagong in Bangladesh. In Nepal and Vietnam both forms exist. In the mid 20th century Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the renowned Indian constitutionalist, became a Buddhist and with him and after him many followed. There are pockets of Buddhists in India today.

The *Mahayana* (the great vehicle) is prevalent in China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim and an increasing number of Buddhist are in Europe, USA, Canada, and parts of South America.

The *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa*, amongst the oldest Pali chronicles, were preserved throughout many historical vicissitudes by monks in Sri Lanka. According to the Pali tradition, a number of Buddhist councils have been held. These synods revised and updated the texts from time to time.

The first was held under the chairmanship of Kasyapa, the Elder, at the Vulture Peak in Rajagriha, Capital of Magadha in the reign of King Ajatasatru shortly after the Buddha passed away. The Buddha's cousin and attendant monk, Ananda (who was noted for his acute memory) was asked to reiterate what the Buddha had actually said on various occasions. The Buddha used Pali, a regional dialect so that he could be

understood by ordinary people, rather than Sanskrit, the language of the *Vedas*. Brahmins had a monopoly of performing religious rites, and they used only Sanskrit. In the Pali canon Buddha's discourses are usually prefaced with Ananda's 'Thus have I heard'. After the Buddha passed away, eighteen different schools emerged.

The second council took place in Vesali in 383BC, about a hundred years after the Buddha's death. Here the *Sangha* (Order of Monks) divided into two groups: *Sarvastavadins* (*Theravadins*) with their Pali canon, and the *Mahasangikas* (The great community) who adopted Sanskrit; an important chronicle, the *Mahavastu* is extant today. The Mahayana including Vajrayana can be considered the successor of the *Mahasangika*.

The fourth council was held under the patronage of King Kanishka in the 1st C, AD at his capital Pushpapur (Peshawar), after he had shifted it from Pushkalavati (Charsadda). Asvaghosa, the poet philosopher, expounded the *Mahayana* doctrine at this council that he organized. Kanishka, the most illustrious of the Kushan kings had the Buddha's teachings engraved on copper plates. A sapling of the Bodhi tree was planted by King Kanishka in Peshawar. More than a thousand years later Babar, the Mughal emperor, visited Peshawar to see a descendant of the peepul tree. Kanishka emulated emperor Ashoka (272-37 BC) also in that he sent missions to China and other places. The Chinese emperor sent Buddhist teachings to Korea and the latter in turn to the emperor of Japan. The sixth Buddhist council was held in June 1956 in Rangoon in Burma (which I attended as one of two representatives of Pakistan).

The *Mahayana* (the great vehicle) is considered a later and expanded version of the earlier orthodox *Theravada* teachings which the Mahayanists termed *Hinayana* (the lesser vehicle). The Theravadins on their part thought many *Mahayana* teachings were extrapolations. In the *Mahayana* system there is great emphasis on the *Bodhisattva* ideal wherein the seeker postpones achievement of *nirvana* and dedicates himself to the service of all living beings; and the *Trikaya* (three Bodies of Buddha).

In both forms of Buddhism, a *Bodhisattva* is a future Buddha. The next Buddha, *Maitri* or *Metteya* is at present said to be in the *Tusita* Heaven as was the case of the *Bodhisattva* Gautama before taking form for the last time as the son of King Suddhodana and Queen Maya of Kapilavastu. In the fullness of time the Buddha *Maitri* will appear on earth and teach the *dharmma* (the law) to all beings. According to the historical Buddha, Buddhas appear from time to time, and show the way. They are not gods nor the incarnation of any divinity.

The Buddha taught *avidya*, *anicca*, *anatta* (ignorance, impermanence and soullessness). He explained *pratitya samutpada* (the law of dependent origination) or the causal formula, the cycle of ceaseless coming together, existence and dissolution of all factors and elements (*samsara*), and liberation through the noble eightfold path (*nirvana*).

The greatest dialectician after the Buddha is considered to be Nagarjuna who expounded the philosophy of the *Madyamika* or *Sunyata*. Some of the other ancient Buddhist teachers and savants besides Asvaghosa (1c) are the brothers Asanga and Vasubandhu (4c), Nagarjuna (5c), Dharmakirti (7c), Chandrakirti, Vimalakirti, Kamalashila (8c).

Some of the modern scholars are Max Muller, Oldenberg, Rhys Davids, Nyanatiloka, Conze, Taranath, T.D. Suzuki, Ikeda, Tucci, and the greatest present day exponent of Buddhist teaching is the fourteenth Dalai Lama.

Before the 1st century the Shakyamuni Buddha was represented by symbols only: the *Bodhitree* or a footprint. The Gandhara art form was the earliest form of Buddha images. The other school of Buddhist art is the Mathura. The Tibetan Thangka on cloth is the third form of Buddhist representational art.

From Taxila to Peshawar, Dir and Swat, the region is replete with excavated monasteries and Buddha statues. The best known is that of the Fasting Buddha housed in the Lahore Museum. An emaciated Prince Siddhartha with gaunt features and a torso of ribs and skin depicts the ultimate stage of severe austerities, before he accepted an offering of rice gruel that gave him back flicker of vitality that led him on to his final meditation and attainment of Buddhahood.

Gandhara is the name of the sculpture, mainly in schist, depicting Buddha and scenes from his life. The second connotation is of course the ancient kingdom of Gandhara, even mentioned in the epic *Mahabharata*. Gandhari, the princess of Gandhara is king Dhritarashtra's Queen and the mother of the Kauravas. Gandhara today is in the NWFP of Pakistan. It is here under the patronage of king Kanishka in the 1st century AD that the artisans created the first Buddha image in the likeness of Apollo. The famous debate between king Menander and the monk Nagasena on the nature of self and identity also took place in Gandhara.

Pakistan is a country with a rich multi-textured cultural heritage. The province of Punjab has splendid Muslim monuments. Sindh has the Indus valley civilization, Balochistan boasts many and varied prehistoric sites, and the North West Frontier Province is renowned for the Buddhist

civilization of Gandhara. And Gandhara has influenced the entire Buddhist world and its art may be considered as poetry in stone.

The pervading presence of mounds with archaeological potentials from the river valleys of the Indus to the rugged mountain slopes of Dir and Swat are manifestations of distant and different civilizations that flickered or flourished for a while before dissolution. Some of these mounds have already revealed innumerable Gandhara Buddhist sculptures. Some are illegally and haphazardly excavated by antiquity dealers under cover of night and the Gandhara sculptures unearthed are smuggled out of the country. Some adorn museums, others proclaim their presence like trophies in private collections of the affluent all over the world.

Ensconced under the surface lie any number of stupas, monasteries, and the remnants of ancient hamlets and towns. These sites need methodical and scientific archaeological excavation. If adequate funds are made available by the UNESCO, these sites would assuredly yield new and precious Gandhara artifacts that would shed more light on ancient cultures and civilizations because this region has seen the rise and fall of civilizations, of invasions, of a flux of evanescent glories of races, peoples and tribes. As a necessary corollary we would need to construct a chain of museums and hotels for the benefit of foreign visitors of various shades including those seeking knowledge of ancient culture and history in general.

The Buddhist monastery of Takht-i-Bahi in the Mardan district is the only world heritage site in the NWFP. It draws thousands of visitors every year. If we are to preempt further vandalism, preserve these historic relics of the past and act responsibly toward mankind's heritage, the only answer is for UNESCO to devise effective measures. Alternatively UNESCO should take them under its wing and declare all or as many as possible, world heritage sites.

Ranigat

The site is on a hill top in Bunner bordering Swabi district. It was jointly excavated by the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan and a team of the Kyoto University of Japan. A main stupa and votive stupas were unearthed, yielding priceless Gandhara sculptures.

Jamal Garhi

The stupa site at Jamal Garhi village in the Mardan district was scientifically excavated before the independence of the country. It produced exquisite Gandhara sculptures. And the renowned fasting

Buddha in the Lahore Museum was recovered from the site of Sikri in the neighbourhood of Jamal Garhi.

Kashmir Smast

This natural cave is situated in the Sakra Range of hills in the Mardan district. It was in use in all the periods of ancient history. It contains the remains of the early Shivite monastic establishment and needs further exploration and excavation inside and outside the cave. Adequate funds should be placed at the disposal of the excavators quickly before many of these artistic treasures disappear.

But Kara-III

The site was excavated by the Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar in Swat district. Complete stupas and shrines were discovered.

Shinkardar stupa

A huge stupa stands by the roadside close to the village of Shinkardar in Swat district. It is presumed to be the stupa of king Uttarasena who had brought the relics of the Buddha on a white elephant and enshrined them in it.

Najigram stupa and monastery

These are the two beautiful stupas and a monastery near the village of Najigram in Swat district, about half an hour's walk from the village. The two stupas are bigger than the stupa of the Takht-i-Bahi. The monastic cells still retain their original roofs, but they need immediate attention of UNESCO for their conservation as well as for further excavations.

Hund

The village within the Mughal Fort is the third and last capital of Gandhara on the right bank of the river Indus in the Swabi district. It was the seat of the famous Hindushahiyya dynasty of Gandhara. Alexander the Great, the Chinese pilgrims Hiuen Taang and Sung Yuu, Babar, the founder of the Mughal empire and other famous invaders crossed the river Indus here on their onward journey to Taxila and India.