

Chapter - I

INTRODUCTION

In the opinion of Romain Rolland, there is one place on the surface of the earth, where all the dreams of living men have found a home from the very earliest days when men began to dream of existence, that permanent home is India. India is proud of her great sons from time immemorial and Buddha is one of them. He brought fulfilment to a mass of her ancient dreams after discovering the paths of enlightenment, which endows life with permanent bliss and happiness.

The leaders of free India could be able to recognise promptly the greatness of India's noblest son, the Buddha.

In the modern time, a deal of interest has been created in Buddhism in the western countries as well as in the Buddhist group. The history of Buddhism, if it could be written in full, would be of immense value.

Buddhism is the world's first proselytising religion which the history of philosophy ever presents. Its fundamental ideas and essential spirit can remarkably be compared with the advanced scientific thought of the nineteenth century. The modern pessimistic Philosophy of

Germany that of Schopenhaur and Hartmann is only a revised version of ancient Buddhism. As far as the dynamic conception of reality is concerned, Buddhism may be compared with creative evolutionism of Bergson. Early Buddhism suggests the outline of a philosophy suited to the practical wants of the present day and helpful in reconciling the conflict between faith and science. Early Buddhism in India is not an ethical guide but also an ideology as well. Buddha, an Asian Martin Luther further questioned the prevailing religious doctrine and uphold the sanctity of human intellect and its freedom.

About 2500 years ago Buddhism was born, in India as a reaction to vedism. In the sixth century before Christ, there must have happened in India something very important - some great social, political, moral and religious changes - that brought about the birth of Buddha.

The age in which the Buddha was born was a time of great spiritual unrest and remarkable intellectual ferment. It gave birth to a galaxy of spiritual leaders of mankind. There was Pythagoras in Greece, Zoroaster in Persia, Lao-tzu and Confucius in China. Hindu tradition looks upon the Buddha as one of the ten incarnations of the Lord, in spite of the traditional Vedānta outlook on the Buddha as one who is the heterodox and beyond the pale of the Vedas.

The many-sidedness of Buddhism can be traced directly to the personality of its founder, called the Śākya Muni. He possessed

to the highest possible degree, a warm and responsive human sympathy, a love not only of truth but also of beauty. The Buddha's teaching provided not only a rational analysis and a systematic solution of the problems of life, but it also furnished ways and means of living a rich and an abundant life of unity and service.

The Buddha laid the greatest emphasis on Love, or as He called it Friendliness, to all creatures.

Early Buddhism has made original contribution in several fields. It shattered the eternalist philosophy of *Upaniṣads*, and for that reason, they do not believe in the existence of Self i.e., *Nairātmyavāda*.

Early Buddhism teaches man to approach truth directly; it discards priests, mediators, ceremonies, incarnations, gods, revelation, mystical interpretation etc. It transforms a person's character and ennobles him. A Buddhist is not afraid of death and faces bravely the prejudices and follies of people. He is the friend of men and stands above kings, princess and ministers. Buddhism was based on reason and meditation. Early Buddhism was essentially a reform movement, urging every man to give up his vices and asking him to practise purity of conduct in his daily life.

The main object of early Buddhism was to bring about a reformation movement in the religious practices and a return to the

basic principles. Buddhism like as humanism crossed racial and national barrier and the enemy we have to fight within ourselves. To achieve peace we must maintain inner harmony.

Early Buddhism inculcates a high system of ethics. The chief human virtue is *Maitrī*, which may be translated as love, good will and benevolence. Early Buddhism had from the very beginning been insistent on adopting the middle path in all matters. In this point also they are maintaining the midpoint between Theism and Materialism.

Buddhism is essentially a rationalist religion. It appeals to a man's analytical faculties and exhorts him to slum all forms of superstitions and unfounded beliefs, however high. It is immensely practical. Over-emphasis on morality makes it singularly distinct from other religions: Good life as long as one lives and final extinction (Nibbāna) is the essence of Buddhism.

The Buddha's teaching provided a systematic solution of the problems of life and where liberty is sanely tempered and controlled by law and self-discipline. A man is in himself a little universe, the ordering of his mind and body is as complex according to the Buddha, as the ordering of the stars. Buddha was not merely a physician of souls but also a surgeon, using the knife, when needed. He asked man to strive for perfection and to love all creatures. Buddhism suggests a philosophy of practical wants of the present day and helpful

in reconciling the conflict between faith and science. This will be clearly seen, if we confine our attention to the leading principle of early Buddhism. Milinda is but an adopted form of the name of Menander, the Greek king of Baktria, who reigned probably from about 140 to about 115 B.C., or even 110 B.C. There is a divergence of opinion among the scholars concerning the date of king Menander.

The blessed teachings of the Buddha had begun to appeal to the Greek mind even before the time of Menander whom we first see as obsessed with doubts and dilemmas about the teachings of the Buddha and then as a devout Buddhist ruler propagating the teachings of the Buddhist religion when his doubts and misgivings had been removed by the Venerable dialectician Nāgasena.

"*Milindaprasna*" or 'The Questions of King Milinda' is a celebrated treatise of early Buddhism.

'*Milinda-pañha*' (Pāli) or '*Milindaprasna*' (Sanskritised) is the collection of dialogues between the Greek King Menander and the Buddhist monk Nāgasena.

It is stated in the *Milinda-pañha* that Milinda was born in a village named Kalasi in the Doab of Alasanda i.e. Alexandria (Modern Kandahar). His capital was at Sāgala. This city is identified with the modern Sialkot in the Punjab. Menander's dominions comprised

Peshawar, the upper Kabul valley, the Punjab, Sindh, Kathiawar and western Uttar Pradesh.

Menander was a well-informed scholar and a keen debator. He was well versed in various branches of learning and expert in argument. He wanted to understand the true essence of Buddhism which raised for him several difficulties and knotty problems. He approached many teachers, but none could solve his difficulties. Keen seeker of truth as he was, Menander was greatly disheartened by this. It was by a fortunate chance that one day he saw a Buddhist monk named Nāgasena going on his begging round. The calm and serene personality of the sage had a silent but powerful influence on the king's mind. The monk who was no ordinary teacher told the king that he was agreeable to a discussion only if it was held in the Paṇḍitavāda way and not in the Rājāvāda way. The king paid homage to the teacher in a fitting manner and put his difficulties one by one before the sage who ably solved them all to the king's entire satisfaction.

On this celebrated dialogue which the king had with the monk is based on the *Milinda - pañha* which is considered to be the most notable book in the non-canonical Pāli literature of early Buddhism. Suffice it to say that the deepest spiritual problem

with which the king was confronted was his inability to understand how the Buddha could believe in rebirth without believing in a re-incarnating self or ego. This knotty problem has been solved by the Venerable Nāgasena in a masterly way in this book for all time.

If we judge from the view point of ancient Indian culture and civilisation, the book '*Milinda-pañha*' is valuable which is glorious with historical and geographical facts. It consists of the discussion of a number of points of Buddhist doctrine treated in the form of conversations between King Milinda and Nāgasena, the Elder. The king himself plays a very subordinate role. The questions raised, or dilemmas stated, are put into his mouth. But the solutions to the questions or dilemmas form a major portion of the work, and these are put into the mouth of Nāgasena.

It is said that as soon as they had exchanged formal greeting, the king asked about his name Nāgasena replied that he is known as Nāgasena.

This statement of the Elder Nāgasena set the ball rolling and there followed a series of questions and answers, including the famous chariot illustration which maintained that just as the parts of a chariot put together make a chariot, similarly the different components of an

individual make an individual. The questions of king Milinda (or *Milinda-pañha*) is a masterly work on Buddhism. It treats the all important problems of momentariness, no-soul, *Nirvāṇa* and other important philosophical issues in a threadbare manner.

It contains the views of the Buddha sets out, as they appeared to his very earliest disciples in a series of 185 conversational discourses, which will some day come to hold a place in the history of human thought, akin to that held by the 'Dialogues of Plato'. It has been observed that there is a great similarity between the modern Bengali literature '*Sri Ramkrishna Kathāmr̥ita*' composed by Sri Ma.

The persons who have a keen interest in ancient Indian religion, philosophy and culture, will be certainly satisfied by reading this book broadly to lead them to ethical and spiritual development. Indian culture can be compared to a grand tree from which a lot of branches of various shapes and sizes come out to hold a grand variety of flowers and leaves - an inexplicable collection of exquisite beauty. Innumerable creatures come here to relax under the soothing shade of this magnanimous ancient tree and seek emancipation from the cruel clutches of worries and anxieties produced by the three major causes of sorrow. All the systems of Indian Philosophy try to achieve the same objective which is the *NIRVĀṆA*. *Milinda-pañha* paves the

way for quenching the thirst for spiritual knowledge as have been done by the *Upaniṣad*, the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Dhammapada* which are the masterpieces reveal the spiritual upliftment of ancient India.

The "Questions of King Milinda", is undoubtedly the masterpiece of Indian prose, from a literary point of view, that had then been produced in any country. In the Questions of Milinda we got a negative interpretation of the Buddhist teaching. Nāgasena doubted the causation of Buddha. For believing an incomplete evidence is not only a blunder but a crime. But Buddhism inspired an entirely different outlook about the world. Buddhism knows no being but becoming. The law of dependent origination is the core of Buddhist philosophy. With the help of his philosophy of change, he shattered the concept of an eternal soul and eternal Brahman.

This idea of continuous change is clearly brought out by the Buddhist monk Nāgasena, in his discourse with King Milinda. It may here be recalled, the famous Greek dialectician, *Heraclitus* who also used the simile of flowing water to prove that the "world is a continuous process of change."

In short, the *Milinda-pañha* occupies a unique position in Indian literature if it is adjudged from the point of view of metaphysics, or literature or history or knowledge of geography.

The dialogues between king Milinda and Nāgasena were delivered depending upon the facts in reality. The importance of dignity and the charm of skill in the whole fiction is maintained here. The historical evolution of thought and of the rise of literature in India will more and more look upon the questions as a whole and estimate its right value.

In fine, it may be said that important though the treatise is, a preliminary survey has revealed that no significant philosophical analysis of this work is done. Apart from being translated into so many languages as a matter of course, philosophers have only praised the book without bringing out the philosophy as such of this masterly work.

We shall analyse the philosophy of *Milindaprasna* to see what it has to say anew, what it repeats and towards what it orients the general drift of Buddhism. I am confident, this will add something to the understanding of early Buddhism.