

The Relevance of Buddha's teaching methods in Modern Pedagogy

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“One is one's own refuge, who else could be the refuge?”

- Lord Buddha

It was as early as 2500 years ago that a man of Light was born in India, the world knew him later as the 'Buddha', to dispel the age-old prevalent darkness over the world. We know Buddha as 'Tathagata' or an 'Enlightened One'; one who renounced the inheritance of throne and kingdom in order to embark upon the exploration of the Universal Truth of happiness and became the prince of ascetic world. How he achieved his enlightenment is a matter of grave interest for the scholars across the world! Attempts have been made in every era by the eminent research scholars to dig deep into Buddha's profound philosophy to give new interpretations and to find out the new relevances of his teachings. Attempts have also been made to draw attention to the dimensions of myth that have been largely ignored by the Western scholarship. To say that Buddha was a Godlike figure that tread the ascetic path of self-mortification and achieved his liberation from all miseries of the corporal world, would be to ignore the fact that he was a breath-inhaling man, and what he achieved in his life is possible for any human being to achieve. Lord Buddha's liberal rule was '*Ehipassiko*', that is, come and examine. He himself invites the humanity from all corners of the world to come and investigate and examine the authenticity of the Truth He preaches. As a Buddhist monk opines, "Among the founders of religion, the Buddha.....was the only teacher who did not claim to be other than a human being, pure and simple. A man and only a man can become Buddha.' Hence, there is such a close relevance of his teachings with human life, for he based his doctrine on human happiness. He was concerned more with the mystery of human sorrows rather than with the unreproducible question "Who created the world?" And so, he resorted to very genuine but effective method of teaching to make even the laymen understand his succinct sermons.

The present paper deals with bringing out the relevance of Buddha's teaching methods for the teachers of this age. So many modern pedagogical methods have been advanced across the world in modern times, but an attempt will be made here to show that Buddha's methods of teaching still hold importance for us and can become immensely fruitful in modern classes.

Buddha was a spiritual leader who, unlike other religious leaders, never asserted that he was a descendent of God himself. He never trod the wrong path, nor he misled the people by urging them to believe in impracticable things. Truth was the path he followed in his intellectual journey and he obtained his primary wisdom by accepting discipleship of different spiritual Gurus, much like a common man who goes to schools, colleges and universities to get education. 'For full six years the ascetic Gotama wandered about the valley of the Ganges, meeting famous religious teachers, studying and following their systems and methods, and submitting himself to rigorous ascetic practices. They did not satisfy him.' When they could not quench his thirst for knowledge, he left their refuge and set out alone to discover the true know-through-experience

method which is to practically experience all the knowledge of spiritual world. He sat under the Peppal tree, which came to be known as the Bo-tree, with a pledge of not to rise from his posture till he achieves Buddhata, the Ultimate Wisdom, and ultimately and resolutely discovered the unique method of experiencing the truth of transience of life, the secret of miseries and reincarnation.

What is more venerable thing about Buddha is not his enlightenment only, but his compassion that led him to teach his hard-earned knowledge to other human beings, regardless of caste, class or religion. 'After his Enlightenment, Gotama the Buddha, delivered his first sermon to a group of five ascetic, his old colleagues, in the Deer Park of *Isipatan* (modern Sarnath) near Banaras. From that day, for 45 years, he taught all classes of men and women—kings and peasants, Brahmins and outcasts, bankers and beggars, holy men and robbers.' He could have lived a secluded life, experiencing the pleasure of his wisdom, but he felt pity for the ignorant people who were wallowing in the mire of cravings and aversion. The greatest and the most compassionate as He was, he decided to make his first disciples to those five prior—companions who had left him when he had had rice-curry of Sujata by calling him a renegade. It is this pity that is most inspiring thing about him as a Guru of the common masses and it is the same entity that is missing from hearts of the of the present day teachers. Instead, we find a proud feeling of position and degrees in them. They find it difficult for them to come out of their prison of self. Unfortunately, we have forgotten the age-old maxim that a heart with compassion and words colored with love can even pierce the stones. The above example from the life of Buddha is one great lesson for such teachers.

About forty-five years of his life Lord Buddha was teaching and disseminating his knowledge unceasingly to elites and the downtrodden alike. During his time, the most learned Brahmin community, who would claim a sole monopoly of learning and studying Vedas, had come under the influence of Buddha and were ordained in his doctrine 'Dhamma' at their own will. He used different methods to teach, encourage and stimulate each person who would approach him to develop himself and work out his own emancipation. He preached the principle of individual responsibility and allowed the freedom of thought which unheard of elsewhere in the history of religions. There are many incidents in his life where he used different methods to teach different people. It was a sheer intelligence and wisdom of Buddha that he would first evaluate and weigh the knowledge and mind of the people who would approach him and accordingly use a suitable method to pierce through their ignorance. Sometimes he would give them sermons, or sometimes make them understand by giving an everyday example of common experience; sometimes he would send them in society in search for something, and sometimes would ask them to do some superstitious rites and ritual to bring into light their hollowness. At other times, he would ask questions in reply to the questions asked by the people, and many a times he would remain shut to the unimportant queries. Thus, whatever method is applicable to make things simpler for the common folk to understand the ultimate truth about human life, he would exploit it. He never adhered to one single method in his proud of having such a great knowledge. He did so because his knowledge is so subtle and profound, almost incomprehensible for the youngsters and the laymen that he had to invent new methods of teaching. It was sheer genius of Buddha that he understood the need of these methods at those ancient times which proves his foresightedness much advanced than his age.

Among the myriad methods Buddha availed, we can cite here a few as instances for the appraisal and judge their applicability in modern times.

1) Once when a woman, whose small child died at very early age, brought her child before Lord Buddha thinking that only he can cure her child and bring him back to life. People told her that her child had passed away and there was no use doing anything for him. But words would fall on her deaf ears. She had gone mad on account of the premature death of her only son. So she brought him to Buddha with a hope that he would cure him with magic and awake him. Buddha understood that the grief of the death of her son has made her unable to understand anything and it is futile sermonizing her in such a condition. So he asked her to go to the village and bring some grains from the house where nobody had passed away. She went accordingly from door to door asking for the grains, but she could not find even a single house which hasn't seen death. Ultimately, she understood herself that the death is inevitable and common to all. She calmed down and became a disciple of Buddha. In this case, we learn how to calm down students who are excited under some emotional outburst. We can give them practical things to do, so that they could understand things themselves.

2) Second example we can cite is an encounter of 'Bharadwaj' Brahmin with Lord Buddha. Bharadwaj Brahmin's son had come in refuge of Lord Buddha and was ordained as a monk. On this, Bharadwaj was so angry upon Buddha that he insulted him with foul swear-words. But Buddha, who was an ocean of compassion, gave him a very warm welcome and asked him to calm down and sit. To make him calm down, He asked him, if a guest comes to his house with presents for him and he doesn't accept, what will happen with those gifts? Bharadwaj replied that the presents will still belong to the guest. Buddha smiled and told him that in the same way, he does not accept the gifts of swear-words that he has brought and they remain to him. These words penetrated the angry heart of Bharadwaj and he fell in Buddha's feet to ask pardon for his words.

Here we learn to keep our heads cool and in control when we are insulted or abuses are thrown at us. Only love and compassion can come to our help. With these virtues, we can amend and reform even the most vainglorious urchins in our schools and colleges.

3) In another incident, Buddha was doing Charika (wandering) by a river where he saw a Brahmin doing some rituals for the salvation of his dead father. He came to Buddha and requested him to bring about salvation of his father. Buddha asked him to fill two earthen-pots, one with butter-oil and one with stones and put them under water. When he did so, Buddha asked him to smash up the pots with a stick. He did so and saw that the oil was coming to the surface of the water and stones remained at the bottom. Buddha preached that this is the law of Nature. If his father's deeds (Karma) are light like butter-oil, he will naturally rise above; if his Karmas are solid and weighty like stone, none can raise him above.

This is another practical example given to a superstitious person by Buddha to bring him out of the false beliefs. Even in this technological and scientific era, we find that the modern men are still stuck to these blind-faiths and superstitions. Students, especially from rural areas, are victims of these mind-corrupting diseases. It becomes a duty of every teacher to wash the dirt that has besmirched the minds of the pupils and to do so, they can follow various practical methods that Lord Buddha had himself used.

4) The Encounter between Buddha and the man-slayer 'Angulimala' is a quintessential example of how to overcome other's hatred and anger with fearless faith in one's own

virtues. When Buddha heard that a man namely 'Angulimala' has killed nine hundred and ninety-nine people and prepared a garland of their fingers, he deliberately chose to go through that way of forest where Angulimala was hidden. Angulimala saw him and asked to stop there. He threatened Buddha with his sword. But Buddha was in his solemn state, calm and fearless. He told Angulimala that just as one cannot fix the leaves of the tree back once plucked, in the same way one cannot revive a living being once killed. If one can't give life to others, he has no right to take it from them. Angulimala came to his consciousness, shed his sword down and fell in Lord Buddha's feet.

This was the victory of Buddha's fearless compassion. As a teacher, fear is the first hurdle that we have to pass and overcome.

Thus, there are innumerable incidents from Buddha's life that we can cite here as examples to illustrate the virtues of a noble teacher. Teachers are not the teachers only inside the classrooms. The scope of his responsibilities goes beyond the classes where all his virtues are daily tested. However, the matter of concern here are virtues. They never grow old or stale. They are beneficent still in modern age as they were in Buddha's time.

Today we find a drought of all these virtues among the teachers. A dearth of responsible and discreet teacher is distinctly noticeable fact in this Computer Age where teachers are found to shove these noble virtues aside by giving an excuse of the influence of Western education. But, however modern or fashionable one may become, the dearth of these virtues would never let him rise in the eyes of his pupils.

Lord Buddha has been acclaimed as a 'Universal Teacher'. It's not an exaggeration to call him so, for the people of all parts of the globe have today recognized the importance of his preaching and have guided their lives on the line of his precepts. Buddha's philosophy is based on teaching and learning of knowledge. Nothing is given importance except this ideal. Buddha was himself an embodiment of all the noble virtues he preached through his sermons. He was very steadfast as regards the characters of his monks whom he would send to teach people. He had prepared separate precepts or rules of conduct for them.

To understand the idea of a teacher or a Monk in Buddha's mind, it is must to go through the conversation between King Milinda and Bhante Nagarjuna, where they discuss the true virtues and responsibilities of a good teacher. In "Milind Panha", it is told, King Milind gives a list of a noble teacher in response to the queries of Nagarjuna. He says that there are 25 virtues that a teacher who supervises every conduct of a pupil must possess. They are as follows:

- i) Teacher should keep his pupil all the time under his strict supervision.
- ii) He should give instructions to his pupils all the time, i.e., which rules or principles to follow and which should be renounced.
- iii) Teacher should always be giving instructions about which things should be heeded and which should be neglected.
- iv) He should keep watch on what the pupil eats and drinks, and upon his sleep-hours.
- v) He should nurse when the pupil is indisposed.
- vi) He should pay attention to what the pupil has attained so far and what he hasn't.
- vii) He should keep watch on his moral character.
- viii) Whatever alms he collects in his alms-pot, he should share it with his pupils.
- ix) He should encourage pupils by saying "Don't be afraid. You will, sooner or later, get through this also?"
- x) He should all the time advise his pupil as regards the choice of the company.
- xi) He should also tell his pupil which place or village to go and which not to go.
- xii) He should tell him which residing place for the monks (Vihara) to be dwelt.

- xiii) He should not kill his time in gossiping on trivial topics with him.
- xiv) A pupil should usually be pardoned if he detects any fault in him.
- xv) He should help him concentrating his mind.
- xvi) A pupil should be taught regularly, instead of giving him unnecessary leave.
- xvii) He should not keep his knowledge hidden from pupils.
- xviii) All the knowledge he possesses should be taught to the pupils with all his interest and enthusiasm.
- xix) He should love his pupil as his only child by considering him his knowledge-son.
- xx) He should take every precaution that the pupil should not go astray from his objectives.
- xxi) He should nourish a thought in his mind that he is bringing pupil up by feeding him the particles of knowledge,
- xxii) He should treat his pupil with amiable conduct just like a friend.
- xxiii) If a calamity falls upon the pupils, teacher should come to his help instead of leaving him alone.
- xxiv) He should never neglect such a thing or fact which is worth to be taught to the pupil.
- xxv) He should help the pupil in recovering, if he is in tumbling down the spiritual life.

These twenty-five virtues of a good cautious teacher are not at all outdated precepts of a forgotten tradition. They still hold applicability even in modern times. Even if one throws a casual eye upon the state of teacher-pupil relationship and the classroom atmosphere in our century, he would instantly realize both the dearth and need of these charismatic qualities. Today, pupils are constantly breaching away from the pedagogues who have barely passed few exams and desperately need knowledge and good training.

There is an urgent relevance of these enduring virtues today more than ever. These moral precepts have become a mere matter of talks today and nobody takes troubles to observe them in practice. However, whatever be the fact, their everlasting value cannot be neglected. Once Dr. Abdul Kalam had asserted in his 'Vision For 2020', "Economic prosperity and military strength alone do not bring peace to any nation.....Evaluation of spiritual forces in addition to economic prosperity and military strength will bring happiness, peace and prosperity." To bring this ideal into being, these moral and spiritual doctrines should be made the basis of our education system.

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