

Bodhi Leaf Publication No. A 7

THE MASTER'S QUEST FOR LIGHT

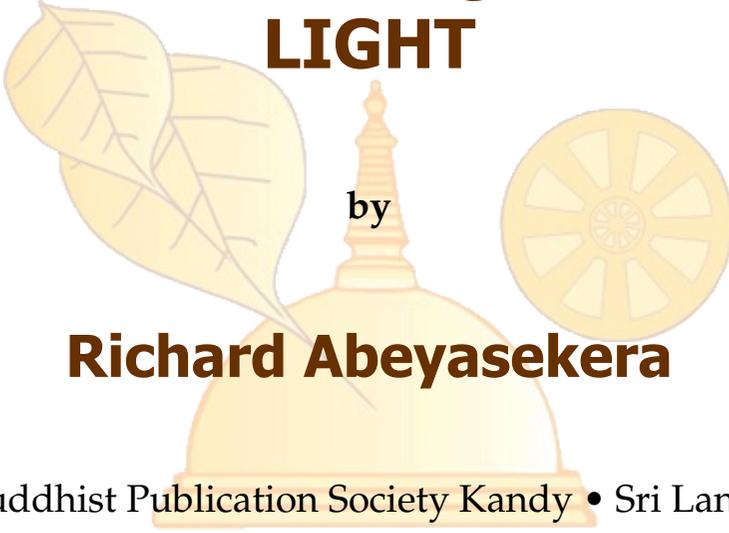
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BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY



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Buddhist Publication Society Kandy • Sri Lanka

Bodhi Leaves Publication No. A 7

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First impression 1959 Second impression 1962 Third
impression 1972

BPS Online Edition © (2017)

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Some Reflections On The Master's Quest For Light

Amidst the great characteristics of the Bodhisatta's ^[1] unique personality, there stand out with singular prominence his boundless compassion, his indomitable courage and his unswerving allegiance to truth.

To achieve the supreme knowledge of the Buddhas, the Master had to perfect himself through severe ordeals of suffering in his innumerable past lives. And in this Noble Quest for the highest knowledge, the highest man can ever reach, there was no streak of selfishness, no wavering whenever there arose the need to give up, to renounce and sacrifice. His heart was ever filled with sympathy for suffering humanity; and his whole quest was directed towards finding out a way for liberating mankind from its sorrows.

Throughout that noble quest of his, he held fast to truth. From whatever else he swerved in that time of travail which preceded the birth of light in his mind, he never swerved from acknowledging the truth whenever it was presented to him. He considered well before he made a promise, and once the promise was made, he was ever loyal to his word,

whatever the strain for him to abide by his promise. He held before him the thought :

“Be thou to every promise true, Refuse to promise what thou cans't not do.’

Personal comfort, personal security, personal profit—these he shunned when confronted with the Truth. Seldom was he wrong in that long period of training, but he never said that he did right when he did wrong. His speech was always truthful and in exact accord with his own actions. *Yathāvādī tathākārī*, (he) acts as he speaks; that is the salient mark of a Great Being in search of Enlightenment. He was ever a Saccavādi—upholder, utterer of Truth.

* * *

Great as his adherence to truth was his boundless compassion and goodwill towards all beings; and numerous are the instances when his compassion shone out radiantly. Consider how great was his compassion which made him to renounce the world in his last birth. He was surrounded by all princely comfort and pleasure which men prize high; he was blessed with what the material world could possibly give to man. He dwelt in beautiful palaces, partook of choicest viands, lived amidst the strains of music and the dance of women. Luxury in such lavish abundance would have stifled the spiritual yearnings of a weaker man. But with firm control of mind, he checked all inclinations to indolence and lifted it above the gilded pleasures of the palace.

His discerning mind viewed life's insecurity and discontent; he saw the misery of both the rich and the poor. The worldly poor believed that happiness was to be found in material welfare, and lived struggling to possess. The worldly rich could not rise above their wealth, clung on to it and were crushed by it. His vision developed these thoughts, and the conviction ripened with him that all was subject to suffering, —*dukkha*. "How unhappy is mankind!" he exclaimed. And this thought led him to spurn all princely comfort, power, a throne, wife and child, to live the rigorous life of the homeless ascetic in search of that path that leads men beyond all suffering. And it was this same thought that led him to wander incessantly for forty-five years bearing aloft the torch of Light in his great mission of mercy with an energy and devotion that has never been surpassed.

A biographer of the Buddha, a Christian, an avowedly adverse critic of the Master, Saint Hilaire, makes this admission: "His glory which no one can dispute is the boundless charity that filled his soul."

The great Renunciation which witnessed such sublime compassion, also reveals his indomitable courage. He was conscious of the comforts he was leaving; he saw the ordeals before him. He knew of the secure life he was abandoning, and the dire insecurity that lay ahead of him. Yet his mind was unmoved by the prospect of hardship and had no yearnings for the past. On the day he decided to renounce the world, he heard that his beloved wife had brought forth

a son. "Another fetter to break", he said, and went forth from home to homelessness. And right through those long years of trial, this power to surmount every obstacle on his path to Enlightenment grew stronger in him. Never did he spare himself in his endeavour to reach the highest.

* * *

The Buddha was born in an age of intense intellectual and spiritual activity. A time of religious unrest, a time of experimentation, of bold investigation and high achievement in the realm of man's thought. Materially too, it was no backward age. But it essentially was a time, when the things of the spirit, the things unseen ranked higher than the seen, the material and the gross. Man then knew that true development does not proceed upon outward lines, but inward; and man then had not become so materialistic as to consider experiment in spiritual life in search of Truth, as madness. Then were the hermit, the mendicant monk and the ascetic with the yellow-coloured rag-robe, more honoured than the prince or minister of state. It was round the hermit and the monk that crowds gathered with eager ears. It was in fact the sight of an ascetic in yellow grab, that showed the Master the way to solve life's misery and urged his renunciation.

Many were the schools of philosophy that flourished then. One school believed that inward development for comprehending the truth was only arrived at by starvation, by the infliction of suffering on oneself, by extreme

asceticism—*attakilamathānuyoga*. The Master lived amidst these celebrated teachers, became an adept of their philosophy and at Uruvelā subjected himself to the severest of ascetic practices with boundless enthusiasm. Very difficult for a human to undergo were the austerities he practised.

Said the Master, “Again, Sāriputta, I confess to have practised the four kinds of ascetic life and discipline. “Rigorous have I been in my ascetic discipline, rigorous beyond all others. Repulsive have I been in my ascetic practice; repulsive beyond measure. Scrupulous have I been in my ascetic life; I have practised the height of scrupulousness. Solitude have I sought in my practice of asceticism; the utmost extreme of solitude.”

He lived on herbs, fungi, roots; he wore rags from dust heaps; he never washed and allowed filth and dirt to accumulate on his body till it dropped off of itself. He lived in the haunted depths of forests, scorched in broiling summer, cold, naked and fireless in the chilly winter. He slept in charnel fields amidst putrefying corpses with charred bones for pillow.

In his abstinence from food, his endurance was yet more remarkable. He brought himself gradually to feed on one single berry a day. In the Mahāsaccaka Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya, the Master gives so humanly this moving account of the plight of his body due to his abstinence.

“Like the knotted joints of withered creepers became

all my limbs; like a buffalo's hoofs were my shrunken-buttocks, like a string of beads my protruding backbone. Like the rafters in a tumble-down roof stay askew and aslant, so crazy showed my ribs; and like the starry gleams on the waters of a deep well, so shone my gleaming eyes deep down and afar in the depths of their sockets. And as the rind of a cut gourd shrinks and shrivels in the heat, so shrank and shrivelled the scalp of my head
. and all because I ate so little. When I touched the surface of my stomach, my hand contacted the backbone; and when I felt at the backbone, my hand encountered the skin of my stomach; so closely did my belly cleave to my backbone. When I stroked my limbs to revive my body, lo did the hairs of my body fall away under my hand, rotted at their roots; and when going to nature's calls, I toppled over for very weakness and all because I ate so little."

His courage in these experiments was marvellous. And it is said that his remarkable energy and endurance was spoken of everywhere, so that his fame spread through the country 'like the sound of a great bell hung in the canopy of the skies'.

* * *

Then followed the supreme expression of strength in that last act of his struggle for light. Having realised the futility of those dire austerities, which so enfeebled both body and

mind and hindered higher mental development, he courageously abandoned them in the face of ridicule of his erstwhile admirers.

Then thinking of new paths to the goal of his search, he suddenly remembered his childhood meditation under the shade of that rose apple tree, his mind at peace, aloof from the pleasures of the senses; and he confidently felt 'Here is the way'. He took his seat of grass under the Bodhi tree at Gaya and boldly resolved "Let my flesh, bones, sinews and skin shrivel and wither and my blood dry up, yet I shall not lose strength in my endeavour. Never from this seat will I stir until I have attained full Enlightenment".

It is then that his strength was put to the severest test. For here was a battle against that terrific onslaught of the primeval desires of the human heart—the craving for existence, happiness of life, for lust and power. The most arduous struggle of all had come, but the Master sat undismayed. "Better to me is death in battle (with passions) than that I should live defeated". He summoned up all reserves of strength, and with a mind unmoved, unagitated and unsullied he routed all those hosts of Mara—thoughts of lust, hate and delusion. Cankers destroyed, mind concentrated and perception clear, he unraveled the mystery of being by the full comprehension of the Four Noble Truths. He reached the goal of his quest—unshakable deliverance of the mind, perfect insight, supreme Enlightenment. In the fullness of his wisdom, he thereupon joyously uttered:

“Seeking but not finding the House Builder, [2]
I hurried through the round of many births;
Painful is birth ever and again.
O House Builder, you have been seen;
You shall not build the house again.
Your rafters [3] have been broken up,
Your ridge pole [4] is demolished too.
My mind has now attained the unformed Nibbāna
And reached the end of every craving.”

Notes

- 1 *Bodhisatta* — ‘Enlightenment-Being’, one destined to reach Buddhahood; a future Buddha. It is here used as a designation for Prince Siddhattha Gotama and for his earlier lives.
- 2 Craving (*taṇhā*)
- 3 Passions (*kilesa*)
- 4 Ignorance (*moha*)

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