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# The Concepts of Buddha and Bodhisattva

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The present paper attempts to deal with the concepts of Buddha and Bodhisattva as they are understood philosophically rather than historically, though historical perspective cannot be divorced from the philosophical one. *Śākyamuni* or Gautama, the Buddha, is at once both a historical figure and a body of ideas. It is only the latter which is taken into consideration here. Similarly there is no reference to any particular Bodhisattva revered in the tradition. The basic objective is to put forth those ideas and ideals and beliefs and practices for which the concepts of Buddha and Bodhisattva stand. Historically the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas have lived by these ideas and ideals but the present paper only analyses the latter for pragmatic purpose so that they may be universalized and emulated in the contemporary times by strife-torn and violence-infected world. It specially focuses on the *karu!ā*-centricity of these concepts correlating them with enhancement of quality of life and achievement of excellences. *Mahākaru!ā* or universal compassion is not just to be thought over or talked about but to be translated in action through proper and adequate endeavour (upāya *kauśala*). *Mahākaru!ā*, therefore, must fructify in enhancement of quality of life and achievement of excellences (*Pāramitās*).

*Mahākaru!ā* is the starting point and motivating force of the teachings of the Buddha in the triple facets of *prajñā*, *śīla* and *samādhi*. An attempt is made here to correlate all significant Buddhist concepts and practices with *karu!ā*.

The concept of *karu!ā* or *mahākaru!ā* plays a pivotal role in the Buddhist mode of thinking and way of living. Beginning with the inevitable experience of *duṣkha* and an intense longing for its eradication, the entire Buddhist teaching has dovetailed to the advocacy of the pursuit of an enlightened course of conduct (*bodhicaryā*) which is motivated and guide by

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the altruistic feeling of *karuṇā*, an all-embracing universal love which is natural and innate in all living beings but which needs to be developed and perfected through a proper cultivation of body, will and mind.<sup>2</sup>

Buddhism has not been a speculative enterprise but a practical *darśana* of which *mahākaruṇā* has been a differential hallmark. The enlightenment of *Śākyamuni* is not theoretical in nature consisting in the formulation of a well-knit thought system, logically coherent and linguistically compact. Rather, it stands for the realization of inner and intrinsic unity and interdependent character of all beings, of the entire cosmos as the doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda* entails. The doctrine of *Dharmakāya* also implies a global outlook, a *mahaprajñā* which spontaneously issues forth in *mahākaruṇā*.<sup>2</sup>

All significant Buddhist concepts and practices centre around *mahaprajñā* (*mahābodhi*) and its dynamic aspect of *mahākaruṇā*. *Prajñā* and *karuṇā* are two facets of the same *bodhi*-situation. *Prajñā* is not abstract or barren state of existence and must blossom forth and fructify in *karuṇā*. *Prajñā* without *karuṇā* is lame and *karuṇā* without *prajñā* is blind. It may not be out of place to mention here that though highlighted in Mahāyāna Buddhism<sup>3</sup> and in other cultural traditions of India, *karuṇā* has been an ideal prescribed for emulation in all the cultural traditions of the world. But the centrality it has acquired in Buddhism is something unique which makes it attractive and fascinating.

To begin with *Śākyamuni*, the Buddha, he is the very embodiment of *karuṇā*. He possesses a loving heart which is extended to all beings without distinction. Out of compassion for all beings languishing in suffering he preached *dharma* and he did so not to a selected group of people but to the entire suffering masses. He was motivated by loving mercy for the whole universe (*sarvalokānukampā*). He loves all creatures as his own children, says

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<sup>2</sup> The word '*karuṇā*' occurs very frequently in all principal treatises of Mahāyāna tradition though it also occupies a prominent place in the Hinayāna Literature. *Karuṇā* stands for a very complex process comprising many types of feelings and hence no single word in English language can convey its full meaning. The *Mahāvīyūtpatti* discusses thirty two aspects of *karuṇā* writes Hardayal in "The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit literature" (p.24). It comprises all the *Brahma vihāras, pāramitās* etc.

<sup>3</sup> Suzuki points out that the term 'Mahāyāna' was first used to designate the highest principles, or being, or knowledge, of which the universe with all its sentient and non-sentient beings is a manifestation, and through which only they can attain final salvation (*mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa*).

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the *Saddharma puṣarīka* (228.4). The Buddha is distinguished from all other beings for his *mahākaruṇā*, for his intense longing and strenuous effort to alleviate the suffering of the masses. D. T. Suzuki in "*Outlines of Mahāyāna Buddhism*" (pp.273-4) discusses in detail how the Buddha works out the plan for universal redemption in all possible ways. The Buddha attained omniscience in order that he may deliver the world.

The Buddha is basically a *Dharmakāya*<sup>4</sup> which incorporates the unity or oneness of all existence, from which flows the eternal stream of love, compassion, sympathy and mercy. A never drying stream of *karuṇā* flows out spontaneously from the fountainhead of *Dharmakāya* which is a sustaining force but also a loving heart. It is *karuṇā* and *bodhi*. All existences are one in *Dharmakāya*. It is an organized totality of things, a principle of cosmic unity. But it is not a cold and lifeless metaphysical principle. It is an inexhaustible fountainhead of love and compassion. Suzuki (pp.233-4) describes the nature, characteristics and role of *Dharmakāya* in detail and quotes a Mahāyāna sūtra as follows :

*"With one great loving heart  
The thirsty desires of all beings he quencheth with coolness refreshing;  
With compassion, of all doth he think  
Which like space knows no bounds;  
Over the world's all creation  
With no thought of particularity he revieweth,  
"With a great heart compassionate and loving,  
All sentient beings by him are embraced;  
With means (upāya) which are pure, free from stains and all excellent,  
He doth save and deliver all creatures innumerable,  
With unfathomable love and with compassion,  
All creations caressed by him universally;  
Yet free from attachment his heart is.  
"As his compassion is great and is infinite,  
Bliss unearthly on every being he confereth,  
And himself showeth all over the universe;  
He'll not rest till all Buddhahood truly attains" (Aṭaṣaka Sūtra, Chap. 13).*

Like the Buddha, the *Bodhisattvas* are also incarnations of *karuṇā*. A

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of *dharmakāya* constitutes the central point in the Mahāyāna tradition. It is the highest principle in which the Buddhists find the ultimate significance of life.

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Bodhisattva is characterized by *bodhicitta* and *bodhicaryā* both of which are directed towards universal welfare (*Yathābhūta darśino Bodhisattoasya sattvo mahākaruṇā pravartate, Bodhicaryāvatāra pañjikā* 9. 1). A Bodhisattva, as a *kalyāṇa mitra*, exhibits his *karuṇā* chiefly by resolving to suffer the torments of others, by striving for the enlightenment of others and by postponing his own emancipation till such time every one else gets emancipation. The very thought of enlightenment is produced in him for the welfare and liberation of all living beings (*sarvamukti*). He is an 'engaged Buddhist' actively participating in social uplift. He is happy in the happiness of others and unhappy when others are unhappy. He is a manifestation of *Dharmakāya* whose all motives, efforts and actions pivot on the furtherance of universal welfare. He alleviates the suffering of others even at the cost of his own comforts. He possesses *mahākaruṇācitta* from which there is spontaneous outburst of *karuṇā* for all sentient beings without distinction or discrimination.<sup>5</sup>

A Bodhisattva is comparable to the *sthitaprajñā* of the *Bhagavadgītā* who has *samadhi* and who is *sarvabhū tahiterata*<sup>5</sup> Both are characterized by equanimity of mind, realization of similarity, and commonality of experience with all sentient beings. Benevolent temper permeates their lives in a natural way. Both are free beings but their freedom is altruistic and not self-centred. A Bodhisattva practises four psycho-physical modes of living known as *Brahma vihāras* viz. *maitri, karuṇā, muditā* and *upekṣā*, which are not to be viewed in discreteness or in isolation. Here also there is centricity of *karuṇā* and the remaining three are its correlate. *Maitri* is the basis of *karuṇā*. It stands for love, respect and care for all lives. It is lived concreteness of loving kindness based on the feeling that just as our life is precious to us, so also is the life of others. *Muditā* is altruistic sympathetic joy. It is happiness in the happiness of all. It is a consequence of *karuṇā*. *Upekṣā* is the prerequisite of *karuṇā*. It stands for compassion to all beings. It also means equanimity of mind apart from impartiality.

Like the *Brahma vihāras* all the *pāramitās*, six or ten, pertain to *karuṇā*. They are *dāna, śīla, kṣānti, vīrya, dhyāna, prajñā, upāya, praṇidhāna, bala* and *jñāna*. Out of these *dāna pāramitā* is specifically related to *karuṇā*. It consists in charity and in renunciation of the fruits of charity. *Śīla pāramitā* is related to *karuṇā* insofar as it helps in preserving *ātmabhāva* for *parārtha*. *Kṣānti*

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<sup>5</sup> The Buddhist literature abounds in stories, parables and legends pertaining to *karuṇā, tyāga, dāna* etc. exhibiting exaggerated philanthropy, self-denial, self-sacrifice etc. for universal welfare being undertaken by the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas.

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*pāramitā* stands for forbearance, tolerance, patience, endurance forgiving, non-perturbance in suffering etc. all of which provide a bedrock to *karuṇā*. Through *vīrya pāramitā* merciful acts are performed. It helps in cultivating strength for ever active altruism and inexhaustible energy for it. It comprises upāya *kauśala* in association with the four *pratisamvids* of *dharmā*, *artha*, *nirukti* and *pratibhāna*. All of them help *karuṇā* to be effective.

*Śūnyatā*, which Nāgārjuna equates with *pratītyasamutpāda*, is the central gospel of Buddhism. In the empirical context it advocates *nissvabhāvatā* of all existence. This idea is double-edged insofar as positively it implies sameness of all existence and negatively it means cultivation of *anātabhāva* which paves the way for the experience of sameness. The experience of *śūnyatā* of all existence develops a mind-set which generates a compassionate heart, arouses *karuṇā* enables one to own up the suffering of others as one's own suffering and to sacrifice one's own welfare for others. Through *bodhi* alone there is realization of *śūnyatā* of all existence, *Anātmabhāva* is the application of *śūnyatā*.<sup>6</sup>

Cultivation of selflessness, or egolessness to be precise, provides a basis for widening of the self. The doctrine of *anityatā* leads to *anātmabhāva* and this, in turn, prepares the ground for communitarian living (*saṅgha jīvana*) and this further facilitates social cohesion. Only through social cohesion suffering can be alleviated and peace realized.

One of the implications of the doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda* is interrelatedness of all existence in the ever-expanding network of relationship. This is expressed as "*sarvam sarvātmakam*". This is what the *Bhagavadgītā* has also put forth as "*Sarvabhūtasthamātmānam sarvabhūtāni cātmani* (6.29).

This idea of interrelatedness helps in transcending the distinction

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<sup>6</sup> *Śāntideva* writes.

*Mucyaṃ sattu ye te prāmedyasāgarāḥ ,  
Taireva nanu paryaptam mokṣerikena him. (X III.108).  
Ata parārtho kṛtvāpi na mado na ca vismaya  
Na vipāka phalāḥ parāthakāntaḥ. (8.10). i.e.,*

"Will not the ocean of joy that would be there when all become free be sufficient for me? What am I to do with my liberation alone? Therefore even while performing altruistic deeds I should have neither self-conceit nor amusement. I should not have any clinging to the fruits as I should long only for doing good to others."

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between 'sva' and 'para'. One who overcomes this distinction he alone can work for the totality. But one who works for the totality works for himself as well. So in selflessness there is merger of 'sva' and 'para' and this solves the problem of egoism and altruism. Out of selflessness mah2karu!2 proceeds.

In Buddhism attainment of *nirvāṇa* is the ultimate destiny and goal of all existence. Positively understood *nirvāṇa* is self-fulfilment through *karuṇā*. It consists in universal love for all beings. *Prajñā* is the intellectual aspect and *karuṇā* is the emotional aspect of *nirvāṇa*. Negatively, it is annihilation of the notion of ego, utter negation of all egoity, of all desires, of the false view of substantiality of things etc.<sup>7</sup>

As stated above, enlightenment or *nirvāṇa* lies in the effacement of the idea of individual self and in the cultivation of *anātmabhāva*. It is the widening of the self, the experience of 'Aham Brahmāsmi' and 'Tattvamasi' to use the Upaniadic language. It is the spiritual expansion of the individual and its merger in the universal. Śāntideva in *Bodhicaryāvatāra* gives a classical exposition of this state of existence as '*parātma samatā*' and '*parātma parivartana*'.

He writes,

*Parātmasamatāmādau bhāvayedeвамādarāt.*

*Sama du5kha suchā5 sarve pālayantavyā mayātmaavat* (8.90).

*and, Ātmānam cāparānścaivo ya5 śīghram trātumicchati.*

*Sa caret paramam guhyam parātmaparivartanam* (8.120).

One who has the realization of *parātma samatā* and *parātma parivartana* will argue on the basis of parity that,

*Mayāna du5kham hantaavyam du5khatvāt ātmadu5khavat*

*Anugrāhyā mayānye' pi sattvatvādātmasattvavat.*(8.94)

*Yadāmama pare4ām ca tūlyameva sukham priyam*

*Tadātmana5ko viśe4o yenātraivo sukodyama5* (8.95).

*Yadā mama pare4ām ca bhayam du5kham ca na priyam*

*Tadātmana5ko viśe4o yattam rak4āmi netaram* (8.96).

i.e., "I should dispel the suffering of others because it is suffering just like my own, and I should benefit others because they are sentient beings just like myself. When both myself and others are similar in that we wish to be happy and do not want to suffer in any way, what then is special about me?"

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<sup>7</sup> A Bodhisattva possesses the *praṇidhānas* all of which flow out of *karuṇā* (See Suzuki pp.308-10 for details). Likewise all his reflections are directed towards *karuṇā* (Suzuki pp.369-71).

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Why should I protect myself and not others?"

The same idea is found expressed in several other texts. The Śik4āsamuccaya, for example, writes in similar vein as follows:

*Yadātmana5 pare4ām ca bhayam du5kham ca na priyam  
Tadātmana5 ko viśe4o yattam rak4āmi netaram.*

Under the impact of the doctrine of *karu!ā* the theory and practice of the traditional Indian theory of *karma* received a total transformation and instead of being mechanistic and retributive it became attributive and distributive. This modification was subsequently accepted by all non-Buddhistic Indian traditions. In the changed form it attributes agency of karma to the agent but distributes the *karmaphala* to the society.<sup>8</sup> It thus advocates transfer of merit (and of demerit as well) known as *pari!āmanā*. In the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* we have a very impressive exposition of this phenomenon given by Śāntideva as follows;

*Anena mama pu!yena sarvasattv2 a\$e4ata5  
viramyā sarva pāpebhya5 kurvantu kuśalam sadā.*

i.e., Let all beings without exception be saved from sin and suffering on the basis of the merits acquired by me. Let every one be happy on that account.'

He further writes,

*Yat kiñcit jagato du5kham tataroam mayi pacyatām.  
Bodhisattva śubhai5 sarve jagat sukhtama4tuca (10.56).*

i.e., "whatever is pain and suffering in this world let it come to me. Let every one in the world be happy on account of the good deeds of the Bodhisattva."

Earlier he writes,

*Evam sarvamidam k#tvā yanmayāsāditam śubham.  
Tena syām sarvasattoānām sarvadu5 kha praśānti k#ta. (3.6).*

"Whatever good I have acquired by doing all this meritorious work, let it appease and assuage all the pains and sorrows of all living beings."

The Buddhist ethical code springs from *karu!ā* and it touches each and every form of existence. The doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda* as interdependence, interpenetration and interfusion of all phenomena and the view of *Dharmakāya* as a unity of all existence in which "In one is all and in many is

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<sup>8</sup> Insistence on there being no '*kṛtapra!āśa*' and '*ak#tābhyāgama*' gave it a retributive form, leaving no scope for grace, mercy, help and cooperation. Further, it cannot provide for a distinction between management of *karma* and management of *karmaphala* which need not be mixed up.

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one. One is identical with all and many is identical with one"<sup>9</sup> provide a solid basis for Buddhist concern for ecology. Concern for the welfare of the natural world has been an important element throughout the history of Buddhism. Recognition that human beings are essentially dependent upon and interconnected with their environment has given rise to an instinctive love and respect for nature. The Buddhist ecology is deep and global. Love of and consideration for nature has been its cornerstone. The flow of *karuṇā* does not get arrested with human species but extends to nature.

The advocacy of universal responsibility in Buddhism has vegetarianism as its corollary. *Ahimsā* and *karuṇā* imply *sarvasattvānukampā* and *sarvajīva-dayā*. It shuns killing of life of animals and plants. All life is sacred and meaningful. In Jātaka stories we find that plants and animals speak to human beings. Meat eating and killing of animals or even cutting of green trees is violative of the Buddhist spirit of *karuṇā*.

The Buddhist doctrine of *karuṇā* calls for a transvaluation of values through a paradigm shift based on an enlightened view of life and reality. It calls for a global ethics of responsibility, and mutuality. It advocates wholeness of life, realization of infinitely complex networking of relationships, living and working together in collectivity (*saṅgha*), sharing a common life with cosmic fraternity etc.

The Buddhist ideal of life has been very aptly described in the following verses quoted by Suzuki (p.53);

*"Arouse thy will, supreme and great,  
practice love and sympathy, give joy and protection.  
Thy love like unto space,  
Be it without discrimination, without limitation.  
Merits establish, not for they own sake,  
But for charity universal,  
Save and deliver all beings,  
Let them attain the wisdom of the Great Way."*

The quest after perfection and attainment of excellence in life characterise the Buddhist scheme of transvaluation of values. Life is meaningful in the pursuit of the ideal and not the actual. The meaningfulness of life consists in gradual flowering and fulfilment of one's

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in "Buddhism and Ecology" p.16, edited by Martine Batchelor and Kerry Brown.



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own being in cooperation with and through the help and support of other fellow beings. Enhancement of quality of life has been the perennial existential concern of all human beings right from eternity. All human endeavours have been prompted by and oriented towards this concern. The traditional Indian concept of *puruṣārtha* is one of the prominent formulations of this concern for quality of life.

The Buddhist view of life is opposed to the materialistic conception of human beings. It goes beyond the materialistic confinements and brings in the wider consideration of the total human being. There can be no denying of the fact that food, clothes, shelter etc. are the basic necessities of life and they must be attended to on a priority basis. They constitute the base of human existence and therefore they are of foundational value. Any consideration of quality of life must therefore begin with ensuring a minimum level of standard of food, clothes, shelter and other basic material requirements. In the absence of these human existence can be worse than that of animal. But it should also be remembered that a human being does not live by and for the sake of these alone. There are deeper concerns of life which should also be taken into account in any developmental program concerning human being. There are different levels and states of human aspirations and achievements and in a holistic program all must find due place and importance.

In the Buddhist framework no developmental program can be effective and enduring if it is one-sided, attending only to the material or spiritual. The two need to be synthesised. Nāgārjuna, a great Buddhist seer, has very perceptively stated in the *Mādhyamika kārikā* (10) that *Vyavahāramanāśritya paramārtho na dṛṣyate. Paramārthamanāgamya nirvāṇam nādhigamyate.* i.e., Without having worldly knowledge the ultimate truth is not understood and without realizing the ultimate truth nirvana can not be attained.

He further writes.

*St. Na saṣsārasya nirvāṇāt kiñcidasti viśeṣaṃ.*

*Na nirvāṇasya saṣsārāt kiñcidasti viśeṣaṃ ( xxv.19).*

*Nirvāṇasya ca yā koṣi koṣi saṣsaraṇasya ca*

*Na tayope antaram kiñcit susūkam api vidyate ( xxv.20).*

i.e., "Nothing of empirical existence is different from *nirvāṇa*, nothing of *nirvāṇa* is different from empirical existence. That which is the status of *nirvāṇa* is also the status of *samsāra*. There is not the slightest difference between the two." So there should be synthesis of science dealing with *vyavahāra* and spirituality pertaining to *paramārtha*. Science alone, which is

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built on relative knowledge, is not able to satisfy all spiritual cravings, but it is certainly able to direct us to the path of enlightenment.

Śāntideva in *Bodhicaryāvatāra* pleads for universal well-being. Every person must be able to manifest his/her capabilities through a dynamic discovery of one's potential, being assisted in this process by the society. No distinction can be made in this regard in terms of race, colour, creed, sex or country. Going a step further, and this is much more a concern of *karuṇā*, a special consideration must be given to the physically and/or mentally disabled people who are poverty-stricken. All is not well with the life of the disabled people in general and poverty-stricken slum dwelling ones in particular. Apart from the fact that they have an intrinsic dignity and legal title to exist and to unfold their capabilities in full it is also a social obligation on our part to care for them and work for their welfare. In this respect no discrimination or compromise can be made between able or disabled persons as all have similar capabilities and similar goals to pursue and realise in order to live a meaningful life, a life worthy of living. On the contrary, there should be a special display of *karuṇā*, a preferential treatment in view of their double handicap.

There is another point which must be emphasised in understanding the meaning and scope of quality of life. It concerns the individual as well as the cosmos. Since the two are interrelated, interdependent and one organic whole, one can not attempt to realize a good quality of life keeping in view an isolated individual, society, nation or region. It has to be a global vision and a universal realization without any prejudice to any one section of the universe.