

BUDDHA OR KARL MARX

“An address by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was arranged on 20th Nov. 1956, just before the conclusion of the world Buddhists Council Conference at Kathmandu. This lecture was delivered in the palace of the King of Nepal. To propagate Buddhism with all its merits in such a country as Nepal, where the Hinduism based on Maws of Manu’ was prevailing officially, was a revolutionary incident. In this speech Dr. B. R. Ambedkar stressed the basic angle to look at Buddhism.

Dr. G. P. Malalshekar (Srilanka) President, World Buddhist Council, requested Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to talk on “Non-violence in Buddhism” to which he consented. However, the majority delegates of the conference insisted upon Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to talk on “Buddha or Karl Marx”. Mr. U. Chan Htoon, former President of World Buddhist Council and Hon’ble Judge of the Supreme Court of the Union of Burma alongwith his wife escorted Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to the dais and all the delegates of the conference showed due respect to him,

Mahendra Vir Vikram Sahdeo, the King of Nepal, occupied a specially decorated chair on the dais. Hon. Chandramani Mahasthavir, G. P. Malalsekhar, Hon. Amrutanand Mahasthavir and U. Chan Htoon also occupied the dais. Initially Hon. Chandramani gave Trisaran and Panchasheela to all. Dr. G. P. Malalsekhar introduced and welcomed Dr. B. R. Ambedkar—with a garland and requested him to address the gathering.”¹

Dr. Ambedkar said,

President, Your Reverences and Gentlemen,

I am sorry that, having come to Nepal to attend the Conference, I have not been able to participate in its proceedings in the way in which a delegate ought to participate. But I am sure, most of the delegates are aware that although I am here, I am physically a very ill man, and I am quite unable to bear the stress and strain of the Conference proceedings. It is, therefore, not out of any disrespect for the Conference that I have been usually

¹: Bhikshu Sumedha, Pp. 126-127.

absent, it is because of my personal condition that I could not do justice to the task of the Conference. It is perhaps because of my absence from the Conference, I was asked by way of compensation to address you this afternoon. I consented to do that, but even here there have been surprises flung on me. I had not enough notice that I was to speak here. And when I was asked what subject I would speak on, I mentioned the subject of, Ahimsa in Buddhism. But I find that a large majority of the people attending this Conference are desirous that I should speak on "Buddhism and Communism," a subject to which I, in a very passing sentence, referred at the first general meeting. I am quite prepared to agree to the suggestion of the change of subject, although, I must say that I am not quite on the spur of the moment prepared to deal with such a large, enormous, and if I may say so, a very massive subject. It is a subject which has had half the world in grips, and I find that it has held also in its grip a large number of the student population even of the Buddhist countries. I look upon the latter aspect of the matter with grave concern. If the younger generation of the Buddhist countries are not able to appreciate that Buddhism supplies a way of life which is better than what is supplied by the Communist way of life, Buddhism is doomed. It cannot last beyond a generation or two. It is, therefore, quite necessary for those who, believe in Buddhism to tackle the younger generation, and to tell them whether Buddhism can be a substitute for Communism. It is then only that Buddhism can hope to survive. We must all remember that today a large majority of the people in Europe and a large majority of the youngsters in Asia look upon Karl Marx as the only prophet who could be worshipped. And they regard, the largest part of the Buddhist *Sangha* as nothing but the yellow peril. That is an indication which the Bhikkhus must take up, must understand, to reform themselves in order that they could be compared with Karl Marx ; and Buddhism could compete with it.

Now with this introduction, I propose to give you a few salient points in Buddhism and in Marxism or Communism in order to show you where the similarity of ideals lies and where the differences arise between Buddhism and Marxism. And thirdly, whether the Buddhist way of life of reaching the goal is a lasting one, or whether the Communist way of bringing about the goal is the lasting one. Because there is no use in pursuing a certain path, if that path, is not going to be a lasting path, if it is going to lead you to the jungle, if it is going to lead you to anarchy, there is no use pursuing it. But, if you are assured that the path you are asked to follow is slow, may be devious, may be with long detours, yet if ultimately makes you reach a safe, sound ground so that the ideals you are pursuing are there to help you, to mould your life permanently, it is much better, in my judgment, to follow the slower path, and the devious path rather than to rush up and to take what we call short cuts. Short cuts in life are always dangerous, very dangerous.

Now let me go to the subject. What is the theory of Communism? What does it start with? Communism starts with the theory that there is exploitation in the world, that the poor are exploited by the rich because of the property that they hold, and they enslave the masses, that enslavement results in suffering, sorrow, and in poverty. This is the starting point of Karl Marx. He uses the word 'exploitation'. What is the remedy that Karl Marx provides? The remedy that Karl Marx provides is that in order to prevent poverty and the suffering of one class it is necessary to remove private property. Nobody should possess private property because it is the private owner who appropriates or misappropriates. To use the technical language of Karl Marx, the surplus value which the workers produce, the worker does not get the surplus value which he produces. It is appropriated by the owner. Karl Marx asked the question why should be the owner misappropriate the surplus value which is produced by the efforts of the working man? His answer is that the only owner is the State. And it is because of this that Marx propounded the theory that there must be the dictatorship of the proletariat. That is the third proposition that Marx

enunciated. That Government must be by the exploited classes and not by the exploiting classes, which is what is meant by dictatorship of the proletariat. These are fundamental propositions in Karl Marx, which have the basis of Communism in Russia. They have undoubtedly been expanded, it has been added too, and so on. But these are the fundamental propositions.

Now let me, for a moment, go to Buddhism and see what the Buddha has to say about the points made out by Karl Marx. As I told you, Karl Marx begins with what is called exploitation of the poor. What does the Buddha say? How does he begin? What is the foundation on which he has raised the structure of His religion? The Buddha, too, 2000 or at any rate 2400 years ago, said exactly the same thing. He said, "There is *Dukkha* in the world." He did not use the word 'exploitation' but He did lay the foundation of His religion on what He called *Dukkha*. There is *Dukkha* in the world. The word *Dukkha* no doubt has been interpreted in various ways. It has been interpreted to mean re-birth, the round of life, that is *Dukkha*. I do not agree with that. I think there are lots of places in the Buddhist literature where the Buddha has used the word *Dukkha* in the sense of poverty. Therefore, so far as the foundation is concerned, there is really no difference at all.

It is unnecessary for the Buddhist people to go to Karl Marx to get the foundation. That foundation is already there, well laid. It is where the Buddha begins his first sermon—the *Dharma Chakra Pravartana Sutta*. Therefore, to those who are attracted by Karl Marx, I say, study the *Dharmachakra Pravartana Sutta* and find out what the Buddha says. And you will find sufficient satisfaction on this question. The Buddha did not lay the foundation of his religion either on God, or on Soul, or anything Supernatural like these. He laid His finger on the fact of life—people are living in suffering. Therefore, so far as Marxism or Communism is concerned, Buddhism has enough of it. And the Buddha has said it 2000 years before Marx was born.

With regard to the question of property, you will again find some very close affinity to the doctrine of the Buddha and the doctrine preached by Karl Marx. Karl Marx said that in order

to prevent exploitation, the State must own the instrument of production, that is, property. Land must belong to the State, industry must belong to the State, so that no private owner might intervene and rob the worker of the profits of his labour. That is what Marxism said.

Now, let us go to the *Sangha*, the Buddhist *Sangh*, and examine the rules of life that the Buddha laid down for the monks. What are the rules that the Buddha laid down? Well, the Buddha said that no monk shall have private property. Ideally speaking, no monk can own property. And although there might be a few lapses here and there, and I have noticed that in some countries the monks own some property, yet in the large majority of the cases the monks have no property at all. In fact, the Buddhist rules for the *Sangha* are far more severe than any rule that the Communists have made in Russia. I take it as a mute subject, nobody has yet discussed it and come to any conclusion.

What object did the Buddha have in forming the *Sangha*? Why did he do it? Going back a little into the history, when the Buddha was engaged in propagating this religion, those we today call the "*Parivrajakas*" were existing there long before the Buddha was there. The word "*Parivrajaka*" means a displaced person, a person who has lost his home. Probably during the Aryan period the different tribes of the Aryans were warring against one another as all tribal people do. Some broken tribes left, lost their moorings and they were wandering about. And it is those wanderers that were called *Parivrajakas*. The great service that the Buddha did to these *Parivrajakas* was to organise them into a body, to give them rules of life - those that are contained in the '*Vinayapitika*'. In the rules, the Bhikkhu is not allowed to have property. The Bhikkhu is allowed to have only seven things - a razer, a lota for getting water, a *Bhikshyapatra* and three *Chivaras*, and the needle for sewing things. Well, I want to know if the essence of Communism is to deny the private property, can there be any greater and more severe rule so regards private property than is found in the '*Vinayapitika*'? I do not find one. Therefore, if any people or

any youngsters are attracted by the rule contained in the Communist system of rules that there shall be no private property, they can find it here. The only question is, to what extent can this rule of denial of private property be applied to society as a whole? That is a matter of expediency, time, circumstances, development of human society. But, so far as theory is concerned whether there is anything wrong in abolishing private property, Buddhism will not stand in the way of anybody who wants to do it; because it has already made this concession in the organisation of the Buddhist *Sangha*.

Now, we come to another aspect of the matter, and that aspect is - what is the ways and means which Karl Marx or the Communists wish to adopt in order to bring about Communism? This is the important question. The means that the Communists wish to adopt in order to bring about Communism, by which I mean the recognition of *Dukkha*, and abolition of property, is violence and killing of the opposed. There lies the fundamental difference between the Buddha and Karl Marx. The Buddha's means of persuading people to adopt the principles is by persuasion, by moral teaching, by love. He wants to conquer the opponent by inculcating in him the doctrine that love and not power can conquer anything. That is where the fundamental difference lies - that the Buddha would not allow violence, and the Communists do. No doubt the Communists get quick results; because when you adopt the means of annihilating men, they do not remain to oppose you.

You go on with your ideology, you go on with your ways of doing things. The Buddha's way, as I said, is a long way, perhaps some people may say, a tedious way. But I have no doubt about it that it is the surest way.

There are two or three questions which I have always asked my communist friends to answer and which, I must frankly say they have not been able to answer. They establish by means of violence what they call the dictatorship of the proletariat. They deprive all people who have property, of their political rights. They cannot have representation in the legislature. They cannot have right to vote, they must remain what they call second grade subjects of the State, the ruled, not

sharing authority or power. When I asked them, "Do you agree that dictatorship is a good method of governing people"? They say, "No, we don't, we don't like dictatorship". Then we say, "How do you allow it?" But they say, "This is an interim period in which dictatorship must be there." You proceed further and ask them, "What is the duration of this interim period? How long? Twenty years ? Forty years ? Fifty years ?" No answer. They only repeat that the proletarian dictatorship will vanish, somehow automatically.

Very well, let us take the thing as it is that dictatorship will vanish. Well, I ask a question, "What will happen when dictatorship disappears ? What will take its place ? Will men not need Government of some sort ?" They have no answer.

Then we go back to the Buddha and ask this question in relation to his Dhamma. What does he say ? The greatest thing that the Buddha has done is to tell the world that the world cannot be reformed except by the reformation of the mind of the man, and the mind of the world. If the mind is changed, if the mind accepts the Communist system and loves it loyally and carries it out, it is a permanent thing, it does not require a soldier or a police officer to keep a man in order. Why ? The answer is : The Buddha has energized your conscience itself that is acting as a sentinel in order to keep you on your path. There is no trouble when the mind is converted the thing is permanent.

The Communist system is based on force. Supposing tomorrow the dictatorship in Russia fails, and we see signs of its failure, what would happen ? I really like to know what would happen to the Communist system. As I see it, there would be bloody warfare among the Russian people for appropriating the property of the State. That would be the consequence of it. Why ? Because they have not accepted the Communist system voluntarily. They are obeying it because they are afraid of being hanged. Such a system can take no root, and therefore in my judgment unless the Communist are able to answer these questions, what would happen to their system ? When force disappears, there is no use pursuing it. Because, if the mind is not converted, force will always be necessary, and this is what

I want to say in conclusion that one of the greatest things I find in Buddhism is that its system is a democratic system. The Buddha told the Vajjis when the Prime Minister of Ajata Satru went to tell the Buddha, that Ajata Satru wanted to conquer the Vajjis, He said, the King won't be able to do it as long as the Vajjis follow their ways of their age-old system. The Buddha for unknown reasons did not explain in plain terms what he meant. But there is no doubt about it that what he was referring to was the democratic and the republican form of government, which the Vajjis had. He said : so long as the Vajjis were following their system, they would be unconquered. The Buddha, of course, was a great democrat.

Therefore, I say, and may I say so if the President will allow me, I have been a student of politics; I have been a student of economics, I was a professor of Economics, and I have spent a great deal of time in studying Karl Marx, Communism and all that, and I have also spent good deal of time in studying the Buddha's Dhamma. After comparing the two I came to the conclusion that Buddha's advice with regard to the great problem of the world, namely, that there is *Dukkha*, that *Dukkha* must be removed, that the Buddha's method was the safest and the soundest.

Thus, do I advice the younger generation of the Buddhist countries to pay more attention to the actual teachings of the Buddha. If I may say so in conclusion if any peril arises to the Dhamma, in a Buddhist country the blame shall have to be cast upon the *Bhikkhus*, because I personally think that they are not wholly discharging the duty which devolves on them. Where is the preaching? The *Bhikkhu* is living in his cloister taking his meal, one meal no doubt and sitting quietly : probably he is reading, and most probably I find them sleeping, and in the evening having a little music. That is not the way of propagating religion.

My friends, I want to tell you, I do not want to criticise anybody; but religion, if it is to be a moral force for the regeneration of society, you must constantly din it into the ears of the people. How many years has a child to spend in School?

You do not send the child to school on a day and then withdraw the child home and expect the child to grow into learning, to get education. The child has to go to School every day, sit there for five hours and study constantly. It is then, and then alone that the child gets somewhat saturated with what is called knowledge and what is called learning. Here the monastery is not a state. The *Bhikkhus* do not call the people to the monasteries on any single day and deliver sermon to them on some subject or moral education. I have never seen it.

I went to Ceylon and I told some people that was particularly anxious to see how the *Bhikkhus* preach. They told me that they have got '*Bona*', *Bana* some word they use which, I subsequently learnt meant, '*Vanaka*'. They took me at 11 O' clock to one place, to small little square thing as big as this, a table and I sat on the ground. A *Bhikkhu* was brought in. Several men and women brought water and washed his feet and he came up and sat there. He had a fan with him, you see, Gods only know what he said, of course, he must have preached in Singhalese. It was not more than two minutes, and after two minutes he departed.

You go to Christian Church, what happens ? Every week people assemble there. They worship, and some priest delivers a sermon on some subject from the Bible in order to remind the people what Jesus told them that they should do. You will be probably surprised, to know that 90 per cent of Christianity is copied from Buddhism both in substance and in form. You go to Rome, see the main Church and you will be reminded of the big temple which is known as '*Viswa Karma*' at Berut.

Vishabigne, who wrote a book on Buddhism, and was a missionary in China, had expressed his great surprise as to how this similarity occurs between Buddhism and Christianity. So far as the outlook, he dared not say that the Buddhist copied Christian, but he would not admit that the Christians copied Buddhism. There is so much of it, I think time has turned and we must now copy some of the ways of the Christians in order to propagate our religion among the Buddhist people. They must be made aware, every day and all time, that the Buddha's Dhamma is there, standing by them like a policeman to guard lest they

should go the wrong way. Without that this religion will remain probably in a very decadent state. Even now that I find it even in the Buddhist countries, its condition is very decadent. But its influence is there. No doubt about it.

I wanted to tell you one very interesting epilogue which I saw in Burma. I went to Burma. I was called for the Conference and they took me to show how they were going to reconstruct the villages. I was very happy. I went with them and the Committee had planned to reform the village. Their streets as usual were crooked, bent here and there, nothing systematic. So the Committee put down iron pillars and lined ropes that this street must go this way. In good many cases I found that the lines drawn by the Committee went across a piece of land which was owned by a private individual. When I went and saw and I asked them, "How are they going to manage ? Have you got money to pay for the property that you are going to take ?" They said, "Nobody wants money." Everybody said, "If you want it, take it." Why is this ? Why in my country there would have been bloodshed if you take a little piece of land from somebody without giving him compensation. But there it is, why ? Why were the Burmese so free with their property ? Why did they not care for it ? It is because the Buddha has taught "*Sarvam Anityam*." Everything you see, is impermanent. Why Tight for impermanent things ? It is all right if you want the land, take it.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I do not think I can continue any further, nor is it necessary for me to do that.

I just wanted to give you a point of view from which to look at. Do not be allured by Communist successes. I am quite confident that if we all become one tenth as enlightened as the Buddha was, we can bring about the same result by the methods of love, of justice, and good will. Thank you very much."¹



¹ : Report of the 4th Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, Kathamandu, Nepal.