

Sir Edwin Arnold's Poem 'The Light of Asia': A Philosophical Reading

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Abstract :

Lord Gautam Buddha is the founder of Buddhism. He was a prince and the next king of the Sakyas. His parents king Suddhodana, and Maya the Queen came to know that their son 'wilt preach the Law and save all flesh'. Though the king tried hard to divert his son's mind but he couldn't success. Prince Siddharth became the Buddha. And Lord Buddha's teaching made him immortal. Many things have been said and discussed about his principles and life. His principles seem to be ageless. They are having life-giving and life-saving essence. 'The Light of Asia' of Sir Edwin Arnold is an attempt to depict the Buddha's life and teaching in poetic form. And the present paper is also an effort to point out the principles of Buddha. It aims at philosophy of Lord Buddha and how this philosophy is unique in the world.

There is no doubt that reading a poem is a process, none of us reads a poem exactly like other. Undoubtedly, Sir Edwin Arnold's (1832-1904) 'The Light of Asia' (1879) is a classic poem in English. It is written in blank verse and divided into eight books. In this poem Sir Edwin Arnold, in his own words, he attempted 'by the medium of an imaginary Buddhist votary, to depict the life and character and indicate the philosophy of that noble hero and reformer, Prince Gautama of India, the founder of Buddhism'.¹

The paper in an attempt to trace those philosophical aspects which are not only changed the lives of millions of people but also helped human societies, through the ages, all over the world, to achieve the highest and ultimate goal of life that is sublime pleasure and the truth about Nature and the cause of human suffering.

The first step, for any critical study, it is necessary to ascertain what literary type or genre we are dealing with and what particular kind of it. This foremost step's answer is very necessary, because different literary genres are judged according to different merit of standards. In this regard, the present poem does have the elements of epic. Like-it is a long narrative poem in blank verse, it tells the tale of a single hero as well as group involved in a great historical event. It is legendary story of Lord Buddha and involves divine as well as human characters. It has a national and communal dimension and at the same time it tells a story of collective history of ancient India. The poet collected and read existed scattered materials for his poem and formed a splendid whole. The events of this poem are magnified by the poet's own sheer imagination but some of them undoubtedly belong to actual history. He observed three facets of the life of the Buddha blended into one and stated that 'who (the Buddha) united the truest princely qualities with the intellect of a sage and the passionate devotion of a martyr'.²

As it is a philosophical reading we must understand the term 'philosophy'. The English word, 'philosophy', is derived from two Greek words 'Philein' and 'Sophia' which mean 'to love' and 'wisdom' or 'knowledge' respectively. So etymologically philosophy means to love wisdom or knowledge. It is both the seeking of wisdom and the wisdom sought. In Indian thought philosophy is called *darsāna*, vision of truth. In short, the aim of philosophy should be to find out the ultimate truth. The Pali word 'ditthi' stands for philosophy and literally means 'a view'. And there are two kinds of view are distinguished: wrong view (*micchā ditthi*) and Right view (*sammā ditthi*).

As far as this poem is concerned it is a poetical philosophy of the Buddha. Buddha about whom it is said 'his mere presence brought peace to souls in anguish and that those who touched his hands or garments momentarily forgot their pain; evil passions fled at his approach and men whose dull unimaginative lines had been a mode of death arose, as it were, from their living graves when he passed by'.³ At every page and line of this poem we can see presence of Buddha. This could be proved by the mere citation from Book the Seventh, and make clear the above statement. In reply to Princess Yasôdhara, Tripusha and Bhallak narrate what they heard and seen under the Bodhi-tree at Gaya. Tripusha says:

'The hearts of men follow his path as leaves
Troop to wind or sheep draw after one
Who knows the pastures.'
-Book The Seventh, 115-117.

Wherever Buddha went people from all walks of life followed him and His Middle Path among them were kings, queens, knights, princes, princess bandits, rishis, sudras and many more. Such was the Buddha's magic.

This poem conveys a strong moral message. As it is well-known that Greek critic such as Plato emphasized morals and utilitarianism in literature. Horace stressed that literature should be delightful and instructive. Samuel Johnson opines that the larger function of literature is to teach morality and to probe philosophical issues. All these views and considerations are to be found in this poem. The poet praised Buddha in these words:

'.....a teacher of the wise,
World-honoured, holy, wonderful; a Buddha
Who both deliver men and save all flesh
By sweetest speech and pity vast as Heaven':
-Book the Seventh, 72-75.

Among different kinds of philosophical systems in the world, Buddhism occupies a unique place it is not a philosophy as philosophy per se. Since it is practical philosophy it has not engaged in mere speculation on man and his destiny. It points out a way for his perfection, which is to be practiced in his day today life. It is a philosophy with a tinge of morality influencing man's conduct. Man is at the center of Buddhist philosophy. Many points of Buddhism is well cited by Professor Max Müller as:

"His life is flawless. His constant heroism is equal to his conviction and if the theory he sets forth is false, the personal examples he gives are irreproachable. He is the living model of all the virtues he preaches, his abnegation, his charity his unchanging gentleness never fail for even a moment. Silently he prepared his doctrine, in six years of retreat and meditation; he propagates it solely by the power of the word and of persuasion for more than half a century, and when he dies in the arms of his disciples it is with the serenity of a sage who has practised goodness all his life and is assured of having found the Truth."⁴

The Truth that the Buddha found after having Sujata's meal at Gaya under the Bodhi tree through deep thinking and defeating the army of 'the Ten chief sins'- 'Mara's mighty ones such as, lust, pride, kama, laziness, hate, doubt, etc., is marvelous. How Siddhartha overcome all these sins while in His deep thinking, the poet writes:

'But Buddh needed not,
Sitting serene, with perfect virtue walled,
As is a stronghold by its gates and ramps;'

-Book the Sixth, 393-395

The poet described Buddha's Enlightenment in this way:

'In the third watch,
The earth being still, the hellish legions fled,
A soft air breathing from the sinking moon,
Our Lord attained samma-sambuddh; and further he says:

'And in the middle watch, Our Lord attained *Abhidjna*-insight vast
Ranging beyond this sphere to spheres unnamed,
System, on system countless world and suns.....' and
'when the fourth watch came the secret came
Of sorrow, which with evil mars the law', here the Buddha got remedy for human suffering, the Four "Noble Truths".

Now, I would like to comment on the Four Noble Truth and The Eightfold Path. There is a beautiful and figurative description has been given in Book the Eighth. Actually, the core of Buddha's philosophy is his Noble Truths and The Eightfold Path. The First Noble Truth is 'Sorrow or Dukkha (Suffering) In Buddhism the entire teaching is just the understanding of dukkha, the unsatisfactory nature of all phenomenal existence, and the understanding of the way out of this situation. In the early Buddhist scriptures, the word dukkha is used in the sense of psychological, physical and philosophical. On the basis of this, there are three aspects of suffering : 1) suffering in its most obvious form (*dukkh-dukkhatā*) 2) suffering or the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned states (*Sankhārā-dukkhatā*) and 3) suffering caused by change (*viparināma dukkatā*)⁵. And in His formulation of the Noble Truth of suffering , the Buddha says, the five aggregates of clinging are suffering ' . And they are: the first is the matter (*rūpā kkhandhā*), it contains the four Great Primaries i.e. Pathavi, āpo, tejo, vāyo; the second is feeling or sensation (*vedanā kkhandha*). It is threefold: pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral; the third is perception (*sanna kkhandha*) its function is recognition (*sanna kkhandha*) its function is recognition (*samjanana*) of objects both physical and mental; the fourth is Mental (volition) Formation (*Samkhara kkhanda*). All mental factors are included in this group. And the last and fifth Aggregates is Consciousness (*Vinna kkhandha*). Sir Edwin Arnold paints the picture of pain in the poem in these words:

'Ache of the birth, ache of the helpless days,
Ache of hot youth and ache of manhood's prime;
Ache of the chill grey years and choking death,
These fill your piteous time'.

-Book the Eighth,-334-337

The Second Noble Truth is ‘Cause of Suffering’. And it is none other than craving (*tanhā*). The craving is threefold, namely: craving for Sense pleasures (*Kama-tanhā*), craving for continued existence, for becoming (*Vibhava-tanhā*), and craving for non-existence, for self-annihilation (*Vibhava-tanhā*). Thus, it is clear that suffering is the effect of craving which is the cause. And poet rightly depicted that:

‘So flameth, Trishana, lust and thirst of things.
Eager ye cleave, to shadows, dote on dreams;
A false Self in the midst ye plant, and make
A world around which seems:’

-Book the Eighth,-354-357

The Third Noble Truth is the ‘Cessation of Suffering’ (‘Sorrow’s Ceasing’). And this can only happen if we destroy craving, which is the root cause. It is called ‘peace’. For ‘Eternal Beauty’ and ‘for pleasure’ we must cease our cravings. The Buddha also says that ‘we must extirpate: the complete cessation (nirodha), giving up (cago), abandoning (patinissaggo), release (mutti) and detachment (analaya) from that very craving’⁶. In the poem these things mentioned in other ways like:

‘Of perfect service rendered, duties done
In charity, soft speech, and stainless days.
These riches shall not fade away in life,
Nor any death dispraise.
Then sorrow ends, for Life and Death have ceased’;

-Book the Eighth,-382-386

The Fourth Noble Truth is The Way that is the Middle Path (Majjhima – Patipada). The Middle path is to be followed for the ending of suffering . This Path is called middle because it lies between the two extreme paths of ‘Self-indulgence’ (Kamsukhallikanu-yoga) and ‘Self-mortification’ (attakilamanthanu-yoga). This path consists of eight factors. The Path is described in terms of three aggregates consisting of Morality (Sila), Concentration (Samadhi), and Wisdom (Panna). The poet describes it as: ‘So is the Eightfold Path which brings to peace;

By lower or by upper heights it goes.
The firm soul hastes, the feeble tarries.
All will reach the sunlit snows’.

-Book the Eighth,402-405.

These Eight ways of path are-

- 1) Right Understanding (Doctrine): It means the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths: Suffering, cause of suffering, Cessation of suffering and Noble Eight fold Path. The entire *Sammaditthi-Sutta* and the *Majjhima-Nikaya* is devoted to the explanation of Right Understanding.
- 2) Right Thought : It deals with renunciation or giving up of sensual pleasure nurturing love and good will without any kind of anger and hatred; and practicing amity and concord abstaining from violence.

3) Right Speech (Discourse): It is the practice of correct speech. ‘Govern the lips’, is what the poet says. One should avoid lying (musavada) and adhering to truth; to abstain from tale-bearing or back-biting (pisuna vacca). Our words must be ‘Tranquil and fair and courteous’ so we can win the heart of others.

4) Right Action (behaviour) : It deals with abstinence of three kinds of bodily misconduct: taking life, theft and misappropriation, and sexual misconduct. In this regard the poet writes: ‘.....Let each act

Assoil a fault or help a merit grow;
Like threads of silver seen through crystal beads
Let love through good deeds show’

-Book the Eighth,-418-421

5) Right Livelihood: It means to reject wrong kind of living. Wrong livelihood means to earn wealth by devising ways and means detrimental to good people.

6) Right Effort: It consists of the four great efforts. They are : to prevent the arising of unwholesome thoughts that have not yet arisen ; to abandon unwholesome thoughts that have already arisen ; to develop wholesome thoughts that have not yet arisen; and to maintain wholesome thoughts that have already arisen by one who practices the path of Emancipation.

7) Right Mindfulness : It deals with four kind of contemplation : contemplation of the body (Kayanupassna) of Sensation (Vedanupassana) , of mind (Cittanupassana) and of mind- objects (dhammanupassana).

8) Right Concentration : It is the attainment of meditative absorptions (Jhana). There are five obstacles in the path of deliverance. Through meditation we can overcome these obstacles. They are: ‘desire for sensual pleasure (Kamacchhands), ill will (Vyapada), sloth and torpor (thina - Middha), restlessness and worry (Uddhacca-Kukkucca) and skeptical doubt (Vicikiccha)⁷. This is the Eightfold Path. And when someone walks on this Path he wins. The poet aptly described this in these words:

‘To such commencement hath the first stage touched;
He knows the Noble Truths’, the Eightfold Road;
By few or many steps such as shall attain

NIRVANA’S blest abode’.

- Book the Eighth, 442-445

Beside this Buddha also taught the ‘Ten observances’ that is the Dasa-sil and how a mendicant must know the Three Doors and the Triple Thoughts ; The Six fold States of Mind ‘the Fivefold Powers; The Eight High Gates of Purity; the Modes of Understanding ; Iddhi Upeksha; the Five Great Meditations. Thus he laid the great foundation of Sangha well. When we study the Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path and other principles of Buddha in the light of philosophy, we come to conclusion that the original meaning of philosophy is to embrace or love all knowledge and wisdom is really fulfilled. As I earlier mentioned that man is at the center of Buddha’s teaching this philosophy helps man to attain bliss and calm. As philosophy developed certainly