

## **The Enlightenment of Buddha**

**Presidential Address of His Excellency the Governor of Sikkim, Shri. Balmiki Prasad Singh at Global Buddhist Congregation (November 27-30, 2011) New Delhi.**

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Let me at the outset greet each one of you assembled in this ancient and yet modern city of New Delhi, the capital of India. I hope your stay is comfortable and that your deliberations will be fruitful.

As I rise to give the Presidential address, I find that my job is both easy and difficult. It is easy for everything that was required to be said has already been shared with you. It is difficult since as the President of this august congregation, I am also required to summarize statements made here this morning by nineteen speakers and say something of my own. I have, therefore, in the highest Buddhist tradition decided to adopt the middle path approach.

We are meeting today to celebrate the 2600<sup>th</sup> year of the Enlightenment of Lord Buddha. I thank the Chairman and the organizers for inviting me to preside over this historic Global Buddhist Congregation, 2011. I also acknowledge the seminal contribution made by Ashoka Mission, New Delhi in organizing this event under the leadership of Ven. Lama Lobsang.

The enlightenment of Gautama at Bodh Gaya was an epoch making event of tremendous significance to humankind. It made a huge impact on human consciousness and changed the future course of history both in India and outside. It is no wonder that a fifth of the world's population today seeks to follow Buddha's teachings with devotion and dedication and the remaining ones are increasingly getting attracted to the Buddhist thoughts. This sentiment had been best captured by the renowned Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore when he wrote "*the world was not conquered by Alexander but by Buddha*". For Lord Buddha was no ordinary light. His indeed is the light of eternal value.

It is instructive to recall his journey towards enlightenment and its nature and content. It may be recalled that at the age of 19 years this prince of

Sakya tribe and Gautama clan was married to Princess Yasodhara and was later blessed with a son, Rahul. However, at the age of 29, Siddhartha left his home and his infant son to seek enlightenment and peace – a task that was not precisely known to him nor was ever articulated in any scripture or folktale.

Gautama received instructions from gurus at Vaishali and Rajagriha and later practiced penances and austerities at Uruvela (near Gaya) for six years but without any results. It was, however, at Bodh Gaya after a period of seven weeks' continuous meditation, sitting under a peepal tree, that Siddhartha obtained supreme enlightenment at the age of thirty-five. That historic night, the Sakyamuni experienced a profound inner transformation. He also felt that he has understood a set of truth that are integral to the deepest structure of existence. Thereafter, he became the Buddha or the Enlightened One. He went on to Sarnath where he preached his first sermon to five Brahmins who had been his companions for six years at Uruvela. His preachings are well known as *dharma-chakra pravartana* (setting in motion the wheel of law).

The five holy men of Sarnath who received these instructions became Buddha's first followers. In

the remaining forty-five years of his life, Buddha travelled around north India teaching the masses and debating with many other religious teachers the four noble truths, the eightfold path, and dharma. Buddha always spoke in the people's language Prakrit and not in Sanskrit. Many people became his followers but stayed with their jobs, homes and families. These lay followers provided food and shelter for other who decided, like Buddha, to give up ordinary life and become wandering monks wearing saffron robes. The community of monks and nuns became known as the *sangha*.

The story of the Enlightenment of Buddha, as stated a little while ago, spread rapidly. Buddha's impressive personality, use of the common people's language, and his communication skills made his gospel spread fast. It is another matter that Buddha's dialogue and discussions were recorded well after his *mahapari nirvana* in Pali and these formed the basis of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam where the Hinayana form of Buddhism prevails. Similarly, some hundred years after Buddha, several scholars recorded the Buddhist precepts and practices in Sanskrit. These Sanskrit writings of Buddhist scholars in India spread to China, Japan, and

Central Asia and provided the kernel for the growth of the Mahayana form of Buddhism.

For purposes of our discussion in this Conference, we need to view Buddha's contribution in the perspectives of middle path approach, dharma, compassion, rationalism and non-violence.

### **The Middle Path Approach**

The doctrine of the middle path, which emphasizes moderation in all things, accommodation of antithetical points of view, and primacy of a common-sense approach, is not without its possible misuses. To arrive at the middle path is not to effect a compromise but to attain a harmonious view among conflicting interpretations. This is a difficult task. At a deeper level, it denotes unity of mind and thought.

Buddha's middle way has also received treatment subsequently from the point of view of logic and philosophy. The most significant among them is that of Nagarjuna who lived in south India in approximately the second century and founded the

Madhyamika, or middle path schools of Mahayana Buddhism. Our view of the middle path, however, relates to matters of practical relevance in day-to-day life and not to high logic or philosophy.

Buddha provided an institutional mechanism for the ‘*sangha*’—the Buddhist order of *bhikkus*—to help establish the supremacy of *dharma* in public life. In the ‘*sangha*’, compassion and kindness would be the guiding factors along with discipline, meditation, holding frequent assemblies, showing respect to the senior *bhikkus*, and so on. A famous saying is as follows:

*Buddhamsharanamgacchāmi.*  
*Dharmamsharanamgacchāmi.*  
*Sanghamsharanamgacchāmi.*

(I go for refuge to the Buddha, to the Dharma, and to the Sangha.)

In Buddha’s conception of *dharma*, there was no place for priest-craft and ritualism. This was a clear departure from the Vedic era. Several of the rituals and ceremonies associated with the Vedic value system and practised by the common people at the time of birth, marriage, death, harvesting and

particularly animal sacrifices and food offerings disappeared.

### **Compassion**

Love and kindness are the very basis of society. Hatred, the Buddha said, was never appeased by more hatred—it could only be defused by friendship and sympathy.

Our ordinary sense of love and compassion is actually very much involved with attachment. The deep feeling of compassion and love for one's own wife or husband, parents, and children is related to attachment, and has a very limited circle. Again it is centred on familial relationship—because they are my mother, my father, my children, I love them. In contrast to this is a clear recognition of the importance and rights of others. Developed from that viewpoint, compassion will reach even enemies.

Compassion is the real essence of religion. All religions emphasize betterment, improvement of human beings, a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood, and love. If one can practise compassion, then the essence of religion is automatically followed, whether it is the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, or Islamic way. The important thing is that in daily life one must

practise the essentials of religion—non-violence, love, and compassion—and on that level there is hardly any difference between Buddhism, Christianity, or any other religion.

### **Rationalism**

Lord Buddha attached great importance to rational enquiry than perhaps any other religious leader in history. The Buddha says in a sutra:

*Monks and scholars should*

*Well analyse my words,*

*Like gold (to be tested through) melting, cutting  
and polishing,*

*And then adopt them, but not for the sake of  
showing me respect.*

By this Buddha meant that even if a particular doctrine is set forth in scriptures, one must examine whether or not it meets the test of reasoning. If it comes in conflict with reasoning, or is at variance with new realities, it is no longer appropriate to assert its primacy and to follow its dictates. This applies to Buddha's sayings as well.



A fundamental change in attitude is necessary. Basically a Buddhist attitude on any subject must be one that accords with the facts. If, upon investigation, one finds that there is reason and proof for a point, then one should accept it. That is not to say that there are not certain points that are beyond human powers of deductive reasoning—that is a different matter. However, when we investigate certain descriptions as they exist in sacred texts and we find that they do not correspond to reality, then one must accept the reality, and not the literal scriptural explanation.

Lord Buddha, like Socrates, was never content to accept traditional certainties as final, however august they might be. Socrates questioned everything, infecting his interlocutors with his own perplexity, this being the beginning of new ideas and institutions. In a similar fashion, Buddha believed that every individual must find the truth in his own way and should question everything even Buddha's own words and sayings. This new rationality had no place for blind faith.

### **Non-violence**

According to Buddhism, non-violence is not just the absence of violence, rather it is a positive mode of attitude and action that gives life

constructive shape and further entails goodness for others and oneself. All non-violent actions are motivated by compassion and altruism. Such an attitude not only restrains the person from indulging in violence but driven by the force of love and compassion, also makes him strive to benefit other beings to the utmost extent, both in terms of quantity and quality. The eightfold path enables one to lead a constructive non-violent way of life.

Non-violence is a fundamental teaching of Buddhism. Buddha's thinking was clear about the wider application of non-violence. He would spend hours in the forest alone, reflecting on the power of benevolence. He stated:

*Buddha insists on an active and systematic cultivation of the spirit of goodwill for all kinds and conditions of men and even for animals and other sentient creatures.*

It is our moral responsibility to be concerned for the well-being of all sentient beings. By developing a sincere kind heart, we can make this world a better place to live in. A good heart is the true source of all happiness. To resort to a weapon is

the easiest way one can think of protecting oneself as it is the direct consequence of fear and a sense of enmity. Compassion and a good heart transcend the realm of enmity where the weapon has no place. Living a life with non-violence is the most constructive approach towards harmonious living.

### **India and Buddhism**

Ladies and gentlemen, Buddhism was entirely a product of India. For Buddhism found its highest expressions in India in terms of literature and institutions such as monasteries and universities. The Nalanda University set up in Bihar in the fifth century BCE became the premier centre of Buddhist learning in the world and served develop several systems of knowledge till it was destroyed by the invader, Bhaktiyar Khilji's forces in 1193. Another renowned centre was raised at Taxsila (now in Pakistan) which too was destroyed in the fifth century CE. Vikramashila University also in Bihar set up and developed during the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries became another significant place of learning. Scholars from distant lands came to study and reflect in these universities. Even today the Nalanda school is associated with various branches of humanity studies.

Mahatma Gandhi, on several occasions, hailed Buddha as a true Hindu. He felt that if we had accepted Buddha's social philosophy there could have been no untouchability in India. This is true. Besides, I also believe that if we had followed the rationalist approach of Buddha in letter and spirit, there would have been no illiteracy in our land.

Mystics and monks, poets and musicians, painters and sculptors, historians and philosophers of all ages have been expressing themselves on the Buddha's fascinating journey towards Enlightenment, the content of Enlightenment itself, and his thoughts and precepts. In the process several folklores and folktales have been weaved and some of these have flourished over the millennia. Each generation of Indians would have something of the Buddha etched in his memory.

As a college student, I was greatly attracted by the voyage of Siddhartha and often contemplated upon as to what inspired him as a Maharajkumar and young householder to undertake this seemingly impossible task. Maithili Sharan Gupt, a popular Indian poet of my time, deeply influenced by the *Ramayana*, compared Siddhartha's quest with the journey of Lord Ram from his palace in Ayodhya to

the forest to spend fourteen years at the behest of his father.

Today I know that the comparison between Lord Ram and Lord Buddha is not apt and somewhat limited. For Siddhartha was alone in this journey while Lord Ram was accompanied by his wife and brother. Lord Ram had a prescribed period of forest dwelling as ordered by his father while Buddha's journey had no time-frame but only fulfillment of a mission that he had set before himself and so on. And yet the following lines of Maithili Sharan Gupt are still part of my consciousness. I recall it before you today from memory acquired five decades ago. It would read as follows :

हेरामतुम्हारावंशजात,  
सिदार्थतुम्हारीभांतितात,  
घरछोडचलाहैआजरात,  
आशीषउसेदोलोप्रणाम,  
हेक्षणभंगुरभवराम, राम !!

**The World We Live in and the Buddhist response**

The world is facing enormous challenges of poverty, of illiteracy, of disease and malnutrition of children, of environmental degradation, of climate change, of unemployment, of inequality and exploitation, of atomic weapons and many more.

These challenges require urgent attention. But the world we live in is mired with senseless violence, suicide squads, terrorism, and crime. It raises the question which can be called in simple terms: *How to live?*

It needs to be realized that in our current global society, it is no longer possible to lead an isolated life. People of different faiths and belief live together. It is, therefore, necessary to understand each other's needs, aspirations, faiths, and belief practices. We have to learn to live together in concord in spite of traditional differences of religion, civilization, nationality, class and race. To accomplish this, we have to know each other, which include knowing each other's past. We must learn to recognize and, as far as possible, understand the different cultural configurations in which human nature has expressed itself in different religions, civilizations and nationalities.

Scholars are re-examining the history of the Buddhist doctrine in the light of modern ideas. Buddha has been considered a rationalist, an empiricist, and a social prophet, and the dharma an ideology for a new age. For Buddha in his teachings spread over long forty-five years never deviated from human nature and natural surroundings. He would emphasize that even Nirvana was natural to human experience. Modernists feel strongly about the social role that Buddhism can play. In India, for example, a crusade was initiated in 1958 against the caste theory of untouchability. The solution was presented in the form of a return to Buddhism. This makes it clear that individuals who would experience cruelty at the hands of some forms of institutional religious practices would be welcome to move to Buddha's teachings of *Karuna* and love.

Buddha's scrupulous empiricism, his demand for intellectual and personal independence, his belief in dialogue, his insistence on the 'middle path' are useful beacons to solve our present problems. We may not be able to fully practice the method he prescribed or raise ourselves to the level of his conduct but one can certainly move towards building institutions and supporting individuals that make for a

truly compassionate political and social architecture as called for in the *Bahudha* approach.

The Buddhist approach of the middle path, of non-violence, of love and compassion, influences people of a large number of countries in the world. Buddhist approach of rational self-enquiry also enables a person to achieve a higher state of discipline and harmony beyond narrow sectarian and national prejudices. All these become axiomatic when seen in the light of the well-known Buddhist maxim: '*Be a lamp unto yourself*' (*AppaDeepoBhav*).

At a personal level, I have found Lord Buddha very attractive. For Buddha helps you travel nearer to realization of your own divinity. He makes the spiritual life both adventurous and attractive. A mere contemplation of his thoughts create fresh interests in service of the ignorant and the needy, to work for non-violent and peaceful community and all these, in turn, generate new joys in human hearts.

Let the ideas and precepts of love and compassion, of peace and non-violence, which are integral to the Enlightenment of Lord Buddha guide us in resolution of our modern day problems and in construction of a harmonious world.



I thank you for your attention.

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**His Excellency Shri Balmiki Prasad Singh**  
Governor of Sikkim

Shri Balmiki Prasad Singh is a distinguished scholar, thinker and public Servant. H.E. the Governor was born on January 1, 1942 in Bihar. He was educated in a village school and subsequently at the Universities of Patna and Oxford. He passed his M.A. in Political Science from Patna University, Patna, standing first in first class with record marks and several gold medals. He became a lecturer in Political Science in Patna University at the age of nineteen.

Shri B.P. Singh was appointed to the elite Indian Administrative Service (IAS) in 1964. He has since been the recipient of several awards and fellowships, including the Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship (1982-84) and Gulzari Lal Nanda Award for Outstanding public service from the President of India.

Over the past four decades Shri B.P. Singh has held a variety of important positions within Assam as well as in the Government of India. He was Additional Secretary, Ministry of Environment and Forests (1993-95), Culture Secretary (1995-97) and Home Secretary (1997-99) in Government of India.

As an international civil servant, Shri B.P. Singh served as Executive Director and Ambassador at the World Bank during 1999-2002 representing India, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and was one of the founder members of the Development Gateway Foundation (DGF) and member, Global Environment Facility (GEF), Washington D.C.

As an intellectual with avid interest in academics, he held a variety of honorary academic and governmental assignments including (i) Chancellor of the Central University of Tibetan Studies, Sarnath for six years; (ii) Chief Editor of the South Asia Series on “Perspectives on Economics, Technology and Governance” of Oxford University Press, New York; and (iii) Mahatma Gandhi National Fellow.

Being an Administrator he was always occupied with important assignments but even then he was able to spare his time and energy for the literary work and penned down his memories, his thoughts and his experiences in :  
(i)Threads Woven: Ideals, Principles and Administration;  
(ii) The Problem of Change: A Study of North-East India ;  
(iii) India's Culture: The State, the Arts and Beyond; (iv) Bahudha and the Post 9/11 World ; and (v) Our India.

**Shri B.P. Singh is currently Governor of Sikkim.**