

Central Buddhist Teachings

By Satish Kumar

Nandini did not feel that she herself was a potential Buddha, but she very much liked the idea of the Buddha as her friend. Although everyone revered him as a great guru, an enlightened master, an illustrious incarnation, and so on, these high-sounding attributes created a barrier of formality and a sense of distance; they produced hierarchy and expectation. So when the Buddha presented himself as a friend, it put Nandini at her ease, and she felt encouraged to seek some very personal advice. She said, "I try to follow your teachings on meditation, but find it hard to focus. It is difficult to be detached from desires, from likes and dislikes, from attractions and aversions. My mind keeps jumping around like a monkey. Tell me, my friend, should I be putting great effort into concentrating the mind or just let it wander?"

"Neither, Nandini," said the Buddha. "You are a musician, you play sitar. How do you tune it?"

"I tune it carefully so the strings are neither too loose nor too tight. Only then will the sitar sound sweet."

"So it is with the mind, Nandini. Allow it to be in balance. Avoid extremes: the middle way is better. Neither force the mind too hard into concentration nor let it wander aimlessly. Meditation is to pay attention, to be aware of your breathing, your posture, your feelings, your perceptions, your thoughts and all that passes through your mind and the mind itself; whatever is going on within you and between you and the universe. Meditation is not just sitting for an hour here or an hour there; meditation is a way of life. It is practiced all the time. There is no separation between meditation and everyday living. When you have ceased to be bound by the past or by the future, when you are fully present in the here and now, then it is meditation."

"This all sounds so simple, Enlightened One, but my memories, my dreams, my doubts, my anxieties dominate me. I wonder whether there is any purpose to this life, I wonder if the universe has a purpose—or does everything exist by chance? I even wonder whether the world was created—or is it without beginning? I wonder whether the world will come to an end—or will it continue forever? I wonder and wonder constantly, and so I find it impossible to live in the present moment."

In the tranquil surrounding of the Jeta Grove, Nandini was pouring out her problems. She was pleased to find the Buddha on his own, at peace, giving total attention to her. He smiled at Nandini and said, "All your wonderings are metaphysical speculation. What does it matter if the world had a beginning or not? Whether it will last for eternity or come to an end tomorrow? If an arrow hit your driver, would you ask who shot this arrow? Where it came from? In which foundry was it made? Who was the maker? Whether the arrowhead was made from iron or copper? Would you waste your time deliberating on these intellectual questions, or would you focus on pulling out the arrow from the body of the driver and find ways of healing the wound?"

"I would certainly be quick to remove the arrow."

“Then, noble Nandini, why are you wasting your time in pondering irrelevant metaphysical questions when you and your fellow beings are afflicted by suffering that is caused by ego and attachment? Isn’t it urgent to look at your suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the ways to end suffering?”

Buddha was speaking with clarity. Nandini could feel the force of his convictions, but her intellect was resisting.

“Nevertheless, I want to find the truth,” said Nandini, “the truth about the arrow. How can I rest without knowing the truth? Isn’t it essential to find the truth and establish the facts?”

“Truth is only one virtue among many, and it is an elusive virtue at that,” explained the Buddha. “Truth has to sit within the family of virtues. Seeking truth is not enough—especially not at the expense of addressing the pain of the present moment. Seeking compassion, love, generosity, friendship, and happiness is important, too. Moreover, these virtues are more helpful in ending suffering than the pursuit of truth.”

“I do see your point,” nodded Nandini, “but the problems of everyday life are not that simple.” After a brief pause she said, “I believe you to be a wise man, so I will try to follow your teachings.”

But the Buddha wished to take no such responsibility. He said, “Nandini, don’t just follow me. Don’t just accept this because I say so: try it for yourself, test it in your life. If you find that what I say resonates with your experience and with your own truth, only then accept it. If I tell you about the sweetness, the softness, and the fragrance of a mango fruit, it won’t mean much. When you try it, taste it, and experience it for yourself, only then will you know what a mango is. Wisdom cannot be communicated in words or concepts or theories; it has to be discovered and experienced by yourself. My teaching to you is like pointing a finger to the moon. My finger is not the moon. Forget my finger and look at the moon. I say this to you because I have direct knowledge of suffering and I have direct knowledge of the end of suffering through the Noble Eightfold Path. This Eightfold Path of right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration leads to peace, harmony, wholeness, and enlightenment.”

“You speak of right view and right action, but how is one to know what is right and what is wrong?” asked Nandini.

“Whatever lessens suffering in yourself and others, that is right. Whatever increases suffering, that is wrong. The answer is within you. When you are free of pride and prejudice, when you are calm and attentive, a light will shine within you. Through meditation and through being mindful you will find your own knowledge of rightness. You will be your own light. Just be true to yourself, Nandini, just be yourself.”

After a few moments, the Buddha continued, “I can point out the moon, but you will have to see the moon with your own eyes, and you will see it when you look up.”

There was nothing more for Nandini to argue with. The Buddha had given her profound insights: much to meditate upon, and to practice.

Nandini took a walk to the lotus pond, and while she reflected upon the simple and restrained life-style of the Buddha, a deep sense of despondency overwhelmed her like a dark cloud. “The Buddha has only three robes,” she thought. “One for the day, one for the night, and one to change into after bathing. His robes are a patchwork of many pieces of old cloth sewn together. He has just one blanket to sleep on and just one bowl for his food. He eats only once a day. Is he the same Siddhartha, who was the prince of many possessions? Now he is practicing utter restraint, whereas I am possessed by my possessions. My life is cluttered with so many objects—no wonder that my mind is cluttered. The Enlightened One is the master of his life, and therefore he is the master of the world. I am a mere manager of my goods and chattels. And yet I love my creature comforts—my saris of silk, my shawls of soft wool, my soft bed, my saffron rice, my servants, and my groom—I can’t imagine shaving my head and possessing only three robes. How can I reconcile my longing for liberation and my attachment to the world? I am comfortable, but I am not happy. I want to be happy as well as comfortable. The Buddha doesn’t seem bothered, but I am.”

Once again, many doubts descended upon her. Sad and perplexed, Nandini sat by the pond holding her head in her hands.

The Buddha saw her from a distance. He realized that all was not well with Nandini, so he walked slowly down to the pond.

“Has the Buddha’s discourse disturbed you, Nandini? You look worried.”

“I am infected by doubts and dilemmas. You live a life of great restraint. You are happy with so little, but this is beyond me.”

“Nandini, do not be so concerned with external forms, with appearances. You can practice loving-kindness wherever you are. What you consider the frugality of our life in Jeta Grove is not imposed or contrived; it arises naturally. Simplicity of material possessions is only one aspect of spiritual practice; what is more important is to simplify your inner life. Empty yourself of ambitions, likes, and dislikes.” The Buddha spoke in a consoling voice.

“What do you mean by inner simplicity?” asked Nandini.

“More than our external burdens, we are burdened by the internal confusion of identity. Be free of such confusion, Nandini. Be empty of the idea of a separate self, a separate I. What does ‘I’ consist of? Am I my legs or my arms? Am I my intellect or my feelings? Am I my perceptions? Am I Siddhartha, a prince born in the Sakya clan? Who am I? What is my identity? I am no one thing. I am everything. I am not an isolated, autonomous, separate self. There is nothing to hold on to. Nothing to be attached to. I am a microcosm of the macrocosm. I am the universe itself. Life is a flow of energy: it takes a form and then dissolves. All forms are waves on the surface of the sea of life. They rise and they

fall; there is no point in being attached to a changing form. Be the wave, and know that you are part of the great ocean of existence. That is the ultimate simplicity.”

“But I am Nandini. I am this person with my own individual personality, with my own soul.”

“You are and you are not. If you look beyond, you will see the big picture. What is left of you if the food you eat, the water you drink, the air you breathe is taken away from your body? What you call your ‘individual personality’ or your particular soul did not drop from the sky. Take away your father and your mother, take away all the ancestral influences you have inherited, take away all the culture, language, and the perceptions you have acquired: then what will be left of you? In this big picture, you carry within you the entire history of evolution as well as millions of years of the future to come, the entire network of relationships, the continuous dance of life; you are much much more than this small individual soul imprisoned in this flesh and blood personality. You are infinitely flowing energy, you are indivisible; and that is what makes you individual.”

“I see,” said Nandini. “I seem to have got into the habit of clinging to my separate self, but now I understand that the entire existence including myself is a dance of energy which moves without boundaries: from earth to humans and back to the earth and everything in between.”

“Exactly so, Nandini,” said the Buddha. “All life and everything besides flow into each other.”

Nandini bowed to the Buddha. She felt calmer, and made her way home.

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