

Book Review

Meditation and the life in Bharat at the time of Buddha

by Dr. Anirban Sengupta and Mithu Lahiri

Maha Bodhi Book Agency, Kolkata, 2021. PP. V + 1-140.

ISBN: 978-81-950703-6-7. Rs. 400/-

The book entitled “**Meditation and the Life in Bharat at the time of Buddha**” by two erudite scholars Dr. Anirban Sengupta and Smt. Mithu Lahiri is a compilation of articles on different socio-religious aspects of India since the pre Vedic period upto the Buddhist era; such as, the methodology of the practice of Meditation (*dhyāna*) as explained both in the Hindu and Buddhist scriptures, the religious history of India with special reference to Buddhism, the socio-political background for the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the socio-economic condition of India during the time of Buddha as depicted in the Pali literature. It is interesting to note that for each and every aspects of discussion on the above mentioned subjects, both the authors have tried to make a brief comparative study with the thoughts of Buddha and other contemporary and also previous religious teachers, philosophers and social thinkers.

In the **Introduction** portion of the book, the authors have tried to explain the definition of ‘religion’, its nature and evolution and also a comparative study of that with ‘Dharma’ as it is used world-wide and also in Indian concept. Basically the etymological meaning of the word ‘Dharma’ which is originated from the root *dhṛ* means to hold, bear as to support [धर्मणा धारणेन - ऋक्संहिता ३/१७/१ भाष्य]. The word ‘Dharma’ is appropriately used as *Dhāraka* as it is explained by Ācārya Sāyana. [धर्मणा धारयितृणां कुवेरादीनाम्। ऋक्संहिता १/५५/३ भाष्य also as धर्म धारकं कर्म - ऋक्संहिता ७/८९/५ भाष्य]

Therefore ‘Dharma’ is used here in the sense of ‘karma’. Actually, ‘Dharma’ is a set of ethics or law which upholds the society. For instance the term *Rājadharmā* signifies the set of values or ethics to be followed by the kings or one who ruled the country. Similarly, the term *gārhasthyadharmā* indicates the duty of those who lives in the household or the head of the family and the members of the family. *Āpadadharmā* means the way of living to be adapted during crisis (*Āpada*). So it appears that *Dharma* is used in the sense of ethics, set of duty etc. But in most cases the ‘religion’ or ‘dharma’ is not used in this broad sense. It is usually used in a very narrow sectarian senses with full of wrong superstition and unscientific views. That is probably the main reason behind the present situation of unrest throughout the world in the name of religion (*dharma*).

However, in the present work, in the **Introduction** portion the authors for explaining

‘religion’ elaborately discussed the practice of worshiping varieties of idols, symbols, unseen spirits, sacrifices etc. customary practices, rituals by the people of India, since prehistoric period up to the time of Buddha. In addition to it, a brief religious history of India is sketched in the introduction part, which seems not clearly visualize the object of the authors of this research work.

The first chapter of this book is “**Dhyāna (Meditation) : the Hindu vis-à-vis Buddhist view point.**”

In this chapter inner philosophy, different technicalities of *Dhyāna*, as described in the Vedic scriptures, Patañjali’s *Yogaśāstra*, as well as, posture of Meditation, timings, subject and place of meditation etc. are elaborately discussed.

It is noted that in course of discussion on *Dhyāna* (Meditation) from Hindu concept the authors have mentioned elaborately many subjects like the basic doctrine of Yoga, its eight-fold steps (*aṣṭāṅgayoga*) which is necessary for being competent of performing *Dhyāna*, the physiology, different stages of *dhyāna* etc. But curiously regarding Buddhist meditation, the discussion on two basic process of meditation i.e. *jhāna* (*dhyāna*) in Theravāda Buddhism i.e. *Śamatha* and *Vipāsanna* [which is very popular today] are not clearly presented. It is noted that although the authors were completely silent about the forty (40) different rules of *Śamatha dhyāna* according to Buddhist philosophy, but in a nutshell they have discussed *ānāpānasati dhyāna* (*ānāpāna* meditation) by referring Pali texts *Ānāpānasatisutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*.

In course of discussion on contemplation and concentration of mind for attaining steadfastness, of the traditional Vedic meditation, *Mokṣa* and *Nibbāna*, the ultimate goal of human beings, according to Buddhists; both the authors have tried to make a comparison of the same with Pali Nikāya texts of Buddhist literature and *Śrīmad-Bhagavadgītā*. Here they in support of their views have cited a lot of references from the Pali texts, which is undoubtedly praiseworthy. But, for the easy understanding of readers and students, it seems necessary to cite textual references by following proper research methodology of giving specific and correct references of primary and secondary reference books.

However, in this chapter the authors have elaborately explained the Buddhist philosophical and ethical teachings like Four Noble Truths (*Catur Āryasatya*), Noble-Eight Paths (*Ārya Aṣṭāṅgikamārga*), the way of acquiring Right knowledge (*Śamayak jñāna*) about this world in view of Buddha i.e. the theory of impermanence (*anicca* = Sans. *anitya*). Four levels of *Jñāna*, according to Mahāyana Buddhism and so on. In these points proper citation of quotation from the Pali texts and their translation as referred by the authors are undoubtedly commendable. Moreover, the analysis of different practical and philosophical theory of both the Hindu and Buddhist meditation like *Salāyatana*, Four *Arupa Jñānas* (Higher Meditation, pp. 60-73) and its eight successive stages, even the *Saññā-Vedaitā nirodha* : that means the cessation of consciousness and sensation i.e. 9th *Jhāna*, the highest level of *Dhyāna*, discussion on three types of *Samkhāra*; one of the most difficult term in Buddhist metaphysics in which the blending of the subjective and objective view of the world and of happening is explained by citing examples from the *Mahāparinibbāna Suttanta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* with necessary referential quotations from the Pali texts are undoubtedly commendable.

It also seems necessary to mention that no where the page number of the texts or translations are mentioned. Sometimes references are given only by using abbreviation of the texts e.g. quotation from the *Samyutta Nikāya* is simply written as S.N. which may mislead the scholars as reference from *Sutta Nipāta* of the Pali literature because there is no separate portion for Abbreviation in the book. The last part with the sub-heading in chapter I, *The Meditation in Buddhist Tantra* (pp. 76-78), which is very difficult to explain in a few words, the authors have dealt this topic in a very lucid language, which would help the student to acquire a primary knowledge about the subject easily. Again there is no clear reference of books or texts are mentioned, except for the names of some scholars of Tantric Buddhism.

On the contrary, in the page 18 of the book the opinion of author regarding *Dhyana* (Meditation) is as follows :

“... *Meditation is used in maximum cases for relief from stress and strain*” which cannot be accepted as a whole. Because it has some other sides too. That is, for attaining steadfastness of mind and also for gaining concentration of mind, which is very important for each and every work and also for the improvement of both physical and mental health **Meditation** is very important.

Chapter II of the Book is titled as “**Common Religious Life of India from the Pali Nikayas**”. In this chapter instead of common religious practices of the Buddhists and the followers of other religions, names of a good number of Brahmanical (Hindu) deities like Brahmā and Mahā Brahmā, Indra or Śakra, Sūrya (Sun god), Candra (the Moon), Śrī – the goddess of Prosperity, Yakṣa, the tree gods (*rukṣha devatā*) etc. Are given. Sometimes archaeological evidences of these images of the god and goddesses, which are also available in the seals of Indus valley, Bharut stupas and from other archaeological evidences up to 1st century AD are mentioned. Some of these gods and goddess may be found occasionally in the Pali Nikāya texts, stories of *Jātakas* and *Avadānas*. By citation of the common names of these gods and goddess authors tried to delineate the common ritualistic practice of the contemporary Hindus, Buddhists and Jainas in the then society. But it is not clear in all respects.

In this chapter (page 81) the authors commented that “*No doubt, the volume of the Sanskrit literature is much more vast than that of Pali as Sanskrit literature contains almost every type of books-scripture, poetry and drama, books of law (Smṛti), books of statecraft (Artha), mathematics & science, philosophy, medical science, mythology and chronicles etc. On the contrary, the scope of Pali literature is much smaller-comprising of religious texts based on the preaching of Buddha, later commentaries thereupon and some chronicles.*” (p. 81).

The opinion of the respected scholars is not totally acceptable here. Because the whole of Pali canonical and non-canonical texts furnish ample information of texts on the above mentioned subjects. Those are presently treated as “Applied Buddhism”, which is very popular and well-known. From the Buddhist literature one can easily get the discourses of Buddha on social justice, ecology and environment, Human Rights, Role of state and duties of a Righteous king, importance of basic material wealth, welfare economics for personal happiness as well as for spiritual progress, religious tolerance etc.

In this context, it may be mentioned here that in chapter V of this book, the authors

have mentioned some discourses of Buddha on these subjects as available from Pali literature of which I shall state later.

Next, the IIIrd chapter of this book is on the “**Rise of Mahāyana : the Social and Political Factors**”. This chapter mainly dealt with the primary reason behind the schism of Buddhist samgha, just after the *Mahāparinibbāna* of Lord Buddha. In addition to it, the discussion on political, psychological, socio-religious scenario of India from 5th century B.C. to 2nd century A.D. were presented here with vivid description of the concept of *Avatāra* and the concept of *Bhakti* etc.

It appears that, the respected authors have consulted a good number of secondary reference books for writing this chapter. Citation of proper references as per the research methodology and explanation of the main object of the presentation of this article are extremely necessary.

Chapter IV of this book is entitled “**Economy & Social Stability : The Thoughts of Buddha**”.

This chapter discusses on what is crime and the main reason behind the criminal activities etc. In view of both the author’s economic inequality, addiction to the intoxicants, unleashed sensuous desire and unlimited greed are basic reasons of all criminal activities which are undoubtedly true.

Then a discussion on the factors behind the emergence of terrorism, as it is marked by the sociologists and political-analysts, the way out of these criminal activities for making a peaceful and habitable society are done. In this context some important Pali *Suttas* of the *Nikāya* texts are also referred by the scholars along with their translation. This proves that the Buddha’s teachings are still today applicable for the solution of socio-economic problems like unequal distribution of finance, social misbehavior, caste-distinction, religious intolerance etc., and varieties of crimes. Here for the reduction of poverty level, which is very important for economic and social stability *Dāna* is encouraged and elaborately explained by the author. In addition to that religious and racial tolerance, which are very important for the present society, all over the world, are also discussed in the chapter, in the light of the teachings of Buddha.

Chapter V, the last chapter of this book is titled “**Developing one’s potential : The view of Buddha**”. In this chapter the authors have tried to explain how an individual could develop his or her inner potentiality, which is essential for the betterment of one’s own, including his or her family and also important for the betterment of the society. With this objective they have quoted some Pali texts and translations. Sometimes in support of their views they compared the Buddha’s discourses and opinion regarding this matter with Kauṭīliya’s *Arthaśāstra* too. The clarity of discussion on the process of development of one’s potentiality is very insignificant and sometimes irrelevant.

Observation :

This book on Meditation and social life in ancient India would undoubtedly help the readers and students of Buddhist studies for understanding socioeconomic condition of India during the time of Buddha and for gaining a primary knowledge of the philosophy of Theravāda

Buddhism. The comparative study of the process meditation of Hinduism and Buddhism is helpful for interested scholars. In spite of that the following points may be noted :

a) There are a lot of printing mistakes in the book which implies in attentive proof-reading. A few examples of these are given below :

1. In page 25 first para the wrong printing of spelling strengthening, in page 39 line 3, the spelling of 'demise' is printed as *damise*, in page 59 there is a quotation from the *Dhammapada* verse number 188-189, (verse numbers are not mentioned in the book) is printed as,

Bahuṃ ve saraṇaṃ **khanti** pabbatāni vanāni ca. Arāmarukkhacetiyaṇi manassā bhayamajjita.

Metaṃ kho saraṇaṃ khemaṃ netam saramuttamam

Mataṃ saraṇamāgamm subbadukkhā pamuccati.

The correct form of the verse is as follows,

Bahuṃ ve saraṇaṃ yanti pabbatāni vanāni ca

Arāmarukkhacetiyaṇi manassā bhayamajjitā.

N'**etaṃ** kho saraṇaṃ khemaṃ n'etaṃ saraṇaṃ uttamam

N'etaṃ saraṇaṃ āgamma subbadukkhā pamuccati. (188, 189)

Moreover page 100 spelling 'even' printed as 'heaven' and so on.

b) There are some needless quotation from the Pali texts and the repetition of the same words like "Bhagavan Buddha" etc. may be avoided.

c) Use of the sign & instead of writing 'and' in the middle of the sentence is not commendable and probably wrong. Although presently some authors write in that way.

d) System of putting diacritical mark for Pali and Sanskrit words and footnotes are not properly maintained as per research methodology.

e) For the frequent use of Abbreviated form of words like 'SYV', 'RV', 'ŚN', 'DN' needs a list of Abbreviation either at the beginning or at the end of the book is suggested.

But the fact cannot be ignored that both of these two learned and erudite scholar Dr. Sengupta and Ms. Lahiri have tried their level best to make a comparative study of Buddhist Meditation system with Vedic *Sanatana paddhati* of India, which would help the students and readers to know the system of meditation and a provide glimpses in to the social life in the then India.

I hope in future it would be good if this valuable book be edited and some portions may be deducted, which seems not to come under the preview of this book.

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today lot rain be-pr.pf.3rd
'Today there was heavy shower.'

b) boneder tʃhobi.
sister-gen.pl. picture
'Sisters' picture.'

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Editor: Sarraastha De Basu Pub: Kolkata Society for Asian Studies December: 2021
Paper Back Edition, ISBN: 978-81-955545-1-5
E-Book Kindle Edition, ASIN : B09N2QB2NZ

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Editors : Archita Ghose & Sarmistha De Basu
June : 2021 Pub: Kolkata Society for Asian Studies
ASIN : B097NL92S2
E-Book, File size: 2386 KB/ Kindle Editlon

Published by Kolkata Society for Asian Studies, Postal Address : 3/25/1, R.K. Chatterjee Road, Kolkata- 700042

Phone : +91-9432490361

Email : Ksasianstudies@gmail.com kspublicationl@gmail.com

Website: www.kolkatasocietyforasianstudies.com www.jrksas.org

Printed at : The Saraswati Printing Works, 2, Guru Prosad Chowdhury Lane, Kolkata 700 006

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