

The Buddha as a reformer of his society

The society of ancient India at the time of the Buddha had a number of traditions and practices that were not beneficial to its people. These were unfair and oppressive and sometimes even harmful. For example :

1. The caste system
2. Discrimination against women
3. Over-dependence on faith and rituals
4. Animal sacrifices
5. Tyranny and misrule

1. The caste system (Social reform)

The Buddha argued against the injustice and harshness of the caste system although it was deeply entrenched in Indian society at the time. He instead promoted the ideas of equality and fairness, for example, that a person should be known by his deeds and not his caste.

The Buddha also allowed the people of any caste to join the Sangha.

"Not by birth is one an outcast;
not by birth is one a brahman.
By deed one becomes an outcast,
by deed one becomes a brahman."

Vasala Sutta

2. Discrimination against women (Social reform)

The Buddha preached in favour of sexual equality despite the attitude and practices of the time that women were inferior and should always be subject to male domination. For example, he allowed women to join the Sangha and many eventually also attained enlightenment.

Furthermore, in the **Sigalovada Sutta**, he ascribed equal and reciprocal responsibilities to husbands and wives although this was very much against the tradition of the time. The Buddha said that a husband should treat his wife in the following manner :

- i. by being courteous to her,
- ii. by not despising her,
- iii. by being faithful to her,
- iv. by handing over authority to her,
- v. by providing her with adornments.

In **Dhammapada Verse 53**, a lady called Visakha was described as wiser than her father-in-law and eventually even converted him to be a follower of the Buddha.

On one occasion, the Buddha was with King Pasenadi, who was displeased when he received news that his queen gave birth to a son. The Buddha told him that some women are better than men, who are wise and good, and who are pure in word, thought and deed. They may one day give birth to sons who would rule a country.

3. Over-dependence on faith and rituals (Spiritual reform)

The Brahminical teachings at the time maintained that the results and purity of the present life, as well as the next life, depended on the proper rituals and sacrifices to the gods. The Buddha however, taught that it is not correct to depend on others as this means that people will not take full responsibility for their own actions.

By oneself indeed is evil done and by oneself is one defiled;
By oneself is evil not done and by oneself is one purified.
Purity and impurity depend entirely on oneself;
no one can purify another.

Dhammapada Verse 165

In the **Kalama Sutta**, the Buddha also said that people should not have blind faith but enquire and investigate further to discover the truth for themselves.

4. Animal sacrifices (Spiritual reform)

It was common at the time for people to slaughter large numbers of animals in the belief that this would lead to their protection and prosperity. In the **Kutadanta Sutta** he Buddha said that such sacrifices are wrong and said that it is better to offer things such as oil, butter and ghee as these offerings do not cause harm to other beings.

He then described offerings which will produce even better results such going for Refuge in the Triple Gem and keeping the Five Precepts. Ultimately, the Buddha said that the best sacrifice is to renounce and attain enlightenment by practicing the Dhamma.

All tremble at the rod. All fear death.
Comparing others with oneself,
One should not harm or kill,
nor cause others to harm or kill.

Dhammapada Verse 129

5. Tyranny and misrule (Political reform)

In the **Cakkavatti Sihananda Sutta**, the Buddha said that immorality and crime could arise from poverty. Instead of suppression by force, in the **Kutadanta Sutta**, the Buddha suggested the king should focus on economic development and provide fair and decent wages to the people so that they can survive in dignity without needing to resort to crime.

In the **Aditta Jataka** story, he further advised that a good ruler should observe Ten Royal Duties :

- i. **Dana** - liberality, generosity, charity.
- ii. **Sila** - a high and moral character.
- iii. **Pariccaga** - sacrificing everything for the good of the people.
- iv. **Ajjava** - honesty and integrity.
- v. **Maddava** - kindness and gentleness.
- vi. **Tapa** - austerity of habits.
- vii. **Akkodha** - freedom from envy, ill-will, enmity.
- viii. **Avihimsa** - non-violence.
- ix. **Khanti** - patience, forbearance, tolerance, understanding.
- x. **Avirodha** - not obstruct any measures that are conducive to the welfare of the people.

The best example of a king who ruled according to the principles of Buddhism and practiced pacifism and compassion, was King Asoka. He prohibited animal sacrifices and eventually also forbade the killing of animals in the palace for consumption. He spread Buddhism throughout India through Rock Edicts and Pillars which had important teachings inscribed on them.

The Buddha challenged many unfair and oppressive customs and practices, and wherever he had some influence, he tried to redress these injustices and harshness. By speaking out with his clear and undeniable teachings, many people realized that they should not continue with such traditions and beliefs and changed their ways. In this manner, the Buddha played a significant role as a reformer of his society.

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