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KAREN ARMSTRONG'S BUDDHA (THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER): A STUDY

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Karen Armstrong spent years as a Roman Catholic nun, and her best-selling autobiography *Through the Narrative Gate* explains this. She is the acclaimed author of *A History of God*, *History of Jerusalem*, *The Bible: A Biography*, *Muhammad*, *The Battle for God*, *The Spiritual Staircase* and *The Great Transformation and others*. Interestingly, this catholic nun dedicates *Buddha* to her Buddhist sister Lindsey Armstrong.

The present biography *Buddha* by her projects Buddha's life in a fantastic manner. It is said, "Buddha stands with Socrates, Confucius and Lao Tzu as one who revolutionized the religious ideas of his time to advocate a new way of living." (*Buddha* Cover page).

The biography has six chapters: Renunciation, Quest, Enlightenment, Dharma, Mission, and Parinibbana, with notes, gloss and index. Karen Armstrong's introduction is enlightening. She tells that Buddha was an enlightened saint-philosopher, without believing in the cult of personality. Buddha is proved to be a historical figure. Buddha lived c 483 BC, and Ashoka who patronized Buddhism ruled India from 269 to 232 BC. Buddhist Sangha copied his teachings in Pali holding four councils. The scriptures were held in three baskets - the Basket of Discourses (Sutta Pitaka), the Basket of Disciplines (Vinaya Pitaka) and a Miscellaneous body of teachings.

Renunciation: Gotam Siddharth left his family, wife and son besides the state for living in holiness. All this was an unpleasant affair for the people in Kapilavastu. He decided to find a solution to the puzzle of existence with perennial philosophy. He felt that there could be something better, fuller and more satisfying. Buddha meditated about the Vedic evils of kama, varna and ritualism, each of which sounded like a web of difficulties, complication and bizarre affairs. They looked to be negative. Karen Armstrong narrates the Buddha's early life until he renounced the world clearly. The four evil sights caused this.

Quest: Buddha left his father's kingdom Sakka and entered Rajagraha, the capital of Magadha, a powerful kingdom then. It was one of 14 Mahajanapadas. He entered Rajagraha, the capital of Magadha where Bimbisara himself ruled.

'Quest'- the Buddha sought quest by two modes. The first was by doing yoga, which but he followed for mending his rowing mind. It was not for better health. He did asanas, pranayam and ayatanas, following Alara Kalama. This yet failed to please him.

The second for his quest was tapasa (asceticism) which he did, ruining his health. He did not eat for days, slept in sun and winds, breathed heavily. Yet this did not seem to be a means for enlightenment. The other five disciples with him too followed him as if their saviour. Buddha decided not to follow anymore gurus. He felt there might be other ways for enlightenment.

Enlightenment: Buddha reached Bodha Gaya, now in Nepala. He sat under Bodhi tree and did meditation. One day he achieved crying 'I found out

The Buddha started teaching a middle path, first in Saranath. Karen Armstrong observes, "Next, the Buddha outlined the Four Noble Truths: the Truth of Suffering, the Truth of the Cause of Suffering, the Truth of the Cessation of Suffering or Nibbana, and the Path that led to this liberation. However, these

truths were not presented as metaphysical theories but as a practical program. The word dhamma denotes not only what is, but what should be. The Buddha's Dhamma was a diagnosis of the problem of life and a prescription for cure, which must be followed exactly. Each of the Truths had three components in his sermon. First, he made the bhikkhus see the Truth. Next, he explained what had to be done about it: suffering had to be 'fully known'; craving, the cause of Suffering, had to be 'given up'; Nibbana, the cessation of suffering, had to 'become a reality' in the heart of the Arahant; and the Eightfold Path must be 'followed.'"(Armstrong 94). His immediate disciples were Kondanna, Vappa, Bhaddiya, Mahanama, Assaji and others.

The Sangha was becoming a sizeable sect, but the new Arahants could not be allowed to luxuriate in their newfound liberation. Their vocation was not a selfish retreat from the world. They too had to return to the marketplace to help others find release from pain. They would now live for others, as the Dhamma enjoined. 'Go now,' the Buddha told his sixty bhikkhus, and travel for the welfare and happiness of the people, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, welfare and happiness of gods and men. He said, "No two of you go the same way. Teach the Dhamma, bhikkhus, and meditate on the holy life. There are beings with only a little desire left within them who are languishing for lack of hearing the Dhamma; they will understand it. Buddhism was not a doctrine for a privileged elite; it was a religion for 'the people,' for 'the many (bahujana).' In practice, it appealed mostly to the upper classes and to intellectuals, but in principle it was open to anybody, and nobody, whatever his or her caste, was excluded." For the first time in history, somebody had envisaged a religious program that was not confined to a single group, but was intended for the whole of humanity. This was no esoteric truth, like that preached by the sages of the Upanisads. It was out in the open, in the towns, the new cities and along the trade routes. Whenever they heard the Dhamma, people started to throng into the Sangha, which became a force to be reckoned with in the Ganges plain.

Dhamma: It was open to anybody, and nobody, whatever his or her caste. For the first time in history, somebody had envisaged a religious program that was not confined to a single group or community, but was intended for the whole of humanity. This was no esoteric truth, like that preached by the sages of the Upanisads. It was out in the open, in the towns, the new cities and along the trade routes. Whenever they heard the Dhamma, people started to throng into the Sangha, which became a force to be reckoned with in the Ganges plain. The Mauryan Emperor Ashok made Buddhism the state religion later.

Mission: Buddha preached his new faith in Uruelu, Rajagraha and elsewhere. Even the King Bimbisara became his disciple. Sariputta and Moggallana too. Buddha visited Kapilavastu and his father king Shuddhodara and others became his disciples. Son Rahul also joined the order. We are left with images, not with personalities, and with our Western love of individuality. Ananapidindika also joined Buddha as Anand, inviting him to his kingdom in Sravasti.

These were very elaborate arrangements for men who had embraced 'homelessness.' Within a short space of time, the Buddha had acquired three large parks, at Rajagraha, Kapilavastu and Savatthi, where the monks could live and meditate.

King Pasenedi of Kosala was very impressed by the friendliness and cheerfulness of life in the Buddhist *aramas*. It was in marked contrast to that of the court he told the Buddha, where selfishness, greed and aggression were the order of the day. Kings quarrelled with other kings, brahmins with other brahmins; the royal and rich families and friends were constantly at loggerheads.

The Sangha is the heart of Buddhism, because its lifestyle embodies externally the inner state of Nibbana. Monks and nuns must 'Go Forth,' not only from the household life but even from their own selves. A bhikkhu and bhikkhuni, almsman and almswoman, have renounced the 'craving' that goes with getting and spending, depend entirely on what they are given and learn to be happy with the bare minimum. The lifestyle of the Sangha enables its members to meditate, and thus to dispel the fires of ignorance, greed

and hatred that bind us to the wheel of suffering.

Parinabbana: The last section of the biography speaks of how the Buddha reached Kusinara and attained Nibbana there.

Karen Armstrong's *Buddha* is really the *New York Times* bestseller.

References:

1. Armstrong, Karen. *Buddha*. London: Phonex, 2000.