

Was Buddha an Escapist?

Buddha has often been described as an escapist by a section of people who believe that it is quite possible to attain enlightenment while performing the duties of samsara. And they cite the examples of saints like Kabir and Nanak who led a family life but in no way were any less saintly. The criticism that is leveled against Buddha was that he was selfish and left home in pursuit of Nirvana. That he deserted his young wife and infant son who were dependent on him. Could he not have achieved self realization by sitting at home and doing his family duties?

Firstly, we should recognize that the men of God who have blessed this earth with their presence, were of all sorts – educated (Aurobindo) and uneducated (Ramakrishna), married (Buddha and Muhammad) and unmarried (Adi Shankaracharya and Vivekananda), men as well as women (Rabia, Mirabai, St. Teresa of Avilla), Eastern (Lao Tzu) and Western (St. Francis of Assisi), family men (Nanak and Kabir) and renunciates (Mahavir).

In order that we do not create fixed moulds for his Prophets, God in his infinite wisdom and with some sense of humour, has sent his messengers with varied ways, varied languages and varied temperaments. His prophets are so unpredictable! One silently meditates, another dances. One writes, another sings. Evidence shows that God doesn't believe in the idea of 'One size fits all' and that is why I refuse to accept that God has stopped sending his prophets after Jesus.

Secondly, Buddha renounced everything, not just his wife and son. He renounced the throne that was waiting for him, his old father, the kingdom, everything. And he did not renounce them for his own happiness and bliss. He wanted to understand why there is suffering in this world and what the way out of this suffering was. He was not an escapist who escapes from pain and misery. He was living in the lap of luxury with the most beautiful woman of the kingdom and enjoying all the pleasures of a royal life. Those like us who escape from life, usually do so because our lives are full of misery and unhappiness. Here was a man who gave up the ultimate luxuries and pleasures that are available

only to a king. He was a king who exchanged his kingly attire for a begging bowl. No one does that for happiness and bliss.

He was burning with the question: why is there suffering in this world? He could not rest, sleep or do any of his duties unless he found the answer to that question. Ultimately he found the answer to that question after six long years of intense penance. A single minded determination that we cannot even approach. Out of his answer was born one of the great religions of the world: Buddhism.

Buddha was a world teacher, a jagadguru. He was a prophet. He should not be judged with our standards like looking after wife and children, doing family duties etc. There have been billions of human beings who have been very good family men, who earnestly did their duties to their wife and children without any contribution to mankind. Today Buddha is still an inspiration, a living force in the life of people. Today a large part of humanity still says: Buddham sharanam gacchami. The messengers of God come to this world to raise the consciousness of the mass of humanity and bring light into a dark world steeped in ignorance and delusion. They don't come to raise families. Moreover, Buddha's wife and son belonged to the royal class. They were not economically dependent on Buddha. Later on Buddha did come back to them and transformed their lives. Buddha's father, his wife and son, all became his disciples. Puny creatures like us should not drag the men of God to our level and judge them with standards like family duty etc. Buddha did not live for his family. He lived and died for mankind. He attained enlightenment at the age of 35. He died at the age of 80. For 45 years he taught what he learned. He lived only for others. The question of living for himself and his family is totally beside the point.