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**Festival of flowers**

Every year on April 8, the birthday of Siddhartha Gautama Buddha has been celebrated throughout Japan. Also known as Kanbutsu-e or Hana Matsuri (the festival of flowers), it is celebrated with socio-religious zeal and passion. Buddhist temples across the country used to be decorated with beautiful colors and candles.

Although Prince Siddhartha Gautama opened eyes in a royal family belonging to a Himalayan state around 2500 years ago, he was much interested to find the bitter realities of life and resolve problems amicably.

One day, at the young age of thirty, he left the royal palace to discover the truth. Gautama Buddha tried various ways of enduring hardships to seek spiritual peace, but finally realized that in order to find eternal peace, it is necessary to live a good and pure life, to have mercy on everyone and not to hurt anyone.

The first principle of Buddha's philosophy is that success in life depends on our way of thinking. If we adopt a negative attitude in life, we will suffer from various psychological problems. On the other hand, a realistic approach guarantees a prosperous life.

The second principle of Buddhist philosophy emphasizes that it is very important to control one's thoughts in order to live a healthy life. People who do not control their thoughts are not able to perform any duty with dedication and concentration. The third principle explains that the greatest cause of heartbreaks is due to our attachment to worldly things. People become impatient when their great expectations are not met and thus, their fantasies eventually turn into bitter realities.

Buddha, in his fourth principle of philosophy, explained that those who only speak about good deeds but do not practise them can never be happy. According to him, a person's own life experience is the greatest teacher. Every human being should perform according to the voice of his/her conscience and no matter what the situation, the negative attitude must not be adopted.

Today, over seven percent of the world's population (approximately 520 million people) are followers of Buddhism. Most Asian countries – including Japan, Koreas, China, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Singapore , Bhutan, Laos, India and Mongolia – have large Buddhist populations. Eighteen percent of the population of China, consisting of around 244 million people, is Buddhist. There are also Buddhists residing in Russia, the United States and other Western countries.

The 2,000-year ancient Gandhara civilization, belonging to the northern part of present-day Pakistan, reflects Buddhism's glorious past in our region. That is why every Buddhist in the world wants to visit the sacred sites located in Taxila, Takht-e-Bahi, Swat and other Pakistani areas. In my view, the promotion of religious tourism is essential for the stability of our national economy.

There is also a huge demand for Buddha statues made in Pakistan all over the world. In the historic city of Taxila, there are many talented sculptors who learnt the art of making statues from their ancestors. According to international media reports, their hard work is paid Rs2,000, while Pakistani sculptures are being sold in the international black market for above 10,000 dollars. Unfortunately, instead of overcoming the issue of antiquity trafficking, our outdated laws are resulting in the exploitation of Pakistani artists.

Today, on the occasion of Gautama Buddha's birthday, I would like to suggest that the laws about preparing copies and replicas of Gandhara statues must be revised. Statues of Gautama Buddha with the label 'Made in Pakistan' would not only generate huge foreign exchange from the global market, but also add to our positive image in the world. There is an urgent need to promote cultural diplomacy with Buddhist-majority countries.

The writer is a member of the National Assembly and patron-in-chief of the Pakistan Hindu Council.

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