

Buddhism and Comparative Religion

and other Essays

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Buddhism and Comparative Religion¹

Ever since the 17th century when the first news about Buddhism reached Europe, that religion has always been an object of special interest to all scholars who occupied themselves with the comparative study of the world's great creeds. And this, for several reasons.

The biography of the Buddha has always possessed a special human touch which appealed strongly to the imagination and the sentiments of persons susceptible to heroic deeds and moving feelings. The noble principles of Buddhism have at all times won admiration from those who believe in the inherent good in man. Historians felt particularly attracted by the changing fate of a creed that had in the course of time won so many adherents in many countries of Southern Asia, but disappeared again from many places where it had flourished for centuries. It is of special interest to see what changing forms this religion assumed during the two and a half thousand years of its existence and to observe how it adjusted itself to the requirements of nations, the very names of which were not even known to its founder. If one considers the many features in which Buddhism exists today, one cannot help saying that in this one system almost all ways of religious life have found their expression: from the stern, sober, calm thoughts of ascetic seekers for salvation to the highly emotional fervour of ardent worshippers of world-redeeming saviours and from the lofty speculations of mystics to the elaborate rites of magicians who try to banish evil spirits with the help of their spells.

From the point of view of the philosophy of religion, Buddhism deserves a special interest because it makes dubious Kant's assertion that belief in God, in the immortality of the soul, and in the freedom of the will are the three great essential parts of the dogmatics of every religion of a higher order. Of course, the Buddha was a partisan of the *kiriyaavāda* (belief in the moral efficacy of action) and a strong opponent of teachers who like Gosāla Makkhaliputta said, "There is no such thing as exertion or labour or power or energy or human strength; all things are unalterably fixed."

But concerning the other two questions, Buddhism takes a stand quite of its own contrasting entirely with that of Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and other faiths; for Buddhism acknowledges neither the existence of permanently existing souls nor of a creator and ruler of the universe. This is a logical outcome of its fundamental philosophical conception. As a doctrine of becoming and uninterrupted flux, it cannot accept the idea of unchangeable substances; just as, according to Buddhism, there is no matter which in itself is eternal though it may change its forms over and over again, so there cannot be an individual soul of everlasting life which takes on a new material clothing in the course of its reincarnations. And just as there is no everlasting personality, so there can be no personal god, who remains as an immovable pole in the midst of changing phenomena. The only permanent force that Buddhism believes in is the law that rules the universe, and from elements of existence forms lumps of transitory character which dissolve again and again to be replaced by others.

Although Buddhism denies the existence of permanent souls, it does not deny the continuation of individual life after death. The basic idea of its conception is that death means the end of a certain individual A, because the component parts which had united to form it dissolve, but the moral forces which a man or some other being had produced during his life become the cause of a new individual B who is, so to say, the heir of the actions of A, so that B earns compensation for his good and punishment for his bad deeds. It is, therefore, that the new individual B is neither identical with the old one, A, nor is it different from A, because it

¹ Reprinted with permission of the Helmuth von Glasenapp-Stiftung, Wiesbaden (Germany), from *Buddhism and Comparative Religion*.

emerges from it, just as the fire of the second part of the night is the uninterrupted continuation of the fire that burnt during the first part of it. It is not our task here to deal with the different theories of the *antarābhava*,² etc. which have been devised to explain or to prove this theory. In this connection it is sufficient for our purpose to establish the fact that Buddhism is in full accordance with many other religions in the supposition of a life after death in which all acts are required. The only difference between Buddhism and other Indian religions consists in this that Buddhism gives a different philosophical interpretation. In practice it is in complete harmony with all systems that accept metempsychosis. Instead of the theory of an immutable permanent soul which forms the nucleus of the individual A in this existence and of the individual B in the next existence, it offers a different view: every individual is a stream of evanescent dharmas (physical and mental factors of existence) arising in functional interdependence. Every new individual existence is the flowing on of this stream.

This doctrine of reincarnation without the adoption of the belief in a persistent soul-substance has always puzzled scholars, and it has been called a logical impossibility because it denies the identity of the man who has done an action and of another man on whom it is rewarded. But in truth it has quite the same metaphysical value as the theory of a wandering permanent soul. Professor T. R. V. Murti³ rightly says: "How does the acceptance of the *ātman*, the unchanging permanent entity, explain kamma, rebirth, memory or personal identity more plausibly? As the permanent soul is of one immutable nature, it cannot have different volitions when different circumstances call for different actions. ... A changing *ātman* (soul) is a contradiction in terms. No *ātman*-view has accepted or can accept a changing self; for once we accept change of the *ātman*, we have no valid argument to confine this change to definite periods i.e. it remains unchanged for an appreciable stretch of time and then changes. This would mean two different *ātmans*. Nor can we admit that one part of the *ātman* changes while the other part is permanent. If the changing part does belong to the *ātman* as integrally as the other part, then we would be having a supposedly unitary entity, which has two mutually opposed characteristics. This does violence to our conception of an entity."

When the Buddha replaced the theory of a permanent soul substance with the theory of a "mind-continuum," he tried to avoid the difficulties inherent in the doctrine of *ātman*. That his theory also conceals knotty points is evident. For, no sufficient philosophical arguments can be adduced for things which transcend the human faculty to demonstrate rationally matters that are not accessible to our limited comprehension. The belief that there is no continuation of any sort of life after the death of an individual is also not strictly demonstrable; for the theory of a matter out of which everything is produced is as equally an outcome of speculation and of a certain "Weltanschauung" as the different hypotheses concerning the soul or the mind-continuum.

Stranger still, it appears to most observers that Buddhism denies the existence of a creator and ruler of the world because for many religious minds, especially in the Occident, religion is synonymous with the belief in God. For this reason many theologians have said, "Buddhism is a philosophical or ethical system but no religion." This view, however, is a very superficial subterfuge. For, judging from its outward appearances as well as from its inner attitudes, Buddhism exhibits all the marks observed in other religions. It has places of worship, rites, and monasteries, and with its adherents it calls forth purely religious feelings of devotion, piety, tranquillity of mind, etc. It has its legends, relates wonders, tells of visions of heaven and hell, etc. It even acknowledges a great number of celestial beings who, although they have no eternal life, exist for centuries and may give their worshippers worldly comfort and happiness. All this makes it evident that to Buddhism the appellation religion cannot be denied. This shows that

² Intermediate existence between two lives; a conception developed in later schools of Buddhism.

³ T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, London 1955, p. 32.

the restriction of the term “religion” to the different kinds of theism is too narrow. The ancient Romans, to whom we owe the term “religion,” were no theists but adored a great number of gods and did not differ in this respect from the Buddhists of former times or today. One can therefore only infer from this fact that theism is one of the forms of religion and that the term “religion” embraces a great number of varieties of beliefs. As Mohammedans and Christians and a great part of the Hindus are theists, some historians have thought that Buddhism, being a religion of the highest order, must also be in one way or the other theistic. The President of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, Prof. Malalasekera, writes, in his article “Buddhism and the Enlightenment of Man” in the *Listener* (London, 7th January 1954), that a Buddhist does not believe in a creator of the Universe. “If asked ‘How did Life begin?’ he would ask in return ‘How did God begin?’,” and the late Professor Takakusu, a great scholar and a pious Mahāyānist, said in his work *Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy* (2nd edition, Honolulu 1949, 45) “Buddhism is atheistic. There is no doubt about it.” That the Buddhists of bygone ages were also atheists can easily be ascertained from the great doctrinal works of the Pāli Canon and from the writings of the philosophers of the Great Vehicle. I may refer the reader to the article “Atheism” (Buddhist) by L. de La Vallee Pousin in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, 2:184, and to my (German) book *Buddhism and the Idea of God*⁴ where I have collected passages from Hinayāna and Mahāyāna works.⁵ To the quotations given there may be added the *Isvara-Kartrtva-nirākṛti* published by Prof. F. W. Thomas (JRAS 1905, 345–349).

So there can be no doubt whatever about the fact that Buddhism has been atheistic for at least two thousand years. The stalwart champions of theism eager to uphold their thesis that every highly developed religion acknowledges the existence of God are not troubled by this fact. They maintain the assertion that the Buddha did not say anything against the existence of God. But this is clearly wrong. For, in the Buddha’s dialogues reported in the Pāli Canon there are several passages in which he criticizes in a most outspoken way the opinion that the world may have been created by God or may be governed by Him. So he said according to the Aṅguttara Nikāya 3, 61 (Vol. 1, p. 74): “People who think that the will of God (*issara-nimmāna*) allots to men happiness and misery, must think that men become murderers, thieves etc. by the will of God.” A similar argument occurs also in the Jātakas (No. 528, V, p. 238; No. 543, VI, p. 208). In the Brahmajāla Sutta (Dīgha-Nikāya 1, 2, 2 Vol. I, p. 17) the Buddha propounds even a theory as to how the wrong belief in a creator has arisen. When the god Brahmā was born at the beginning of a new age of the world in a heaven prepared for him by his kamma, unconscious of his former existence, he wished to have companions. When other beings came into existence because of their kamma he imagined that he had created them by his will. The beings, in their turn, noticing that Brahmā existed before them thought that he had created them. So a sort of primordial monotheism originated at the beginning of the world by the error of Brahmā and the first men.

The likelihood that the Buddha was a religious teacher but did not acknowledge the existence of God is further corroborated by the fact that his contemporary Mahāvīra, the Tīrthaṅkara of the Jains, took a similar attitude. In India the Mīmāṃsā philosophy and the classical Sāṅkhya propagated also the Anīsvara-vāda (i.e. a non-theistic doctrine). But religious beliefs of this kind are not confined to India. The Neo-Confucianism of Chu Hsi also denies that a personal God rules the world, as did those ancient Greeks, Romans, and Teutons for whom Fate or Necessity reigned the cosmos and the life of man.

⁴ H. von Glasenapp, *Buddhismus und Gottesidee, Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur in Mainz, Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftliche Klasse* 1954, Nr. 8 (Wiesbaden 1954).

⁵ See *Buddhism and the God Idea. Selected Texts* edited by Nyanaponika Thera. The Wheel No. 47. Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Ceylon (Editor).

The thoughtful reader may ask how it is possible that so many religions dissent from an opinion cherished by so many religious heroes like Moses, Christ, Mohammed or the great Vaishnava and Saiva saints. The answer is that the idea of God is a very complex one. It combines the ideas of a creator, ruler, and destroyer of the universe with those of an author of moral laws, of a just judge, of a helper in need and a saviour of mankind. In Buddhism the same ideas are distributed among several factors. The creation, rule, and destruction of the universe are ascribed to the Universal Law as are the allotment of reward and punishment according to the automatically working kamma. As this Law is immanent in the cosmos there is no need of a Lawgiver. The revealers of this Law are the Buddhas, who for this reason are venerated. The transitory devas (deities) function as helpers in worldly troubles. Concerning the question of salvation the Buddhist schools differ: for some of them it can be reached only by man's own endeavours; for other schools the grace of the Buddha Amitābha is the expedient for salvation. The feelings of devotion and reverence, which the theistic religions concentrate upon God, are turned towards the Buddhas as the sages who have shown the way to Nirvāna.

So the same ideas, impulses, instincts, longings, and hopes which determine the theistic religions are equally alive in Buddhism, and they are, above all things, the most essential feature of all religions: the conception of awe-inspiring holiness and the sense of the holy which is different from everything profane.

The Influence of Buddhist Philosophy⁶

On the occasion of the two previous meetings of our Symposium, the Contribution of Buddhism to Art and Letters was dealt with. We proceed now to our discussion on Buddhism's Contribution to Philosophy. Making use of a simile employed by Ānandavardhana on poetry I may say this: Art is the beautiful corporeal frame of Buddhism, literature is its *prāṇa* or life-breath, philosophy is its mind; so that the topic of our deliberation is, as it were, a task of penetrating gradually more and more into the depth of the inner core of the great spiritual movement which has given so much to the world.

I feel deeply honoured by having been asked to preside over this session. I take it as a distinction not so much for my own humble endeavours to fathom the profundity of Buddhist philosophy but as an award of honour bestowed upon my country, because especially in Germany, philosophers have for a long time shown great interest in Buddhism.

The first Germans who had heard the name of the Buddha were probably theologians who had read the works of St. Hieronymus, one of the fathers of the Christian Church. For, this saint mentions the miraculous birth of the Buddha. But of Buddha's doctrine, nobody seems to have had any detailed knowledge during the Middle Ages. It was not until the 17th century that a German philosopher obtained some knowledge of Buddhism. It was Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) who took a very keen interest in China, whose philosophy had just been made known to Europe by the works of French Jesuits. Leibniz drew from their books some points of the Buddhist doctrine as taught in the Chinese Empire. In his most famous book, the *Theodicee* he speaks of Fo, as the Chinese call the Buddha, and refers to the Madhyamika-System and its doctrine of Emptiness.

A wider range of knowledge we find with Immanuel Kant (1724–1806). It is not much known that Kant at the University of Königsberg delivered not only lectures on Philosophy but also on Geography. Without ever having left his native town he had acquired a considerable knowledge of all the parts of the globe by reading books on travel. He therefore in his lectures speaks about Buddhism in Ceylon, Burma, Siam, in China, Japan and Tibet. He draws a very sympathetic picture of the Buddhist monks in Burma. He says, "The Talapoins of Pegu are praised as the world's kindest men. They live on the food which they beg at the houses and give to the poor what they do not need for themselves. They do good to all living beings without making any discrimination on the grounds of religion. They think that all religions are good which make men good and amiable."

Kant already knew that Buddhists do not believe in a creator and ruler of the universe who judges men after death, for he writes; "They reject the idea of divine providence, but they teach that vices are punished and virtues are recompensed by a fatal necessity." Kant did not yet know anything about the Buddhist doctrine of Karma and Rebirth, and his philosophy has in no way been influenced by Buddhist ideas. But the doctrine of metempsychosis appealed to him in several periods of his life. Even shortly before his death, when asked by his friend Hasse about the future of the individual after death, Kant expressed himself in favour of the doctrine of transmigration. On another occasion he called it one of the most attractive teachings of Oriental philosophy. He himself taught a pre-existence of the soul before man is born and he

⁶ Presidential Address delivered at the Fifth Session on "Buddhism's Contribution to Philosophy" of the Symposium on "Buddhism's Contribution to Art, Letters and Philosophy" arranged from November 26th to 29th, 1956, in New Delhi, by the Working Committee for the 2,500th Buddha Jayanti, Government of India, in collaboration with the UNESCO, to commemorate the 2,500th Anniversary of the Parinirvāna of the Buddha. Reprinted from *The Mahā Bodhi*, Vaisakha Number 1957.

was of opinion that after death man has to continue his way to perfection in infinite progress. His ideas have, therefore, in this point much in common with Buddhism.

Kant lived at a time when Buddhist texts had not yet been studied and translated by European scholars. It was only after his death that English and French scholars began to occupy themselves with the Buddhist scriptures. In contradistinction to Kant, the German philosophers of the beginning of the nineteenth century were better informed about Buddhist philosophy. Thus we find with Schelling and Hegel some more detailed remarks on Buddhism, and in later times with Nietzsche and many other philosophers. An enthusiastic admirer of the great religion of the East was Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860). Since he was introduced to Indian Wisdom as a young man of 26 years of age until his death at the age of 72 he read almost every book published on Buddhism and came to the conviction that Buddha, together with Plato and Kant, was one of the three great illuminators of the world. He was much influenced by Buddhist thought in framing his own system of metaphysics. He believed in a strong conformity of his doctrine with that of the Buddha. So he wrote: "If I were to take the results of my philosophy as a yardstick for the truth, I would concede to Buddhism the pre-eminence of all religions of the world. In any case I can be happy to see that my teaching is in such great harmony with a religion which has the greatest number of adherents on earth." There are, indeed, many points in which the German philosopher agrees with Buddhists: they both deny the existence of a personal God; they teach that neither a beginning nor an end of the cosmic process can be established; they both assume the existence of a plurality of world systems; they see no essential but only a gradual difference between men and animals and are therefore ardent advocates of the protection of animals against cruelty; they do not believe in permanent immortal souls and metempsychosis, but in a rebirth caused by the will (*saṃsāra*), which manifests itself in the doings of the previous existence; they both acknowledge a moral law (*dharma*) as the moving factor in the universe. Though they both have a pessimistic outlook on life, they are optimistic in so far as they are both convinced of the possibility of a liberation from the trammels of existence. Just as for Buddha, so for Schopenhauer too, the state of deliverance cannot be explained with the help of terms and words belonging to our world of phenomena. Schopenhauer's system, being an original and independent outcome of his own thinking, differs, of course, in many other points from Buddhism. This partly finds its reason in the fact that at the time of Schopenhauer Buddhism was not yet sufficiently known in Europe.

Schopenhauer was the greatest herald of Buddhist wisdom ever arisen among the philosophers of the Western world. His works had a deep influence on many other thinkers rendering them in their turn, very keen on studying the sacred writings of the Buddhist faith at least in translation. A remarkable witness of the overwhelming impression that Buddhism made on him are the following words of a great musician, the famous composer, Richard Wagner (1813–1883). He wrote: "Buddha's teaching is such a grand view of life that every other one must seem rather small when compared to it. The philosopher with his deepest thoughts, the scientist with his largest results, the artist with his most extravagant imagination, the man with the most open heart for everything that breathes and suffers—they all find their unlimited abode in this wonderful and incomparable conception of the world."

It is an uncontested fact that Buddhism has played a role in the realm of Indian philosophy during the one thousand five hundred years of its existence in the sub-continent, not only because it produced a great variety of metaphysical systems many of which belong to the most elaborate and sublime ones the fertile Indian mind has ever created. But the contribution of Buddhism is still greater. Through its very existence it has compelled the Brahmanic and Jaina philosophers to defend their teachings and to improve and remodel them. The discussions kindled by the struggle waged between Buddhist philosophy of permanent flux and the Upanishadic philosophy of unchangeable being have raised Indian metaphysical thought to that

high level which has earned for it the admiration of the world. Since the celebrated passage in the Majjhima Nikāya 22 where Buddha argues controversially against the doctrine of the Vedānta, and the Kathaka Upanishad 4, 14, where the Brahmins reject the Buddhist theories of dharmas, the antagonism between the Vedānta and Buddhism permeates the whole history of Indian philosophy, just as the fight between the conception of the world of Heraclitus and Parmenides dominates Greek philosophy. As so often in similar cases, each of the two opponents has learned much from the other and taken over some of the other's ideas. To my mind the monistic Mahāyāna shows the deep influence which Vedānta has exerted on later Buddhism. On the other hand the lofty idealism of Yogavasishta of Gaudapada and Shankara are indebted to Nāgarjuna's and Asaṅga's theories on the unreality of the world.

But the contribution of Buddhism to philosophical thought is not confined to India. Buddhism has been the originator and promoter of philosophy in many countries that had not yet developed a philosophy of their own when the doctrine of the Buddha reached them. Buddhism has stimulated the intelligentsia in Ceylon, Burma, Siam, Kamboja, Laos, Korea, Japan, Tibet and Mongolia, to philosophical endeavours. In China, too, which already possessed a philosophy of a high level, Buddhism has greatly developed the indigenous metaphysical thought. It is well known that Taoism, at least in its later phases, has been influenced by Buddhist theories. But Confucianism too is indebted to it. It seems to me that the founder of the Neo-Confucian school, the celebrated Chu Hsi (1130–1200), though a staunch opponent of Buddhism, has learned much from Buddhism. Idealists such as Shao Yung (1011–1077) and Wans Yangmin (1472–1528) too have drawn deeply from the fountain of Mahāyāna.

Buddhism having had such an enormous direct and indirect influence on philosophical thought in the whole of Southern and Eastern Asia proves that it must have appealed greatly to Asian mentality.

It is noteworthy, that in contradistinction to the overwhelming importance Buddhism has had in the East, it has till now not been able to fertilize, in a comparable way, thought in the West. The reason for this fact may have been that its sublime doctrines were not easy for Westerners to understand, though the emperor Ashoka had already sent missions to the Greek kings.

As far as our present knowledge goes it was only gradually that Buddhism unveiled its essence to the Occident. The Greeks already knew of the name, Buddha. They also knew of his supernatural birth and they were aware of the fact that the *Samanaioi* (*śrāmaṇa*) were different from the brahmanical ascetics. In the Middle Ages the story of Buddha leaving his home was known in the Christianized form of the legend of Barlām and Josaphat. Marco Polo (1254–1323), the famous Italian traveller, paid his tributes to the saintly life of Gautama when he wrote in his *Travel Diary*: “*Illec fist moult grans adbstinences, ainsi comme s’il eust este crestien. Car s’il l’eust este, il feust un grand saint avec notre Seigneur Jhesucrist, a la bonne vie et honneste qu’il mena.*” “He lived a life of grand abstinence as if he had been a Christian. For had he been, he would have been a great saint with our Lord Jesus Christ, considering the good and honest life he led.” The first European I know of who mentions an important doctrine of Buddhism, which distinguishes it from the other great religions of the world was the French traveller, La Loubere, who wrote in his work *Du Royaume de Siam*, published in 1691, (Vol. 1, p. 395), “I think that one can establish that Buddhists do not believe in a world-ruling deity.” We are indebted to the great English indologist, Henry Thomas Colebrooke⁷ for the first interpretation of the Buddhist theory that there is no transmigrating soul but nevertheless a rebirth caused by karmic influence. In the lecture “On Indian Sectaries,” read at a public meeting of the Royal Asiatic Society, February 3, 1827, he said, “There is not an eternal soul, but merely succession of thought, attended by

⁷ H. Th. Colebrooke, *Essays on the Philosophy of the Hindu* (1829). New edition of his works by E. B. Cowell, London 1873, Vol. 11, p. 419.

individual consciousness abiding within body.” Colebrooke also explained the “concatenation of causes and effects” which link one existence with another. Though many European scholars have dealt with this crucial point of Buddhist metaphysics, it took many years of investigation before the true basis of this doctrine was elucidated. The two Russian scholars, Theodore Stcherbatsky, and his pupil, Otto Rosenberg, have shown that the doctrine of the “dharma,” i.e. impersonal soul forces, is the central philosophical conception which is at the bottom of all Buddhist philosophical thought. The great Belgian indologist, La Valle Poussin, has dealt more minutely with the problem in his magnificent translation of Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa*. We understand now why the celebrated stanza “*Ye dharmāḥ hetuprabhāvāḥ*” is the credo of all Buddhists.

It is to be regretted that most European indologists in former times have continued to occupy themselves less with the doctrines of living Buddhism as they have been taught for over at least 2000 years than with speculations on the doctrine that the Buddha may have taught. Many of these scholars have tried to show that Buddha’s own doctrine differed greatly from the doctrines that today form the basis of all Buddhist philosophy. It seems to me very improbable that Buddha was no philosopher at all, as some scholars think. For in a time in which the texts show a very highly developed philosophical life was going on in Ancient India, Buddha would not have been able to win adherents from the philosophically trained Brahmans and Kshatriyas, if He had not propounded a doctrine which could hold its own in view of hair-splitting dialectics of materialists, agnostics, sceptics, and the very elaborate systems of Brahmans and Jains. Other scholars are of opinion that Buddha’s teaching was a special form of Vedānta and that the monks later on changed it to its present form. I do not think that this is probable. For to maintain this assertion it would be necessary to show in detail how the anātma-doctrine of the Buddhists has developed out of the alleged ātma-doctrine of the Buddha. It will not do to quote some sayings of the Buddha unconnected with their context and to interpret them in the said manner. Nor is it to be understood that on the one hand the texts at our disposal should be so reliable that the so-called true original Vedantic doctrine of the Buddha may be surmised therefrom, and on the other hand they should be so unreliable that most of their metaphysical contents have been fabricated by the monks of a later time. Nor do I understand what necessity there may have been for the Buddha to teach a particular new doctrine, when it was only a re-hash of the Upanishadic teachings of His time. One may ask with Professor T. R. V. Murti, in his excellent book on the Madhyamika system, “If the ātman had been a cardinal doctrine in Buddhism, why was it so securely hidden under a bush that even the immediate followers of the Master had no inkling of it?”⁸ In my opinion, from the point of view of objective scholarship, we may acknowledge that the real doctrine of the Buddha cannot be ascertained today because we do not possess manuscripts from His own hand nor were His teachings taken down on records. All we know of Him was taken down in writing only four centuries after His Nirvāna. If we cannot identify with absolute certainty the original Doctrine of the Buddha, we may ask, “What may it most probably have been?” I think it most likely that His doctrine was, at least in its most essential points, a predecessor of what all Buddhists of today agree in. I can see two reasons for the Vedantic explanation of Buddha’s teachings. One is an emotional one: the Vedantist has the natural inclination to harmonize the teachings of the great Gautama with a system which he thinks to be the most sublime in the world. I myself having written several works on Vedānta have the greatest esteem for it. I consider Vedānta to be one of the most grandiose philosophical conceptions ever originated in the world of thought. But this admiration for the Vedānta does not carry me, as an historian of Indian Philosophy, so far as to interpret Vedantic ideas into the Buddhist texts. The other reason why many scholars have tried to interpret the teachings of the Buddha in a Vedantic fashion is one of a view of history. It is an

⁸ T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, London 1955 p. 17.

undoubted duty of an investigator of the history of Indian thought to show the dependence of every new system on older ones preceding it, and to trace its very roots to contemporary ideas. Now, there is no possible doubt that the sublime teachings of the Upanishads were in existence before Buddha. As Buddha's Nirvāna in some respect resembles the Brahmā of the Vedānta, it seems plausible to believe that Buddha was a sort of Vedāntist. But this, in my opinion, is a delusion. For Buddha's Nirvāna is in no way like the Brahma, the absolute being, which is the very foundation of the world, or out of which everything that is has developed and come into existence. It is only that Nirvāna is a state of peace, of rest, of calm, in which it may be compared to one of the aspects of the Brahma. But there are many different systems in the world the ultimate aim of which is such a state of redemption. But the several systems as such differ widely from Advaita Vedānta because they have a theistic basis, as the Mohammedan and Christian mysticism, or as Jainism, which denies the existence of a world-ruling deity. For this reason the reference to Vedānta carries no weight. One may, of course, argue that a similar need, or requirement, is deeply rooted in many religious minds, but there is neither a necessity nor a possibility to trace all kinds of quietism to the same source.

There is yet another deliberation which speaks against the exclusive dependence of Buddha's teachings on that of the Upanishads. The Buddhism of the Theravādins and all the older schools is a pluralistic system. Now a pluralistic interpretation of the world was very common in Magadha, for Jainism was spreading there just at Buddha's time. As far as I know, nobody has ever tried to deduce Jainism from the Upanishads or to interpret its doctrine in a Vedāntic manner. I cannot therefore see any reasonable ground for assuming that Buddhism must have sprung from an Upanishadic fountain. In my work published in 1940 on the stages of development of Indian thought, I have tried to trace the Buddhist dharma-theory to antecedents in the Vedic time; for, the Brahmanas and the Vedic texts teach a pluralism of substantial factors which have a strong similarity to Buddhist dharmas, for in that remote period of Indian thought qualities such as love, hatred, knowledge etc. were considered as substances which had their own quasi-independent existence, and were not regarded as inherent in any substance. Of course by this I do not mean that the dharmas of Buddhism are in any way identical with these archaic concepts of the epoch of the Brahman texts. What I would suggest is only this: that the Buddhist theory of dharmas may have arisen out of ideas that have their precursors in the Brahmana-time. Between the comparatively primitive and crude concepts of this archaic mode of thinking and the highly refined means of the Buddha, there lay centuries of philosophical development. It may be that between these two periods, other thinkers were active in shaping and perfecting these ideas, and in this respect, the Buddhist doctrine that there were Buddhas before Gautama may not be without foundation.

I have tried to show the contribution of Buddhism to philosophy. I have tried to show how the knowledge of Buddhism has developed step by step in the realm of the mind of European scholars. I have tried to show some of the problems which European thinkers have tackled, and I have taken the liberty of pointing out how I myself stand in this respect. Far be it for me to maintain that the solutions I have tried to offer are in any way definitive; nor do I want to force them upon others who many have more knowledge than I have. But perhaps the thoughts I have tried to expound here may form a basis for a discussion which may bring to light new facets of thinking and may serve to elucidate some problems of Buddhist philosophy.

The Buddha's Place in Indian Thought ⁹

The Buddha is the greatest personality that India has produced in the many millennia of her history. For the people of Asia's wide expanses, today as centuries ago, the Buddha is the great exponent of the spirit of India. His name is known to the uncivilized nomad in the icy steppes of Siberia as well as to the cultured son of China. To him turn in homage the gentle Sinhalese of tropical Ceylon and the war-like Japanese of Nippon's moderate climes. When early last century scholars of the West began to study the spiritual life of Asia, the Sage of the Sakyans, as no other genius of the East, became the prime focus of interest. No other has been so often mentioned, praised and blamed. No other has exercised, even 2500 years after his death, such a significant influence on the philosophy of Western thinkers. Among them I mention only Schopenhauer as an example.

When searching for the cause of this extraordinary phenomenon, we ask ourselves why just the Buddha could make such a strong and long-lasting impact, while many other Indian thinkers and prophets who at their times were equally popular, did not penetrate beyond India's borders and were even forgotten in their own home country. In looking for the reasons we find that in the personality of the Buddha several features are united which only in their totality were able to produce that universal effect which the founders of other India religions could not achieve. The first among the features is the fact that in the course of his preaching the Buddha summarized the results of prior philosophic thought and did so in a form that was precise and yet intelligible to the unlearned; secondly, the fact that the Buddha himself practised and embodied up to the highest point the ethical principles which he taught; and thirdly, he made his way of salvation quite independent from the limitations of Indian tradition and its caste system and therefore offered it to the whole of humanity.

Like all great teachers of mankind, the Buddha was also a child of his time. From his predecessors he took over the teachings of Kamma, rebirth, the sorrow-yielding transience of all craving, asceticism, liberation through knowledge and Nirvāna.¹⁰ But by giving these teachings a distinctive philosophical character that took them out of their connection with brahminical tradition, the Buddha created a teaching of deliverance that was meant for all men. Unlike them, he did not speak of sacrifices or of Brahma, but he may be called a phenomenologist who, restricting himself to the actualities of the inner and outer world as perceived by man, explained

⁹ Translated from the German, with permission of the publishers, Verlag I. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen (Germany), extracts from Helmuth von Glasenapp, *Indisches Leben im Wandel der Jahrhunderte* (Bd. 177, *Sammlung gemeinverständl. Vorträge*).

¹⁰ Certain doctrines are common features of religious thought because they are truths, or reflections of truths, similar to the natural laws discovered, often independently, by scientists. Thus it is a fact that some predecessors of the Buddha had discerned the truths embodied in the teachings of Kamma, rebirth, the sorrow-yielding transience of all craving or rather, of all existence, asceticism, liberation through knowledge, and Nirvāna. But not all the religious teachers of the Buddha's time accepted them and those who did so, interpreted them in different ways. It was left for the Buddha to penetrate them further than his forerunners had done, and to see them in a clearer light, stripped of all adventitious preconceptions. To say that the Buddha 'took over' those doctrines as Hegel, for example, took over Kant's doctrine of the categories, or as Plato took over the central ideas of Socrates, is to place his thought on no more than a progressive philosophical basis. But in fact the doctrines the Buddha taught were the result of his own unique, independent confrontation with reality, his own supra-mundane insight (*bodhi*) carried beyond the range of intellectual speculation. In some respects, the Buddha confirmed his predecessors' partial realizations. In others he corrected them; but his teaching was not in any sense a mere development of something that already existed. It was the vision of one who sees clearly what others had glimpsed with eyes clouded by various forms and degrees of ignorance (*avijjā*). (Editor).

the nature of suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the noble eightfold path leading to Nirvāna. Similarly as his contemporary, Heraclitus of Ephesus, he taught the *Panta Rhei*, the eternal flux of all phenomena. The Brahmins taught, as Parmenides did, a state of being, abiding and eternal, in which every individual self, has its roots. The Buddha proclaimed the very antithesis of it: there is no abiding Being, no immutable Self; there is only a becoming, a flux. Only by understanding the nature not only of the external world but also of the ego is it possible to attain to the highest selflessness that brings about Nirvāna, the dissolution of the imaginary personality-complex.

The Buddha's teaching could not have had such an enormous success in India and beyond its borders if not for his so very attractive personality. The Buddha was not a theoretician who offered good counsel to others, but he was one who by his own example put the final authentic seal on the ethical teachings he proclaimed. Aged 29, he left the luxurious court of his royal father at Kapilavatthu (in the Himalayas) and donned a mendicant's robe for seeking after salvation. In vain he searched for ultimate wisdom among other teachers; in vain he undertook the severest ascetical self-mortification for many years. Finally, after seven years of spiritual struggle, the Eye of Understanding opened within him, under the holy fig tree (the Bodhi Tree), which can still be seen at Bodh Gaya. Thus he became a Holy One, an Awakened One, a Buddha. For over forty years he then walked through the northern parts of India, in ascetic's garb, living on collected alms food, and preaching his doctrine. Up to his death at eighty, he did not shirk the hardships of the fatiguing peregrinations on foot, for the sake of spreading his message. The texts describe him as a majestic personality, a man of self-abnegation and of a rare kindness of heart, the embodiment of passion-free serenity. Pious faith may have later glorified the Buddha surrounding him with a divine aura and with a dense overgrowth of legends and miracles, but below that sacral over-painting of the original picture there remains the image of a man of rare equipoise and serenity; the figure of a Saint who has transcended the world and whose features radiate the perfect stillness of his mind.

The Buddha was no revolutionary in the Western sense. Though he was opposed to the Brahmins' arrogance, his aim was not a revolution against the social order as represented by the caste system in India. A graded structural organization of society appeared to him, the aristocrat, a necessity by natural law, as natural as the gradation of beings in general, starting with the lowest animals and rising, through men and spirits, to the gods; because, according to the Buddha, even gods are subject to Kamma as are men, and therefore enjoy their present position only for a limited time. What he challenged was the claim of Brahmins to be superior to the other castes, by virtue of being the guardians of the sacred Vedic tradition. For the Buddha, no class or caste privileges existed as far as salvation was concerned. Hence his emphatic statement, "Not by birth is one a Brahmin, but only by knowledge and moral conduct." It is only the moral qualities that determine an individual's rank in the stages of his gradual progress towards deliverance. Hence also members of the lower castes were admitted to his monastic Order. So we find among his disciples, side by side with Brahmins and warriors, those who had been scavengers or had other despised occupations, even a converted robber chief. For the Buddha neither noble birth nor wealth was decisive, but solely a man's understanding and his moral conduct.

The monks and nuns who, withdrawn from worldliness, lived, either singly or in communities, a life of renunciation and of active loving-kindness for all that lives, had always been only a minority among the Buddha's followers, as they represented only the upper ranks of his disciples. Below them were numerous lay devotees who, at various stages of dedication and inner development, observed only a part of the rules binding on monks; and finally there were the still larger numbers of those who were in sympathy with the teaching and participated in its rites, but who, without exclusive allegiance and with the Indian's typical tolerance, were

devoted also to other religious cults. Hence, from the Buddhist point of view, the teaching of deliverance can be understood and practised by different people to a very different extent, according to their inclinations and capacities. The "road to enlightenment" starts even as far down as on the level of animals. We hear, for instance, of pious elephants and hare, or of a frog that as reward of homage paid to the Buddha, was reborn in a devout human family and, progressing steadily, finally gained deliverance. If one wishes to have a correct idea of the Buddhist Weltanschauung and outlook on life, one has to familiarize oneself with the Buddhist conception that an incalculably large number of living beings, through thousands of years, in thousands of lives, proceed on their way to the light, slowly, though not without relapses. The Western concept that salvation depends on the moral quality of one single life must not be used as a basis for judging Buddhist ethics. Hence the widely spread opinion that because the Buddha taught renunciation to his monks, he wanted *all* men to be monks, is quite erroneous and so also the idea derived from it, that Buddhism is averse to culture. Because only a few among the countless beings will reach Nirvāna after slow progress, therefore Buddhism, from its very start, has provided less stringent ethical precepts for those who only gradually can achieve that maturity required for final liberation. Hence, in Buddhist countries, art and sciences have always been cultivated, and it is not by chance that Buddhists have been among the founders of Indian medicine, as it was one of their foremost endeavours to help suffering humanity. For the great majority of Buddhists, and this I found also in present-day Burma, Siam, China and Japan, Nirvāna is only the ultimate, distant goal to which practically only the monk is devoted. Buddhism when it flourished, was certainly not a pessimistic and life-denying religion. This can be seen from the fact that some of the greatest rulers of ancient India, Ashoka (250 B.C.), Kanishka (100 A.C.) and Harsha (650 A.C.), were Buddhists.

Buddhism did not establish in India an organized Church in the Western sense, and it had no central ecclesiastical authority laying down what was the true faith and what was not. Hence there arose many schools and sects who differed from each other in several doctrinal issues, though all of them revered the Buddha as their Master. As enforced conversion is alien to Buddhism and as it did not demand exclusive allegiance nor a formal repudiation of other religions, the total number of Buddhists underwent strong fluctuations. Buddhism was never the dominant religion of India, and it was always only a section of the population that professed it. Even at periods of its widest dissemination on the Indian subcontinent, Brahmanism always remained a strong force. When, since about the 8th century A.C., Brahmanism came to the fore again and vigorous religious movements arose in its midst to which an ageing Buddhism was no match, Gautama Buddha's teaching almost vanished in India. Similarly, as Christianity which in present-day Palestine counts only very few followers but instead had conquered a large part of the world, so also Buddhism found in the Far East and in South-East Asia rich compensation for the loss in India. In Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, in Tibet, Sikkim, and Bhutan almost the whole population is Buddhist; in Ceylon it is a large majority; and in China, Korea, and Vietnam, Buddhism has a large number of followers, while in Japan it is the predominant religion.

Within the long history of Indian religion, the one and a half millennia of Buddhist history on Indian soil are only an episode; but it is an episode of a significance that can hardly be rated highly enough. Buddhism has amalgamated the currents of Indian thought in a system of ingenious synthesis which decisively influenced minds at a time of India's political and cultural greatness. It was through Buddhism that Indian ideas became known in most parts of Asia, and this was an achievement of cultural propaganda of a vast extent. But also in contemporary India, the impact of the Buddha, his teaching and his community of monks is still very much in evidence. The formulations given by the Buddha and his disciples for fundamental concepts of the Indian world-view have partly been adapted by the opponents and made parts of their

systems. This applies, for instance, to formulations connected with the law of moral causality (kamma), the teachings on a gradual path to enlightenment, liberation by knowledge, and Nirvāna. Also the towering personality of the Buddha could not be overlooked or by-passed: hence they gave to him, the great heterodox, rank of an incarnation (*avatār*) of God Vishnu.

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