

BUDDHISM—THE FULFILMENT OF HINDUISM

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Speciality of India's history

The history of India differs in certain respects from that of all other countries of the world. It is not a sad record of bloody conquest and reckless exploitation of the weaker races by the strong. It is, on the other hand, a wonderful chronical of the evolution and progress of Hindu civilization not only throughout the length and breadth of India but also in foreign countries that collectively came to be very rightly called "Greater India." Even when the ancient Hindu monarch desired in the words of Aitareya Brahmana, "to attain to superiority, pre-eminence and overlordship among all kings, to acquire an all-embracing authority by attaining all forms and degrees of sovereignty, to achieve the conquest of both space and time and be the sole monarch of the earth up to the seas," he had before him the ideal of not only a political, but also a cultural conquest—the conquest of Dharma—an ideal later on proclaimed all over the land by King Asoka, "the beloved of the Gods." Centuries before the advent of Bhagavan Buddha, this conquest by religion and spirituality was begun in right earnest in unknown lands and among aboriginal peoples. This peaceful penetration of Aryan ideas and ideals was proceeding slowly and steadily, bringing into existence a new synthetic civilization, predominantly Aryan in tone, but formed of the union of both the Aryan and non-Aryan cultures. The great task before Lord Buddha and his followers was to hasten this process of Aryanisation so wisely inaugurated by the early fathers of the Hindu race.

Influence of Buddhism

The story of the rise and spread of Buddhism forms a most glorious chapter to the interesting history of the cultural unity of

Bharatavarsha. The advent of Bhagavan Buddha marked a new epoch in the religious history of the world. India, scattering his message over the Eastern world, became the maker of nations, of churches, of literature, arts and scientific systems, in countries far beyond her own borders. But within India proper, the life of the great teacher was the first nationalizer. By democratizing the Aryan culture of the Upanishads, Buddha determined the common Indian civilization and gave birth to the Indian nation of future ages. True to the command of the Master, the inspired missionaries of Buddhism carried as early as the third century B.C. his great message of "mercy and charity, truth and purity, kindness and goodness," to the different parts of India and Ceylon, and even to the Hellenic Kingdoms in Asia, Africa and Europe. The noble teachings of Buddhism, rational and humane at the same time, exerted a great influence on peoples within and outside the bounds of India. Unlike the Semitic faiths, Buddhism never attempted to destroy other religions, but instead, tended to fulfil them by all means in its power. And everywhere in place of dead forms and ceremonies, meaningless austerities and penances, it held before mankind a course of practical ethics of which the Master himself was the highest embodiment. It tried to break down the invidious distinctions between class and class, race and race, and gave to one and all the opportunity to grow in spirituality and culture. And so widespread became the influence of Buddhism that "contemplative fraternities" came to be established even in distant countries like Egypt and Palestine. At the time of the birth of Christ there existed on the western shore of the Dead Sea, the Essenes—a hermit clan to which John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ are said to have belonged,—a brotherhood "marvellous beyond all others in the world, without any women, without the joys of domestic life, without money." It was a society which was resorted to in large numbers by men driven through weariness of existence and surges of ill-fortune—a community in which none was born but which nevertheless lived on perennially. Buddhism established itself wherever it went, but its power was felt more in the Eastern than in the Western part of Asia.

Foundation of Greater India

The expansion of Hindu culture in foreign lands began long before the spread of Buddhism. Enterprising Hindu traders crossed the seas and mountains and carried to distant countries not only the commercial products but also the religion and culture of India. Many of these commercial groups founded small colonies particularly in Indo-China and in the islands of the Indian Archipelago. By virtue of their superior civilization they exercised great influence and became the ruling powers at many places. But none of these colonizing enterprises was founded on brute force and supported by the ruthless subjection and even extermination of the aborigines, as has been and is still being done by the modern European colonists in different parts of the world. The policy followed by the Hindu adventurers was the same as was adopted in India itself. It was racial and cultural reconciliation and assimilation which allowed each community to maintain its distinctive individuality and proceed along its own law of growth. Following in the wake of Hinduism came its child, Buddhism. Like the mother faith, it too became the carrier of India's religion and philosophy, art and architecture, learning and literature. This cultural expansion undertaken by India was, to quote the apt words of Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, "an invasion of peace and not of war, for to spread a spiritual civilization by force and physical conquest—would have been uncongenial to the ancient cast of her mind and temperament. The ships that set out from the eastern and western coasts of India were not fleets of invaders missioned to annex those out-lying countries to an Indian empire, but of exiles and adventurers carrying with them to yet uncultured peoples Indian religion, architecture, art, poetry, thought, life, manners." If Hinduism was flowing to foreign lands like a placid stream, Buddhism came as a tidal wave that swept the then known world, especially the eastern part of Asia. And within the sixth century of the Christian era the religion of the Enlightened One came to be established in Ceylon, Java and Bali, in China, Korea and Japan, in Burma, Siam, Tibet and many other countries. The spirit of Buddhism was the ancient harmonizing spirit of India.

Its ideals were the universal ideals of the Eternal Religion of India. "Within the era of cultural exchange," observes Dr. James H. Cousins in his "Cultural Unity of Asia," "India takes the place of originator, not through seniority, nor by force but by the silent and deep pressure of the basic truth which it has been given her to utter, the truth of the unity of all things in the Divine mind."

Relation between Hinduism and Buddhism

There exists a great misunderstanding about the true relation between the ancient faith and the original teachings of Gautama the Buddha. Over-zealous Buddhist missionaries are sometimes anxious to prove that the Master founded a new religion with an entirely new moral code. There are also some Hindu scholars who blindly believe that Lord Buddha contributed nothing to the ancient religion and philosophy of India. If he did anything at all, it was to preach a false and atheistic doctrine in order to delude and ruin the enemies of Vishnu ! If we want to form a correct estimate of the two faiths, we should not identify Hinduism with either Vedic rituals or with the religion of the commonalty which consists in following dead forms and ceremonies. Similarly Buddhism should not be confused with the religion of intricate atheistic philosophies, gigantic temples, elaborate rites and corrupt practices of Tantra. We must go to the very fountain head of Hinduism and Buddhism—to the Upanishads and the Tripitakas and Dharmapadas. And when we do that we find that there is a clear continuity between the most ancient Hindu scriptures and the original teachings of Lord Buddha. In fact Buddhism was an open revolt against the ritualism of the Vedic Karma Kanda which advocated the sacrifice of animals and claimed to take the sacrificer to the threshold of immortality. There was nothing altogether new about this "protest"; even in the earliest Upanishads we find bold and sincere souls questioning the utility of the Vedic rituals and ceremonies and advocating instead the path of renunciation and knowledge. "The deluded souls," says the Upanishadic seer, "who think that sacrifices and charitable works are of supreme

value do not know the blessed goal. Neither by works, nor by progeny, nor by wealth but by renunciation alone can immortality be attained." In the words of Prof. Hopkins, "One cannot read the Upanishads without feeling that he is already facing an intellectual revolt. The close and stifling air of ritualism has been charged with an electric current of thought that soon produced a storm. That storm reached ahead to Buddhism, but its premonitory signs appear in the Upanishads, and its first out-break preceeded the advent of Gautama."

The Aryan path

Lord Buddha discovered in his own life the highest ideals of the ancient faith. The path that he pointed out was, as he himself said, the Aryan Eight-fold Path. He called it also the middle path which avoided the two extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification and advocated "right view, right aspirations, right speech, right conduct, right mode of livelihood, right effort, right mindedness and right rapture." Sri Krishna too speaks of the same path and the same ethical and spiritual culture when he says in the Gita—"Success in Yoga is not for him who eats too much or too little nor for him who sleeps too much or too little. To him who is temperate in eating and recreation in his effort for work and in sleep and wakefulness, Yoga becomes the destroyer of misery. Humility, non-injuriousness, forbearance, uprightness, service of the teacher, purity, steadiness, self-control, constant application to spiritual knowledge—this is the path to Truth." Lord Buddha thus preached the old ideals in their pristine purity with a new power contributed by a personality all his own. Again, the Brahmin—the knower of Brahman—the embodiment of the highest spiritual and ethical virtues—has ever been the ideal of the Vedic religion. "He alone is a Brahmin," says Yajñavalkya, "who departs from this world after having realized the Imperishable." In the words of the Gita, "Control of mind and senses, austerity, purity, forbearance and also uprightness, knowledge, realization, belief in a hereafter—these are the duties of a Brahmin." Lord Buddha speaks in the same strain

in Dharmapada—"He who is thoughtful, blameless, settled, dutiful, without passions, and who has attained the highest end, him I call a Brahmana." Besides, he believed in common with the Hindu teachers in the law of Karma and Re-incarnation. The order of monks that he established was no innovation in India where innumerable spiritual aspirants, having known the self and rising above the desire for sons, wealth and heavens, wandered about as mendicants even in the most ancient days.

Soul, God, and Nirvana

The most important conception in the Hindu religion is that of the Atman, and Lord Buddha is said to have denied it altogether. A study of the original Buddhism proves that this is not the fact. It is not the Master but his followers who are responsible for this negation. What Lord Buddha seems to have denied was the eternal existence of the "ego-entity" to which mortals cling with so inordinate a passion. "Only through ignorance and delusion," says he, "do men indulge in the dream that their souls are separate and self-existent entities. Self is death and Truth is life. The cleaving to self is a perpetual death, while moving to the Truth is partaking of Nirvana which is life everlasting." As to the existence of God, Lord Buddha neither denied nor affirmed it. Like the Sankhyas, he might not have found a place for God in his cosmological system. But his description of the highest experience clearly shows that his ultimate reality was, like that of the Vedantins, a positive state of existence in which all individualities and personalities were transcended. This he calls Nirvana—an experience that cannot be described either as "to cease" or "to live." "Final deliverance is declared by the sage Buddha to be nothing other than a flow of faultless states of consciousness." It is mental repose free from stress and conflict. Nirvana which is the consummation of the spiritual struggle, is a positive blessedness. It is the goal of perfection and not the abyss of annihilation. Through the destruction of all that is individual in us, we enter into communion with the whole universe and become an integral part of the great purpose. Perfec-

tion is then the sense of oneness with all that is, has ever been and can ever be. The horizon of being is extended to the limits of reality. Milinda says. "It is a kind of existence devoid of egoity, a timeless existence, full of confidence, peace, calm, bliss, happiness, delicacy, purity, freshness." Sariputta rebukes Yamaka for holding the heretical view that a monk in whom sin is ended would be cut off. Max Müller and Childers, after a systematic examination of all passages relating to Nirvana, conclude that "there is not one passage which would require that its meaning should be annihilation." It is clear that it is the false individuality that disappears while the true being remains. Even as the rainbow is a mixture of fact and imagination, so is individuality a combination of being and non-being. The falling raindrops are the *rupa*, the line of light is the *nama*, and the product of their crossing is *bhava* or the rainbow, which is an appearance, an illusion. But it has something real as its basis that is eternal. The psalms of the elders and the nuns are full of eloquent descriptions of the deep joy and the immortal delight of Nirvana surpassing all description. The individual consciousness enters into a state where all relative existence is dissolved. It is the silent beyond. In one sense it is self-extinction, in another absolute freedom. It is the fading of the star in the brilliant rise of the sun or the melting of the white cloud in the summer sky. To think that Nirvana is annihilation is according to Lord Buddha, "a wicked heresy" (Samyutta, III 109). Lord Buddha after having declared that the condition of the liberated one is inconceivable, continues: "Teaching this, explaining this, I am falsely, without reason, wrongly, not truthfully accused by some....." "An unbeliever is the Samana Gautama; the real entity's destruction, annihilation, dying away is what he preaches. What I am not, what is not my doctrine, that I am accused of" (Majjhima, 22). It is, in the words of the Master, "neither coming, nor departing, nor standing still, nor death, nor birth. Nirvana is the end of all sorrow. There is an unbecome, unborn, unmade, unformed. Since there is an unbecome, unborn, unmade, unformed, there is an escape for that which is become, born, made and formed." In much the same

language does the Upanishadic sage try to describe the Atman or Brahman — “Having realised that which is soundless, touchless, formless, imperishable and also without taste and smell, eternal, without beginning or end and immutable, one is released from the jaws of death.” The state of one who has attained Mukti or Nirvana even while being in the body has been described in both positive and negative terms. “Like a vessel immersed in the ocean, he is full within and full without. Like an empty vessel placed in the ocean of ether, he is void within and void without.” Whether the Vedantic teachers speak of the highest experience as Purna (full) or the Buddhist as Sunya (void) - it is all the same.

Buddha's greatest achievement

“The prevalent notion,” observes Dr. Rhys Davids, “that Gautama was an enemy of Hinduism, and that his chief claim on the gratitude of his country-men lies in his having destroyed a system of iniquity, oppression and fraud is nothing but a great misconception. This is not the case. Gautama was born and brought up and lived and died a Hindu. There was not much in the metaphysics and psychology of Gautama which cannot be found in one or other of the orthodox systems, and a great deal of his morality could be matched from earlier or later Hindu books. Such originality as Gautama possessed lay in the way in which he adapted, enlarged, ennobled and systematized that which had already been well said by others; in the way in which he carried out to their logical conclusion principles of equity and justice already acknowledged by some of the most prominent Hindu thinkers.” The greatest achievement of the Master lay in his practical application of the eternal truths embodied in the Upanishads. To the grand philosophy of the Vedanta he added what may be called Buddhist humanism. To the life of renunciation he joined the ideals of service which already existed in a limited form in the ancient scriptures. This path of service as emphasised by Lord Buddha was a sure means for preventing the life of meditation from lapsing into the

dry intellectualism or morbid inactivity so very dangerous to spiritual life. Besides, by democratizing the highest Aryan culture, he brought it within the easy reach of all, irrespective of caste or creed, race or nationality. It was the glory of Sakya Muni that he had the large-heartedness to bring out the truths from the hidden Vedas and throw them broadcast all over the world. He was the first in the world who brought missionarising into practice—nay, he was the first to conceive the idea of proselytising. Hinduism cannot live without Buddhism nor Buddhism without Hinduism. The separation between the Buddhists and the Brahmanas was the cause of the downfall of India. Let us then join the wonderful intellect of the Brahmana with the heart, the noble soul, the wonderful humanising power of the great Master. This happy union of Hinduism and Buddhism—of head and heart, renunciation and service, meditation and activity—is sure to bring about the awakening and regeneration not only of the Hindus but also of the Buddhists, and unite India with the Buddhist countries of Asia in a common bond of culture. Such an alliance, if properly established, has the immense possibility of founding a world-federation on the spiritual ideals of Asia, which India represents so faithfully, more than any other country in the world.

