

# BUDDHISM AND VEDANTA

## CHAPTER I

### RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN INDIA BEFORE BUDDHA'S TIME

When one compares the two systems, Buddhism and Vedanta, one is so struck by their similarity that one is tempted to ask if they are not one and the same thing. Buddha, it will be recalled, did not claim that he was preaching anything new. He said he was preaching the ancient way, the Aryan Path, the eternal Dharma. Somehow or other, people had lost sight of this path. They had got caught in the meshes of sacerdotalism. They did all kinds of crazy things thinking they would get whatever they wanted through them. We get a true picture of the situation in Lalita vistara which says :

‘Stupid men seek to purify their persons by diverse modes of austerity and penance, and inculcate the same. Some of them cannot make out their mantras; some lick their hands; some are uncleanly; some have no mantras; some wander after different sources; some adore cows, deer, horses, hogs, monkeys or elephants. Some attempt to accomplish their penance by gazing at the sun ... .. resting on one foot or with an arm perpetually uplifted or moving about the knees ... ..’ Vedanta, with its literature mostly in Sanskrit, was a closed book to the common people. What Buddha taught was essentially this Vedanta, only he taught it in more practical terms, in terms that people would understand, in terms, independent of dogmas, priesthood and sacrament. He presented it in a new garb, stripped of vague phrases, laying the greatest stress on reason and experience. He did not quote any scriptures, for they confused people and people did not understand them. Also, it is doubtful if he at all recognized their authority. ‘The test of the pudding is in the eating’—this was the criterion he asked people to apply. ‘The doctrine is not

1 Radhakrishna's Indian philosophy, vol 1, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1941 reprint p. 356

based on hearsay, it means "Come and see."<sup>2</sup> He once said to Kalamas: "This I have said to you, O Kalamas, but you may accept it not because it is a report, not because it is a tradition, not because it is so said in the past, not because it is given from (our) basket (or scripture, *pitaka*), not for the sake of discussion, nor for the sake of a particular method, nor for the sake of careful consideration, nor for the sake of the forbearance with wrong views nor because it appears to be suitable, nor because your preceptor is a recluse, but if you yourselves understand that this is so meritorious and blameless, and when accepted, is for benefit and happiness, then you may accept it."<sup>3</sup>

The onus is entirely on you, you yourself have to work out your destiny, not that somebody else will be responsible for what you do or what you are. There is no magic, no mystical force controlling man's destiny, it is just as he wills and works, entirely a question of his choice and effort. If he succeeds, it is because he has made the right choice and he has also worked hard; but if he fails, he himself is responsible for it, because he did not make a correct decision and he did not perhaps work hard enough, either. It was for people to try and see whether what he taught worked or not. If it did not work, they were free to reject it. "Try it as gold is tried in fire", he said (The Bulletin of June 1975, p. 130). Not that Buddha held out liberation as a gift to be offered to those who supplicated him; it was something to be had only by those who were prepared to work hard. There was no such thing as grace or miraculous intervention in Buddha's scheme of things. He disowned that he was a saviour. People had to save themselves—Uddhared Atmanatmanam (Gita VI 5)". Therefore, O Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge ... .. Look not for refuge to anyone except yourselves." (The Creed of Buddha, Holmes, The Bodley Head, London, 1949 reprint).

2. Ibid

3. The Basic conception of Buddhism by Vidhusekhar Bhattacharya, University of Calcutta' 1934 p. 10

Manu says, 'na lingam dharmakaranam' ( External symbols are no criterion of a religious man ). Buddha also attached no importance to external symbols. What to him was important was a man's way of life and character. Was he honest? Was he able to control his passions? Was he a man of renunciation? If so, he was a spiritually advanced person. The essence of spiritual life is self-control, 'Yogah Chittavrittinirodhah' ( Patanjali, Yogasutra ), both Buddhism and Hinduism hold. He also underlined the importance of reason. He said one should follow one's own reason ( yukti-sarana ) and not any individual ( pudgala-sarana ), whenever he might be. This is not to say that one must always ignore what others say. If what others say is sound and good, one might accept it but not otherwise. It is not the age or the status of the person who gives the advice that counts but whether or not one's own judgement says that the advice is good.

What Buddha taught was something based on his own experience. It was also clear, straightforward and readily efficacious. Because it produced results immediately, as if inviting people to try and see whether it works or not, it was often referred to as *ehipassika* (to be seen immediately) or *samakristika* (to be experienced in this very life). In giving it these appellations, people wanted to point its contrast with the Brahminical rites and rituals, which bore fruit, if at all, not in this life but in the life hereafter.

No Hindu accepts the whole of the spectrum of Hindu faiths and beliefs. There are aspects of it he finds repulsive and he, therefore, rejects them. This does not make him less Hindu than any other Hindu. Buddha, in that sense, was a Hindu to the last day. Dr. Rhys Davids has said, "Gautama was born and brought up and lived and died a Hindu... There was not much in the metaphysics and principles 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 adopted, 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.<sup>4</sup> Buddha has been described by Swami Vivekananda as 'a rebel child of Hinduism', but this is not to say that he rejected everything Hindu and taught something new, something not known to Hinduism. Buddhism is no freak, not an accident of history but a by-product of the process of thinking which had long been going on in the Hindu mind. According to Rhys Davids 'Buddhism grew and flourished within the fold of orthodox belief.'<sup>5</sup>

Yet it must be admitted that Buddha broke away from what then passed as Hinduism. The religious scene in India was then dominated by two extreme groups : the Charvakas on the one hand and the votaries of *Karma Kanda* (the ceremonialists) on the other. The Charvakas were after physical pleasure, they were sensualists, pure and simple. They must have been very strong in Buddha's time, that is why perhaps Buddha never tired of harping on '*Anatmavada* (no substance to the phenomenal world), *Anityata* (the impermanence of things) and universal suffering (*Sabbadukha*). He felt sorry for people who ran after sense-pleasure, for they did not know they could never be happy that way. This was why the recurrent note underlying his teachings was the concept of universal suffering. He talked of this suffering so often that many thought and still think that he was a pessimist. What he was really doing was only making a statement of fact, not palatable to many though. Then there were people who believed in *Karma-Kanda*, people who performed rituals hoping they would get whatever they wanted through them. Some wanted money, some long life, some children, some wanted to get into heaven after death. There was nothing wrong in asking for these things, but people forgot they were all short-lived. Even if they got into heaven and became gods and goddesses, they could enjoy this privileged status only for a while. They would have to return to earth as men and women and begin life over again. If they satisfy one desire, another soon takes its place. It is like trying to put out fire by tutter. It only makes the blaze stronger. ( Na

4. Radhakrishnan's *Indilan philosophy* Vol 1, p. 361

5. *Ibid*

jatu kamanam upabhogena shamyati/Havisha Krisnavartmeva bhuyah  
eva abhivardhate. )

This state of eternal thirst in man is described by Buddha  
as follows :

'What he sees he does not wish for,  
But something he does not see;  
Methinks he will wander long,  
And what he wishes, not obtain,  
He is not pleased with what he gets;  
No sooner gained it meets his scorn.  
Insatiate are wishes all !  
The wish-free, therefore, we adore !''

Warren's Buddhism in translations,  
( Radhakrishnan's Indian Philosophy, p. 154 )

Hindu scriptures also praise people who are 'wish-free' Aptakamah i. e., people who are able to overcome their craving for perishable things. The Padma Purana says :

Indriyani vase Kritva yatra tatra  
vasennarah  
Tatra tasya Kurukshetram Prayagam  
Pushkaram tatha

'If you are able to control your mind, then you need not go visiting holy places. Wherever you are, the place is holy.' The Gita also extols the man who is able to control himself. Such a man, according to it, attains peace and nirvana ( VI. 15 ). Such a man i. e. the man who is free from all desires, is considered by both Hinduism and Buddhism as the ideal man. The object of life is to try and become such a man. The business of religion is to help man reach a state in which he is able to say that there is nothing he wants outside of himself, he is full and he has nothing to ask for. Such a man is 'free', free in the sense that he is his own master and because he is his own master he never succumbs to any temptation of any kind.

Buddha felt distressed when he found people did not know the real meaning of religion. They performed rituals but why they performed them they did not know. On the one hand, there was ignorance, on the other, there was the tyranny of the selfish priests. What pained him more was that there were scholars who did nothing to help the masses. They kept debating among themselves about high metaphysical matters. Not that they were deeply religious or interested in religious contents, but they found pleasure in discussing philosophy, they just wanted to show themselves off—that's all. This was why perhaps Buddha always discouraged idle discussions. If people asked him metaphysical questions, he either parried them or remained silent. *Viveka Chudamani*, a work on Vedanta, says *Sastrajalam Maharanyam Chittabhramanakaranam* (The scriptures are like a vast forest where one easily gets lost). If there was a real seeker, Buddha would gladly answer his questions. But most people asked questions just for the fun of asking, without any intention of applying the knowledge that Buddha might impart to them. It was a fashion with people in those days to engage in scholarly debates about metaphysical matters but it was not that they were dying to know the truth. They were superficial people who talked and talked never got anywhere near the truth and perhaps never wanted to get near the truth, either. They were confused people and if Buddha said anything to them they would have got more confused. The best knowledge is personal knowledge. People must discover the truth themselves and not by proxy. This was why he showed them the way to the truth, but never tried to explain to them what exactly the truth was like or what happened when one realized the truth, for that would have been an impossible task. Between these materialists and pseudo-intellectuals, there were many splinter groups of people (Niganthas, Ajivakas and Shramanas) whose philosophies varied in degrees of aimlessness of life and sensualism.

#### BUDDHA'S ADVENT

It was at this juncture that Buddha appeared, as if to save

humanity. He taught Vedanta, the essence, in Aldous Huxley's language the H. C. F., of all religions. Vedanta had so long been treated as the close preserve of a few. Only those who were highly educated had access to it. In fact, not only Vedanta, but all other systems were a sealed book to the common people, for books on those systems were all in Sanskrit. Buddha taught Vedanta but taught it in the language of the people. He was perhaps the first religious teacher in Indian history to do so. He avoided dialectical Vedanta, he taught only those aspects of it which everybody could understand. His Vedanta was simple, clear and practical. He wanted people to fix their minds on the problem which was immediate and which bothered them most. What is that problem? The problem of suffering. There is suffering everywhere, high and low, rich and poor, no one is exempt from it. There is physical suffering as well as mental suffering. Suffering is a fact of life which one must face, willy-nilly.

#### BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS

He reduced the whole question of religion to four basic truths, truths he called 'four Aryan truths' (Catvari Arya-satyani). They are :

1. Life is full of suffering
2. The cause of this suffering is desire
3. Suffering can be overcome only by overcoming desire
4. Self-discipline is the only key to control of desire

But how can this self-discipline be attained? There is no magic about it, only by practice. Practising what? Buddha recommends an eightfold path. Practise, he says, (1) Right Faith (2) Right Resolute (3) Right Speech (4) Right Action (5) Right Living (6) Right Effort (7) Right Thought (8) Right Self-concentration.

#### SELF-CONTROL, KEYNOTE OF VEDANTA AND BUDDHISM

The emphasis here is on the word 'Right' that is to say, you have to tread your path very carefully and stick to it. The onus is entirely on you. If you make a wrong choice you have

yourself to blame for it. The advice may be difficult to follow, but there is no haziness about it. Surprisingly, Vedanta also gives the same advice. It asks you to examine what is enduring and what is not, and then choose only that which is enduring (Nityanitya-vastu-viveka-ihamutrapphala-bhoga-viraga). It asks you to eschew even life in heaven, for that too is ephemeral. The choice must be your own and it must be a correct choice. Vedanta also asks you to practise self-restraint. By self-restraint, it understands *Shmao* (control of the mind) *Dama* (control of the sense organs), *Uparati* (withdrawal from sense pleasure) and *Titiksha* (austerity). As part of this practice, one should also concentrate on things conducive to spiritual growth and have faith in oneself. Thus, both Vedanta and Buddha attach the greatest importance to the sense of discrimination and self-restraint. There is no place here for miracle. The only miracle they recognize is the miracle of self-discipline. Self-discipline, according to them, is the whole of religion. Both reject rituals out of hand, for it can, at best, produce some temporary benefit, but not change the mind of man where the seat of all trouble lies. Vedanta emphatically declares that the ultimate truth can never be known through ritualism. *Na Karmana na Prajaya dhanena amritatvam* anashuh (Not by rituals nor by children nor by wealth, only by renunciation, can you get immortality) Kaivalya Up. 2. One of the Upanishads (Br. Up. I, IV, 10) even thinks that the gods do not feel happy at the prospect that man should know the ultimate truth, for then they will miss the sacrificial offerings which man gives them and which they covet. This is why they hold back the ultimate truth from man so that they can continue to receive man's sacrificial offerings. But man will for ever remain in bondage unless he gains mastery over himself. The importance that Buddhism attaches to self-control can be gauged from the following remarks of Buddha.

"If a man were to conquer in battle a thousand times a thousand men, and another conquers one, himself, he indeed is the greatest of conquerors" Dhammapada 103.

Dhammapada also says: "Not even a god can change into



defeat the victory of a man who has vanquished himself" 105.

Chittadhino Dharmo Dharmadhino Bodhih (on the mind *depends Dharma*, on the practice of Dharma depends enlightenment). (Radhakrishnan's Indian Philosophy, p. 423).

## AVIDYA

But why is it that people run after ephemeral things ? Due to ignorance (Avidya) both Buddhism and Vedanta aver. Ignorance is, according to Buddhism, one of the links in the chain of existence that binds man. Vedanta also regards as the root of all trouble, But when did ignorance start ? How did it start ? Both Buddhism and Vedanta dismiss these questions as irrelevant. What is relevant is to know how it can be ended and then try to end it. Because of this ignorance, man has endless desires and he keep running after perishable objects. He sees the world crumbling around him, he sees how brittle it is, yet he finds himself running after it.

Shelley says :

Worlds on worlds are rolling over  
From creation to decay,  
Like the bubbles on a river,  
Sparkling, bursting, borne away

Radhakrishnan's Indian Philosophy p. 368

Indeed. the world which we love and to which we are so much attached is only a bubble on the ocean of infinity. It is said that it is this impermanence of things that spurred Buddha to take to the life of a recluse. He had, while out on a drive through his town, seen signs of decay in the shape of old age, disease and death. Against this, he had also seen signs of peace and joy on the face of a hermit. This set him thinking.

He understood that only through renunciation, renunciation of perishable objects, that one could be happy — *tena tyaktena bhunjitha* (Therefore, save yourself through renunciation) Isa upanisad I. Those who run after this sense-world, plunge deeper and deeper into darkness — *Andham tamah pravisanti ye asambhutim*

*upasante.* Isa 1, 12. If you run after sense-pleasure, sometimes you may enjoy yourself for a while, but your enjoyment cannot last for long. Soon you will find the pleasure has slipped through your fingers. But if you can say, 'I don't care for external pleasure, I have everything I need within me, I am content, I am full, that is to say, if you can overcome your craving, then you are indeed happy. This is the ideal that is held out by both these systems. They follow maxim, 'That which is in the hands of other people is a cause for sorrow, that which is within your grasp is a cause for happiness'. *Sarvam Paravasham duhkham Sarvam atmavasham Sukham.* In other words, you have to be your own master.

The contrast between one who runs after sense-pleasure and one who does not is very well brought out in the following verse of the Mundakopanisad :

Dva Suparna Sayuja Sakhaya  
Samanam Vriksham Parishashvajate  
Tayoranyah pippalam Svadu-atti  
Anashnan-anyoh abhichakashiti

Two birds are on the same tree; they look exactly alike; one runs from one fruit to another; sometimes the fruit turns out to be sweet, sometimes bitter. The other bird, however, is calm, quiet only watching.

## DETACHMENT

It is this complete withdrawal from the world that both Vedanta and Buddhism advocate. The withdrawal need not be physical but it must be mental. That is to say, you may work like anybody else does, but while others work with an eye to the fruits of their labour, you will have to work with a spirit of detachment. Ordinarily, we work because we have something in view, something we want to get; we have some desire in our mind and it is this desire that drives us to do, what we do. We are, in other words, at the mercy of our desires. If we succeed in our endeavour, we are overjoyed, but if we

fail, we break down. We are like that bird, sometimes eating sweet fruits, sometimes bitter, sometimes happy, sometimes unhappy. Our goal is to be like the other bird, the bird which does not allow its happiness to depend upon external factors, which has complete mastery over itself. Buddha had this mastery over himself, so he had 'changeless bliss' (Light of Asia, pp 51-52). It is not that Buddhism or Vedanta is advocating inertia. Buddha himself was an active man. To the last day he worked, worked ceaselessly trying to save mankind. He never allowed himself to rest. He, however, enjoyed infinite rest in the midst of infinite activity. This was possible because he worked not for himself but for others, he worked with complete detachment, he worked not under the compulsion of desire but out of compassion. In the Gita also we find Sri Krishna urging Arjuna to work, but he cautioned that he must work with detachment (*Karmanyeva adhikaraste ma phaleshu kadachana*). Gita II, 47.

In explaining why there is suffering Buddha propounds the well-known theory of *Pratityasamutpada*, conditioned origination. The theory means that nothing comes into being just out of nothing; something must have been its cause which existed earlier. Buddha describes this as *Dharma*, the law that governs the whole world-process. There is suffering in the form of old age, disease, death or despair, grief etc. (in other words, *Jara-marana*) because of birth (*Jati*). Where there is birth there is death. But between birth and death, there are many experiences which one must go through, they being a logical corollary to the fact of birth (*Jati*). So the goal, according to both Vedanta and Buddhism, is to go beyond birth and death, to break through this cycle, the wheel of becoming (*Bhava chakra*). It is *Avidya* (ignorance) which keep this wheel moving. The chain of causation, put in the reverse order, is like this :

From *Avidya* spring the *samskaras* (impressions), from impressions the initial consciousness of the embryo (*Vijnana*), from consciousness name and form (*Nama and Rupa*), from name and from six organs of knowledge (*Sadayatana*), from the organs contact

(sparsa), from contact sense-experience (Vedana) from sense-experience thirst i. e., desire (trisna), from desire attachment (upadana), from attachment the tendency to be born (bhava), from this tendency birth (Jati), from birth old age, death, etc. (Jaramarana).

Both Vedanta and Buddhism hold that this ignorance is cosmic. How and when this ignorance started they do not discuss, but the interesting point is that both think that this ignorance is 'real' as well as 'unreal', 'real' if you think it is real and act accordingly, 'unreal' if you refuse to recognize that it exists and behave as if it does not.

Both Buddhism and Vedanta accept the law of Karma and its corollary, reincarnation. How long does this law of Karma operate? So long as you think you have a 'self' and so thinking, run after sense-enjoyment, says Buddhism. Vedanta thinks this law of Karma operates so long as you do not know your true self. You think your body is your self. So you try to keep the body in comfort. If the body is in pain, you think you are in pain, if the body enjoys something, you think you are enjoying it. In the case of Vedanta, your ignorance of your true Self is the root of your trouble. The dictum of Vedanta is — 'Know thy Self' Atmanam Vidhi.

Buddhism does not speak of there being any permanent Self, rather discourages the idea that there is such a thing as 'Self'. It keeps harping that there is no 'Self', perhaps because it is observed that it is from this idea of 'Self' that attachment grows. When Buddhism says there is no such thing as 'self' it obviously refers to the phenomenal world which is without substance. Ananda once asked Buddha why he preferred to remain silent when people asked him whether there was a self or not. Buddha replied that this was because he did not want to confuse people. If he said that there was no self, people might then become completely nihilistic in outlook, thinking annihilation was the end of everything. If he said that there was a self, then people would mistake the body for the self and run after sense-enjoyment. In essence, however, both the

standpoints mean the same thing. The problem is the problem of overcoming attachment to the phenomenal world. Buddhism says you can overcome this by knowing that it is false. Vedanta says that you should know that it is false but should try to shift your attachment to your true Self which is free and independent under all circumstances, without birth and without death, which is Existence, Knowledge and Bliss Absolute, and which needs no help of the phenomenal world for its happiness. If the surface of the mirror is clean, you have a good reflection of yourself on it. The layer of dust that has accumulated on it is the hindrance. This hindrance has to be removed. Similarly, there is the hindrance of the false ego and consequential attachment to the world to your knowledge of the Self. If you remove this hindrance, you automatically know your Self. Buddha stressed the need to remove this hindrance, the false ego and the attachment to the world. He perhaps argued that if he talked about the Self, people would get confused, so he wanted that they should concentrate on the removal of the hindrance rather than try to understand a subject which is really beyond understanding. The self is something 'words cannot express'—'the mind comes away from it baffled, unable to reach it' (Taittiriya, II. 4)

Renunciation is thus the key-note of both Vedanta and Buddhism. Renunciation of what? Renunciation of that which is *Anitya*, ephemeral. Both also point out that you are the architect of your own fate. If you are what you are today, it is entirely because of what you were yesterday. What you are going to be tomorrow will be determined by what you are today. Everything, therefore, depends upon you. Here again *Pratitya-samutpada* operates your own action leading to the reaction to which you are subject now.

Buddhism and Vedanta are more a science than a religion. They are based on observed facts. They prescribe methods which lead to predictable results. Both are dominated by common sense, reason and experience. Both deny a personal God and therefore the necessity of prayers. Both hold life is full of suffering, man is

caught in the 'wheel of becoming' (*Bhava chakra*), the goal is to get out of the cycle of birth and death, to attain *Nirvana*, *Mukti* or *Moksha*, so that there is no more birth, no more 'becoming'. But how to get this *Nirvana*? By practising self-restraint, by practising *asta-marga* (the eightfold path). It is the same thing as *Shama*, *Dama Uparati*, etc. of Vedanta. In either case, the aim is to prevent the mind from running after this world which both recognize as *Anitya* (transitory), the cause of all suffering.

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