

The Historical Context of the Rise of Buddhism

as edited by
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Professor K.N. Jayatilleke, in his erudite, posthumous work, *The Message of the Buddha*, discusses the religio-historical backgrounds which existed prior and during the time of the Buddha.

“Tradition has it that the Buddha was born in a certain historical context, at a certain time and at a certain place when his doctrine was likely to be most needed, understood and appreciated.

It was then that the aspirant to Buddhahood came down from the *Tusita* heaven to be born among men. Whatever the truth of this belief may be, there is no doubt that the appearance of the Buddha was preceded by the presence of a diversity of religious and philosophical beliefs about the nature and destiny of man in the universe.

In fact, there is hardly any major religious or philosophical view prevalent today, or which has evolved in the course of human thought in the East or West, that was not represented then by some religious or philosophical teacher who had appeared on the scene.

THEISTS, MATERIALISTS AND AGNOSTICS

These major views were in fact held by six outstanding religious or philosophical teachers, who are each said to have had a large

following and who were. the senior contemporaries of the Buddha. There was Makkhali Gosála, the Theist (*issara-kiriyavádin*), according to whom the world was created by a divine fiat and continues to unfold itself like a ball of thread that unwinds when flung on the ground. Being under the impact of various evolutionary forces over which they have no control, beings gradually evolve under varying conditions of existence until they eventually attain final salvation.

In the other extremem, was Ajita-Kesakambalì, the Materialist, according to whom fools and the wise alike terminate their existence at death and there was no such thing as a ‘good life,’ which religious men talk about.

Opposed to both these views was Sañjaya Bellapphiputta, the Sceptic Agnostic or Positivist, who held that beliefs about an after-life, moral responsibility and ultimate salvation were beyond verification and that, therefore, one could not, with reason, hold any firm opinion about them.

Many people are even today either Materialists, Theists or Sceptics. Their world-view or *Weltanschauung* is in fact basically not different from those put forward by these three leading philosophers at the time of the Buddha.

There are, however, three other leading thinkers referred to in the early Buddhist texts, and they, too, represent certain types of thought met with (still) today as well as in the history of human speculation.

There was Púraóa Kassapa, who was a Natural Determinist holding that everything was strictly determined by natural forces. As a corollary to his determinism he was, like the scientists who held a deterministic view of nature, an Amoralist who believed that there

was nothing good or evil as such.

Pakudha Kaccáyana, on the other hand, was, like Empedocles or Aristotle, a Categorialist, who tried to explain and comprehend man and the universe by classifying reality into discrete categories.

Lastly, Nigaópha Nátaputta, the historical founder of Jainism, was a Relativist in his theory of knowledge, holding that there was some truth in every point of view, and an Eclectic in his metaphysics, which tries to combine the truth of all these different, even contradictory standpoints.

All these teachers, it is said, who represent standard types of belief, were held in great esteem and veneration by the people, and the religion and philosophy of Buddhism is distinguished from every one of them.

Some of the disciples of the Buddha were in fact drawn from among those who adhered to their doctrines. Sáriputta, for instance, the chief disciple of the Buddha, was originally a follower of Sañjaya, the Sceptic.

Very often, however, the Buddha classified the teachers of his time into two categories, the Eternalists (*sassata-vada*), who believed in the existence of an integral soul, which survived the death of the body, and the Annihilationists (*uccheda-vada*) who asserted the total destruction of the human personality with the death and dissolution of the body.

Among the Eternalists were various types of Theists and among the Annihilationists were various categories of Materialists. The views of these two schools of thought were the predominant views of the time and, it is in opposition to both of them that the religion and

philosophy of Buddhism is presented.

VEDIC TRADITION

If we examine the non-Buddhist sources, we find that some of these theories are traceable to the Vedic tradition, while others can be traced to the non-Vedic. But these terms, Vedic and non-Vedic, are to some extent misleading. For it is possible or even probable that many of the views within the Vedic tradition evolved under the impact of the non-Vedic, while some of the non-Vedic teachings, on the other hand, can be shown to have branched off from the Vedic.

In this chapter, which concerns the historical context of the rise of Buddhism, we shall very briefly consider what is meant by the Vedic and the non-Vedic traditions and the general attitude of Buddhism to each of them, without going into details.

It is generally agreed among scholars that Buddhism arose in the sixth century BC during or somewhat after the period when the Upaniãadic doctrines were being formulated. The Upaniãads are considered to form the tail-end of the Vedic tradition and are hence known as the Vedanta or the end of the Vedas.

But it is held to be the end of the Vedic tradition, not merely in a chronological sense, but because the Vedanta constituted the essence or consummation of the Vedic tradition. Even in the Buddhist texts we find the phrase, *vedantagu-brahmacariyo*, used to denote a person who has gained the heights of spiritual knowledge and as such has consummated his religious life. In an Upaniãadic context, the phrase would denote one who has mastered the essence of the latter portion of the Vedic tradition and as such has realised the fruits of the religious life. This shows the close relationship between Upaniãadic and early Buddhist thought.

The Upaniāads, however, do not present a single view but a variety of views regarding the nature and destiny of man in the universe, although there is a certain homogeneity in the thought of the middle and later Upaniāadic thinkers. These thinkers were historically separated and geographically isolated from each other, and there is evidence that they built upon earlier theories and criticised each other.

They are, however, all deemed to belong to the Vedic tradition by virtue of the fact that they owed a general allegiance to the Vedas. With the majority of the middle and later Upaniāadic thinkers this allegiance was a very loose one, since they considered the earlier imaginative and discursive type of knowledge as a form of ‘lower knowledge’ (*apara vidya*), while their own knowledge was derived from an expansion of consciousness and extra-sensory powers of perception. This was due to the practice of Yoga, and the intuitive knowledge thus gained was regarded by them as *para vidya* or the ultimate knowledge.

One important difference with Buddhism was the fact that it paid no special allegiance to the Vedas. The Buddha, it is said, studied under Yogic teachers presumably of the Vedic tradition, such as Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, but, although he mastered their teachings, he is said to have gone away dissatisfied with them. However, immediately after his enlightenment, it is significant that he first thinks of preaching to these two teachers, since he considered that they were very wise and would have soon profited from the Dhamma.

The recognition of the worth of these Upaniāadic teachings in the Buddhist texts is embodied in the stanza with which Brahma, the regent of the cosmos, invites the Buddha to preach the Dhamma to

the world, which would otherwise be destroyed without it.

It reads as follows: ‘There arose in the past among the Magadhan peoples a Dhamma, which was not perfect and which was conceived by imperfect seers. Open now the door to immortality so that people may listen to the Dhamma, which has been fully comprehended by a Perfect One.’

A further recognition of the value of the intuitive insights of some of the Upaniãadic seers is contained in the Buddhist concept of the Pacceka Buddha, which accepts the fact that one may attain salvation and a high degree of enlightenment by one’s own efforts, without necessarily depending on the teaching of the Buddha himself.

Even the teaching of the Buddha, it may be noted, is only a guide to understanding, ‘for one has to put forth effort oneself, for the Transcendent Ones are only guides’ (*tumhehi kiccam atappam akkhataro Taftgata*). In one place in the Sutta Nipáta, the Buddha recognises the fact that not all the recluses and brahmins are involved in decay and death (*na’haí bhikkhave sabbe samanabráhmaóase játi-jaraya nivutta ti brumi*).

AN ANCIENT WAY

Of similar import is the conception of the Buddha or the Enlightened One as a discoverer of an ‘ancient way’ (*puráóam aftjasam*) already discovered in the past. But it is not clear whether the ‘past’ here referred to is the historical past of the present world-cycle or of a previous world-cycle.

Buddhism upholds the cyclical oscillating theory of the universe, which expands and contracts during immense periods of time, called *vivap̣pa* and *saívap̣pa-kappas*, aeons of the expansion and contraction of the universe.

One Sutta and a very early one states that the Buddha ‘was the first in the history of the present world to break through the shell of ignorance and attain illumination.

In another Sutta, however, which belongs to a ‘later stratum, the historical Buddha is represented as the seventh Buddha of the current epoch, while still later in the tradition he becomes the twenty-fourth. It is possible that these latter views were developed under the impact of the Vedic and Jain traditions respectively. For the Vedas are traditionally revealed by seven seers, the *saptars I* and Nigaópha Nátaputta, the founder of Jainism, is held to be the twenty-fourth saviour or Tirthankara.

Yet the basic Buddhist concept is an inherently rational and plausible one. The Buddha merely discovers by his unaided efforts the truths about the nature and destiny of man in the universe and reveals them out of compassion for mankind. This has been done by countless Buddhas in the past. For according to the oscillating theory of the universe, the universe has no beginning in time, and the further we go back in time, there is the possibility of going back still further, with successive and unending expansions and contractions of the universe.

Likewise it is inferred that there would be such Buddhas in the future. As for the present, it is stated in the Mahávastu, a work embodying some of the earliest views of Maháyána Buddhism, that there are galactic systems (*loka-dhátu*) in space in which Buddhas are presently preaching the Dhamma. This is not a conception that is wholly alien to the Theravada tradition. For even today in Ceylon Buddhists recite the stanza, ‘*ye ca Buddhá atitá ca, ye ca Buddhá anágatá, paccuppanná ca ye Buddhá, ahaí vandámi sabbadá.*’ This means: ‘I revere at all times the Buddhas in the past, the Buddhas in

the future and those in the present.’ It is not implausible to believe that, just as much as there are scientists in this earth who have discovered by experiment and observation certain laws operative in nature, there could be other similar beings who have similarly discovered these laws in an inhabited planet of our galactic system or in an alien galactic system.

To come back to earth and to history, we find that it was the convergence of the two traditions, the Vedic and the non-Vedic, which blossomed forth in Buddhism. And it is a remarkable fact, as we have observed, that towards the end of the Vedic tradition there emerged sincere seekers after truth and immortality, who devoted their entire lives to this quest, renouncing all else.

This quest begins in the *Áraóyakas* or the early Upaniãadic period, prior to about 800 BC, when we meet with the following prayer recorded in the *Brihadáraóyaka Upaniãad*:

From the unreal, lead me to the real!
From darkness, lead me to light!
From death, lead me to immortality!
(1.3.28)

It is in answer, as it were, to this quest that the Buddha circa 528 BC announced to the world: ‘Open for them are doors to immortality’ (*Apárutá tesaí amatassa dvára*). And during the interval of time from 800 to 528 BC earnest seekers gave up everything for this quest.

A NEW ERA

It marked a new stage in the development and evolution of the human mind, but mankind has still to learn the lessons from the discoveries made by this awakened human intellect about or somewhat prior to the sixth century BC.

It, is also at this time that we discover the world over a new awakening of the human race. In Greece, Pythagoras, perhaps influenced by Eastern thought, conceives of philosophy as a way of life, sets up a brotherhood and teaches the doctrine of rebirth, which later influenced Plato.

Platonic ideas eventually had an impact on Plotinus, St Augustine and the modern Western world. In Israel, the prophet Isaiah dreams of a time to come when there shall be human brotherhood and all nations shall live in amity and friendship and wars shall be no more. In Persia, Zoroaster views the world as a battleground in which the forces of good and evil contend and is convinced of the eventual victory of good over evil. In India, as we have already seen, the Upaniãadic seers achieve a breakthrough in human consciousness and one of them predicts that ‘truth alone shall conquer and never untruth’ (*satyam eva jayate nanrtam Mundaka Upaniãad, 3.i.G*). In China, Confucius ethicises human relationships and Lao Tse speaks of the need for man to live in harmony with eternal values and principles.

This message of the sixth century BC which marks the spiritual awakening of man and the consequent faith in the possibility of harmonious living may appear to be antiquated to some, but it is likely to prove to be more relevant, to the modern world than would seem at first sight.

It was during this sixth century BC that the Buddha was born and spoke after his enlightenment in a modern idiom, which is becoming increasingly intelligible to man in the twentieth century.

Buddhist tradition, again, has it that the world at this time was eagerly awaiting the birth of an Enlightened One. The Sutta Nipáta,

says that the sage Asita predicted that the Buddha-child ‘was born for the welfare and happiness of mankind’ (*manussa-loke hita-sukhatay, a jato*).

Certainly the Vedic tradition looked forward to someone, who would lead the people from darkness to light and from death to immortality.

As H. G. Wells points out in his *Short History of the World*, ‘Gautama Buddha . . . taught his disciples at Benares in India about the same time that Isaiah was prophesying among the Jews in Babylon . . .’ (Penguin Books, revised edn., September 1946, p. 90.

Isaiah says that a people who walked in darkness have seen a great light and speaks of a child to be born at the time and who shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father and the Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace, it is said, there will be no end.

It is a curious coincidence that all these epithets have been claimed by or for the Buddha, either during his lifetime or a few centuries after his birth. For the Buddha says that he is the *Accbariya-Puggala* or the Wonderful Person and *Sattha devamanussanam*, the Counsellor of gods and men, while he has been called ‘the God among gods’ (*Brahmatibrahma, Devatideva*), the Eternal Father (*Adi Pita*) and the *Santiraja* or *Santi-nayaka*, the Prince of Peace.

The Buddha himself says in the *Bhayabherava Sutta*: ‘If anyone says that there is born in this world a perfectly enlightened being for the weal and welfare of mankind out of compassion for the world, for the weal welfare and happiness of gods and men, he may rightly say this of me.’

In the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*, the Buddha speaks of going to Kasi to set up the Kingdom of Rule of Righteousness (*Dhamma-cakkani*

pavattetum), which is elsewhere called Brahma-cakkam or the Kingdom of God, but since Brahma here does not have a theistic connotation, it would mean the highest or the most sublime kingdom.

And it is said that the gradual advance of this Rule of Righteousness cannot be prevented by any religious teacher, angel, Satan (Mára), God (Brahma) or anyone in this cosmos.

The *Mahávastu* interprets this Rule of Righteousness in a political setting when it says that ‘The Rule of Power ultimately depends on the Rule of Righteousness (*Balacakrarp hi nisraya Dharmacakram pravartate*).

No one would say that the reference in Isaiah’s prophecy is a Buddhist interpolation. But a similar statement attributed to Confucius in one of his classics is considered by scholars to be a Buddhist interpolation in the text, though the evidence is far from conclusive.

It is said in the Chinese classical text, *Lieh-tfu*, that when the chief minister of the state of Sung visited Confucius, he asked him the question, ‘Are you a Sage?’ to which Confucius is said to have replied: ‘How would I presume [to call myself] a Sage? In fact, I am only one who has extensively studied and who has [stored up] much knowledge.’ The minister then asked Confucius whether various kings and emperors of China were Sages, to which he replied in the negative. Finally in exasperation he asked Confucius, ‘Who then is a Sage?’

It is said that Confucius changed countenance at this question and after a pause answered as follows: ‘Among the people of the West there is a Sage. He does not speak and is yet spontaneously believed,

he does not [consciously] convert people and yet [his doctrine] is spontaneously realised. How vast he is! There is none among the people who can find a name for it!' (See E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1959, p. 274.)

Some Chinese scholars have taken this to be a reference to Lao-tzu but the Buddhists of China have seen in it a reference to the Buddha for the Buddha was known as the Sakya-Muni or 'the Silent Sage of the Sakyans.'

An ancient Chinese Buddhist scholar makes the following comment on this text: 'To judge from this [text], Confucius was fully aware of the fact that the Buddha was a great Sage. But at that time no opportunity had as yet arisen [to expound the doctrine], so he knew it but remained silent ...' (ibid.).

WAR OF IDEOLOGIES

Whatever the historicity of these texts, even if we judge the Buddha by our worldly standards, there is little doubt that the Buddha was a person with the keenest intellect and the kindest heart. He towers above the enlightened thinkers of his age for, in his Dhamma, we have an ideology which is claimed to put an end to all ideologies and which shall eventually be shown to be true when all other ideologies have in the light of reason and experience been shown to be false.

The supreme victory in the battle of ideologies (*anuttaro saḍgama-vijayo*), it is claimed shall be won by the Dhamma. It is for this reason among others that it has been claimed of the Buddha that he is the Enlightened One par excellence or the Anuttara Sammásambuddha.

The doctrines of Buddhism can be better understood if we can, see in them the impact of the different theories and practices enunciated in

the Vedic and non-Vedic traditions. One of the basic principles of Buddhism has been that of accepting whatever it thinks is sound, good and true from whatever source it comes, and of rejecting what it believed to be unsound, evil and false.

On this principle, we can observe that there are some things which are acceptable to Buddhism in the Vedic tradition and others which are rejected. It is the same with the theories of the Materialists, Sceptics, Ajivikas and Jains in the non-Vedic tradition. A careful study of what is derived from each of these traditions as well as what is rejected will help us to comprehend the Dhamma with greater clarity and precision.

CHRONOLOGY

We have already said that in the opinion of most scholars Buddhism arose during or after the Upaniãadic period of Vedic thought. But this period stretches from about the eight to the fourth century BC, and the question as to what point in the chronological scale Buddhism comes into being is an important one.

For the question as to whether certain ideas in the Upaniãads influenced or were influenced by Buddhism can be determined largely from such a chronological framework. For example, it has been surmised, though in my opinion not correctly, that Buddhism was not aware of the impersonal concept of Brahman as the ultimate reality to be realised by attaining union with it in this life itself.

If so, then if Buddhism spoke of the ultimate reality beyond space, time and causation as the state of Nirvana to be realised here and now, rather than as a Heaven of Brahma or a Brahma-loka to be attained after death, someone may conclude that the conception of Brahman as an impersonal reality to be realised here and now was influenced by Buddhism. Such conclusions, however, should not be

arrived at on the basis of our preconceptions, but on objective criteria, which can be accepted on the basis of their inherent plausibility in the light of reason and experience.

Traditionally, there are 108 Upaniåads but in actual fact the number is about 200. Of these, thirteen principal Upaniåads were commented on by Sankara and have been classified as early, middle and late. Thus *Chandogya* is early, *Karha* belongs to the middle period, while *Maitrayani* is late.

Where does Buddhism take its rise? Is it contemporary with the early, middle or late Upaniåads? Or does it appear long after the thirteen principal ones had come into being? All these views have been held by various scholars.

But the theory that is most plausible and is consistent with the facts is the one that holds the rise of Buddhism is somewhat prior to the *Maitrayani Upaniåad*, which is a late Upaniåad. For there seems to be good evidence that this particular Upaniåad refers to a rising Buddhist movement.

The Upaniåad mentions a sect wearing a 'ruddy robe' (*kasaya*), which converts people by recourse to 'rational arguments and examples' (*tarka-drstanta*), denies the doctrine of the soul (*nairatmyavada*), preaches a Dharma which is destructive of the Vedas and orthodox scriptures (*Vedadisastra—hiísaka-Dharmabhidhyanam ...*) and whose goal is the mere attainment of pleasure (*ratimatram phalamasya*).

It can be shown that all these descriptions could apply only to Buddhism in the historical context, although some of them could have applied other movements.

Thus, the Materialists may be said to have resorted to rational arguments and examples and posited the attainment of pleasure as their goal, but they did not teach Dharma or wear a ruddy robe.

The Jains, on the other hand, had a Dharma but they did not deny the existence of the soul nor because of their ascetic way of life did they pursue pleasure.

It was the Buddhists, who at this time were being criticised by other religious sects as being addicted to pleasure. Besides, they wore a ruddy robe, the *kasaya-vastra*. They used rational persuasion as the means of winning over others to their point of view. They taught a doctrine that denied the validity of the concepts of soul and substance and preached a Dharma, which was not based on, and in fact denied, the acceptance of the Vedic revelation.

Besides, the *Maitrayani Upaniâad* shows evidence of the influence of Buddhism although it forbids the brahmins from studying what is not of the Veda.

So the rise of Buddhism, it may be presumed, is not far removed in time from the *Maitrayani Upaniâad*, although it is somewhat prior to it. We may, therefore, regard the period from the *Rgveda* to the *Maitrayani Upaniâad* as the Vedic tradition that could have had an impact on the rise of Buddhism.

But the non-Vedic tradition is equally important. The Materialists, Sceptics, the various speculations about time and change in the doctrines of the Ajivikas and the eclectic theories of the Jains have left their mark on Buddhism, which extracted what was true and valuable in each of these schools of thought leaving out the dross.

Predominant among these in the non-Vedic tradition were the

Materialists. There are seven schools of such Materialists referred to in the *Brahmajála Sutta* and the existence of several of them is independently attested in the non-Buddhist literature. The first maintained that the mind was identical with the living body and that there was no mind apart from the body that was alive. The second held that mind was an emergent by-product of the body, which disintegrated at death. There were also mystic Materialists, some of whom believed in the possibility of expansions of consciousness by the use of drugs and this was criticised by the Buddhists as *micchá jhána*—trances attained by wrong means.

It is against the background largely of these two main schools of thought that Buddhism is presented. Buddhism accepted the fact there was some degree of truth in ‘some of their doctrines but showed that the ultimate truth transcended them both.

Referring to the *bhava-dipphi* or ‘the personal immortality view’ and the *vibhava-dipphi* or ‘the annihilationist view,’ the Buddha says: ‘These religious and philosophical teachers who fail to see how these two views arise and cease to be, their good points and their defects and how one transcends them both in accordance with the truth, are under the grip of greed, hate and ignorance ... and will not attain final redemption from suffering’ (*Majjhima Nikáya*, 1.65).

Besides these two main views, however, we must not forget the variety of views about the nature and destiny of man in the universe, prevalent at the time. These have been summarised in the *Brahmajála Sutta*, which refers to sixty-two views and ways of life.”

Reference

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