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Chapter Three

Buddhism





Lord Buddha and the Buddhist Tradition



The 6th century B.C.E. holds a significant place in the history of mankind. This period is known as the age of spiritual awakening. During this period many religious leaders were born and there arose many waves of spiritual knowledge in various regions of the world. In Iran, there was Zarathustra (the founder of Zoroastrianism); in China Confucius (the founder of Confucianism), and Lao Tzu (the founder of Taoism), were influencing people through their philosophical teachings. There was also a wave of spiritual revolution taking place in India. Its pioneers were Lord Mahavira and Lord Buddha.

The revolution in India was not merely one of religious fervor, but also involved the political and social arenas. Throughout this period of transformation the people raised their voices against the rituals and violent sacrifices of the established Vedic tradition. The caste system was also questioned openly during this period, and many other aspects of the prevailing tradition were seen to be governed by selfish motives.



Social Stratification

At the time of Buddha, Indian society was divided into four castes. These were the *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra* classes. This division was not related to merit or deeds, but was a tradition simply based on birth. The four groups engaged in distinct and separate life styles. Marriage out of caste was simply not allowed. It is clear from Jain and Buddhist texts that *Brahmin* and *Kshatriya* castes were the ruling castes. They were invariably involved in tension with regard to their authority to rule over others. The *Kshatriya* consistently competed with the *Brahmins* in knowledge, science, and ascetic practices. The *Vaishya* class held an inferior status to the *Brahmin* and *Kshatriya*. The word householder was commonly used to refer to the *Vaishya* class. They were respected in royal circles solely on the basis of their wealth and status and therefore their representatives were quite influential in the King's court. The *Shudra* class, all non-Aryan or were aborigines, composed the lowest of these four castes. In addition to these four castes there also were the *Chandalas* (untouchables) who were so low that they were not even considered a caste. It was a sin to even see a *Chandala*, and even more so to touch one. They were segregated from the society. Also, at this time in Indian history, there were quite a few people in the grip of various cults, which were



organized on the basis of black magic, spirits, and demons. In general, it can be said that the fire of ingratitude, selfish attachment, hatred and atrocities prevailed throughout the land. The country was fertile ground for revolution.

Religious Conditions

At the time of Lord Buddha's birth the condition of religion (*dharma*) also had become chaotic and very confused. The society had fragmented into hundreds of sub castes. Religious practices had been reduced to empty rituals and outward display. People worshiped materialism (worldly gains in this life and after) while leaving true spirituality unattended.

At this time animal sacrifice was at its zenith. Each day the priests of the temples satisfied their selfish needs by slaughtering animals. Their blood covered the sacred sacrificial altars. Sacrificial rituals had begun to be looked upon as the path to liberation (*moksha*). Wealthy people believed that they could be absolved of sin by having animal sacrifices performed. The common and poor people were unable to afford such opulent sacrificial rituals. But these less fortunate people were engaged in equally delusional paths to liberation. Many practiced physical austerities for the sake of their spiritual well-being: standing on



one foot, meditating with one arm always raised, and extreme fasting, for example, were all resorted to this end. An immense illusory net of beliefs based on these austerities was on rise, and even Lord Buddha practiced some of these in his early ascetic life.

At the same time there were those in the society who supported neither the sacrificial sects nor severely austere practices. Predictably, a few of these aspirants revolted against these established practices. Turning their back to these prevalent rituals and showing their resentment toward these practices, these few nonconformists searched for the truth as wandering monks. The result: before the advent of Buddha various sects and schools of philosophy arose. During this period of religious confusion, many people were longing for a way to eradicate suffering and find suitable answers to the essential questions of life. None of the prevailing cults offered such a path. What was needed at this crucial time; were the key human virtues of compassion, loving kindness and sympathy. Lord Buddha appeared on this earth for the purpose of reviving these essential human virtues (benevolent *samskaras*).



Birth of Lord Buddha

In 563 B.C.E. Lord Buddha, whose family name was Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, was born in the valley of Nepal near the city of Kapilvastu in the forest of Lumbini. His father's name was Shudhodhana and his mother's name was Mahamaya Devi. Shudhodhana, who belonged to the famous Ikshvaku clan, was the king of Madhya Pradesh. Kapilvastu was the capital of his kingdom.

When the Buddha's mother was pregnant with this child she expressed her desire to the King that she be allowed to go to her father's house in the city of Devadeha. The King gladly accepted her wish and she set out for her father's house with a caravan of her attendants. On the way Mahamaya went into labor and gave birth to this radiant child. She then returned to Kapilvastu with her newborn child and her retinue in order to be with her husband, the king.

According to tradition, as the King was so overjoyed by the birth of his son, he summoned the wise sage and priest named Kaldeval to consult about the child's horoscope. After seeing the brilliant face of the child the sage proclaimed: "This exceptional child will be a great and wise (enlightened) man. Further, if he



chooses to stay as a householder he will become a sovereign king. If, however, he chooses to be an ascetic, he will become a Buddha—an enlightened being.”

All the rituals of a newborn were performed and he was named Siddhartha. But after the seventh day of giving birth to her son, his mother Mahamaya passed away. The responsibility for raising him fell on the shoulders of his aunt, Gautami. Later, the king made Gautami his queen. Having been raised under the loving care of Gautami, Siddhartha became known as Gautama.

Siddhartha’s Childhood

When the child Siddhartha became a youth the king sent him for education and study to the family Guru, whose name was Vishwamitra. Siddhartha had exceptional keen intellect and so he quickly grasped the knowledge of all subjects. Once, while he was walking in the royal gardens, a swan, who was crying pitifully, suddenly fell at Siddhartha’s feet. The swan had been struck by an arrow and was throbbing with pain. Siddhartha pulled the arrow from its body and proceeded to care for the stricken swan. In the meantime, his cousin, Devadatta came running and told him: “This is my swan! It has been struck by my arrow”. Siddhartha replied: “I have saved its life. It sought



refuge in me and so it is mine.” The argument grew fierce and the two boys finally took their dispute to the king. The king listened to both arguments and pronounced that the one who protects the life of a creature has the right to that creature. This was a great disappointment to Devadatta. He became envious and bore malice towards Siddhartha.

In the midst of all the comforts and luxuries in the palace, Siddhartha still loved solitude. This concerned the father who had planned to insulate Siddhartha from the harsh realities of everyday life. He succeeded in doing this until the day Siddhartha expressed a desire to take a walk in the forest outside the confines of the palace. Siddhartha set out for the forest riding in a beautiful chariot. The crowds of the city were eager to catch a glimpse of their prince who had been virtually cloistered for many years.

Four Passing Sights

While going through the crowd on the way to the forest the prince saw a man who was very old and feeble. The old man walked with the help of a cane and exerted a great effort. His body shook from old age. The prince asked the charioteer: “What kind of man is this?” The charioteer replied: “This is an



old man who once was like you, but he has become as you now see him because of old age. We will all become like this when we are old.” Upon hearing this, Siddhartha felt distressed and detached, and he immediately returned to the palace.

When the king came to know of this event, he became alarmed. When he discovered the cause of Siddhartha’s distress, he ordered the chief minister to prevent even the shadow of an old person to be seen anywhere near the palace. Once again the prince went for an outing to the forest. On his way this time he saw a sick and ailing man who was lying on the ground crying in pain. The prince asked the charioteer to stop and then he asked the charioteer who this man was. The charioteer told Siddhartha that this man was diseased and sick. He explained that disease is the nature of the body. The prince was overwhelmed with compassion and was unable to bear the sight of the ailing man. He had to return to the palace.

Due to the sudden return of the prince, the king discovered what had happened. After finding out the reason for Siddhartha’s anxiety the king ordered that neither old nor sick people should be allowed near the palace, thereby hoping to shield his son from these harsh realities. Nevertheless, Siddhartha became disturbed and restless from these two sights of suffering. He considered: If



old age and sickness are the nature of the body then there must be a way to get freedom from these menacing phenomena.

Thereafter, his mind could not find peace within the walls of the palace. One day he went out walking and as he was strolling he saw a corpse being carried to the cremation grounds. The loved ones of the deceased were following and weeping in great pain at their loss. This was the first time in his life Siddhartha had seen this, and he was astonished. He again asked his charioteer what was happening. The charioteer explained: “Some man has died and his relatives are taking his lifeless body to the cremation grounds.” Thus Siddhartha learned, to his despair, that all living beings must meet the same end. Overcome by such thoughts the prince returned to the palace.

Once again the king came to know of the event and thought it must be a bad omen that his son was repeatedly distressed by these common life events. He remembered the prophecy spoken at the time of Siddhartha’s birth and was greatly concerned. The King quickly made further arrangements to keep the prince tethered to the material world. However, Siddhartha continued to be distressed by the grim realities of life he had seen, and his detachment from the world only grew in the course of time. When the King saw that the prince was becoming even more



detached, he hurriedly arranged for Siddhartha to be married to a most beautiful girl named Yashodhara, the daughter of a neighboring king.

Yashodhara was always eager to serve her new husband with her devout love for him. When the prince became 26 years of age he was blessed with a son. Upon hearing the news of the birth of his son, instead of rejoicing, Siddhartha withdrew into a very contemplative mood. He thought to himself that the birth of his son was a bondage that would pull him away from spiritual thoughts. Therefore, he named his son Rahul. Rahu is the mythical deity in Hinduism who obscures the light of the sun during an eclipse.

The king arranged for the prince to be continually immersed in worldly pleasure and distracted from the spiritual path. Nevertheless, even a wife, son, throne, beautiful women, and all means of enjoyment were unable to satisfy or divert Siddhartha from his spiritual path. One day while he was on his way to participate in a garden celebration he noticed an ascetic (*sadhu*) passing by. Curious about the man who appeared to be an embodiment of detachment and filled with contentment, Siddhartha asked his charioteer about the man. The charioteer said: “Prince! He is a mendicant.” The prince further inquired,



“What is a mendicant?” The charioteer replied, “A mendicant is one who remains detached from the world and stays immersed in meditation. He shuns worldly pleasures and attachments. He has overcome the sorrows of old age, disease and death.” This discourse about the life of a mendicant was very pleasing and consoling to Prince Siddhartha.

Inspired by this exemplar of renunciation, Siddhartha approached his father with great respect and requested: “Father, now that your grandson has been born, please give me permission to renounce this householder’s life as my heart feels no pleasure in these worldly things.” The king was utterly shocked and tried to persuade Siddhartha with various arguments. Still determined, Siddhartha further asked: “Father, if you could find me a remedy for these four ailments I will abandon my desire to leave the palace life. These four issues are as following: I should never die, never become old, never experience sickness and never face any kind of deficiency. The King replied: “All these matters concern the natural laws. Who is there that has control over these things?” The king refused to give him permission to leave.



The Great Renunciation

That very day the child Rahul was seven days old, and the king made arrangements for a great celebration to mark the auspicious day. The celebration included opulent festivities with performances by attractive dancers. As Siddhartha was watching these festivities, he slipped into a state of deep contemplation and then fell asleep. When the exhausted dancers saw the prince sleeping, they too dozed off, sleeping wherever it was immediately convenient. After some time the prince awoke. He saw in the bright light of the lamps that these beautiful dancers, scattered here and there, were completely unconscious. He noticed that some of these sleeping damsels' mouths were hanging open, some were drooling, and some had their clothes disheveled. What had looked like a scene of rejoicing now appeared to Siddhartha as a cremation ground filled with dead bodies. An overwhelming sense of detachment consumed him. He returned to his private royal quarters where his wife and son were fast asleep. Seeing the beautiful face of his son he wanted to hold him, but he did not do so as this might awaken his wife and thereby ruin his secret plans. He decided at that moment to flee from his life as a householder.



Under cover of the silence of night, Siddhartha asked his charioteer, Chandak, to prepare the horses. In the midst of a summer night gleaming with the light of a full moon, Siddhartha exited the great gates of the palace. Crossing the boundaries of three states he reached the Anoma River. Siddhartha stopped at the banks of the river and with the sharp edge of his sword he cut off the locks of his hair and removed his princely ornaments and garments. Handing over his precious ornaments to his charioteer Chandak, Siddhartha asked him to return to the kingdom. The charioteer, much taken aback and distressed, returned to the kingdom and reported the incident. This flight of Siddhartha is known as “the Great Renunciation.”

In Search for Truth

As he continued on the way to Raj Graha Siddhartha came across three *ashrams* and stayed with their *acharyas* (teachers). However, their meditation practices seemed inadequate and incomplete to him. He decided to spend some time in solitude in the Pandava hills. After that he went to Uruvella (Bodhagaya) where there lived a pundit named Alara Kalama, an acclaimed teacher of Samkhya philosophy. Siddhartha studied under him and learned certain yogic techniques. Yet again, the inner quest of Siddhartha was not satisfied. From there he went to study with



Acharya Ruddrak (the son of sage Uddalak) who was a renowned teacher and scholar. He too could not fulfill the spiritual need of Siddhartha. Siddhartha then undertook a path of intense meditation and self mortification on the banks of the river Niranjana (Falgu). The practice of intense austerities made him frail and weak. At times he would become unconscious due to lack of food. Even with this practice of self mortification Siddhartha felt no closer to realizing the Truth. In this way many years passed during which he was performing arduous austerities.

After living and practicing in this manner for many years, Siddhartha began to feel disheartened. It is believed that in this state of mind Siddhartha saw Lord Indra (the king of gods) in a dream. Indra was playing a stringed instrument. One string of this instrument was too tight and the sound coming from it was discordant, while another string was too loose and was equally displeasing. A third string was neither too tight nor too loose and its sound was very pleasant. Siddhartha felt inspired that the lesson from this dream was that the middle way was the superior path. He could see that extreme austerities would not lead to the attainment of enlightenment. He realized that it was only proper to follow the middle path, and to abandon both the hard austerity of asceticism and the life of leisure.



The Great Realization

With this new realization, Siddhartha bathed in the river Niranjana near Bodhagaya, in state of Bihar in Northern India.¹ Determined Siddhartha, then, sat in meditation on a grass mat under a Banyan tree and practiced one-pointed focused meditation. He continued this practice until he attained *bodhi* (enlightenment or Knowledge) at the age of 35. His inner heart radiated with the light of spiritual knowledge (*brahmajnana*). He realized the Truth and experienced Inner Peace (*Shanti*). This experience is known as “the Great Realization or Enlightenment” (Buddhahood). From that point on Siddhartha was known as Lord Buddha and *Tathagata* (literally, “thus gone like that”). Having attained Buddhahood, the all knowing state, Siddhartha Gautama spoke these words:

I have run through a course of many births looking for the maker of this dwelling (body) and have not found him. Painful is birth again and again. Now you are seen, O Builder of the house (body), you will not build the house again. All your rafters are broken, your ridgepole is destroyed, the mind, set on the attainment of nirvana (enlightenment,) has attained the extinction of desires” (Dhammapada, Jaravaggo: 8 - 9)

Lord Buddha explained that the word “Buddha” means to be filled with unbounded knowledge as vast as the infinite space. He further said,



I Gautama have attained this state and if you try wholeheartedly you also can attain this state.

The Early Teachings of the Buddha

After his great enlightenment (*nirvana*), Siddhartha, now called the Buddha, proceeded to share the path to *nirvana* with others. He gave his first sermon, “Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Law,” in Rishi Pattam of Sarnath, near the city of Banaras in northeastern India. In response to this, five men became his disciples. During the remaining 45 years of his life he spread his message to all, from kings to poor alike, by traveling through neighboring states, such as Avadha, and Bihar. Most of his teaching took place in the state of Bihar and Ayodhya.

In his first sermon, the Buddha taught:

Mendicants should avoid these two extremes: First, avoid sensual pleasures and second, refrain from pain-inflicting austerities. Avoiding these two extremes I have found the Middle Way. This path leads to knowledge and truth. Also this is the bestower of Peace (shanti)

Prasenajit, the king of Koshel kingdom, Bimbsara, the king of Magadha, and Ajatshatru accepted this message and became the disciples of Lord Buddha. The Buddha established a community of his mendicant disciples. He gave his congregation of mendicants this three-fold proclamation: “I take refuge in



dharma; I take refuge in Buddha; I take refuge in *Sangha* (the community of monks).” In the time of the Buddha, Sanskrit was the established language of sacrament, therefore the word *dharma* is used; however, in later times, Pali and Prakrit became the languages of the common people and the Sanskrit word *dharma* became *dhamma* in the Pali language.

In accord with Lord Mahavira of Jain dharma, Buddha was also a great proponent of non-violence. He was always eager to sacrifice his own life for the sake of protecting the life of other beings. He once said to a king: “If you think you will attain heaven by sacrificing some helpless animal, then you should be able to find the greater reward by sacrificing a human being. Oh, King! Cut the shackles of that animal, and free the animal! Instead, sacrifice me. I ask you, will it not be, that you will acquire a greater merit through human sacrifice?” The king was shocked.

Many years had passed after Buddha had left Kapilvastu. His father, King, Shudhodhana, became anxious after not seeing or heard from his son for such a long time. He was eager to meet with him and sent many letters through various channels in order to contact him. Finally, the king sent Buddha’s childhood friend, Kalaudai, as an ambassador to carry a letter to him. When



Kalaudai reached Buddha, he himself undertook the vow of a mendicant as a follower of Buddha and never returned to the king. After six months had passed, Kalaudai finally gave the letter to Buddha and told him the news of his father. The Compassionate Buddha and his entourage set out for Kapilvastu on the day of full moon in the month of March, which is considered an auspicious time to travel. The whole city of Kapilvastu was overjoyed by the return of the prince, who was now the great Buddha.

After meeting with his ascetic son, the King became overwhelmed with emotions. He escorted his son to the palace along with his followers. All the townspeople came to see the great Buddha, but his wife Yashodhara could not gather the courage to see this sight—her husband as an ascetic. After persuasion by his father Buddha proceeded toward the inner quarters of the palace of Yashodhara. She came to meet him, and overwhelmed with emotions, fell at her Lord's feet. Lord Buddha soon left the palace and the kingdom of King Shudhodhana. As the time passed both Yashodhara and the King were initiated into the *Dhamma* (the Path) by the Buddha. The Buddha's step-brother Nanda was to be consecrated as the heir of the kingdom after the king Sudhodhana. But Nanda became deeply impressed by the sacred teachings of the Buddha, and in



the middle of the celebrations of his consecration and wedding ceremony, he decided to be initiated by the Lord Buddha. That very day he chose the life of a mendicant, instead of that of a sovereign king.

Yashodhra, gripped with love for her husband, desired that if Buddha would stay in Kapilvastu a little longer so that she would be able to see him more often. One day as Buddha turned back from the kingdom after begging for alms Yashodhra sent Rahul, her son, to see the Buddha, his father. Rahul uttered the words his mother had instructed and asked: “Dear father, give me my inheritance rights”. In response, when the Buddha returned to his *ashram* he told his disciple Sariputra to give Rahul the honor of renunciation. Thus at a very young age, Rahul became a renunciate and a part of the community. The King was very distraught when he heard about this.

At that time there was a *sanyasi* (renunciate) named Sanjaya who was residing with his disciples in Rajgraha. Two of his disciples were Sariputra and Modgalyayna, both sincere students who were always engaged in spiritual practices. When they heard about the essential truths and knowledge taught by the Buddha, they quickly became his disciples. Buddha proclaimed: “These two will be my chief and most trusted disciples.” In time the



Buddha's words came true. Devadatta and Ananda, cousins of the Buddha, also became his disciples. At the age of sixty the Buddha appointed Ananda as his chief attendant. Ananda remained in Lord Buddha's service wholeheartedly until Buddha's passing away from this material world.

Towards the Setting Sun (End of Buddha's Life)

Buddha continued to teach the path to ultimate freedom which is achieved by following the truth, practicing nonviolence, and maintaining purity of conduct. He gave understanding to people with regard to purity of the self and the Inner Light. In 483 B.C.E., at the age of 80, while in Kushinagar (in the Gorakhpur district in the state of Uttar Pradesh), the Buddha left his physical body and attained *Mahparanirvana* (Great Freedom).

In the last moments of his life he gave final words to his disciples:

O! Mendicants! Be a lamp to thyself and take refuge in yourself. Be your own support and make Dharma (the path of the Buddha) your lamp, taking refuge in it.



Doctrines of Buddhism

When we look at the fundamental doctrines of Buddhism we can see that they were derived from the prevailing *Sankhya darshana* (*Sakhya Philosophy*) and the latter *Upanishads*.

This is validated by the reference from Lokamanaya Balgangadar Tilak, a religious leader and great scholar of Indian philosophy:

This has been established indisputably that just as Jain Dharma, so also Buddha Dharma is a son of the Vedic Dharma. As a son, after taking his inheritance from his father follows his individual path, in the same way the Buddha Dharma separated from the Vedic Dharma. In other words, Buddhism is not a stranger or foreign to Vedic Dharma. Moreover, it is a branch arising out of the prevalent Brahman- Dharma.

The essentials of the teachings of Buddha Dharma are understanding the nature of the self and the purity in action, conduct, and thought. The Buddha declares:

Abandonment of all evil deeds and sins, accumulation of all meritorious deeds, and purification of the mind and conduct is the discipline of Buddha.

The Buddha emphasized that the middle path is the most desirable path. To have pure conduct one must avoid both of the extreme paths: intense austerities and sensual pleasures. The Buddha condemned violent acts such as animal sacrifices. He also protested against needless rituals, the self-claimed



superiority of the pundits (priest class) and *brahmins*, and the inequity of the caste system. He advocated a path that was pure, simple and based on the principles of moral conduct. The Buddha taught that by treading this path people can attain freedom and go beyond the cycle of birth and death (*samsara*).

Lord Buddha and his Path of Four Noble Truths

1. In this world there is suffering.
2. This suffering has a cause.
3. There is a way (cure) to become free from suffering.
4. The Eightfold path is prescribed to attain freedom.

In order to escape the cycle of death and birth and the suffering of the world a person should follow the Eight fold path.

This Eightfold path is as follows:

1. Right view
2. Right intent
3. Right speech
4. Right conduct
5. Right livelihood
6. Right effort
7. Right vigilance (Mindfulness)
8. Right Samadhi (Concentration)



The essence of Buddha's teaching is as follows:

1. Do not criticize others. Do not speak ill of others.
2. Do not commit any kind of violence.
3. Control yourself by choosing right moral conduct.
4. Eat in moderation.
5. Live in solitude.
6. Yoke the mind to meditation (Yoga).

The Main Texts of Buddha Dharma

After the *Mahaparanirvana* (the final liberation) of the Buddha, his prominent disciples recited and compiled his words on the basis of their memory. These have become the main texts of Buddhism. They are known as *Tripitika*, “the three baskets:” *Vinya Pitika*, a collection of the rules of discipline for Buddhist monks; *Abidhamma Pitika*, the philosophy and discourses of the Buddha; and *Sutapitika*, the principal doctrinal teachings of the Buddha's Dharma. There is an additional text (of later date) which is quite essential to the teachings of the Buddha. This is the *Melindpanha*, a compilation of the discourses between a Greek king named Melinda and the great Buddhist scholar Nagarjuna.



The Spread of Buddhism

Due to the influence of the Buddha's teachings, the heart of the great monarch Ashoka was transformed when he witnessed the great devastation and killing that took place in the battle of Kalinga. The Buddha's message of peace and non-violence inspired King Ashoka to raise the flag of the Buddha's Dharma (peace and brotherhood) instead of lifting arms for destruction. Thereafter, Ashoka played a pivotal role in the spread of Buddhism. He sent emissaries to various countries, and as a result, there are many *stupas* and relics with engraved Buddhist teachings in lands far from India. Ashoka's legacy is useful in reconstructing historical accounts of early Buddhism.

Buddhism had an important influence on many of the doctrines of Christianity, a Western religion, and it also became popular in many Eastern countries including Nepal, Tibet, China, Sri Lanka as well as in other parts of central Asia.



The Branches of Buddhism

About a hundred years after the death of the Mahatma Buddha, Buddhism split into two branches due to differing interpretations of his message and basic doctrines. These two branches, Hinayana and Mahayana, each developed according to their understanding of the principles of Buddha's message. Hinayana means "Small Vehicle." This tradition accepted the essential teachings of the Buddha as its foundation. It is also known as the "Southern Buddhism" or Theravada Buddhism (The Way of the Elders).

Human life is filled with suffering. The individual soul goes through the cycles of death and rebirth. Therefore, putting an end to this cycle ends the suffering. This can be accomplished through self restraint and control of one's selfish desires. This central doctrine of the Buddha is also delineated in the *Upanishads*. Buddha adopted the eightfold path in order to end the cycle of death and rebirth, and to put an end to the selfish desires. This doctrine is the foundation of the Hinayana sect of Buddhism.

The followers of the Hinayana sect do not consider Buddha as God, and do not prescribe his worship. According to the



Hinayana way, a human being can escape the cycle of birth and death and attain liberation by his own unaided effort.

In contrast to this, the Mahayana or “Big Vehicle” sect thinks of the Buddha as a form of God or a celestial being. The goal of the followers of Mahayana Buddhism is the attainment of Buddhahood for the purpose of helping other living beings. For this reason this sect teaches that it is necessary to take the vow of a *Bodhisattva*, an enlightened being, who has chosen to incarnate in this world to help fellow beings. Thus, the Mahayana sect gives importance to the ideal of the *Bodhisattva* in place of the ideal of the Buddha, an enlightened being who does not return to the cycle of death and rebirth. The followers Mahayana recognize *Bodhisattvas* such as Avalokiteshvara (“Lord who looks down” or a being of compassion). They further believe that one can attain liberation by worshipping representations of these *Bodhisattvas* in the form of *murtis* and symbols (various representations of the Bodhisattva).

Teachings of the Buddha

When we study the following specific episode in the life of the Buddha, the essence of his teachings is revealed to us.



Once, there were five *brahmins* (learned individuals from the priestly class) who approached the Buddha and requested: “Lord, please be the judge of the merit of our arguments.” One of the *brahmins* said: “In my *Shastras* and the sacred texts the form of God is described as such and such, and the method to attain that God is described as such and such.” And then the other *brahmin* heatedly argued: “No sir. This is all erroneous since, in my text, it is written the opposite. These texts which I have studied have prescribed a different path for God realization.” With increasing excitement and frustration the other *brahmins* too proudly presented their views, citing the respective *Shastras* and holy texts concerning the nature of God and His attainment. Lord Buddha listened calmly, and said: “Have you heard in any *Shastra* that God ever becomes angry, or does harm to anyone, or that God is impure?” They all replied in unison: “No, our scriptures tell us that God is pure, without any imperfections and, that He bestows prosperity and well-being.” Lord Buddha replied: “Friends, Why don’t you first strive to practice a pure and moral life and by doing so you can attain the knowledge of God?”

As described earlier, the *Sutrapitika* is one of the three divisions of the *Tripitika*, the Pali Scriptures of Buddhism. There are five sections of *Sutrapitika*, one of which is *Khuddaka Nikaya*.



Within *Khuddaka Nikaya* there are fifteen books. One of these fifteen books is the *Dhammapada*. The essential teachings of the Buddha on various matters are presented in the *Dhammapada*.

Here give some examples from the *Dhammapada*:

One should not associate with friends who are evildoers, nor with persons who are despicable. Associate with friends who are virtuous, and who are the best (in conduct) of men. (Panditavaggo)

Whatever an enemy may do to an enemy and whatever a hater may do to a hater, a wrongly directed mind will do us greater harm. (Chitavaggo)

Sandalwood or tagara, a lotus flower or a Juhi flower, all possess pleasant fragrance. However, the fragrance of virtue surpasses even these. (Puphaavaggo)

A person who constantly practices reverence, and who gives respect to the elders and seniors, for that person four things will increase: life span, beauty, happiness and strength. (Sahasavaggo)

One who has not practiced control of sexual desires and has not acquired wealth in youth pines away (in old age) like old cranes in a lake without fish. (Jaravaggo)

Follow the law of virtue but do not follow the path of unrighteousness. He who practices virtue lives happily



*in this world as well as in the world beyond.
(Lokavaggo)*

*One who becomes a sluggard or a glutton, rolling
himself about in gross sleep like a hog fed on wash,
that foolish one again and again takes birth.
(Nagavaggo)*

*It is difficult to obtain a birth as a human being.
Difficult is the life of mortals. Even more difficult is it
to hear the true law. The [most] difficult is to rise to
Buddhahood (enlightenment). (Buddhavaggo)*

*He who destroys life or kills, who speaks untruth, who
takes what is not given to him in this world, who goes
to another man's wife committing adultery, or who
gives himself to intoxicating liquors, such a person
uproots himself (digs his own root in his world).
(Malavaggo)*

*As rain breaks through an ill thatched house, so
passion makes its way into an unreflecting mind.”
(Yamkavaggo)*

*Better is one day of life for he who is wise and
reflecting, than a life of a hundred years for one who
is ignorant and unrestrained. (Sahasvaggo)*

*There is no fire like passion; and no ill like hatred;
there is no sorrow like this physical existence; and no
happiness higher than tranquility. (Sukkhavaggo)*



Lord Buddha's *Sadhana* (Meditation Practice) (Buddha's Teachings, Compared with the Vedic Dharma and Santmat)

It has been two thousand five hundred years since the passing (*paranirvana*) of Buddha. According to the Indian sources, the *Bhagavad-Gita* predates Buddha by at least 2500 years.² It is interesting to find similarities between the teachings from these two sources. Therefore, it would not be out of context to cite references which convey the similarities.

A good example is found in the *Gita* (Chapter 6: 5- 6):

Let a man lift himself by himself; let him not degrade himself; for self alone is the friend of the self, and the self alone is the enemy of the self. For he who has conquered his self by the self, his self is a friend, but for him who has not possessed his higher self, his very self will act like an enemy.

This can be compared with a similar teaching in the *Dhammapad's Attavaggo* where the Buddha states: "The self is the lord of the self."

The *Chittavaggo of the Dhammapada* (verses 10-11) also states:

Whatever an enemy may do to an enemy, whatever a hater may do to a hater, a wrongly directed mind will do even greater harm. Neither mother nor father nor



any relative will do a greater service than a well directed mind will do.

In the *Dhammapad's Dandavaggo* the Buddha warns:

He who in seeking his own happiness inflicts pain on other beings, who are also desirous of happiness, does not obtain happiness after death.

The identical ideas were stated in the older texts, such as the *Manu Smriti* and the *Mahabharata*.

The *Manu Smriti* (5/45) states

Those who seek pleasure by harming other beings are happy neither in living nor in death.

We can also compare these sources of teaching on the subject of merit in serving the elders. The *Dhammapada* states:

To him who constantly practices reverence and respects the aged four things will increase: life, beauty, happiness, and strength. (Sahsavaggo, 10)

Manu Smriti (2/121) also states the similar ideas:

To the one who is endowed with the nature of serving the elders and showing reverence each day, four things will increase:

- 1. Life*
- 2. Wisdom*
- 3. Fame*
- 4. Strength*

In the *Mahabharata's Ashwamedhaparva* it is stated:

As a man spins and pulls a strand (fiber) from a spool of jute, in the same way a yogi witnesses his atman by separating it from the body.



In this analogy, the jute represents the body and the strand represents the soul. This reference is known by the accomplished yogis.

The same images are used in the *Dighanikiya's Samanjaphalasutta* (1/ 2):

As a man pulls out a strand from a spool of jute, in his mind he determines that the jute and the strand (fiber) are now separate. But the strand was originally taken from the jute itself (it was a part of it).

The Vedic texts are replete with images of various deities, such as Brahma, Indra, Varuna, Yaksha, Gandharva, and Kamadeva. The later Buddhist texts also speak of many celestial realms with multiple deities. And it can be seen that both sets of texts elaborate on several philosophical concepts in identical ways including, sinful and meritorious deeds, heaven and hell, bondage and liberation, the cycle of *samsara* (death and rebirth).

Moral standards are also treated the same in both traditions: Stealing, consuming intoxicants, violence and adultery are the five sins to be avoided. The Vedic texts maintain that it is essential to abstain from them for the practice of inner meditation. Later, the Buddha gave the very same instructions to his disciples. He mandated that establishing oneself in the five virtues (*Shilas*), the seeker must practice meditation (*dhyāna*).



Similarly, in the early text *Yogshikhopanishad* (Chapter I) it is said:

Knowledge (wisdom) without yoga, and yoga without knowledge cannot give freedom. Therefore, a practitioner who seeks freedom must practice both knowledge and yoga.

And we find in the *Dhammapada's Bhikkhuvaggo* (13):

There is no meditation for one who is without wisdom (knowledge), and no wisdom for one who is without meditation. He, in whom there are meditation and wisdom, is close to nirvana.

Shri Gosvami Tulsidas Ji also echoes the familiar theme in the *Ramacharitamanas* when he says:

Wisdom coupled with yoga is the giver of moksha (liberation).

There are many other examples of this correspondence of concepts. Even when there is some variation in language, there is no difference in essence. In fact, there are also many discourses, in which there is not even a language difference. And it should also be noted that in various contexts terminologies is identical with same meaning. Due to the lack of space, we cannot explain all of the specific references here. But a few will be further elaborated for a better understanding of these ideas.



Understanding the Definition of *Nirvana*: The Essential Concept of the Buddha's Teachings

Let us now look at the word *nirvana* which is ubiquitous in the teachings of the Buddha and in the texts of Buddhism. We hear the word '*nirvana*' not only in the teachings of the Buddha, but also in the Jain texts, in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and as well, numerous references are made in the Santmat literature.

An early reference to *nirvana* is also found in the words of the 24th Tirthankara, Lord Mahavira, where the character of a true seeker of *nirvana* is described:

Those who are guileless and simple, their souls become pure. In those pure ones resides dharma (truth; the sacred law). Just as fire burns hotter and gives off more light when ghee (clarified butter) is added to it, in the same way the aspirant who is simple and chaste reaches nirvana.

The word '*nirvana*' and '*brahmanirvana*' appear frequently in the *Bhagavad-Gita*:

This is the divine state, O Arjuna. And having attained this, a man is not deluded. Fixed in that state, even at the hour of death, he reaches Brahmanirvana. (2/72)

He who finds his happiness within, his joy within, and his light only within, that yogi becomes divine and attains Brahmanirvana. (5/24)



Now we will present some of the words of the saints in this context.

Sant Kabir says:

Where that the Purusha (Supreme Being) resides, nothing else exists. This I know (from my experience). Whoever understands what I say [this mystery] has achieved nirvana.

Guru Nanak Dev Ji speaks about *nirvana* as a permanent and eternal state which can not be attained without first purifying the heart. He elaborates further that *nirvana* is only possible by immersing oneself in celestial sound:

The Divine Palace (Divine Abode of the Supreme) cannot be achieved unless one is pure in heart. By immersing oneself in the celestial sounds one is able to attain the state of nirvana.

Shrichand Ji Maharaj, the founder of the Udasi community, speaks about the mysterious nature of *nirvana*:

Guru is eternal and knowledge of the Vedas is subtle; the knowledge of nirvana is very mysterious.

In the words of Jagjivan Sahab:

[Those are fortunate] who are intent on listening to the inner celestial sound of unqualified nirvana.

Maharishi Mehi Paramhans Ji Maharaj says:

Unnamable, unapproachable, unseen, is the abode of Truth (the Supreme Reality). When the consciousness



(soul) immerses in this Reality, it reaches nirvana, the saints.

Sant Gareeb Das Ji says:

Allah and Ram are both beyond our understanding and without qualities. My Lord, resides in me, not in a palace or other abodes.

Sant Tulsidas Ji says:

A person who wants to attain the state of nirvana without meditation on God (Rama), even if this same person is endowed with learning, is like an animal without a tail [the learned person would be unable to attain the highest state without devotion].

What exactly does the word *nirvana* mean? In the Pali language, the term *Nirvana* is comprised of two words: *nih+vana*. The word *vana* means desire (*tanha*) and the prefix *nih* indicates negation. Thus *nirvana* means, “without desire.” Another way the word *nirvana* can be translated is “to extinguish—extinguishing of a flame.” In other words, when the flame of selfish desire is extinguished, *nirvana* is possible. A third way the word *nirvana* can be translated is “without an arrow.” I once heard this presented by a prominent Buddhist scholar named Bhikshu Jagdishkashyap who told a story about a certain man who approached the Buddha with a metaphysical question.



The Buddha responded:

If a man is struck by an arrow and is in excruciating pain, will he not remove the arrow and place medications on the wound? Or will that person first search for the cause of the arrow being shot at him? Will he first seek to know the intention of the person who shot the arrow?

The inquirer answered, that, the person will first remove the arrow and treat the wound. The Buddha then said:

Dear friend, you have been struck by the arrow of death, the cycle of death and rebirth (Kala), and therefore you should first rid yourself of the suffering, just as the man struck by an arrow first removed the arrow. Then you may consider questions about who created this world, and why, and by what means.

This example shows that getting rid of the arrow of suffering is a way to understand *nirvana*, which is ridding ourselves of the cycle of birth and death. It is not an exaggeration to say that one who conquers death through *Sadhana* (meditation) attains *nirvana*.

Several definitions of *nirvana* are given in the Buddhist texts:

Nirvana is a state in which all the samskaras (imprints of karmas and tendencies) are erased. It is a state in which all afflictions and pains are destroyed, selfish desires are overcome, and one is devoid of attachments. (Dighanikaya, Mahapdanasutta)

Another Buddhist text recounts of a time when an ascetic approached the Buddha and asked:



“What is nirvana?” Buddha replied: “Dear one, nirvana is cessation of passion, hatred, and attachment.” (Buddha Philosophy and Literature)

The Way to Attain Nirvana

After exploring some background on the literal definition of *nirvana*, more questions arise. How can a person attain *nirvana*? How can we have knowledge of this state? To begin to answer this, we must refer to the Buddha’s teachings on the practice of meditation and the state of *Samadhi*, the final step of the eight-fold path. The Buddha taught about the four stages of concentration in the practice of *dhyāna*. These are described in detail in the *Dighanikaya’s Samanjaphalsuta*. There is also a well known story about an ascetic who once approached the Buddha to ask: “What is the path for realizing *buddhahood*?”

Buddha answered:

This is the noble eight-fold path. Only by walking on this path is one able to arrive at the goal.” (Buddha Philosophy and Literature)

It will also be important to make a general comparison of the relevant practices in the Santmat and Buddhist traditions. In Santmat we practice four stages of meditation. This is similar to the Buddhist tradition, which speaks about mantra meditation,



visualization of a sacred form, the yoga of vision (intense focus) and the yoga of sound.

However, Buddhists are not all in agreement with certain aspects of *mantra* meditation, and they do not all recite the same mantra. Tibetan Buddhists recite “*Om Mani Padme Hum*” whereas Japanese Buddhists (SGI sect) recite: “*Namyo Hareng Kyo*”. Most Buddhists use the “OM” or “*Namo tasya bhagavato arhato samma sambuddhas* (Honor to Him the Blessed One, Who Conquered all Obstacles, and the Fully Enlightened One)” mantra. Many also recite the triple gem: “*I Take Refuge in Buddha, Dhamma and Samgha.*”

Another practice that is common to both traditions is mental concentration on a physical form. Buddhist texts elaborate on this in a similar way to *mānas dhyāna* of Santmat.

In the Buddhist text *Digha Nikaya*, mendicants are given these instructions:

A bhikkhu should sit in a crossed legged posture, keeping the back and neck erect, and become mindful of all directions. He should then collect the wandering mind which is scattered in all four directions

By focusing within, the aspirant purifies the mind. This text, *Digha Nikaya*, notes various details concerning concentration on a physical form: The aspirant focuses mentally on a physical



form, then by engaging the mind creates a mental body that is different from the physical one. The mental image thus created will be more vivid, well-built, and will have radiant physical organs.

In my understanding, this is an equally valid interpretation and description of the Santmat technique for meditating on the physical form (*Mānas dhyāna*). There doesn't seem to be any other way to describe it. The Buddhist text, *Digha Nikaya*, further elaborates about the divine eyes and divine ears.

We find also in the *Buddhacharya*, written by the great Buddhist scholar Rahul Samskratayn, a record of a story about Rahula, the son of the Buddha:

Rahul sat in a yogic pose with erect body. He kept his mind in front (focused mind in front of the eyebrows).

The *Rig Veda* also speaks of keeping the mind focused in front while sitting in a yogic pose. In Santmat, this same technique is known as *Driṣṭi Yoga*.

It is also said in the *Digha Nikaya*:

A mendicant sits in a forest under a tree or in a calm empty space in a firm posture while keeping his body erect.



The *Bauddhacharya* also refers clearly to the inner light in several passages. For example:

Oh Brahman! I light the inner light, leaving aside the wood fire (fire of ritual sacrifice). I remain concentrated in light while practicing brahmcharya (celibacy; abiding in the divine state).

And also explains inner practice of as the performance of true sacrifice:

Oh Brahman! This ego is a fire pit for the fire ceremony, anger is the smoke of the fire ceremony, speaking untruths are the ashes, and the heart is the place of light. One who disciplines the self attains this inner light (performs the true sacrifice).³

The *Digha Nikaya* further describes this experience of seeing the inner divine light and hearing the inner divine sound. It says:

Oh Mahalee, through deep concentration the mendicant attains one-pointed samadhi, and beholds the celestial forms in the east. This is known as ekangi samadhi (one-limb samadhi), in which the divine sight opens up. In this deep concentration, the mendicant only sees the divine forms, but does not yet hear the divine sounds. However, in the state of ubhyangi samadhi (two-limb samadhi), the meditator sees the divine forms in the east, and also hears the divine sounds.⁴

In the following passage the Buddha describes the mysterious and ineffable nature of *nirvana*:

This is that space in which there is no earth, no water, no fire and no sky. . . . It is not this world, it is not the other world, and there is no moon and no sun. Dear aspirant, no one goes there and no one comes from there and no one stays there. No one gets separated and no one gets born. It is without beginning and



without any support. All sorrows end here (In realization of this truth suffering ends). (Bouddha Philosophy and Literature)

It is said in the *Digha Nikaya*:

In that space there is no talk of creation, sustaining of creation or death. In this space infinity abounds. There is no water, no earth and no light. There is even no air.

Thus it can be seen that the state of liberation that both the Buddha and the sages of the *Upanishads* referred to as *nirvana* is the same as the state of liberation that the Indian sants call *mukti*. The Buddhist and Vedic texts, as well as the Santmat texts, are in complete agreement with respect to these concepts of *nirvana* and *mukti*. This will be clear as we compare some of these references from various texts.

The *Katha Upanishad* describes the state of *nirvana* as follows:

There the sun does not shine, nor the moon. There is no light and not even fire can exist there. But due to its (that mysterious power) existence it gives light to all of creation. And all creation is seen by its light.

In the *Bhagavad-Gita* Lord Krishna says:

There the sun does not shine nor moon nor fire. Having reached this Divine abode (My abode) no one returns.

Saint Kabir Sahab elaborates on the Highest State:

Let me give you a depiction of that realm. In that realm there is no day, no night, no sun, no moon, no



stars, neither light nor darkness, and no air and no water. The only ones who have knowledge of this realm are those who have visited there (have experienced this state). There is no earth, no sky, and only a few saints dwell in this mysterious realm. There is no fear of death; there is neither sunlight nor shade. A Yogi (hatha yogi, through physical exercises) cannot fathom this world through yoga. The ascetic can not find it through penance, and it can only be attained through the constant practice of meditation. The one who knows the inner workings of consciousness, in the mind, realizes this realm (state).

Guru Nanak Dev describes this state in these words:

There is no shimmering of moon or stars, no rays of the sun, no flash of lightening in that place. One cannot even speak about this place. There are no symbols or words that can describe it. Only accomplished souls experience [enjoy] this heavenly realm.

Saint Charandas Ji says:

There is no sun, no moon, and no twinkling stars. There are no gods (the trinity: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva) who dwell there, and even maya (creative power of the divine) with the three qualities (gunas) has no power there. It is beyond the Vedas, yoga, sacrifice, and austere practices. There is no air, no earth, no fire, no sky, no day, no night, no sins and no good deeds. It is beginning, middle, and end of all. Says Charandas, this state is Brhaman (Infinite Being) Itself.



We have seen that the saints, the Buddhist monks, and the Jain [spoken of in the previous chapter] teachers all describe the ultimate goal of the spiritual journey as liberation.

After attaining this state the Buddha proclaimed in ecstasy:

O builder of the house! I have seen you and you will not build the house again. Your rafters are broken, your ridgepole is destroyed! The mind established in nirvana has extinguished all past karmas, and all selfish cravings have been destroyed. (Dhammapada, Jaravaggo)

The *Mahopanishad* tells of a sage who was immersed in the holy river of wisdom, devotion, and meditation. This sage cries out in similar manner:

Having seen the transcendent (beyond), the knot of the heart (ignorance) is disentangled, all doubts have disappeared, and all karmas have been destroyed!


This is a brief discourse on Lord Buddha's teachings on *nirvana* and *sadhana* (the meditation practice).

Was Buddha an Atheist?

In the following section we try to address the claim made by many, including scholars, that since the Buddha did not explicitly speak of God he was a *nastika* or non-theistic.



All the theistic religions of the world recognize the existence of God. The Divine Being is referred to by various names due to different languages: *Brahman* (*Hindu*), God (Christianity), Allah (Islam), Buddha (Buddhism), Tao (Taoism), Yahweh (Judaism), and Ahur Mazd (Zoroastrianism). Generally, we speak of a religion with a belief in God as a theistic religion. Religions which do not have a belief in God would be called atheistic.

Upon careful consideration, we can see that there are in fact two types of atheism: entirely atheistic and partially atheistic. The Belief Systems which do not have a belief in the existence of either God or soul are considered to be entirely atheistic. Those which do have a belief in the soul but not in God are considered partially atheistic. 

In modern times some people have interpreted the Buddha's silence on the issue of the existence of God as atheistic. In their opinion, Buddha refused to answer any questions regarding the existence of the Divine Reality and the Soul (*Atman* or *Jivatman*), and therefore they have concluded that Buddha was an atheist.

However, in my opinion these kinds of conclusions demonstrate limited knowledge and ignorance about the essence of the



Buddhist texts. In fact, Buddhist literature contains multiple references to the soul (*atta* or *atman*), the Lord (*Natha*), and the maker of the body.

Examples can be found even in the *Dhammapada*, where the Buddha elaborates on Soul or self (*atta*):

The atman is the lord of atman. What else could be the Lord? When the individual self (jivatman) is well subdued, a man finds the Lord (Natha) who is difficult to fathom. (Dhammapada 12/ 4)

Some scholars have interpreted the word ‘lord’ in this verse as if it literally means “lordship.” However, even a cursory examination of the words in Pali, the original language of these texts, yields the intended meaning. In Pali the word ‘lord’ is in the second case accusative, and therefore it would best be translated as ‘to the lord’.

The noted Buddhist scholar Bhikshu Rahul Sankrityayan has explained this in his rendering of this verse of the *Dhammapada*:

A man is the lord of himself. Who else then could be the lord? If the self is wholly disciplined then he is able to attain a lord who is difficult to be attained.

There are other places as well in the *Dhammapada* where Buddha addresses the creator of the body:

Oh maker of the house I have seen you. . . (Jaravaggo)





“Impermanence” (*anicca*) of Buddhism and “Not real” (*Maya*) of the Vedic Dharma

In the Vedanta literature, in the *Upanishads*, and in the literature of the saints, this physical world is said to comprise both name and form, and is referred to as *maya*. *Maya* is understood to be illusory and not real, to be ever-changing, and dependent upon a higher reality. In the *Chandogya Upanishad*, *Brhidarnyaka Upanishad*, *Mundaka Upanishad*, and *Prashna Upanishad* it is repeatedly stated that the nature of the world is transitory, destructible, and not real. Therefore, we must seek for that essence which is constant, true and unchanging by transcending these realms of name and form.⁵

The world of name and form is also described as *avidya* (ignorance) in the *Katha* and *Mundaka Upanishads*. In the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, the world is also described as illusory *maya*.

The *Upanishads* also explain the nature of *atma*:

The soul (atman), which is beyond name and form, is brimming with joy and tranquility. In its Turiyatita form (the fifth state—a state of cosmic consciousness; a state of unity with the source), atman is beyond good and evil⁶. (Teja bindu Upanishad)



Lord Buddha says:

A mendicant is one who has no attachment to the world of name and form. He is one who does not grieve for what is not real (asat, the ever changing reality). This is the true mendicant. (Dhammapada, Bhikkhuvaggo)

In the *Ramcharitmanasa*, Saint Tulsida says:

Name and form are the two obstructions to God.

All of these references from the *Upanishads* and the texts of the saints, show agreement with the words of the Buddha, not difference.

The Ineffable Divine and Silence

One person may say the true form of God is Nameless (transcending any human definition), a second person may say the true form of God is Soundless (*nishabda*; beyond sound) and yet a third may keep silence in regard to the nature of the Divine. Is it logical to simply label the one who keeps silence an atheist? The wise person should reflect on this matter. If you say that the Divine Reality is nameless and then proceed to describe Him, are you not contradicting yourself? How can you describe something which is nameless? In thinking about this example, one might well conclude that the third person, who was



silent when describing God, was actually closer to the nameless description of God.

Keeping silence in answer to the question of the nature of the Divine, is also found in the *Upanishads*. A prime example of this is found in the famous discourse between Sage Vashishta and Shri Ram in the *Yoga Vashishta*. Shri Rama had queried Guru Vashishta about the nature of *Atman* and *Brahman* (the Supreme Reality). In response the Guru remained silent. Ram repeated the question. Guru Vashishta remained silent. Shri Rama asked a third time, and still the great sage remained mute. With joined palms Ram then asked his teacher Vashishta: “Reverend Sir! Are you displeased with me and therefore not answering my question, since you always assist me in understanding?” Guru Vashishta replied: “My dear son! I am not displeased with you. I have been answering the question which you have posed. The answer to your question is only given in silence, since the Divine is ineffable, unmanifest, and beyond the senses. How could I describe the nature of the reality which transcends the senses through these very sense organs (speech)?”

The point here is that if we were to call the Buddha an atheist when he is silent on the question of the nature of the Divine, as some people have, then logically we must also call Guru



Vashistha an atheist when he is silent in answer to the same question.

Shunya and Transcendent Reality

Some scholars have expressed certain doubts about the religious nature of the Buddha's teachings claiming that he only promulgated belief in "emptiness" or "nothingness," (the literal meaning of *shunyata*) or "annihilation" (the literal meaning of the word *nirvana*), not in the existence of God or Higher Reality. Therefore, they argue, his philosophy should be considered as nihilistic. According to their reasoning, it would follow that those who teach about "emptiness" or "nothingness," in the sense of the transcendent form of Ultimate Reality is also referred to *as shunya* cannot be theistic. However, teachings about *shunyata* (emptiness) are not only found in Buddhist literature, but are also prominent in the writings of many of theistic saints. Here are some examples:

Gorakh Nath Ji says:

*It (God) is neither existent nor non-existent (shunya);
its nature is beyond the reach of senses and thought.*

Sant Kabir Sahab says:

*Meditation on the Formless (shunya) is enjoyed by all
knowers of Truth.*



Guru Nanak Dev Ji says:

In the thought-less state of Samadhi (sunna, emptiness), neither maya (illusion) nor the snare of mind exist. Only the gracious God exists.

Paltu Sahab says:

Staying in solitude and meditate on emptiness (shunya).

Saint Dadu Dayal Ji says:

That [Ultimate] Reality is beyond the dual categories of qualified and unqualified; it is Emptiness which transcends emptiness (shunya).

Saint Charan Das says:

When the soul is absorbed on the peak (highest inner realm) of emptiness, then it experiences rapture.

This emptiness is also known as ether (*akasha*) or void (*avakasha*). In the *Ramcharitamanasa*, Gosvami Tulsidas Ji invokes Lord Shiva:

I invoke the name of Shiva--Lord Shiva, who dwells in the space of infinite knowledge (akasha)]”

There are discussions about *shunya* in the *Tantra Shastra* and also in the *Jnanasankalni Tantra*, where it says,

Meditation is not meditation unless the mind is united with Shunya” (57).

Maharishi Mehi says:

Consciousness that is traveling beyond sunna (void) and mahasunna (the great void) traverses the realm of



bhanvar gupha (the whirling cave). There it experiences the sound of Truth (sat), which is the Original Sound. This Sound embodies the essence of the spiritual preceptor. O Practitioner! Hold on to that sound and become one with that True Sound.

In the *Upanishads* there are multiple references to Emptiness or Space (*shunya*). In the fourth *Brahmana* of the *Mandala Brahmanopanishad* it is said:

There are five kinds of celestial Shunya (ether) which are increasingly more subtle: akasham, parakasham, Mahakasham, Suryakasham and Parmakasham. The infinite light permeates all of these akasham, but the Parmakasham is ineffable and is brimming with infinite bliss. It is the essential element.

When one considers all these descriptions of *Shunya* (emptiness or void), the question arises whether the composers of the *Upanishads* and the saints were atheists. The univocal response is, of course, that they are not atheists. How then could one logically consider the Buddha to be an atheist? The Buddha regularly speaks of both *nirvana* and *Shunya* in almost identical terminology, and yet he is accused of atheism solely on the basis of his silence on this question about the nature of God.



Purity of Conduct and *Nirvana*

Throughout the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, and the literature of the saints there are exhortations to follow the path of morality.

For example, in the *Brahmanda Puranottar Gita* it says that one cannot attain *Brahman* without first being purified:

This body has nine gates. Without purifying this body no one can attain Pure Brahman. Thus say the wise ones.

Sant Kabir Sahib says:

By carefully tending to the life of morality, the bride (atman) and groom (God) enjoy bliss.

Guru Nanak Dev says:

The Truth can only be placed in a clean vessel, and few indeed are those who live a pure life.

The *Katha Upanishad* underscores the necessity of the life of morality:

Those who have not abstained from wicked acts, whose senses are not calm, and whose minds are agitated, can not attain this [the Ultimate Reality] through prajna (spiritual knowledge).

The Buddha gives instructions to follow five essential ethical principles. He teaches abstention from lying, stealing, intoxicating substances, violence, and adultery, and claims that the one who indulges in these sins brings his own destruction.



In the *Dhammapada* it is said:

He who destroys life, who speaks untruth, who steals, who goes to another's wife and who takes intoxicants; even in this world he digs up his own roots. (Dhammapada, Malavaggo).

In the words of Maharishi Mehi we find similar instructions:

Untruth, intoxicants, adultery, violence (in the form of harming other living beings or even eating meat), and stealing, are the five sins which humans should avoid.

Right Association (*Satsang*); Guru (*Spiritual Guide*), and *Dhyāna* (Meditation)

The ancient sages and *rishis* sang the praises of these three— the spiritual preceptor (*guru*), meditation (*dhyāna*) and fellowship (*satsang*).

Lord Buddha also glorifies these three in the form of *the Three Refuges*, also known as the Triple Gem:

Take refuge in Buddha, take refuge in Dhamma (the path of meditation), and take refuge in the community of monks. Thus the Buddha is clearly in agreement with the ancient sages.

The Buddha's teachings clearly seem to be in agreement with theistic texts and the teachings of other sages.



The Concept of No-self (*anatta*) and Reincarnation: A Contradiction?

It is generally accepted that someone who holds to the theory of no-self would not have room for reincarnation in his philosophy. It is also assumed that a believer in n-self cannot also believe in the concept of transmigration. But, the Buddha himself speaks about his own multiple lives. His *Jataka Tales* (the stories of Buddha's past lives) are the prime evidence.

The following verse from the *Dhammapada* can be presented as testifying his belief in the reincarnation of the soul:

*I have run through a course of many births looking for
the Maker of this dwelling and have been unable to
find Him. Painful is birth again and again.
(Dhammapada, Jaravaggo).*

Conclusion

Theorists of Atheism typically do not believe in an afterlife, and therefore, for them this life is the extent of fulfillment. They do not consider that there is life after the death of the gross body, and they disregard the traditional belief in heaven and hell. Consequently, the happiness of this physical body is their ultimate goal. In contrast to those opinions, Buddha unequivocally speaks about life after the physical death of the



body and gives great details of heaven and hell. He does not consider the pleasures of this body to even be fulfilling. The atheists say, “However insignificant the contents in your hand may be, they are more valuable than the hope of possessing golden coins tomorrow.” They would also say that the hope of finding a peacock tomorrow would never justify letting go the mere pigeon which you hold today.

In contrast to such statements, we read in the words of Buddha:

If by giving up trivial pleasures one might acquire higher joy, the wise man must give up the pleasure of little value, looking toward the greater contentment.

By reflecting upon the essential teachings and beliefs of the Buddha, such as *nirvana*, the life of moral rectitude, his belief in heaven, hell, and reincarnation, we see that his teachings are fairly similar to the ancient teachings that were prevalent at the time that the Buddha taught. It would be short-sighted and, too simplistic to call Buddha an atheist solely on the basis of his silence in regard to the nature of the ineffable, transcendent Ultimate Reality. It is ironic that Buddha has the status of “the ninth incarnation of Vishnu” in Hinduism, and at the same time is rejected by some as an atheist. Before making such a claim one must carefully study the teachings of Buddha. It requires cautious and careful consideration of the question: Was the Buddha a theist or an atheist?



¹ According to a legend, after his bath Siddhartha is offered milk and rice by a maiden Sujata. In receiving the food Siddhartha marked the end of his life of asceticism, as well as the turning point—attainment of enlightenment.

² Various Indian scholars date the *Bhagavad-Gita* around 2500B.C.E. The Western scholars argue, however, that the *Bhagavad-Gita* was composed around 3rd century B.C.E.

³ Referring to the Vedic Ritual of Fire-Sacrifice. This text interprets the fire ritual as symbolic.

⁴ The texts of Tibetan Buddhism elaborate on the experience of Light and Sound:

O nobly-born, when thy body and mind were separating, thou must have experienced a glimpse of the Pure Truth, subtle, sparkling, bright, dazzling, glorious, and radiantly awesome, in appearance like a mirage moving across a landscape in springtime in one continuous stream of vibrations. Be not daunted thereby, nor terrified, nor awed. That is the radiance of thine own true nature. Recognize it. From the midst of that radiance, the natural sound of Reality, reverberating like a thousand thunders simultaneously sounding, will come. That is the natural sound of thine own real self. Be not daunted thereby, nor terrified, nor awed.

(Extracts from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Bardo Thodol), edited by Dr. W. Y. Evans-Wentz (London, 1957)

Divine Sound is also known as the Sound of Silence:

As you calm down, you can experience the sound of silence in the mind. You hear it as a kind of high frequency sound, a ringing sound that's always there. It is just normally never noticed. Now when you begin to hear that sound of silence, it's a sign of emptiness – of silence of the mind. It's something you can always turn to. As you concentrate on it and turn to it, it can make you quite peaceful and blissful. Meditating on that, you have a way of letting the conditions of the mind cease without suppressing them with another condition. Otherwise you just end up putting one condition over another.

(Ajahn Sumedho, a bhikkhu of the Theravada school of Buddhism in “The Sound of Silence.”)

In the Buddhist text, the *Surangama Sutra*, *Bodhisattva* relates to the Sound meditation:

*Ananda and all you who listen here
Should inward turn your faculty
Of hearing to hear your own nature
Which alone achieves Supreme Bodhi.*



*That is how enlightenment is won.
Buddhas as many as the Ganges' sand
Entered this one gateway to Nirvana.
All past Tathagathas
Have achieved this method.
All Bodhisattvas now
Enter this perfection.
All who practice in the future
On this Dharma should rely. . .*

(The *Surangama Sutra*: Selections from the Upasaka Lu K'uan Yu
Translation, Published by Rider and Company, London).

⁵ The Madhyamika School of Buddhism states that reality (*shunya*) is the transcendent, indefinable and immanent in all beings. This is also called *Shunyam Tattvam*.

⁶ The first state is *Jagrata*, the conscious state; the second is *svapna*, the dream state; the third is *sushupti*, the dreamless sleep; the fourth is *Turiya*, a serene transcendental state; the fifth is *Turiyatita*, "beyond the fourth," a state of pure awareness.

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