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**BUDDHISM AND MODERN THINKERS**

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It would be easier for us to map the word ‘modern’ dawned in the nineteenth century onwards when the British system of education and revaluation of the medieval values and ways wake up. Buddhism had faced the problems in so far as cultivating cultural attitude and beliefs in India, and so also historical disappearance of Buddhism from Indian episode has been become a general problem of Hindu ideal of life and practice. Hindu mind was not always comfortable with the Buddhist doctrine of no-soul theory and the theory of momentariness. The non- Buddhist schools made the points of attack against these two concepts. Udayan in his book, *Ātmatattvaviveka* refuted the Buddhist thesis of no-soul theory (*anātmavāda*). Even *Kumārila*’s tirade against Buddhism took the frontal attack against Buddhism though he had great respect for Buddhist ethics emphasizing code of conduct like *ahimsā*. For him, the truth of Buddhism has been mixed up with much that is false, and he also compares it to the milk put in the dog’s skin<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, there must have been historical reasons of which Hindu culture and philosophy remains, and *Kumārila* critiqued Buddhism, but no one mentions that *Śāntarakṣit* gave a fitting reply to *Kumārila* in *Tattvasaṃgraha*.

Usually, *Samkara* is credited with routing Buddhism out of India, and he had wondered in his *Brahmasūtra-bhāṣya* how a particular ideology attached with a single individual teaching could give rise to divergent schools sometimes opposed to each other. He commented also that either they had misunderstood the core meaning of the teachings as they were weak in intellectual ability or they intended to delude people at large. This is not acceptable on the basis of stupid notion. Because the second alternative is a departure from charity and patience as regards the opinion of the rival school of thinking. As to the first alternative *Samkara* did not specify what was the real teaching of the Teacher, and only to that extent the charge of misunderstanding could have been sustained. Later researches pointed out how *Samkara* had appropriated concepts from his Buddhist predecessors like *Nāgārjuna*. The concept of the Absolute beyond all empirical predicates had become *nirviśeṣa* Brahman with Advaita

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<sup>1</sup> “*Tantravārttika*, 1.3.6: *Śvācarmanikṣipta kṣiravad*”

**SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY**  
**PEER REVIEWED**

*Vedānta. Nāgārjuna's* dialectic as regards the four-concerned negation (e.g., is, is-not, both is and is-not, neither is nor is-not) or p, ~p, p~p, ~pv~p leads to the idea of impossibility of any speak ability of the Absolute or *anirvacaniya khyāti vāda* in *Samkara's* epistemology. Silence of the Buddha becomes the ultimate category of wisdom.

In addition, the question may be arisen: Why should the disappearance of Buddhism is ascribed to Samkara's critique of it? Replying to this, it can be said that philosophical wrangling cannot be the cause of the disappearance of any school rather there are other reasons. Daya Krishnan, a philosopher in our times, has raised question for philosophers to look into the cause of change of philosophical climate, and the *Brāhminical* mode of thinking felt uncomfortable with the Buddhist mode of metaphysical thinking in depth. For example, Vivekananda remarked that he did not endorse all Buddhist philosophy due to the lacking in metaphysics, but desires to have a good deal of metaphysics. It implies that Vivekananda had in mind only Pali Buddhism in this juncture, but not *Mahāyāna* in particular which is quite sophisticated in the matter of metaphysical depth and probing on what Vivekananda was inspired.

Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan remarked in this context that there is no ground of truth that Buddhism have left no trace in the lineage of Indian philosophical thinking, and the alleged disappearance is to be understood as having gone sub-terranean. The noble and best elements of the Buddhist heritage have been absorbed into the Hindu way of life and culture, and he paid a serious attention to the Buddhist thought in his translation *Dhammapada* with a commentary, the masterful discussion on *Nāgārjuna* and *Vijñānavāda* in the first volume of *Indian Philosophy*. Though the teachings of the Buddha had made the sensibility of the followers of the *Brāhminical* lineage of life and culture somewhat uncomfortable, yet his moral personality has been taken in high esteem while casting his teachings away. Even a conscious endeavour has been initiated to accommodate the Buddha and his teachings as a valued integral part of the Indian heritage, and Tilak wrote a section on the Buddha and the Pali Buddhist philosophical writings in his commentary on the *Gītā*. In discussing the pure reason as elucidated in the *Gītā*, he quoted the *Dhammapada* and remarked: "...that the *Sthitaprajña*, whose mind has once become complete pure and desireless, cannot afterwards be guilty of any sin, and that whatever he does, he is free both from sin and merit; and it is stated in many places in Buddhistic woks that the 'arhat' that is, the 'man who has reached the state of perfection',

**SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY**  
**PEER REVIEWED**

is always pure and sinless.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Buddha’s teachings have been highly estimated by Tilak,

and also remarked that Buddhism had been arisen into rebellion against *Brāhminical* orthodoxy through founding a dwelling apart after having taken its share of the patrimony. This remark is, I think, based on some hard historical realities.

This trend is seen to be continued through the other modern monumental thinkers like Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore. We have no hesitation to say that Vivekananda had unbounded respect and regard for the Buddha in respect to the ethical excellence that the Buddha embodied. Even he never encountered *Nagārjuna*’s dialectical thesis all through of his writings, and he also touched the *Vijñāna* thesis of momentariness of consciousness in a lecture at abroad following Saṃkara’s footsteps. It is true that there is a gulf of differences between Buddhism and *Vedānticism* because of their standpoints under heterodox and orthodox respectively in Indian philosophy except some issues on ethical or moral insights. It is found that there is a tendency to iron out the differences between the Hindu conceptions of ethics and the Buddhist’s theory of morality.

It is notable that Vivekananda, in one of his Chicago lectures on 26<sup>th</sup> Sept., 1893 spoke at length on the connection between Buddhism vis-a-vis Hinduism. In this regard, he makes it clear by saying: “Hinduism cannot live without Buddhism, nor Buddhism without Hinduism. Then realize what the separation has shown to us, that the Buddhists cannot stand without the brain and philosophy of the Brahmins, nor the Brahmin without the heart of the Buddhist. This separation between the Buddhists and Brahmins is the cause of the downfall of India.”<sup>3</sup> But it is pity that the history of thought has not been researched in the light of Vivekananda’s observation about the Hindu-Buddhist linkage. He also concludes: “Let us then join the wonderful intellect of Brahmins with the heart, the noble soul, the wonderful humanising power of the Great Master.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, according to him, the Buddha was the logical fulfilment, logical development of the religion of Hindus, and the logical conclusion.

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<sup>2</sup> B. G. Tilak, ‘*Śrī Bhagavadgītā-Rahasya*’, Abhishek Publications, New Delhi, 2021, p. 717.

<sup>3</sup> Swami Vivekananda “*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*”, Vol. I, p. 24, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 19<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2016

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, Vol. I, P. 24

**SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY**  
**PEER REVIEWED**

Now the question is: What are the reasons of his admiration and respect on the Buddha? Certainly, there are several reasons and grounds what he had express throughout his life in his conversations, letters and addresses, and what he took as a world mission, obviously, following *Vedāntic* thought in a new version. It is an intense love for the Buddha arisen out of his spiritual realization from his young age. Once, when he, before knowing as Vivekananda, remained on meditation removing all fetters in mind experienced an extraordinary vision what he described: “The room filled with a divine effulgence and the striking figure of a monk suddenly appeared, standing before me at a little distance. He wore an ochre cloth and held a kamandalu (water pot) in his hand. His face was calm, serene and indifferent to the world, and its contemplative expression captivated me. He walked towards me slowly, fixing his gaze on me as if he wanted to say something. But I was so seized with fear that I couldn’t sit still.”<sup>5</sup> He came out of the room being afraid, and returned afterwhile removing his fear to the room where he founded that the monk was not there. Later he expressed his brother disciples what he experienced: “I have seen many monks but never have I seen such an extraordinary expression on any other face. That face was imprinted on my heart forever. I may be wrong, but quite often I think that I was blessed on that day with a vision of Buddha”<sup>6</sup>. In his several deliberations, he regarded the Buddha as the highest point of man’s spiritual evolution, for he called it “the Buddha-man” or “the greatest man that was ever born.”

Though Vivekananda’s master, Sri Ramakrishna explained the subtle similarities and differences between Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism, he saw in Sri Ramakrishna, the Buddha, and within the Buddha, Sri Ramakrishna in respect of his discussion of the death of the Buddha. Sister Nivedita explained: “He told how the blanket had been spread for him beneath the tree, and how the Blessed One had lain down, ‘resting on his right side, like a lion’, to die, when suddenly there came to him one who ran, for instruction. The disciples would have treated the man as an intruder, maintaining peace at any cost about their Master’s death-bed, but the Blessed One overheard and saying, ‘No, no! He who was sent [the Tathagata or Messiah] is ever ready’, he raised himself on his elbow and taught. This happened four times, and then only, Buddha held himself free to die...”<sup>7</sup>. She also continued to understand as: “The immortal

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<sup>5</sup> Swami Saradananda, “*Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*”, tr. Swami Chetanananda, St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 2003, p. 833.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.835

<sup>7</sup> His Eastern and Western Disciples. ‘*The Life of Swami Vivekananda*’, Vol. 2, pp. 545-46, Advaita

**SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY**  
**PEER REVIEWED**

story went on to its end. But to one who listened, the most significant moment had been that in which the teller paused at his own words, - 'raised himself on his elbow and taught'—and said in brief parenthesis, 'I saw this, you know, in the case of Ramakrishna Paramahansa!' And there arose before the mind the story of one, destined to learn from that teacher, who had travelled a hundred miles, and arrived at Cossipore only when he lay dying. Here also the disciple would have refused admission, but Sri Ramakrishna intervened, insisting on receiving the newcomer, and teaching him."<sup>8</sup>

The Buddha was Vivekananda's moral icon what he often taken as having promulgated the ideal of Karma-yoga, because at the end of the Karma-yoga we find an impassioned peroration on Buddha where he says: "Let me tell you in conclusion a few words about one man who actually carried this teaching of Karma-yoga into practice That man is Buddha. He is the one man who ever carried this into perfect practice. All the prophets of the world, except Buddha, had external motives to move them to unselfish action. The prophets...there is. He was, in the conduct of his life, absolutely without personal motives; and what man worked more than he? Show me in history one character who has soared so high above all. The whole human race has produced but one such character, such high philosophy, such wide sympathy. This great philosopher, preaching the highest philosophy, yet had the deepest sympathy for the lowest of animals, and never put forth any claims for himself. He is the ideal Karma-yogi, acting entirely without motive, and the history of humanity shows him to have been the greatest man ever born; beyond compare the greatest combination of heart and brain that ever existed, the greatest soul-power that has even been manifested."<sup>9</sup> Vivekananda is such a person who clearly declared that the Advaita as applied in its yoga perception form is Buddhism, because, for him, Advaita is not a mere scholasticism but a way of life based upon the realization of human unity. The Buddha is one who never claimed worship, and Vivekananda says: "Buddha is not a man, but a state. I have found the door. Enter, all of you!"<sup>10</sup>

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Ashrama, Kolkata, 1979.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 546

<sup>9</sup> 'The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda', Vol. I, pp. 115-16, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 19<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> His Eastern and Western Disciples, 'The Life of Swami Vivekananda', Vol. I, p. 367, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 1979.

**SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY**  
**PEER REVIEWED**

It is praiseworthy to note that Vivekananda went to the extent of saying that the Buddha was his *ishta*, and he expressed it with clear terms in a portion of his letter (February, 1890) which is worth quoting: “Lord Buddha is my Ishta-my God. He preached no theory about Godhead- he was himself God. I fully believe it.”<sup>11</sup> This is no doubt a remarkable statement and it has not been taken note of. Besides his personal adoration of the Buddha, he considered the social element of Buddhism with regard to the Buddha’s deep all-embracing humanism depicted in the practice of *brahma-vihāra* what he referred it as “the Buddha’s heart”, and said: “...that sympathy, that love, that heart, that thinks for all, until Buddha’s heart comes once more into India..., there is no hope for us.”<sup>12</sup> It is pity, for him, that the followers of Buddha did not realize the import of Buddha’s teachings in many cases, and he made it possible to have the intellect of a *Śaṅkara* with the heart of a Buddha as a blessed combination.

The original *bodhisattva* ideal is seen in Buddha himself, and he who embodied in compassion attained from hundreds of previous births of self- sacrifice, never take breath for himself and never claimed anything for himself. Later this ideal had been elaborately replaced instead of the arhat by the *Mahāyāna* school. Its goal was not to achieve *Nirvāṇa* which is the blissful state of all Buddhists, but to attain *bodhi*. Its goal was not self-annihilation, but to attain the experiential awareness of the ultimate reality which is one with compassion. Thus, the *bodhisattva* strove to be a man of service to others rather than attain final release. Vivekananda formulated and envisaged this ideal so passionately that helped him to form his world mission. For him, doing good to others is the way to liberation, and it is the way of his mission what he defined in humanistic and altruistic words, ‘*ātmana mokṣārtham jagaddhitāya ca*’. Even when he made clear in his Chicago lectures that the crying evil in India is not religion, but the suffering millions of Indians actually need food, it means that he embraced loving indeed Buddha’s admonition to go out for the amelioration of people’s sorrows and sufferings; for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many (*vahu jana hitāya, vahu jana sukhāya ca*).

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Letter-12’, p. 19, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 20008.

<sup>12</sup> His Eastern and Western Disciples, ‘*The Life of Swami Vivekananda*’, Vol. II, p. 393, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 1979.

**SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY**  
**PEER REVIEWED**

Let us take the case of Rabindranath Tagore, an eminent personality in Indian modern thought, who has reassembled the *Upaniṣads* on the same pedestal in the company of the *Dhammapada*, because both has become one unbroken spiritual inheritance through history. For him, it was a matter of spirit and, therefore, there is no *Brāhminical*-Buddhist divide. Before understanding his insights, we must have a look about his foundation on which he has assessed the Buddhist philosophy.

That Rabindranath has written variously on the Buddhist lore is a common knowledge, yet perhaps not a very deep one. One might cite instances of the ballads composed on Buddhist episodes in the *Katha-O-Kahini*. These are acknowledged as having been based on the Sanskrit manuscripts discovered from Nepal by Rajendralal Mitra and Haraprasad Shastri. Both these persons of monumental scholarship were personal acquaintances of Rabindranath. The publication of Nepalese Buddhist Literature occurred in 1882. The Buddhist Text Society was founded in Kolkata in 1892. These events impacted Bengali literature in a measure that is worth recalling. For example, the publication of Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*, a poetical biography of Buddha based on the *Lalita Vistara* inspired Nabinchandra Sen to compose in Bengali verse an account of Buddha's life under the title *Amitabha*. And Rabindranath's elder brother, the first Indian civilian, Satyendranath Tagore wrote *Buddhadeva* in Bengali and thereby popularised the Bengali reading public with the thoughts and ideas of Buddha. Less known are the various articles on Buddhist philosophical themes and a biographical account of the life of the Master by Satischandra Vidyabhusan. The family church of the Tagore has for its scripture, *Brahmadharma*, compiled by the poet's father Devendranath, with copious extracts from the *Dhammapada*, along with those from the *Upaniṣads* and other valued works such as the *Manusamhitā*.

It should not be a matter of surprise that in the introduction of the *Sādhanā*, English version of Rabindranath's *ethico-religious* and philosophical essays, he mentions Buddha's teachings as "matters of spirit" that helped him in the development of his life. There is on record how profoundly he was moved when Rabindranath visited Bodhgaya. And he always mentioned Buddha as the greatest of men ever born, an evaluation that has been endorsed later by Sri Aurobindo as well.

These are evident data. But more important are the oblique ones. For example, in a poem we find Rabindranath alluding to a prince who had donned tattered robes and went

**SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY**  
**PEER REVIEWED**

homeless in looking for a larger life of the spirit. In another he wishes to wander about manuscript-filled monasteries on hill sides in Tibet. This is somewhat surprising even as a matter of wishing, and it goes to show the poet's expansive awareness of the existence of faiths other than his own. Rabindranath was actively associated with the activities of Mahabodhi Society, and he composed a poem to mark the inauguration of the Mulagandha Kuti Vihar at Sarnath. His visits to Java and sighting the Buddhist archaeological remains at Barobudur inspired a couple of poems on the message of Buddha. His drama, *Natirpuja* was a remake of an earlier poem. But the prelude song captures the rejuvenating message of love and compassion to be instilled in our hearts when the world around us is silted by hatred and anger. The first two stanzas summarise Buddha's ethical teachings that bear a crying relevance for the world devilled as it is by strife and war.

Mostly Rabindranath was acquainted with Pali Buddhism, and the Metta Sutta of the *Sutta-nipata* reappears more than once in his discourses. The metaphor of a mother ever mindfully protecting her only child marks the quality of unbounded love to be extended towards all being in every direction. The metaphor is a part of the meditational technique called *brahmavihāra*, which Rabindranath had discussed more than once in his various writings. He knew as well some *Mahāyāna* works. For example, he discussed the contexts of Nagarjuna's *Śraddhā-Utpatti-Śāstra* (the original in Sanskrit is lost, but a translation in Chinese is extant. There is a classic restoration in English by Venkataraman). In the context of his discussion Rabindranath makes a crucial judgment. He interprets the Buddhist *tri-ratna* as providing a three-fold scheme of life. Dharma is the pursuit of liberative knowledge, Sangha inculcates the ethics and art of living with others, and Buddha is the object of devotion. This implies that Buddha is important in so far as he points to the way of Dharma, which is the point of supreme importance. The teaching is more important than the teacher, who only points to the way. This interpretation is consistent with the view that Buddha used the parable of a raft for crossing over to the other shore. Having crossed over, the raft is no longer important. The metaphor of the raft is the cognitive aid to one's attaining liberative knowledge. The conative aspect is answered by the Sangha, the community of persons who are striving together to cross over the stream. The affective aspect of devotionism is satisfied by the figure and image of the person who has gone before us, pointing to the Way. It is in this three-fold way that the Buddhist *tri-ratna* satisfied the needs of the human psyche, the cognitive, the conative and the affective.

**SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY**  
**PEER REVIEWED**

It is possible to say that all the leaders of modern thought, in some forms or other, have spelled their views and theories around the essence of Buddhist insight. As to the harmony of religious concerned which is required to provide love, motiveless action, compassion for the good of others without the sense of caste, creed and race. Liberation in true sense would lead us to keep the bodhisattva ideal and its reflection towards society for holistic living removing religious bigotry, fanaticism, factionalism etc. The disinterested social works for the good of all through the spiritual inheritance would be the basis of welfare society, and also for the true workers and leaders, now and then, what we can recall the Dalai Lama's famous remark in his book, *Ancient Wisdom, Modern World, and Ethics for the New Millennium*, where he says:

May I become at all times, both now and forever— A protector for those without protection,

A guide for those who have lost their way, A ship for those with oceans to cross,

A bridge for those with rivers to cross,

A sanctuary for those in danger, A lamp for those in need of light,

A place of refuge for those in need of shelter, And a servant to all those in need.

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**SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY**  
**PEER REVIEWED**

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