



Study On Swami Vivekananda And Buddhism

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Abstract: Vivekananda believed that, the source of Hindu religion and cultures were Vedas. He was more attracted by the philosophy of the Upanishads because it prepared the way for human salvation. No other literature in the world presents such a clear philosophy for the liberation of man from worldly bondage. He believed that Upanishads are a source of strength and create confidence in man. The Upanishads ask people to shed all weakness, pessimism towards life teach man to face the world with strength and vigour again. Vivekananda found in the Upanishad the principles of a universal religion. The principles of Upanishads inspired him very much and helped in moulding the character and philosophy of Vivekananda. The teaching of Gautama Buddha was another important force that influenced him very much. Buddha renounced the world not for his own salvation but for the salvation of the whole mankind which was suffering from all kinds of misery. The eternal message of Buddha was a theme very dear to Vivekananda. The teachings of Buddha established a silken bond of fellowship and love between different groups of people and it forms one of the arresting episodes of human history.

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Introduction:

The full moon of Vaiśākha which falls in this month coincides with the 2500th anniversary of the Parinirvāṇa of Gautama the Buddha whose life and teachings have been a perennial source of inspiration to humanity. The teaching of the Buddha has always been a matter of great controversy ever since the first Council held at Rājagṛha after the Nirvana of the Buddha. From the earliest times, attempts were made to construe the teaching of the Buddha as one of agnosticism with a veneer of ethical idealism. This may be the reason why even our Government, which prides itself on its secularism, is tempted to give some importance to anything connected with Buddhism. This great event offers us an opportunity to ponder over the significance of the life and teaching of the Buddha. An attempt is made here to review his cardinal tenets in the light of Swami Vivekananda's study and reflections.

Swāmī Vivekananda had great admiration for the attractive personality of the Buddha. He believed that 'as a character, Buddha was the greatest the world has ever seen; next to him Christ¹. He worshipped him as God incarnate on earth.² Unlike many scholars the Swami was not inclined to think that he founded a new religion or taught a new way to salvation. On the contrary, he accepted the Buddha as a 'Hindu' in the same way as Jesus was a Jew. Like Jesus, he also came to fulfil, and not to destroy. He points out with great

insight that in the case of Jesus 'it was the old people, the Jews, who did not understand him, while in the case of Buddha, it was his own followers who did not realize the import of his teachings....he was the fulfilment, the logical conclusion, the logical development of the religion of Hindus'³.

A glance at the Upaniṣads will confirm the Swami's thesis. Defiance of sacrifices and external forms of religion, belief in the law of karma, the notion of the non-substantiality of the world and the possibility of release from transmigration are to be found in the Upanishads. The emphasis laid by the Buddha on the phenomenal nature of the world strongly reminds us of similar passages in the Upanishads⁴ which condemn the world of experience. Many important texts reject the categories of the phenomenal world by accepting an absolute reality. It must be admitted that the Buddha also did accept the reality of the absolute though he did not describe it in positive terms. If this position is not accepted we have to cut off the Buddha from the spiritual milieu of India. The evolution of a nation's thought is a continuous inner growth conforming to the national pattern and not a mere superimposition from without. That is how the Sāṃkhya, Mīmāṃsā and even Cārvāka schools of thought are not foreign to the metaphysical speculations of the Vedic philosophy. Kumārila Bhaṭṭa declares in his *Tantravārtikā* (I, iii, 2) that the basic notions of Buddhism like subjectivism,

momentariness and non-self theory (nairātmyavāda) are derived from the Upanishads. It was left to Swami Vivekananda to boldly proclaim that Sri Krishna himself incarnated as the Buddha 'to show how to make his theories practical'. 'As it were to give a living example of this preaching,' says the Swami, 'as it were to make at least one part of it practical, the preacher himself came in another form, and that was S'ākyamuni, the preacher to the poor and the miserable, he who rejected even the language of the gods to speak in the language of the people, so that he might reach the hearts of the people...he who pressed the Pariah like a second Rāma.'⁵ Throughout the ages Buddha has been depicted as one who has attained steady wisdom and imperturbable peace. Not all images set up in Buddhist countries smile upon humanity. Though some of these images are calm and serene they make us think of him as the embodiment of inactivity. Very few of the votaries can conceive of the tremendous dynamism behind those half-closed eyes and gently smiling lips. Buddha did not merely sit in padmāsana with folded arms. He discovered that the masses were quite satisfied with the market-religion and did not care to know the essence of Vedānta. He had to fight with the orthodox ritualists on the one hand, and the heterodox agnostics on the other hand. In accordance with the synthetic spirit of the Gītā, he taught that karma performed without any desire for the result was not opposed to jñāna. Says Swami Vivekananda:

'Let me tell you, in conclusion, a few words about one man who actually carried this teaching of karmayoga 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...He is the ideal karmayogi, acting 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 ever existed, the greatest soul-power that has ever been manifested.'⁶

We have to raise a fundamental question of philosophy to know the views of Buddha on God, soul and liberation: (a) Is there an absolute reality behind the changing phenomena? (b) Is there a permanent soul or self as distinct from body, mind, senses, etc.? (c) Is Nirvana or release a positive state? If there is a reality which is not in a state of flux, the attainment of that reality becomes logical and natural; this realization or attainment is called Nirvana. The person who attains that state ipso facto must possess a self which survives bodily destruction. If the reality does not exist, it is futile to speak of a permanent self or its liberation,

In trying to determine the views of the Buddha we are confronted by a serious difficulty since the Buddha did not leave any written record of his teachings. Further, he was supremely silent on the fundamental problems of metaphysics. There are some Buddhists who think that the Pali canon embodies the pure teachings of the Buddha. T. W. Rhys Davids, Mrs Rhys Davids and many other scholars have shown that the Pali tradition is not so immaculate and that it has undergone a good deal of modification from time to time. From the time of the Buddha down to Aśoka, we have some documents of importance which enable us to construct a rough picture of early Buddhism. The following period of three centuries (from Asoka to Kaniška) is one of darkness. It was a period when gigantic hordes of uncivilized nomads, mostly Huns and Śakas, migrated from Central Asia to India and conquered regions in the northwest. These uncivilized foreigners adopted the religion and culture of the people, mostly Buddhist, whom they conquered. The result of these events has affected the subsequent history of India politically, economically and linguistically. A great transformation was brought about in the religion of the north-west, namely, Buddhism. Kanishka himself became a convert to Buddhism. Rhys Davids says:

'The brave barbarians became Buddhist so far as they were able. But they were so soaked in animistic superstitions that their ability was equal to the task only after they had brought down the religion to the level of their understanding...From the time of Kaniska, the whole power and influence of the Imperial State were thrown on the side of animistic tendencies, and it was within the boundaries of the empire of the Kushan Tartars that the more important of the innovations were introduced to Buddhist doctrine.'⁷

This phenomenon is not new in the evolution of religious thought. When the Goths and Vandals adopted the faith of the Roman Empire they improved upon the speculations of the people and were responsible for the changes that had set in. 'When the conflict of the nations subsided,' says Rhys Davids, 'the religion of the Roman Empire had become Roman Catholicism.'⁸ Dela Vallee Poussin, a great authority on Buddhism, says, 'No European would admit the "authenticity" of the whole Pali Scriptures.' This is true of non-Europeans also who do not profess Buddhism as their creed. Of course, we do not doubt the authenticity of the Buddha's pronouncements on the Four Noble Truths, the Eight-fold Path, and the utterances attributed to him in some of the early Suttas.

For long, a false impression was created that the teaching of the Buddha was negative rather than

positive. He is most misrepresented in his attitude towards the idea of reality as he refrained from making any definite statement. But often the Upanishads give a negative description of Brahman. The Seer of the Upanishad declares:

‘There the eye goes not;
Speech goes not, nor the mind.
We know not, we understand not
How one would teach It.
Other, indeed, is It, than the known.
—Thus have we heard of the ancients
Who to us have explained It.’⁹

We cannot apply the categories of empirical experience to the absolute. While the Seers of the Upanishads ventured now and then to give positive descriptions of the reality, the Buddha uniformly refused to describe the absolute. The same reality, which revealed itself as Īśvara or Brahman to the Seers of the Upanishads, appeared as Law or Dharma to the ethically inclined Buddha. The concept was not new to Vedic religion or to the Buddha, as the R̥gveda from earliest times spoke of Rita as the moral order of the universe. The same Rita becomes Satya and Dharma in the Upanishads and Mahābhārata¹⁰

Thanks to modern research; people have ceased to think of the Buddha as an agnostic. The veteran scholar, Mrs Rhys Davids, vehemently protested against the imputation of atheism to Buddhism and maintained that Buddhism is neither theistic nor atheistic. ‘The educated man in Buddha’s day’, she says, ‘believed in Deity as immanent in each man, as the Most, the Highest, the Best in that man’s spiritual being of self.’¹¹ Prof. Keith thinks that the notions of the reality of the absolute, the self and Nirvana can be traced to the canon itself. Swami Vivekananda held the view that the Buddhists had emphasized one aspect of Buddha’s teaching namely, the doctrine of change. Says the Swami:

‘But the reality is that there is both change and changelessness in the universe. It is not that the soul and the mind and the body are three separate existences... It is the same thing which appears as the body, as the mind, and as the thing beyond mind and body, but it is not at the same time all these. He who sees the body does not see the mind even, he who sees the mind does not see that which he calls the soul, and he who sees the soul—for him the body and mind have vanished...There is then but one all-comprehending existence, and that One appears as manifold.’¹²

The absolute has never changed; all the changes in the universe, which the Buddhists emphasize, are but appearances in that one reality. The Vedantin accepts the non-substantiality of the body, mind, feelings, etc., which limit the unborn, immortal Self.

The Buddha never wanted to finitize the Self or reality. ‘He preached no theory about Godhead—he was himself God...no one has the power to put a limit to God’s infinite glory. No, not even God Himself has the power to make Himself limited.’¹³

In his famous Sermon at Sārnāth, the Buddha does not deny the reality of a permanent Self. In his conversation with Vacchagotta, he refuses to deny the existence of a Self.

Then Vacehagotta the Wanderer came to the Exalted One and greeted him in friendly wise, and after the exchange of mutual courtesies sat down at one side. So seated he said to the Exalted One:

‘Master Gotama, what have you to say about the existence of the Self?’

At these words the Exalted One was silent.

‘How now, Master Gotama? Is there no such thing as the Self?’

At these words the Exalted One was silent. Then Vacchagotta the Wanderer (in disgust) rose up from his seat and went away. Not long after he was gone the venerable Ananda said to the Exalted One:

‘How is it, Lord, that the Exalted One made no reply to the question asked by Vacchagotta the Wanderer?’

‘If, Ananda, when asked “Does the Self exist?” I had replied to him, “The Self exists”, then, Ananda, that would be to side with all those recluses and brahmins who are eternalists.

‘But if, Ananda, when asked the question, “Does the Self not exist then?” I had replied, “No! The Self does not exist” would that reply be consistent with My knowledge that all things are impermanent?’

‘No, Lord, it would not.’

‘Again, Ananda, when asked “Then does not the Self exist?” if I had replied “No! It does not exist”, it would have added to the bewilderment of Vacchagotta the Wanderer, already bewildered. For he would have said, “Formerly I had a self, but now I have one no more.”’¹⁴

And now we come to the second misconception of Buddhism. Nirvana or deliverance is the essence of the teaching of the Buddha and the *raison d’être* of Buddha. Chullavagga¹⁵ says:

‘As the vast ocean, O disciples, is impregnated with one flavour, the flavour of salt, so also, my disciples, this law and discipline is impregnated with but one flavour, with the taste of deliverance.’

Nirvana was looked upon by Buddhists as implying a state of annihilation, nothingness. They took a gloomy view of the universe. As existence was

suffering, unqualified deliverance from existence alone could satisfy them. It is difficult to believe that the Buddha cherished a negative conception of Nirvana; for this negative definition cannot appeal to the spiritual needs of the aspirant. The Buddhist conception of Nirvana has its origin in the Vedantic conception of Brahmanirvana, which is a positive one. It is the further shore beyond good and evil, state of immortality, the fortunate union of the individual self with the Supreme. It is rather strange that the Buddhists should have ignored the enormous mass of texts which represent Nirvana as a blissful state. The Dhammapada and Therīgāthā give eloquent proof of the profound bliss and fervid feelings with which Nirvana was looked upon. The Yamaka-Sariputra dialogue suggests that Nirvana is a positive state beyond reason and conception. Yamaka's view of Nirvana as annihilation is strongly condemned as a 'wicked heresy'. A celebrated fragment in the two oldest books (Udāna, viii, 3; Itivuttaka, 43) suggests that Nirvana is existence:

'There is O disciples, a something that is not born, not produced, not created, not compounded. Were there not, O disciples, this something not born..., there would be no possible exit for what is born.'

The profound nature of Nirvana cannot be fathomed. Buddha refused to answer all questions about Nirvana and gave the reason for his silence:

'Why has Buddha not taught his disciples... whether the saint lives on beyond death or not? Because the knowledge of these things does not conduce to progress in holiness... what contributes to peace and enlightenment, Buddha has taught his own; the truth of suffering... Therefore, O Malunkyaputta, whatsoever has not been revealed by me, let that remain unrevealed; and what has been revealed, let that be revealed.'¹⁶

The path of wisdom lies in knowing that Nirvana is deliverance and not in discussing it, and the Buddha rightly practised it. Swami Vivekananda has pointed out that Nirvana is the re-attainment of the pure, original state, an idea common to many religions. The Swami says:

'This idea seems to be the most prominent in Vedanta, and, as I have said it appears to me that every religion holds it... So with the Buddhists. They believe in the state called Nirvana, which is beyond this relative world. It is exactly the same as the Brahman of the Vedantins and the whole system of the Buddhists is founded upon the idea of regaining that lost state of Nirvana.'¹⁷

It was mentioned before, that Swami Vivekananda regarded the Buddha as a Vedantin who

followed the true tradition of the Upanishads. Consequently, his teaching also cannot be anything but Vedanta. If Sankara is called a crypto-Buddhist, it is probably more true to call the Buddha a crypto-Vedantin, who openly did not like to label himself with any name. When the knowledge of Vedanta became a secret doctrine confined to a small coterie of intellectual aristocrats the Buddha got hold of it and taught it to the masses. 'Long after that', says the Swami, 'when atheists and agnostics had destroyed the nation again, it was found out that Advaita was the only way to save India from materialism.'¹⁸ Thus according to Swami Vivekananda Advaita twice saved India from materialism. Before the Buddha came, a hideous form of materialism had spread all over the country. Says the Swami:

'Buddha brought the Vedanta to light, gave it to the people, and saved India. A thousand years after his death a similar state of things prevailed... Then Sankaracarya arose and once more revived the Vedanta philosophy. By Buddha, the moral side of the philosophy was laid stress upon, and by Sankaracarya, the intellectual side.'¹⁹

In his account of early Buddhism, Dr S. Radhakrishnan has shown certain points of similarity between the s'ūnyavāda and Advaita which regard the world of experience as unreal and admit reality, beyond all distinctions of experience and knowledge. It is wrong to identify sunya with nothingness. While describing the nature of sunya in his Madhyamikakārikā, it appears as if Nāgārjuna is using the very words of the Upanishads. It is unborn, unoriginated, uncompounded, neither one nor many, neither being nor non-being. It cannot be grasped by thought nor described by words. It is the negation of all conception. Many difficulties have arisen because of the interpretation of the word, sunya. As Dr Radhakrishnan points out it is applied to the world of experience as well as to the ultimate reality. The world of experience is as mysterious and unintelligible as the reality. Neither can be defined as being or non-being. If the world is being, the reality is not; if the reality is being, the world is not. 'Nothing can be predicated of it,' says Rudolf Otto, 'since it is "absolutely and intrinsically other than and opposite of everything that is and can be thought".'

Buddhism was born in the kingdoms of Kosala and Magadha, a peculiarly favourable soil for the growth of this religion, being far removed from the strongholds of Vedic culture in the western India. Most probably Buddha's Parinirvana took place at about B.C. 480. The first Buddhist Council was held at Rajagriha after the demise of the Buddha, the second Council at Vais'ali at about B.C. 380 and the third Council during the reign of Asoka at Pāṭaliputra after

the schism of Mahāsāṅghika had taken place. During the four centuries that elapsed between the reigns of Asoka and Kanishka, Buddhism strengthened its position. Its decline set in at about the eighth century when Hinduism again revived under the influence of the great leader, Kumārila Bhaṭṭa. In the South, Buddhism lost its ground due to the Vedantic leavening caused by the advent of Sankara and Ramanuja. It further declined in the West by the Muhammadan conquest of Sind in A.D. 712 and finally received its death-blow in its native place when Muhammadans invaded Magadha in A.D. 1200 and destroyed all the monasteries.

At no time India has been a favourable soil for the growth of agnosticism or atheism, though the glimmerings of naive atheism can be traced back to the Vedic period. Long before the Buddha the Lokayatikas and the followers of Samkhya tried in vain to destroy the faith of people in the Godhead. Buddhism which had borrowed the half-hearted atheism of the Samkhya school was seriously handicapped from the very beginning as such a dry and dreary creed could not inspire the masses. The result was that Buddhism had to die a natural death in spite of its ethics and metaphysics.²⁰ The teaching of the Buddha had become degenerated as most of his followers were ignorant. Negative Nirvana could not take the place of God. So the masses brought their gods, demigods and demons and a 'tremendous hotch-potch was made of Buddhism in India'²¹. Another cause for the decay of Buddhism in India was that it failed to harmonize its previous systems. Vedanta never rejected the preceding ideas. The fault of Buddhism was that it could not perceive this continual, expansive growth, and for this reason, it never made an attempt to harmonize itself with the pre-existing steps towards the ideal.²² Another harmful tendency in a religion is its inability to impart real culture to the masses. Knowledge without culture cannot raise the lower classes permanently; on the contrary, it may turn them into dangerous fanatics. This was exactly what happened when the Buddha stopped the Sanskrit from being studied by the people. To get immediate results he preached in the language of the day, Pali. It spread the ideas quickly and made them reach all corners. 'Knowledge came,' says the Swami, 'but the prestige was not there, culture was not there. It is culture which withstands shocks, not a simple mass of knowledge.'²³

The exclusiveness of Hinduism prevented it from taking ready help from outside but kept it pure and free from many debasing elements which Buddhism in its propagandist zeal was forced to assimilate. This extreme adaptability made Buddhism lose all its individuality.²⁴ As time went on the Buddhists emphasized the debasing elements of Buddhism too much. The essential aspects of truths were suffocated

by the fissiparous forces. India was forced to reject the destructive tendencies that formed in the name of Buddhism. 'That was the decree of Indian national thought,' says the Swami.

Though Swami Vivekananda boldly pointed out some chief causes for the decay and disappearance of organized Buddhism in India, he firmly believed that neither Hinduism nor Buddhism could live without the other; for if Hinduism symbolizes the boldest speculations of the human mind, Buddhism represents all that is good and noble in the human heart. The Swami says:

'This separation between the Buddhists and the Brahmins is the cause of the downfall of India. That is why India is populated by three hundred million beggars, and that is why India has been the slave of conquerors for the last thousand years. Let us then join the wonderful intellect of the Brahmin with the heart, the noble soul, the wonderful humanizing power of the Great Master.'²⁵

Buddha was born for the good of humanity. So he invited everyone to become what he is in his essence. His advice was very simple. If men wanted to become happy, there was a way for it. Let them get rid of egotism, all lower desires and cravings of the flesh, all hatred and evil thoughts. Let them cultivate feelings of love and compassion good thoughts and the right aspirations. Let them be calm and serene. This is Nirvana, the ending of decay, death and sorrow.

Buddha's last hours were spent in giving counsel to the assembled monks. He invited them thrice to state any doubt with regard to his teaching or to the rules of the Order so that he might remove it. Finally, he addressed thus:

'And now, brethren, I take my leave of you; all the constituents of being are transitory: work out your salvation with diligence.

Concept of Universal Religion

The Universalism of Buddhist principles attracted the attention of Vivekananda and like Buddha he also becomes a world spiritual leader. "All his work in east or west was to summon men and women to the spiritual heritage. He taught them to realise the divine that us embedded in man." iii All the activities of Vivekananda had one single objective. His primary object was to give to man the priceless gift of selfknowledge. The way he developed the spiritual self-confidence makes him a unique personality in human history. His conceptions of religion were revolutionary one in the sense that it differed from the conceptions of other sages of the past and present. Religion was considered by him as the healthiest exercise that the human mind could have. At the same time religion constitute the basis of human mind could have. At the same time religion constitute the basis of

human conflicts throughout the world. Instead of playing the role of a unifying factor religion divided people. This happened because people fail to understand that different religion had the same goal. This happens because of the ritualistic domination of religion. He stood for the fusion of all religion in to one universal religion. Man has to accept the variations in religion and beliefs as a sign of life and an essential trait of mankind. To make the people understand this feature of religion, he spoke and acted to explain the conception of religion to people.

Establisher of Religious harmony

According to him all religion must have a positive approach. It must teach man to resist from doing evil things. At the same time people must learn from religion. He believed that humanity without religion will be a mass of brutes. It constitutes the most important lesson taught by Vivekananda on matters of religion. All religions should teach love and mutual tolerance as the cardinal principles of religion. All believers of God must race that is the test of true religiousness. All believers of God must preach tolerance and religious universality. If one religious is true, then all must be true. He insisted on harmony, peace and good will and discarded fanaticism, rivalries and heated discussions. Vivekananda stood and worked for the spiritual integration of mankind. He said “our minds are like vessels and each of us tries to arrive at a realisation of God. God is like the water that fills the different vessels of different shapes. In each vessel the vision of god takes a different form. Yet he is one, he is God in every sense.” iv By this expression Vivekananda was presenting a very valuable lesson before humanity. He was presenting the fact that the apparent contradictions in different religions are not real. The message of Vivekananda was for the unity of human society, which would have made much progress in history, if there was no sectarianism,

fanaticism and violence in the name of religion. In establishing religious harmony, Vivekananda considered the Vedanta Philosophy as the best suitable basis. Vedanta harmonised all the various aspirations of man. Explaining this point Vivekananda said “Love every man as your own self and not as your brother, in Christianity. Brotherhood should be superseded by universal self – hood”v . Like Buddha, Vivekananda also believed that God exists not in the idols or temples but on the other hands he rests with in one self. Therefore by purity of action and thought one can attain Godhood and by this method everyone can attain Godhood and by this method everyone can attain salvation and equality before God. The Vedanta philosophy was the best suitable method for reaching this spiritual sphere of progress. Thus the universal religion of Vivekananda believed that no man of religion can persecute another man. The rational broad minded nature of Vivekananda helped in spreading this universal aspect of Hinduism and he succeeded in presenting Hinduism as a religion of tolerance and universal acceptance.

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