

BUDDHIST AND VEDIC STUDIES

A Miscellany

by

O.H. De A. WIJESEKERA

M.A., Ph.D., (Lond.)

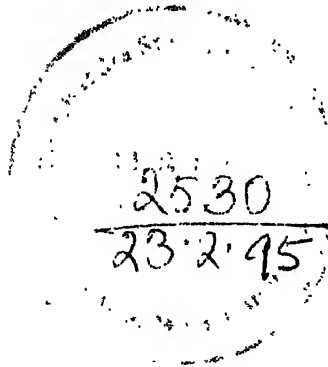
*Hon. D.Litt. (Colombo and Peradeniya),
Emeritus Professor of Sanskrit and former
Vice-Chancellor, (University of Ceylon)*

Foreword by

PROF. R. N. DANDEKAR

Edited by

PROF. M. H. F. JAYASURIYA



21-2-1955
Perad-361
R, 2757-

**MOTILAL BANARSIDASS PUBLISHERS
PRIVATE LIMITED • DELHI**

1

The Buddha and Metaphysics*

The Buddha's so-called silence on certain fundamental metaphysical problems has given rise to a variety of interpretations. Consequently, we find Buddhist philosophy condemned, mostly by its Western critics, as negativism, scepticism, agnosticism, nihilism, materialism, pluralism, etc. Sympathetic students of the subject, generally Hindu writers, incline to the view that Buddhism is some kind of idealism; according to the more orthodox among them it is a mere footnote to Vedānta idealism. But even to these friends of Buddhism, the Buddha, if he be an idealist, is a mistaken, or at best, a half-hearted one.

Professor Radhakrishnan, somewhat baffled by the 'silence' of the Buddha, concludes: 'The only metaphysics that can justify Buddha's ethical discipline is the metaphysics underlying the Upaniṣads'.¹ He is one who fights hard against the 'nihilist' and 'agnostic' interpretations of hostile critics, but even he is heard to complain mournfully that 'the central defect of Buddha's teaching is that in his ethical earnestness he took up and magnified one-half of the truth and made it look as if it were the whole'.² No wonder, then, that Radhakrishnan himself is compelled to admit that Buddhism is 'metaphysical agnosticism'.³ It seems, therefore, a mere matter of courtesy when he accords to it the title 'Ethical Idealism'.

In the face of these and other criticism Buddhists have contented themselves with the facile admission that the Master was 'indifferent' to all metaphysical problems. But to a serious student of Buddhist thought who approaches the subject from an historical standpoint, and who does not stand with any preconceived metaphysical theories, it becomes increasingly clear that all these judgments are biased and therefore necessarily ill-founded. Nor was the Buddha, he

* *Ceylon Daily News*, Vesak Number, 1941.

discovers, so obstinately silent on all fundamental questions as is generally believed.

Now, metaphysical theories are notoriously vague and also arbitrary however much they may be garbed in learned language and made to look profound by hair-splitting dialectics. Metaphysics, according to one modern philosopher, are only variations on the theme of cosmic lying. The gibe, it must be admitted, is not altogether without point if we mean thereby the ontological abstractions of most idealists. Such philosophers generally strive to find some *a priori* principle whence everything in life and nature can be derived, and thus they seem, as Viscount Samuel once remarked, to construct the roof first and then hang the house from it!

The significance of the metaphor lies in this, that all ontological speculations are meaningless and lead us nowhere. This does not, however, mean that all questions discussed in metaphysics are absurd and mere moonshine. Even if we do not resort to Kant's famous distinction of 'transcendent' and 'immanent' metaphysics, the fact remains that Buddhism accepts at least a few doctrines from the earlier philosophy of India such as the *karma* doctrine with its correlate, the idea of *saṃsāra* or repeated birth and death, which must in the final analysis belong to the sphere of metaphysics.

To begin with, then, let us be clear as to what we mean by metaphysics, at least for the purpose of this discussion. Metaphysics, we are told, is the inquiry which attempts to discover the ultimate reality underlying the universe. The common-sense world, the metaphysician holds, is an appearance only, an appearance of a reality underlying it, which is the ultimate substance supposed to be there once the qualities or features are stripped off. This notion common to all idealistic philosophies, whether they be Indian or European, is the root of all metaphysics. Hence we may define it as the inquiry into ultimate reality, or, as the ancient seers of India called it, 'the real of reals' (*satyasya satyam*). This inquiry has three fundamental aspects according as it concerns itself with the problem of the Absolute (God), of soul, or of the cosmos (i.e. external reality).

These appear to be the main questions that have engaged the attention of metaphysicians of all ages and of all countries. It will be our endeavour here to discuss what attitude the Buddha had in regard to these fundamental conceptions of the metaphysicians. In short, what exactly did the Buddha think of the Absolute, God, individual soul and cosmic existence?

In attempting, however, to get at the exact opinions held by the Buddha on such matters we are confronted with a difficulty of considerable magnitude. It seems to be the practice of most students of the subject to base their conclusions solely on the study of the canonical literature of Buddhism, the earliest parts of which must have been written at least a century after the demise of the Master, without any reference to the previous development of thought in India where this whole literature grew. They completely ignore the philosophical, religious and social background of Buddhism, provided in particular by the *Upaniṣads* and generally by the whole of the later Vedic literature. This method of approach, to say the least, contravenes all canons of what is known as the historical method. No system of ideas can be correctly understood by a mere internal analysis without reference to the previous evolution of each factor analysed, for ideas like all phenomena of life are organic and develop gradually. This 'genetic' method compels one to commence the study of Buddhism with an evaluation of the philosophy of the *Upaniṣads*, since, as we have already observed, they form the background of Buddhist thought.

In fact, I may hazard the conjecture that future researchers will establish beyond a shadow of doubt that the Pali Canon, which I hold to be the oldest and the most reliable source of information as regards 'primitive Buddhism', contains in the main the Buddha's answers to the metaphysical problems posed in the *Upaniṣads*. The India of the sixth and seventh centuries B.C. just before the birth of Gotama presents a remarkable spirit of deep philosophical reflection and earnest quest after truth. Speculation was rife concerning the problems of existence. This struggle of man to probe into the mysteries of life, to understand its meaning and purpose, is recorded in the *Upaniṣads* which have been preserved to us by the ingenuity of the Hindus.

Now, what are these *Upaniṣads*, and what metaphysical conclusions do they contain? The *Upaniṣads* form the concluding portion of the Vedic literature; hence also called the Vedānta or 'the end of the Veda'. They date from about the tenth century B.C. and are generally counted to be 108, but of which about a dozen are considered pre-Buddhistic and of inestimable value for the history of later Indian thought, inasmuch as they are the repositories of a heterogeneous mass of mystical, philosophical and psychological matter which forms the source of almost all the later philosophical

systems (*darśanas*) even including Cārvāka materialism.

The transition of the early Indian mind from the naive realism of the *Rgveda* and the cold ritualism of the *Brāhmaṇas* to the earnest philosophizings of the *Upaniṣads* forms an important landmark in the history of Indian thought. Bold speculations about the origin of the world from one God are not altogether wanting even in the Saṃhitā period, and the *Rg* and *Atharvavedas* contain many hymns where for the first time the riddle of the universe is attacked with considerable philosophic insight and ability. In these hymns we find the Vedic seers attempting to grasp some principle that could be regarded as the unity behind all the diverse powers of nature, the One Being (*ekam sat*) who was above all other gods, identified subsequently with *Prajāpati*, *Viśvakarman*, *Brahmaṇspati*, *Skandha*, *Kāla*, etc.

He is also conceived anthropomorphically as a Cosmic Person or *Puruṣa*. The former tendency is seen to develop further resulting in the conception of *Brahman* in the *Upaniṣads* while the latter idea of an Universal *Puruṣa* leads to the Upaniṣadic notion of a World-Soul or *Ātman*. The *Upaniṣads* carry out these two tendencies to the furthest limits possible. It should be noted however, that it is by a process of extrospective observation that these conceptions are reached. By another circuitous route, a sort of introspective analysis, the sages arrive at the conception of an individual soul (*ātman*), an essential being that persists through all vicissitudes and experiences of the empirical self, underlying all states of consciousness such as the waking, the dreaming and that of deep dreamless sleep. This real soul of man is said to be eternal being (*sat*), pure intelligence (*cit*) and spontaneous bliss (*ānanda*).

The central concept of the *Upaniṣads* is, of course, that of *Brahman*—a neuter word meaning 'the growing' or 'the swelling one'—and hence the philosophy of the *Upaniṣads* has been called *Brahma*-ism. It is the ultimate reality behind all appearances or the world-ground, and *Puruṣa* or *Ātman* conceived as the World-Soul is no other than this selfsame cosmic essence or *Brahman*. But the highest stage in the evolution of Upaniṣadic metaphysics is reached only when the individual soul or *Ātman* is affirmed to be the ultimate reality or the Universal Soul, i.e., *Ātman* or *Brahman* itself, a conclusion summed up in the famous equation "Thou art That" (*tat tvam asi*). This identity is further affirmed by the statements 'I am Brahman' (*aham Brahma asmi*) and 'I am this whole world' (*aham idam sarvam asmi*).

Thus it is a striking fact that so far back as the period of the *Upaniṣads* the Indian mind had concluded that reality was spiritual, that *Brahman* or *Ātman* was also *cit*. This ultimate reality of the Absolute is affirmed to be the ground and source of our psychical life and of the multiform external world (*sarvam idam brahma*). In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*⁴ it is said: "As a spider might come out with his thread, as sparks come forth from fire, even so from this soul (*ātman*) issue forth all vital energies, all worlds, all gods and all beings; the mystic meaning (*upanīṣat*) thereof is 'the real of the real' (*satyasya satyam*)." Hence there is no doubt that the Absolute is conceived as the ontological principle, the source of all beings and the diverse phenomena of nature. The Absolute is both immanent and transcendent. This metaphysical conclusion of the *Upaniṣads* has been hailed as the grandest form of pantheism or absolutist monism ever reached anywhere in the world. It is this philosophy that compelled Schopenhauer to bestow the highest praise on those thinkers and say 'they (the *Upaniṣads*) have been the solace of my life, and will be the solace of my death'.

Now, Gotama the Buddha, was born and bred in an atmosphere entirely surcharged with the spirit of this mystical pantheism. As such during the course of his long career as the exponent of somewhat revolutionary philosophy he had frequent occasion to meet various philosophers of the *Upaniṣadic* and other (i.e. heretical) schools. The whole of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* of the *Suttanipāta* seems to refer to these metaphysicians, their doctrines (*dhammas*) and views (*ditṭhis*), and, abundant evidence of such contact is forthcoming from other early parts of the Canon, as well, those like the *Digha*, *Majjhima*, *Saṃyutta* and *Aṅguttara Nikayas*.

Thus it is natural to expect that the Master would have expressed some opinion or other on the fundamental metaphysical problems of the day. Everybody was asking: 'Who is *Ātman*, what is *Brahma*? (*ko nu atma kim brahma*)'. It is, of course, claimed by some that the Buddha wisely remained silent on these ultimate questions. But, unfortunately for them, the evidence of the Canon does not support this view. It may be true that the Buddha disliked all *a priori* metaphysical constrictions⁵ regarding an ontological Absolute or World-Soul. But he did not always remain silent on these problems as is generally believed. Let us see how he dealt with the question of the World-Soul (*Ātman*) and its theistic counterpart God (*Īśvara*).

It is admitted by all that the Buddha denies the existence of a

personal God or Creator. In this sense he was undoubtedly an atheist. He vigorously attacked all the 'creation theories' of the earlier religion. The world is neither the work of God (*issara-kuttam*) nor of Brahma (*Brahma-kuttam*). Professor Radhakrishnan says, however, that, though the Buddha denied the existence of a 'capricious' and 'interfering' God, there is nothing to tell us that Buddha denied the reality of an eternal self-sustaining spirit, the active mind of the universe⁶.

According to him in Buddhism this intelligent principle is *karma*. In the same context, Radhakrishnan affirms that 'Buddha will not say that the principle of *karma* is an entirely mindless energy'. For Mrs Rhys Davids, the 'first Sakyans' had their own notion of Deity as Dharma (Pali: *dhamma*), 'the great self who is to be revered'.⁷ What is meant by these authorities is that the Buddha's conception of law and regularity in the Universe is implied in *karma* and *dharmā* must point to some 'deep design' of a 'cosmic idea' of an Universal Spirit.

I claim that this interpretation is based on a prejudiced view of the whole matter. The conception of *karma* must not be confused with the idea of the presence of regularity in life and nature. The one is purely personal and volitional (*cetanā*) and the other is universal and neutral. Again, if the Buddha affirmed *dharmā* as cosmic law, he also believed there was an equally great proportion of *adharma* or chaos as well in the world. In short, to talk of 'deep design' is to ignore the Buddha's greatest contribution to Indian thought. On the fundamental question of the existence of any reality behind all the diverse phenomena of nature or the presence of a designing and planning mind in the cosmos, the Master expressed himself quite clearly when he answered the inquisitive Mogharājamānava with a categorical negative: 'Look upon the world (*loka*) as void (*śūnya*), O Mogharāja, being always thoughtful; having destroyed the pre-conception of an *Ātman* one may overcome death. . .'.⁸ We cannot fail to see here that the Buddha believed the *Ātman* or World-Soul (or world-ground) to be a mere fiction of the imagination, even though the *Ātman* whose reality is refuted here is not the individual soul (*ātman*).

On this latter question, that is to say, the existence of an individual self or *Ātman* in man, the Buddha's attitude was clear. The earlier thinkers had taken two fundamental positions on this issue. The idealistic metaphysicians of the *Upaniṣads* had regarded it, as we

have already seen, as an absolute unchanging existent (*sat*), an eternal intelligence (*cit*), whose innate nature was bliss (*ānanda*).

The Buddha referred to this doctrine as *sassatavāda* or the 'eternalist theory'. In opposition to this idealistic school and as a reaction to it had arisen even in the Vedic period a powerful body of materialist philosophers (Cārvākas, Lokāyatas, Pāṣaṇdas, etc.) who, very much like the materialists of our own day, called their system a 'science' (*śāstra*, as opposed to philosophy or *darśana*) and opposed the doctrine of an eternal soul from a 'scientific' angle. The Pali books mention them as 'heretics' (*tiṭṭhiyas*). These thinkers rushed to the opposite extreme of affirming only the material factors in man to be real in any sense whatsoever; even mind is an emergent from their concatenation, consciousness being a mere by-product of matter. There is no such thing as a soul (*ātman*) in man who is completely cut off, annihilated, on the disintegration of the body at death (*kāyassa bheda param-maraṇā ucchijjantī*).

It is characteristic of the dogmatism of the period that every thinker was compelled to accept the one or the other of these two extreme positions, viz., eternalism or annihilationism. The Buddha persistently evaded these two extremes (*ubhayante*).

The *Saṃyutta Nikaya* tells us that when the wandering ascetic Vacchagotta came to the Buddha and asked him: 'How now, Gotama, is there a soul (*atthiatta*)?' the Master remained silent, and, when he was asked whether that meant he denied a soul, once more he was silent. To idealist interpreters like Radhakrishnan the Buddha's silence in this instance means that 'Buddha declines to deny the reality of a permanent 'I', and, therefore, the neutral attitude of the Buddha must show that he tacitly admitted the metaphysical position of Upaniṣadic pantheism and idealism.

On the other hand, to most Western critics this silence means a categorical denial leading to nihilism or even materialism.¹⁰ Both these interpretations are, of course, the result of an enthusiasm of the critics for their own metaphysical outlook, and, in my opinion, unwarranted. When Vacchagotta had departed unsatisfied, Buddha himself explained his silence to Ānanda saying that a negative answer would have put himself (i.e. the Buddha) on the side of those who professed 'annihilation' (*ucchedavāda*) and a positive reply would have committed him to the idealist, eternalist position (*sassatavāda*).

Furthermore, if the Buddha did accept the metaphysical stand-

point of the *Upaniṣads*, as is claimed, and actually believed in the existence of an eternal, unchanging spontaneously blissful soul, he, the honest, outspoken thinker that he was, would have *affirmed* it, but not remained silent. On the contrary, as he himself further explains to Ānanda, he was convinced that all phenomena, psychic as well as physical, were devoid of a soul in the Upaniṣadic sense (*sabbe dhammā anattā*).

Now, it must be plain to the thoughtful reader that whatever the much disputed doctrine of *anatta* may mean it cannot point to a purely materialistic conception of the individual (*puggala*) just as it does not imply eternalism. In the *Samyutta Nikāya*¹¹ it is clearly asserted by the Master that there is a *puggala* who is the bearer (*bhārahāro*) of the burden of the five aggregates (*pañcūpādānakkhandhā*), viz., the individual who has such and such a name, clan, etc. (*yo ayam āyasmā evamnāmo evamgotto evam vuccati bhikkhave bhārahāro*). It is therefore definitely wrong to say as some Buddhists have done 'that the individual represented a complex of physical and mental elements without soul or personality. . . .' an unguarded statement that reduces Buddhism to the level of nihilism or annihilationism from which the Master tried to save it by his silence to Vacchagotta.

Then how can we understand the negative description of personality as *anattā*? The answer to this question is found in the Buddha's pregnant conception of *bhava* or 'becoming', a continuous flux. It is not change, for to change there must be a substance, which Buddha denied. It is the individual himself who is the 'becoming', there is no immanent 'becom-er'. There is *bhava* but no *satta* or eternal being behind the process. Personality or *puggala* is *bhava* individualized by the limiting force of *karma* (*upadhi-saṅkhāra*). It is significant that the Jainas, most probably before Buddhism came into being, had used *pudgala* for karmic matter or materialized karma.

Now, it is said in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*¹² that this 'becoming' is characterized by three signs (*tilakkhana*): that is to say, it is impermanent, sorrowful and of an 'evolving' nature (*sabbe bhavā aniccā, dukkhā, viparināmadhammā*), and this is the very same formula that is found in other places as *aniccā dukkhā anattā*. It is therefore quite legitimate to conclude that the negative *anattā* is synonymous with the positive *viparināmadhammā* or 'evolving'.

That is to say, both in the individual of *samsāric* experience and

in the material world the Buddha saw only an 'evolution'. At any given moment in this process of 'evolution' or 'becoming' the individual is called *bhūta* or 'the become'. Thus it is said in the *Sutta Nipāta*:¹³ 'Becoming is dependent on grasping and "the become" (*sci.* the individual) falls into ill' (*upādānapaccayā bhavo, bhūto dukkham nigacchaū*).

Hence it will be clear that while not denying the reality of an 'evolving' *samsāric* individual the Master positively refused to accept an eternal, unchanging, ontological entity partaking of the nature of eternal Being as is understood by the Upaniṣadic conception of the soul or *ātman*.

Let us finally turn to the question of the Absolute. The *Brahman* of the *Upaniṣads* was an ontological entity or principle; that is to say, it is the source or first cause from which all beings and everything in the cosmos are derived, and, to which everything returns in the end. Radhakrishnan believes that Buddha's conception of *nirvāṇa* is also similar if not the same. 'The illusion of becoming is founded on the reality of Nirvāṇa.'¹⁴ But the Master never speaks of *nirvāṇa* as the first cause or the world-ground; it is for him no ontological principle.

In the only place in the Canon where he defines the Absolute he pictures it as 'that which is unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, the presence of which makes possible the escape from what is born, become, made and compounded'.¹⁵ In this sense he applied even the word *Brahma* to it, as when he calls himself *brahmabhūta*.¹⁶

It is, however, not to be conceived by *a priori* methods. It is a state to be realized by the individual by his own efforts (*bhāvanā, samādhi, jhāna, etc.*). When the escape (*nissaraṇa*) from desire and craving (*chandarāga*) is achieved, that is *nirvāṇa*.¹⁷

REFERENCES

1. S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. I p. 470.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 457.
4. *Brhad . Up.* II.1.20.
5. *pakappita ditthi, vide Suttanipāta (Sn) 786, 802.*
6. *Loc. cit.*, p. 460.
7. *Vide pp. 49, 279, The Birth of Indian Psychology and its Development in Buddhism*, 1936.
8. *Sn*, 1119.
9. *Loc. cit.*, p. 687.

10. See, for instance, Spengler, *Decline of the West*, pp. 350. 352 et seq.
11. *SN*, III.25.
12. *AN*, I.258; II.177.
13. *Su*, 742.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 449.
15. *Udāna*, VIII.3.10.
16. *Su*, 561.
17. *Yam loke chandaragavinayo chandarāgapahānam idam loke nissaranam, AN, I*, p. 258.