

The Buddhist Attitude to Revelation

In the *Saṅgārava Sutta*, the Buddha states that there are three types of religious and philosophical teachers, considering the basis of their knowledge, who prescribe divergent ways of life. Firstly, there are the revelationists (*anussavikā*), who claim final knowledge on the basis of revelation, such as, for instance, the brahmins of the Vedic tradition. Secondly, there are the rational metaphysicians (*takkā vīmaṃsī*), who claim final knowledge on the basis of their faith in reason and speculation. Thirdly, there are those who claim final knowledge of things not found in the traditional revealed scriptures (*ananussutesu dhammesu*), based on a personal understanding derived from their extrasensory powers of perception.

It is significant that the Buddha classifies himself as a member of the third group. Referring to this class of religious and philosophical teachers the Buddha says, “I am one of them” (*tesāhaṃ asmi*, MN 100.8/M II 211). It would surely be of interest to Buddhists to know something about this last class of religious and philosophical teachers with whom the Buddha identifies himself. It would also be important to note the difference between the Buddha and the other members of this class. But in order to do this, it would be necessary on the one hand to identify the Buddha’s contemporaries and predecessors, who were presumed to belong to it. On the other hand, it is vital to examine the Buddhist attitude to the other two classes of religious and philosophical thinkers.

This would involve an analysis of the means of knowledge recognised in pre-Buddhist thought. For this purpose it would be necessary to look into both the Vedic and the non-Vedic traditions that preceded Buddhism. The pre-Buddhist Vedic tradition comprises the thinkers who paid some sort of allegiance to the Vedas. From the evidence of the Buddhist scriptures and the Vedic texts, they consisted of the thinkers responsible for the literature from the Ṛgveda downwards up to about the *Maitrāyaṇi Upaniṣad*. The pre-Buddhist non-Vedic tradition would comprise the materialists; the sceptics, who are called *amarāvikkhepikā* (i.e. eel wrigglers) in the Buddhist texts and *ajñānavādins* or agnostics in the

Jain texts; the Ājīvikas, who propounded theories about time and change; and the Jains, who had Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta as their leader.

A careful study of the relevant texts of the Vedic and non-Vedic traditions shows that the thinkers who claimed a final knowledge of things not found in the traditional revealed scriptures, based on a personal understanding derived from their extra sensory powers of perception, are to be found in both the Vedic and the non-Vedic traditions prior to Buddhism. They were none other than those who practised *yoga* and claimed to have acquired certain extra sensory faculties of perception and expansions of consciousness. We shall examine later the respects in which the Buddha may be compared and contrasted with them.

Here it is relevant to examine the claims of the authoritarian thinkers, who regarded the Vedas as revealed scriptures, as well as those of the rationalists, who put forward metaphysical theories about the nature and destiny of man in the universe based on speculative reasoning. It is worth remembering at the same time that the authoritarian thinkers and the rationalists were by no means confined to the Vedic tradition. They are to be found in the pre-Buddhist non-Vedic tradition as well. The *Suttanipāta* refers to “the Vedas of the Samanas or recluses, as well as to the Vedas of the brahmins” (*vedāni viceyya kevalāni samaṇānaṃ yaṃ p’atthi brāhmaṇānaṃ*; Sn 529) and there is evidence to show that some of the Ājīvikas had their own authoritative religious and philosophical texts handed down by tradition. Besides, there were rationalists, perhaps the majority of them, in the non-Vedic tradition. The materialists, sceptics and many of the Ājīvikas were rationalists who based their findings on reasoning. So we find the authoritarian thinkers, the rationalists, as well as the empiricists or experientialists, whose knowledge was derived from experience, represented in both the Vedic and the non-Vedic traditions prior to Buddhism.

We shall here examine the authoritarian thinkers of the Vedic tradition and the Buddhist attitude to them. For this attitude illustrates the Buddhist attitude to revelation. It was the belief of the majority of the thinkers of the Vedic tradition that the whole of it was the word uttered or breathed forth by the Great Being, who is the ground of existence. A passage in the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* reads as follows: “It is—as from a fire laid with damp fuel, clouds of smoke separately issue forth, so, too, verily, from this Great Being

has been breathed forth that which is Ṛgveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda, (Hymns) of the Atharvāns and Angīrasas, Legend, Ancient Lore, Sciences, Upaniṣads, Stanzas, Sūtras, explanations and commentaries. From it, indeed, are all these breathed forth” (2.4.10). Since this Great Being (*Mahād Bhūtam*) is conceived as the source of all knowledge and power, these scriptures were an infallible divine revelation. In a later passage in the same Upaniṣad, which adds to this list, the entire cosmos is said to be breathed forth by the Great Being. Both passages occur in a context in which the highest reality is said to be non-dual (*advaitam*). This impersonal conception is to be found in other works of this period, where the Vedas are said to be a product of the basic structure of the world (*skambha*), time (*kāla*) or logos (*vāk*).

Very much earlier in the Ṛgveda itself, though in a late hymn (RV 10.90), the origin of the Vedas is traced to the sacrifice of the Cosmic Person (*puruṣa*). This led in the Brāhmaṇas to the theory that the Vedas are due to the creation of Prajāpāti, the Lord of all creatures. This Prajāpāti is often identified in the Brāhmaṇas with Brahmā, who according to the Buddhist texts is considered by the theistic brahmins to be creator of the cosmos. In the Upaniṣads, Prajāpāti or the Lord of creation sometimes continues in his role as the creator of the Vedas (*Chāndogya Up.* 4.17.1–2). But Brahmā often gains prominence as the creator of the Vedas, although they are actually revealed to mankind by Prajāpāti. The *Chāndogya* says: “This did Brahmā tell to Prajāpāti, Prajāpāti to Manu, and Manu to human beings” (8.15). Very much later in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, Brahmā is still “the first of the gods and the maker of all,” who eventually reveals both the higher and lower forms of Vedic knowledge to mankind.

On the internal evidence of the Vedic tradition itself, we find that the claim was made at a certain stage in its history that the texts of the Vedic tradition were divinely revealed. The later Vedic tradition, therefore, considers the *ṛṣis* who composed the Vedic hymns, as “seers” in the literal sense of the term, who see the Vedas by means of extrasensory perception (*atīndriyārthhadraṣṭarāḥ ṛṣayaḥ...*). Radhakrishnan gives expression to this traditional point of view when he says that “the *ṛṣi* of the Vedic hymn calls himself not so much the composer of the hymns as the seer of them,” but it is a theory that was put forward as early as the Brāhmaṇas.

It is because the Vedic thinkers believed their texts to have been divinely revealed that they looked down with scorn at the claims of certain religious and philosophical teachers to have personally verified the truths of their doctrines by developing their extrasensory powers of perception. In the *Subha Sutta*, the Buddha criticises some of the ethical recommendations of the Upaniṣads on the ground that neither the brahmins at the time, nor their teachers up to several generations, nor even the original seers claimed to know the consequences of practising the virtues referred to by verifying the fact with their paranormal perception. Subha, the brahmin student, is enraged at this and quotes the views of one of the senior brahmins, who treated such claims to verify these facts in the light of paranormal perception with contempt, considering them ridiculous (*bassakamī*), for it is impossible for a mere human being (*manussa-bhūto*) to claim such knowledge. The point here is that Vedic knowledge is divinely revealed in contrast with the knowledge of the Buddha, which was merely human and therefore of lesser worth.

It is the same criticism that is sometimes levelled against Buddhism by some of its theistic critics on the basis of theistic presuppositions. It is said that the knowledge of the Buddha was merely human, whereas the knowledge allegedly contained in their respective theistic traditions is divine, implying thereby that it was more reliable.

We may examine the value of this criticism. But let us first assess the value of the Buddhist criticisms of the Vedic tradition in their historical context. In the above context, the Buddha criticises the acceptance of certain statements merely on the ground that they are contained in an allegedly revealed text without their being verified as true. It may be stated here that verifiability in the light of experience is one of the central characteristics of truth according to Buddhist conceptions.

In the *Sandaka Sutta*, Buddhism is contrasted with four types of false religions, and four types of religions which are unsatisfactory though not necessarily false, by claiming that the statements of Buddhism have been verified by the Buddha and many of his disciples and were, therefore, verifiable in principle by anyone with the requisite competence. A statement can be reliably accepted as true only when it is repeatedly verified and not because it is

dogmatically declared to be the truth on the grounds of revelation. In the *Caṅkī Sutta*, the Buddha says: “There are five things which have a twofold result in this life. What five? A belief based on faith (*saddhā*), one’s likes (*ruçī*), on revelation (*anussava*), superficial reflection (*ākāraparivittakka*), and agreement with one’s preconceptions (*ditthhinijjhānakabhanti*).... For even what I learn to be the truth on the ground of it being a profound revelation may turn out to be empty, hollow and false, while what I do not hear to be a truth on the ground of it being a profound ‘revelation may turn out to be factual, true and sound” (MN 95.14/M II 170–71). The Buddha goes on to say that one safeguards the truth by accepting a statement from revelation as such without dogmatically claiming it to be true, which is unwarranted. This means that it is spurious to claim as knowledge the truth of a statement in a revealed text. It is different with a statement which has been reliably verified in the light of one’s personal experience. It is noteworthy that the Buddha says that beliefs held on the grounds of faith, one’s likes, revelation, etc., are likely to have a dual result, namely to be verified as either true or false in this life itself.

In the *Sandaka Sutta*, a similar conclusion is drawn. One of the reasons why a religion based on revelation is unconsoling or unsatisfactory (*anassāsika*) is that it may prove to be either true or false and one cannot say what it is for certain. It is said: “Herein a certain religious teacher is a revelationist, who holds to the truth of revelation and preaches a doctrine according to revelation, according to what is traditionally handed down, according to the authority of scripture. Now, a teacher who is a revelationist and holds to the truth of revelation may have well-heard it or ill-heard it and it may be true or false. At this, an intelligent person reflects thus—this venerable teacher is a revelationist, etc.... so seeing that his religion is unsatisfactory he loses interest and leaves it.” So even the fact that it has been clearly apprehended as a revelation is no guarantee of its truth, for revelation is no criterion of truth. For the statements of revealed scripture may turn out to be true or false.

This is one of the central criticisms of revealed religion as found in the Buddhist texts, which reappears in the context under discussion in the *Subha Sutta*. The second criticism that is made is that neither the brahmins living at that period, nor their teachers up to several generations, nor even the original seers claimed to know the

consequence of practising these virtues after realising the fact with their higher knowledge, although the Buddha himself could do so.

While the Vedic tradition, from the time of the Brāhmaṇas onwards, claimed that the composers of the Vedic hymns were in fact seers who intuited the truths or saw the statements which were revealed to them by their extrasensory perception, the Buddhists not only denied any higher insight on the part of the seers but quite emphatically asserted that the hymns were in fact *composed* by them. The original seers (*pubbakā isayo*) are constantly described as “the makers and the utterers of the hymns” (*mantānaṃ kattāro, mantānaṃ pavattāro*; DN 13.20/D I 242). The internal evidence of the Ṛgvedic texts proves this, for in them the Vedic poets merely claim to make (*kr̥*), compose (*taḥ*), produce (*jan*) and utter (*avadannrāñi*) the hymns. The Vedic Anukramaṇī merely defines a *ṛṣi* as “an author of a hymn” (*yasya vākyaṃ sā ṛṣib*). So there is no historical justification for the claim that the original authors of the Ṛgveda had any extrasensory vision. The Buddhist criticisms were, therefore, realistic and made in the light of objective facts as they saw them. What is true of the origins of the Vedic tradition is true of other revelational traditions, when their historical origins are objectively examined.

The idea that the Buddha was a “mere human being” is also mistaken. For when the Buddha was asked whether he was a human being, a Brahmā (God) or Māra (Satan), he denied that he was any of them and claimed that he was Buddha, i.e. an Enlightened Being who had attained the Transcendent. This does not, however, make the Buddha unique for it is a status that any human being can aspire to attain. The significance of this claim is brought out in the *Brahmanimantika Sutta*, where it is shown that even a Brahmā eventually passes away while the Buddha, being one with the Transcendent Reality beyond space, time and causation, is not subject to such vicissitudes.

At the same time, the Buddhist criticism of revelation does not imply that revelations are impossible. According to the Buddhist conception of things, it is possible for beings more developed than us to exist in the cosmos and communicate their views about the nature and destiny of man in the universe through human beings. All that is said is that the fact that something is deemed to be a revelation is no criterion of its truth, and revelation, therefore,

cannot be considered an independent and valid means of knowledge. No book on scientific method today regards it as such and even theologians have begun to doubt the validity of such claims. According to Buddhist conceptions, revelations may come from different grades of higher beings with varying degrees of goodness and intelligence. They cannot all be true. This does not mean that they are all necessarily false. For they may contain aspects of truth although we cannot say what these are by merely giving ear to them. This is why Buddhism classifies religions based on revelation as unsatisfactory though not necessarily false.

It is a notorious fact that different revelational traditions and individual revelations contradict each other. If “truth is one” (*ekam hi saccam*), as Buddhism believes to be the case, they cannot all be true though all may be false. There are diverse views on crucial matters even within the same revelational tradition. The Brāhmaṇas and the Upaniṣads, for instance, contain several creation myths and divergent accounts as to how life came into existence on earth. The ideas they contain differ from those of the Babylonian myths with which the Western world is familiar.

One such creation myth, for instance, states that in the beginning, the world was Soul (Ātman) alone in the form of a Person. Human beings are the offspring of Ātman, who first creates a wife to escape from anxiety and loneliness. Later the wife assumes the forms of various animals, while Ātman assumes their male forms in order to make love to her. It is thus that the various species of animals come into being. This account of creation is in a section of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. The creation myth in the *Aitareya Upaniṣad* is quite different, although this too starts with the story that in the beginning Soul or Atman alone existed and there was no other thing whatsoever. Atman creates the worlds by an act of will and then thinks of creating people to look after them. Then, it is said that “right from the waters he drew forth and shaped a person” (*Aitareya Up.* I.3). Here man is created not by an act of procreation, not out of clay, but out of the waters. The evolutionary account of the origin of life found in a section of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* is still different. It says that from the Atman or the Soul there progressively emerged space, wind, fire, water, earth, plants, food, seed and then man.

If we compare and contrast the materialist criticism of the Vedas with the Buddhist, we see the difference in approach. The materialists condemned outright the whole of the Vedic tradition and saw no good in it at all. According to them, the Vedas were the work of fools and knaves or in their own words, *bhaṇḍa-dhurta-nisācaraḥ*, i.e. buffoons, knaves and demons. On the other hand, the Buddhists, while holding that the original seers who were the authors of the Vedas merely lacked a special insight with which they were later credited, in keeping with historical fact, praised them for their virtue and rectitude. The materialists categorically repudiated the Vedas as false, self-contradictory and repetitive (*anṛtavyaghata-punarukta-doṣa*). The Buddhists, while pointing out the contradictions and falsities and repudiating the claims to revelation, did not consider all the traditional beliefs in the Vedic tradition to be wholly false. Among the false beliefs, the materialists would point to the belief in sacrifices, in a soul, in survival, in moral values and moral retribution. The Buddhists, however, criticised the Vedic conception of the sacrifice and denied the necessity for the concept of a soul, but agreed with the Vedas in asserting survival, moral values and moral recompense and retribution, which are among the beliefs which formed part of the right philosophy of life or *sammā diṭṭhi* in Buddhism.

Even with regard to the sacrifice, the materialists saw nothing but deception and fraud in it. The Buddhists, while condemning sacrifices as involving a waste of resources and the needless destruction of animals, were not averse to the simple sacrificial offerings made in good faith by the earliest brahmins who killed no animals for the occasion. Just as much as some of the Upaniṣads reinterpret sacrifice or *yajña* as the religious life, Buddhism conceives of *yajña* at its best to be the highest religious life as advocated in Buddhism.

The difference between the attitude of the Upaniṣads and Buddhism towards sacrifices, despite the similarities indicated, may be described as follows: the Upaniṣads as the *jñāna-marga* or “the way of knowledge” tended to regard the earlier Vedic tradition in the Brāhmaṇas, advocating the *karma-marga* or “the way of ritual” and the associated learning as a lower form of knowledge (*aparāvidyā*), while the thought of the Upaniṣads was a higher form of knowledge (*parāvidyā*). But even as a lower form of knowledge, it

was not discarded. For us to do so would be to deny the authority of the injunctive assertions of the Vedas, which advocated sacrifices, and thereby question and undermine the belief in Vedic revelation. So even where the Upaniṣads urge the cultivation of compassion, an exception is made with regard to the sacrifice. Paradoxically, it is said that one should not harm any creatures except at the sacrificial altars (*abimsan sarvabhūtāni anyatra tīrthebyah; Chāndogya Up.* 8.15.1). So it was the belief in revelation which is ultimately the basis for the belief in animal sacrifices.

The materialists, likewise, saw no basis for a belief in revelation since they counted as real only the observable material world. Buddhism on the other hand did not question the basis of the belief in revelation except for its denial of a personal creator God. It criticised particular claims to revelation and the attempt to regard revelation as a separate valid means of knowledge. In the *Tevijja Sutta*, the brahmins claim to have a diversity of paths for attaining fellowship with Brahmā or God. The Buddha criticises these claims on the ground that not one of them has “seen Brahmā face to face” (*Brahmā sakehidiṭṭho*, DN 13.12/D I 238). This was true of the brahmins present at the time right up to the original composers of the Vedas. So the claim to revelation is without basis. Although Brahmā is believed to be the creator of the cosmos, he is none other than a temporary regent of the cosmos, an office to which any being within the cosmos could aspire. The knowledge of the Buddha, who has attained the Transcendent, excels that of Brahmā, who is morally perfect (*asaṅkiliṭṭha-citto*) but is neither omniscient nor omnipotent. The Buddha, who has held this office in the past and has verified in the light of his extrasensory powers of perception the conditions required for attaining fellowship with God or Brahmā, could state that there is no diversity of paths all leading to such a state but the one and only path consisting in acquiring purity of mind, cultivating compassion and being selfless or without possessions. What is verifiably true is more reliable than a blind belief in a claim to revelation.

The Buddhist attitude to any such revelation would be that of accepting what is true, good and sound and rejecting what is false, evil and unsound after a dispassionate analysis of its contents without giving way to prejudice, hatred, fear or ignorance. The Buddhist criticism of religions based on authoritarian claims is not

limited to a criticism of a claim to revelation. An analysis of the sermon addressed to the Kālāmas shows that it is only the first of the grounds for an authoritarian claim, although it was undoubtedly the most important and, therefore, the one to be examined and criticised in detail. The different kinds of claims to knowledge based on authority are seen in the classification of such claims in the *Kālāma Sutta*, which mentions besides revelation claims made on the grounds of tradition (*paramparā*), common sense, wide acceptance of hearsay (*itikiru*), conformity with scripture (*piṭaka-sampadā*) and on the ground of something being a testimony of an expert (*bhavyarūpatā*) or the view of a revered teacher (*samaṇo me garu*). They could not be deemed to be valid means of knowledge and the requirement of safeguarding the truth (*saccānurakkehanā*) demands that beliefs held on such a basis be admitted as such instead of dogmatically claiming them to be true. Such dogmatism leads to undesirable consequences for oneself and society—to intolerance, conflict and violence—and is a departure from sincerity and truth.

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of
K. N. Jayatilleke**

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Contents

Sources	vi
Foreword	viii
Preface	xi
Publisher's Preface	xii
1. Buddhism and the Scientific Revolution	I
2. The Historical Context of the Rise of Buddhism	9
3. The Buddhist Conception of Truth	21
4. The Buddhist Attitude to Revelation	33
5. The Buddhist Conception of Matter and the Material World	43
6. The Buddhist Analysis of Mind	53
7. The Buddhist Conception of the Universe	65
8. The Buddhist Attitude to God	77
9. Nibbāna	89
10. The Buddhist View of Survival	99
11. The Buddhist Doctrine of Kamma	109
12. The Case for the Buddhist Theory of Karma and Survival	119
13. The Conditioned Genesis of the Individual	157
14. The Buddhist Ethical Ideal of the Ultimate Good	185
15. The Basis of Buddhist Ethics	195
16. The Buddhist Conception of Evil	205
17. The Criteria of Right and Wrong	215
18. The Ethical Theory of Buddhism	227
19. Some Aspects of the Bhagavad Gīta and Buddhist Ethics	237
20. Toynbee's Criticism of Buddhism	255
21. The Buddhist Attitude to Other Religions	273
22. Buddhism and Peace	299
23. The Significance of Vesākha	317
24. Buddhism and the Race Question	331
25. The Principles of International Law in Buddhist Doctrine	371
Bibliography to Pali Texts and Translations.....	483
Abbreviations	484
Bibliography to Chapter 25	485
Kulatissa Nanda Jayatilleke	491

Sources

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K. N. JAYATILLEKE

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