

BUDDHISM - ITS RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

There is no gainsaying the fact that every great person is a child of his own age and must be appraised with particular reference to the historical and religious conditions in which he lived. However, great a personage he may be, he can not be independent of his age and circumstances. It is said that Gautama Buddha was born at a time, place and country, when conditions were favourable for the errand he was to carry out. For a proper understanding and appreciation of Buddhism which became one of the international religions, it is, therefore, necessary to have a review of the religious environment prior to and during the time of Gautama Buddha.

It is a rare occasion in human history that the world produced in the six century B.C. mighty religious personages in several countries. H.G. Well writes that «the sixth century B.C. was indeed one of the most remarkable in all history. Everywhere... men's minds were displaying a new boldness everywhere they were working up out of traditions and kingships and priests and blood-sacrifices and asking the most penetrating questions. It is as if the race had reached a stage of adolescence — after a childhood of 20,000 years »<sup>1</sup>. In Greece appeared Parmendes and Empedocles, in Iran, Zarathustra, in China, Lao-tse and Confucius and in India, Mahāvīra and Gautama Buddha. Apart from them, there were mighty thinkers who pursued the views of their predecessors and worked out new trends of thought. Thus, this period is of great importance from the point of view of the history of religion. India was, no doubt, in the maze of interacting philosophy and religious views when Buddhism arose. The Vedic India advocated the cult of sacrifice for happy life in this world and as also in the next. It could not fully secure for the performer the objects for which the sacrifices were performed. Merits achieved through them were efficacious only for a

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1. *A short history of the World*, p. 128.

short time. They could not give eternal peace, but bring only temporary happiness. But the object of mankind is to attain permanent happiness and the mind of the people was naturally directed to things eternal. The trend of the views, therefore, turned against the rigidity of the Vedic sacrificial system. People were inquisitive of true knowledge which could bring eternal peace. Thus a new mode of life was found out. It was the life of renunciation as against the life addicted to the pleasure of senses. As a consequence, the system of four *Āśramas* i.e. four stages of life evolved. The four *Āśramas* were: *Brahmacarya* (celebrate life), *Gāharastya* (household life), *Vānaprastha* (forest life), and *Sanyāsa* (life of renunciation). Practically « these stages were prescribed for the highest caste only, the Brahmanas, who monopolised intellectual culture and religious ceremony i.e. the homas, *yajñās*, etc. »<sup>2</sup>. The first is concerned with education, the second with family-life, the third with retirement of household life and the fourth with meditational practices in order to realise the highest truth. The last two were considered favourable for contemplation and obtaining true knowledge and peace of mind. Man's mind, therefore, turned away from the old course and began to think in a better way than the performance of Vedic rites and rituals. In the *Upaniṣadas* we find the great quest for truths for the attainment of salvation and peace. In most of them are discussed the nature of *Brahman*, the soul and transmigration, and the doctrine of *Karma*. *Brahman* is real, the universe is false (*māyā*) and there is no difference between a living being (*jīva*) and *Brahman* — these are, in short, the fundamentals of the *Upaniṣadas*. Through the comprehension of the true knowledge the realisation of *Brahman* could be obtained. The emphasis was thus laid on deliverance through knowledge acquired by meditation and the practice of yoga rather on rituals (*Karmamārga*). This could be done by one-self without the assistance of the priests. In the *Bṛhadrāṇyaka Upaniṣad* (I.3.38) we also find a prayer which reads:

*From the unreal lead me to the Real  
From darkness lead me to light  
From death lead me to immortality*<sup>3</sup>.

This vital deviation from the Brahmanic teaching indeed paved the way for more lively and autonomous thinking. The cultured classes of the period were thus in favour of deeper aspect of learning as opposed to the elaborate and extensive Vedic sacrifices. The common people were still steeped in superstitious beliefs and rituals. They used to believe that soul dwell within the bodies of men, animals, plants etc, all alike. In other words, they believed in animism. The worship of trees, serpents,

2. N. DUTTA, *A comparative study of Brahmanic āśrama and Buddhist monasticism*, *Yagajjyoti*, A Buddha Jayanti Annual, 1972, p. 11.

3. *Asato mā sat gamaya // tamaso mā jyotirgamaya // mrtyoḥ mā amṛtaḥ gamaya //*.

*yakṣas*, *gandharvas* and the like were also invoked in this age. We are told that the worship of sacred trees was connected with the *yakṣa* cult. A few trees were, in fact, considered to be sacred because they were believed to be the abode of *yakṣas*. They were generally regarded as superhuman beings worthy of respect, but of some lower status than the *devas* (gods). From the Pāli *Mahāvamsa* we learn that the *yakṣa* cult was very popular in the pre-Buddhist time. It is seen that such popular beliefs and practices at this period had also a considerable influence in India.

In the Buddhist texts there are frequent references to the six non-Buddhist teachers<sup>4</sup> who were respected by the wise, nobles and kings alike. They were well-known throughout the country as founders of schools of thought. A few of them were senior contemporaries of Gautama Buddha, and were also followed by a large body of disciples. It is interesting to study their view-points. Below are given the names of those teachers and the doctrinal views they held:

(1) Pūraṇakassapa — was the oldest of these six outstanding philosophers. He upheld the doctrine of non-action (*akiriyavāda*), which, according to Dr. B. M. Barua, is a doctrine of passivity of soul. He was rather a fatalist or natural determinist. He maintained that everything was determined by natural forces. «He was what we say today an Amoralist». According to this doctrine, a person does not earn merit by good deeds such as, gifts, sacrifices and the like. Similarly he does not incur sins by bad deeds such as, killing, telling a lie, and so forth. It is the body which acts, the soul remains unaffected thereof. The body only enjoys the consequences of *Karma*. Śīlaṅka, the Jaina commentator, calls it *akāravāda* and identifies it with the Śāṅkhya view. Buddhism, however, admits neither identity nor difference of the soul and body.

(2) Makkhali Gosāla — He founded an independent school of thought known as Ājīvika school. The *Majjhimanikāya*<sup>5</sup>, however, records his two other predecessors Nandavacca and Kisa-saṅkicca. He may thus be regarded as the third or last Tīrthaṅkara of the Ājīvika school. He held the doctrine of fatalism (*niyati saṅgatibhāva*). He explains that all beings are without power and force; they are regulated by the destiny. There is no other cause whatsoever for happiness and misery of a being. He denies also the consequences of action and exertions. He further advocated the theory of purification through transmigration (*saṃsāra-suddhi*). According to it, all beings would pass through several existences in order to attain emancipation. Like a ball of thread the consecutive

4. B. M. BARUA, *A History of pre-Buddhistic Indian Philosophy*, pp. 227 ff.; B. C. LAW, *Buddhistic studies*, pp. 73 ff.; A. L. BASHAM, *History and Doctrines of the Ājīvikas*, pp. 10 ff.; I. B. HORNER, *Gautama and the other sects*, in IAOS, vol. 64, n. 4, pp. 28 ff.; *Dighanikāya*, vol. 1, pp. 47 ff.; *Milindapañha*, p. 4.

5. *A History of Pre-Buddhistic Indian philosophy*, p. 279.

existences are unalterably fixed. Nothing is to be done to change the course of natural purification. Neither good nor bad deeds have any effect in effecting one's destiny. There are, of course, infinitive gradations of existence and each existence is eternal<sup>6</sup>. By his doctrine of fate or non-causation he denied both action and its consequence. In the *Aṅguttaranikāya*<sup>7</sup> Buddha while referring Makkhali Gosāla observes: « Just as the hair blanket is reckoned the meanest of all woven garments, even so, of all the teaching of recluses that of Makkhali is meanest »<sup>8</sup>.

We know very little about the name and the life of Makkhali. The *Sumaṅgalavilāsini*<sup>9</sup> and the *Papañcasūdanī*<sup>10</sup> record that Makkhali Gosāla was once employed as a servant in a house. While carrying an oilpot along a muddy road one day he slipped and fell down, although his master warned him saying « *Makkhali* » (stumble not). Hence was his name. On finding that the oilpot broken he fled away. His master followed him and caught hold of him by his garment. But he left it and ran away naked. He was also known as Gosāla as he was born in the cow-shed. It is said that his father was a Mañka (dealer in pictures). Gosāla also took to this profession until he became a monk.

(3) Ajita Kesakambalī — He was a materialist, advocating the doctrine of annihilation (*Ucchedavāda*). He denies the effects of *karma*. According to him a *karma* (action), good or bad, does not produce any effect. There is no further life after death. In his *A History of Pre-Buddhistic Indian Philosophy* Dr. B. M. Barua<sup>11</sup> describes him as the historical founder of Indian materialism. A human being is composed of four elements — water (*āpa*), fire (*teja*), wind (*vāya*) and earth (*paṭhavī*). After death each of them returns to the corresponding element and the sensefaculties (*indriyas*) into the space (*ākāśa*). Everything ends in death. It is mere idle to talk of the next world. It may be said that his doctrine is similar to that of the Lokāyata or Bārhaṣpatya school, better known as the Cārvaka school. The Pāli is silent about Ajita's view regarding a soul. In the Jaina *Sutrakṛtāṅga* we find Ajita's theory of the soul which is akin to the view of the Cārvaka that the soul is not different from the body, « Upwards from the soles of the feet, downwards from the tips of the hair on the head, within the skin's surface is (what is called) soul (*jīva*) or what is the same, the atman. The whole soul lives; when this (body) is dead, it does not live. It lasts as long as the body lasts, it does not outlast the destruction (of the body)... ». « As a man draws a sword from the scabbard and shows it

6. BARUA, *Pre-Buddhistic Indian Philosophy*, p. 306.

7. Vol. I, P.T.S., p. 286.

8. *Seyyathāpi bhikkhave yāni kiñci tantavutānaṃ vatthānaṃ kesakambalo tesarṃ patikittho ākkhāyati. Kesakambalo bhikkhave site sito uṃhe uṃho dubbayyo duggaṇḍho dukkhasarṃphasso, evarṃ eva kho bhikkhave yāni kiñci puthu samaṇappavādanaṃ Makkhalivādo tesarṃ patikittho ākkhāyati.*

9. Vol. I, p. 143.

10. Vol. I, p. 422.

11. P. 288.

(you, saying); " Friend, this is the sword, and that is the scabbard, so nobody can draw (the soul from the body) and show it (you, saying); Friend, this is the soul and that is the body "... »<sup>12</sup>. It is thus evident that Ajita Kesakambalī upheld that the body and the soul are identical (*taṃ-jīva-taṃ-sarīraṃ*) as against the view that the soul is distinct from the body (*aññāṃ-jīva-aññāṃ-sarīraṃ*). Santaraksita's *Tattvasaṅgraha* identifies Ajitakambalī with Kambalāsvatara.

It is said that Ajita was his personal name. He was called Kesakambalī from his garb. He used to wear blanket of human hair described as « the meanest of all garments ».

(4) Pakudha Kaccāyana — According to him, a being is composed of seven elements — earth (*paṭhavī*), water (*āpa*), fire (*teja*), air (*vāya*), pleasure (*sukha*), pain (*dukkha*) and soul (*jīva*). These elements are everlasting and immutable by their very nature. They are uncreated and produce nothing new. They do not move or change or trench one upon another, or contribute to pleasure or pain or both. There is, therefore, no killer or teacher or hearer. Killing a being means nothing but separating the elements constituting the body. « When one with sharp sword cleaves a head in twain, no one thereby deprives anyone of life, a sword has only penetrated into the interval between seven elementary substances »<sup>13</sup>. In Buddhism it is called *Sassatavāda* (eternalism) which maintains that the soul and the world are eternal. It is said that Pakudha Kaccāyana « was like Empedocles or Aristotle a Categorialist, who tried to explain and comprehend man and the universe by classifying reality into discrete categories ». The *Sumaṅgalavilāsini*<sup>14</sup> and the *Sāratthapakāsinī*<sup>15</sup> record that Pakudha was his personal name and Kaccāyana was his lineage (*gotta*). Elsewhere<sup>16</sup> we find that he did not use cold water but hot water. When is was not available he did not wash. According to him, to cross a stream was a sin and expiation could be made by constructing an earthen mound. This amply proves how he was austere on matters of external conduct.

(5) Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta — He was the founder of a school which advocates *ajñānavāda* (agnosticism). When a question was put to him, he resorted to equivocation. He did not give any positive opinion. His teaching consisted in evasion of answers and the substance of judgement. He denied to give any definite answer to the problems of metaphysical speculation and those problems were also put to Buddha who refused to answer them thinking that they were not conducive to the well-being of mankind. The views advocated by Sañjaya were identical with those of Amarāvikkhepikās (eel-wrigglers) who did not give any

12. SBE, XLV, p. 340.

13. *Dialogues of the Buddha*, part I, p. 76, fn. 1.

14. Vol. I, p. 144.

15. Vol. I, p. 102.

16. *Sumaṅgalavilāsini*, vol. I, p. 144.

definite views as to the ultimate problems. It is said that Sañjaya who was an eminent religious mendicant and founder of a religious Order, was the teacher of Sāriputta and Moggallāna.

Very little is known about Sañjaya. We are only told that he was the son of Belaṭṭha. In the *Mahāvastu*<sup>17</sup> and the *Divyāvadāna*<sup>18</sup> Sañjaya is known as Sañjaya Vairatiputra and Sañjayi Vairattiputra. In the *Āṅguttaranikāya*<sup>19</sup> the Aviruddhaka who was so called for the moral conduct is mentioned as the follower of Sañjaya.

(6) Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta — He was no other than the great sage, better known as Mahāvīra, the historical founder of Jainism. He at first joined the religious order founded by Pārśvanātha who is said to have lived 250 years before him. His code was almost similar to that of Pārśvanātha. Pārśvanātha and his followers were naked, while Mahāvīra and his disciples wore white garments. Mahāvīra upheld the doctrine of *kiriya* (action). According to him misery is due to one's own deeds. It is not caused by others. Liberation can be obtained by true knowledge and good conduct. A soul transmigrates according to good or bad deeds.

From the *Sāmaññaphalasutta*<sup>20</sup> we learn that the Nigaṇṭha (fetterless) is restrained with four-fold restraint (*cātuyāmasaṃvara*). He is restrained in regard to all water, as also in regard to sinful activities. He is free from all sins and lives at ease as he has purified himself from them. The Nigaṇṭhas laid most emphasis on *ahiṃsā* (non-injury to living beings) and were very cautious against the accidental killing even of insects as they believed that every living being had a soul. Jainism lays more emphasis than Buddhism on rigorous ascetic practices. Jainism is further a philosophy based on the doctrine of Anekāntavāda (many possibilities). Every object is to be looked at from different aspects in order to have a true knowledge of it. « For the sake of practical application, the Anekāntavāda has been condensed into seven members (*saptabhāṅgi*) thus: from seven different standpoints a being is (i) permanent (ii) impermanent (iii) both permanent and impermanent (iv) indescribable, (v) permanent and indescribable (vi) impermanent and indescribable, (vii) both permanent and impermanent as also indescribable »<sup>21</sup>. It is to be seen that Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta « was a Relativist in his theory of knowledge holding that there was some truth in every point of view and an Eclectic in his metaphysics, which tries to combine the truth of all these different even contradictory standpoints ».

It may be said in a nutshell that « of these six teachers *Pūraṇa* denies the evil karma in a bad act and vice versa; Ajita in preaching

17. Vol. 3 (Senart ed.), p. 59 f.

18. Cowell and Neill edition, pp. 143, 145.

19. Vol. 3, p. 276.

20. *Dīghanikāya* (P.T.S.), vol. I, pp. 47-85.

21. I.H.Q., vol. 33, n. 223, p. 227.

annihilation at death, shuts out the possibility of any effect to be worked by *karma*; and Mokkhali rejects both *karma* and its effect. The theory of Pakudha seems to exclude responsibility; the Nigaṇṭha simply begs the question, by asserting that a Nigaṇṭha has attained the end and Sañjaya gives no answer at all »<sup>22</sup>. These types of beliefs upheld by all those teachers were indeed held in great esteem and veneration by the then people of India but the religion and philosophy of Buddhism is distinguished from every one of them.

Those six illustrious teachers apart, there were a large number of eminent Brahmanical teachers and Parivrājakas. The Brahmanical teachers were strictly following the Vedic tradition. They recited the Vedic hymns and earned their livelihood by officiating as priests in the sacrifices. Kings as well as a section of people patronized them. Kūṭadanta<sup>23</sup>, Tevijja<sup>24</sup> and other Pāli suttas refer to the Vedic rituals and sacrifices which were in vogue in those days. Brahmins, wellversed in the Vedic rituals, were only requisitioned for the performance of the sacrifices. They also enjoyed grants of land and property under the patronage of the king. They were, indeed, very wealthy and sometimes performed sacrifices at heavy expenses. The *parivrājakas* were, on the otherhand, a class of wandering teachers who had no permanent residence. They used to wander from place to place almost throughout the year. Their main objectives were to enter into discussion with other religious teachers « on matters of ethics, philosophy, nature-lore and mysticism ». The Pāli texts mention that halls were erected for the accommodation of the *parivrājakas*. Elsewhere we also find special places set apart for them in the groves near the settlement. It was in such places that *parivrājakas* could lodge and hold discussion. People living near the places where the *parivrājakas* stopped visited them with a view to showing their respect and derive benefit by their teachings. The life of a *parivrājaka* was open alike to brahmins and non-brahmins. Even a woman could embark on the career of such a *parivrājaka*. The *parivrājakas* « formed an important part of the religious and philosophical movement of Ancient India ».

The *Brahmajāla Sutta*<sup>25</sup> enumerates a list of sixtytwo forms of philosophical speculations about the self or soul and the world existing at the time of the advent of Buddhism. They are traditionally known as sixtytwo heresies (*dvāsaṭṭhiyo ditṭhiyo*). They fall under two divisions: (i) the speculation about the past (*pubbantakappika*) and (ii) those about the future (*aparantakappika*). Thus it is evident that all these wrong views of philosophical speculations originated owing to the ignorance of time — *pubbanta* (priority) and *aparanta* (posteriority). This sutta also tells us that « as a fisherman were to catch all the fishes and

22. *Dialogues of the Buddha*, part I, p. 76 fn. 1.

23. *Dighanikāya*, vol. 1, pp. 127-39.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 235-53.

25. *Dighanikāya*, vol. I, pp. 1-46.

other creatures of the pond with his net, just so, all the wrong philosophical views have been caught in this enumeration ». These views may broadly be divided under the following heads:

(1) Four kinds of Sassatavādā i.e., those who hold that the self or soul and the universe are eternal.

(2) Four kinds of Ekaccasassatavādā i.e., those who hold that the self and universe are eternal in some respect and in some not.

(3) Four kinds of Antānantikā i.e., those who hold that the universe is finite as well as infinite.

(4) Four kinds of Amarāvikkhepikā i.e., those who equivocate about good and evil.

(5) Two kinds of Adhiccāsamuppannikā i.e., those who hold that the soul and the world originate without a cause.

(6) Sixteen kinds of Uddhamāghatanikasaññivādā i.e., those who hold that the soul is unconscious after death.

(7) Eight kinds of Uddhamāghatanika-asaññivādā i.e., those who hold that the soul is unconscious after death.

(8) Eight kinds of Uddhamāghatanikanevasaññināsaññivādā i.e., those who hold that the soul is neither conscious nor unconscious after death.

(9) Seven kinds of Ucchedavādā i.e., those who hold that the soul is extinct after death.

(10) Five kinds of Diṭṭhadhammanibbānavādā i.e., those who hold that nibbāna can be attained in this life.

Of the aforesaid sixtytwo views the first eighteen refer to the speculation about the past (*Pubbantakappika*), while the remaining fortyfour to those about the future (*Aparantakappika*). It is thus evident that all these wrong views of philosophical speculations originated owing to the ignorance of time — *Pubbanta* (priority) and *Aparanta* (posteriority).