

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF PSYCHOLOGISM: THE UNIVERSAL 'CREED' OF BUDDHISM

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, I would make an attempt to see Buddhism as a philosophy that hails the religion of man by being clearly a-ritualistic and a-Brahmanic. It came to take the shape of a world-view that seeks to liberate man from the 'tedious confines' of his circumstances and make him aware of his inner strength, whereby he can actualize his potential by transcending all notions of the self – an idea that we also find in the Gita. The study would also discuss the "psychology" of the East that has always embraced this idea of a consummate unification with the "Universal Soul", but it was difficult to teach the masses about the nature of reality and the perception of truth in an ordinarily perceivable way – a reason why it was a challenge that led the Buddha to strive towards discovering the path of deliverance.

**Keywords;** Buddhism, Creed, Humanity, Psychologism, Religion

Buddhism, traditionally thought to be a religion, in actuality hails the religion of man. It is a concept that seeks to overthrow 'authority', 'convention' and 'social sanction'<sup>1</sup> and to hail the 'creed' of humanity. The social dogmas, concerning Brahmanism, and the much-too-practised religious rites found little place in the entire discourse. This a-ritualistic and a-Brahmanic philosophy served to disavow all 'speculative meanderings'<sup>2</sup> concerning the doxological rubric of religion. It distances man from the 'discouragement' and 'despondency'<sup>3</sup> of his life-experiences and leads him to the path of happiness and the final nirvana. One has only himself to recline to in order to reach the highest point of spiritual attainment. The distinctive features that mark the philosophy are its empiricity, its scientificity, its pragmatism and its psychologism. Its undeterred postulation of 'direct validation'<sup>4</sup> and experientiality aim to keep the highest faith in man. Hence, the Buddha's enlightenment may neither be taken to mean 'a flourishing of political freedom, [an] artistic innovation, [a] scientific development and philosophical progress',<sup>5</sup> as it does in Western intellectual history, nor be considered as 'a mere liberation from the oppression of a particular ideology, but a liberation from cyclic existence,<sup>6</sup> in accordance with a Buddhist interpretation of the concept. It was perhaps a supreme attempt to awaken man to discover his inner divinity, inner strength and inner poise, an attempt to redeem man from the suffering universe, and an attempt to appeal to the inmost nobility in man so that a unified world may be ushered.

Buddha's time could not adequately perceive and inculcate the values his teachings intended to imbue man with and to enlighten him to the ideals of 'liberation' from his 'tedious confines, where we identify enhanced awareness of our inner strength, where we actualize our potential, where we articulate our article of faith and where mental journey moves on our psychological path'.<sup>7</sup> We can, also, at this point bring in the idea of 'self-transcendence'<sup>8</sup>

here from the Gita, which offers us the realization that the notion of the 'I' or the 'I-ness' in us is 'verily the product of the mind'.<sup>9</sup> Man can rise beyond his situational prescriptions only by dint of his psychological freedom from the 'discord and disharmony, division and disintegration and delusion and deceive'<sup>10</sup> of his physical surroundings. It is the mind of man that the Buddha uplifts trying, in the process, to liberate him and bring about moral fortitude. Hence, I would like to see this phenomenon as being rather 'anthropo-centric' than being 'theo-centric'. It consists of a theology of man that, in its turn, shows him the 'path of deliverance that was for the first time accessible to all'<sup>11</sup>:

It is intended to enable his followers to evolve into a different kind of human being, cured of carrying in perpetuity the burden of life's unchanging laws of existence. Living as we do in a highly complex age, dependent on technology, buffered by possessions and swamped by a sea of media information, it is hard for us to imagine the towering influence this extraordinary man, who opted to live a life of those who live on the margins of society, had upon his time, and indeed upon all of subsequent history. At home in the wilderness and on the road, living a life of stark simplicity, dedicated to spiritual striving and teaching, his power and spiritual authority was immense.<sup>12</sup>

In Eastern philosophy, the soul is considered to be supreme and the 'fundamental reality' and the site for an 'identification of God with the world-soul, or soul of universal Nature'<sup>13</sup> – a belief that is 'the outcome of a movement of thought which is at once natural and logical'.<sup>14</sup> The soul is that essential divinity that is envisaged as the unique truth, which implies that other extraneous ideas are equally 'shadows' or are only 'unreal' reflections of that truth. Thus, this theology consists of the metaphysics of one unified soul that is indestructible, irreducible and imperishable. This 'soul' or the 'consciousness' is the ground or the tabula rasa on which the impressions of our experiences are recorded. The experiences are momentary and fleeting, impermanent and transitory, and, therefore, it is the soul that is eternal and all other things compared to it are but physical and, hence, mortal. The universality of the soul can, thus, be understood as the point of centrality of all experience. According to the author of The Creed of Buddha:

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1 Sanghamitra Sharma, *Legacy of the Buddha: The Universal Power of Buddhism*, New Delhi:

Bhavana Books and Prints, 2001, p. 40.

2 Ibid., p. 41.

3 Ibid., p. 41.

4 Ibid., p. 42.

5 Jay L. Garfield, 'Enlightenment and the Enlightenment', in *Buddhism, World Culture and Human Values* (ed.) Pabitrakumar Roy, Sarnath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 2009, p. 34.

6 Ibid., pp. 34-35.

7 M. K. Pandey, 'Fine-tuning Inner Space for Value-Added Vision', in *Buddhism, World Culture and Human Values* (ed.) Pabitrakumar Roy, p. 264.

8 Ibid., p. 265.

9 Ibid., p. 265.

10 Ibid., p. 265.

11 Sharma, *Legacy of the Buddha: The Universal Power of Buddhism*, p. 36.

The Soul, which is at once One and Many, is the real bond of union among men; and all communal sentiments, such as attachment to country, clan, or family, are ultimately rooted in the sense of oneness in and through the Universal Self.<sup>15</sup>

The philosophy of the East has always been underpinned by this metaphysics of anti-materiality and anti-individuality. The ideological incarceration of the soul within the confines of the body is but a corporeal materialization of the soul that is eventually united with the Universal Soul on the mortal effacement of the body. The process can no better be explained than by what I quote here:

Beginning its individualized career as a spiritual germ, it passes through innumerable lives on its way to the goal of spiritual maturity. The development of the germ-soul takes the form of the gradual expansion of its consciousness and the gradual universalization of its life. As it nears its goal, the chains of individuality relax their hold upon it; and at last, – with the final extinction of egoism, with the final triumph of selflessness, with the expansion of consciousness till it has become all-embracing, – the sense of separateness entirely ceases, and the soul finds its true self, or, in other words, becomes fully and clearly conscious of its oneness with the living Whole.<sup>16</sup>

The ‘psychology’ of the East has always embraced this idea of a consummate unification with the Universal Soul which is also envisaged as the ‘absolute truth’. Such an experience would be transcendental, transpersonal and emancipatory. There is a complete negation or disavowal of the individual self that seeks to or, at least, should seek to unite with the ‘Universal Self’ – something that is considered to be ‘the highest imaginable type of knowledge’.<sup>17</sup>

It is here that the Eastern domain of thought was greatly contributed to by the Buddhist ideology. It was perhaps that knowledge which the former was waiting for. As Dr. J. Parthasarathi says in his ‘Preface’ to the book *Buddhist Themes in Modern Indian Literature*:

It was ancient India’s unparalleled privilege to get Lord Buddha as its first Emancipator-Reformer. He came into this land centuries before the Christian era, preaching a message of deliverance for suffering humanity, flowing from the depths of his untold penances. The irresistible enchantment of the personality of the Master and the appeal of his teachings of compassion, non-violence and brotherhood won over vast populations to his new faith called Buddhism after him.<sup>18</sup>

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12 Ibid., pp. 36-37.

13 *The Creed of Buddha*, by the author of *The Creed of Christ*, Delhi: Seema Publications, First Indian Edition, 1975, p. 3.

14 Ibid., p. 3.

15 Ibid., p. 11.

16 Ibid., pp. 15-16.

17 Ibid., p. 41.

18 Dr. J. Parthasarathi, ‘The Response to Buddhism in Modern India: An Editorial View’, in *Buddhist Themes in Modern Indian Literature* (ed.) Dr. J. Parthasarathi, Madras: Institute of Asian Studies, April 1992, p. XIII.

It was a difficult task to accomplish since it is perplexing to teach the masses about the nature of reality and the perception of truth in an ordinarily perceivable way. The primary reason for this is that knowledge of philosophy and truth is not within the grasp of plebeian comprehension. Any attempt to explain the metaphysical nuances of these ideas would seem to be esoteric, undecipherable and, hence, unreal and even preposterous. Thus, such seemingly recondite formulations may seem to be sometimes awry, sceptical, incredulous and dogmatic.

It is for this reason that there was a necessity for ‘the real apprehension of ultimate truth

.... The actual expansion of the soul, in response to the forces in Nature that are making for its development ...’.<sup>19</sup> As the soul grows, the consciousness also does. It is the vision that needs to expand and grow wider and man needs to see things clearly. Horizons remain limited unless are explored with an unimpeded perspicacity.

In 6th-century India was born the momentous Buddha who took up the challenge to illumine the suffering minds of the teeming millions who were hitherto unawakened, ignorant, uninstructed and were incapable of ‘mental discipline’.<sup>20</sup> He strove to discover the path of deliverance from the present cyclic order of life and offer a clear vision of the fact that an ‘unenlightened soul’<sup>21</sup> would have to pass through a multiplicity of earth-lives the objective of which is to lead the soul through the various stages of its development. With the ideals of ‘kindness, gentleness, unselfishness’<sup>22</sup> and ‘compassion’,<sup>23</sup> he appealed to the highest form of nobility in man so that he can reap the seed of universal love and sympathy to cast away his desire for earthly and material accomplishments. The teachings aimed to inspire man to seek spiritual freedom by engaging in compassionate deeds as well as to awaken him to act in accordance with the inner moral law of self-transcendence. The element of experientiality in such teachings also brings to our mind the law of Karma which influences the realities of the subsequent births – something that man cannot but be circumspect about. This should not be considered as an attempt to generate a sense of fear – particularly so far as a set of teachings, that aims to give birth to individual freedom, is concerned – since injudicious and inconsiderate actions, in accordance with the natural law, are certain to ‘affect the material conditions of our own and of other lives; ... produce social consequences which have a wide circle of disturbance; ... affect, for good or for evil, our own characters of those with whom we are much in contact’.<sup>24</sup>

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19 The Creed of Buddha, p. 51.

20 Ibid., p. 69.

21 Ibid., p. 72.

22 Ibid., p. 87.

23 Ibid., p. 87.

24 Ibid., p. 98

25 Ibid., p. 80.

26 Ibid., p. 80.

27 Ibid., p. 89.

28 Ibid., p. 89.

29 Ibid., p. 89.30 Ibid., p. 90.

The primary objective, hence, of all action is to bring any form of individual desire, that seeks to serve 'the lower self'<sup>25</sup> and that 'proves itself to be evil by causing ceaseless suffering to mankind',<sup>26</sup> to a complete extinction. Any action, again, that impedes the process of the struggle of the self to identify with the 'Universal Self', is unworthy, unwholesome, undesirous and iniquitous. Man should be able to unchain himself from the fetters of the 'self',<sup>27</sup> 'delusion',<sup>28</sup> 'sensuality'<sup>29</sup> and 'ill-will'<sup>30</sup> and cultivate such a virtue that 'rewards itself by strengthening the will, by subduing unworthy desire, by generating knowledge of reality, by giving inward peace'.<sup>31</sup> The nurturance of such a virtue constitutes the ethical philosophy of the Buddha, who was perspicacious and wise enough to raise the human mind to the level where it can know the phenomenal world with every freedom that is needed but, at the same time, was circumspect enough not to contradict the natural law that begets suffering, in some way or the other, through a conscious or even unconscious choice of a wrongful action. Hence, freedom here does not imply a rise above the natural law or a choice that could lead to a form of disharmony with the basic element of inner goodness and foster, instead, indignity, evil, dishonor and impiety, forbidding man to know his 'Real Self'<sup>32</sup> that is hidden in him and that comprises the very essence of his existence as a human.

Thus, the Buddha through his long journey as a Teacher-Meditator-Mediator appealed to man's better being and preached on the inward journey that needs to be undertaken in order to attain the highest goal of wisdom. The fundamental sense of reality was to be cultivated and the Master attempted to do just that. Self-seeking and carnal desires are not only preposterous but also fruitless, since the very objects of desire are impermanent and are, for this reason, unreal or are mere 'shadows' or 'reflections' of the real. Hence, if the transcendental divine cannot be envisaged, this 'unreal reality' shall ever lead to the path of fallacy, delusion, dilemma and unfulfilment. Perceptibly here, a Platonic idea of 'mimesis' seems to be at work, and the soul and the body remain, forever, only metaphysical conceits without any possibility of self-actualization or self-emancipation. We do, at this point, also feel, and that too very importantly, that the Buddha's ideals concerning the highest spiritual attainment come to meet the Upanishadic perception of the Universal Soul and the individual soul. The two psychologies intersect where we find the Buddha conceptualizing a rise above one's materialistic desires and subjective considerations, and an absolute 'subjugation'<sup>33</sup> and 'extinction of desire'<sup>34</sup> (so that the soul is not kept in darkness about its own 'true nature and destiny'<sup>35</sup> and is freed from this 'whirlpool of birth'<sup>36</sup>), an inculcation of self-control, sympathy, kindness, compassion and good will, an attempt to dispel 'the last taint of egoism and the last shadow of ignorance'<sup>37</sup> and an attainment, that is how, of an 'imaginable bliss',<sup>38</sup> an awareness about the consequences of one's action and also about the fact that 'character is destiny', the fruitlessness of 'ceremonial observances',<sup>39</sup> and an investment of 'a tremendous burden on the human will'<sup>40</sup> in the sense that 'it rested with them [men], and with them [men] only, to determine what course the process of their [men's] development

31 Ibid., p. 108.

32 Ibid., p. 100.

33 Ibid., p. 113.

34 Ibid., p. 113.

35 Ibid., pp. 113-114.

36 Ibid., p. 114.

37 Ibid., pp. 114-115.

should take, and how long their pilgrimage on earth (from life to life) should last'.<sup>41</sup>The significant strain of identity may be found in the spiritual idealism that runs through the veins of the teachings of the Buddha and the 'highest expression[s]'<sup>42</sup> of the Upanishads. Both have the philosophical grounding of the suppression of all forms of 'egoism',<sup>43</sup> 'all the desires and delusions on which it feeds, and breaking, one by one, the fetters of the surface life and the lower self'.<sup>44</sup>

The fact that accounts for the tremendous impact of Buddhist philosophy on not only the spiritual, but also the cultural, literary and intellectual, atmosphere of India is the element of pragmatism that it brought to transform the conduct of men to whom the Upanishadic ideals appeared to be esoteric, too far-fetched and too exalted to be realistic and practicable. This 'chasm' was awaited to be filled by a positivist manifestation in the everyday life of man. The innermost essence needed to be given an expression to or, in other words, be translated into ethical action. The lofty metaphysicality, intuitionality, poeticality and symbolicality of the Upanishads and the profound empiricism of the Buddhist 'creed' have, nevertheless, served to enrich Eastern thought in ways unparalleled in the history of philosophy of the world. Whether the 'austere inwardness'<sup>45</sup> of the Buddhist metaphysical system follows directly from the philosophy of the Upanishads or not is something that cannot be wholly serendipitous, since we can barely be in disagreement with what is encapsulated in the following:

Even if the age in which Buddha lived had been separated by a thousand years from the age which gave birth to the stories of Brahma and the Gods, and Nachikêtas and Death, we should feel justified, on internal evidence, in concluding that Buddha had somehow or other come under the influence of the ideas which those stories enshrined. But we need not trust to internal evidence only. We know that the spiritual atmosphere of India in Buddha's day was impregnated with the ideas of the Upanishads. We know that those ideas must have appealed with peculiar force to a thinker of Buddha's exalted nature (whether he ended by emancipating himself from their influence or not).<sup>46</sup>

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38 Ibid., p. 115.

39 Ibid., p. 115.

40 Ibid., p. 101.

41 Ibid., p. 101.

42 Ibid., p. 112.

43 Ibid., p. 112.

44 Ibid., p. 112.

45 Ibid., p. 110.

46 Ibid., pp. 116-117.

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