

Common Concept of *Dharma* in Buddhism and Hinduism

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I

In the Buddhist triad of the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Samgha*, the first (i.e. *Dhamma*) is perhaps the most complex, controversial and difficult to interpret. In common parlance *Dhamma* or *Dharma* has been taken to mean religion or rituals of worship. However, it is far from the truth as this meaning does not fit into the concept of this word either in Hinduism¹ or in Buddhism. None of the texts belonging to either of the sects has ever used *Dharma* in the sense of the English word religion.

According to the account contained in the Vinaya text *Mahāvagga*² the Buddha, after his Enlightenment (*nirvāṇa*), spent some time at different places before he gave his first sermon at Sārnāth (Bihar), India. During this period he met two merchants Tappusa and Bhallika who offered food to the Buddha and became his first lay-disciples by saying "we take our refuge, Lord, in the Blessed One and in the *Dharma*."³ Which *Dhamma* did they refer to? The Buddha had not given any sermon so far and 'The Wheel of The Law' (*dharmacakra pravartana*) was not set in motion as yet by him. Actually the Buddha had not even decided to preach his doctrine at that time for the Vinaya texts tell us that he debated with himself for quite sometime whether to impart his knowledge to the world or not. It was at the request of Brahmā Sahampati (Svayampati)⁴ that the Buddha agreed to preach his doctrine.⁵ Now the Buddha set out to look for the appropriate persons who could understand the doctrine and decided upon the five monks who were his companions for sometime in his search for knowledge and presently were residing at Varanasi. The Buddha now travelled to Benaras and there in the Deer Park (*Mṛgāsikhīāvana*) he gave his first sermon setting the wheel of the Law in motion by preaching the five *bhikkhus* who were duly ordained.⁶ This was the beginning. Thereafter a large number of lay-disciples and *bhikkhus* were ordained and the *saṃgha* came into existence.

Neither at the time of his sermon at Sārnāth nor at any other time the Buddha talked of starting a new religion. He only professed to have discovered the cause of suffering (*dukkha*) as contained in the Four Noble Truths⁷ and to overcome suffering by following the eightfold path (*aṣṭamārga*) i.e. right belief, right aspiration, right speech, right conduct, right means of livelihood, right endeavour, right memory and right meditation.⁸ The Buddha asked his followers to adopt this ideal code of conduct and herein lies the true import of *dhammam saraṇam gacchhāmi*. Once this is accepted, the concept of the Buddha's *dhamma* becomes crystallized, which was based on the ethical values of all the times.

This interpretation of *dharma* is fully substantiated by irrefutable epigraphic evidence. In his Pillar Edict II, Aśoka, the great Mauryan Emperor, says, "*Dharma* is meritorious; but what does *Dhamma* include? [It includes] few sins, many virtuous deeds, compassion, liberality, truthfulness [and] purity"⁹ Here we are told in unambiguous words that *dharma* is moral code of conduct comprising virtues of life which are universally accepted as ideals to be followed. The idea of *dhamma* is repeatedly mentioned in the inscriptions of Aśoka in one form or the other. It is a moot point whether this is the Buddhist concept of *Dhamma* which Aśoka preaches in his Edicts or simply law of piety.¹⁰ Aśoka's leanings towards Buddhism are well-known and a careful analysis reveals that Aśoka's definition of *dhamma* does not differ from that of Buddhism.¹¹

The literary evidence contained in the *Lakkhana Suttānta* of *Dīghanikāya* sets the seal of certainty on this point. It contains the following definition of *Dhamma* which is almost an echo of Aśoka's P.E. II. It says:

sachche cha dhamme cha dame cha saṁyame,
socheyya-sīlalay-uposathesu cha!
dāne ahimsāya asāhasa rato,
dallam samādāya samattamāchare!!¹²

Here *sachcha*, *socheyya* and *dāna* are common with the constituents of *dhamma* referred to above. For the rest D.R. Bhandarkar has very aptly pointed out that *ahimsā* (-*asāhasa*) and (*dama*-) *saṁyama* of the verses must correspond to *dayā* and *mādave* of Aśoka's inscriptions. And it is not impossible that *śīla* of the verses stands for the *sādhāve* or *kayāne* of the epigraphs.¹³ There, thus, remains no doubt about the Buddhist concept of *dhamma* which is not religion but ethical code of conduct.

II

The Hindu view of *dharma* does not differ from that of the Buddhist view. In the vast ocean of the Vedic, post-Vedic and the classical literature the word *dharma* has been repeatedly used to convey the idea of human values in Indian society on which stands the entire edifice of Hindu culture like a steadfast rock. It has never been taken to mean religion implying worship according to the tenets of a particular faith. It is a very comprehensive term which includes law, usage, practice, prescribed conduct, duty, morality, righteousness, benevolence, virtue, justice and rarely religion.¹⁴ It is very near to *ṛta* of the Vedic literature, where the latter stands for righteous conduct or order. In the *Atharvaveda* the term *dharma* is mentioned along with *ṛta*, *satya*, *tapas*, *rāṣṭra*, *karma*, etc.,¹⁵ which gives a clear-cut meaning of its implication in the Vedic texts.

Dharma as Law or Justice finds favour with several Vedic and post-Vedic texts. The *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa* refers to Indra as personification of *dharma*. The *Mahābhārata* uses the same term for Yama. Yama being the god of justice is always called *Dharmarāja* in Sanskrit texts. The *Harivaṃśa Purāṇa* applies the term to Viṣṇu also, taking him to be personification of justice.

The *Upaniṣads* define *dharma* as that which sustains society. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* lays down that *dharma* (Law) is the power of Kṣatriya (ruling class) and there is nothing higher than *dharma*.¹⁶ It goes to the extent of saying that *dharma* is *Brahma*.¹⁷ The *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad* also defines *dharma* as sustainer of society.¹⁸ The *Kāthopaniṣad* goes to the extent of saying that he who takes *dharma* as separate from *ātman* (self) runs to waste after him.¹⁹ But the idea of *Dharma* as rituals of worship is conspicuously absent from these philosophical texts of great merit.

Dharma finds copious mention both in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhagavadgītā*. The *Mahābhārata* variously associates it with duty, law, justice, etc. in the form of *rājadharma*, *āśramadharma*, *varṇadharma* and so on.²⁰ It clearly stands to mean the righteous conduct in each sense. The *Bhagavadgītā*, one of the greatest works on the philosophy of *karma* and *yoga* repeatedly mentions *dharma* as duty or conduct which it considers as foremost in life. Actually the very essence of Lord Kṛṣṇa's teaching is that *karma* and *yoga* are *dharma* in themselves.

However, the most explicit definition of *dharma* is given by the ancient sage Manu in his script of code of law (*Manusmṛiti*), which is

considered most authentic and most sacred amongst all codes of Hindu Law. He says, "Contentment, forgiveness, self-control, non-stealing, honesty, control of the organs of senses intelligence, knowledge, truthfulness and abstention from anger is the tenfold definition of *dharma*."²¹ This definition leaves no scope for any doubt about the Hindu view of *dharma*, which is exactly the same as that of Buddhism.

III

The common concept of *dharma* in Buddhism and Hinduism, discussed above, belies the general belief that the Buddha was opposed to Hinduism or Vedic religion and *vice-versa*. The idea of opposition between Buddhism and Hinduism has given rise to the wrong notion that there was a revival of Hinduism at the cost of Buddhism. A colossal misunderstanding prevails that Hinduism was solely responsible for the decline and disappearance of Buddhism from the land of its birth. There is nothing farther from the truth than such a view.²² Buddhism and Hinduism flourished side by side without any conflict, shared common concepts and philosophy, have been complimentary to each other and were patronised without distinction by the adherents of both the systems.

The Buddha's attitude towards Brāhmaṇas and the Vedas is clear from the following incident recorded in the *Mahāvagga*. Once a certain *Brāhmaṇa* approached the Buddha and asked: "By what, Gotama, does one become a Brāhmaṇa, and what are the characteristics that make a man Brāhmaṇa?" The Blessed One replied. "That Brāhmaṇa who has removed [from himself] all sinfulness, who is free from haughtiness, free from impurity, who is self-restrained, who is an accomplished master of the Vedas, who has fulfilled the duties of *brahmacharya* (a student or a celibate) such a Brāhmaṇa may justly call himself a Brāhmaṇa, whose behaviour is uneven to nothing in the world."²³ These are exactly the qualities of a true Brāhmaṇa visualised in the Vedas and the *sūtras*. Here and at several other places in the Buddhist texts we find the Buddha speaking of the Vedas and the Brāhmaṇas with respect.²⁴ His only reservation being, that a man does not become a Brāhmaṇa by birth but by his action. The Upaniṣads openly condemn ritualism and the idea finds place even in the orthodox writings of Manu. The Buddha acted in the spirit of a true socio-religious reformer and not as the founder of a new religion.

The wrong notion of the Buddhist persecution and the so-called

Hindu revivalism can be illustrated by the following examples. Puśyāmītra, the founder of the Śuṅga dynasty, is often dubbed as a persecutor of Buddhists on the basis of a single reference contained in the *Divyāvādana*. This late Buddhist work tells us that the Brāhmaṇa king Pūsyāmītra persecuted the Buddhist monks of Sākala in the north-west, inflicting capital punishment on them. Leave aside the scope for exaggeration in this account, it is sufficient to point out that it was neither a case of religious persecution nor Puśyāmītra was against Buddhists. The action was a political exigency of the time. The *bhikkhus* of Sākala sided with the foreign invader Menander against Puśyāmītra and the Śuṅga monarch was left with no other alternative but to deal with them sternly in the national interest. This, just, cannot be called religious persecution. We must not forget that the famous *stūpas* at Sānchī and Bharhut besides several Buddhist monasteries in the very heart of the Śuṅga empire were enlarged and embellished during this very period and with royal patronage. It would have been impossible had there been any religious persecution of Buddhism.²⁵

The second example is that of the so-called Hindu revivalism during the Gupta period. The Gupta rulers are often accused of promoting and protecting Brahmanism contrary to the well established evidence which speaks otherwise. The very founder of the Gupta dynasty is known to have built a Buddhist monastery for the Chinese pilgrims and handsomely endowed it with a grant of 24 villages. Samudragupta helped in the construction of a Buddhist monastery at Bodh Gayā for the Ceylonese *bhikkhus*. The famous Buddhist university at Nālandā was established during the rule of Kumāragupta I under the royal patronage, which it continued to receive till the end of the Gupta rule. King Vikramāditya is said to have sent his own son to study under the celebrated Buddhist scholar Vasubandhu. The Buddhist affiliations of Narasimhagupta and Vainyagupta are well-known. Besides all this we must not forget that the best masterpieces of the Buddhist art, both in sculpture and painting, were produced during this very period. Mathurā and Sārnāth became the famous centres of the Buddhist art. There cannot be a better proof of the flourishing condition of Buddhism alongside Hinduism—a true picture of secularism.

A very important contribution of the post-Gupta period, which is often ignored, to the fusion of Hinduism and Buddhism, was the acceptance of the Buddha as an incarnate of Viṣṇu and his inclusion in the Hindu pantheon. Numerous representations of the Buddha as

an incarnate of Viṣṇu were produced in the sculpture through out the country, this time onwards. There are literary references to this effect in the Purāṇas, the *Gīta Govinda* and several other texts. Thus the great Master was raised to the status of supreme God in Hinduism during this very period.

The development of *vajrayāna* and *tāntric* cults in the post-Gupta period further helped Hinduism and Buddhism to mingle and ultimately merged into each other. An inscription discovered from Bodh Gayā provides a beautiful glimpse of the Brāhmanical rituals being followed in Buddhist temples in the eleventh and twelfth centuries AD. While recording the construction of a temple (Gandhakuti) of the Buddha at Bodh Gayā by the king Puruṣottamasimha of Kamā, the epigraph tells us that, "The worship of the Most Worshipful One is always performed at the three prayer times by Rāmbhā like dancing girls, accompanied by the maid-servants to the accompaniment of musical instruments sounding at the highest note, and dancing wonderfully because they are elated in offering worship in the teachings of the Lord."²⁶ Thus we see that with the passage of time the common concept of *dharma* in Hinduism and Buddhism brought about the mingling of the two in rituals as well.

Two great religious philosophers of the post-Gupta period; namely, Kumāriḷa Bhaṭṭa (c. AD 725) and Śāṅkarācārya (c. AD 800) are primarily held responsible for the revival of Hinduism and collapse of Buddhism in India. It may appear true at the surface but deep analysis of the philosophy of these two will portray a picture entirely different. "However, much they insisted on the authority of ancient tradition, the real result of their labour was not to reestablish the order of things which prevailed before the rise of Buddhism, but to give authority and solidity to the mixture of Brahmanism, Buddhism and popular beliefs."²⁷ The debt of Śāṅkara to Buddhism has been beautifully summed up in the following words of Sir Charles Eliot:

The debt of Śāṅkara to Buddhism is an interesting question. He indicted polemics against it and contributed materially to its downfall, but yet if the success of creeds is to be measured by the permanence of ideas, there is some reason for thinking that the vanquished led the conqueror captive. Śāṅkara's approval both in theory and practice of the monastic life is Buddhistic rather than Brahmanical. The doctrines of *māyā* and the distinction between higher and lower truth, which are of cardinal importance in his philosophy, receive only dubious support from the Upaniṣads and from the Bādarāyaṇa, but are practically identical with the teachings of the Mādhyamika School of Buddhism and it was towards this line of thought rather than towards the theism of the *Pāsupātas* or *Bhāgavatas* that he was drawn. The affinity was recognised in India, for Śāṅkara and his school were stigmatised by their opponents as Buddhists in disguise.²⁸

The prevalence of socio-religious harmony in India in spite of the existence of many sects and schools of thought is fully illustrated by the following apocryphal verse:

*yam śaivāssamupāsate śiva iti brahmeti vedāntino
 baudhā buddha iti pramāṇapaṭavah kartteti naiyāyikāḥ!
 arhannityatha jainaśāsanatāḥ karmeti mīmāṃsakah
 so=yam no vidadhātu vāñchhitaphalam trailokyanātho hariḥ!!*

“Whom the followers of Śiva worship as Śiva and the followers of Vedānta as Brahma, whom the Buddhists [call] Buddha, and whom the adherents of the school of logic, who are clever in quoting authorities, call the creator.

Those who are adherents of the Jain teachings call him *arhat*, and those of the Mīmāṃsā School regard him as ‘the performer of the ritual’. May, He, lord of the three worlds, the god Viṣṇu, grant us the desired object.”²⁹ In nutshell the land of such ideas one cannot think of different concepts of *dharma* in Buddhism, Hinduism or any other sect.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. We have used the term Hinduism in its narrow but more popular sense. Actually it is a very comprehensive term meaning an entire culture or way of life of the land of Bhāratavarsā. Cf. S. Radhakrishnan, *Hindu View of Life*.
2. *Mahāvagga*, I
3. *Ibid.*, I 4.5. Only the dyad – the Buddha and *Dhamma* are referred to here as the *saṃgha* had not come into existence as yet.
4. He has been correctly identified with *Brahmā Svayambhu* of the Brāhmanical literature by Rhys Davids. *SBE*, XIII, 86, fn.1.
5. *Mahāvagga*, I:5.
6. They were, Koṇḍañña, Vappa, Bhaddiya, Mahānāma and Assaji.
7. The four noble truths as we understand are the Buddha’s philosophy of life, suffering, its causation but not his *dhamma*. The latter lies in the Eightfold-*pāth*.
8. *Samyak dṛṣṭi*, *samyak saṅkalpa*, *samyak vāk*, *samyak karmāntaḥ*, *samyak ajivaḥ*, *samyak vyayamaḥ*, *samyak smṛti*, *samyak samādhi*.
9. *Dhamme sādhu kiyaṃ chu dhamme ti; apāsīnave bahu kayāne dayā dāne sache sochaye Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, I, 120-21.
10. The question of Asoka’s *Dhamma* is a much debated topic. Scholars like J.F. Fleet (*JRAS*, 1908, 491 ff.), J.M. Macphail (*Asoka* 48), V.A. Smith (*Asoka*, 59f.), F.W. Thomas (*Cambridge History of India*, I, 505), R.K. Mookerji (*Asoka*), etc. believe that *Dhamma* propagated by Asoka was not Buddhism but simply a moral code of conduct or law of piety. Fleet calls it *rāja Dharma*. However, E. Senart (*JA* XX, 1891, 259ff.) and D.R. Bhandarkar (*Asoka*, 91ff.) are of the view that it was

nothing but Buddhism. In our view the controversy has arisen because of the improper interpretation of the word *Dharma*. Once it is realised that *Dhamma* is that code of conduct which is preached by Buddhism, Hinduism and others alike, the confusion will end by itself. Cf. Rock Edict VII of Aśoka which says, "All sects may dwell at all places because they all desire self-restraint and purification of heart." Such examples can be multiplied from the inscriptions of Aśoka.

11. Cf. E. Senart, *IA*, XX, 1891, 259-66.
12. *Lakkhaṇa Suttanta, Dīgha Nikāya*, III, 7.207, Vipassana Research Institute, Igatpuri, 1993.
13. D.R. Bhandarkar, *Aśoka*, Calcutta, 1955, 110.
14. Cf. Monier Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 510.
15. Cf. *Atharvaveda*, 11.7.17.
ṛtam satyam tapo rāṣṭram amo dharmāśca karma ca,
bhūtam bhaviṣhyaducchiṣte vīrya lakṣmīrbalam bale!
16. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I, 4, 14.
17. *Ibid.*, II: 5.11.
18. *Mahābhārata Upaniṣad*, 79.7.
19. *Katha Upaniṣad*, IV. 14.
20. Cf. *Mahābhārata, Śāntiparvan*.
21. *dhṛti kṣamā damo-stayam śauchamindriyanigrahaḥ!*
dhīrvidyā-satyam-krodho daśakam Dharmalakṣhaṇam!! *Manusmṛti*, VI: 92.
22. The topic has been dealt with at length by late Buddha Prakash (*Aspects of Indian History and Civilization* (Agra, 1965), 27ff.) and Jagannath Agrawal (*Haryana Sahitya Akademi Journal of Indological Studies*, I, 1986, 19-27).
23. *Mahāvagga*, I. 2. 2-3.
24. See also *Dhammapada*, XXVI.
25. Cf. Jagannath, *Comprehensive History of India*, II, (Bombay, 1957), 99-100..
26. *IA*, X, 1881, 341ff.
27. Sir Charles Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, II, London, 1971 (Rept.) 207.
28. *Ibid.*, 211. See also Satkari Mookerjee, "Buddhism in Indian Life and Thought", *The Cultural Heritage of India*, I, (Calcutta, 1982, (Rept.), 575ff.
29. Jagannath Agrawal, op.cit., p. 26.