

## THE ANCIENT ORIGINS OF BHAKTI AND THE DHARMA OF THE BUDHA

Raj Singh<sup>1</sup>

*Bhakti*, at a fundamental level, is so essentially a "human" experience, that it cannot be confined to a particular tradition. Since this term is a part of Sanskrit vocabulary and obviously originated and gained currency in certain Vedic religious outlooks and practices, it is often narrowly understood and defined as "Hindu devotion". Thus, expositions of *bhakti* of a Socrates or *bhakti* of a Plotinus would be treated as philosophically exotic and culturally hybrid speculations. Even within Indian religious and philosophical traditions *bhakti* remains narrowly understood both historically and philosophically. It is commonly believed that *bhakti* suddenly and explicitly appeared with the last couplet of the *Svetasvatara Upanishad* and for the first time enunciated rigorously in the *Bhagavadgita*. It is often narrowly understood as an expression of theism, merely as the *bhakta's* devotion for his or her *bhagvan*, a subject relationship, and thus absent in *nastika* (non- theistic, non-Vedic) religions like Buddhism and Jainism.

However, a simple etymological probe will indicate that *bhakti* has more anthropocentric and existential connotation rather than being originally and primarily indicative of human-God relationship. *Bhakti* was always meant to introduce the human factor into philosophical abstractions and religious enigmas. The status of *bhakti* as a perennial tendency of Indian thought is missed when its pervasiveness is

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Raj Singh is Associate Professor of Philosophy, Brock University, St Catharines, Ontario, Canada.

overlooked by the cultural historians preoccupied primarily with its periodic and varied eruptions. The philosophical role of *bhakti* is missed when it is taken as an alternative to *Jnana* (knowledge) rather "the living *jnana*". A succinct meaning of *bhakti*, as pin-pointed by a later classic *Narada Bhakti Sutra* (10th cent.) is *parama-prema* (higher attainment of love). As "loving devotion" and a basic involvement of the human soul with things it finds valuable and fulfilling, *bhakti* is not a sole possession of Indian philosophies and religions. As a basic longing of human heart, it is universal. However, Indian traditions offer a remarkable fusion of *bhakti* and *jnana*, as well as some rigorous investigations into and experimentations with the nature of *bhakti*. A study of Indian world-views from the pivotal point of *bhakti* reveals original and fascinating insights into human nature and human potential.

The aim of this paper is to show that *bhakti* was already in vogue in religious circles when the Buddha appeared on the Indian religious scene. This ancient form of *bhakti* was not only a catalyst in the formation of the Buddha's new world-view, but *bhakti* continues to pervade the dharma of the Buddha in its early doctrinal period as well as in its *mahayana* developments. In order to identify the pervasive but subtle presence of *bhakti* in the earliest statements of the **Buddha dharma**, both *bhakti* and dharma need to be precisely defined in terms of their essential as well as relevant philosophical meanings and implications. This means that we will retrace the broader and original meaning of *bhakti* in order to study its role in the formation and elucidation of the Buddha's dharma. However, as we shall see that 'dharma' carries several special meanings within Buddhism, and thus in this short essay we cannot possibly enumerate all the various ways of *bhakti* visible in Buddhist ethics, religious practices, movements and doctrinal developments. Thus, we will confine ourselves to Buddha-dharma in the sense of "the basic teachings of the Buddha" and will remain focussed on the pre-mahayana period. When we glean through the records of early Buddhism, we notice that even though the ancient Buddhist-*sutras* do not show any debt to the *Bhagavdgita* and did not produce *bhakti* classics such as the *Bhagavat-purana.*, *Narada Bhakti Sutra* and *Sandilya Bhakti Sutra*, *bhakti* not only shaped the existential

focus of Buddhism but remained part and parcel of that tradition. Nicol Macnicol in his *Indian Theism*<sup>2</sup> published in 1914, has a chapter titled "Theism within Buddhism" which gives an account of the presence of *bhakti* within early and *mahayana* Buddhism. More recently B.G. Gokhale (1981) has explored the aspects of *bhakti* in the first five centuries of Buddhism in his article "Bhakti in Early Buddhism"<sup>3</sup>. Both these scholars have contributed toward correcting the view that *bhakti* is exclusively a Hindu practice and shown with attention to detail the presence of *bhakti* in Buddhism with citations from *nikayas* and *mahayana* documents. However, Macnicol is obviously equating *bhakti* with theism, and Gokhale is too sure about the meaning of *bhakti* as faith (*Sradha*). Says Gokhale.

There is no need for us to go into the detailed implications of the philosophical aspects of the history of faith and knowledge since we are concerned here with the development of the *bhakti* element in early Buddhism... Nor is there much need for us to discuss at length the origin and development of the term *bhakti* in Brahmanical literature,(Or)... whether the movement ... originated first... in its Vasudeva-Krishna evolutions.

In my view, however, the philosophical implications of the idea of *bhakti*, an understanding of its etymology and an appreciation of its history are of utmost importance. One has to have a picture of "the thought ferment" of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. India to study the continuing presence of *bhakti* in the Buddhist outlook. Not only *karma* and rebirth but also *bhakti* constitutes what Buddhism shares with Vedanta. Furthermore, one can only "attempt" to define perennial thematic concepts such as *bhakti*. These are never conclusively or exhaustively defined, for to do so will be an over-simplification. Thus, to study the rise of *bhakti* in Buddhism we will proceed toward the times of

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<sup>2</sup>Nicol Macnicol, *Indian Theism*, (Delhi: Munshilal Banarsidas, 1915).

<sup>3</sup>B.G. Gokhale, "Bhakti in Early Buddhism" in J. Lele, ed., *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991).

the Buddha by way of a short historical over-view of the pre-Buddhist evolution of *bhakti* and its presence in the non-Buddhist and non-Jaina schools and sects of the age in which the Buddha put forward his world view.

But before we do so, a brief note on the various chief meanings of dharma within Buddhism is in order. The word 'dharma' carries various meaning in the early Vedic as well as in early Buddhist traditions. Needless to say it cannot be defined easily nor can it be translated casually. The law or lawfulness, the ground, the established order, the moral order, duty, doctrine, religion, the fundamental nature of things, etc. are some of its traditional meanings. It is a word that was well chosen by the Buddha for his doctrine and for his new heterodox religious system as a whole. It is well known that the term 'dharma' has been widely employed within Buddhism in three significant ways. Firstly, dharma is understood in the sense of 'Buddha-dharma' that is the teaching or the doctrine of the Buddha. As indicated in the triple refuges sought by the Buddhists, namely, the refuge in the Buddha, in the dharma and in the *sangha* (community), the truth of the teaching is to be viewed as independent from the personality of the teacher. That the Buddha wished the noble truths to take precedence over himself and the doctrine itself to remain true and everlasting teacher of the *sangha* is testified by the various extant records (*sutras*) of his discourses and made abundantly clear in *mahaparinibbana-suttanta*, which reports on the last moments of the life of the Sakyamuni Buddha. This *sutra* is comparable in many ways to Plato's *Phaedo* in so far as it succinctly recapitulates the personal standpoints of the master, the entire life's philosophy of the Buddha in one stroke of death contemplation. That the dharma is one thing and the authority of the Buddha another is clearly stated in this oft quoted concise statement from the *anguttara-nikaya*:

Whether the Buddhas arise, O *bikkhus*, or whether the Buddhas do not arise it remains a fact and the fixed and necessary constitution of being, that all its constituents are transitory [and, it is repeated, *dukkha* (unsatisfactory) and lacking in *atman* (soul, substance)].

This fact a Buddha discovers and masters, and when he has discovered and mastered it, he announces, teaches and publishes, proclaims, discloses, minutely explains and makes it clear, that all the constituents of Being are transitory...*dukkha* ... (and) lacking in *atman*<sup>4</sup>.

The second broad sense in which the term 'dharma' is employed within Buddhism is that of proper conduct, moral conduct and duty. Due to the prevalence of the *bhakti* ethos, this proper conduct was meant to have nothing to do with the traditions *varna dharma* (duties of the class to which one belongs), but it means moderate and fitting conduct indicated by the term *samma* in the fourth noble truth. It may also mean code of conduct prescribed for the *bikhus* (monks) and *upasakas* (novices). The third important use of the term dharma within Buddhism is dharma as reality or "the way it is". Dharma is not only understood as reality and as nature of things but "realities" are also called dharmas. We should keep in mind that "reality" is understood in its dynamic and transitory sense and dharmas are not taken as substances but as irreducible ultimates.

Besides these three chief uses of the term dharma several of its other ontological and cosmological meanings are traced within Buddhism in general and Buddhist philosophical schools in particular. However, in the following study of the bond between *bhakti* and the *Buddha-dharma*, we will confine ourself to dharma in the first above mentioned sense. Let us turn now toward the original and ancient meaning of the word *bhakti*.

The verbal root of the term *bhakti* lies in Sanskrit *bhaj*, means "to share", "to partake", "to participate"<sup>5</sup>. Since sharing with persons indicated a communication, *bhaj* was used in the sense of love, and with respect to various aspects of love, such as to possess, to enjoy, to prefer,

<sup>4</sup>*Anguttara-nikaya*, iii.134, in H.C.Waren, trans. *Buddhism in Translations*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), Foreword.

<sup>5</sup>M.Dhavamony, *Love of God according to Saiva Siddhanta*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp.11-45. Dhavamony offers a comprehensive etymological analysis of the term 'bhakti'.

to adore, to worship, to commit oneself, and to be loyal. *Bhakti* then etymologically conveys the sense of participation and sharing. In the classics of Sanskrit literature composed from the fifth century onwards, derivatives of *bhaj* are used to speak about both secular and religious love, about the relationship between man and women, about reverence toward a guru, worship of gods, man's love of God, God's love of man. The synonyms of *bhakti* are all synonyms of *prema* (love) such as *priti*, *sneha*, *anuraga*, *anurakti*, etc.<sup>6</sup>

The birth of *bhakti* seems to have taken place in the Vedas. *Rig Veda* contains numerous hymns to several gods, often personifications of the powers of nature or clan gods. If *bhakti* is an attitude of love, devotion, friendship and reverence, it is certainly present in these human outpourings of communion with the divine. Homage is paid to, mercy is sought from, and power is recognized of major gods such as Varuna, Agni, Indra and several minor deities. Although the term *bhakti* is not to be found in the *Rg Veda* hymns, the root word *bhaj* is present<sup>7</sup>. The essential tendencies of *bhakti* such as recognition of God's charity, friendliness and deep involvement in human affairs, as well as man's self-surrendering prayer (*nivedana*), symbolic offering (*archana*), and sweet recollections of god's goodness (*smarna*) are all evident. The notion of *sraddha* (faith) the companion concept of *bhakti*, which is a religious pre-requisite of all forms of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism is certainly present in these hymns, and the term itself is used many times<sup>8</sup>.

What is most interesting is that the devotee of the *Rg Veda* constantly addresses gods as father, mother, brother, relation and honoured guest and invokes God's friendship (*sakhya*). This means that religious love was being measured by secular love, or that no distinction was made between *prema* and *bhakti*. The relation with the divine was one of love and love's attendant expectations, offerings and involvements. This love

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<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>7</sup>*Rig Veda*, 1.156.3; 8.32.14; 9.113.14; 9.113.2; 10.151.2,3,7.

<sup>8</sup>*Rig Veda*, 8.32.14; 9.113.2,4; 10.151.2,3,7.

appears in the sense of *karuna* within Buddhism as *Guru-bhakti* for the Buddha is equally visible.

Next era, that of the Upanishads, is an age of speculation. Here the basic existential questions are spelled out and pursued with a vigour and originality that not only set into motion various philosophical schools, but resulted in the birth of Buddhism and Jainism. It was later in this age that the composition of the epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* had begun. *Bhakti* blossoms a second time and appears in many forms in the central Vedic tradition as well as in the heterodox traditions of Buddhism and Jainism. There is concrete historical evidence that theistic cults of *Pancharatra* and *Bhagvatas* were in vogue<sup>9</sup> resisting the impersonalization of *Para-brahman* (ultimate absolute) of the Upanishads. What is remarkable is that *bhakti* penetrates all speculative and spiritual endeavors of the age: the upanishadic thinkers, Jains, Buddhists, the devotees of the *Bhagvata* and *Pancharatra* faith. The culture of *bhakti* pervades even the sects called *nastikas*, that is, those who did not recognize Vedas and their appendages as the supreme authority. These sects have not left any written scriptures or documents of their own, but are referred to in the Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads, both derogatorily and in terms appreciative of their asceticism, religious drive and spiritual quests. However, almost all references to them in the Buddhist and Jain *Suttas* are critical and unappreciative. For instance in *Brahmajala sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya*, sixty-two non-Buddhist schools are mentioned and are called holding wrong views or *michchhaditthi*. The *sramanas* and *Jatila Brahmanas*, who did not recognize the Vedas, are mentioned in many ancient texts. Buddhism and Jainism were themselves *sramana* sects. The *Vinaya* mentions Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta with whom the Buddha had personal contact. Some of the religious leaders called *titthiyatirathkara* or heretics in ancient Buddhist *suttas* were: Purana Kassapa, Pakudha Kachayana, Makkhali Gosala, Ajita Kesakambhin and

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<sup>9</sup>R.g. Bhandarkar, *Vaisnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems*, (Strasbourg: K.J. Trubner, 1913), pp.2-14. See also: P.Banerjea, *Early Indian Religions*, (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1973).

Sanjya Belathiputta. One of the surviving sects was that of the *Ajivikas* which lasted up to the 14th cent. A.D. <sup>10</sup>Although the *Ajivikas*, *Carvakas* and other prominent sects were the target of Buddhists, Jains and the *astika* (believers in the Vedas) faiths, they too participated in a common religious ethos, a culture of *Guru-bhakti* had taken place by the time the Buddha and Mahavira appeared. The Rg Vedic tendency to anthropomorphize religious devotion reflects itself in the *Guru-bhakti* upheld in *Svetasvatara-Upanishad*.

This tendency of *bhakti* attitude to uplift *prema* to *parama-prema*, begins to perceive the presence of god in the person of the Guru. This belief is fully in evidence in early Buddhism. It is interesting to notice that the incarnated lord that appears in the *Bhagavadgita*, as well as the Buddha, Mahavira and the deities of the *Pancharatra* faith were called *Bhagvan*, a term indicating the supreme object of *bhakti*.

When we study the origins of Buddhism and Jainism, we notice that these traditions also embraced the way of *bhakti* from their very inception. Not only did they inherit convictions concerning *karma*, rebirth, and the necessity of final liberation from the Vedic tradition, but also the spiritual ethos of *bhakti*. *Bhakti*-faith that was always the faith of the masses was essentially opposed to the caste-system and was characterized by an adoration of the spiritual stalwarts in human form. A proselytizing spirit always pervaded it. The *bhakta*, old and new, were never obsessed with their private salvation, but always wanted to share their joyful insights with the masses. Also, the messages of *bhakti* were always transmitted in the common languages and not in Sanskrit. It is likely that all these elements were present in the *Bhagavata* and *Pancharatra* cults as well as social life at the time of the appearance of the Buddha and the Mahavira. They simply adopted all the above-mentioned features of the *bhakti*-faith in their new systems. After the attainment of enlightenment, the Buddha had no qualms about sharing his *arya-satyas* (noble truths) with mankind. Buddhism was opposed to the caste system, and its founders and saints have a missionary spirit, and

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<sup>10</sup>S.R. Goyal, *A Religious History of India*, Vol.I, (Meerut: Kusumanjali, 1984), pp.133-162.



spread their word in the common languages, at least in the first few centuries. The hierarchies of spiritual status among the *tathagatas*, *arhats* within Buddhism kept alive a modified *Guru-bhakti*. This is not to say that Buddhism does not offer an original ontology. It clearly seems to be reacting to the Vedic assumptions. Buddhism offers an explicitly humanistic and antimetaphysical philosophy. Non-existential questions were dismissed by it as unfruitful, and the Buddha exercised his majestic silence about theistic speculation, as we read in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, in the so-called "arrow sermon" of the Buddha<sup>11</sup>. Buddhism shows the same pre-occupation with existential questions and non-metaphysical orientations that were typical of the *bhakti* traditions.

Thus *bhakti* as the practice of love, as the existential rather than metaphysical approach, as the fusion of the abstract truth with ideal ways of living, the doctrine (dharma) and its abiding presence in its adept practitioners (*arhats*) comes into and pervades Buddhism well before the arrival of *mahayana*. It is this ancient form of *bhakti* that makes Buddhism a living philosophy as well as a philosophical religion. In the dharma of the Buddha, the fusion between *nirguna* (abstract) and *saguna* (concrete) *bhakti* takes place. It is visible in the Buddha's last words recorded in the *Mahaparinibbana sutanta*: "decay is inherent in all component things, work out your *nirvana* with diligence". Abstract truth is offered here as an impetus for the ultimate project of existence. This fusion between *nirguna* and *saguna* is visible, as Vinoba Bhave<sup>12</sup> explains, in the daily prayer of the Buddhists, seeking refuge in the Buddha (*saguna*) and in the dharma (*nirguna*) and in the community (*saguna*). This *saguna bhakti* shows through the logical analyses of the implications of dependent origination in Nagarjuna's *mula-madhyamika-karikas*. In his works, Nagarjuna does not lose sight of the existential issues at hand and shows his care for the *saguna* as he intersperses his discourses with tributes to his master. The following is but one example:

<sup>11</sup> *Majjhima-nikaya*, 63, in H.C. Warren, trans. *Buddhism in Translations*, pp.117-122.

<sup>12</sup> Vinoba Bhave, *Talks on the Gita*, (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1960), pp.164-165.

In the admonition to katayana, the two theories concerning "existence" and "non-existence" have been refuted by the bhagvat who is adept in existence as well as non-existence<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>*Mulamadhyamaka-karika*, XV.7, in David J Kalupahana, trans. *Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), p.232.