THE ANCIENT ORIGINS OF BHAKTI AND THE DHARMA OF THE BUDHA

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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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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 involvemt 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 worldviews 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 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 Buddhadharma 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 Sandiliya Bhakti Sutra, bhakti not only shaped the existential 462 Raj Singh

focus of Buddhism but remained part and parcel of that tradition. Nicol Macnicol in his *Indian Theism*² 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 Buddhism³". 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

²Nicol Macnicol, *Indian Theism*, (Delhi: Munshilal Banarsidas, 1915).

³B.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 thesangha (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 bikhus, 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 transistory...dukkha ... (and) lacking in atman⁴.

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 perscribed 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". 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,

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

⁵M.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, derivates 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.⁶

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 present⁷. 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 times8

What is most intersting 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

⁶ Ibid., p.20.

⁷Rig Veda, 1.156.3; 8.32.14; 9.113.14; 9.113.2; 10.151.2, 3, 7.

⁸Rig Veda, 8.32.14; 9.113.2,4; 10.151.2,3,7.

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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 vogue9 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 Some of the religious leaders personal contact. titthivatirathkara or heretics in ancient Buddhist sutras were: Purana Kassapa, Pakudha Kachayana, Makkhali Gosala, Ajita Kesakamblin and

⁹R.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. ¹⁰Although 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 abovementioned 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

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

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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 Buddha¹¹. 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 suttanta: "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 12 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 orgination in Nagarjuna's mula-madhyamikakarikas. 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:

¹¹Majjhima-nikaya, 63, in H.C. Warren, trans. Buddhism in Translations, pp.117-122.

¹²Vinoba 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-existence¹³

¹³Mulamadhyamaka-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.