

## Mahatma Gandhi and Buddhism

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### *An Encounter with Buddhism*

MAHATMA Gandhi considered religion, spirituality, morality, and ethics, in fact, all activities of life, whether personal or public, to be integrated into the search for self-realization. He said in the introduction to his *Autobiography*; “What I want to achieve... what I have been striving and pining to achieve for 30 years—is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain *Moksha*.” In this search, he felt instinctively inspired by the life and teaching of Lord Buddha. He did not see Buddhism as a new religion but, historically, as the most daring effort made to reform and revitalize the *sanatan* Hindu tradition of India. He saw it as the most revolutionary attempt to propagate the doctrine of *ahimsa*, or nonviolence, in its widest sense.

His concept of Truth as God and *ahimsa* as a sense of identification with all creation, attained through self-purification, was in line with the teaching of Lord Buddha. He wrote at the end of his *Autobiography*; “... a perfect vision of Truth can only follow a complete realization of *ahimsa*... identification with everything that lives is impossible without self-purification... God can never be realized by one who is not pure of heart.” Did not Siddhartha also say when quitting his family and palace:

This golden prison where my heart lives caged,  
To find truth, which henceforth I will seek,  
For all men’s sake, until truth be found.

Since there is hope for man only in man,  
And none hath sought for this as I will seek,  
Who cast away my world to save the world.<sup>1</sup>

The first two religious books that Gandhiji studied during his student days in London (1888–1891) were Sir Edwin Arnold’s English translation of the Bhagavad Gita—*The Song Celestial* (1885)—and *The Light of Asia* (1879)—which depicted the life and philosophy of Gautama Buddha. He writes in his *Autobiography*; “I read it [*The Light of Asia*]

with even greater interest than I did the Bhagavad Gita. Once I had begun it, I could not leave off... My young mind tried to unify the teaching of the Gita, *The Light of Asia*, and the Sermon on the Mount. That renunciation was the highest form of religion appealed to me greatly.”<sup>2</sup> Much later in India, while denying that his ‘philosophy’ was an indifferent mixture of Tolstoy and Buddha, he had written in 1925 that he owed much to Tolstoy and Buddha but he fancied that his philosophy represented the true meaning of the teaching of the Gita, and further that the source of his inspiration was of no consequence as long as he stood for unadulterated truth.<sup>3</sup>

### *Hinduism and Buddhism*

During his long formative period in South Africa (1893–1914), where he organized a struggle against racial discrimination, and evolved his theory and practice of *satyagraha*, he made his first statements in appreciation of Lord Buddha and his teachings. In an ‘open letter’ addressed to the Members of the Legislative Council and Assembly at Durban [1894], while asserting the greatness of India, he wrote; “Add to this the facts that India has produced the Buddha, whose life some consider the best and the holiest by a mortal, and to some second only to that lived by Jesus.” In Durban, he once upset his hostess when he said that Gautama’s compassion was extended to all living beings while one failed to notice this love in the life of Jesus. He repeated this conviction in a letter written on July 2, 1913: “It is difficult to say who was the greatest among Krishna, Rama, the Buddha, the Jesus, etc.... In point of character alone possibly the Buddha was the greatest. But who can say?”<sup>4</sup>

Speaking in a lecture on ‘Hinduism’ in Johannesburg on March 4, 1905,<sup>5</sup> he explained the indissoluble link between Hinduism and Buddhism. Gautama Buddha came into this world when Hinduism had become too rigid. He taught that animal sacrifice was despiritualizing and that toleration of all life was the highest form of love. Buddhism was to Hinduism what Protestantism was to Catholicism; a movement of reform. The jealousy of the Hindu priesthood having been aroused, Buddhism as a formal creed declined but its spirit remained in India and actuated every principle professed by the Hindus. Gandhiji reiterated this view later in his life.

Paying homage to the Buddha for his renunciation of worldly attachments, Gandhi wrote in the Indian Opinion on July 7, 1907, how in the sixth century B.C., Lord Buddha, after “suffering many privations, attained self-realization... and spread ideas of spiritual welfare among the people.”<sup>6</sup> In letters written on January 28, 1909, July 19, 1913, and

June 10, 1914, he praised how the Buddha had left his wife and parents and brought deliverance to them as well; and how they were admired by the world for this act of sacrifice and also how his own freedom from attachment with Kasturba (his wife) permitted him to serve her better. In a letter dated August 23, 1911, he praised his own state of voluntary poverty, as this was the state of the Buddha and the way to self-realization.<sup>7</sup>

After returning to India in 1915, until his imprisonment in 1922, Mahatma Gandhi had led local satyagrahi in Champaran, Ahmedabad, and Kaira, an all-India movement against the Rowlatt Bills, and the non-cooperation movement. During this period, his first public reference to the Buddha's teachings was made in his speech at the Missionary Conference in Madras, given on February 14, 1916. He said that Hinduism was a mighty force because of its underlying swadeshi spirit and that it was erroneous to think that it had driven out Buddhism; it had in fact absorbed it. He repeated in a speech given on October 21, 1917 that Buddhism cherished the same ideals as Hinduism.<sup>8</sup>

In a number of articles written during this period,<sup>9</sup> he said that it was unmanly and against the Buddha's teachings to be afraid to die because we are unable strike. Both the Buddha and Christ had taught us how to nonviolently resist what was wrong by direct action, taken with truth and love, against the arrogant priesthood, the hypocrites, and the Pharisees. The Buddha, "with a lamb on his shoulder," did not spare the cruel Brahmins engaged in animal sacrifice, but he was "all love at heart." Says Gandhiji, "Who am I in comparison with these? Even so I aspire to be their equal in love in this very life." During an earlier visit to India in 1901, too he had spoken against "this cruel form of worship" to a friend in Calcutta but was told, "The sheep don't feel anything." Writes Gandhiji, "I thought of the story of Buddha but I also saw that the task was beyond my capacity."<sup>10</sup>

In a speech he gave on July 27, 1916, he said that had the Buddha and Christ not spent years in the wilderness preparing themselves for their mission, they would not be "what they are." Again in his famous speech given at the Muir College Economic Society in Allahabad on December 22, 1916, he said that "the Buddha, Jesus, and other great religious leaders ... had deliberately embraced poverty," and we would only go downhill if we make "materialistic craze as our goal."<sup>11</sup>

### *Practice of the Buddha's Teachings*

After his release from jail in 1924, Gandhiji delivered speeches on Buddha Jayanti at Bombay on May 18, 1924, and at Calcutta on May 7,

1925, in which he explained that his book-knowledge of Buddhism was confined to Sir Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*, which he had "devoured from page to page" and "with deep veneration," and one or two other books. He said, "Many friends consider that I am expressing in my own life the teachings of Buddha. I accept their testimony... I am trying my level best to follow these teachings." He emphasized the following points in those speeches:<sup>12</sup>

(a) He drew "no distinction between the essential teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism." The Buddha had "lived Hinduism in his own life." The "blind Brahmins" had "rejected his reforms because they were selfish." But the masses, who are "philosophers in action," had recognized in the Buddha the true exponent of their own faith. And being himself one of the masses, he found that "Buddhism in nothing but Hinduism reduces to practice in terms of the masses." Buddhism was not banished from India. Its every essential characteristic was translated into action in India much more perhaps than in countries that "nominally profess Buddhism."

(b) The Buddha had taught Hinduism "not to take but to give life. True sacrifice was not of others but of self." He made the Vedas a living word but "the priests clung to the letter and missed the spirit."

(c) The reformation that the Buddha attempted has not yet had a fair trial. The Buddha taught us to "trust in the final triumph of truth and love." He "lived what he taught." "Each one of us should see how much of the Buddha's message of mercy and piety we have translated into our lives."

(d) The Buddha was not an atheist. Buddhism teaches humility and the masses approach God in all humility.

During the same period, in various other references also, he continued to insist that Buddhism was a "mighty reform in Hinduism. Buddhism rightly insisted on internal purity. Its appeal went straight to the heart. It broke down arrogant assumptions of superiority."<sup>13</sup> The Buddha renounced pleasures as they "become painful." To have anything was a torture to him.<sup>14</sup> He said that Buddhists were not atheists nor agnostics as we all may have different definitions of God: "God is that indefinable something which we all feel but which we do not know."<sup>15</sup>

In 1926, Gandhiji delivered a series of discourses on the *Gita* in the Sabarmati ashram in which he explained that there was no difference between the *nirvana* mentioned by Lord Buddha and the *nirvana* of the *Gita*. They referred to the same state. He related how once the Buddha had fainted while fasting and a woman placed a few drops of milk on his lips... "Did the milk rouse his appetite? No; on the contrary, he realized

God soon after.” The Buddha’s *nirvana* was only “a seeming inertness,” not *shunya* [nothingness]. It is “perfect disinterestedness.”<sup>16</sup> He had written in a letter earlier that he drew “no distinction between Buddhist *nirvana* and the *Brahma nirvana* of Shankara,” as he believed in the complete annihilation of one’s individually as being “an absolute condition of perfect joya and peace.”<sup>17</sup>

He wrote on January 4, 1926 that he wanted to propagate *ahimsa* as a religion of the brave *kshatriyas*, as the Buddha, Mahavira, Rama, and Krishna, all votaries of *ahimsa*, were *kshatriyas*. “*Ahimsa* is the extreme limit of forgiveness. But forgiveness is the quality of the brave. *Ahimsa* is impossible without fearlessness.” Soon after returning from Ceylon, he said at Sabarmati that forgiveness was a quality of the soul, and that the Buddha had asked us to “conquer anger by non-anger.” And non-anger meant “the supreme virtue of charity or love.”<sup>18</sup>

As time passed, Gandhiji tended to link even more issues with the teaching of Lord Buddha. During his Presidency of the Belgaum Congress in December 1924, he had unequivocally responded to a Ceylonese deputation’s plea that possession of the historic Buddha Gaya temple should be vested in the Buddhists and called the reported animal sacrifice in it a “sacrilege.”<sup>19</sup> In a speech at Gaya, he said, if untouchability was not removed, the Hindu society, and to him it included Buddhists, might all perish altogether.<sup>20</sup> Again, the contrast between the palaces built in New Delhi for wealthy people and the miserable huts of the laborers reminded him of the shock received by Gautama Buddha when he saw such miseries and which also transformed his life and the fortunes of the world.<sup>21</sup>

### *Buddhism and the World Religions*

During his two-week visit to Ceylon in November 1927, he addressed a large number of Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian groups, as well as other public forums. In every speech he referred to the Buddha’s life and teaching. The main points covered by him in those speeches are summarized below:<sup>22</sup>

(a) The Great Master had taught the Right Path. Its first maxim is truth, and the second “to love all that lives,” and it teaches “personal purity of life.” This is what we have to learn, even in a college.

(b) As for the return of the Buddha Gaya temple to Buddhists, he had done everything humanly possible but there were several obstacles preventing this from happening.

(c) Some people had “accused” him of “being a follower of the Buddha” and of “spreading Buddhist teachings under the guise of sanatan

Hinduism.” But he felt proud of it and he owed much to the inspiration he had derived from the Buddha’s life.

(d) The Buddha’s teaching formed an integral part of Hinduism, which “owes on eternal debt of gratitude to that great teacher,” who was “one of the greatest Hindu reformers,” a “Hindu of Hindus.” He never rejected Hinduism but broadened its base. He made some of the words of the Vedas yield meanings more relevant to the age. What Hinduism did not assimilate was not an essential part of his teaching. In fact, his teaching was “not assimilated in its fullness” outside of India.

(e) For a complete study of Buddhism they should study Sanskrit scriptures and observe the five *yamas* [vows], viz., celibacy, truth, *ahimsa*, non-stealing, and non-possession.

(f) The Buddha, Mohamed, and Jesus were Asiatic. All that is permanent in Hindu culture is also found in their teachings. If we search for the greatest common measure in all great faiths, we come to the very simple factor, viz., “to be truthful and nonviolent.”

(g) The contention that the Buddha did not believe in God “contradicts the very central fact of the Buddha’s teaching.” He justly rejected the “base things,” like animal sacrifice being done in the name of God. He “redeclared the eternal and unalterable existence of the moral government of this universe... the law was God himself.” From this also arose the confusion about the meaning of nirvana. It is the “extinction of all that is base in us... vicious in us... corrupt and corruptible in us.” It is not the “dead peace of the grave” but the “living happiness of a soul.”

(h) The Buddha had an “exacting regard for all life, be it ever so low.” But as Buddhism traveled abroad, “sacredness of animal life” had not that sense, as if we could avoid the effects of our own acts. “It is an arrogant assumption to say that human beings are lords and masters of lower creation. On the contrary, being endowed with greater things in life, they are trustees of the lower animal kingdom.” Further, “If animals could not be sacrificed to the gods above, how could they be sacrificed to the epicure in us?” The Buddha wanted us to sacrifice ourselves, our lust and worldly ambition, and not other life.

(i) “The Buddha renounced every worldly happiness, because he wanted to share with the whole world his happiness, which was to be had by men who sacrificed and suffered in search of truth. A time is coming when those who are in the mad rush today of multiplying their wants, vainly thinking that they add to the real substance, real knowledge of the world, will retrace their steps and say: What have we done?”

(j) The Buddha’s spirit lies in treating life not as “a bundle of enjoyments and privileges, but a bundle of duties and services.” That is what

separates man from the beast. Hence, the 'drinking' habit was "totally against the spirit of the Buddha."

(k) Untouchability, being practiced in Ceylon also, was "wholly against the spirit of the Buddha," who had "abolished every distinction of superiority and inferiority."

(l) To render something unto the Buddha for his "great message of mercy," they must wear *khadi*.

### *Buddhism and Nonviolence*

Gandhiji visited Burma [Myanmar], another Buddhist country, in March 1929, and spoke at a number of public and religious meetings in which he emphasized the following points:<sup>23</sup>

(a) He felt honored when Buddhists in Ceylon, Burma, China, and Japan claimed him as their own, because "Buddhism is to Hinduism what Protestantism is to Roman Catholicism, only in a much stronger light."

(b) Speaking in a pagoda he said he was glad that the Phoongys [Buddhist monks] were leading the political movement in Burma, but they must remain "pure beyond suspicion" and combine with the movement "great wisdom and great ability," and may Lord Buddha's spirit guide everyone in the movement.

(c) They had "one of the greatest truths that the world can ever have uttered by one of the greatest teachers of mankind, viz. *ahimsa*." They should put it to practice in every act of life. Used wisely, it could become their "own saving and the saving of mankind." It was the most active force in the world. "It radiates life and light and peace and happiness." But it appeared that this message had "only touched but the surface of the heart of Burma." For example, "when the law of *ahimsa* reigns supreme, there should be no jealousy, no unworthy ambition. No crime." But the incidence of murder was common in Burma. India perhaps had taken the Buddha's message more fully.

(d) The Buddha undertook *tapasya*, i.e., penance, to overcome the oppression, injustice, and darkness around him. The priests sitting there must also lead others through penance, bringing out the spirit of the scriptures. Then they would realize that taking animal life, smoking, drinking, and being afraid are inconsistent with the Buddha's doctrine of love.

(e) Those following the Buddha's teaching could not afford to pass a single moment in idleness.

Later, he could not comprehend how the followers of Buddha could give themselves up to savagery during the riots in Burma in 1938, in

which even the priests took an active part. Similarly, when the Burmese leader Gen. U Aung San and his comrades were assassinated in 1947, he considered it “a great tragedy.” He said that the terrorists who committed such political murders, considered the victims to be criminals. But one who thus took the law into his hands, “commits violence against the people.” He enunciated a vital principle of public life: “Only an elected Assembly can dispense with the obligation to be nonviolent.”<sup>24</sup>

After returning from Burma, Gandhiji was again thrown into the hectic arena of politics, the campaign against untouchability, and a series of *satyagrahi* and imprisonments. After his release in 1944 and until his assassination, he was ever more deeply involved in the post-war political and communal problems in the country. But even during these periods, he continued to make frequent references to the Buddha and his teachings.

In 1929, he had written and said that prophets such as the Buddha had preserved their religion “by breaking down bad traditions.” They had stood alone but had “living faith in themselves and their God.” He reiterated this statement in 1932 and said that they had stood against the world but “were humanity incarnate. To have such humility, one must have faith in oneself and in God.” He explained to N.K. Bose in 1934 that in the teaching of prophets like the Buddha, there was a permanent portion and an impermanent one, the latter being suited to the needs of their time. As we try to sustain this latter portion, we find so much distortion in religious practice today.<sup>25</sup>

While propagating the virtue of ‘bread labor’ or manual work, Gandhiji said that Jesus was a carpenter and the Buddha lived on charity—however, “a roving ascetic” also had a lot of manual work to do. He himself preferred the Gita’s gospel of work to that of contemplation and was “never attracted by the idea of complete renunciation,” but said that there “may be some like the Buddha whose mere thoughts would influence the world.”<sup>26</sup>

### *The Efficacy of Prayer*

He was a firm believer in the efficacy of ‘prayer.’ He said that the Buddha, Jesus, and Mohamed had found illumination through prayer and could not possibly live without it. In a dialogue with Charles Fabri, a Buddhist, who thought that Buddhism had taught him that some spirits could do without belief in God, Gandhiji had said; “But Buddhism is one long prayer.” Those who could not pray should be humble and not limit “the real Buddha.” Skepticism and intellectual conception do not help in critical periods of life. But “to know the meaning of God or



prayer,” one must “reduce oneself to a cipher.” In difficult times when spiritual conception alone helps, then we have a glimpse of God. “That is the prayer.” Buddha, Jesus, and Mohamed had also fasted to see God face to face.<sup>27</sup>

A Japanese *sadhu* who came in 1935 to Gandhiji’s Wardha ashram, had stayed on and the evening prayer always commenced with his *mantra* ‘*nam myo ho rengo kyo*,’ meaning “I bow to the Buddha, the giver of true religion.” When World War II broke out and the police were taking him away, he recited this *mantra* and left his drum with Gandhiji. Since then, morning and evening prayers at Sevagram ashram would start with the same *mantra* as a reminder of *Sadhu* Keshav’s “purity and single-eyed devotion.”<sup>28</sup>

Gandhiji reiterated that, along with Vivekanand, he believed that “Shankara never drove Buddhism from India for he was himself a *prachhanna* [in disguise] Buddha. He merely rid it of the bad things that were creeping into it, and prevented its alienation from Hinduism.”<sup>29</sup> In any case, the substance and purity of the Buddha’s teaching had been best preserved in India. As “a Hindu of Hindus, he [the Buddha] gave a new orientation to Hinduism.” Nor is Buddhism realized, said Gandhiji, “by getting to know its externals.” In a letter to the Dalai Lama, he wrote that he had asked his friends to give up “secretiveness and superstition if Buddhism is to live.”<sup>30</sup>

One of the many things for which Gandhiji revered the Buddha was “his utter abolition of untouchability, that is the distinction between high and low.”<sup>31</sup> Had not the Buddha said;

Make all fresh kin. There is no caste in blood  
Which runneth of one hue, nor caste in tears,  
Which trickle salt with all; neither cometh man  
To birth with tilak-mark stamped on the brow,  
To sacred thread on neck. Who doth right deeds  
Is twice-born, who doeth ill deeds vile.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, while propagating *khadi*, he had emphasized the Buddha’s concern for the poor.<sup>33</sup>

### *Practice of Nonviolence*

He said in an interview [1937] that the effects of the Buddha’s nonviolent action “persist and are likely to grow with age,” while those of Hitler’, Mussolini’s and Stalin’s violence though immediately visible were transitory. He had the greatest veneration for the Buddha, one of the greatest preachers and warriors of peace. The Buddha—and 600

years later Jesus—had taught us the love that was “essentially a social and collective virtue,” not a mere personal one. In another context, he said that in the Buddha’s time, the present day type of politics did not exist and hence the Congress experiment in practicing nonviolence in the political sphere was a new one.<sup>34</sup>

When he saw a leaflet published by the Madras Provincial War Committee saying that World War II was being waged for “great ideals,” including that for peace, “as exemplified in the teaching of Lord Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi,” he asked for this clause to be removed “as being untrue.” He said, “If Lord Buddha was on earth in the body at this moment, such a war would be impossible” and “Ashoka is perhaps the only instance of a great king having voluntarily abandoned war.”<sup>35</sup>

When communal violence erupted in Bihar in 1947, he was so anguished that “the hallowed land of Lord Buddha and King Janak and Lord Rama” was seeing the “devilish dance of violence.” It could only retrieve its ancient glory by means of nonviolence. He commented similarly about corrupt practices in Bihar.<sup>36</sup>

Gandhiji could not subscribe to the doctrine of Asia for the Asiatics. There was the imprint of Buddhistic influence on the whole of Asia including India. Asia has to relearn the Buddha’s message and deliver it to the world. The flower of nonviolence, which seemed to be withering, must come to full bloom. Later addressing the Inter Asian Relations Conference in 1947, he said that wisdom had come to the West from the East—the Buddha and other prophets all had come from the East. “The West is today pining for wisdom. It is despairing of the multiplication of the atom bomb ... It is up to you to tell the world of its wickedness and sin,”—that was the teaching of our teachers.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, during the last period of his life with violence and hatred prevailing all round, Gandhiji denied that he could be “a modern Buddha.” The Buddha and the later prophets “had gone the way they went in order to stop wars.” They could establish peace and happiness. The fact that he could not do so was “proof positive” that he had no such power. He was no divine person since “I am not able to establish peace.”<sup>38</sup>

### *Closing Remarks*

Here, I have attempted to give a summary of what Mahatma Gandhi had said and written about Lord Buddha’s life and teaching. He revered the Buddha and was deeply committed to follow the essence of his teaching. He saw the Buddha as one of the greatest reformers of Hindu *dharma* who taught us truth and *ahimsa*, self-purity, sacrifice and renunciation, and faith in the ultimate morality, which Gandhiji called God. He taught

us to realize the unity of all life and the truth of what we are through our actions and selfless service, through humility and piety. In spirit, Gandhiji had followed in Lord Buddha's footsteps.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Light of Asia*, Bk. IV.

<sup>2</sup> *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (revised edition), Publication Division, 2000, New Delhi; [hereafter referred as 'CWR'] 44:142-3.

<sup>3</sup> CWR 30:248.

<sup>4</sup> CWR 1:198, *Autobiography*, CWR 44:211, CWR 13:192.

<sup>5</sup> CWR 4:199.

<sup>6</sup> CWR 7:88.

<sup>7</sup> CWR 9:283-4, 13:216, 12:36-7.

<sup>8</sup> CWR 5:152, 16:106, 14:176.

<sup>9</sup> CWR 15:253, 21:306, 22:159.

<sup>10</sup> *Autobiography*, CWR 44:266-7.

<sup>11</sup> CWR 15:242, 276-7.

<sup>12</sup> CWR 27:448-9, 31:299-302.

<sup>13</sup> CWR 28:11.

<sup>14</sup> CWR 29:462-3, 32:40.

<sup>15</sup> CWR 30:334.

<sup>16</sup> CWR 37:111-2, 125-6, 130, 337.

<sup>17</sup> CWR 33:334.

<sup>18</sup> CWR 36:428-9, 41:103.

<sup>19</sup> CWR 30:48.

<sup>20</sup> CWR 38:64.

<sup>21</sup> CWR 38:323.

<sup>22</sup> CWR 40:365-6, 368-71, 374-5, 390-1, 395-6, 400, 425-7, 442-3, 431, 416-7, 434-7, 447, 450-1, 456, 458-9.

<sup>23</sup> CWR 45:194-5, 207, 212, 251, 252-4, 225.

<sup>24</sup> CWR 73:392, 96:92, 102.

<sup>25</sup> CWR 46:227, 47:145, 56:324, 64:319.

<sup>26</sup> CWR 48:335, 68:115, 78:369.

<sup>27</sup> CWR 53:318, 75:177, 76:167-8.

<sup>28</sup> CWR 81:487, 96:190.

<sup>29</sup> CWR 57:228, 60:86.

<sup>30</sup> CWR 61:452, 95:116, 94:253.

<sup>31</sup> CWR 60:193.

<sup>32</sup> *The Light of Asia*, Bk. VI.

<sup>33</sup> CWR 45:163.

<sup>34</sup> CWR 70:261, 73:392, 74:386, 424, 81:464.

<sup>35</sup> CWR 78:162.

<sup>36</sup> CWR 93:104, 95:127.

<sup>37</sup> CWR 74:294-5, 94:222-3.

<sup>38</sup> CWR 93:289, 95:54.