Preface

The intellectual and emotional impact of Buddhism on the western writers and thinkers is a widely recognised fact. Rainer Maria Rilke, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Aldous Huxley, Bertrand Russell, Carl Gustav Jung, John Masefield, Nikos Kazantzakis, Bertolt Brecht and Octavio Paz are only a few of the intellectual stalwarts of the modern times who came under the influence of this ancient wisdom of Asia. Since the end of World War II, not a year passed without the publication of important books on Buddhism in at least one European language. References to Buddhism are becoming more and more frequent not only in literature but also even in daily press. In America Buddhism is so pervasive that the term “American Buddhist” is not an uncommon one. Among the American writers who are influenced by Buddhism, the most prominent ones are Fenollosa, Emerson, Thoreau and Henry Adams. The Beat writers of the 50s and 60s like Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Jack Kerouac, Philip Whalen, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gary Snyder also showed some kind of an affinity with Buddhism. Robert Frost does not figure at all in this list of these western writers and intellectuals who had acquaintance with Buddhism. However, one cannot rule out the possibility that Frost was familiar with the
Buddhist philosophy, especially on the ground that he lived and wrote in an age vibrant with Buddhist thought; and this is evident, not of course conspicuously, in some of his writings and personal letters. But as a poet who wanted to establish his independence in thoughts and writings, Frost always took special care to extricate himself from all schools of thought including Buddhism. Nevertheless, a reader, especially one who is familiar with the life and teachings of the Buddha, can discover in Frost’s writings a few oblique references to Buddhism which indicate in clear terms the poet’s admiration for this great philosophy of the east. More than that, such a reader can find that many of Frost’s thoughts and ideas run parallel to the Buddhist doctrines. The present study, prompted by this conviction, envisages a new thematic appraisal of Frost’s poems in the light of Buddhist wisdom. At the same time, this study does not intend to trace mechanically the Buddhist doctrines in Frost’s poems, nor does it aim to establish that Frost was a Buddhist in the conventional sense of the term.

The work is divided into seven chapters including an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction discusses some of the references that Frost makes to the Buddha and his wisdom, and tries to explain how these references are helpful for a Buddhist interpretation of his poems. An attempt is also made in the introduction to draw some parallels between Frost’s philosophy and
the Buddhist wisdom. The historical as well as personal reasons for Frost’s favourable disposition towards Buddhism is also debated here. The first chapter is devoted to the analysis of some major poems in the light of the Buddhist doctrine of “dukkha.” Frost’s philosophy of suffering and violence is examined here in the background of the Buddhist doctrine of “dukkha.” The second chapter deals with the resemblance between the Buddhist doctrine of “anicca” and the theme of change in Frost’s poems. The theme of desire present in Frost’s poems is scrutinized in the third chapter in comparison with Buddha’s teaching on “tanha.” The fourth chapter examines in detail poems that depict man’s egoism, and tries to illustrate that the concept of egoism both in Frost and in the Buddha has many things in common. The last chapter probes into the theme of self-revelation in Frost’s poems, and makes an appraisal of them in the Buddhist perspective that “Be Ye a Lamp Unto Themselves.” The study comes to the conclusion not only that Frost’s poems contain the themes of suffering, impermanence, desire, egoism and self-realisation, but also that these themes, which are basic in Buddhist teachings, show a steady progression from one to the other.

The collection of Frost’s poems entitled *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, edited by Edward Connery Lathem is used in the present study as the basic text of Frost’s poems; all the extracts of Frost’s poems, cited in the thesis, come from this book. Among the Buddhist texts
referred to in the thesis, there are two editions of *The Dhammapada* - one translated by S. Radhakrishnan, and the other by Juan Mascaro. While Radhakrishnan’s translation - a translation from the original Pali text itself - is marked by his scholarly interpretation of this Buddhist scripture, Mascaro’s is noted for its poetic excellence. Both of these translations have thus their own merits, and hence they are made use of in this work. For the translations of other Buddhist scriptures, I mainly depended on E. A. Burtt’s *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*, G. F. Allen’s *The Buddha’s Philosophy* and *Buddha’s words of Wisdom*, and Henry Clarke Warren’s *Buddhism in Translations*.

This work is made possible through the help and co-operation of some of my eminent professors, friends and well-wishers, and therefore, it would be ungracious on my part not to mention my obligations to them.

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I remember now with love and veneration my grand aunt late Smt. Mundikkuty, lying on whose lap I read for the first time, at the age of twelve, an English book – a short biography of Lord Buddha.

Too small a payment for too great a debt.

A. R. VIJAYARAGHAVAN