Introduction

Robert Frost is perhaps the most favourite American poet of the Indian readers. One important reason for Frost's popularity in India seems to be that the Indians, like the Israelis, feel that “they as well as he, had known sadness and suffering” (Faigel Broude qtd. in Mertins 412). In other words, it is the tragic element in Frost's poetry, more than anything else, that might have fascinated the Indian mind. As everybody knows, Buddhism is the most profound tragic philosophy that impressed the Indian mind for centuries. “In the whole history of thought,” says Radhakrishnan, “no one painted the misery of human existence in bleaker colours and with more feeling than Buddha” (Indian Philosophy 362). So an Indian reader is urged by instinct or intuition to read Frost's poems in the light of Buddhist wisdom. Such an approach — an approach different from the Western criticism — would probably help to resolve many of the complexities and ambiguities that critics like James L. Potter, Reginald Cook, Lionel Trilling and many others found in Frost's poetry.
One derives the inspiration for this literary venture from Frost's own essay “The Prerequisites” which first appeared in the New York Times, Book Review for March 21, 1954, and which was later used as the preface to Frost's 1954 volume Aforesaid. “The Prerequisites” is a cryptic analysis of Emerson’s poem “Brahma.” Frost begins the essay with a confession that some fifty years back he failed to understand fully the last stanza of “Brahma” which reads as follows:

The strong Gods pine for my abode,
And pine in vain the sacred Seven,
But thou, the meek lover of the good!
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven. (Fisher 106)

However, Frost then recognised that “the whole poem smacked of Asia,” and that there was “a whole religion behind it different from the one [he] was brought upto.” Sixty years later when he read those lines again, he “saw through the meek lover of good.” Frost continues:

His meekness must have meant the perfect detachment from ambition and desire that can alone rescue us from the round of existence. And the ‘me’ worth turning thy back on heaven for must of course be Nirvana – the only nothing that is something. (emphasis added) (qtd. in Lathem and Cox 95-97)
The words and expressions italicised in the above passage are definitely associated with Buddhism. “The detachment from ambition and desire,” according to Buddhism, is the way to escape from the cycle of birth and death, and then to attain Nirvana – the state of meaningful emptiness. Though Frost does not mention the name of the Buddha, for reasons yet to be investigated, his affinity with and admiration for the Buddha is evident in the essay “Prerequisites.”

It is interesting to note in this context that the Buddhist teachings fascinated Frost still earlier. This is clear from his letter to Louis Untermeyer dated August 8, 1921 which he wrote in a mood of terrible distress. Here is an extract:

I have planted or have caused to be planted a Boh tree in India to sit out the rest of the dance under when I shall have done with vanities: and this without knowing what a Boh tree is. It may shed rain, but will it shed lightning? Do I want it to? I go, incredible as it may seem to you. (emphasis added) (qtd. in Untermeyer, Letters of Frost 134.)

Here again the words emphasised in the above extract bear resemblance to the Buddha’s life and teachings. The “Boh tree” is often used as a synonym for the Buddha’s enlightenment, because the Buddha is said to have attained Nirvana while meditating under
the Boh tree. "Vanity" is an English equivalent of the Pali word "Ich" (ego) - a word which frequently occurs in the Buddhist teachings. "Dance" reminds us of the cycle of life and death which in Buddhism is the natural outcome of one's "Karma." Similarly, "rain" and "lightning" can be taken to symbolise the Buddha's profuse love and compassion, and his enlightenment respectively.

Though Frost was perhaps acquainted with Buddhism as early as 1921, his knowledge of that philosophy appears to be vague and imperfect as he himself admits in the letter through the words—"and this without knowing what a Boh tree is." However limited his knowledge of Buddhism was at that time, we have reasons to believe that Frost then recognised it as a way of salvation from the miseries of life. That must be the reason why he turned to that philosophy for solace in times of mental strife.

There is again evidence to believe that Frost had some interactions with the Buddhists of his time. In a 1918 letter to George F. Whicher, Frost writes about a Buddhist preacher in his neighbourhood. He says:

My favourite tomato froze right in my heavy winter overcoat. Our local Buddist [sic] blames it all on the eclipse in conjunction with the new star in Aquila. She was educated at the New Hampshire State Normal School (where I taught) and belongs to the Baptist
church but she professes Buddhism at the evening meetings, practises transmigration and derives the present more from the future than from the past. (Thompson, Letters of Frost 231)

The letter does not make clear whether Frost attended those evening meetings held by the local Buddhist, or whether he took the Buddhist theories of rebirth and transmigration for granted. But one feels that Frost was very much alive to the Buddhist activities of his time.

One who looks for Frost’s references to Buddhism will be delighted to read “An Importer,” a short poem of Frost which alludes obliquely to some aspects of Buddhism. The poem speaks about “Mrs. Someone” who visited Asia. She brought back bamboos, ivories, jades and lacquers, devil-scaring firecrackers, recipes for tea with butter and many other items that would amaze every one. “Mrs. Someone” also brought with her

Arguments too stale to mention
’Gainst American invention –
Most of all the mass production
Destined to prove our destruction.

What are telephones, skyscrapers,
Safety razors, Sunday papers
But the silliest evasion
Of the truths we owe an Asian?
But the best of her exhibit
Was a prayer machine from Tibet
That by brook power in the garden
Kept repeating Pardon, pardon;² (emphasis added) (396-397)

It has to be admitted that this is neither a significant nor a representative poem of Frost. Yet the poem has a special fascination for a student of Buddhism for a number of indirect references it makes to Buddhism. The expression “an Asian” is most probably an allusion to the Buddha who exhorted man to renounce worldly comforts in order to attain eternal peace and happiness. America’s craze for mass production of material comforts like telephones, skyscrapers, safety razors and the like is, according to the poet, nothing but “the silliest evasion” of the Buddha’s truth. Earlier we saw that in his essay “The Prerequisites” Frost referred to Buddhism as a religion of Asia, and it strengthens the impression that “an Asian” in the poem is the Buddha himself. Furthermore, in the following lines Frost speaks about “a prayer machine from Tibet,” and as we know, it is a devise used even today by the Tibetan Buddhists for prayer in their temples. A serious reading makes it abundantly clear that along with the poet’s strong disapproval of American mass-production of material comforts, the poem expresses his overwhelming appreciation and admiration for the Buddha and
his teachings. All the more, Frost seems to suggest that the way out of world’s destruction, to be caused by America’s mass-production of material comforts, is the Buddhist path of self-discipline in matters of physical pleasures.\footnote{3}

Now that Frost’s acquaintance with Buddhism is almost a certainty, it is necessary to look for its sources. Firstly, an investigation in this direction has to take into account the intellectual climate of the period in which Frost lived and wrote, because we are told that it was an age vibrant with Buddhist teachings. In *The Asian Legacy and American Life* Arthur Christy gives a detailed account of how Buddhism got introduced in America and how it influenced the American intellectuals. In the second half of the nineteenth century, America, like the rest of the western world, faced a crisis of faith. The challenges of Darwinism and modern science shattered the religious faith of the time. Consequently, disillusionment was in the air, and there was a sense of failure all around. Attempts at harmony and synthesis were indeed made, and solutions to some of the problems were offered by individuals like William James. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* James tried to resolve the conflict between faith and science. He proposed that faith would always supply the necessary equilibrium and a genuine emotional satisfaction for the individual. One solution was to return to the orient for an answer to man’s existential plight. Christy makes
an interesting distinction between two orientalisms that prevailed in nineteenth century America. The earliest orientalism, according to him, centred on the Vedanta, and the transcendentalists who relied chiefly on *The Bhagavat Gita* “sought an ethic and therapeutically useful religious philosophy” (47). The other was Buddhism. Christy points out that “for men like William Sturgis Bigelon, Percival Lowell, John La Farge, Henry Adams, the Spanish-yankee of Salem, Ernest Fenollosa, and the cosmopolitan Lafcadio Hearn, Japan and Buddhism offered quiet, solace, and escape”(43). Eusebio L. Rodrigues in his essay, “Out of Season for Nirvana: Henry Adams and Buddha” sums up the Buddhist influence on the American intellectuals as follows:

On the swirling sea of intellectual chaos and confusion the oil of Buddhism was poured from time to time and this provided enisled patches of temporary peace and comfort for some restless minds. (108)

The period from 1860 to 1900 witnessed a gradual but steadily increasing interest in Buddhism and its teachings among the American intellectuals and artists. The avenue of approach was through art and aesthetics rather than through philosophy and metaphysics. In 1876 the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia initiated a great deal of interest in Japanese art. This interest was already stimulated by La Forge who wrote on Japanese art in 1869,
and by Edward E. Morse, a renowned collector of Japanese pottery. It culminated in the establishment of a department of Japanese art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in July 1889. The interest in Japanese art – an interest evoked by Buddhism – gradually established the proper mood and atmosphere for the introduction of Buddhism in America.

The interest in Buddhism spread like wild fire in America in 1879 with the publication of Edwin Arnold’s poem, *The Light of Asia*, which according to Arthur Christy, was reported to have gone into eighty editions in America (43). Says Christy: “One reason for the popularity of *The Light of Asia* in America was doubtless the fact that its readers represented a generation of New Englanders who had lost faith in both its hope and ancestral tradition”(43). This poem, a kind of epic, describes the life and precepts of Gautama the Buddha. The solution to the problem of human suffering offered by the Buddha was practical rather than metaphysical, and therefore it had an instant impact on the disillusioned of the time. Lafcadio Hearn, commenting on a new edition of *The Light of Asia* in 1883 wrote:

After all, Buddhism in some esoteric form may prove the religion of the future. What are the heaven of all Christian fancies after all but Nirvana – extinction of individuality in the eternal. (qtd. in Rodrigues 182)
Living in an age when Buddhism dominated the intellectual climate in America, it was quite natural that Frost too showed interest in the Buddhist teachings. Apart from this outward influence, some other personal reasons can also be attributed to Frost's inclination towards Buddhism. Before probing into these reasons one should attempt a brief survey of both Frost's religious faith and the special features of Buddhism.

Undoubtedly, religion played a major role in Frost's upbringing. His mother Isabel Belle Moodie was a very religious woman. Born a Coverting Presbyterian she baptised Frost first in that faith when he was very small. Then she switched to the Unitarians. Finally she evolved into the Swedenborgian Church, and the poet was again baptised in the New Jerusalem faith. Says the poet humorously and also with disgust: "So I am sure I was twice, may be, three times baptised before they were satisfied with it .... All this baptising and church and Sunday school may have had a bad effect on me. I did so much of it when young that I never felt any call to continue it later in life" (qtd. in Mertins 8-9). However, Frost's father, William Prescott Frost Jr., was a non-believer, and that had a counter acting influence on him in religious matters. In a letter to Lawrance Thompson in 1948 Frost emphasises his own uneven spiritual heritage:
You seem to reason that because my mother was religious I must have been religious too at any rate to start with. You might as well reason that because my father was irreligious I must have been irreligious too.

(qtd. in Hall, *Robert Frost* 46)

This letter frustrates the attempt of Frost’s critics and biographers to arrive at any conclusion on the poet’s religious belief. A few years before he died, Lawrance Thompson wrote to Dorothy Judd Hall that Frost’s religious belief “provides more problems than any other part of his art – and it happens to be inseparable from his art” (Hall, “An Old Testament Christian” 319). Some critics – Yvor Winters, Joseph Warsen Beach, and George L. Nitchie among them – hold that Frost was an agnostic, or in other words, “a spiritual drifter.” Lesley, Frost’s daughter, vehemently refutes this argument by quoting her father’s own words: “I despise religiosity. But I have no religious doubts. Not about God’s existence anyway.” Then Lesley points out as a documentary evidence that “there was always a Bible with [Frost’s] easy reach including a Latin one (Paris 1865) with his mother’s inscription [sic]” (313). Further, the poet’s letter (1921) to Louis Untermeyer stands testimony to his faith: “I should n’t wonder if my last end [sic] would be religious” (qtd. in Hall, *Robert Frost* 9).
Hall maintains that a comprehensive look at Frost’s “life long self-revelations in poetry and prose – however guarded they were – reveals to us a deeply religious man” (“An Old Testament Christian” 318). She also observes that “Belief is a central concern in his work and the driving force behind it” (Robert Frost 11). Hall quotes Theodore Morrison’s statement about the spiritual quality in Frost’s poetry: “Every one who reads Frost feels, I suppose, that in some sense he was a deeply religious man, if only in the sense that these poems are emotionally charged with an ultimate piety” (27). What gives Frost’s poems “This sustained measure of piety,” according to Hall, is “a quality of heart and mind” (27). So Frost’s religiosity has nothing to do with institutional religions. Manorama Trikha emphasises this point in her discussion of Frost’s “God-belief.” She says: “About Frost’s ‘God-belief’, it is absolutely clear that he repelled the institutional or traditional Christian scheme of Christ or Mary and thus dismissed theological quiddities” (88). In Frost’s view, it is not a man’s religion, but his own inner worth that reflects his spiritual quality. In his words,

If you would have out the way a man feels about God, watch his life, hear his words. Place a coin, with its denomination unknown, under paper and you can tell its mark by rubbing a pencil over the paper. From all the individual rises and valleys your answer will come out. (Lathem, Interviews 149)
The root of Frost's tendency to tease orthodox religions can be found in the decay of Protestantism and also in the rejection of Protestant Christianity by the Anglo-Saxon writers. Protestantism unintentionally encouraged the individual seeker to formulate his own belief quite apart from any established sect or creed. Thompson points out that in America the Puritan non-conformists, who fled from Archbishop Laud to pursue their own rigorous religious beliefs, very soon discovered other forms of non-conformity. Thompson adds: "Frost, who boasts of his Puritan descent, and who is decidedly puritanical in many of his sympathies, might be viewed as a non-conforming Puritan non-conformist" (Robert Frost 18).

In his religious views Frost represents the dilemma of a modern humanist. Joseph Kau observes that science and religion divided the loyalties of the modern humanist. On the one hand there is the theism of Eliot, and on the other the materialism of Stevens. Poets like Frost inhabited the middle position between belief and unbelief, between religious faith and materialism. Eliot assumes a moral stance and Stevens an intellectual one in their attempts to resolve the dichotomy. But Frost assumes an "ambivalent stance." His sensibilities are on the side of religion, but scientific reason argues against acceptance. Kau concludes:

Caught between contraries, a predicament which fosters much of tension in his poetry, Frost opts frequently for a
resolution that, while seemingly accepting the proof of science and the logic of reason, still indicates a religious bias. (99)

A comparison between Frost's religious beliefs and Buddha's teachings demands a short discussion on the special features of Buddhism as religion. To begin with Buddhism is an anti-religion in the sense that it has no Pope, no metaphysics and no Bible. "Buddhism," says Christmas Humphreys, "is unique among the so-called religions of the world in having no criteria for orthodoxy" (The Buddhist Way 27). The hallmarks of a religion are personal God, an unchanging and immortal soul, and the necessity for the salvation of the latter by the former. These three factors are entirely absent in Buddhism. As Octavio Paz puts it, "[The Buddha] is not a god [sic] made flesh in order to save mankind; he is a man who renounced being a god in order to teach mankind the way toward solitary liberation"(178). All religions provide an authority, but Buddhism has none. The Buddha is reported to have advised his disciples:

Do not be misled by report, or tradition, or hearsay. Do not be misled by proficiency in the pitakas, nor by mere logic and influence, nor after reflection on some view and approval of it nor because the recluse (who holds it) is your teacher. (Humphreys, The Buddhist Way 27)
“Buddha was a Protestant,” says R. R. Diwakar, “and a thorough-going one” (145). He came at a time when certain evils in Hinduism, the traditional religion, grew and became intolerable. He belonged to the line of Shramanas instead of the Brahmans. He therefore did not rely on the Vedas, but on his own insight, experience and reason. He could then work constructively instead of engaging himself in controversies regarding Vedas, their antiquity and authority, interpretation and so on. He shifted the emphasis regarding religious authority from the Vedas, the priests, traditions, rituals, ceremonies and others to observation, search after truth, experience and rationality.

The Buddha was predominantly a moral genius. According to him, moral conduct with the aim of attaining good for oneself and also for the whole mankind was the essence of “Dhamma.” Compassion (“Karuna”) was the source of his morality and good of all (“Kalyan”) its ultimate goal. He taught his disciples to renounce all worldly desires (“Tanha”) which cause sufferings and miseries in life. So the salvation of man through good moral conduct, not through intellectual pursuit, was the aim of the Buddha. His “Nirvana” is nothing but the extinction of ego-centric desires, achieved through the elevation of one’s mind and character.
The Buddha was a pragmatist in religious matters. He did not encourage metaphysical speculations or philosophical theories. He was against wasting time in "intellectual acrobatics," as R. R. Diwakar puts it (144). He saw that such things led nowhere. He was primarily interested and absorbed in finding a way out of suffering than in trying to investigate into the ultimate etymology of suffering.

Being a rationalist, the Buddha did not want even the humblest of his followers to have blind faith in him and to follow him as an outside authority. He told every one to follow the light that was in himself. He based his teaching on his own experience as interpreted by rational faculties. He himself recognised no authority besides his own conscience or the light of reason. He did not make any mention of intuition or mystic experience as his authority. He had, no doubt, "Sambodhi" or Enlightenment, a supreme mystic experience. But what he emphasised was the clarity of perception of the truth of experience, the inevitable logic of facts and the light of reason. In his view, even intuition or mystic experience, if it is to be of practical use, has to stand the test of the cold light of reason. In short, the Buddha was the first rationalist in religion who chose a middle path between man's reason and his mystic experience.
One who examines Frost’s religious beliefs by placing them in conjunction with the features of Buddhism as a religion can easily trace some parallels between them:

1) Both Frost and the Buddha were unorthodox believers. Being born and brought up in a choking atmosphere of more than one orthodox religion, Frost developed from his early days a hostility towards religious dogmas, and throughout his life and career he teased and questioned them. Buddhism too, which originated as a revolt against the orthodoxy of Brahminic religion, challenged the authority of the Vedas and the other religious scriptures in matters of rites and ceremonies.

2) Frost and the Buddha were not opposed to true religiosity; in fact, man’s spiritual development, unstained by the old and stale convention of institutional religions, was always their serious concern.

3) In their religious beliefs Frost and the Buddha insisted more on individual’s freedom and effort – which are often subordinated in traditional religions – than any outward forms of worship or prayer. Spiritual salvation, in their view, can be achieved only through individual’s relentless endeavour, and not through the assistance or interference
of an outside authority. “All revelations have been ours,” said Frost, and the Buddha exhorted his disciples to “Be a lamp unto thyself.”

4) Both Frost and the Buddha were practical rather than metaphysical in their approach to religion. They shunned metaphysical discussion on the dogmatic theories of religion like the origin of universe, man’s creation, the immortality of soul and so on. Instead of wasting time to seek and find out an answer to the question “What is life?” they concentrated their attention on the problem of “How to live?” They would have learnt from experience that discussions on the metaphysical problems about the existence of God and the origin of universe do not solve the earthly problems of man’s suffering. These discussions, on the other hand, help only to worsen human situation by creating superstitions and divisions among men.

5) Like the Buddha, Frost too adopted in religious matters a moral approach, and not an intellectual one. In their view, man’s spiritual quality depended on his good moral conduct and not on his knowledge of religious scriptures or doctrines.
6) Furthermore, Frost and the Buddha were rationalists who invoked men to test their spiritual wisdom in the light of their own reason and experience before accepting it. In fact, they took a middle path between reason and intuition.

For these reasons, historical as well as personal, Frost would have found in Buddhism an anchor for his thoughts and ideas. One question still baffles the reader: why was Frost unwilling to mention the name of the Buddha even in the writings in which he made references to Buddhist teachings? One can only speculate the reason. Firstly, as a man who asserted his independence in thinking, Frost would have taken extreme caution not to give an impression to his readers that he recognised an authority in religion. Secondly, like the Zen Buddhists, Frost did not approve a prophet including the Buddha, though he imbibed the spirit of Buddhism. Dorothy Judd Hall observes that “The Old Testament taboo about naming the deity seems to lurk behind Frost’s reticence to speak of God” (*Robert Frost* 24). This can be stated as the third reason for Frost’s refusal to name the Buddha in his works.

Among the works in which Frost alluded to Buddhist teachings – “The Prerequisites,” his two letters, one to Louis Untermeyer (1921) and the other to George F. Whicher (1928), and his poem “The Importer” – “The Prerequisites” wins one’s attention more than the
others. The fact that Frost published this essay as a preface to his volume *Aforesaid* adds to its significance. By doing so, one can assume, Frost urges his readers and critics to evaluate his poems in the light of Buddhist Wisdom. “The Prerequisites” is then not “a curious choice for an introduction to [Frost’s] own poetry,” as Elaine Barry points out (*Frost on Writing* 137), but a most conscious and deliberate choice of the poet. Elaine Barry’s comment typifies the attitude of traditional critics towards Frost’s essay “The Prerequisites”; they failed to understand the significance of the essay in the study of Frost’s poetry. But a serious reader, who tries to make a reappraisal of Frost’s poetry, finds in this essay a key to unlock many of the poet’s complexities in the light of one of Asia’s ancient wisdoms.

II

A Buddhist reading of Frost’s poems then is made possible by the poet himself. However, the poet does not provide the reader with a definite method or guideline for this kind of poetic reappraisal, barring the suggestion given in his interpretation of Emerson’s poem “Brahma.” This interpretation is indeed a model, based on which the reader can formulate a new critical method. In Frost’s reading of “Brahma” one notices two special features: firstly, Frost does not claim that “Brahma” is a Buddhist poem; secondly, he does not
mechanically impose Buddhist ideas in the poem. Frost’s only intention seems to be to prove that even in a poem which does not directly express Buddhist ideas, a sensible reader can perceive higher dimensions of meaning and significance if it is analysed in a Buddhist perspective. This critical method of Frost can be adopted as the basic approach in a Buddhist reading of his poems too.

A Buddhist reading of Frost’s poems, therefore, does not aim at tracing the Buddhist elements in those poems. It is primarily an attempt to see and evaluate Frost’s poetry in the light of the doctrines of the Buddha. The difference between the two approaches is remarkable: while the former approach is a mechanical tracing of the Buddhist ideas present in Frost’s poetry, the latter is an imaginative recreation of the poems in the light of the Buddhist Wisdom. Further, while the first approach can be applied only to poems which deal with the Buddhist teachings directly, the second one can be used for other poems as well which do not contain the Buddhist thoughts on the surface. The second approach, which is adopted in the present reading of Frost’s poems, envisages that the Buddhist doctrines are universal and not confined to a particular time or place or person.

Needless to say, a Buddhist reading of Frost’s poems is primarily based on Buddhist doctrines. In this context the term
“Buddhism” requires a little clarification. There are, of course, different sects in Buddhism all over the world, and these sects often confront each other in matters of interpretation. The opposing and contradictory principles of these sects are too complex to be resolved easily, and therefore the only alternative for a reader is to accept the term “Buddhism” in a broader sense which includes “the vast range of thought and teaching now to be found in the various parts of the Buddhist world” (Humphreys, The Buddhist Way 28). The Buddhist doctrines, used in the present analysis of Frost’s poetry, are more or less recognised by the different sects of Buddhism. The analysis here presents the views of an ideal Buddhist scholar who recognises the essence of Buddhism.

The essence of Buddhism, approved and accepted by all the Buddhist sects, is condensed within the four noble truths of the Buddha:

1) This is the noble Truth as to suffering: birth is painful, disease and death are painful, grief, sorrow, lamentation, depression, despair are painful; association with the uncongenial is painful; separation from loved ones is painful; not getting what one wants is painful. In fact every part of us – existing as we do, because we grasp hold of life – is subjected to suffering.
2) This is the noble Truth as to the cause of suffering: it is ignorant craving, which leads to rebirth, and is associated with desire – attachment, seeking pleasure everywhere, the craving for happiness in this life or in future life.

3) This is the noble Truth as to the ending of suffering: it is the putting an end to ignorant craving, giving up that desire-attachment, abandoning that pleasure-seeking and craving for life or for the cessation of life.

4) This is the noble Truth as to the path that leads to the ending of suffering: it is the Aryan Eight fold path, namely: right views, right mindedness, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right endeavour, right mindfulness, right concentration. (Allen, Buddha's Words of Wisdom 38)

Besides the four noble truths, there are some other philosophical and ethical points that are explicitly stated by the Buddha. These are the theory of dependent origination, the theory of universal change, the theory of non-existence of the soul and the theory of Karma. These theories are essentially the offshoots of the four noble truths, and therefore, the present study concentrates on the four noble truths more than the secondary doctrines.
The major poems of Frost are analysed in the present work in the light of the Buddhist teachings on “dukkha” (suffering), “anicca” (change), “tanha” (desire), “ich” (ego), and “attadipa” (self as our light). It would be appropriate in this context to explain how these teachings are associated with the four noble truths. The first noble truth states that life is full of suffering which includes pain, illness, old age and death. The doctrine of “anicca” or change suggests that life is an inevitable process of growth and decay. Disease, old age and death are different manifestations of human suffering. So the Buddha’s doctrine of change is an extension of his first noble truth. The second noble truth is concerned with human desires which, according to the Master, are the causes of suffering. Desire for worldly pleasures leads to a long chain of suffering. This desire, according to the Buddhists, inhabits man’s ego. In other words, ego is the breeding ground of human desires. Desire and ego complement each other, and destroy human happiness. Self-realisation, otherwise known as “Nirvana,” is the ultimate goal of Buddhism. The third noble truth says that man’s ego-centric desires can be annihilated, and the fourth noble truth suggests the ways – the eighth fold path – for the extinction of those desires which in the end paves the way for Enlightenment or self-realisation. The present work envisages a new appraisal of Frost’s poems in the light of these basic doctrines of
Buddhism. However, one thing has to be made absolutely clear that this study is not meant to push Frost into the Buddhist camp.

1 James L. Potter points out that “The more we examine Frost and his work, the more clearly we see that much lies beneath the surface, that his work is complex and ambiguous” (67-68). Reginald L. Cook quotes Melville’s remark about Hawthorne that “there is the blackness of darkness beyond” Hawthorne’s “sunlight,” and observes that “what Melville said of Hawthorne seemed to apply to Frost” (A Living Voice 262). It was indeed Lionel Trilling who provided the key to unfold the complexities and ambiguities in Frost’s poetry in his famous speech on Frost’s eighty-fifth birthday in which he called Frost a tragic as well as a terrifying poet (Burnshaw 105). Manorama Trikha also sees “the other Frost” behind “the democratic simplicity of his utterances,” and maintains that there is “something” in his poetry “which cannot be overruled or ignored” (“Frost Today” 1-2).

2 This poem is quoted from The Poetry of Robert Frost edited by Edward Connery Lathem. All the lines and passages from Frost’s poems cited hereafter in this work come from the above collected poems.

3 For a reader who prepares himself for a Buddhist interpretation of Frost’s poems, a reference to the Buddha or his teachings in connection with the poet, however insignificant it may be, will be of immense interest. Here is an example. In his book, Robert Frost: Life and Talks-Walking, Louis Mertins describes a party held by him and his friends in honour of Frost. In the party, says Mertins, the Frost admirers crowded round “the man of the hour—and of the ages—looking for all the world like an inarticulate Buddha” (270). Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant in her biography of Frost, gives an account of the poet’s physical appearance as follows: “Frost’s blue eyes look out on the world with a kindly, dreamy expression. There is an expression of mildness in his countenance that radiates. I do not think that you could mistake the good feeling for man that is in his face. His manner is calm, attractive and frank of appeal” (228). Bearing in mind this description of Frost’s physical appearance by Sergeant, one cannot but approve of Mertins’ comparison of the poet with the Buddha, who is always portrayed as an embodiment of peace, love and tranquility. One more observation of Sergeant in her biography of the poet is interesting. Sergeant happened to see a photograph of the poet in the ‘backpiece’ of a Japanese translation of Boy’s Will, on which she says: “The ‘backpiece’ is from a photograph of Robert Frost at ease in his Morris chair in the Ripton Cabin, with one of the Morrison’s little dogs, and in loose garments a Zen Buddhist would approve” (xxv). These references and remarks arrest a Buddhist’s attention, but they are too casual to be pursued further.